

Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman and the Creation of the Universe—II

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Deification of the Universe

After Sri Ramakrishna transmitted spiritual energy to Swami Vivekananda through a touch, the latter had this remarkable religious experience, ‘The magic touch of the Master that day immediately brought a wonderful change over my mind. I was astounded to find that really there was nothing in the universe but God! I saw it quite clearly, but kept silent to see whether the impression would last; but it did not abate in the course of the day. I returned home, but there too, everything I saw appeared to be Brahman. I sat down to take my meal, but found that everything—the food, the plate, the person who served, and even myself—was nothing but That.... While walking in the streets, I noticed cabs plying, but I did not feel inclined to move out of the way. I felt that the cabs and myself were of one stuff.... This state of things continued for some days. When I became normal again, I realized that I must have had a glimpse of the Advaita state. Then it struck me that the words of the scriptures were not false. Thenceforth I could not deny the conclusions of the Advaita [Nondualistic] philosophy.’¹⁴ Ontologically the universe remains the same, no matter how it is experienced. We experience the world epistemologically through our physical senses. When Ramakrishna touched

Vivekananda, the latter experienced the world epistemologically through his spiritual senses, that it is pervaded and interpenetrated by a blissful Divine consciousness.

Sri Ramakrishna had a similar experience stating, ‘After realizing God, one sees that it is God Himself who has become the universe and all living beings. The Divine Mother revealed to me in the Kali temple that it was She who had become everything. She showed me that everything was full of Consciousness. The Image was Consciousness, the altar was Consciousness, the water-vessels were Consciousness, the door-sill was Consciousness, the marble floor was Consciousness—all was Consciousness. I found everything inside the room soaked, as it were, in Bliss—the Bliss of Satchidananda.’

From a metaphysical standpoint, their mystical experiences support Spiritual Pantheism (all-is-God) or, if you prefer, Spiritual Panentheism (all-is-in-God), that empirical existence as experienced through the spirit is the ‘spiritual universe’, a manifestation or expression of the transcendental Brahman-God that is distinct from it. Pantheism here means that Brahman-God is both the transcendent Reality and is immanent as being identical with the universe. When Ramakrishna had that experience he was in a state of *samādhi*,

viewing the universe from the spirit. We do not realize this because we view the world from the five physical senses and the intellect and not from the spirit. Seen and experienced from the senses and intellect (*māyā*), the world appears to be imperfect. As Vivekananda stated, ‘The sum-total of this whole universe is God Himself. Is God then matter? No, certainly not, for matter is that God perceived by the five senses; that God as perceived through the intellect is mind; and when the spirit sees, He is seen as spirit.’¹⁵ ‘Deification of the world—giving up the world as we think of it, as we know it, as it appears to us—and to know what it really is. Deify it; it is God alone.’¹⁶ Ontologically and chronologically this sublime and spiritual pantheistic universe always exists. A perfect Brahman-God creates a perfect universe. The mystic has some realization of this when he/she perceives the world through the spirit. People experience the world as imperfect. This is due to the limited nature of their perceptive apparatus and the imperfect thoughts in their mind that they project into the outside world (*māyā*). Is it paradoxical that the world is objectively perfect, while subjective perception is imperfect?

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. From the One emanates (to flow from, radiates) *ex deo* (out of God) Nous, from 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.’¹⁷ Highest is the One

comparable to Nirguna Brahman, less perfect is the Nous the Divine Intellect to *Ishvara* (or *Parā-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 (*Parā-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.¹⁸

b) Based on his religious experiences, Ramakrishna’s *Vijnāna* 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.’¹⁹ 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.’²⁰ *Vijnāna* 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? *Vijnāna* 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 *Vijnāna* 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.

Ramakrishna describes the Nirguna-Saguna relationship in the following ways: a) *Substance-Attribute relation*: ‘fire and its power to burn,’ ‘milk and its whiteness,’ ‘water and its wetness,’ and ‘the lustre of the gem.’ He stresses their bidirectionality, ‘You cannot think of fire without its power to burn, nor can you think of the power to burn without fire.’²¹ b) *Substance-Mode relation*: ‘The ice melts; it becomes the same water it was before’ and ‘Milk sets into curd, and the curd is churned into butter’, they are not essentially different.²² c) *Substance-Action*: ‘The snake and its wriggling motion.’²³ d) *Substance-Form*: ‘Shakti cannot exist without Brahman, just as waves cannot exist without water.’²⁴ e) *Inactive-Active aspect relation*: ‘Shakti, the Power of Brahman-God. This Primal Power and Brahman are one and the same.’ f) *Emanation relation*: ‘The Absolute may be likened to the sun, and the Relative to the rays.’²⁵ g) *Whole-Part relation*: ‘Whole and part are like fire and its sparks.’²⁶

c) The Christian Trinity implies 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.²⁷ Like Ramakrishna they consider both to be ontologically and chronologically 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.²⁸

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.²⁹

f) The epistemological viewpoint as explained by Swami Vivekananda is, ‘The Personal God is the highest reading that can be attained to, of that Impersonal, by the human intellect.’³⁰ 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 reflected off a pure spiritual mind is Saguna Brahman.

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

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.’³¹ 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.’³²

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 (*kāla*), and causality (*kāraṇa*) (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.’³³ In this sense a person’s ontology (views of reality) is determined by his or her 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 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 reflection:* Vivekananda mentions, ‘Whatever of intelligence we see in nature is but the reflection of this Self [Atman] upon nature.’³⁴ ‘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.... 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.’³⁵

d) *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.³⁶ '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.'³⁷

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)³⁸ 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 refers to '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 (*Antaryāmin*).

Saguna Brahman Manifests as the Universe

Only the Saguna nature possesses a Divine-Universal Mind with an intellect and will, and a Universal Body. Working through these It creates, preserves, and destroys the universe, which requires complexity, space, time, and mutability. The relation between Saguna Brahman-God and the universe is comparable to: Greater-Lesser, Perfect-Imperfect, Primary-Secondary; One-Many, Universal-Particular (particularization), Whole-Part; Homogeneous-Heterogeneous, Unity-Diversity; Abstract-Concrete, Idea-Object, Internal-External (externalization), Subject-Object (objectification), Subtle-Gross; Archetype-Ectype, Source-Image, Source-Participation, Source-Reflection, Source-Representation; and Cause-Effect, Free-Determined, Independent-Dependent, Necessary-Contingent, Source-Emanation, Source-Transformation.

Creation of the universe occurs:

a) *By means of a transformation and modification:* Brahman-God transforms into understandable because *Mahat* is rational and has made us rational.

b) *On account of fragmentation, particularization, and division:* The integrated Whole (*Mahat*, the Universal Mind and Body) is ontologically prior to and subdivides into Its parts that constitute the universe. This is a complex procedure since the Universal Mind and Body fragmentizes into a vast number of different human and animal minds and bodies, each with a different nature. Also, their minds (particularly human) and bodies are in a process of continually changing. When fragmentation occurs producing the mind of particular individuals they are always less than the Universal Mind. Sri Ramakrishna mentioned, 'God alone has become all this;

but He manifests Himself more in certain things than others.’³⁹ So, fragmented individuals vary from one another in their capacities and their degree of manifestation changes over time. Vivekananda states, ‘The mind is universal. Your mind, my mind, all these little minds, are fragments of that Universal Mind, little waves in the ocean; and on account of this continuity, we can convey our thoughts directly to one another.’⁴⁰

c) *By externalization, objectification, grossification, and projection:* The internal becomes external, the subject an object (see Eternal Subject above), and the subtle mental the gross physical. Many neurologists think that the human brain creates the mind and thought but actually the mind (subtle body composed of subtle matter and energy) creates the physical body (gross matter and energy) including the brain.⁴¹ Swami Vivekananda relates, ‘We are all projected from one common centre, which is God. The highest as well as the lowest life God ever projected will come back to the Father of all lives.... “From whom all beings are projected, in whom all live, and unto whom they all return; that is God.”’⁴²

d) *As a reflection, image, and copy:* For Plotinus (c. 205-70), the visible world is an imperfect reflection of the Ideal Forms of the Divine Intelligence (Nous), which is transplanted onto matter. He said, ‘Nature [Physis, *Samsara*] is an image of intelligence, and since it is the last and lowest part of the soul, [it] has the last ray of the rational forming principle which shines in it.... that which is reflected from It [Nous, Divine Intelligence] into matter is nature ... and these are the last and lowest realities of the intelligible world.’⁴³ All-Soul [World-Soul] is ‘an image of Intellect [Nous, Divine World and Divine Mind], as its life is a reflection and likeness of it.’⁴⁴

The universe as an ectype is an imperfect copy of the original Reality. From this standpoint, the content in the Mind of God are the true realities, and the sense objects of finite perceivers are imperfect copies or resemblances, phenomenal manifestations, or representations of the eternal archetypes.

e) *From Divine Ideas:*⁴⁵ Indian and Western religious philosophers agree that the universe is created out of exemplary ideas or forms, the archetypes of all things that exist in the Divine Mind. These ideas are the thoughts of Brahman-God, which are mental forms within the Divine Intelligence, out of which the universe is made. Thoughts in the Divine Mind not only create physical objects, but also abstract entities such as the principles of reason, laws of logic and mathematics, numbers, values such as goodness, etc. Swami Abhedananda relates, ‘God thinks of the manifold world in His Cosmic Mind and then gives them the material form.... He projects the images of the manifold world outside from within.’⁴⁶ ‘The Cosmic Mind contains all the ideas or concepts of the various things that have come into existence since creation.’⁴⁷ First the Divine Mind thinks then It wills. A person can think without willing, but cannot will unless s/he thinks.

f) *From Divine Words (logos) or sound vibration:* According to Shankara at the beginning of each cosmic cycle, the Vedic words in the mind of Brahman (God) are the archetypal ideas, used to create the names and forms of all things in the universe. ‘The universe, consisting of the gods and others, originates verily from the Vedic words.... He [Brahman] was intent on creation, the Vedic words flashed in His mind before creation and then He created the things according to these’.⁴⁸ Vivekananda added, ‘This eternal Sphota [Logos, Sound-Brahman], the

essential eternal material of all ideas or names, is the power through which the Lord creates the universe; nay, the Lord first becomes conditioned as the Sphota [Logos, Sound-Brahman], and then evolves Himself out as the yet more concrete sensible universe.' 'The words of the *Vedas*. These are the eternal words out of which the whole universe has been produced. There cannot be any thought without the word. Thus, whatever there is in this world is the manifestation of thought, and thought can only manifest itself through words.'⁴⁹

g) *Through a succession of changing thoughts*: It is possible that when an object splits into two pieces this does not occur through a process of division. It could occur through a succession of thoughts in the mind of Brahman-God, beginning with the whole object and ending with the object as two pieces. Similarly, when Brahman-God creates the universe this could occur through a succession of changing thoughts and not from the empirical object undergoing change.

h) *Creatio ex nihilo*: Creationism whereby the Lord creates the phenomenal world from nothing.

i) *Pantheism*: Brahman-God has become or transforms into the universe. This can be qualified by degrees of the presence of Brahman-God in the universe.

Ontological creation is perpetually ongoing, occurring at this very moment and at every other moment in time. We might think of ontological creation as vertical and chronological as horizontal over time. Preservation of the universe is due to perpetual creation and the ceasing of it brings about destruction. Brahman-God knows of the events occurring in the universe in at least three ways: 1) intuitively, utilizing nonpropositional modes of apprehension, 2) through inference, and 3)

by observation. It would be limited if It had only one-way of knowing.

Chronological creation begins at one point in time and ends in another. Most people believe that after creating the universe Brahman-God occasionally intervenes in its workings. A less held idea is Deism, that Brahman-God the uncaused First Cause created the initial conditions including the physical constants and laws of the universe and then withdrew and let it run itself without interference. In this case there would be no need for Brahman-God to intervene at a later date. This is analogous to a person or a machine manufacturing a watch or a clock and then letting it run by itself. Augustine (354-430) believed that God created everything at the beginning of time in a potential germ-state including all people and they later materialized coming into empirical existence at different times in world history.⁵⁰

If the universe proceeds out of the Divine Mind, this implies that metaphysical creation and relations are also a logical creation and relations. We find the idea of a logical creation in the teachings of Johannes Scotus Erigena (c. 810-77). The universal (the class-concept or logical genus) is the original reality that produces the particulars (the species and ultimately the individuals) taking on definite form. For him logical relations of concepts are also metaphysical relations. The universals of the Divine Mind are determining substances that through logical subordination become production and inclusion of the particular by the general. When creating the universe, logical partition and determination transform into a causal process by means of which the universal takes on form that unfolds in the particulars. Following this system the creation of the universe might possibly proceed in the logical process and sequence of genus, then species, then individuals.⁵¹

According to Plato, Eternal Forms (*Eidos*) are archetypes, meaning original models, of which particular objects, properties, and relations are copies. Particulars participate in the Forms, and the Forms inhere in the particulars. Forms such as Beauty are more real than any object that imitates them. Unlike physical entities, these Forms are timeless and unchanging unqualified perfection. They are the essences of various objects that determine what kind of thing it is. For example, a particular table exists only because tableness is at the core; it is its essence. Form transcends space and time altogether, yet it provides the formal basis for them. They are perfect, unchanging,

and non-physical without spatial or temporal dimensions. The entity is essentially or really the transcendent Ideal Form, and the empirical object in the sensible world is an appearance (*phainomena*), shadow, or imitation of It.⁵²

Swami Abhedananda taught, 'Before man came into existence there was an Ideal Man or a perfect type of man in the thought of God, and its projection or physical manifestation became something like [less than] that ideal type, because the gross manifestation, being limited by time, space, and causation, cannot be exactly the same as the ideal type which is perfect.... All human beings, therefore, are more or less imperfect expressions of that Ideal Man.'⁵³ ■

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THE HYMN OF SAMADHI

(Rendered from Bengali)

Lo! The sun is not, nor the comely moon,
All light extinct; in the great void of space
Floats shadow-like the image-universe.

In the void of mind involute, there floats
The fleeting universe, rises and floats,
Sinks again, ceaseless, in the current "I".

Slowly, slowly, the shadow-multitude
Entered the primal womb, and flowed ceaseless,
The only current, the "I am", "I am".

Lo! 'Tis stopped, ev'n that current flows no more,
Void merged into void—beyond speech and mind!
Whose heart understands, he verily does.

—*CWSV*, Vol. 4, p. 498.