CHAPTER III

REALITY BRAHMA AND ĪŚVARA
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It is a common fact that the question of reality, the ontological problem puzzles all with diffidence and hesitation. Inspite of purely philosophical problems there is much divergence of view and confusion in respect of the meaning of reality. G. T. Patrick comments, "The subject may be approached from the standpoint of one's own individual religious experience. It may be approached from the standpoint of religious faith in the teachings of the church or religious authority. It may be approached from the standpoint of profound philosophical reflection."¹

The thirst for knowing the absolute reality is continuing for a long time. The problems of reality drew the attention of the earliest Greek philosophers. "Thales of Miletus, who lived in the sixth century before Christ and who is called the father of philosophy, said that all things come from water; but his successors in the Ionian school thought that they come from air or fire. Rapidly the early Greeks advanced beyond these crude conceptions and soon arrived at the theory that the world is made of atoms, or little material particles. Since then many theories as to the ultimate nature of reality have been advanced"²

Gradually in the system of thought there are three types of philosophical theories of reality, Monism, Dualism and Pluralism. Monism insists that the ultimate stuff of the world is one. According to dualism, mind and matter are the fundamental realities in the world and they can be reduced – the one to the

¹ G. T. Patrick, Introduction to Philosophy, pp 385-386
² ibid., p 181
other. As a metaphysical theory, pluralism asserts that the reality of the world is manifolds and it is wrong assumption that reduces the welter of the world to substances or one.

There are varieties of vocabulary with regard to the idea of God. Theism, Deism, Pantheism, Polytheism and Monotheism indicate the idea of God or reality. Theories like atheism, agnosticism and other heterodox thinkers attempted to deny or disprove the existence of God or Reality, though with baffling arguments.

Pringle Pattison says that the Reality is one and the human mind is also one, and not a bundle of unconnected and conflicting faculties. Various modes of apprehending reality must have a relation to one another through their common basis both in the subject and in the object. Philosophy is just the attempt of the reason to realize the co-ordination of the different aspects of experience and thereby express, as far as may be, the nature of the total fact.³

The famous Agnostic Herbert Spencer also admits that by the limited intellectual power man is unable to know that mysterious unknowable power. He asserts, "One truth must grow ever clearer – the truth that there is an Inscrutable Existence everywhere manifested to which he [the man of science] can neither find nor conceive either beginning or end. Amid the mysteries which become the more mysterious the more they are thought about, there will remain the one absolute certainty that he

³ Pringle Pattison, The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy, 1917, p 57
is ever in presence of an Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed.”

William James in his book ‘The Will to Believe’ presents his most significant thoughts about God and ultimate spiritual reality. To quote James, “Call it, if you please, just ‘a stream of ideal tendency,’ but unless there is such a stream, it is difficult to account for the sources of all those ideals which make life worth living. That we live by these ideals is strictly true. In our experiences we distinguish a lower and a higher part of ourselves and we feel that this higher part is in some way continuous with more of the same quality. This divine MORE is exterior, to us, and yet we are in some way connected with it, in some kind of harmony with it, and upon this harmony our peace and security rest. ‘The visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance,’ and to the spiritual world we give the name God.”

Both Plato and Aristotle visualize Reality as one. But neither of the philosophers has maintained their standpoints to the sole reality of Ideas and Forms. Hegel has given a monistic Philosophy, according to which the Absolute Reality manifesting itself dialectically through the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

According to Hegel, Reality is eternal, unchangeable and a systematic whole. Anything which comes short of this is only an appearance and not Reality. However, things of daily life are

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4 Herbert Spencer, Principles of Sociology, Vol III, p 175
5 William James, The Will to Believe, pp 52, 54, 57
short-lived, changeable and have their beginning and end. So everything like tables and chairs and even the yonder mountain and planets are not real as per definition of Reality.⁶

The Absolute, for Hegel, is the Idea, concrete in itself and unfolding itself, an organic system, a totality which contains a rich set of levels and aspects.⁷ This all-inclusive Reality attains to self consciousness by subjugating Nature and Life. The key-notion here is Kant’s ‘Synthetic Unity of Apperception’ which is the ultimate basis of the synthetic function of each and every category and universal.⁸

According to Bradley, Reality is experience that rejects esse est intelligi. For him thought is universal and Reality is inherent and pervasive in all particular things. Appearance is not entirely unreal; it is incomplete fragmentary and inharmonious. But appearance belongs to Reality and without it Reality will be void and unintelligible. Though thought presents something which belongs to Reality still it falls short of Reality. In his words, “The Absolute has no history of its own, though it contains histories without number. These, with their tale of progress or decline, are constructions starting from and based on some one given piece of finitude. …For nothing perfect, nothing genuinely real can move. The Absolute has no seasons, but all at once bears its leaves, fruit and blossoms.”⁹

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⁶ Y. Masih, A Critical History of Modern Philosophy, 1975, p 305
⁷ C. J. Friedrich, The History of Philosophy, p 164
⁸ ibid., p 322
⁹ F. H. Bradley, Appearance and Reality, 1930, p 442
The celebrated German philosopher Max Muller comments, "Frederick Schiegel, in his work on Indian Language, Literature, and Philosophy remarks: It cannot be denied that the early Indians possessed a knowledge of the true God; all their writings are replete with sentiments and expressions, noble, clear, and severely grand, as deeply conceived and reverentially expressed as in any human language in which men have spoken of their God."\(^{10}\)

Max Muller further refers to Sir William Jones who remarks, 'That it is impossible to read the Vedânta or the many fine compositions in illustration of it, without believing that Pythagoras and Plato derived their sublime theories from the same fountain with the sages of India.'\(^{11}\)

It is a fact that the concept of "Tattvajñâna" – a true knowledge of Reality is not exactly the same with the fundamental doctrines of various sects. It is therefore, "unequivocally urged by almost all the systems of Indian Philosophy that only a supreme realization of the ultimate Reality or Realities can put an end to the otherwise unending human miseries and redeem the bound individual soul permanently sordid shackles of recurring births and deaths. In consonance with the said common aim and solution of Indian philosophical systems, philosophy has to be defined mainly as an exposition of the essential nature of Reality. So the fundamental problem, which lies at the root of all philosophical questions, is the

\(^{10}\) F. Max Muller, The Vedanta Philosophy, 1950, pp 6-7  
\(^{11}\) ibid., p 6
determination of the true nature of Reality or Realities, the realization of which results in emancipation."\(^{12}\)

Now an attempt will be made to enquire about the idea of Brahman (Brahmajijñāgāsā) from the Vedāntic perspective referring to the Upaniṣadic thoughts as interpreted by Bādarāyaṇa, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva. In this respect Swami Vivekananda’s own comments in the light of teachings of his great master Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa may be mentioned here.

Vedānta seeks to establish that Reality is not only eternal but also absolute, one without any second, unalterable and immutable also. The Brahma Sūtra of Bādarāyaṇa is treated as a basic Vedāntic text. Bādarāyaṇa establishes the central theme of Vedānta after repudiating the probable contradictory statements of the Upaniṣads with a critical analysis. While the karma Mīmāṃsā of Jaimini enquires of the duties (dharma) mentioned in the Vedas, the Uttara Mīmāṃsā of Bādarāyaṇa analyses the philosophico-theological views of the Upaniṣads. But the Sūtras are so brief and abstruse that they cannot be intelligible without a commentary. The commentators interpret their commentaries in accordance with their own preconceived opinions. For example, “Even when Bādarāyaṇa formulated his Sūtra, there were differences of opinion about such central topics as the characteristics of the released soul and the relation of the individual soul to Brahman. Āśmarathyā holds the bhedbheda view of the relation of the soul to Brahman, that it is neither absolutely different nor absolutely non-different from it.

\(^{12}\) Veermann Prasad Upadhyä, *Lights on Vedanta*, 1959, p 2
Auḍulomi is of opinion that the soul is altogether different from Brahman up to the time of final release, when it becomes merged in it, and Kāśakṛtsna thinks that the soul is absolutely identical with Brahman, which, in some way or other, presents itself as the individual soul."\textsuperscript{13}

The Upaniṣads are clear that the Supreme can be grasped only by spiritual intuition. The ultimate mystery cannot be grasped by intellect or vast learning, yet it can be known. The seers have proclaimed that they have known the Supreme Person dwelling beyond darkness. Those who know Him attain life eternal.\textsuperscript{14}

F. Max Muller says that in the ancient hymns, incipient traces of this yearning after one God are available. The gods, though separate individualities, are not represented as limited by other gods, but each god is for the time being implored as supreme, a phase of religious thought, which has been described by the name of Henotheism, as distinguished from the ordinary Polytheism. Thus one of the Vedic gods, Indra, the god of the air, is called Visvakarman, the creator of all things. In some places this One as a neuter, is called the great Divinity of all the gods.\textsuperscript{15}

It is true that the Upaniṣads do not give us a systematic account of reality. It is a collection of statements of Truth in its various phases, which are made not by one but several seers and sages in different Upaniṣads. But Śamkarāchārya evolved a consistent system out of the diverse declarations of the. According

\textsuperscript{13} S. Radhakrishnan, \textit{Indian Philosophy}, Vol II, 1989, p 432
\textsuperscript{14} Radhakrishnan Reader, \textit{An anthology}, edited by P. Nagaraja Rao and others, p 451-452
\textsuperscript{15} F. Max Muller, \textit{Vedanta Philosophy}, 1950, pp 16-17
to Śaṁkara, God, the Supreme Cosmic Spirit or Brahman is the One, the only reality. Other than Brahman, everything else is false. Brahman is infinite, omnipresent, omnipotent, impersonal and transcendent reality.

According to Śaṁkara’s Advaitism, Brahma is the only one reality which suffers no dualism, nor any difference. Brahma is the only reality is not the original view of Śaṁkara, but of the Upaniṣads. Śaṁkara interprets it from his own point of view. It is true that the Brahman is one Reality, but only in the Pāramārthika level, and in the Vyavahārika level Jīva and Īśvara are true. Brahman is Saṁcidānanda, who is of an absolutely homogeneous nature. The appearance of this world is due to Māyā – the illusory power of Brahman, which is neither sat nor asat. So world is unreal.

Brahma (Nirguṇa) which is without qualification is called God or Īśvara (Saguṇa) when viewed in relation to the empirical world and the finite souls. There are not two Brahmas, only two forms of Brahma – Brahma ‘as it-is-in-itself’ and ‘as-it-is-in-relation-to-the world’. The former is the unconditioned and the latter is conditioned. It is conditioned by māyā and is thus called Īśvara.

In Advaita philosophy Brahman means nirguṇa Brahman. Īśvara is saguṇa Brahman. Under the influence of Māyā, Brahman becomes Īśvara. He is the subject of worship. He is the giver of the fruits of one’s karma. Thus it can be said that, in Advaita Vedānta Brahma is ultimate Reality and Brahma appears as Īśvara.
only due to the Māyā. Until we cannot reach the higher truth (Brahman), the lower truths are useful (Īśvara).

But Rāmānuja does not accept the impersonal Brahman of Śāṅkara. According to Ramanuja, Brahma is with attributes (savisesha). He is endowed with all auspicious qualities. Brahma is not absolutely one and homogeneous. Brahma is personal God with attributes. Brahma is identical with God. There is no distinction between the indeterminate Brahma and the determinate Brahma.

The central theme of Vedānta is Brahman. Now therefore the enquiry of Brahman as stated by S. Radhakrishnan is this “The Brahma Sūtra starts with the verse, athāto brahmajijñāsā. Now, therefore, the desire to know Brahman. Is there anything in this world? Everything we look upon is perpetually changing. The world seems to be a number of risings and perishings. Is there anything which is unchanging, eternal, in this adventure of time? Simply because we feel the need for it, it does not follow that there is something. we may be hungry, that does not mean that we have food. there must be some reason by which we understand what our yearnings are and whether there is anything to satisfy them.”

Swami Vireswarananda explains the first sūtra ‘Athāto Brahmajijñāsa’ in the following way. “Now (after the attainment of the requisite spiritual qualities) therefore (as the results obtained by sacrifices etc., are ephemeral, where as the result of the knowledge of Brahman is eternal), the inquiry (into the real

16 S. Radhakrishnan, Search for Truth, 1995, p 12
nature) of Brahman (which is beset with doubts owing to the conflicting views of various schools philosophy, should be taken up).”\(^{17}\)

At the very beginning the usefulness of such an enquiry is questioned. Actually such an enquiry is not desirable. According to Vireswarananda, “As Brahman is pure and unconditioned, there is no doubt or indefiniteness about it, for we have such definitions as, ‘Brahman is Truth, Knowledge, Infinity’ (Tai. 2.1). As identical with the Self (Ātman) – which the Vedānta holds – also, there is no doubt about Brahman; for the Self is nothing but object of the notion of ‘I’, the empirical self which is well known to exist as something different from the body, senses, etc. Moreover, no one doubts his own existence. There is therefore no indefiniteness about Brahman, which would induce one to make an inquiry into It. The objection is that this empirical self is a result of superimposition (Adhyāsa) of the non-Self on the Self and vice versa, and is therefore not the true Self, cannot be accepted, for such a superimposition between two absolutely contradictory objects is not possible.”\(^{18}\)

He further says that “An inquiry into Brahman is desirable, because there is some indefiniteness with respect to it, for we find various conflicting views concerning Its nature. Different schools of philosophy hold different views. Superimposition would have been impossibility, and there would have been no indefiniteness about Brahman, if the empirical self had been the real Self. But it is not. The scriptures (Srtūts) say that the Self is free from all

\(^{17}\) *Brahma Sūtras*, translated by Swami Vireswarananda, 1995, p 17

\(^{18}\) *ibid.*, pp 17-18
limiting adjuncts and is infinite, all blissful, all-knowing, One without a second, and so on.”

The Second Sūtra is ‘Janmādy asya yataḥ’. That means (Brahman is that omniscient, omnipotent cause) from which proceed the origin etc., (i.e., Substance and dissolution) of this (world). Radhakrishnan explains the second Sūtra in this way - “That from which all beings arise, all beings are sustained, into which they are dissolved, that is the Ultimate Reality. Find out yourself whether such an Ultimate Reality is or is not, by rational means, by investigation, by Jījñāsā, by ālocanā. We try to find out whether there is anything answering to this Supreme Reality.”

Radhakrishnan further says that “When he makes out that tapas is brahman, he is making out that the very aspiration that we have is indicative of the Reality. When he makes out that tapas is brahma, he makes out that the longing which we have, the yearning which we have, is itself symptomatic of the working of the Supreme in our minds and hearts. If it were not there, you would not have it, you would not ask for it. So the Taittirīya Upanisad tells us that if you look at the world and if you look at the successive stages through which it has come to its present position —anna, prāna, manas, vijñāna and ānanda —you will see that this world is progressing, unfolding and registering all the progressive values.”

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19 ibid., pp 18-19
20 ibid., p 20
21 S. Radhakrishnan, Search for Truth, 1995, p 12
22 ibid., pp 12-13
The third sūtra says Sāstra-yonitvāt. The scripture being the means of right knowledge. Swami Vireswarananda translates the third Sūtra in this way - “The scripture (alone) being the means of right knowledge (with regard to Brahman, the proposition laid in Sūtra 2 becomes corroborated).”

To him this Sūtra makes the idea expressed in Sūtra 2 clearer. If any doubt has been left regarding the fact that Brahman as the origin etc., of the world is established by scriptural authority and not by inference etc., independently of it, this Sūtra makes it clear that śrutis alone are proof about Brahman. Brahman is an already existing thing like a pot, and so It can be known by other means of right knowledge independently of the scriptures.

Brahman is formless, so it cannot be perceived directly. For the absence of inseparable characteristics it can not be established by inference or analogy (upamana). Therefore, It can be known only through the scriptures. But one who is ignorant of the scriptures cannot know that Brahman.

According to Advaita system, Brahman is the only reality, all else being are illusory appearances. Brahman is the only ultimate reality, the world of multiplicity and plurality is false and ultimately, the Ātman and the Brahman are not different. From the higher or transcendental point of view knowledge of Brahman as the ultimate reality is essential. That knowledge describes Brahman as non-dual, absolutely indeterminate and devoid of all distinctions, external as well as internal. It is indescribable.

24 ibid., p 24
because no description of it can be completed. The best description of it is through the negative way. Brahman is ‘neti-neti’ or not this, not this. It is beyond speech and mind.

According to Hiriyana “The Advaitins assign Upaniṣadic statements like neti-neti – Not this, nor that – a secondary place while the primary place is given to those like Tat tavam asi, which point to the reality in us as the ultimate. That is, the negative statement is not to be understood in isolation, but along with positive ones like Tat tavam asi. Negation is only a preliminary to affirmation. It means that the Absolute is not conceived here objectively—as merely inferred from outer phenomena; but as revealing itself within us. This alters totally the significance of the negative description, for we are thereby constrained to admit not only its positive character but also its spiritual nature. It is not thus a bare or contentless being for which the Absolute stands here. Nor should the statement that Brahman is unknowable lead us to regard the doctrine as agnostic. It, no doubt, rules out all discursive thought as inapplicable to Reality: but it does not represent it as extra-empirical—as something wholly outside the world of experience.”

Alan W. Watts stated, “When St. Augustine was asked what time was, he replied, ‘I know, but when you ask me I don’t.’ The same is true of reality. We know it all the time, but when we begin to think about it, it vanishes. Thus it is said in Zen Buddhism, ‘If you want to see into it, see into it directly. When you begin to think about it, it is altogether missed.’ For the same reason the Kena Upaniṣad says, ‘He who thinks that Brahman is

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25 M. Hiriyana, Outlines of Indian Philosophy, 1993, pp 375-376
not comprehended, by him Brahman is comprehended; but he who thinks that Brahman is comprehended knows It not. Brahman is unknown to those who know It, and is known to those who do not know It at all.'

Brahman, then, is the real world as it is in itself, before we begin to describe or define it in any way, before we split it asunder into millions of arbitrary distinctions called feet, inches, stars, trees, men, ounces, pounds, and mountains.\(^26\)

The real meaning of the ‘world is unreal’ is that, ‘all is Brahman’. But even this vision of Reality (All is Brahman) appears only when the ‘I’ (consciousness or ego) is completely destroyed. To quote Sri Ramakrishna, ‘But what remains when God completely effaces the ego cannot be described in words’.\(^27\)

As long as he (i.e., a spiritual seeker) is consciousness of “I”, he is conscious of others also. Nothing whatsoever exists after he cuts through the whole thing with the sword of jñāna. Then even this “I” becomes as unreal as the magic of the magician.\(^28\)

From the above discussion on Reality, Brahma and Īśvara it is clear that the world is not unreal but also real from a different standpoint. Even the Advaitins do not go against this view. So Vivekananda is not a true Advaitist as because he regards the world as false (mithyā). In orthodox Advaitism, also, the distinction is drawn between the vyavahārika (phenomenal) and

\(^26\) Alan W. Watt’s article entitled ‘The Negative way’, published in *Vedanta for Modern Man*, edited by Christopher Isherwood, 1952, p 24


\(^28\) *Ibid.*, p 460
the paramārthika (transcendental). For Swami Vivekananda, the world is real so long as his mission in the life was to be fulfilled. After his work was done, the Swami is convinced that he will transcend the material world and merge in the supreme Oneness. In his book 'Understanding Vivekananda' Amiya Kumar Majumder supports this view.²⁹

Swami Vivekananda in his address, 'God in Everything' delivered in London, says that "The Vedānta does not in reality denounce the World. The idea of renunciation nowhere attains such a height as in the teachings of the Vedānta. But, at the same time, dry suicidal advice is not intended; it really means 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. We read at the commencement of one of the oldest of the Upaniṣads, 'whatever exists in this universe is to be covered with the Lord.' We have to cover everything with the Lord Himself, not by a false sort of optimism, not by blinding our eyes to the evil, but by really seeing God in everything."³⁰

In this regard it may be cited now a few verses from 'The Quintessence of Vedānta of Sri Sankaracharya' —

"214. Brahman is That which is. One should ascertain the nature of Brahman by ascertaining the nature of Existence. To ascertain Brahman requires faith in the Śāstras."

²⁹ Amiya Kumar Majumder, Understanding Vivekananda, 1972, p 75
³⁰ Swami Vivekananda, Jnana Yoga, 1970, p 132
“215. One should therefore cultivate supreme faith in the
guru, and in what the Vedānta says. It is by faith alone and no
other means that the earnest seeker attains liberation.”

“216. To the extent to which one speaks the truth, one
inspires faith. The Vedas are to be trusted because they constitute
the word of God.”

“679. Listen attentively, and I shall tell you why the knower
of Brahman declare that the world is unreal. Just as rope alone is,
when the illusion of the snake in it has been negated, so also when
the world comes to be regarded as unreal and has been negated,
all that remains is the non-dual Brahman.”

“680. When once the apparent reality of the world has been
set aside all that remains is pure Being. The seers of Brahman
realise that non-dual Reality, by a process of apavada, or the
negation of negation.”

“690. Just as, as the result of defective vision, the one moon
seems to be double so also as a result of the defective
comprehension of the intellect, the One Reality seems to be
multifarious. When once the illusion of the intellect is conquered,
the one Reality, Brahman, reasserts itself and make itself
manifest.”

“691. No one would imagine a rope to be snake when one
knows that it is no more than a rope. The snake which the

31 Swami Tattwananda (translated), The Quintessence of Vedanta of Sri Sankaracharya,
(Verse No 214, 215, 216), 2002, p 78
32 ibid., p 256
imagination conjured up becomes one with the real object, the rope. In the same way, when Brahman is realised, the idea of the world, and the delusion which caused that idea, both merge in Brahman.”

“698. In reality, there is no difference between Ātman and Brahman. The difference that we seem to perceive lies but in our imagination. It has no being. It is for this reason that the sruti proclaims again and again the oneness of the Ātman with Brahman.”

“That Being which is this subtle essence, even That all this world has for its Self, That is the Truth; That is the Ātman, That Thou art, O Swetaketu.”

Swami Vivekananda says, “You cannot describe Him by any other language. All attempts of language, calling Him father, or brother, or our dearest friend, are attempts to objectify God, which cannot be done. 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? Thus, I would repeat to you once more, God is neither knowable nor unknowable, but something infinitely higher than either. He is one with us; and that which is one with us is neither knowable nor unknowable, as our own self.”

33 ibid., p 260 (verse 690-691)
34 ibid., p 264 (verse 698)
35 Chandogya Upaniṣad-VI, 8.7
36 Swami Vivekananda, Jnana yoga, 1970, pp 114-115
Everyone must keep in mind one thing – the difference between ‘Brahman’ and ‘Īśvara’. We commonly use these two words interchangeably, they are related to one and the same Reality but there is a difference between them. Brahman is actionless, qualityless, formless, independent, the observer and the witness of everything.37 But Īśvara is one step below Brahman. ‘Īśvara’ is Brahman united with māyā, Brahman with attributes. The Vedānta Sāra says, “Īśvara is ignorance associated with pure consciousness: as it has the sattvika quality, it cannot delude Īśvara”.38

Swami Vivekananda explains the relation between Īśvara and the Brahman in the following manner. According to him, “Īśvara is the sum total of individuals, yet He is an individual, as the human body is a unit, of which each cell is an individual. Samashti or collected equals God; Vyāshti or analyzed equals the Jīva. The existence of Īśvara, therefore, depends on that of Jīva, as the body on the cell, and vice versa. Thus, Jīva and Īśvara are coexistent beings; when one exists, the other must........Omnipotence and omniscience are obvious qualities and need no argument to prove from the very fact of totality. Brahman is beyond both these and is not a conditioned state; it is the only Unit not composed of many units, the principle which runs through all from a cell to God, without nothing which can exist; and whatever is real is that principle, or Brahman. When I think I am Brahman, I alone exist; so with others. Therefore, each one is the whole of that principle.”39

37 Swami Lokeshwarananda, The Way to God as Taught by Sri Ramakrishna, 1992, p 24
38 ibid., p 25
39 C.W.,V, pp 269-270
Sri Ramakrishna Paramhamsa explains in this context to Hazra: “Why do you address the pure Ātman as ‘Īśvara’? The pure Ātman is inactive and is the witness of the three states. When I think of the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, then I call the pure Ātman Īśvara’. What is the Pure Ātman like? It is like a magnet lying at a great distance from a needle. The needle moves, but the magnet lies motionless, inactive.”

Sri Ramakrishna called the Pure Ātman Īśvara. Īśvara is not inactive like Brahman. Īśvara creates, preserves and destroys. He punishes the wicked, listens to our prayers and has unlimited power. He is the receptacle of all auspicious qualities.

Ramakrishna says God with form and God without form both are real. Brahman is without form, but for devotees he assumes a form. He is formless, and again He has forms. For bhakta, He assumes forms. But He is formless for Jñāni, a Bengali songs says, ‘Mother, you are the Saviour. You are everywhere, in everything. You are with form and again without form’.

In the Bible it is said, ‘God made man in His own image.’ But it is also true to Vivekanananda that man makes God in his own image. Because when one worship God and offers some sweets and fruits and sing songs to Him – everything to make Him happy. Everyone do all these things because they themselves like them. One thinks that perhaps He enjoys what one enjoys.

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40 Swami Nikhilananda (translated), The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 1981, pp 654-655
41 Swami Lokeswaranand, The Way to God as Taught by Sri Ramakrishna, 1992, p 25
42 ibid., p 35
Swamiji says that everybody we see God through has own spectacles.\(^{43}\)

_Yā yasyā’bhimatā pūṁsaḥ sā hi tasyaiva devatā—‘A person sees God according to his own way of thinking, from his own point of view’.\(^{44}\)_

Swami Satprakashananda thinks Saguṇa Brahman is the imminent in the universe as the Supreme Self and acts like Īśvara. As Īśvara He is the Personal God. The term personal is used to indicate that He has attributes. It does not mean that He has a form like a human being. He possesses all excellences in the highest degree. He is the repository of all greatness and goodness. He is All-knowing, All-powerful, All-embracing.\(^{45}\)

Nirguṇa Brahman is designated as the Higher (Parā) Brahman and Saguṇa Brahman as the lower (Aparā) Brahman. However Saguṇa Brahman, apart from māyā, His limiting adjunct, is no other than Nirguṇa Brahman. As pointed out by Swami Vivekananda, “The very idea of causation exists only in the phenomenal world, and God as the cause of this universe must naturally be thought of as limited, and yet He is the same impersonal God.”\(^{46}\) So Īśvara is described in the Upaniṣad both as personal and impersonal.

In the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad it is stated, “From the relative point of view Brahman is conceived as personal Īśvara, and He possesses Māyā (māyādhīśa or māyīn) as His active power, under

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\(^{43}\) Swami Lokeswarananda, _The Way to God as Taught by Sri Ramakrishna_, p 27

\(^{44}\) _ibid_, p 27

\(^{45}\) Swami Satprakashananda, _The Universe God and God Realization_, 2004 ©, p 77

\(^{46}\) _C.W._, II, p 336
His control; with Māyā He projects the universe through its trigunās.⁴⁷ (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 1.3)

He is immanent in the universe as Īśvara, and transcendent as Brahman. Īśvara controls the universe from within (Antaryāmin) as its Soul. As long as we have attachment to our personality, Reality as Īśvara is more important to us than Reality as Absolute Brahman. We can approach Īśvara easily, through love, and receive His grace. It is very difficult to give up attachment to personality without hard spiritual disciplines over many births.⁴⁸

It was stated in the Gitā, Brahman as Īśvara responds to all in the way they approach Him (Gitā 4.11: ye yathā mām prapadyante tān tathaiva bhajāmyaham), just as a steel piece made into a sword, knife, needle, or wheel serves as such. Being two aspects of the same Reality, there is no rivalry between Brahman and Īśvara, though the sādhakas, who are anxious to promote their own ideals, may go on disputing their relative superiority.⁴⁹

AMIYA MAJUMDER states that Vivekananda’s idea of God is basically identical with the Vedāntic concept of God – everything is divine —“All this is, indeed, Brahman”. ‘But, while in Śaṅkara’s view, there is a distinction between the Absolute and God, in Vivekananda’s view the distinction is not absolute. God is the Absolute endowed with Māyā, says Śaṅkara, and since the world is eternally negated in Brahman, God as creator of the world is not ultimately real. Hence, from the orthodox point of

⁴⁷ Swami Mukhyananda, Sri Shankaracharya: Life and Philosophy, 2006, p 71
⁴⁸ ibid., pp 71-72
⁴⁹ Gitā 4.11
view Brahman (Absolute) alone is real, God (Īśvara, qualified or determinate Brahman) is ultimately unreal."

According to Swami Vivekananda "The Impersonal God is a living God, a principle. The difference between personal and impersonal is this, that the personal is only a man, and the impersonal idea is that He is the angel, the man, the animal, and yet something more which we cannot see, because impersonality includes all personalities, is the sum total of everything in the universe, and infinitely more besides. 'As the one fire coming into the world is manifesting itself in so many forms, and yet is infinitely more besides,' so is the Impersonal."

Amiya Kumar. Majumder refers to the problem 'how can the supreme Reality have two contraries, personality and impersonality' disappears, once we remember that the truly Indeterminate can manifest itself in any manner whatsoever. There is no limit to Its expression, nor is It guided by any phenomenal law. To say that the Impersonal cannot become personal is again to determine the Indeterminate which is a futile attempt.

Swamiji says "Who can understand the throes of the love of the Gopis – the very ideal of love, love that wants nothing, love that even does not care for heaven, love that does not care for anything in this world or the world to come? And here, my friends, through this love of the Gopis has been found the only solution of the conflict between the Personal and the Impersonal

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50 Amiya Kumar Majumder, Understanding Vivekananda, 1972, pp 70-71
51 C.W., II, pp 319-320
52 Amiya Kumar Majumder, Understanding Vivekananda, p 78
God. We know how the personal God is the highest points of human life; we know that it is philosophical to believe in an Impersonal God immanent in the universe, of whom everything is but a manifestation. At the same time our souls hanker after something concrete, something which we want to grasp, at whose feet we can pour out our soul, and so on. The personal God is therefore the highest conception of human nature. ........The only thing they understood was that he was infinite Love, that was all........A great landmark in the history of religion is here, the ideal of love for love's sake, work for work's sake, duty for duty's sake, and it for first time from the lips of the greatest of Incarnations. Krishna, and for the first time in the history of humanity, upon the soil of India.\textsuperscript{53}

When the Brahman is reflected by Māyā then it is Īśvara. Īśvara is the personal aspect of the impersonal Brahman. C. D. Sharma says, "Īśvara has been a taxing problem for the followers of Śaṅkara. According to some, Īśvara is the reflection of Brahman in Māyā, while Jīva is the reflection of Brahman in Avidyā. According to others, Brahman, limited or conditioned by Māyā is Īśvara, while Brahman limited by Avidyā or the internal organ (which is a product of Avidyā) is Jīva. The former view is called Reflection Theory (pratibimbavāda) and the latter Limitation Theory (avachedavāda). Some regard Jīva as the reflection of Īśvara. The defect in the Reflection Theory is that Brahman and Māyā both being formless, how can a formless original be reflected in a formless receptacle? To avoid this some have suggested the Identity of the Original and the Reflected Image (bimbapratibimbābhedavāda). But this too cannot be

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{C.W.}, III, pp 257-258
accepted. The defect in the Limitation Theory is as to how can Māyā or Avidyā constitute limitation to Brahman? Those who do not agree with either of these theories have suggested a third, the Appearance Theory, according to which Īśvara and Jīva are inexplicable appearance of Brahman (ābhāsavāda). 54

When Brahman is viewed as Saṁsāra, God, Soul and Nature arise simultaneously and when Brahman’s own essence is realised, God, Soul and Nature vanish simultaneously.

Swami Mukhyananda comments, “It is really immaterial for Śaṅkara, whether you derived Brahman from Īśvara or Īśvara from Brahman in the Upaniṣadic sense, for they are not Realities.” 55

Vivekananda raises a vital question- how the Infinite, the Absolute, becomes the finite? He gives his answer to his article entitled ‘The Absolute and Manifestation’ delivered in London, 1896.

The concept of the universe, he explains, includes not only the material world but also the mental (spiritual) one, heavens and earth and everything that exists here. Mind and body are the name of change and all these changes compose our universe.

According to Swamiji this Absolute (a) has become the universe (b) by coming through time space, and causation (c). This is the central idea of Vedānta. He says “Time, space and causation are like the glass through which the Absolute is seen,

54  C. D. Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, 2003, pp 281-282
55  Swami Mukhyananda, Sri Shankaracharya: Life and Philosophy, 2006, p 120
and when it is seen on the lower side, it appears as the universe. Now we at once gather from this that in the Absolute there is neither time, space, nor causation. The idea of time cannot be there, seeing that there is no mind, no thought. The idea of space cannot be there, seeing that there is no external change. What you call motion and causation cannot exist where there is only One. We have to understand this, and impress it on our minds, that what we call causation begins, if we may be permitted to say so, the degeneration of the Absolute into the phenomenal, and not before; that our will, our desire and all these things always come after that.\(^\text{56}\)

Again he says “In asking what caused the Absolute, what an error we are making! To ask this question we have to suppose that the Absolute also is bound by something, that it is dependent on something; and in making his supposition, we drag the Absolute down to the level of the universe. For in the Absolute, there is neither time, space, nor causation; it is all one. That which exists by itself alone cannot have any cause. That which is free cannot have any cause; else it would not be free, but bound. That which has relativity cannot be free. Thus we see the very question, why the Infinite became the finite, is an impossible one, for it is self-contradictory.”\(^\text{57}\)

According to Swami Vivekananda, “God is more than knowable. This is a great fact to learn. You must not go home with the idea that God is unknowable in the sense in which agnostics put it. For instance, here is a chair, it is known to us. But


\(^{57}\) \textit{ibid.}, p 111
what is beyond ether or whether people exist there or not is possibly unknowable. But God is neither known nor unknowable in this sense. His something still higher than known; that is what is meant by God being unknown and unknowable.\textsuperscript{58}

That the whole world is full of the Lord is teaching of Vedānta. If anybody opens his eyes he will see Him.\textsuperscript{59} Swamiji thinks that the one central idea through out all the Upaniṣads is that of realization. He expresses his idea of reality in this way, "In the Reality, there is no death, there is no misery; in the Reality, there is no one to mourn for, on one to be sorry for. He has penetrated everything, the Pure One the Formless, the Bodiless, the Stainless, He the knower, He the Great Poet, the Self-Existent, He who is giving to everyone what he deserves. They grope in darkness who worshipped this ignorant world, the world that is produced out of ignorance, thinking of it as Existence, and those who live their whole lives in this world and never find anything better or higher are groping in still greater darkness. But he who knows the secret of nature seeing That which is beyond nature through the help of nature, he crosses death, and through the help of That which is beyond nature, he enjoys Eternal Bliss."\textsuperscript{60}

To Vivekananda this world is nothing but a hideous caricature, a shadow of the Reality. Everybody should go to the Reality. Renunciation will take all to It. Renunciation is the very basis of true life; every moment of goodness and real life that all enjoy is they we do not think of themselves. This little separate self must die. Then all will find that all are in the Real, and that

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{ibid.}, pp 112-113
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{ibid.}, p 133
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{ibid.}, pp 143-144
Reality is God and He is own true nature of all and He is always in all and with all. Let all live in Him and stand in Him. It is the only joyful state of existence. Life on the plane of the Spirit is the only life, and let all try to attain to this realization.\(^{61}\)

Ānanda is Bliss Absolute, Perfect Joy, Brahman is the Source of all the bliss in the world. ‘He is of the nature of sweetness’.\(^{62}\)

After discussing the nature of Reality, Brahman and Īśvara, now an attempt will be made to concentrate to Vivekananda’s interpretation of the Rg-Veda Samhitā on reality. He says that Reality is One; the sages call it by various names. From the earliest periods, the Vedas have proclaimed One Reality underlying the universe of endless variety and constant change.

The earliest statement of universalism comes from the Rg Veda. The Rg Veda I.164.46 states “Ekaṁ sat viprā bahaudā vadanti, they call it Agni (the god of fire), Yama (the god of death), Matarisvanb (the god of wind).” This statement is echoed in Rg Veda 10.114.5: “Him with fair wings, though only one in nature, wise singers shape, with songs, in many figures.” These statements have been interpreted in two major ways. From the perspective of non-dual they mean that only the One or Brahman is true. The world of names and forms is Māyā, it is false or illusory in relation to Brahman.\(^{63}\)

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\(^{61}\) ibid., p 173

\(^{62}\) Taittirīya Upaniṣad, II.7 (quoted from Swami Lokeshwarananda, The Way to God, p 20)

The schools of dualistic or theistic Vedānta have interpreted “Ekāṁ sat” differently. Brahman is true, and the names and forms used by the sages are also true (as sages are speakers of truth). Thus, the “Ekāṁ sat” means that only Brahman is universally true, and everything else is false, Māyā or illusion. It has also been interpreted to mean that all gods are true, as they participate in or share in the reality of Brahman. Thus one interpretation says all gods are universally false, and the other says all gods are universally true.\textsuperscript{64}

Throughout the Rg -Veda Samhitā\textsuperscript{64} we find such statements are found such as:

(i) The infinite One is the Lord of the moving and the unmoving, of all that walk and all that fly, of the multiform creation.\textsuperscript{65}

(ii) He who, though One, assumes the names of many gods.\textsuperscript{66}

(iii) The One Existence is conceived as many.\textsuperscript{67}

This One undifferentiated Being is the sole support of the manifold. Just as clay pot has no existence without clay, similarly, multiple things and beings have no existence without Pure Being. The undiversified One appears diversified by diverse names and forms, which changes constantly, while the underlying Reality

\textsuperscript{64} Rg-Veda (III:54.8) Samhita, (Text with exhaustive index), edited by Sreepada Sarma Satavalekara, Svadhyaya- Mandala, paradi, Surat, India
\textsuperscript{65} ibid., III: 54.8
\textsuperscript{66} ibid., X: 82.3
\textsuperscript{67} ibid., X: 114.5
ever remains the same, unaffected, unstained by the diversities and mutations of the phenomenal order.  

The scriptures always indicate the one truth, the infinite existence, the infinite wisdom, the infinite love. But as the declares, ‘Truth is one, sages call it by various names.’ The seers feel the intoxicating bliss of that one existence and express it various point of view. Thus Ramakrishna says that impersonal God is my father and persona God is my mother. According to Ramakrishna, “Brahman, absolute existence, knowledge and bliss, may be compared to an infinite ocean, without beginning or end. As through intense cold some portions of the ocean freeze into ice, and the formless water assumes form, so, through intense love of the devotee, the formless, absolute, infinite existence manifests itself before him as having form and personality. But the form melts away again with the rise of the sun of knowledge. Then also is the universe no more. Then is there but one infinite existence.”

Swami Prabhavananda explains the Rg Vedaic statement (Truth is one, sages call it by various name) in this way – “There are an infinite number of facets, as it were, to the infinite God. He can be loved and worshiped and meditated upon through any of these facets. Some worship Him as the inner light – the sorrowless light within the shrine of the heart. Others worship Him as a personal being, ‘the repository of the infinite blessed qualities.’ Others worship Him as ‘God the father,’ or ‘God the mother.’ Others again worship Him in His incarnations as Krishna, Christ,

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68 Swami Satprakashananda, The Universal God and God-Realization, 2004 ©, p 40
Buddha, or Ramakrishna. He is with form and without form; He is personal and impersonal and beyond; He is absolute existence, absolute Knowledge and absolute bliss; and He is the indefinable, inexpressible reality."

Sri Ramakrishna gave the illustration of the water in the ocean. It is formless. But when vessels of many shapes and sizes are dipped into the water, the water assumes the forms of the vessels. What is contained in them is the formless water. Similarly, though God is indefinable, inexpressible, predicateless, the various ideas of God, are, as it were, the forms and expressions assumed—and they contains nothing but the inexpressible, indefinable truth'.

In the Harvard lecture, Swami Ranganathananda says that the great sages of the Upanisads, Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, Śaṅkarācārya, in the past, and Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, in the modern age, represent the highest expression of this universality of vision and sympathy. The first note in the music of harmony of religions is struck in the earliest period of Indian culture in the famous mantra of the Rg-Veda (1.164.46): Ekāṁ sat vīpṛa bahudhā vadanti—‘Truth is One; sages call It by various names’.

The various gods and goddesses are found in our spiritual pantheon in course of time keeping the religious sanctions with Sanātana Dharma. “But our people slowly forgot that they were all alone; and that led to some sectarian conflicts, as said before,
which were solved by Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Śankarācārya, in the past, and Sri Ramakrishna in our own times. Its impact on India has been tremendous. The Truth we have to recapture today is the great Upaniṣadic truth of Ekameva advitiyam Brahma — 'Brahman is one only, and non-dual.'

In consonance with the various beliefs about religions, there are different types or forms of religion prevailing among various groups of mankind. In primitive religions, we find worship of spirit or ghosts, animals, trees and stones. These go by the names of fetishism, animism, spiritism, totemism etc., the belief of ancient Indians, the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans and other peoples in many gods and goddesses is known as polytheism. The modern religions with belief in one highest or supreme Deity is called monotheism, and the general examples are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Hinduism is also really a monotheistic creed, but owing to different names of the deity in different sects of the Hindus, the monotheism is questioned by outside critics. But still it may be that Hinduism remains the most complex and artistic religion of a monotheistic nature for it surpasses even monotheism by its conception of monism. Max Muller, the celebrated German Scholar, has characterized the Vedic Hinduism as a kind of Henotheism, as in it polytheism has gradually made room for monotheism.

Swami Vivekananda, in his First Public Lecture in the East at Colombo on 1897 informs that it is found in the religions of the different races to establish the supremacy of the Gods with a generic name like Baal or the common name of Moloch among

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72 Swami Ranganathananda, Practical Vedanta and The Science of Values, 1995, p 23
the Jewish races. He says, “In India the same competing gods had been struggling with each other for supremacy, but the great good fortune of this country and of the world was that there came out in the midst of the din and confusion a voice which declared, (Ekaṁ sad viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti) – ‘That which exists in One; sages call it by various name.’ It is not that Śiva is superior to Vishnu, not that Vishnu is everything and Śiva is nothing, but it is the same one whom you call either Śiva, or Vishnu, or by a hundred other names. The names are different, but it is the same one. The whole history of India you may read in these few words. The whole history has been a repetition in massive language, with tremendous power, of that one central doctrine.”

Swamiji again says, “And herein is the explanation of the most remarkable phenomenon that is only witnessed here – all the various sects, apparently hopelessly contradictory, yet living in such harmony. You may be a dualist, and, may be a monist. You may believe that you are the eternal servant of God, and I may declare that I am one with God Himself; yet both of us are good Hindus. How is that possible? Read then (Ekaṁ sad viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti) – ‘That which exists is One; sages call It by various names’.”

Kalyan Bagchi raises an objection against religion which is bound to cults and also blind to religious realization of spiritual experience. A spiritual experience is at once intensive and extensive. Every spiritual experience has an intensiveness in it – its depth is unfathomable, it has some mystery woven into its

73 C.W. III, pp 112-113
74 ibid., III, p 113
texture. And because of this mystery, every spiritual experience leaves room for infinite alternative modes of realization. ‘Ekaṁ Sad Viprāḥ Bahudhā Vadanti’. The different cults merge into the undifferenced unity of the one. The ‘one’, however, is no numerical one containing ‘many’, nor an abstract unity denying the many. It is ‘alternatively’ ‘each’ of them. Such alternation is not ‘disjunctive’ but ‘conjunctive’. Spiritual realization is a unity of indefinitely many—‘any’ for that matter—conjunctive alternatives. And because this is a unity of many forms, of ‘any’ forms of experience, it is not chained to any particular cult. Like parable and stories and history and myths, ‘cult’ too derive their meaning from religion and therefore are explained by religious experience instead of explaining it.75

According to Swami Vivekananda, when the sages declared ‘Ekaṁ Sad Viprāḥ Bahudhā Vadanti, – they meant that “The Being perceived was one and the same; it was the perceiver who made the difference. It was the hymnist, the sage, the poet, who sang in different languages and different words, the praise of one and the same Being. ‘That which exists is one: sages call It by various names.’ Tremendous results have followed from that one verse. Some of you, perhaps, are surprised to think that India is the only country where there never has been a religious persecution, where never was any man disturbed for his religious faith. Theists or atheists, monist, dualists, monotheists are there and always live unmolested. Materialists were allowed to preach from the steps of Brahminical temples, against the gods, and against God Himself; they went preaching all over the land that

the idea of God was a more superstition, and that gods, and Vedas are religion were simply superstitions invented by the priests for their own benefit, and they were allowed to do this unmolested."  

Swami Abhedananda while delivering a lecture before the union of the University of California in 1901 said, "The student of Vedānta philosophy, after studying the ancient philosophical systems, Greek and the modern philosophies of Germany, finds that the ultimate conclusions of modern philosophers are like faint echoes of the thundering expressions of what the ancient Vedic seers of Truth realized, at least two thousand years before the Christian era. The monistic systems of Professor Le Conte of John Fiske, of Hegel, and others philosophers of Western countries and moderns times, find their prototype in the utterances of those ancient philosophers of India. The first conception of this idea of monism that was ever expressed before the world we find in the Rg Veda, the most ancient of all scriptures of the world; 'That which exists is One; men call it by various names.' That One is not far from us. It is in us and outside of us."  

Swami Vivekananda writes, "There is tremendous religious persecution yet in every country in which I have been, and the same old objections are raised against learning anything new. The little toleration that is in the world, the little sympathy that is yet in the world for religious thought, is practically here in the land of Aryas, and nowhere else. It is here that Indians build temples for Mohammedans and Christians; nowhere else. If you go to other countries and ask Mohammedans or people of other religions to

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76 C.W., III, p 348  
77 Swami Abhedananda, The Vedanta Philosophy, 1991, p 9
build a temple for you, see how they will help. They will instead try to break down your temple and you too if they can. The one great lesson therefore, that the world wants most, that the world has yet to learn from India, is the idea not only of toleration, but of sympathy. Well has it been said in the Mahimnah-stotra: ‘As the different rivers, taking their start from different mountains, running straight or crooked, at last come unto the ocean, so, O Śiva, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead unto Thee.’

As Rg Veda says (Ekaṁ Sad Viprāḥ Bahudhā Vadanti) ‘God is one but wise man describes him in several ways.’ So Swamiji also proclaims that through the high philosophy or low, through the most exalted mythology or the grossest, through the most refined ritualism or errant fetishism, every sect, every soul, every nation, every religion, consciously or unconsciously, is struggling upward towards God. Every vision of truth that man has is a vision of Him and none else.

This universal Vedāntic truth lived and taught by his illustrious guru Sri Ramakrishna, and his own realization form the basis for Vivekananda’s message of the unity of all religions. In his view, though the different religions of the world differ from one another, their underlying purpose is the same – God-realization. He illustrates this point in the following way. Just as the same water can be collected in a vessel different sizes and shapes, Truth can be seen through different religions. He referred to God as water and the different religion as vessels of different

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78 C.W., III, p 114
shapes and sizes which contained this water. In each vessel (of religion), the vision of God comes in the form of the vessel.

Swamiji draws every attention to the fact of unity in diversity, which is the very plan of the universe. The same thing can be viewed from different standpoint and yet be the same thing. A human being is different from an animal, but as living beings - man, woman, animals and plants are all one, and as pure existence man is one with whole universe.

It may be said that the reality is one which may be termed as Brahman (Absolute), Isvara (God) and some other name. But all these terms referred to the same reality. Absolute and God are two when seen from different views but they refer to the same reality. God is in all, all is in God. Thus Vivekananda says ‘He is in the universe, He is universe Himself.’ God is not outside of man, He is within man.