

The Supreme Radiance

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, received instruction from a revelation that occurred around the beginning of the turn of the seventh century CE. A voice came to him and said, "Read!" Muhammad, being illiterate, responded to the voice that he could not read. The voice said that "it is the Lord Most Bountiful who teacheth by the pen, [who] teacheth man that which he knew not" (Qur'an, Surah XCVI, 1-5). Then the voice said, on two separate occasions, "O Muhammad, thou art God's messenger, and I am Gabriel." The vision accompanying this voice was exceptionally bright, so much so that Muhammad had to turn away his face "from the brightness of the vision...."¹

The Qur'an is quite specific about who would be the source of this kind of Light:

*Allah is the Light
of the Heavens and the Earth...
Light upon Light,
Allah guideth unto His light
whom he will....(Qur'an Sur. XXIV, 35).*

Often quoting this passage, the Sufi tradition of Islam makes frequent reference to the vision of a Divine Light. As a mystical tradition, Sufism is that form of Islam that emphasizes the need for a direct experience with God. Sufis routinely describe an experience with a Light once a devotee reaches a certain level of contemplation, usually accompanied by intense feelings of joy, even ecstasy. As with the Qur'an, the poetry in this tradition is an exquisite expression of the Divine presence that the Sufi encounters. A few introductory examples will help illustrate:

*The Essence of the First Absolute Light,
God gives constant illumination,
whereby it is manifested and it
brings all things into existence,
giving light to them by its rays.*

*Everything in the World
is derived from the Light of His Essence
and all beauty and perfection
are the gift of His bounty,
and to attain fully to this illumination
is salvation.²*

*Within a Magian tavern
the Light of God I see;
In such a place, O wonder!
Shines out such radiancy...³*

*I take refuge in the Light
of Thy glorious Countenance
which illuminates the heavens.⁴*

*Thou art the Light of Light
and Lord of Lords accompanying all things.
Glory to Him whom nothing resembles,
the All-Hearer, all-Seer.⁵*

*O God. Thou art hidden from us,
though the heavens are filled
With Thy light which is brighter
than the sun and the moon...⁶*

*There is naught in the Universe
save one Light!
It appears in a variety of manifestations.
God is the Light;
its manifestations, the Universe...⁷*

Sufis frequently dwell on the identification of God (Allah) with the Light. For the 13th century Sufi Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi, "God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth."⁸ God is "the embodiment of light, and the source of all illuminations."⁹ The Divine Light is not like any other light, however. It is unlike anything ordinary people see from day to day. Ibn 'Arabi tells us that "His light is brilliant."¹⁰ Even more than that though, the phenomenon is really beyond description. Like so many other Sufis, ibn 'Arabi has recourse to poetry to describe the indescribable:

*Ocean's a drop from my pervading Sea,
Light but a flash of my vast Brilliancy...¹¹*

When one perceives the Divine Light fully, everything else disappears. The person then realizes that this is really "the very light of the Absolute [God] as such..."¹¹ The 13th century Indian Sufi Maneri tells us that God's "very brilliance blinds me to whatever descends."¹² This Light is "a thousand times more luminous than that of the sun," Maneri says.¹³ Nuri, a 10th century Persian Sufi, explains that the "light of God... is the first thing to appear when God wants to guide a person on the mystical path..."¹⁴ For Sufis, it is abundantly clear that the Divine Light, however difficult to describe to those who have never seen it, is both beautiful and perfect:

*In Thy perfect light,
Loverhood I learn.
To Thy beauty bright
Line and Rhyme to turn...*

*Ne'er from my nostrils went
Thy sweet and familiar scent
Ne'er vanished from my sight
Thine image bright....¹⁵*

To see God, to see the Light, is one of the primary goals of Sufism. The 18th century Naqshbandi Sufi Nasir Muhammad 'Andalib said that one should "strive to bring himself towards this light..."¹⁶ Once again, though, the most exquisite sense of being drawn to the Light is provided in poetic form. Mansur al-Hallaj lets us know that once one becomes aware of the presence of God and His Light, there is no turning back:

*You understand our God is a consuming fire.
The rose opens to the light,
the Narcissus leans to the shade...
But at some point His Light
penetrates our eyes, destroying our shades...
If we are roses we are drawn to light.
We do not think about the end.
There is none.¹⁷*

Or, as other Sufis would express it:

*Lord, plunge me into the sea
of the Light of Thy majesty
that I might come forth with
the shining of that majesty upon my face...
I as Thee by Thy Name of Light
and by Thy Countenance that is Light,
O Light of Light...
to veil me in the Light of Thy name...
for Thou art the Light of all
with Thy Light.¹⁸*

*O Light of Light
who dost illumine
the obscurity of non-being
with the effulgence of Thy Light,
make Thy Light of... each part of me,
till I shall be only Light,
and flooded with the Light
of Thy Unity.¹⁹*

Just before his death, the 18th century Indian mystic Mir Dard prayed for the following:

*O God, give me
light in my heart
and light in my tongue
and light in my hearing*

*and light in my sight
and light in my feeling
and light in all my body
and light before me
and light behind me.*

*Give me, I pray thee,
light on my right hand
and light on my left hand
and light above me
and light beneath me.
O Lord, increase light within me
and give me light
and illuminate me.²⁰*

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