

Response to Commentary

'WHO CAN SAY WHENCE IT ALL CAME, AND HOW CREATION HAPPENED?'

(*'Rig Veda'*, X, 129)

Gregory M. Nixon*

My title is taken from a line in the *Rig Veda* as it was reproduced in Mircea Eliade's sourcebook for the History of Religions. Since Syamala Hari sent a thought-provoking commentary relating my enthusiastic but inarticulate speculations on the source of time, space, and experience (as found in my guest editorial "Time & Experience: Twins of the Eternal Now?" in *JCER* 1[5]) to the august and prolific thinking of "Indian Philosophy", I thought I might be allowed to reply with a voice from the Vedas. I should note that Meera Chakravorty submitted an article¹ that also elucidated "Indian Philosophy" (specifically from the *Sankhya* or *Samkhya* school of thought) in a way that makes it seem as though I were directly inspired by it. (I use scare quotes around "Indian Philosophy" since I am in doubt that there is any such unified entity, though, of course, there are all sorts of Indian philosophies, both modern and ancient.)

In any case, to both of these commentators, I express my sincere gratitude, for you led me to explore further in these esoteric (to me) realms. I openly admit that I was taken aback to see how these ancient speculations both anticipate and go far beyond anything my poorly researched attempt at suggesting an eternal present of dynamic nothingness as the ultimate source of, well, *everything*. I trust this is a real case of synchronicity, but it is not unlikely that my readings of Joseph Campbell of nearly 40 years ago may have brought me into previous contact with this sort of metaphysics.

In response, I reproduce this commentary by Eliade, followed by some directly relevant lines from the poetry of *Rig Veda*, X, 129. What I especially like is the ambivalence of belief herein expressed. I have politely communicated before with Syamala that I share her wonder at a possible Source that creates yet is itself beyond all space, time, experience, and consciousness (small "c"), but that I do not believe in God — that is, I do not believe in any God that is an entity or *being* (even a deity) or one that can be named like a person. This leaves me with the mysterious paradox of a Source that both exists and does not, that is aware (what Syamala calls Conscious with a capital "C", implying to me cosmic consciousness) yet is not aware OF anything, and that is quiescent and invisible yet infinitely dynamic in potential. In fact, it is a Nothing that is Everything — and this seems to me well beyond anything our mere human verbal or numerical expressions can ever hope to *grasp*.

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¹ The article was vastly informative but not in a format we could use.

The point is, however, that the author of at least this part of the Vedas felt this same awestruck ambivalence so very long ago, probably sensing, as I did, that our all-too-human speculations could never encompass the mystery of mysteries. And s/he managed to express it certainly better than I did, and just as beautifully as did T. S. Eliot with his “still point of the turning world”.

Here is the complete quotation from Eliade’s sourcebook:

‘WHO CAN SAY WHENCE IT ALL CAME, AND HOW CREATION HAPPENED?’

(‘Rig Veda’, X, 129)

This creation hymn is at once a supreme expression of the poetry and philosophy of the Rig Veda and an eloquent murmur of doubt, which carries over into the Upanishads its sense of depth, the mystery, and above all the unity of all creation. In ‘darkness concealed in darkness’ (tamas in tamas), in those ‘unilluminated waters’ which harbour no ‘being’ (sat) or ‘non-being’ (asat), there is generated, by cosmic heat (tapas) the primordial unitary force, That One (tad ekam). ‘Desire’ (kāma) now arose as the primal seed of ‘mind’ (manas), the firstborn of tad ekam, and the rishis, who ‘see’ that original moment when the gods were not, claim now to know the bond of sat in asat. ‘But who knows truly,’ concludes the poet, still in reverence before the mystery: perhaps That One ‘whose eye controls this world’; but then perhaps he truly does not know.

Not only Upanshadic speculation, but also the evolutionary philosophy of the Samkhya system was deeply impressed by this speculation of cosmic origins alongside other Rig Vedic creation accounts such as x, 90 ... and x, 112 ... or I, 32. (Mircea Eliade, editor)

1. *Then [in the beginning] even nothingness was not, nor existence.
There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it.
What covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping?
Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomed?*
2. *Then there were neither death nor immortality,
nor was there then the torch of night and day.
The One breathed windlessly and self-sustaining.
There was that One then then, and there was no other.*
3. *At first there was only darkness wrapped in darkness.
All this was only unilluminated water.
That One which came to be, enclosed in nothing,
arose at last, born of the power of heat.*
4. *In the beginning desire descended on it —
that was the primal seed, born of the mind.
The sages who have searched their hearts with wisdom
know that which is, is kin to that which is not.*
5. *And they have stretched their cord across the void,
and know what was above, and what below.*

Seminal powers made fertile mighty forces.

Below was strength, and over it was impulse.

*6. But, after all, who knows, and who can say
whence it all came, and how creation happened?*

*The gods themselves are later than creation,
so who knows truly whence it has arisen?*

*7. Whence all creation had its origins,
he, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not,
he, who surveys it all from highest heaven,
he knows — or maybe even he does not know.*

Rig Veda translation by A. L. Basham (1954), *The Wonder That Was India*: London, pp. 247-8. In Mircea Eliade, Ed. (1964), *From Primitives to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions* (pp. 109-110). New York: Harper & Row.