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I. Advaita Vedanta and Nirguna Brahman

In the past the emphasis has been placed on the difference between the major religions and not on their similarities. This book employs the method of Comparative Religious Philosophy (CRP) in searching for similarities and contrasts between the teachings of Swami Vivekananda and other Indian and Western thinkers. Through this systematic analysis approach we gain new insights and a broader understanding of the various implications of the ideas they present.

1. Advaita Vedanta in General

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) stressed, "Materialism prevails in Europe today. You may pray for the salvation of the modern skeptics, but they do not yield, they want reason. The salvation of Europe depends on a rationalistic religion, and Advaita--the nonduality, the Oneness, the idea of the Impersonal God--is the only religion that can have any hold on any intellectual people. It comes whenever religion seems to disappear and irreligion seems to prevail, and that is why it has taken ground in Europe and America."¹

Of the various Indian philosophies, Vedanta is the most important and all-inclusive foundation of Indian thought. As Wilhelm Halbfass (1940-2000)

Professor of Indian Philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania discerned, "Vivekananda and his successors were certain that not only could the Vedanta become 'practical' but that it had to become practical if it was to fulfill its possibilities. They assumed that it alone, as the philosophy of absolute unity and the converging point of all religions, philosophies, and ideologies, was capable of providing a solid metaphysical foundation and an effective motivation for ethical demands and practical goals."²

For Judaism, Christianity, and Islam there is no higher religious conception than monotheism, the belief that only one supreme God exists in the universe, the creator and Lord of the world. Yet as Judith M. Brown Professor of History at Oxford University points out, Vivekananda was committed to Advaita Vedanta "as an equal to the world's great monotheisms."³

When Vivekananda travelled to the West, he did not teach Advaita Vedanta immediately, but waited until the opportune time to present his message. According to Marie Louise Burke's (1912-2004) calculations, "It was at Greenacre that he taught for the first time in America the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta (though, as far as I know, not naming it as such) to a group of eager listeners." This memorable event took place in July-August 1894 and not before a large audience. Six years later, Edward Clarence Farnsworth confirmed that at Greenacre, Swami Vivekananda, standing beneath the evergreen pine—emblem of constancy and stability—uttered these words. "I am neither body nor changes in the body; neither am I senses nor object of the senses; I am Existence Absolute, Bliss Absolute, Knowledge Absolute; I am It; I am It."⁴

Arvind Sharma at McGill University in Montreal, Canada wrote there are "five occasions when Swami Vivekananda is known to have entered Nirvikalpa Samadhi." In Almora (August 1890), Hrishikesh (September 1890), Chicago (first half of 1894), Camp Percy (June 1895), and Thousand Island Park (July-August 1895). We should add at Cossipore Garden in 1886 according to the testimony of Swami Vivekananda.⁵

It was not an easy task for Vivekananda to teach to the general public in the West such an apparently abstract philosophy, understood in part by only a

very small number of elite Western intellectuals. In spite of the difficulties, Charles Carroll Everett (1829-1900) Dean of the Harvard Divinity School who heard Vivekananda speak in March 1896 replied, "There are indeed few departments of study more attractive than the Hindu thought. It is a rare pleasure to see a form of belief that to most seems so far away and unreal as the Vedanta system, represented by an actually living and extremely intelligent believer.... The reality of the One is the truth which the East may well teach us; and we owe a debt of gratitude to Vivekananda that he has taught this lesson so effectively."⁶

Swami Vivekananda discovered an original way of understanding the three Schools of Vedanta in terms of a hierarchy of three levels. "All of religion is contained in the Vedanta, that is, in the three stages of the Vedanta philosophy, the Dvaita [Theistic Dualism], Vishistadvaita [Qualified Nondualism] and Advaita [Nondualism]; one comes after the other. These are the three stages of spiritual growth in man. Each one is necessary. This is the essential of religion." "With the oldest theories, therefore, the Advaita is friendly. Dualism and all systems that had preceded it are accepted by the Advaita not in a patronizing way, but with the conviction that they are true manifestations of the same truth, and that they all lead to the same conclusions as the Advaita has reached. With blessing, and not with cursing, should be preserved all these various steps through which humanity has to pass. Therefore all these dualistic systems have never been rejected or thrown out, but have been kept intact in the Vedanta; and the dualistic conception of an individual soul, limited yet complete in itself, finds its place in the Vedanta." "The dualist must remain, for he is as much part and parcel of the national religious life as the Advaitist. One cannot exist without the other; one is the fulfillment of the other."⁷

He continues, "These are the salient points of the three steps which Indian religious thought has taken in regard to God. We have seen that it began with the Personal, the extra-cosmic God. It went from the external to the internal cosmic body, God immanent in the universe, and ended in identifying the soul itself with that God, and making one Soul, a unit of all these various

manifestations in the universe. This is the last word of the Vedas. It begins with dualism, goes through a qualified monism and ends in perfect monism.... all these three stages are necessary; the one does not deny the other, one is simply the fulfillment of the other. The Advaitist or the qualified Advaitist does not say that dualism is wrong; it is a right view, but a lower one. It is on the way to truth; therefore let everybody work out his own vision of this universe, according to his own ideas. Injure none, deny the position of none."⁸ According to the commentary of Swami Atmarupananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, "The Swami used to say that we don't travel from error to truth (the usual view of philosophy), but we travel from truth to truth, from lesser truth to higher truth. There is a ladder of spiritual progression, from the experience of God as separate from the soul, through the experience of God as the one Reality that unites the whole universe in a unity with inner distinctions, to the realization that there is one reality without a second and that the individual is that reality."⁹ In this manner he reconciled the Absolute and Personal Brahman-God (theism), which have been placed in opposition to one another for many centuries.

Along this line, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) maintained that Advaita Vedanta the religion of the Absolute Brahman is the universal religion, the ultimate goal of all spiritual pursuits. "All sects of Hinduism attempt to interpret the Vedanta texts in accordance with their own religious views. The Vedanta is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance. Thus the different sects of Hinduism are reconciled with a common standard and are sometimes regarded as the distorted expressions of the one true canon." "The worshipers of the Absolute are the highest in rank; second to them are the worshipers of the Personal God; then come the worshipers of the incarnations like Rama, Krishna, Buddha; below them are those who worship ancestors, deities and sages, and lowest of all are the worshipers of the petty forces and spirits."¹⁰ For most people, worship of the Personal God, is indispensable for eventually reaching ultimate union with the Transpersonal Brahman. All religions are qualified (Saguna) expressions of the unqualified (Nirguna) Brahman. In the end, all names and forms of the Personal God are

transcended, when the unconditioned Absolute Brahman is realized. Absolute Brahman is the common foundation of all of the religions of the world.¹¹ Advaita Vedanta is pluralistic in accepting all legitimate religions as paths to the highest religion.

The next step is that according to a Nondualist, Advaita Vedanta is not only the apex of Hinduism, but of all of the religions of the world. Advaita Vedanta here means a universal philosophy that underlies all cultural differences, not a particular religion including Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the rest. All religions of the world point to the same truth since their ultimate goal is Nirguna Brahman, the unchanging eternal principles. It is the hidden ground of all phenomenal reality, immediately accessible and verifiable to all people. English-born Professor Ninian Smart (1927-2001) of the University of California, Santa Barbara emphasizes the role of Advaita Vedanta in the thought of Vivekananda, "The Universalist message of Swami Vivekananda, and of his master Ramakrishna, genuinely represents a new departure in world religions—the attempt to make the highest form of Hinduism [Advaita Vedanta] a world faith. In doing so, the Vedanta would cease to be the highest form of Hinduism as such: but it would become the highest form of religion in general. Whether or not this faith will emerge as the unifying factor in the global manifestation of religion is something which will be settled by a process of social dialogue."¹²

Another Vedantic theme of Vivekananda is the oneness of existence, "Their final essence is the teaching of unity. This, which we see as many, is God. We perceive matter, the world, manifold sensation. Yet there is but one existence. These various names mark only differences of degree in the expression of that One."¹³ "Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would reach the goal. Thus Chemistry could not progress farther when it would discover one element out of which all others could be made... and the science of religion becomes perfect when it would discover Him who is the one life in a universe of death, Him who is the constant basis of an ever-changing world. One who is the only Soul of which all souls are but delusive manifestations. Thus is it, through

multiplicity and duality, that the ultimate unity is reached. Religion can go no farther. This is the goal of all science."¹⁴ Religion is the search for the ultimate unity or Brahman-God of which all of the many religions and various sciences are parts. Professor Robert P. Utter explains that science consists in the search for unity, combining particulars into smaller classes and then into larger classes. But religion "the science of sciences" goes farther, since it is the search for ultimate unity or God. Take science to its logical conclusion and reach the final unity of all, the Absolute One.¹⁵

Vivekananda adds, "We have shown how what we call the external world is $x + \text{mind}$, and the internal world $y + \text{mind}$... According to Vedanta, it is the mind, its forms, that have limited x and y apparently and made them appear as external and internal worlds. But x and y , being both beyond the mind, are without difference and hence one. We cannot attribute any quality to them, because qualities are born of the mind. That which is qualityless must be one; x is without qualities, it only takes qualities of the mind; so does y ; therefore these x and y are one. The whole universe is one." As Vivekananda implies independent of the mind x and y are identical because they have no qualities to differentiate them.¹⁶

Vivekananda continues on this subject, "The first principle of reasoning is that the particular is explained by the general, the general by the more general, until we come to the universal. For instance, we have the idea of law. If something happens and we believe that it is the effect of such and such a law, we are satisfied; that is an explanation for us.... I see a particular being, a human being, in the street. I refer him to the bigger conception of man, and I am satisfied; I know he is a man by referring him to the more general. So the particulars are to be referred to the general, the general to the more general, and everything at last to the universal, the last concept that we have, the most universal—that of existence. Existence is the most universal concept... We have to come to an ultimate generalisation, which not only will be the most universal of all generalisations, but out of which everything else must come. It will be of the same nature as the lowest effect; the cause, the highest, the ultimate, the

primal cause, must be the same as the lowest and most distant of its effects, a series of evolutions. The Brahman of the Vedanta fulfils that condition, because Brahman is the last generalisation to which we can come. It has no attributes but is Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss--Absolute. Existence, we have seen, is the very ultimate generalisation which the human mind can come to. Knowledge does not mean the knowledge we have, but the essence of that, that which is expressing itself in the course of evolution in human beings or in other animals as knowledge.... We are absolutely one; we are physically one, we are mentally one, and as spirit, it goes without saying, that we are one, if we believe in spirit at all. This oneness is the one fact that is being proved every day by modern science.... This grand preaching, the oneness of things, making us one with everything that exists, is the great lesson to learn."¹⁸ Existence can be looked upon in different ways. First, there is the dichotomy, something either exists or it does not. Next, there is Necessary Existence without a cause and contingent existence with a cause. Also there are higher and lower levels (or layers) of existence.

To quote Reverend Glyn Richards (1923-2003) of the Congregational Church in Wales, "For Vivekananda the one great lesson that man needs to learn is L
SEP the essential unity of mankind and the oneness of the universe. The difference between man, the animal kingdom and plant life is one of degree and not of kind. Man is at one with the universe, the sum total of which is God. The test of spirituality is the ability to recognize the oneness of life and this occurs when the veil of ignorance falls from man's eyes and he achieves L
SEP the state of jivanmukti or self-liberation. He no longer sees the manifold of L
SEP existence but the basic unity of all things. He sees that there is but one Self, one reality, and that the empirical world is a manifestation of the one."¹⁹

As Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) discerned, "Some men have the perception of difference predominant, and are conversant with surfaces and trifles, with coats and coaches, and faces, and cities; these are the men of talent.... And other men abide by the perception of Identity; these are the

Orientalists, the philosophers, the men of faith and divinity, the men of genius (Journals, VI: 493-94).”²⁰

Vivekananda agrees that aspects of Vedanta are being taught in modern philosophy books authored by Westerners. “There is no book on philosophy, written today, in which something of our Vedantism is not touched upon--even the works of Herbert Spencer contain it. The philosophy of the age is Advaitism, everybody talks of it; only in Europe, they try to be original.”²¹ In his book, *First Principles* (1862) Herbert Spencer writes about the unknowability of the Infinite, Absolute, and Unconditioned. Swami Abhedananda mentioned Spencer’s ideas corresponding with those of Kapila the Sankhya philosopher in his description of force, matter, and motion.

People have noted the different approaches of Shankara (c. 688/788-720/820) and Vivekananda to Advaita Vedanta. An important reason for this is that they are writing for a different audience. Shankara was primarily writing for Medieval Indians who were monastics and a small elite portion of the educated population. Vivekananda is addressing modern people of India and the West, of both genders, married and single, and to all socio-economic classes. There is also over a thousand years of accumulative knowledge in many intellectual fields between the Shankara and Vivekananda, which the latter incorporated into his explanation of Vedantic principles.

There is higher knowledge (para vidya) that gives understanding of Brahman and lower knowledge (apara vidya) that provides comprehension about phenomenal existence. Higher knowledge examines the root cause of existence and lower knowledge its many physical, behavioral, social-political, etc. effects.

Nondualism (Advaita) is defined in different ways. Transcendent Nondualism applies to Nirguna Brahman and nirvikalpa samadhi since they transcend every finite category of the human intellect. They transcend name and form; space, time, and causality; and the basic categories of human existence such as substance quantity, quality, relations, and action. After being in

Nirvikalpa Samadhi for six months, Sri Ramakrishna could not explain his experience using the words of finite existence.

Monistic Nondualism reduces Reality down to a single substance, principle, or entity that is the ground of reality. In this sense both Materialism and Idealism are nondual. Ramakrishna's Vijnana philosophy is monistically nondual since one reality Brahman is both personal and impersonal; and It becomes all living beings. Ramanuja's qualified nondualism is also monistic since Vishnu is both Brahman-God and Its body is the universe.

Undivided Nondualism (Simple) holds that Reality is temporally, spatially, and conceptually undivided. Being temporally undivided there are no units of time, which means It is changeless. Spatially undivided implies it is partless and cannot be destroyed. Conceptually undivided means there is no conceptual space that differentiates one idea from another (For more details see: Section 2. Divine Simplicity in Ch. III).

Epistemological Nondualism means Reality transcends the human intellect and is "totally other" from reason and sense experience, which Kant emphasized.

The paradox of Transcendent Nondualism is to employ human reason to explain that which transcends the intellect. When the intellect attempts to go beyond its finite limits, are paradoxes unavoidable? Consequently, a few statements made about this Reality might be paradoxical from the standpoint of human reason. But we must remember that the Nondualistic Reality transcends the human intellect and there paradoxes do not exist.

In Chapter V, Section 8. The Most Universal Categories of Existence and Understanding many types of dualities are mentioned including absolute-relative, infinite-finite, eternal-temporal, transcendent-immanent, essence-existence, reality-appearance, subtle-gross, space-time, matter-energy, etc.

Throughout this book the "comparative method" is employed searching for similarities and contrasts between the teachings of Vivekananda and other Indian and Western thinkers. Through this systematic analysis, we gain a broader understanding of the various implications of Vivekananda's central ideas resulting in an expansion of knowledge. In order to generate cumulative

knowledge and theory on a particular subject: Vivekananda's ideas through logical analysis, are combined with those of other Indians and Westerners, and in some cases when comparing their thoughts, new and original ideas are arrived at through an interaction effect. It is one thing to understand Vivekananda's teachings by themselves. It is another to understand the implications of his ideas by relating them to those of the great thinkers. By looking for the common ground between Indian and Western thought, our goal is to arrive at universal principles of religious philosophy and theology accepted by the majority of world thinkers.

According to the traditional classification system, six orthodox (sativa) Indian philosophies (darshanas) are subdivided into three pairs: Nyaya (epistemology and logic) and Vaishesika (categories and atoms), Sankhya (cosmology) and Yoga (mysticism and psychology), and Apurva Mimamsa (ritual and epistemology) and Uttar Mimamsa (i.e., Vedanta) (metaphysics). A common factor that interrelates the six darshanas is that they all accept the revealed authority of the Vedas. Today the Nyaya, Vaishesika, Sankhya, and Apurva Mimamsa remain as intellectual systems but are seldom practiced. In addition, there are also three heterodox (nastika) systems, Buddhism, Jainism, and Carvaka Materialism, which deny the authority of the Vedas.

Karl Potter at the University of Washington created a bibliography of as many writings as he could locate on Indian philosophy. In Section I of *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, under the General category he lists the articles by author names and in Section II records the articles by schools of Indian philosophy. If we combine both listings we get 2,559 articles dealing with Vedanta philosophy. The totals are Advaita (Shankara) 1856 articles, 72.5%, Vishistadvaita (Ramanuja) 280, 10.9%, Dvaita (Madhva), 226, 8.8%, Acintya-Bhedabheda (Chaitanya), 107, 4.2%, Suddhadvaita (Vallabha), 64, 2.5%, and Bhedabheda/Dvaitadvaita (Nimbarka), 11, 1.1%. Hence, Advaita Vedanta and particularly Shankara's version was certainly the most written about Vedanta philosophy during the 20th century. In Section II, Potter lists 586 articles on Yoga, 421 on Nyaya-Vaisesika, 312 on Samkhya, 137 on the Grammarians, and

126 on Purva-Mimamsa. When comparing Indian to Western philosophy a higher percentage of articles deal with the Absolute (Brahman), the Transcendental-Immanent Self (Atman), meditation (yoga), enlightenment (samadhi), and the techniques (four yogas) to attain liberation (moksha).²² There is a tendency for intellectuals to present Advaita Vedanta as the main religion of India, but of course as in other countries most of the people are dualists theists worshipping a Personal Brahman-God that is separate from themselves. Because of this Scholarly Bias some Westerners overlook the theistic aspects of Indian religious philosophy.

2. Unknowability of Nirguna Brahman, the Essence of God, and the Thing-in-Itself, by the Human Intellect and Senses

Indian: "He is never seen, but is the Seer; He is never heard, but is the Hearer; He is never thought of, but is the Thinker; He is never known, but is the Knower" (Br. Up. 3.7.23; cf. 3.4.2). "That which is not comprehended by the mind but by which the mind comprehends—know that to be Brahman" (Kena Up.* 1.6, p. 10). "If you think that you know well the truth of Brahman, know that you know little.... He who thinks that he knows, knows not. The ignorant think that Brahman is known" (Kena Up.* 2.1, 3, pp. 10-11). "Brahman is not grasped by the eye, nor by speech, nor by the other senses" (Mun. Up. 3.1.8).

Old Testament: "Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than the heaven-what can you do?" (Job 11.7-8). "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself" (Is. 45.15; cf. Ex. 33.20; Jn. 1.18). "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55.9). New Testament: "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways" (Rom. 11.33; cf. Ps. 145.3)!²⁴

The methodological approach used in this book is based on the application of the "History of Ideas" in both the Indian and Western context. The thinkers

and their ideas in this section are discussed in a chronological manner. Over time these ideas have taken on new forms and relationships with other concepts. This methodology also includes a "Comparative Philosophy" of ideas of thinkers from both Indian and Western religious and cultural traditions. An aim is to find commensurability, the common ground among both traditions as a basis for comparison. Quotations are often used to maintain an accurate representation of the thinker's ideas. The goal is to understand these ideas from as many different standpoints as possible, in order to creatively develop an expansion of ideas and a new synthesis of thought. Swami Vivekananda is quoted in every section.

Shankara (c. 688/788-720/820) the Advaita Vedantist seer-philosopher concluded, "The Self [Atman=Brahman] is inaccessible to any of the senses. He is not manifest. Wherefore, He is unthinkable. For that alone which is perceived by the senses becomes an object of thought. Verily, the Self is unthinkable, because He is inaccessible to the senses."²⁵ "It [Brahman] is other than the known and above the unknown' (Kena Up. 2:3)... Moreover, it stands to reason to say that Brahman cannot be expressed in words such as 'sat' [existence]; for, every word employed to denote a thing, denotes that thing—as associated with a certain genus, or a certain act, or a certain quality or a certain mode of relation. Thus: cow and horse imply genus, cook and teacher imply acts, white and black imply qualities, wealthy and cattle [SEP]owner imply possession. But Brahman belongs to no genus, [SEP]wherefore, It cannot be denoted by such words as 'sat.' Being devoid of attributes, It possesses no qualities. If It were possessed of qualities, then It could be denoted by a word implying a quality. Being actionless, It cannot be indicated by a word implying an act. The Shruti [Scriptures] says, 'It is without parts, actionless and tranquil' (Svet. Up. 6-19). It is not related to anything else; for It is one, It is without a second, It is not an object (of any sense), It is the very Self [Atman]. Wherefore, it is but right to say that It can be denoted by no word at all; and the passages of the Shruti like the following point to the same thing, 'Whence (i.e., away from Brahman unable to approach Brahman) all words return' (Tait. Up 2:4.1)."²⁶ "This Immutable is never seen by

anybody, not being a sense-object, but is Itself the Witness, being vision itself. Likewise It is never heard, not being an object of hearing, but is Itself the Hearer, being hearing itself. So also It is never thought, not being an object of the mind, but is Itself the Thinker, being thought itself. Similarly it is never known, not being an object of the intellect, but is itself the Knower, being intelligence itself.”²⁷ “As for the statement that Brahman is beyond speech and mind, that is not meant to imply that Brahman is non-existent.” Nirguna Brahman (God without attributes) is intellectually unknowable existing outside the boundaries of space, time, human understanding, discursive reason, sense experience, and the primary categories of existence (See Chapter V). It is unconditioned and indeterminate, not a substance and is without attributes, relations, activity, form or internal variation. It exists prior to all possible experience and is not an object of knowledge.²⁸ Now there is no class to which Brahman belongs, no common genus. It cannot therefore be denoted by words which signify a category of things. Nor can it be denoted by quality, for it is without qualities; nor yet by activity because it is without activity—‘at rest, without parts or activity,’ according to the Scriptures. Neither can it be denoted by relationship, for it is ‘without a second’ and is not the object of anything but its own Self. Therefore it cannot be defined by word or idea; as the Scripture says, it is the One ‘before whom words recoil.’”²⁹

It is significant that the great Indian thinkers of the Middle Ages like Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva were all from South India. Shankara dates back to the 700’s and there were some important philosophers that preceded him.

Swami Vivekananda explained, “We see the very question, why the Infinite became the finite, is an impossible one, for it is self-contradictory.... What is meant by the knowledge in our common-sense idea? It is only something that has become limited by our mind, that we know, and when it is beyond our mind, it is not knowledge. Now if the Absolute becomes limited by the mind, It is no more Absolute; It has become finite. Everything limited by the mind becomes finite. Therefore, to know the Absolute is again a contradiction in terms. That is

why this question has never been answered, because if it were answered, there would no more be an Absolute. A God known is no more God; He has become finite like one of us. He cannot be known, He is always the Unknowable One."³⁰
 "Brahman is Avangmanasogocharam, meaning that which is incapable of being grasped by word and mind. Whatever lies beyond the region of space, time and causation [finitude] cannot be conceived by the human mind, and the function of logic and enquiry lies only within the region of space, time, and causation. While that is so, it is a vain attempt to question about what lies beyond the possibilities of human conception."³¹

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) describes Nirguna Brahman, "If this indefinable, infinite, timeless, spaceless Existence is, it is necessarily a Pure Absolute. It cannot be summed up in any quantity or qualities, It cannot be composed of any quality or combinations of qualities. It is not an aggregate of forms or a formal substratum of forms. If all forms, quantities were to disappear, this would remain.... the Pure Existence is our Absolute and in Itself unknowable by our thought although we can go back to It in a supreme Identity that transcends the terms of knowledge."³²

Jadunath Sinha (1892-1979) basing his ideas on the *Upanishads* and its commentators discerned, "The Atman [equivalent to Brahman] is absolutely unconditioned. It has no attributes. It is devoid of sound, touch, colour, taste, and smell. It is devoid of all sensible qualities. So it cannot be perceived through the external sense organs.... Secondly, the Atman is beyond the categories of space, time, and causality.... The Atman is beyond all categories. So it is beyond the grasp of the intellect. Thirdly, the Atman is the knower of all things and as such cannot be known by anything. How can the knower be known? How can you see the seer of seeing? How can you hear the hearer of hearing"³³

In the West, Nirguna Brahman (God without attributes) has been called the One (Hen; Plotinus), Essence (Dhat, Ibn al-'Arabi), Thing-in-Itself (Arthur Schopenhauer), the Essence of God (or Divine Being, Divine Substance) by many

religious writers, the Godhead (Meister Eckhart), Being-Itself (Paul Tillich), and the God beyond God (Paul Tillich) in Western thought.

According to Harry Wolfson (1887-1974) Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University, "No philosopher before Philo is known to have stated that God, in His Essence, is unknowable and indescribable." Wolfson adds that for Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (c. 30/20 B.C.-45/50 A.D.), "'the contemplation of God by the soul alone without speech ... is based on the indivisible unity.' It is quite evident that what he means here is that God cannot be described by spoken words because He is in His Essence an indivisible unity. Now the indivisible unity of His Essence means not only that He is not composed of matter and form but also that in Him there is no distinction of genus and species, for it is the absence of the latter that makes it impossible for us to describe Him in words.... But since God is the highest genus He has no distinction of genus and species, that is, He belongs to no class and hence we do not know what He is.... Philo therefore maintains that, 'it is wholly impossible that God according to His Essence should be known by any creature,' for God is 'incomprehensible.'"³⁴ God is incorporeal, does not occupy space and is changeless, eternal, self-sufficient, and free of any limitations.³⁵

Origen (c. 185-254) the Greek Alexandrian Christian philosopher reasoned that the Supreme Reality is unknowable to the human intellect since He "transcends mind and being, and is simple and invisible and incorporeal." "God does not even participate in being. For He is participated in, rather than participates.... None of the descriptions by words or expressions can show the attributes of God"³⁶ "He is incomprehensible and immeasurable ... he is far and away better than our thoughts about Him.... our mind is of itself unable to behold God as He is."³⁷

The founder of Neo-Platonism, Plotinus (c. 205-70) of Alexandria and later Rome was a disciple of the Middle Platonist Ammonius Saccas who was also the teacher of Origen. A few writers think that Ammonius' name is derived from the Buddhist "Sakyas" and that he might have been of Indian descent. Plotinus acquired an esteem for Indian philosophy from Ammonius Saccas and desired to

travel to India. He joined the army of Gordian III as it marched toward Persia (Iran) but the campaign ended due to Gordian's death. Plotinus' philosophy has been compared to Advaita Vedanta by J. F. Stall, S. Radhakrishnan, Frederick Copleston, and others.³⁸ According to Plotinus, the One (Hen, Nirguna Brahman), which is also called the Good and the First, "is 'beyond being, It transcends activity and transcends mind and thought." "Nothing can be predicated of It, not being, not substance, not life, as to be above all of these things." "The First [One, Nirguna Brahman] beyond being does not think ... The First Itself is not related to anything, but the other things are related to It ... It desires nothing, for what could It desire, It which is the highest?... The Good is beyond thinking. But the Good will not be conscious of Itself... the Good exists already before the consciousness ... It cannot be said to live." "The One, which is simple and has in It no diverse variety." "The One, as It is beyond Intellect [Nous, Saguna Brahman], so is beyond knowledge and so It does not in anyway need anything, so It does not even need knowing."³⁹ "It is, therefore, truly ineffable; for whatever you say about It, you will always be speaking of a 'something.' But 'beyond all things and beyond the supreme majesty of Intellect' is the only One ... It is not Its name ... we can say nothing of It.... It has no perception of Itself and is not even conscious of Itself and does not even know Itself" [because it is not an object].... but is more and greater than anything said about Him [Nirguna Brahman], because He is higher than speech and thought and awareness; He gives us these, but He is not these Himself." "The One must be without form. But if It is It without form, It is not a substance; for a substance must be some particular thing, something that is defined and limited.... 'beyond being' does not mean that It is a particular thing ... all It implies is that It is 'not this.'" If the One resembled other things, It "would come under one and the same classification as all of them ... He would differ only by His individuality and specific difference and some added attribute. Then He would be two and not one.... So the nature of the Good would be good by participation ... [He is] unmixed with all things and above all things and cause of all things."⁴⁰ "The Good Itself, then, must not think anything: for the Good is not other than Itself."

"It is not therefore Intellect, but before Intellect... [It is] "that on which everything else depends and which Itself depends on nothing."41 "For by being One it is not measured and does not come within range of number. It is therefore not limited in relation to Itself or to anything else: since if It was It would be two. It has no shape, then, because It has not parts, and no form."42 Being absolutely simple the One is beyond thinking which requires duality. It is not an intellect that necessitates a real distinction between the thinking and the object of thinking.

Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240) from Muslim Spain who was the greatest Islamic religious philosopher from a Vedantic standpoint stated, "He who supposes that he has knowledge of positive attributes of the Self has supposed wrongly. For such an attribute would define Him, but his Essence (Dhat) [Nirguna Brahman] has no definition." "Were the Essence to make the loci of manifestation manifest, It would be known. Were It known, It would be encompassed. Were It encompassed, It would be limited. Were It limited, It would be confined. Were It confined, It would be owned. But the Essence of the Real is high exalted above all this."43 "In respect of Itself the Essence has no name, since It is not the locus of effects, nor is It known by anyone. There is no name to denote It without relationship." "Interrelationship between the Real and creation is neither intelligible nor existent. Nothing comes from Him in respect of His Essence. Everything denoted by the Law or taken by the rational faculty as a denotation is connected to the Divinity [His Manifestation Saguna Brahman], not the Essence."44

Following Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) the Italian Catholic theologian the intellect is a created thing that is unable to understand Divine things in their true inner nature. "Divine things are named by our intellect, not as they really are in themselves, for it that way our intellect does not know them, but in a way that belongs to created things."45 "In speaking therefore of Godhead, or life, or something like that as being in God, we indicate the composite way in which our intellect understands, but not that there is any composition in God."46 Since God is beyond any order of the creation, He has only a notional relation to the

world existing in thought not reality. Divine simplicity indicates, "Creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea."⁴⁷ Three months before his passing, Thomas Aquinas experienced an ecstatic vision, ceased all writing, and declared, "All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me."⁴⁸

This reminds us of Shankara's distinction between the world being relatively or phenomenally real (vyavaharika) (Aquinas existing in human thought or idea), and Absolute truth as they are in themselves (paramarthika). See the beginning of Section IV for more details. An important difference is that for Aquinas we misunderstand Divine things, and for Shankara phenomenal existence is misinterpreted. The broad-minded Aquinas studied the writings of the Muslim religious philosophers from Spain (Averroes) to Afghanistan (Avicenna), and Maimonides the Jewish thinker from Spain, Morocco, and Egypt.

Archbishop Gregory Palamas (1296-1357/59) from Greece wrote that Garamod is hyperousios, "beyond being;" He is "nameless and surpassing all names." God is "no-thing," in that He is not an existent object among other objects. Yet, He is "All," since without His continual indwelling and the continual exercise of His creative power, no created person or object would exist in any way whatsoever. "He [God] is both existent and nonexistent; He is everywhere and nowhere; He has many names and he cannot be named; He is ever-moving and He is unmoved and, in short, He is everything and nothing."⁴⁹ The Divine Substance is incommunicable, indivisible, unnamable, and inapprehensible while the manifested creative Divine Energy is just the opposite.⁵⁰

The Protestant Reformers also taught the unknowability of the essence of God. Martin Luther (1483-1546) provides this insight, in the Old Testament, "Let no one, therefore, interpret David as speaking with the Absolute God. He is speaking with God as he is dressed and clothed in His Word and promises."⁵¹ "God also does not manifest Himself except through His works and the Word.... Whatever else belongs essentially to the divinity cannot be grasped and understood."⁵²

For John Calvin (1509-64) there is a difference between knowledge of what God is in Himself and our knowledge of what He is. We know God by virtue of His attributes, the true determinations of the Divine nature and not what God is apart from His attributes.⁵³

Most people believe space, time, and causality exist apart from the human mind, but for Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) they are *a priori* conceptual categories through which the mind imposes order on experience. This is epistemological not ontological idealism. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) the German philosopher remarked, "What Kant says is in essence as follows: 'Time, space and causality are not determinations of the Thing-In-Itself, but belong only to its phenomenon, since they are nothing but forms of our knowledge. Now as all plurality and all arising and passing away are possible only through time, space, and causality, it follows that they too adhere only to the phenomenon, and by no means to the Thing-In-Itself. But since our knowledge is conditioned by these forms, the whole of experience is only knowledge of the phenomenon, not of the Thing-In-Itself; hence also its laws cannot be made valid for the Thing-In-Itself. What has been said extends even to our own ego [self], and we know that only as phenomenon, not according to what it may be in itself'"⁵⁴ The distinction between the Thing-in-Itself and its apparent phenomenal representations corresponds to the Advaitic contrast between Nirguna Brahman and maya. Kant being a philosopher and not a mystic did not realize the Thing-in-Itself could be experienced.

Vivekananda also states, "We cannot see anything outside of space, yet we do not know space. We cannot perceive anything outside of time, yet we do not know time. We cannot understand anything except in terms of causality, yet we do not know what causation is. These three things--time, space, and causality--are in and through every phenomena, but they are not phenomena. They are as it were the forms or moulds in which everything must be cast before it can be apprehended."⁵⁵

Space, time, and causation deal with events that are perceptual, conceptual, volitional, active, and emotional. These five differentiate one object, idea,

intension, action, and feeling from another. While all events involve time, physical and mental space differ, and their modes of causation vary according to different laws. At best there is an analogous relationship between these five causal laws.

In more recent times Russian born Harvard University sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968) indicated, "I agree with all true mystics and great logicians of all great cultures that our language cannot define adequately the ultimate (total) reality and/or the supreme value. All our words, concepts, and definitions, and all our signs and symbols have evolved for indication, denotation, description, and definition of only the finite, the limited, the specific differentiations of the all-embracing, undifferentiated, and quantitatively and qualitatively infinite total reality.... They are unfit for definition or conception of the total reality in its infinite manifoldness. By our words and symbols we can define any of the bounded, specific ripples of an infinite ocean of reality, but we cannot adequately describe the ocean itself: it contains all the ripples and at the same time is not identical to any and all of them.... For this reason the total true reality is indescribable by any words and indefinable by any rational concepts. This explains why many a mystic called it 'the Unutterable,' 'the Unexpressible,' 'the Divine Nothing,' into which fade all things and differentiations.'" 56

In sum, Nirguna Brahman and the Essence of God are both perceptually and conceptually unknowable because they transcend, and are ontologically and temporally prior to space, time, causality; intellect and will of the human mind, and the five sense qualities. They are not constrained or enclosed by them. They are ineffable, indescribable, inexpressible, beyond words, beyond description, and indefinable. The finite mind cannot know the Infinite or express its nature through words. None of the fundamental categories of human understanding formulated by Kanada (c. 6th/2nd Century B.C.) in India and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) in Greece such as substance, quantity, quality, relations, action, etc. apply to it. (See Ch. V. Relation of Nirguna Brahman-Atman and the Essence (Divine Substance) of God with the Divine World and the Universe, Section 8. The Most Universal Categories of Existence and Understanding). Nirguna Brahman and the

Essence of God are simple, indivisible, and an undivided unity without composition. What they are in Themselves cannot be known by the human intellect or senses. We define thing in terms of something else, often a genus, but there is nothing else that we know to define Nirguna Brahman in an exact way, Yet in the Penultimate State we can have some understanding of what their characteristics are from the standpoint of the human intellect using analogies and negation. For these descriptions see Chapter III. The Nondualistic Intrinsic Nature of Brahman-God.

Shankara mentions that Brahman cannot be expressed through any language since it is not a class or species, quality, action or function, or a relation that requires two or more entities. Plotinus mentions the One is not a substance or quantity, or an individual thing that differs from other entities. In other words, Nirguna Brahman is not a category of existence or understanding as denoted by Kanada in India and Aristotle in Greece. Also, Brahman is formless and thus is not capable of being properly described through language. Nor is It an external or internal object (a thought, feeling, or awareness in the mind). According to Shankara, Vivekananda, and other Advaita Vedantists Nirguna Brahman-Atman is the Pure Subject that illuminates all external and internal objects of the phenomenal world, which It ontologically precedes. As Pure Subject the Witnessing Self is aware of the objects of consciousness and cannot be objectified. Conversely, for Immanuel Kant the Highest Reality, Noumena, the Thing-in-itself is Pure Object that cannot be subjectified by the thought categories of the human mind. When we view this Reality through the mind we project space, time, and causation onto It, which is a distortion. Nondual Brahman-God is totally Simple (Undivided) (See Ch. III. The Nondualistic Intrinsic Nature of Brahman-God, Section 2); there is only oneness without divisions.

It is important to realize that in Nirvikalpa Samadhi, exceptional yogis have experienced Nirguna Brahman in a way that far exceeds the scope of human reasoning and understanding. This analysis applies only to the unknowable Essence of God and not to the Personal Brahman-God and the Divine Incarnation (Avatars). Jesus spoke with the Father in Heaven because He is

present in spiritual space and time, and understandable by the mental categories of the mind.

Following the Correspondence theory of Knowledge, a rational mind corresponds to the finite pluralistic world that it understands. But it does not correspond to nondualistic existence and thus it is not understandable to human reason. When attempting to define and gain any conceptual understanding of Brahman-God we limit the unlimited.

Because Brahman-God in some ways transcends the laws of logic, there are contradictions in our understanding of the Divine Reality. Following the "Principle of Limits," this is due to the limitations of the human intellect to grasp the Divine nature. What appears contradictory to us, at a higher level might exist objectively in Brahman-God.

Interpreted from the Ultimate standpoint Nirguna Brahman transcends every form of human knowledge. But interpreted from the Penultimate standpoint, from the perspective of the human intellect, It has the characteristics of simplicity (nondual), aseity, infinite without parts, timeless eternity, and immutability. See Ch. III. The Nondualistic Intrinsic Nature of Brahman-God for more details on this subject.

3. The Way of Negation (Neti Neti, Via Negativa) and the Way of Affirmation (Anvaya, Via Positiva)

Indian: "The Self [Brahman-Atman] is described as not this, not that. It is incomprehensible" (Br. Up.* 2.4.14; p. 146; cf. 4.2.4; 4.4.15; BG 2.29; 10.14; 13.15). "This Self [Atman] is That which has been described as Not this, not this" (Br. Up. 3.9.26; 4.4.22).⁵⁷

There are two approaches to understanding Nirguna Brahman, the supreme through Nirvikalpa Samadhi and the lesser through the human intellect. The latter can be subdivided into the Apophatic (Via Negativa, Neti Neti) approach that tells us what Brahman is not, and the Cataphatic (or

Kataphatic) (Anvaya, Via Positiva, affirmative) method that describes (or indicates) what Nirguna Brahman (the Essence of God, Divine Substance) is from the standpoint of the human intellect. Here Vedantic writers use spiritual experience, scripture, reason, intuition, and visualization to conceptualize what is known about Nirguna Brahman's nature, characteristics, and effects.⁵⁸

Swami Vivekananda disclosed, "One is called the "Neti Neti " (not this, not this), the other is called 'Iti' (this); the former is the negative, and the latter is the positive way. The negative way is the most difficult. It is only possible to the men of the very highest, exceptional minds and gigantic wills who simply stand up and say, 'No, I will not have this,' and the mind and body obey their will, and they come out successful. But such people are very rare. The vast majority of mankind choose the positive way, the way through the world, making use of all the bondages themselves to break those very bondages."⁵⁹ "We sometimes indicate a thing by describing its surroundings. When we say 'Sachchidananda' (Existence-Knowledge-Bliss), we are merely indicating the shores of an indescribable Beyond. Not even can we say 'is' about it, for that too is relative. Any imagination, any concept is in vain. Neti, neti ('Not this, not this') is all that can be said, for even to think is to limit and so to lose [it]." "In the first place, the soul [Atman] is not essentially a knowing being. Sachchidananda is only an approximate definition, and Neti Neti is the essential definition."⁶⁰

In Christian thought Apophatic theology attempts to approach God by negation stressing God's absolute transcendence and unknowability. We cannot know what God is, but rather what It is not. Most important Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) taught that the Essence of God is unknowable but not His energies or powers. A key source was the works of the Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysius (fl. 500) the Areopagite who was influenced by Neo-Platonic thought. Plotinus stressed the One the unknowable Absolute beyond mind that precedes all forms. It is the first principle from which everything else emanates.⁶¹

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) reached the conclusion that, "We are able to gain some knowledge of it [Divine Substance] by knowing what it is not.... We must derive the distinction of God from other beings by means of negative

differences. And just as among affirmative differences one contracts the other, so one negative difference is contracted by another that makes it to differ from many beings. For example, if we say that God is not an accident, we thereby distinguish Him from all accidents. Then, if we add that He is not a body, we shall further distinguish Him from certain substances. And thus, proceeding in order, by such negations God will be distinguished from all that He is not. Finally, there will then be a proper consideration of God's substance when He will be known as distinct from all things. Yet, this knowledge will not be perfect, since it will not tell us what God is in Himself."62

The Apophatic (Negation, via negative, negative philosophy or theology, *neti neti*) approach to Advaita Vedanta explains why Nirguna Brahman (Essence of God) is unknowable from the standpoint of the human intellect. Nirguna Brahman transcends the structure of intelligibility (all concepts and their rational interconnections) so nothing can be said about It as It is in Itself. This method can only tell us through negation what Nirguna Brahman is not. Following this approach Brahman is defined as nameless, formless, spaceless, timeless (eternal), causeless, partless (simple), changeless (immutable), beginningless, birthless, endless, deathless (immortal), and limitless (infinite); or nontemporal (eternal), nondivided (simple), nonchanging (immutable), and nonfinite (infinite). From a mystical standpoint, the goal is an intuitive spiritual experience of identity with Brahman, gained by mentally negating finite existence. Transcendental consciousness is realized by reinterpreting the world following the discriminative practice of "neti, neti" ("not this, not this"). By employing this process, the distinctions due to limiting adjuncts of the phenomenal world are negated and only It remains. From another standpoint, "neti, neti" can be applied to everything that is finite, not to one thing at a time. Therefore, there is nothing finite that can describe Nirguna Brahman-Essence of God

Neti neti can also be used as a method of renunciation and detachment. It is used to overcome those obstacles that prevent our spiritual growth such as the six primary fetters of pride, envy-jealousy, anger, greed-avarice, lust, and delusion.

Another idea is that the Witness Self (Saksin) is the eternal subject the “thinker of thought that cannot be objectified. The *Upanishads* state, “He is never seen, but is the Seer; He is never heard, but is the Hearer; He is never thought of, but is the Thinker; He is never known, but is the Knower” (Br. Up. 3:7). An example of the Neti Neti approach is to realize we are the Eternal Pure Subject and not an object. We are not objects like the body or the mind and its thoughts but are the Eternal Witness (Observer) of these. The more one realizes this the less they will be affected by the problems of the body or mind.

Following the Cataphatic (positive) approach there are two levels of predication. One can intellectually affirm the existence of Nirguna Brahman, Atman, and Saguna Brahman (Personal Brahman-God) employing a number of proofs. More difficult is to prove is that they necessarily exist because it is logically impossible for them not to do so.

The negative and positive forms of explanation are sometimes combined. For example, a nondualist might reject our idea of the world (Apophatic-Via Negativa) and then go through a complex logical analysis to explain why it is nonexistent, or a dream, or an appearance (Cataphatic-Via Positiva).

The Cataphatic approach was employed by the seer philosopher Adi Shankara (c. 688/788-720/820) when defining Nirguna Brahman as Sat-Chit-Ananda. Sat (pure Existence, Being). Chit (pure, absolute, infinite, eternal, unbroken, underlying unitary consciousness, the knower (or witness) in all states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep; self-luminous consciousness, shines with Its own light; the knower of knowing, the seer of seeing, and the hearer of hearing; the pure subject that pervades all cognition and perception, revealing objects, but is Itself never comprehended as an object). Ananda (unlimited, infinite, and eternal Bliss).

Shankara often employs the positive (Anvaya-Cataphatic) approach to describe Nirguna Brahman. This occurs from two different standpoints that are not mutually contradictory since they originate from two different levels and perspectives. The primary definition from the Absolute standpoint is called

Svarupa-laksana, which gives a description of the essential nature of Brahman. The secondary definition is called Tatastha-laksana, the accidental attributes from the relative standpoint of the human intellect. For example, according to Shankara, one set of *Upanishadic* texts describes Brahman as the source and support of the world. These relational attributes are superimposed on the non-relational, essential nature of nondual Nirguna Brahman. This is the original starting point of understanding that provides the necessary foundation that eventually leads the aspirant to the final Advaitic position of nonduality.⁶³

In the *Viveka-Chudamani*, Shankara describes Nirguna Brahman-Atman in the following way as: Simple (no diversity whatsoever, indivisible, without parts, homogeneous, without internal differentiations, undifferentiated and undivided existing as a noncomposite nondual unity). Self-existent (Self-Caused, conceived through Itself, relies on nothing to preserve Its existence, nothing outside of It could be Its cause, unconditioned, indeterminate). Eternal (birthless and deathless beginningless, endless, immortal because it is undecaying, undying because it is changeless and partless). Infinite (immeasurable, formless, boundless without an end, there is nothing outside of It). Immutable (It is always the same, neither acts nor is subject to the slightest change, neither grows nor decays, unchanging changeless, beyond action, indestructible). Transcendent (transcends subject-object duality, discursive reasoning and speech). Immanent (It is in all things and all things are in it, the Inner Self). One in number (one without a second). Perfect (free from every form of evil). Ground of existence (That Reality pervades the universe, It is the foundational substrative and substantial cause of the world, the all-pervading substratum (ashraya) of the finite world, all things are rooted in Brahman receiving their existence from It, while It is rooted only in-Itself). In addition, Nirguna Brahman-Atman is also **Omniscient** (knows all things, the knower in all states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep, reveals this entire universe of mind and matter, by Its light, the universe is revealed, It gives intelligence to the mind and the intellect). **Omnipotent** (Because of Its presence, the body, senses, mind, [SEP] and intellect apply themselves to their respective functions, as though obeying Its

command. Its power is infinite. Brahman is the source of all activity of the senses and the like, unlimited by anything that could bring about its destruction).

Omnipresent filling everything and not confined to a single locality. There is no place where Brahman is not. For more details on Shankara's contribution to this subject see Chapters III and IV.⁶⁴ Shankara stressed that a religious aspirant has to work hard to realize Brahman, its not that since you are already Brahman that no effort is required to discover this. Yet It is not omniscient or omnipotent in the dualistic sense, since the former requires that there is a differentiation between the knower and the known and the latter a differentiation between the doer and the object that is worked on.

Shankara's positive statements concerning Nirguna Brahman-Atman in relationship to phenomenal existence include:

Awareness of personal identity: the immutable Atman maintains our unbroken awareness of self-identity. It unifies the multifarious ideas and disperse data of perception, synthesizing them into a coherent unity making memory and inference possible, else our experiences would be a series of unconnected subjective states.⁶⁵

Brahman-Atman is responsible for intelligence in the mind: cognitive and perceptual events are apprehended through the pure light of the changeless Atman whose essential nature is Self-luminous, comparable to a lamp that illumines an object, the mind is like a mirror that reflects the light of consciousness from Self-luminous Brahman-Atman the Witness-Self.⁶⁶

Brahman-Atman is the knower and witness of the activities of the mind and individual person.⁶⁷

Swami Abhedananda mentions the value of human birth, "Vedanta teaches that every experience has a permanent value. Every stage of evolution is necessary for the progress of the individual soul. At every step of our finite experience, we are learning something and helping ourselves in unfolding the higher powers latent within us.... soul that reincarnates, or manifests its latent powers through different stages of evolution—to fulfill its desires and to gain

experience until perfection is reached and the highest state of spiritual realization is attained."⁶⁹

While living an earthly life one can experience Brahman-Atman: it is a field for the self-realization of the Divine, one can attain to the ultimate state of illumination (anubhava) where the mind is completely absorbed in Brahman (God), become free even in this life when established in illumination, taste the sweet, unending bliss of the Atman, and though he possesses a finite body, he remains united with the Infinite.⁷⁰ Brahman is revealed through spiritual intuition carrying the highest degree of certitude, verifying the statements of the sacred scriptures.

The Avatara (Divine Incarnation) is a manifestation of the Personal God in human form: in order to restore righteousness and for the preservation of spiritual life on earth, and to communicate God-realization to those who are ready for it. In addition a small number of liberated sages assume a human body to carry out Brahman's (God's) plan and to help other people to attain to liberation.⁷⁴

Liberated souls proceed to the heavenly world (Brahmaloka): there they undergo a process of gradual illumination first, there is the vision, then participation, and ultimately absolute identity with Nirguna Brahman-Atman. At the end of the cosmic cycle, liberated souls merge with the transpersonal nondual Brahman.⁷⁵

That external objects do not exist independent of the human mind (Subjective Idealism) is to be rejected. Externality is perceived along with each act of cognition and it cannot be nonexistent, that things and ideas are presented together does not mean they are identical, If there are no objects, how could perception take on the form of objects? If there is nothing external, how can we have even an illusion of externality?⁷⁶

The *Vedas* (Religious Scriptures) are derived from Saguna Brahman (Personal Brahman-God), revealed to the illumined rishis (sages), the eternal spiritual wisdom, uncreated, infallible, eternal, immutable, and of transcendental origin; the ultimate authority concerning the supersensible reality, valid means

of knowing the real nature of Brahman, validated by the supersensuous states (anubhava) of the mystics. Vedic words in the mind of Brahman (God) are the archetypal ideas (Platonic Forms), used to create the names and forms of the genera of all things in the universe.⁷⁷

4. The Doctrine of Maya

Many people do not realize that the Doctrine of Maya is a very positive teaching. When Shankara writes that the world as we perceive it is maya, he means correctly understood the world and all existence is perfect (Nirguna Brahman) and through the veil of maya it appears to be imperfect (phenomenal existence). Since this Perfection already exist knowledge (Jnana) does not create or destroy, it only illumines what is already there. Nirguna Brahman transcends the realm of birth and death, of creation and destruction, and consequently is eternal. In addition, Shankara states that maya "can neither be ascertained as real nor as unreal [mithya]."¹⁰⁶ He makes the distinction between looking at existence from the Absolute point of view of Nirguna Brahman (paramarthika-drsti) and from the phenomenal world point of view (vyavaharika-drsti). Shankara taught the world is relatively or phenomenally real (vyavaharika) from the standpoint of the human intellect, but not absolutely so (paramarthika). This compares to Baruch (or Benedict) Spinoza's (1632-77) sub specie aeternitatis (from the perspective of eternity and infinity) and sub specie temporis (from the perspective of the temporal and finite). When one attains Nirvikalpa Samadhi they then transcend the intellect. The world is not unreal, because it exists until one has knowledge of the Highest Reality. It has relative existence and is not a nonentity like the son of a barren woman.¹⁰⁷ Shankara emphasized "that the universe, as it appears, is real for all purposes for every one in his present consciousness, but it vanishes when the consciousness assumes a higher form."¹⁰⁸

For Shankara and the Nondualist only Nirguna Brahman is real and all else including name and form; space, time, and causality are appearances of a finite

limited existence. He wrote, "Excepting Brahman, there is nothing whatever different from name and form, since the entire world of effects is evolved exclusively by names and forms."¹⁰⁹

Swami Vivekananda relates maya to name and form and to space (desha), time (kala), and causation (nimitta). Viewing Nirguna Brahman through these limiting factors produces our idea of the phenomenal world. He states, "This is the work of Nama-Rupa--name and form. Everything that has form, everything that calls up an idea in your mind, is within Maya; for everything that is bound by the laws of time, space, and causation is within Maya." "According to the Advaita philosophy, then, this Maya or ignorance--or name and form, or, as it has been called in Europe, 'time, space, and causality.'" "This Absolute [Nirguna Brahman] has become the universe, by coming through time, space, and causation. This is the central idea of Advaita. Time, space, and causation are like the glass through which the Absolute [Nirguna Brahman] is seen, and when It is seen on the lower side, It appears as the universe."¹¹⁰ Space, time, and causation, and name and form impose limits on the unlimited. "We have also seen that this Brahman is not this table and yet is this table. Take off the name and form, and whatever is reality is He. He is the reality in everything."¹¹¹ In addition, Vivekananda teaches degrees of maya, "Not that the Self [Atman] can by any means be made to contract. It is unchangeable, the Infinite One. It was covered, as it were, with a veil, the veil of Maya, and as this Maya veil becomes thinner and thinner, the inborn, natural glory of the soul [Atman] comes out and becomes more manifest."¹¹²

Nirguna Brahman is Ultimate Reality free of the human intellect. This is why Sri Ramakrishna after retuning to the human plane of existence could not describe his Nirvikalpa experience. The human intellect imposes finitude in the form of space, time, and causation on to Nirguna Brahman and what is perceived and experienced is Saguna Brahman. This is the epistemological explanation of the difference between the two forms of Brahman.

According to the extreme view all imperfections are unreal and according to the moderate conception they are appearances. An appearance as a rope

appearing to be a snake is objectively unreal but temporarily subjectively real having an actual effect on us. Yet that appearance can cause objective external events to occur such as physiological changes or running away.

It is extremely important to realize that after attaining nirvikalpa samadhi, Shankara and other nondualists did not abandon the phenomenal world. They retained an active interest in the world and did their best to enlighten people. These great souls regarded the world of people and their interactions as sufficiently real to deserve their attention though they were capable of transcending it. After attaining nirvikalpa samadhi he wrote commentaries on the *Vedanta Sutras*, *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* and composed other important religious philosophical books. In the *Viveka-Chudamani*, Shankara begins with the affirmative statement, "I prostrate myself before Govinda, the perfect teacher, who is absorbed always in the highest state of bliss.... Only through God's grace may we obtain those three rarest advantages-- human birth, the longing for liberation, and discipleship to an illumined teacher" and then again mentions "this rare human birth." He established many monasteries in India and created ten monastic orders to aid advanced souls on their spiritual journey.¹¹³ It seems paradoxical that though Shankara considered the phenomenal world to be only relatively real (vyavaharika) a product of maya, from a practical standpoint he worked hard to awaken people. The religious scriptures that he revered are part of the phenomenal world and therefore a product of maya.

Concerning Shankara, Sri Ramakrishna told Vidyasagar and Bankim, "Sankaracharya retained the 'ego of Knowledge' in order to teach others.... a man established in samadhi comes down to the relative plane of consciousness in order to teach others, and then he talks about God." "But God keeps some jnanis in the world of maya to be teachers of men. In order to teach others the jnani lives in the world with the help of vidyamaya. It is God Himself who keeps the jnani in the world for His work. Such was the case with Sukadeva and Sankaracharya."¹¹⁴

Shankara placed great emphasis on moral virtues and acting for the good of the world, which he considered as valuable a place for realizing the truth of Nonduality. While he accepts the spiritual value of a devotee's relationships with a Personal God, he believes that Kramamukti (gradual liberation-salvation) ends in Nondual Brahman as the final goal of religious life. Many people believe that Shankara composed many devotional hymns (Stotras) to Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Devi, Lakshmi, and Ganesha.

From the perspective of humans who live in the world of time, *sub specie temporis* (Sk. *Vyavaharika-drsti*), Nirguna Brahman is simultaneously present with all events that occur within time. But from the Absolute perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* (Sk. *Paramarthika-drsti*), time is nonexistent. Nirguna Brahman transcends the realm of birth and death, of creation and destruction and consequently is timelessly eternal. Advaitists (Nondualists) believe that those people now living in time will eventually attain to the timeless state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi. Qualified Nondualists (*Vishistadvaita*) and Dualist theists (*Dvaita*) consider *maya* to be the power of Brahman, and Shaiva Shiddhanta and Vira Shaivism the material (substantial) cause of the world.¹¹⁵

In the West, Acosmism (non-cosmos) "denies the reality of the universe, seeing it as ultimately illusory, and only the infinite unmanifest Absolute as real. This philosophy begins with the premise that there is only one Reality that is infinite, nondual, and blissful."¹¹⁷

Plato (427-347 B.C.) wrote, "The things of this world, perceived by our senses, have no true being at all; they are always becoming, but they never are. They have only a relative being; they are together only in and through their relation to one another; hence their whole existence can just as well be called non-being." In Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* (*Republic*, Book VII), he "describes a group of people who have lived chained in a cave all of their lives, facing a blank wall (514a–b). The people watch shadows projected on the wall by things passing in front of a fire behind them and begin to ascribe forms to these shadows, using language to identify their world (514c–515a). According to the

allegory, the shadows are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality, until one of them finds his way into the outside world where he sees the actual objects that produced the shadows. He tries to tell the people in the cave of his discovery, but they do not believe him and vehemently resist his efforts to free them so they can see for themselves (516e–518a)."¹¹⁸

For Plotinus (c. 205-70) matter "is actually a phantasm: so it is actually a falsity: this is the same as 'that which is truly a falsity;' this is ... 'what is really unreal.' That, then, which has its truth in non-existence is very far from being actually any reality.... having gone out of true being, it may have its being in non-being." Matter is "truly not-being ... a phantom ... a lie ... its apparent being is not real, but a sort of fleeting frivolity ... the producers of the appearances ... since it is weak and false, falling into falsity." "Real beings are unchanging, but the appearances change."¹¹⁹ Evil is not a positive entity, but is a privation, the absence of good or being. It is the negation of existence and goodness, the inability to create.¹²⁰

According to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) only the Thing-in-Itself (Noumenal) is not an appearance. He writes, "This life is an appearance only, that is, a sensible representation of the purely spiritual life ... If we could intuit ourselves and things as they are, we should see ourselves in a world of spiritual beings, our sole and true community with which has not begun with birth and will not cease through bodily death—both birth and death being mere appearances."¹²¹ The distinction between the Thing-in-Itself and its apparent phenomenal representations corresponds to the Advaitists contrast between Nirguna Brahman and maya. Immanuel Kant describes time and space as empirically real and transcendently ideal.¹²²

Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) has shown that you do not have to be a nondualist to believe that the phenomenal world is an appearance. For her the Reality is Saguna Brahman and not Nirguna Brahman. Mary Baker Eddy the founder of Christian Science wrote, "All real being is in God, the Divine Mind, and that Life, Truth, and Love are all-powerful and ever-present; that the opposite of Truth called error, sin, sickness, disease, death--is the false testimony

of false material sense of mind in matter... As mind is immortal, the phrase mortal mind implies something untrue and therefore unreal." Mortal man, "It is really a self-contradictory phrase for man is not mortal, neither indeed can he be.... There is no life, truth, intelligence, nor substance in matter. All is infinite Mind and its infinite manifestation, for God is All-in-all. Spirit is immortal Truth; matter is mortal error. Spirit is the real and eternal; matter is the unreal and temporal. Spirit is God, and man is His image and likeness. Therefore man is not material; he is spiritual."¹²³ It is the mortal mind that produces a false phenomenal representation of the world. The Reality is the way the Divine mind of Saguna Brahman sees the world. Our view being different is an appearance.

The British philosophers F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) considered the phenomenal world composed of space, time, and relations to be an appearance, because each of these entities involve contradictions. They are less comprehensive and less coherent than the Whole (Absolute). When we try to think out their implications, these ideas by which we try to understand the universe lead to contradictions and paradoxes.¹²⁴ For Bradley, Reality is an all-comprehensive and a logically consistent non-contradictory omniscient Existence. This aspect of Bradley's thought appears to be closer to Saguna Brahman than the nondualists Nirguna Brahman.

Erwin Schrodinger (1887-1961) the Nobel Prize winning quantum physicist concluded that, "The only possible alternative is simply to keep to the immediate experience that consciousness is a singular of which the plural is unknown; that there is only one thing and that what seems to be a plurality is merely a series of different aspects of this one thing, produced by a deception (the Indian Maya) the same illusion is produced in a gallery of mirrors, and in the same way Gaurisankar and Mt Everest turned out to be the same peak seen from different valleys."¹²⁵

Space as maya refers to both physical space that separates objects and conceptual space that differentiates between ideas. These ideas exist individually

or in unified groups as the different disciplines (e.g., physics, astronomy, sociology, psychology, etc, etc.).

The most extreme view of maya is that universe and all imperfections are both objectively and subjectively nonexistent. The universe is unreal as a perception, a conception, or an emotional feeling. Others hold that the world and imperfection are a false projection, consciousness, or imagination; a dream, or a mirage.

It is paradoxical to say that the world is unreal. If it is, then I and the statements that I make (such as the world is unreal) are also unreal. An unreal person is making the unreal statement that the world and everything in it including myself is unreal.

A more widely held view of maya is that the world as we experience it, is a perceptual and conceptual superimposition (Shankara), a veil, an appearance (Kant, Bradley), and/or a misreading (Vivekananda). A classic Indian example is an objectively real rope that appears to be a snake. In Hindu philosophy Adhyāsa is a concept referring to the superimposition of an attribute, quality, or characteristic of one entity onto another entity. Advaita Vedanta stresses the false superimposition of any limited imperfect characteristics onto the Atman the Supreme Self. Superimposition is due partly to remembrance of something previously observed. The superimposition is destroyed by knowledge of the Atman. This is not theoretical or intellectual comprehension but spiritual realization gained through meditation and discriminative knowledge. A superimposition is a projection (viksepa) of falsity like mistaking a rope for a snake, which like a veil (avarana) hides the reality. Maya is due to the limitations of the human senses, intellect, and feelings. The world is real and perfect, but we do not experience it as it truly is.¹²⁶

A more lenient definition of maya is as a reflection to varying degrees, a copy or shadow of the Real (Plato), an image, or as a representation (Indian Sautrantika Buddhism, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer). Concerning the first, the Reality reflects off the mind depending on its vibrational state. These terms apply differently to perceptual maya based on

sense data and conceptual maya related to ideas and feelings-emotions. Even this is not a clear-cut distinction, since today they realize that perception and interpreting sense data is based to some degree on a person's concepts. A perceptual or conceptual reflection, image, or representation is both objectively real in outer experience and subjectively real in the mind, but it is not the original Ultimate Reality. According to Thomas Aquinas our conceptions and perceptions share an analogous relationship with the Reality (Analogical Predication).

Representationalism (also known as Representative Realism or Indirect Realism) is the philosophical position that the world we experience is not the external world as it is in itself, but ideas that form a likeness to and represent it. Our ideas come from sense data of a real, material, external world. An immediate (direct) object of perception is only a sense-datum that represents an external object. We know our ideas and interpretation of objects in the world, but because of a veil of perception between the mind and the existing world (Indian maya) we lack first-hand knowledge of it. Representationalism holds that our ideas come from sense data (or images) of a real external world (Realism). But the immediate object of perception is only a representation of the external object.¹²⁷ Representative Realism was taught by the Indian Buddhistic Sautrantikas School (c. 2nd century B.C.) and later in the West by John Locke (1632-1704). In both societies Subjective Idealism later developed.¹²⁸ This doctrine is Realistic (mind-independent) in holding that something exists which is external to and independent of perception that is causally responsible for the content of our perceptions. It is Idealistic (mind-dependent) in maintaining that objects as we perceive them do not exist when they are not perceived by anyone.¹²⁹ This is an alternative to the idea that the world is an illusion or unreal.

The phenomenal world is an imperfect representation of Ultimate Reality, due to the finite limitations of the five senses and the reasoning faculties of the human mind. Nirguna Brahman cannot be known through thought since It ontologically precedes thought as its cause. Even "neti neti" (not this, not this,

negative theology or *Via Negativa* in the West) is from the standpoint of the human intellect, having no meaning in the Nirguna Brahman realm though this process can lead an advanced yogi to that state. Negative theology attempts to describe the transcendent by negating what is finite and relative. For example, infinite is defined as "not finite" and eternity as "not temporal."

This section defines maya as a type of illusion or appearance (Philosophical Maya), which differs considerably from maya as delusion, a type of irrational act, belief, or feeling that occurs in a real world (Psychological Maya). The latter according to Western psychology expresses itself through ego defense mechanisms. In Indian thought delusion is caused by the six primary fetters and the five fundamental afflictions (kleshas) of Patanjali. For more details see: *Sri Ramakrishna and Western Thought*, Ch. XI. Renunciation and Morality, Section 1. Avidyamaya, Sin, and Evil.

It also manifests through what Sri Ramakrishna called the "Unripe Ego" and by experiencing happiness from those things that do the person harm. There are degrees in Psychological Maya and so a spiritual life is closer to Saguna Brahman than a sensuous life. Some thoughts come closer to resembling or corresponding to the higher or Ultimate Reality (Brahman-God) than others. This is why it is necessary to have the right thoughts, feelings, and forms of action before one can spiritually advance to the higher realms.

5. Realizing Our Oneness With Nirguna Brahman (Atman) and the Godhead

Shankara the seer philosopher achieved spiritual illumination and created a practical religious philosophy that concentrates on attaining supersensuous transcendental consciousness and spiritual intuition (Anubhava) while living on earth. It also leads to liberation from Samsara (empirical existence). Based on his own spiritual experiences he revealed, "Know the Atman (=Brahman), transcend all sorrows, and reach the fountain of joy. Be illumined by this knowledge, and you have nothing to fear." "Those who have attained Samadhi by merging the external universe, the sense-organs, the mind and the ego in the Pure

Consciousness of the Atman—they alone are free from the world, with its bonds and snares.” “The knower of Brahman has realized his true Being, the Atman, which is endless joy.... To taste, within his own heart and in the external world, the endless bliss of the Atman—such is the reward obtained by the yogi who has reached perfection and liberation in this life.”¹³⁰ “When the mind, thus purged by ceaseless meditation, is merged in Brahman, the state of Samadhi is attained. In that state there is no sense of duality. The undivided joy of Brahman is experienced. When a man reaches Samadhi, all the knots of his desires are cut through and he is freed from the law of karma. Brahman is revealed to him, internally and externally, everywhere and always, without any further effort on his part.”¹³¹ “The ego has disappeared. I have realized my identity with Brahman and so all my desires have melted away. I have risen above my ignorance and my knowledge of this seeming universe. What is this joy that I feel? Who shall measure it? I know nothing but joy, limitless, unbounded!” “He who knows the Atman is free from every kind of bondage. He is full of glory. He is the greatest of the great.... He tastes the sweet, unending bliss of the Atman and is satisfied.” “He lives desireless amidst the objects of desire. The Atman is his eternal satisfaction. He sees the Atman present in all things... That is how the illumined soul lives, always absorbed in the highest bliss.”¹³²

Abhinavagupta (c. 950-1025) the Kashmir Shaivite taught, Reality the essential nature of all things is universal and everywhere the same, being one's own true nature (svabhava). Pure subjectivity experiences, enjoys, thinks, senses, and creates all forms of experience. Our authentic nature manifests through an intuitive awareness of the underlying unity of existence, and the integral wholeness of our true Self. Supreme knowledge yields the revelation of one's own innate nature as the Being of all things. Direct awareness of our Divine nature brings supreme bliss.¹³³

Vivekananda described the samadhi experience he had in 1886, “One day in the Cossipore garden, I had expressed my prayer to Sri Ramakrishna with great earnestness. Then in the evening, at the hour of meditation, I lost the consciousness of the body, and felt that it was absolutely non-existent. I felt that

the sun, moon, space, time, ether, and all had been reduced to a homogeneous mass and then melted far away into the unknown; the body-consciousness had almost vanished, and I had nearly merged in the Supreme. But I had just a trace of the feeling of Ego, so I could again return to the world of relativity from the Samadhi. In this state of Samadhi all the difference between 'I' and the 'Brahman' goes away, everything is reduced into unity, like the waters of the Infinite Ocean--water everywhere, nothing else exists--language and thought, all fail there. Then only is the state 'beyond mind and speech' realized in its actuality. Otherwise, so long as the religious aspirant thinks or says, 'I am the Brahman'--'I' and 'the Brahma,' these two entities persist--there is the involved semblance of duality." "As men, we must have a God; as God, we need none. This is why Sri Ramakrishna constantly saw the Divine Mother ever present with him, more real than any other thing around him; but in Samadhi all went but the Self. Personal God comes nearer and nearer until He melts away, and there is no more Personal God and no more 'I,' all is merged in Self [Atman]."¹³⁴

He adds, "The idea of Personal God is not sufficient. We have to get to something higher, to the Impersonal idea. It is the only logical step that we can take. Not that the personal idea would be destroyed by that, not that we supply proof that the Personal God does not exist, but we must go to the Impersonal for the explanation of the personal, for the Impersonal is a much higher generalisation than the personal. The Impersonal only can be Infinite, the personal is limited. Thus we preserve the personal and do not destroy it."¹³⁵ Thus, though the Saguna Personal God is real It is less than the Nirguna Impersonal Brahman-Atman.

Shankara, Kashmir Shaivism, and Swami Vivekananda each placed emphasized on not only comprehending religious philosophy intellectually, but also having a spiritual experience of it. This differs from the Westerners like Immanuel Kant and F. H. Bradley who were concerned only with the intellectual aspects of their philosophies.

Swami Saradananda (1865-1927) explained Vivekananda's spiritual experiences at Cossipore in 1886 this way, "He reached his guru, Sri

Ramakrishna, at Cossipore and, intoxicated, he expressed his mental anguish to the Master and received his grace. For some time he forgot to eat or sleep, and was absorbed day and night in japa, meditation, devotional singing, and spiritual discussion. His intense passion for sadhana made his tender heart extremely firm. He became completely indifferent to the suffering of his mother, sisters, and brothers. Steadfastly following his guru's instructions, he had Divine visions one after another. At the end of three or four months, he experienced the bliss of nirvikalpa samadhi for the first time. These incidents all took place before our eyes. We were amazed. Every day the Master would joyfully praise Vivekananda's intense devotion, longing, and zeal for spiritual practices." 136 Saradananda pointed out that there are degrees in the Nondual experience. "Becoming absorbed in Nondual consciousness is called nirvikalpa samadhi. Some have only seen the Ocean of Consciousness from a distance; some have gone near and touched It; and some have drunk a little of Its water. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'The sage Narada returned after seeing that Ocean of Consciousness from a distance; Shukadeva touched It three times; and Lord Shiva drank three handfuls of Its water and then collapsed, completely devoid of external consciousness.'" 137

Swami Sarvapriyananda of the Ramakrishna Order in New York City points out spiritual enlightenment is not a journey in space (e.g., from this world to Heaven), or a journey in time (e.g. post-mortem), or as an object (e.g., from one object to another). It is a journey from ignorance to knowledge. 138

The process of reaching the One was explained by Plotinus (c. 205-70), "Our thought cannot grasp the One as long as any other image remains active in the soul. To this end, you must set free your soul from all outward things and turn wholly within yourself, with no more leaning to what lies outside, and lay your mind bare of ideal forms, as before of the object of sense, and forget even yourself, and so come within sight of that One." 139

Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327) the Dominican priest and great German mystic gave us insights into his profound spiritual experiences of the Nondual-Advaitic

Godhead, "To gauge the soul we must gauge it with God, for the Ground of God and the Ground of the Soul are one and the same." "There is a spirit in the soul, untouched by time and flesh, flowing from the Spirit, remaining in the Spirit, itself wholly spiritual. In this principle is God, ever verdant, ever flowering in all the joy and glory of His actual Self. Sometimes I have called this principle the Tabernacle of the soul, sometimes a spiritual Light; I say it is a Spark. But now I say that it is more exalted over this, than the heavens are exalted above the earth. So now I name it in a nobler fashion.... It is free of all names void of all forms. It is one and simple, as God is one and simple, and no man can in any wise behold it."¹⁴⁰ "When I came out of the Godhead into multiplicity, then all things proclaimed, 'There is a God' (the Personal Creator). Now this cannot make me blessed, for hereby I realize myself as creature. But in the breaking through I am more than all creatures; I am neither God nor creature; I am that which I was and shall remain, now and forever more. There I receive a thrust, which carries me above all angels. By this thrust I become so rich that God is not sufficient for me, in so far as He is only God in his Divine works. For in thus breaking through, I perceive what God and I are in common. There I am what I was. There I neither increase or decrease. For there I am the immovable which moves all things. Here man has won again what he is eternally and ever shall be. Here God is received into the soul." "The Godhead gave all things up to God. The Godhead is poor, naked and empty as though it were not; it has not, wills not, wants not, works not, gets not. It is God, who has the treasure and the bride in him, the Godhead is as void as though it were not." "Meanwhile, I beseech you by the eternal and imperishable truth, and by my soul, consider; grasp the unheard-of. God and Godhead are as distinct as heaven and earth. Heaven stands a thousand miles above the earth, and even so the Godhead is above God." "Thou must love God as not-God, not-Spirit, not-person, not-image, but as He is, a sheer, pure absolute One, sundered from all two-ness, and in whom we must eternally sink from nothingness to nothingness."¹⁴¹ "Thus I say to you in the name of Divine truth, as long as you have the will, even the will to fulfill God's will, and as long as you have the desire for eternity and for God, to this very extent you are not

properly poor, for the only one who is a poor person is one who wills nothing and desires nothing. When I still stood in my first cause, there I had no God and was cause of myself. There I willed nothing, I desired nothing, for I was a pure being and a knower of myself in delight of the truth. There I willed myself and nothing else. What I willed, that I was; and what I was; that I willed. There I stood, free of God and of all things. But when I took leave from this state of free will and received my created being, then I had God.”¹⁴²

Eckhart also stated, “When I cease projecting myself into any image, when no image is represented any longer in me, and when I cast out of myself and eject whatever is in me, then I am ready to be transported into the naked Being of God, the pure Being of the Spirit. All likeness has to be expelled from it. Then I am translated into God, and I become one with Him—one sole substance, one being, and one nature; the Son of God. And after this has been accomplished, nothing is hidden anymore in God which has not become manifest or mine. Then I become wise and powerful. I become all things, as He is, and I am one and the same being with Him.... Indeed, no image will disclose the Godhead or God's Being to us. If some image or similitude remained in you, you would never become one with God. Therefore in order for you to be one with God, no image must be represented in you, and you must not represent yourself in any.”¹⁴³ Does Eckhart mean that to realize the Godhead, we must cease projecting the physical image of a body and the mental image of a mind, which we consider ourself to be? In Sanskrit this false projection due to maya is called Viksepa.

The German philosopher Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) an admirer of the *Upanishads*, devoted more than one hundred pages to Indian writings in his book *Philosophy of Mythology* (1842). He wrote, “In all of us there dwells a secret marvelous power of freeing ourselves from the changes of time, of withdrawing to our secret selves away from external things, and of so discovering to ourselves the eternal in us in the form of unchangability. This presentation of ourselves to ourselves is the most truly personal experience upon which depends everything that we know of the supersensual world. This presentation shows for the first time what real existence is, whilst all else only

appears to be. It differs from every presentation of the sense in its perfect freedom, whilst all other presentations are bound, being over-weighted by the burden of the object. This intellectual presentation occurs when we cease to be our own object, when, withdrawing into ourselves, the perceiving image merges in the self-perceived.”¹⁴⁴

Spiritual realization is possible according to Arthur Schopenhauer because, “Everyone carries this [the Thing-in-Itself] within himself, in fact he himself is It, hence in self-consciousness It must be in some way accessible to him.”¹⁴⁵ In contemplative experience, “We lose ourselves entirely in this object, to use a pregnant expression; in other words we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception... the individual has lost himself; he is pure will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge.” “When we enter the state of pure contemplation, we are raised for the moment above all willing, above all desires and cares; we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves.”¹⁴⁶

Brahma-jnana is not knowledge of or about something else, but is knowledge as such without a division between subject and object or knower and known. According to strict Advaita, Nirguna Brahman is attained by jnana (knowledge). According to jnana yoga transcendent Being cannot be attained by means of action, since It is beyond the realm of doing. But unless a person is born near perfect, they have to practice the other three yogas in order to acquire the capacity to attain this knowledge.

Sadhu Santinatha wrote in his autobiography *Experiences of a Truth Seeker* (1950) that he lived as a monastic in the Himalayas and attained nirvikalpa samadhi. Later he had a long series of migraine headaches. He then realized he did not have nirvikalpa samadhi and mistakenly thought that no one else has either. He eventually became a Kantian believing that samadhi is not possible for anyone since God is beyond all forms of human understanding.¹⁴⁷ Before a yogi

can attain nirvikalpa samadhi they must first purify the fourth, fifth, and sixth centers. One proceeds up the kundalini hierarchy one step at a time. For most people these centers are purified by combining bhakti and raja yoga (meditation) but some attain it thorough jnana yoga. Possibly Nirvikalpa Samadhi can only be attained through jnana yoga.

For more on this subject see: Sri Ramakrishna and Western Thought, Ch. II. The Nature of Brahman-God, Section 10. Realizing Our Oneness with Nirguna Brahman-Essence of God.

6. Relationship between Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman

Their relationship can be viewed as hierarchal or as equal. a) For the Neo-Platonist Plotinus' (c. 205-70) there are three ontological levels of divinity. The One emanates (to flow from, radiates) *ex deo* (out of God) Nous, which in turn emanates the World Soul. "It must be a *radiation [emanation]* from It while It remains unchanged, like the bright light of the sun which, so to speak, runs round it, springing from it continually while it remains unchanged."¹⁴⁸ Highest is the One comparable to Nirguna Brahman, less perfect is the Nous the Divine Intellect to Ishvara (or Para-Ishvara), and finally the less perfect World Soul to Mahat (Hiranyagarbha), of which the universe is a fragment. According to this idea, Saguna Brahman has two modes or aspects, first the internal and Transcendent one (Para-Ishvara=Nous) that is part of the Divine world (Brahmaloka) being independent of the universe. Second, the external and immanent mode or aspect (Mahat=World Soul) of Saguna Brahman that creates the phenomenal world.¹⁴⁹

b) Based on his religious experiences Ramakrishna's Vijnana considers Nirguna and Saguna Brahman to be ontologically equal. He told his disciples, "The vijnanis accept both God with form and the formless, both the Personal God and the Impersonal.... But mark this: form and formlessness belong to one and the same Reality."¹⁵⁰ One cannot think of the Absolute without the Relative, or the Relative without the Absolute." "Both the Absolute and the Relative

belong to the same Reality."¹⁵¹ Vijnana is an example of the Plenitude of the infinite Brahman-God whose actions and capabilities far exceed ours. Is there an underlying Reality that the Impersonal and Personal are both aspects of and what is Its nature? Vijnana supports Pluralism (both are real), Plotinus is an Inclusivist (both are real but there is a hierarchy), while some Advaita Vedantists are Exclusivist (only one is real).

Expanding on the Vijnana Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna, one aspect of Brahman-God could be timeless, spaceless, changeless, simple, infinite without finite parts, and unknowable to the human intellect and another within time and space, changing, complex, infinite with finite parts, and knowable. Since they are two different aspects of a single infinite Reality, a contradiction might not be involved. Some people mistakenly take an either/or viewpoint.

c) The Christian Trinity teach that God is one in Being with an indivisible essence (ousia) (comparable to Nirguna Brahman) while existing as three co-equal, co-eternal Persons (Hypostases), namely, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (comparable to Saguna Brahman). All three Persons are truly divine, yet eternally distinct from one another.¹⁵² Like Ramakrishna they consider both to be ontologically equal and to belong to the same Reality.

d) According to Charles Hartshorne's (1897-2000) Process Theology, God is dipolar having two aspects. It is nondual, simple, Immutable, formless, and one (comparable to Nirguna Brahman) in Its intrinsic primordial nature of Being. It is dual, complex, mutable, with form, and many (comparable to Saguna Brahman) in Its dynamic consequent nature of Becoming when it acts in the universe and responds to humans. The plenitude of Brahman-God requires that It has both natures; otherwise it would be lacking in Its Divine characteristics.¹⁵³

e) Nirguna Brahman (Essence of God) and Saguna Brahman (Manifestation of God) are related by such philosophical concepts as: the "that" and the "what," essence and existence, existence and content, subject and predicate, and substance and quality, as for example fire and its power to burn. As the British philosopher F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) states, for an empirical object, a "that" (existence) and a "what" (content) are inseparable and not divisible. Yet the two

are conceptually distinguishable. To understand the nature of the "that," it must be qualified by the "what." It is not bare reality, existence without a character and content.¹⁵⁴

f) The epistemological viewpoint as explained by Swami Vivekananda, "The Personal God is the highest reading that can be attained to, of that Impersonal, by the human intellect."¹⁵⁵ From an epistemological standpoint, Saguna Brahman is Nirguna Brahman as seen through the human mind. Nirguna Brahman is Brahman-in-Itself independent of the human mind, and when viewed by a pure spiritual mind is Saguna Brahman (Epistemological Nondualism). The mind imposes the limitations, of space, time, and causality onto Brahman.

g) Nirguna Brahman is the Realities essence, and Saguna Brahman Its manifestation. We might think of essence as internal and Its manifestation as external.

Are Nirguna and Saguna Brahman related in a hierarchal fashion? Is the Nirguna state that transcends the human mind (composed of intellect and five senses) Ultimate Reality? Or are Nirguna and Saguna Brahman ontologically equal as two aspects of the same Reality? What is the nature of that Reality?

7. Nirguna Brahman Manifests as the Universe

a) Through the limitations of name and form: Vivekananda states, "So this whole universe is that one Unit Existence; name and form have created all these various differences.... name and form, or, as it has been called in Europe, "time, space, and causality"--is out of this one Infinite Existence showing us the manifoldness of the universe; in substance, this universe is one."¹⁵⁶ Along this line Shankara wrote, "That omniscient and omnipotent source must be Brahman from which occur the birth, continuance, and dissolution of this universe that is manifested through name and form."¹⁵⁷

b) Through the limitations of space, time, and causation: The Infinite

Nirguna Brahman becomes the finite universe due to the limitations of space (desha), time (kala), and causality (karana) (finitude), and consequently the one existence appears to be many. Swami Vivekananda tells us, "The Absolute and the Infinite can become this universe only by limitation. Everything must be limited that comes through the senses, or through the mind, or through the intellect ... This Absolute (a) has become the universe (b) by coming through time, space, and causation (c). This is the central idea of Advaita. Time, space, and causation are like the glass through which the Absolute is seen, and when It is seen on the lower side, It appears as the universe."¹⁵⁸ In this sense a person's ontology (views of reality) is determined by their epistemology (ways of knowing).

The categories of space, time, and causality (based on Aristotle's four causes) are related to the following six basic questions: space (where), time (when), causation (how), material and formal cause (what), efficient-instrumental cause (who), and the final cause (why). In this sense the four causes are explanations. Each of these six questions involves a limitation, for example 'where' means the event is located in one place and not another, and 'when' implies it occurred at one time and not another. For an idea, the four causes are: material (thought), formal (nature of the idea), efficient (person that is thinking), and final (what it explains).

Because there is space we ask where and because of time we ask when. Space is described by location and distance and time by simultaneity and succession. Brahman-God's characteristics are related to space (transcendence, immanence), time (eternity, immutability), space and time (infinity), and causation (aseity). We might consider space, time, and causation to be the three most basic names and forms. Forms are concrete as objects and abstract as concepts. Space is required to have a form and time in order to act and to change.

c) By objectification: Vivekananda relates, "Were it [the Atman] knowable, it would not be what it is, for it is the eternal subject. Knowledge is a limitation, knowledge is objectifying. He is the eternal subject of everything, the eternal

witness in this universe, your own Self. Knowledge is, as it were, a lower step, a degeneration. We are that eternal subject already; how can we know it? It is the real nature of every man."¹⁵⁹ "He is the Eternal Subject of everything. I am the subject of this chair; I see the chair; so God is the Eternal Subject of my soul. How can you objectify Him, the Essence of your souls, the Reality of everything?"¹⁶⁰ The Eternal Subject (Atman) objectifies and externalizes becoming the universe.

d) By reflection: Vivekananda mentions, "Whatever of intelligence we see in nature is but the reflection of this Self [Atman] upon nature."¹⁶¹ "The apparent man, however great he may be, is only a dim reflection of the Real Man who is beyond." "That which has relative existence has only a reflected existence.... When the soul [Atman] reflects its powers on the mind and the mind thinks." "All this universe is the reflection of that One Eternal Being, the Atman, and as the reflection falls upon good or bad reflectors, so good or bad images are cast up." "The infinite is one and not many, and that one Infinite Soul is reflecting itself through thousands and thousands of mirrors, appearing as so many different souls" "This world is real inasmuch as it contains a little bit [of] the reflection of that God."¹⁶²

e) As the background of existence: Nirguna Brahman-Atman is the background of existence (Being-Itself), the foundational substratum and cause of the world. Vivekananda discerned, "The background, the reality, of everyone is that same Eternal, Ever Blessed, Ever Pure, and Ever Perfect One. It is the Atman, the Soul, in the saint and the sinner, in the happy and the miserable, in the beautiful and the ugly, in men and in animals; it is the same throughout. It is the shining One. The difference is caused by the power of expression. In some It is expressed more, in others less, but this difference of expression has no effect upon the Atman."¹⁶³ "It is the same Infinite Soul, which is the background of the universe, that we call God. The same Infinite Soul also is the background of the human mind which we call the human soul."¹⁶⁴

From the standpoint of the phenomenal world, Nirguna Brahman-Atman, Thing-in-Itself, and Being-Itself can be viewed as being the background or as

the ground of existence. Christians are more apt to think vertically, the Transcendental God as being up there or for a religious philosopher like Eckhart or Tillich (Ground of Being)¹⁶⁵ as the Divine ground beneath us. Vivekananda (and Shankara) used the word “background” rather than the Western term “ground.” The expression “background” is more compatible with mystical experience, that the Divine realm is within and pervades our consciousness. Jesus’ made the statement, “The Kingdom of God is within you (Lk 17:21, King James),” and the Apostle Paul’s pronouncement, “One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:6).

Vivekananda is making the important point that Nirguna Brahman is not “wholly other.” It is the foundation of the universe and without It there would be no universe, which includes us. It is shining through the universe and maintaining its existence at every moment. The Internal Ruler is an immanent form of Brahman-God (Antaryamin).

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- ¹ CW, II:139. Though it is not pronounced this way, a-dvaita, a means non and dvaita mean dual (Latin dualis).
- ² Wilhelm Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), p. 379.
- ³ Judith Brown, *Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1895), pp. 155-56..
- ⁴ Burke, II, p. 150; E. Farnsworth, *The Arena* (1900), pp. 212-18; WARHD, pp. 394, 481.
- ⁵ Arvind Sharma, *Ramakrishna and Vedanta New Perspectives* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1989), p. 118; CW, VII:139-40.
- ⁶ Basu, pp. 601-02; Life, II, p. 76; WARHD, p. 326.
- ⁷ CW, V:82; II:347; III:234.
- ⁸ CW, II:252-53.
- ⁹ HYSC, pp. 510-11.
- ¹⁰ S. Radhakrishnan *The Hindu View of Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927, 1941), pp. 23, 32.
- ¹¹ Y. Masih, *Introduction to Religious Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), pp. 361-63.
- ¹² Ghanananda, pp. 71, 82.
- ¹³ CW, VIII:250.
- ¹⁴ CW, I:14-15.

¹⁵ Robert P. Utter, "Swami Vivekananda's Message to the West," PB (Feb. 1983), p. 53.

¹⁶ CW, II:461.

¹⁸ CW, I:369-70, 372-73.

¹⁹ Glyn Richards, "Gandhi's Concept of Truth and the Advaita Tradition," *Religious Studies* (1986), p. 12.

²⁰ G. Stavig, "Ralph Waldo Emerson's Appreciation of India in His Own Words", PB (May 2001), pp., pp. 269-72.

²¹ CW, V:222.

²² Karl Potter, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, Vol. 1-2 (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1995). It must be remembered that while the Indian philosophers are often nondualists the majority of people are dualistic (theists). In Potter's book the articles are scattered around in different places so it is not easy to calculate the totals.

²⁴ Most Biblical quotations cited are from *The Holy Bible Revised Standard Version* (hereafter HB) (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1952). To create a list of parallel Indian-Christian scriptural passages used in this book the most used sources were: F. Lorinser, *Die Bhagavad-Gita* (Breslau: G. Porsch, 1869), pp. 273-85; Adolf Kaegi, *The Rigveda* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1886), pp. 197-98; E. Washburn Hopkins, *India Old and New* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), pp. 149-57; George Haas, "Recurrent and Parallel Passages in the Principal *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 42 (1922), pp. 1-43; Wade Hatcher, ed., *The Bhagavad Gita and the Bible* (Seattle: Peanut Butter Publishing, 1992); Andrew Wilson, ed., *World Scripture* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1995).

²⁵ BGC, 2.25.

²⁶ BGC, 13.12.

²⁷ BRU, III.8.11.

²⁸ BSB, III.2.22; Radhakrishnan, II, pp. 484, 502, 534-35; Ram Lal Singh, *An Inquiry Concerning Reason in Kant and Samkara* (Allahabad: Chugh Publications, 1978), pp. 173-74, 182, 241-45; Gopal Stavig, "The Supreme Atman of Shankara's Advaita and the Absolute Essence in the Philosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi," *Journal of Dharma* 23 (1998), p. 305. Just as Aquinas gives the objections to his ideas, so also Shankara states the view of his opponent, which they both try to disprove.

²⁹ Ken Wilber, *Eye to Eye* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1983), p. 295. We notice a partial Medieval Historical Parallelism if we use the traditional dates for Shankara (788-820) in that he was roughly a contemporary of the following founders of religious philosophical movements: Vasugupta (fl. 825) of Kashmir Shaivism; Saicho (later known as Dengyo Daishi) (767-822) of the Tendai (Chinese Tien Tai) school of Japanese Buddhism in 805; Kukai (later known as Kobo Daishi) (774-835) of Esoteric Tantric Shingon school in 806; Han Yu (768-824) of the Chinese Neo-Confucianist movement; Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 874/78) from Iran of Sufi mystical philosophical monism; Abu I-Hudhayl (748/53-840/50) from Iraq the first prominent Mutazilite theologian; the Neoplatonist al-Kindi (801-66/73) in Iraq; the North African Isaac Israeli (850-950) the first Jewish Neoplatonist philosopher; and John Scotus Eriugena (810-77) the originator of Christian medieval philosophy during the Carolingian renaissance (G. Stavig, "The Historical Synchronization of Eurasian Medieval Philosophy," Unpublished Manuscript 2003).

³⁰ CW, II:132-33.

³¹ CW, V:206.

³² Lal, pp. 165-66.

³³ Sinha, I, pp. 245-46.

³⁴ Harry Wolfson, *Philo* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), II, pp. 109-11, 150.

³⁵ Web: iep.utm.edu/midplato

³⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, tr. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), VII, 38; VI, 64-65.

³⁷ FP, I, 1:5-6; G. Stavig, "Origen and Indian Thought", BRMIC (March 2003), pp.133-40.

³⁸ Web: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ammonius_Saccus; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plotinus

³⁹ Enneads, I, 7.1; III, 8.10; III, 9.9; V, 2.1; V, 3.12.

⁴⁰ Enneads, V, 3.13-14; V, 5.6, 13.

⁴¹ Enneads, V, 6.5; VI, 9.3, 6; III, 8.10; I, 7.1. For the S. MacKenna translation see, Web:

classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.html

⁴² Enneads, V, 5.11; G. Stavig, "Plotinus and Indian Philosophy", BRMIC (Aug. 2002), pp. 313-18; (Sept. 2002), pp. 360-64. Neo-Platonism was an original and creative syntheses of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Neo-Pythagoreans, and Middle Platonism that began with the works of Antiochus (c. 130-68 B.C.). Two Middle-Platonists, Philo of Alexandria was the founder of Biblical **philosophical** theology and Origen introduced some of these ideas into Christianity.

⁴³ Chittick (1989), pp. 58, 60; originally from Ibn al-'Arabi, *Futuhat* (1911), II, 619, 597.

⁴⁴ Chittick (1989), pp. 59, 62; al-'Arabi (1911), II, 69, 579. Vivekananda stated, "Educated Mohammedans are Sufis, scarcely to be distinguished from Hindus"(CW, 5:190).The most outstanding Vedantic philosopher of Islam is Ibn al 'Arabi, and it was his Sufi school that was dominate in Muslim India for many centuries producing many books of a Vedantic nature. The West's greatest expert on Ibn al 'Arabi, Professor William Chittick of Stony Brook University, New York travelled to India in the 1990's and read these Muslim philosophical works, which he wrote are of the highest quality. It is hoped that these Sufi volumes are preserved that show an affinity with the Hindu Vedantic writings, since they are most beneficial for Hindu-Muslim relations in India. William Chittick, "Notes on Ibn al-'Arabi's Influence in the Subcontinent [India]," *The Muslim World* 82 (1992), p. 222; Gopal Stavig, "The Supreme Atman of Sankara's Advaita and the Absolute Essence in the Philosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi," *Journal of Dharma* 23 (July-Sept. 1998), pp. 303-26; G. Stavig, "Advaitists in Other Lands: Ibn al-'Arabi," *Vedanta Kesari* (Feb. 1999), pp. 67-71; Gopal Stavig, "Ibn 'Arabi's Influence in Muslim India," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* (Oxford University) 45 (Summer 2009), pp. 121-32.

⁴⁵ ST, I, 39.2. In this book the word Divine is capitalized to show reverence.

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- ⁶⁹ Sister Shivani, *Swami Abhedananda in America* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1947, 1991), p. 284
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- ⁷⁴ BSB, III.3.32; BGC, Introduction.
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