



On the occasion of the Opening Ceremony for the International Year of Light, UNESCO 2015

Light, universal symbolic archetype

In all civilisations light passes from being a physical phenomenon to being a symbolic archetype, with an endless spectrum of metaphoric iridescence, especially of a religious kind. The primary connection is cosmological by nature: the entrance of light marks the absolute *incipit* of creation in its being and existence. Emblematic is the very opening of the Bible, which remains the “great code” of Western culture: *Wayy’omer #eloh#m: Yeh# #ôr. Wayyeh# #ôr*, “God said, ‘Let there be light!’ And there was light!” (*Genesis 1:3*). A sonorous divine event, a sort of transcendent *Big bang*, generates a luminous epiphany: silence and darkness is broken open to unleash creation.

In ancient Egyptian culture, too, the irradiance of light accompanies the first cosmic dawn, marked by a great waterlily which comes out of the primordial waters generating the sun. This will be above all the star that becomes the very heart of the theology of Pharaonic Egypt, in particular the solar divinities Amon and Aton. This last god, with Amenophis IV-Akhenaton (XIV cent. BC), will become the centre of a sort of monotheistic reform, sung by the Pharaoh himself in a splendid *Hymn to Aton*, the solar disk: this reform, though, will pass as a short meteor in the sky of traditional Egyptian solar polytheism.

Similarly the archaic Indian theology of the *Rigveda* considered the creative divinity Praj#pati as a primordial sound that exploded in a myriad of lights, creatures and harmonies. Not for no reason, in another religious movement that originated in that same land, its great founder took up the sacral title of *Buddha*, which means the *Illumined one*. And coming into more recent historical periods, Islam too chose light as a theological symbol, indeed one entire “surah” of the Qu’r#n, n. XXIV, is called *An-nûr*, “the Light”. One of its verses would become an enormous success with an intense allegorical exegesis in the “S#f#” tradition (particularly with the mystical thinker al-Ghazali in the XI-XII cent.).

It is the verse 35 which sounds as follows: “God is light in the heavens and on the earth. The light is as a lamp placed in a niche. The lamp is enclosed in a crystal, it is as a star with blinding light lit up with oil from a blessed olive tree ... Light on light is God. He guides those he loves towards his light.” This series of examples could be continued at length passing through the many cultural and religious expressions of the East and West that use, as a theological hinge, something which is at the root of shared existential, human

experience. For life is a “coming into light” (as birth is defined in many languages), and it is living in the light of the sun or guided in the night by the light of the moon and the stars.

Light as a “theo-logical” symbol

Given the limits of our analysis, we will now satisfy ourselves with two essential observations, destined only to allow an intuition of the complexity of the symbolic elaboration built on this cosmic reality. On one hand we shall look more closely at the “theo-logical” quality of light, where it is an analogy to speak of God; on the other hand, we shall examine the dialectic of light-darkness in its moral and spiritual value. We shall take as an example the Bible which generated for Western culture a basic iconographic and ideological “lexicon”. It offers us an excellent general systematic paradigm, with significant internal coherence. The Hebrew-Christian Scriptures have been, among other things, a central cultural reference point for entire centuries, as one independent and alternative witness, the philosopher Friederich Nietzsche put it: “Between what we feel in reading Pindar or Petrarch and reading the Biblical Psalms, there is the same difference as between the foreign land and the homeland” (“preparatory materials” for *Aurora*).

Unlike other civilisations where, simplifying things, light (especially solar) is identified with divinity itself, the Bible introduces a significant distinction: light is not God, but God is light. This excludes, then, a pantheistic realistic aspect, and introduces a symbolic perspective that conserves the transcendent, while affirming a presence of the divine in the light that remains, but as, “work of his hands.” This is how we should interpret the affirmations scattered throughout the new testament writings attributed to John the evangelist. In them we find that: *ho Theòs phòs estín*, “God is light” (1 *John* 1:5). Christ himself presents himself thus: *egô eímì to phòs tou kósmou*, “I am the light of the world” (*John* 8:12). Along this line stands that literary and theological masterpiece, the hymn which opens the Gospel of John where the *Lógos*, the Word-Christ, is presented as the “light that enlightens all men” (1:9).

This last expression is significant. Light is assumed as a symbol of the revelation of God and his presence in history. On one hand, God is transcendent and this is expressed by the fact that light is external to us, it precedes, exceeds, and is above us. God, however, is also present and active in creation and in human history, showing himself immanent, and this is illustrated by the fact that light encompasses, specifies, warms and pervades us. Thus the believer also becomes luminous: think of the face of Moses irradiating light, after having been in dialogue with God on the peak of Sinai (*Exodus* 34:33-35). The faithful person too becomes a source of light, once he has let himself be enfolded by divine light as Jesus affirmed in his famous “sermon on the Mount”: “You are the light of the world ... Your light must shine in the sight of men” (*Matthew* 5:14.16).

In this trajectory, if the Pythagorical tradition imagined the souls of the righteous departed were transformed into the stars of the milky way, the biblical book of Daniel takes on this intuition but liberates it from its immanentist realism transforming it into an ethical-eschatological metaphor: “The learned will shine as brightly as the vault of heaven, and those who have instructed many in virtue, as bright as stars for all eternity” (12:3). And in the Roman Christianity of the first centuries – once the date of 25 December for the Birth of Christ had been chosen (this was the pagan feast of the god Sun, in the winter solstice which marked the beginning of the ascent of light, previously humiliated by winter darkness) – they would begin to define a Christian in the burial inscriptions as *eliópais*, “son of the Sun”. The light which radiated Christ-Sun was also destined, then, to encompass the Christian.

Indeed, in later Christian tradition, a sort of theological solar system would be established: Christ is the sun; the Church is the moon, which shines reflected light; Christians are the stars, not having their own light but being illuminated by the supreme celestial light. That this exquisitely symbolic vision was destined to exalt the revelation and communion between divine transcendence and human historical reality seems clear

from a surprising but coherent passage from the last biblical book, Revelation, where in the description of the ideal city of the perfect eschatological future, the new and celestial Jerusalem, proclaims “It will never be night again and they will not need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will be shining on them” (22:5). The communion of humanity with God will then be full and every symbol will fall away to leave space for the truth of the direct encounter.

The dialectic light-darkness

It is interesting to note that in the text cited mention is made of the night and, hence, of the circadian rhythm. This is a characteristic *tópos* of eschatology (that is of the end times), as we read in the book of the prophet Zechariah who, when describing the end of history, paints it as a “single day with no alternation of day and night, and in the evening it will be light” (14:7). Now, in history that daily rhythm between light and darkness remains and becomes itself an ethical-metaphysical sign. We intend to speak of the dialectic light-darkness that appears in the above mentioned book of Genesis. The creative divine act, expressed through the image of the “separation” puts order into the “disorder” of nothing: “God saw that the light was good/beautiful and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day and the darkness he called night” (*Genesis* 1:4-5).

Significant also is the definition of light as *tôb*, a Hebrew adjective that is at the same time ethical, practical and aesthetic and so, designates something that is good, beautiful and useful. In contrast, then, the darkness is the negation of being, of life, of good of truth. This is why, while the paradisiacal zenith is immersed in the splendour of light, the infernal nadir is clothed in obscurity, as we read in the biblical book of Job where hell is described as “the land of darkness and mortal shadows, the land of dimness and murk, of night and chaos, in which light itself is deep darkness” (10:21-22).

For the same reason the antithesis light-darkness is transformed into a moral and spiritual paradigm. And this is what appears in many cultures and has its apex in the above cited hymn-prologue of the Gospel of John where the light of the divine Word “shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overpower the light” (1:5). And again in the same fourth Gospel we read: “The light has come into the world, but men have preferred the darkness to the light ... those who do wrong hate the light and avoid it ... those who live by the truth come out into the light” (John 3:19-21). In the Judaic community active from the first century BC onwards, discovered at Qumran along the western banks of the Dead Sea, a text describes the “war of the sons of the light against the sons of darkness” following a constant symbolic module to define the contrast between good and evil, between the elect and the reprobates.

This dualism is reflected also in the opposition angels-demons or in the antithetic principles yang-yin, in the divinity in combat between them such as the creator Marduk and the destructive Tiamat, the divinities of the Babylonian cosmogony, or as Ormuzd (or Ahura-Mazda) and Ahriman of the Mazdean Persian religion, or as Devas and Asuras in the Indian world. The same dialectic acquires a new form in the mystical horizon, when it introduces the theme of the “dark night”, as seen by the great sixteenth century Spanish mystical author and poet, St John of the Cross. In this case the torment, the trial and the spirit’s waiting in the night is as a rich womb that preludes the generation of the light of revelation and encounter with God.

In synthesis we could share the affirmation of Ariel in Goethe’s *Faust: Welch Getöse bringt das Licht!*, “What noise light brings!” (II, act I, v. 4671). It is in fact a glorious and vital sign, a sacred and transcendent metaphor, but it is not inoffensive for it generates tension with its opposite, darkness, transforming itself into a symbol of the moral and existential fight. Its irradiation, then, from the cosmos passes into history, from the infinite it descends into the finite and it is for this that humanity seeks the light, as a final cry that is attributed to the same Goethe, *Mehr Licht!*, “more light!”: in the physical sense due to the closing of the eyes in agony, but also in the existential and spiritual sense of desire for

a supreme epiphany of light. This is what the ancient Hebrew poet of the Psalms invoked: "In you, God, the spring of life, in your light we shall see light!" (*Psalms* 36:10).

Card. GIANFRANCO RAVASI

19 January 2015



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International
Year of Light
2015