

Some Remarks on the Religious Significance of Light

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In *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, T. H. Gaster offers an interesting and clarifying explanation of a difficult sentence in "The Poem of Aqhat." This sentence occurs in the passage in which Daniel expresses his joy over the decision of El—communicated to him by Baal—that a son will be born to him. Thereby his family will be prevented from dying out. Moreover, Daniel will have a descendant who can fulfil the filial duties. This son, so says Daniel, will be the man, "Who may make my smoke to go forth from the ground."

What is the meaning of this utterance which sounds both poetical and mysterious? Gaster proposes to consider the saying of Daniel as the equivalent to the well-known adage: "keep the home fires burning." By means of a number of quotations from the Old Testament he makes clear how much value the ancient peoples attached to the fact that the fire, that is, the light, continued to burn in their homes. In their opinion "the extinction of a light" was "a synonym for disaster," as Gaster formulates it.

There is no point in inquiring whether Gaster's exegesis of the quoted sentence from "The Poem of Aqhat" is right or not. I have drawn attention to the quoted passage in Gaster's famous work, because it testifies to the vital importance of light for mankind. The disappearance of light would mean calamity for humanity, causing its sure ruin. From the remotest antiquity man has been conscious of this fact. He has always regarded light as a great treasure, as an indispensable condition of life. Therefore, light has become equivalent to life. No wonder that light has a religious significance. It functions as the bearer and the symbol of a series of moral and religious values. This is evident, for instance, from the fact that *phōs* amongst other terms, signifies salvation.²

Light shines in different shades. Poets praise the warm glow of the sun and the silver rays of the moon. In the northern countries one can enjoy the wonderful reddish evening-light which lends a nearly unearthly beauty to the landscape. In Greece, light is superabundant, sparkling, graceful, the true element of the spirit of beauty and freedom. The eastern countries know a light which is excessive, overwhelming, dazzling, and sometimes demoniac. No wonder that light is variously appreciated, also, in a religious respect.

Thus, light presents itself as an appropriate subject for a religio-phenomenological research. Naturally the question arises: what does this term mean and what does such a treatment of

1 *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (1950), 274-76.

2 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (1961), s.v. *phōs*.

the religious phenomena in question include? Here is not the place to digress to the aim and the method of the phenomenology of religion. We can even skip a reference to the relevant literature, because it is within everybody's reach. Suffice it to state that the aim of this discipline can be formulated as an attempt to order a number of facts, taken from different religions, in such a way that the religious significance of the phenomenon, to which these facts refer, clearly appears. Secondly it should be mentioned that the phenomenology of religion, after having won its victories, mainly owing to the work of scholars like G. van der Leeuw, Fr. Heiler, M. Eliade and G. Widengren, at the moment has become the subject of critical discussions.³ Its method is newly subjected to a sharp inquiry, and in some quarters even its right to exist is questioned—exactly as happened when this branch of learning first entered the circle of the sister disciplines. In my opinion the phenomenology of religion has by its achievements once and for all obtained its right to exist. The only question is to state more precisely both its aim and its method. As to its aim, the definition presented above may be said to be generally acceptable. In regard to its method I strongly doubt whether there is any use in speculating about the manner in which the essence of the phenomenon can be grasped in a deeper sense than is done in the ordinary religio-phenomenological research. For by these speculations one would enter the domain of philosophy in regard to which the student of the history of religions is a layman, so that he unavoidably draws conclusions which are not wholly correct. We had better make an inquiry into the function and value of the factual phenomena, primarily of those which occur in different religions. One such phenomenon is the religious appreciation of light.

In order to tackle this problem one should investigate which part light plays in the different components of the structure of religion. The term structure is used here, because it cannot be denied that all religions are founded on a certain pattern, which consists of: (1) an idea of God or a notion of the Holy; (2) a conception of man's nature and of his path of salvation; (3) a certain cult; and (4) a religious evaluation of the world. In my opinion, the religious significance of a certain phenomenon, in this case of light, can clearly appear only when one examines its function in the context of the different components of the said structure. It has already been indicated that light possesses different shades. This commonplace remark points in the direction of a more comprehensive religio-phenomenological research. This research differs, on the one hand, from a religio-historical monograph. There exists an excellent study by G. P. Wetter on the matter, entitled "Phōs, Eine Untersuchung über hellenistische Frömmigkeit; zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Manichäismus."⁴ On the other hand, the approach to the problem in question, which is made in this article, keeps a distance from the older religio-phenomenological studies in which a mass of interesting facts concerning a certain religious phenomenon are assembled by the author and are ordered by him as systematically as possible, but without any leading principle. Here the attempt is made to demonstrate, with regard to light, not only how it is evaluated by the differing religions, but primarily how its different qualities function within the fourfold scheme which has been sketched.

First, it is a striking feature that light is generally considered as an independent entity,

3 See, e.g., *Numen* 19, fascicles 2-3.

4 *Skrifter utgifna af Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-Samfundet*, 17:1f.

though people have always known that light actually is the radiation of certain sources of heat and light, primarily the sun and the moon and, in a lesser degree, the stars. Nevertheless, light has made such a stark impression that it has been evaluated as a separate element. This idea is, for example, clearly expressed in the creation story in the book of Genesis. It is told that on the first day God called the light into existence by His creative word. The sun and the moon were created no sooner than on the fourth day.

Light is such a radiant element that nobody wonders that the deity is often conceived of as a light-figure, both in the literal and in the figurative sense. Examples of this concept can easily be given. The Indian word *deva* 'deity', can be derived from the verb *div* 'to beam'. The term *vasu* springs from *vas* 'to shine'. The old name *brighu* designates the gods as beings which spread *bhargas* 'brilliance'.⁵ The same idea is the basis of *āścarya*, an Indian designation of the divinity, that is, a being whose appearance calls forth the *āś* of awe.⁶ This religious experience is expressed in the following poetical words:

This is his (of Brahman) illustration:
When it has lightened lightning—ah!
When this has caused to close the eyes—ah!
So far with regard to the divinity (*devatā*).

Other examples of this conception of the deity could easily be presented. I leave it at that, but I may add that in another context I have suggested that the different notions of the the godhead, used in various religions, should be scrutinized in order to detect the original significance of terms for "the divine" worshiped in these religions.⁷ In my opinion, this would be an important way to find out the key word of the religions in question and to solve the difficult problem of formulating a satisfactory definition of the phenomenon "religion" as such. Therewith, one arrives at interesting insights. One of them is the conception of the deity as a light-figure.

In the preceding argument, light is taken partly in a literal and partly in a figurative sense. Before tackling the question of the light as a symbol of a certain conception of God, we shall pay attention to the gods of light in the literal sense of the term. These gods belong to three categories: sky-gods, sun-gods, and moon-gods.

The sky shows itself in two appearances: in a mysterious, dark nightly garment and in the clear, shining attire of the day. It is the latter aspect that is of interest for the present argument. A striking instance of a sky-god who is conceived of as a luminous figure is the ancient Indian Dyaus, who is often called *pitar* 'father'.⁸ In Greece, Zeus is the corresponding figure. The name of the latter god is supposed to signify the illuminator, the god of the heavenly light.⁹ If this line of thought is extended to the Roman religion one meets Jupiter,

5 R. Otto, *Das Gefühl des Überweltlichen (sensus numinis)* (1932), 95.

6 Ibid., 204-5.

7 C. J. Bleeker, *The Key Word of Religion* (1963).

8 Chantepie, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (1925), 2:36.

9 K. Kerényi, *Zeus und Hera: Urbild der Vaters, des Gatten und der Frau* (1972), 12.

who is primarily the god of the clear sky, though he also manifests himself as Jupiter Fulgurator and Jupiter Tonans.¹⁰ No matter how many-sided the character of the latter two gods may be, they originally represent the heaven, which shows a shining face. Therewith, the idea that the sun actually is the source of light is absent. The sky-god himself is thought to be able to put on a bright dress.

The light-god par excellence is the sun-god. Considering the paramount importance which the light of the sun has for mankind, it is not surprising that the sun-god was highly honored in various religions. Famous representatives of this category of gods are Re in Egypt, Shamash in Mesopotamia, Helios in Greece, Amaterasu in Japan, and in a certain sense, also, the Indian Mithra and the Hellenistic Mithras. They are so well known that it is superfluous to describe their nature and appearance. In the context of this religio-phenomenological study it is primarily Re who deserves the attention, as he is a typical representative of this category of gods. The best way of getting acquainted with him is in reading the many hymns which are written in his honor.¹¹ It is not mere chance that these songs are often directed to the sun-god at his rise and at his setting. For the rising sun-god demonstrates a capacity for conquering the forces of the netherworld, and the setting sun-god has reached the moment at which he enters the realm of the dead, where he will spread his light for the inhabitants of this chthonic abode. In both cases the sun-god manifests his highest light-force. Therefore, the sun-god is praised in these hymns, either by means of profound mythological terms or in easily understandable poetical images, by reason of his beauty, his might, and his goodness. For example, the beginning of the famous sun-hymn of Pharaoh Amenophis IV-Echnaton may serve:

Thou shinest gloriously in the horizon of heaven,
 Thou living Aton, who lives from remote times.
 When Thou risest in the eastern horizon,
 Thou filleth all countries with Thy beauty.
 Thou art beautiful and splendid, highly beaming over all countries.
 Thy rays embrace the countries
 To the borders of all that Thou hast created.

The third light-god, the moon, is likewise praised as the giver of light. With regard to the Babylonian moon-god Sin, for example, it is said that his light leads the nations.¹² This phrase possesses even a deeper meaning. Nomads often moved during the night in ancient times, guided by the light of the moon, in order to evade the heat of the day. In Mesopotamian mythology, the moon-god is considered to be older than the sun-god. Generally, the moon-calendar precedes the sun-calendar. Also, in later ages, the moon was highly estimated as a source of light, as appears, for example, from the poetical images used

10 Chantepie, *Lehrbuch*, 2:438; G. Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (1969), 70f.

11 A. Scharff, *Aegyptische Sonnenlieder* (1922).

12 K. Tallqvist, *Månen* (1947), 329.

for the moon as giver of light, such as the torch, the lamp, the lantern.¹³ In the case of the moon-god it is evident that such gods of nature should not be identified with their cosmic substratum. Gods like the Babylonian Sin and the Egyptian Thoth are no deifications of the moon, but show features which are only indirectly connected with the moon as celestial body. Thus the moon-god is always considered as the god of wisdom.¹⁴ On account of the great wisdom ascribed to Thoth, this god could exercise an important function in the cosmos: he reconciled the fighting gods Horus and Seth with each other; he rendered judgment for Osiris against Seth, and he rendered judgment for the deceased.¹⁵ The moon has always fascinated people by its changing phases, by its two sickles, by its darkening and by its reappearance as full moon. Stronger than the sun which rises and sets, which seems to die and to revive, the moon roused the idea that it is a being with a double nature.

The latter considerations naturally lead to a following remark on the character of the light-gods, especially the sun-god. Light is the indispensable condition for the existence and growth of life, in whatever form it may occur. Thus light has become equivalent to life. A further step is taken: to the light, also, moral values are connected. Light is the element of truth, purity, and righteousness, whereas darkness is thought to be the domain of falsehood, impurity, and crime. The character of the sun-god is mostly of a highly ethical quality. He functions as the creator of the world, as the institutor of the world order, as the lawgiver, as the guarantor of justice, as the judge who condemns the criminals. Did not the Babylonian king Hammurabi receive his famous law from Shamash? The children of Shamash are Kettu and Mesharu, that is, right and justice.¹⁶ At the creation of the world Re instituted Ma-a-t. This is a polyvalent notion. It means truth, justice, order in society. Ma-a-t is also a goddess who personifies the world order. The relation between Ma-a-t and Re is twofold: she holds the rank of daughter, because Re called her into existence, but she is also his mother, because Re lives by Ma-a-t. In the hymns, the latter idea is expressed in the following way: Ma-a-t is called the food, the beverage, the clothing of the sun-god.¹⁷ It primarily has been the Pharaoh Amenophis IV-Echnaton, who in his solar theology has laid the stress on truth as the life-element of the sun-god.¹⁸

Because the sun-god maintains order and justice, people turn to him in case of injustice or oppression which they have suffered. In the Egyptian sun-hymns there is the prayer of a man who has been wrongfully persecuted and who now expects redress and rehabilitation from Re.¹⁹ Shamash fulfils the same function. The poet of an Assyrian hymn invokes the god in this way:

O Shamash, king of heaven and earth, lord of that, what is above and beneath,

13 Ibid., 138.

14 Chantepie, *Lebrbuch*, 1:546.

15 C. J. Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth: Two Key Figures of the Ancient Egyptian Religion* (1973).

16 Chantepie, *Lebrbuch*, 1:549.

17 C. J. Bleeker, *De beteekenis van de Egyptische godin Ma-a-t* (1929).

18 H. Schäfer, *Religion und Kunst von El-Amarna* (1923).

19 Scharff, *Sonnenlieder*, 77f.

Without Thee no right is spoken for the oppressed and no judgement is passed on the oppressed.
Thou has still taken pity on him, who is worn, dismayed, trembling, oppressed and ill treated,
At whom his god is enraged, and Thou hast spared him.²⁰

In another long hymn Shamash is circumstantially lauded as the protector of the destitute. Significant are the following lines:

Thou support the innocent man,
Thou inquire into his crime and acquit him of guilt.²¹

This appreciation of the activity of the sun-god is also found outside Egypt and Mesopotamia. An analogous conception occurs in the Vedic literature, in which the Ādityas, the gods of heaven and light, act as the guardians of Ṛta, the cosmic order. Their function is described as follows: "For neither at home nor abroad can the rogue, who speaks evil words, control them, when the sons of Āditi (the Ādityas) bestow their eternal light on a mortal man as a gift of life."²² Sunlight is supposed to release people from every need. A morning song, directed to the sun-god Sūrya, contains the prayer: "By the light, by which Thou expel the darkness, by the ray, by which Thou awaken the whole world, may Thou thereby banish from us all famine, all scarcity of offerings, all illness and all evil dreams."²³

These ethical qualities of the sun-god should not let us forget that the light is ambivalent. It is equivalent to life, but it belongs also to the realm of death. It creates life and blesses man, but it also is a scorching and destructive force. A myth of the Geb-Zé phratry in South New Guinea relates that the cave which the sun—in the shape of a red boy—inhabited, spread a terrible heat. Because this deity kidnapped children, the people decided to catch him. They first managed to carry out the plan after they had extinguished the fire in the abode of the sun.²⁴ Here the sun-god is a devastating force. In the background of the myth apparently lies the experience of the blistering radiation of the sun. Also, the Babylonian god Ninurta shows a similar demoniac nature. He is the god of the glowing summer heat. Correspondingly he is pictured as a redoubtable warrior.²⁵ Though the Egyptians ascribed to Re many favorable qualities, his wrath is nevertheless not unknown. In the so-called wisdom of Anchsheshonq, a passage is to be found in which the effects of this wrath are described. This is done in thirteen lines which all start with the words: "When the sun-god is angry at a country. . . ."²⁶ Not only can the visible light be demoniac, but this also holds true for the invisible, spiritual light. The Quakers who took the Inward Light as their

20 JEOL 7 (1940), 405.

21 JEOL 8 (1942), 674f.

22 K. F. Geldner, "Vedismus und Brahmanismus," *Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch* (1928), 9:46.

23 Ibid., 24.

24 J. van Baal, *Dema, Description, and Analysis of the Marind-Anim Culture (South New Guinea)* (1966), 225.

25 Chantepie, *Lebrbuch*, 1:562.

26 JEOL 15 (1957-58), 15.

guide knew that this light could be numinous.²⁷

The sun-god shows also chthonic features insofar as he is connected with death and with the netherworld. A curious light-myth was linked up with the mountain Lykaion in Arcadia, where Zeus, the light-god, possessed an altar. Men and animals who set foot within this forbidden domain lost their shadow. Whosoever transgressed the border of this holy region would at best prolong his life one year. He belonged to the other world.²⁸ Here the cult place of the light-god is the realm of death. W. B. Kristensen drew the attention to the chthonic traits in the character of the Greek sun-god Helios.²⁹ He is not the only sun-god who has a relationship with the netherworld. From the history of religions, many testimonies can be drawn which make it clear that religious people have conceived of the sun-god, who during the night passes through the netherworld, as a deity who dies and revives—who, so to say, draws his force of resurrection from the realm of death. It is, therefore, not astonishing that the cult of the deceased is often linked up with the worship of the sun-god.³⁰

Nobody has ever worshiped the light merely as rays of the sun or the moon, but always as the bearer of moral and religious values. Thus there is an imperceptible transition from the worship of visible light to the use of light as a symbol of the nature of the divinity. This symbolism is usually employed in order to denote the nature of gods, of whom one—for whatever reason—is not allowed to make an image. Thus the Vājaseneyi-Samhitā says, "The Brahman is the light that is like the sun."³¹ Aša, the most important entity of the "Holy or Benificent Immortal Ones" (Ameša Spentas), which play an important part in the religion of Zarathustra, materializes itself in light and is situated in the uppermost heaven, the region of pure light.³² This light which accompanies Aša is the so called Xvarenah. That Xvarenah possesses great importance in the ancient Persian religion, appears sufficiently from the fact that the nineteenth Yašt of the Avesta is dedicated to this entity. H. Lommel derives Xvarenah from the Arian notion *suvar, 'sun', so that in his opinion the original significance of this notion can be described as "etwas sonnenhaftes." The best translation would be: "Glücksglanz."³³ It is the luck which, according to the ancient Persian idea, accompanies the good kings (thus the princely superiority which characterizes them). Further peculiarities of the relation of Xvarenah to the king will be discussed later on, when the connection between the light and man is dealt with. In the theology of Zarathustra, Xvarenah is a creation of Ahura Mazda.³⁴ In the Fravarāne, a credo which is to be found in Yasna 12, Ahura Mazda is called "Eigner des Himmelsglanz, Eigner des Machtglanz (Xvarenah)."³⁵

27 G. L. van Dalfsen, *Het Inwaartse Licht bij de Quakers* (1940), 148.

28 Kerényi, *Zeus*, 301.

29 W. B. Kristensen, *Het leven uit de dood* (1949), 184f.

30 M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (1949), 125f.

31 Geldner, *Vedismus*, 104.

32 J. Duchesne Guillemin, "The Religion of Ancient Iran," *Historia Religionum* (1969), 1:337.

33 H. Lommel, *Die Yāšt's des Avesta* (1927), 169, 171.

34 *Ibid.*, 176.

35 H. Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Iran* (1938), 273.

In this sense Jahveh is also a "light-god." Ps. 104:2 says that God covers Himself with the light as with a garment. Isa. 60:1 contains the admonition "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." One meets the same idea in the New Testament. I Tim. 6:15-16, describes God as "the King of kings, and Lord of lords who has immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto." The latter idea has apparently inspired the great Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel to his beautiful and profound hymn of the angels in his tragedy "Lucifer." The first three lines of this song, in which the angels interrogatively describe God's being, in the German translation of R. Otto, go like this:

Wer ist es der so hoch gesessen
so tief im gründelosen Licht
von Ewigkeiten ungemessen!³⁶

Also Allah belongs in a figurative sense to the category of the light-gods. *Sūra* 24:35 says: "Allah is the light of the heaven and of the earth; the likeness of his light is as a niche in which there is a lamp." In *Sūra* 33:43 it is testified that Allah leads the faithful from the darkness to the light. As-Suhrawardi praises Allah as "The Light of lights"³⁷ and Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī declares: "When you, in order to get to know God, look at the wonders of the creation. . . you can see the Light of his beauty in the leaves of the roses. . . and in the faces of beautiful men."³⁸ In the later Muslim theology the idea of "the light of Mohammed" occurs. This is a notion which will subsequently be explained. With regard to this item Sahl at-Tustari declares: "Allah has created 'the Light of Mohammed' from his Light and has formed it with his own hand."³⁹

In the preceding argument the significance of the light in its various qualities for the idea of God has been sufficiently explained. Therefore we can turn to answering the question of the function of the light in religious anthropology. In order to acquire a satisfactory answer one should consider that religious anthropology contains a number of themes. In this connection three subjects deserve to be treated, namely the nature of man, his path of salvation, and his future life.⁴⁰

As to the nature of man, one ought to distinguish two conceptions: the anthropology which teaches that man is akin to God and another one which contends that there is a big gulf yawning between God and man. It is evident that people who adhere to the latter type of anthropology deny that man by his nature can participate in the divine light, whilst the followers of the former anthropology assent to the thesis in question. Examples of

³⁶ R. Otto, *Das Heilige*, 23rd-25th ed., 207.

³⁷ J. Schacht, "Der Islam, mit Ausschluss des Qor'ān," *Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch* (1931), 16:118.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁰ C. J. Bleeker, *The Nature and Destiny of Man in the Light of the Phenomenology of Religion* (1963).

trust in man's capacity to take part in the divine light can be met in Brahmanism, in Gnosticism, and in the Hellenistic mystery religions. In the *Vājasaneyi Samhitā*, the *manas*, the divine thinking of which man has part, is called "the only Light of Lights."⁴¹ In the famous conversation in which Yājñavalkya teaches King Jamaka the nature of *ātman*, the sage says that after all other lights have disappeared, man lives by the light of the *ātman*.⁴² One of the basic ideas of all gnostic systems is the thought that man is the bearer of a spark of the divine light which has fallen into the darkness, a spark which should return to the great "Treasure of Light," to "the Land of Light."⁴³ This idea that the soul has descended from the kingdom of Light to the world of Darkness, matter, and sin, has been elaborated by the gnostics in various ways. In the Mithras mysteries, it is taught that man, who originates from the sphere of heavenly light, during his descent to the earth passes seven spheres and thereby receives from each planet a certain quality.⁴⁴ This is again a modification of the theme of "die Himmelsreise der Seele" which has fascinated the people of the later antiquity to such a high degree.

Thereby the subject of the path of salvation is introduced. Whatever the view on the nature of man to which one may adhere, it is generally accepted that man may acquire knowledge of the divine truth which liberates. This knowledge of God is often appreciated as a spiritual light. Sometimes man is deemed capable of receiving the light directly in his heart. Mostly it must be conferred on him by a mediator, a person who in the broader sense of the word fulfils the function of a savior. This first attitude is represented by all "spiritualists" (in the sense of people whose sole guidance is the spirit), by many mystics, and partly also by the Quakers insofar as they are guided by the Inward Light. As mediators of the spreading of the light of truth, first the founders of well known religions can be mentioned. Thus the Buddhists follow the path of Buddha. The decisive event in the life of Buddha happened in the night when he got insight into the liberating truth, an event which is called an awakening or, more specifically, an enlightenment. In the *Vinayapiṭaka-Mahāvagga*, Buddha describes the middle path—between worldliness and ascetism—as the path "that opens the eye and clarifies the mind, and that leads to Rest, to Knowledge, to Enlightenment, to Nirvāṇa."⁴⁵ The so-called "light of Mohammed" has already been referred to.⁴⁶ Al-Hallaḡ deduces all prophecy from this light, namely in the utterance: "The Lights of Prophecy have come forth from his Light [of Mohammed]."⁴⁷ Under the *Shi'ites* the idea circulates that since Adam, the divine Light was inherited by the prophets and subsequently by the descendants of Ali, an idea which caused some *Ismā'īlīya*-groups to consider the *imans* as the incarnations of the divinity and consequently as the bearers

41 Geldner, *Vedismus*, 87.

42 *Ibid.*, 122-23.

43 H. Leisegang, *Die Gnosis* (1955), 361f.

44 *Historia Religionum*, 1:514.

45 M. Winternitz, "Der ältere Buddhismus," *Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch* (1929), 11:39.

46 Chantepie, *Lehrbuch*, 2:674; *Historia Religionum*, 2:177.

47 Schacht, *Der Islam*, 99.

of the heavenly light.⁴⁸ Well known is the word of Jesus in the Gospel according to John 8:12: "I am the Light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." The gnostics have placed this word in the frame of their doctrine of the descent of the light into the darkness. The Pistis Sophia teaches that, when Jesus left the first heavenly mystery in order to descend into the cosmos, he took out of the twelve saviors who dwelled in the Treasure of Light twelve forces which he put into the womb of earthly women. So the twelve apostles were born.⁴⁹ He himself left his garment of light behind during his descent, at the twenty-fourth mystery. He received it back on his return to the world of the aeons. Then he could say: "There is no measure for the Light which was upon me."⁵⁰ Elsewhere it is told that Jesus, after his resurrection, taught his disciples the deepest mysteries, namely, those regarding "the Treasure of Light."⁵¹

There are still other light-figures. To this category firstly belong the old Persian kings who possessed the said Xvarenah.⁵² In ancient Iran these kings were sun-figures who spread so much brilliance that ordinary mortals could not behold them.⁵³ According to the Zoroastrian belief, Xvarenah was bestowed upon them because they confessed the true religion, as was told to king Jamašpa.⁵⁴ But they could also lose this gift, as happened to Jama, who by lying forfeited Xvarenah.⁵⁵ Also the saints are light-figures. The nimbus which on many pictures crowns their heads is a clumsy representation of the light of goodness and holiness which shone from them. Rembrandt possessed the wonderful capacity of painting the supernatural light which accompanied the holy persons from the Bible. The imagination of the faithful sees persons who dedicate themselves fully to God being set aglow with the fire and the light of piety. This is reported, for example, of the monks of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is told about Abbas Joseph, that, when he raised his hands in prayer to heaven, his fingers became ten candle sticks.⁵⁶

It is evident that choosing the path of salvation means that man wholeheartedly accepts and follows the light of truth. "He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life," Jesus said. Both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, primarily in the Psalms and in John, the idea recurs that God has granted His light to man and that the faithful should walk as "children of light."⁵⁷ It would be strange if this idea was confined to the Bible. Actually it is also to be found elsewhere. The gnostics, for example, did interpret the idea in their way. Two manuscripts in the collection of the Dead Sea Scrolls testify to it. The Manual of Discipline is addressed to "the children of light."

48 *Historia Religionum*, 2:138.

49 Leisegang, *Die Gnosis*, 372.

50 *Ibid.*, 373f.

51 J. Dorese, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (1960), 67.

52 Lommel, *Die Yäšt's des Avesta*, 179.

53 G. Widengren, *The Sacral Kingship of Iran* (1959), 247.

54 Nyberg, *Religionen*, 273.

55 Lommel, *Die Yäšt's des Avesta*, 179.

56 N. von Arseniew, *Die Kirche des Morgenlandes* (1926), 71.

57 See, e.g., Ps. 27:1; 43:3; 119:105; Prov. 6:23; 13:9; Isa. 9:1; 51:4; Mic. 7:8; Matt. 5:14; Luke 16:8; John 1:4; 3:19-20; 8:12; 12:46; Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Thes. 5:5; Rev. 22:5.

Another book deals with the "War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness."⁵⁸ The Koran also voices the conviction that he that believes is led from the darkness into the light.⁵⁹

As to the future of man, that is, his life after death, it is clear that the pious imagination has created different images of the land which lies beyond human knowledge. In this connection we shall pay attention only to those conceptions in which the light plays a part. They are easily to be found. Frequently the deceased is conceived of as a glorious being. In ancient Egypt one of the designations of the deceased was *achu* 'light-being'.⁶⁰ In the religion of Zarathustra the paradise of the faithful is the land of "the Lights that have no beginning."⁶¹ It was primarily the gnostics who implanted in the pious people, fettered in the earthly world as they were, the longing for the realm of light, to which they would return after death.

The third point in this argument that calls for attention is the cult. Needless to say, the light played a big part in all kinds of cultic performances. The cult is always a festive act. One can hardly think of religious ceremonies at which no lights are kindled. These lights are symbols of the truth to which religious people adhere and of the joy which faith in God evokes. "The eternal light" which burns as a token of God's presence both in the synagogue and in the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches deserves special attention.⁶² Furthermore, it is interesting to know that Justinus Martyr called baptism *phōtismos*.⁶³ As G. P. Wetter has shown, this term should be understood in the context of the terminology and rites of initiation of the mystery religions. At the ceremony of initiation into these societies, which promised esoteric wisdom to their adepts, a play of lights as a dramatization of the religious truth was likely resorted to.⁶⁴ Well known is this element in the story of the initiation of Lucius into the mysteries of Isis. After the initiation, Lucius is presented to the Isis congregation arrayed as a sun-figure.⁶⁵

Lastly, the question arises as to what function the light has in the religious conception of the world. Two conceptions ought to be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the idea that God has created both the light and the darkness. In Isa. 45:7 God speaks: "I form the light and create darkness." In the religion of Zarathustra it is also taught that Ahura Mazda created both the light and the darkness.⁶⁶ This means that God stands as a sovereign above light and darkness, and also above good and evil. Notwithstanding the fear for the dark and the loathing of sin which are a great puzzle, there sounds an optimistic tone in this conviction. On the other hand, one finds religious people who are so impressed by the

58 T. H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation* (1956).

59 *Sūra* 5:44, 46; 24:40; 33:43; 39:22; 42:52; 57:28; 65:11.

60 Kristensen, *Het leven uit*, 137; C. J. Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals* (1967), 139f.

61 K. F. Geldner, "Die Zoroastische Religion," *Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch* (1926), 1:23, 43, 48.

62 Fr. Heiler, *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion* (1961), 46.

63 Wetter, *Skrifter utgifna af Kungl.*, 1.

64 K. H. E. de Jong, *De Oosters-Hellenistische Mysterien* (1949).

65 *Historia Religionum*, 2:492; A. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (1909), 1:230.

66 Geldner, *Die Zoroastische Religion*, 2.

darkness in this world, so overwhelmed by the evil, that they believe that there existed from the beginning two kingdoms, one of Light and Good, and one of Darkness and Evil. The elements of these two realms have been mixed by a tragical event. Man bears the mark thereof. But the intention is that all particles of light shall be sifted from the darkness and be brought back to the kingdom of Light. This is the common conviction of the gnostics,⁶⁷ of the Mandaeans,⁶⁸ and of the Manichaeans.⁶⁹ No wonder that this world-conception strikes a pessimistic tone.

In conclusion it can be stated that light has a polyvalent religious significance.

67 Doresse, *Secret Books*, 66f.

68 K. Rudolph, *Die Mandäer*, vol. 1; *Das Mandäerproblem* (1960); vol. 2; *Der Kult* (1961); *Theogonie, Kosmogonie und Anthropologie in den mandäischen Schriften* (1965).

69 H. Puech, *Le Manichéisme, son fondateur, sa doctrine* (1949); G. Widengren, *Mani und der Manichäismus* (1961); L. J. R. Ort, *Mani: A Religio-Historical Description of His Personality* (1967).