

# Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind: Light and luminous being in Islamic theology

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**Christian Lange** 

Utrecht University, Netherlands

## Abstract

For theologians, to conceive of God in terms of light has some undeniable advantages, allowing a middle-of-the road position between the two extremes of thinking about God in terms of a purely disembodied, unfathomable, unsensible being, and of crediting Him with a body, possibly even a human(oid) body. This paper first reviews the reasons why God, in early medieval Islam, was never fully theorized in terms of light. It then proceeds to discuss light-related narratives in two major, late-medieval compilations of hadiths about the afterlife, by al-Suyuti (Ash'ari, Egypt, d. 1505) and al-Majlisi (Persia, d. 1699), suggesting that eschatology was the area in which God's light continued to shine in Islam, and the backdoor through which a theology of light, in the thought of al-Suhrawardi (Syria, d. 1191) and his followers, made a triumphant re-entry into Islamic thought.

## Keywords

Islam, light, religion, eschatology

Fill my fond heart with God alone . . .  
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.  
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!  
—Alexander Pope

O God Self-Subsisting,  
support and strengthen us with light.  
Resurrect us towards light.  
—al-Suhrawardi

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## Corresponding author:

Christian Lange, Utrecht University, Janskerkhof 13, Utrecht 3512 BL, Netherlands.

Email: [C.R.Lange@uu.nl](mailto:C.R.Lange@uu.nl)

## Sacred light in Islam

For heuristic purposes, one may state that there are three kinds of sacred light in Islam. First of all, there is God's light, the *nur Allah*. The Qur'an states that God is "the light of the heavens and the earth," and it compares this light to the light emanating from a lamp standing in a niche, "lit from a blessed tree, an olive-tree, neither from the East nor from the West" (24:35).<sup>1</sup> Intimately connected to God's essence, in both Sunni and Shi'i traditions the *nur Allah* is conceived as a light that existed before the creation of the world (de Boer 1995, 122b).

The Qur'an also states, secondly, that the Prophet Muhammad is an "illuminating lamp" (*siraj munir*, 33:46). According to certain Muslim thinkers, God shared His pre-existent light with the equally pre-existent Muhammad (Andrae 1917, 319). Muhammad's Prophetic light, the *nur Muhammad*, thus may be considered the second sacred light in Islam. Whether Muhammad, in his primordial, uncreated state, existed in a bodily or spiritual form is the subject of controversy in Islamic prophetology. The idea of Muhammad's light arguably offered a way out of this controversy, light being neither fully corporeal nor spiritual (Rubin 1975, 107-9). In Shi'i thought, also the members of the Prophet's family, the *ahl al-bayt*, are said to have existed as pre-existent lights (Amir Moezzi 1994, 30, *passim*).

A third group of Muslim thinkers did not speak so much of Muhammad's or the Imams' own, pre-existent light, but rather stressed that God's light was channeled through, and reflected in, Muhammad and the other prophets (Rubin 1979, 41). The Gospel speaks of Jesus as "the light to illumine the heathen" (Luke 2:32), and the Apostles' Creed calls him *lumine de lumine*, "light derived from light." The Qur'an echoes this idea: "Our Messenger [has] come to you . . . A light and an elucidating<sup>2</sup> scripture have come to you from God" (5:15). Muhammad, in this view, is a created being, in whom God's revelation, in the form of light, becomes manifest, but who does not himself produce a sacred light. The third sacred light in Islam, therefore, is derivative: the divine light that enters and illumines the holy person's soul, from where it is reflected outwards. The early mystic Shaiq al-Balkhi (Northern Persia, d. 810) may have been the first to claim this inner light for the Sufis. While for Shaiq, this light can be actively earned by virtue of the mystic's spiritual perfection—he speaks of the "light of renunciation" (*nur al-zuhd*) and the "light of love" (*nur al-mahabba*) (Shaiq 1973, 21)—, according to other thinkers, such as al-Ghazali (Iraq, d. 1111), souls passively receive the divine light in an act of grace, as a light that does not come about "by systematic demonstration or by marshaled argument but . . . [as] a light which God most high cast into my breast" (Ghazali 1967, 25).

In this essay, I focus on the first of these three sacred lights in Islam, exploring the notion of God's light in Islamic theology, more specifically in Islamic eschatology, largely leaving aside the vast amount of literature devoted to the second and third sacred light, especially in Shi'i prophetology and in Sufism. First, I discuss why conceiving of God as light was problematic for early Muslim theologians (8th-11th c.) and even came to carry the stigma of heresy, despite the notion's promise to appease aniconic scruples. Second, I show that, notwithstanding the rejection of a definition of God as light in classical mainstream Sunni and Shi'i Islam, God's light is a prominent theme in Muslim narrative eschatology throughout the centuries. In a sideways excursion, I then provide some examples of how beams of God's otherworldly light, in certain Islamic rituals and religious objects, were thought to reach down to earth and become manifest there in a bodily and material sense. Finally, I examine how the notion of God's otherworldly, eschatological light helped to bring about

the light-centered thought of al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191), and how God's light in al-Suhrawardi's ontology connects with the light-filled "spotless minds" granted to the adherents of the School of Illumination (*madhhab al-ishraq*), an intellectual movement that spawned in the later Islamic Middle Ages and that drew from Neoplatonic and Iranian cosmological notions.

Deploying an analytical framework that connects to the concerns of comparative Religious Studies rather than to conventional, text-centered Islamic Studies, and given my aim of saying something about the *longue durée*, I am forced to paint a broad-brush picture. To trace the history of light in Muslim theology is a complex undertaking, one that deserves a much longer, book-length treatment, which remains to be written. In this essay I merely wish to propose a basic sequence of events and draw attention to some pivotal thinkers and moments in this history. On individual points, readers should feel encouraged to consult the specialized literature mentioned in the list of references.

## God as light

Several clear conceptual advantages attach to a theology of light. The manifold conceptualizations of God as light, in the medieval Jewish and Christian traditions, have been studied, amongst others by Elliott Wolfson (1994) and more recently Aviad Kleinberg (2015). Building on Wolfson's and Kleinberg's analysis, I suggest that to think about God in terms of light enables a middle-of-the road position between apophatism—that is, the position that God is beyond the limitations of what can be expressed through language—and incarnationism—that is, crediting God with a form or body accessible to the senses, possibly even a human body. Wolfson (1994, 51) highlights that the rabbis, continuing a Biblical tradition that included both elements of apophatism and incarnationism, developed strategies that allowed them both to affirm *and* deny the visualization of God. Muslim theologians, I suggest, had similar ambitions and likewise felt the need to maintain the paradox of God being inaccessibly removed and tangibly present at the same time.

Light makes the maintenance of this paradox possible by virtue of at least three properties. First of all, light is visible—think of a fire we see at a distance, burning in the night—but it is invisible at the same time, in the sense that it is not the object of vision but rather the condition under which vision becomes possible. We do not see the light of the day, but rather, we see by it, or through it. Secondly, light is traceable—we see the rays of the sun, at least when squinting our eyes—but it is also formless or, as the Greek Fathers would have put it, *aperigraphos*, uncircumscribed, escaping all limits. As Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) described the divine light she saw in her visions: "I can measure neither height, nor length, nor breadth in it . . . I can no more recognize the form of this light than I can gaze directly on the sphere of the sun" (Hildegard of Bingen 1990, 19). Thirdly and finally, light has no sound, smell, taste or touch, but it is palpable, at least in most instances and certainly in the case of sunlight: we feel the warmth of light on our skin.

In sum, a theology of light is spiritual and sensual at the same time. As such, a theology of light would seem to fit Islam like a glove. Islam, like Judaism, incorporates apophatic as well as incarnationist and anthropomorphic ideas in its holy texts. According to the Qur'an, "there is nothing like Him" (42:11), but God also sits on a throne (2:255 and *passim*) and He stretches out His hands (5:64). According to a famous hadith, God resides in a realm "which no eye has seen, nor ear has heard, nor mind has conceived" (Muslim 1955-56, 4:2174; cf. 1 Cor 2:9), but other hadiths, the so-called "hadiths of the attributes" (*ahadith al-sifat*, see

Holtzman 2018), speak about His hands, fingers, leg, as well as the throne on which He sits (see the hadiths collected and translated in Gimaret 1997).

Besides, as noted, the Qur'an explicitly identifies God as light: an invitation for theologians to build on and develop a theology of light. The fact is, however, that they did not—at least, not in the early and classical phases of Muslim theology. But why did they not take the bait? What held them back?

## A theology of light in Islam?

The problem of anthropomorphism, in classical Muslim theology, pitched the anti-anthropomorphist Mu'tazili, Ash'ari, and Maturidi schools against the Hanbali 'traditionist' school. Glossing over important differences, while the Mu'tazilis, Ash'aris, and Maturidis held that God has no body (though with the caveat that the Ash'aris often said that God's having a body had to be understood "amodally", *bi-la kayf*), the Hanbali traditionists insisted that God *does* have a body, a body with a boundary, located in space, and visible to the eye.

As early as the ninth century, when Hanbalism arose, the Hanbalis' insistence on God's corporeality caused them problems. The eponymous founder of Hanbalism, Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 855), fell victim to an inquisition instigated by theologians at the court of the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, first and foremost because of his view that the Qur'an is uncreated, but also because he held that God has a body. A courtier once accused Ahmad in the presence of caliph al-Mu'tasim (r. 833–42), lambasting him for defending the vision of God, even though God has no boundaries, and hence cannot be seen (al-Khatib 1931, 11:466). Ahmad, as is well known, spent time in prison for his beliefs, later to be released and carried through the streets of Baghdad on the shoulders of his triumphant supporters. The schism within Sunni theology between the defenders of reason (Mu'tazilis, then the Ash'aris and Maturidis) and the proponents of anthropomorphism (the Hanbalis), from then on, became irreparable.

Potentially, for the reasons spelled out above, a theology of light could have helped to smooth over differences. In fact, there were attempts to introduce such a notion in the early history of Islamic theology. One such attempt came from the Persian courtier Ibn al-Muqaffa', who was executed in Basra in 755 or 758 at the latest. In a devotional hymn (Guidi 1927, 8), Ibn al-Muqaffa' addresses God thus:

In the name of the Light, the Merciful, the Compassionate!  
 Exalted is the Light, the powerful king,  
 whose friends recognize him by His greatness, his wisdom and his light,  
 and whose enemies, who do not know Him and are blind in front of Him,  
 are obliged to call Him great because of His greatness . . .  
 Praised and blessed be the Light!

Styled on the first chapter of the Qur'an, *al-Fatiha*, Ibn al-Muqaffa's hymn is a remarkable provocation, part of a larger refutation of the Qur'an in which Ibn al-Muqaffa' imitated the language of the Qur'an and proposed his own scripture.<sup>3</sup> In the eyes of most Muslim theologians, this was sheer heresy. Rather than paving the way for a theology of light in Islam, Ibn al-Muqaffa's intervention discredited the notion of God as light. That Ibn al-Muqaffa' was a convert from Manicheism did not help his cause either.

A generation later, the early Shi'i theologian Hisham b. al-Hakam (d. ca. 795) proposed that God was a circumscribed, "solid body of light" (*jism samadi nuri*), though not a body in humanoid form (*sura*) (see van Ess 1991-97, 1:362; [1989] 2018c, 620). In general, in the ancient "nonrational esoteric tradition" of Shi'ism (Amir-Moezzi 2016, 82), the conception of God as light played an important role, even though Muhammad's "light of prophecy" and especially, "the light of 'Ali and the Imamate" arguably formed the core of Shi'i light-thought (Amir Moezzi 1994, 30, *passim*).

However, in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, when the argument for God's luminous corporeality was, as it appears, still entertained by a number of thinkers, the notion failed to impose itself. Even if darkness, as the autonomous opposite of light, is not mentioned by either Ibn al-Muqaffa' or Hisham b. al-Hakam, their ideas must have sounded rather Manichean, or dualist, and hence in conflict with Islam to other Muslim theologians. The prophet Mani (d. 274), the Baghdad-based bibliographer Ibn al-Nadim related (d. 995), had taught that at the beginning of time, the world was composed of light and darkness, light being "the great [element] and the first, but not in quantity . . . the deity, the King of the Gardens of Light" (Ibn al-Nadim 1970, 777).

Around the time of Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Hisham b. al-Hakam, there was a sizeable group of Manicheans in Baghdad, but when in the course of the ninth and early tenth centuries, Manicheism was violently persecuted and pushed out of the Iraqi heartlands of Islam and forced to retreat to northeastern Iran and Central Asia (see van Ess 1991-97, 1:420), a theology of light likewise disappeared from the horizon of Islamic thought (to the exception of certain radical sectarians, see van Ess 2011, 648-649). True, the Hanbali-traditionists agreed that God was luminous, as the Qur'an asserts; but they were not greatly interested in the notion, preferring to focus their attention on discussions of His hands and His other body parts, and in His location in space, above us (His *fawqiyya*). As for the rationalist theologians, they preferred to interpret the light verse figuratively. For example, al-Najjar (d. 835) is said to have taught that the light verse meant no more than that God "guides" the inhabitants of heaven and earth (see Ash'ari 1929-30, 2:534). Also the great majority of authorities adduced in al-Tabari's (d. 923) commentary on Qur'an 24:35 are quoted as teaching that the notion of God's light refers to the fact that He is humankind's guide (*al-hadi*) (Tabari 2011, 18:161-163), but not that He *is* light.

## Light as a name of God

If God was not light, how and to what extent did Muslim theologians conceptualize light as one of His attributes? In fact, in discussions in Islamic theology about the attributes (*sifat*) of God, light is seldom included. Instead, light appears in lists of the "beautiful names" (*al-asma' al-husna*) given to God. The difference is significant. As an attribute, light connects to God's being. As a name, light only nominally refers to God; it can do so even in a metaphorical way.

In his work on God's names, *The Splendid Goal in Explaining the Beautiful Names of God* (*al-Maqsad al-asna fi sharh asma' Allah al-husna*), al-Ghazali (d. 1111) writes about God's light in terms of His ability to make things "apparent" (*zahir*), that is, to bring them into existence (al-Ghazali n.d., 129-30). "Light," al-Ghazali states,

is the manifest thing that makes all [other] things manifest. What is manifest in itself and makes others manifest is called light. When existence is compared to non-existence, [it becomes clear

that] being manifest belongs to existence and that there is no darkness darker than non-existence. Now, He who is unencumbered by the darkness of non-existence, or even of the possibility of non-existence, He who brings all things from the darkness of non-existence into manifest existence, is appropriately referred to as Light. Existence is a light emanating onto all things from the light of His essence. For He is {the light of the heavens and the earth} (Q 24:35). All [single] particles of the sun's light prove the existence of the sun that illuminates. In like manner, all particles of the things that exist in the heavens, on earth and in between them prove the necessary existence of the One that gave them existence.

In conclusion to his discussion, al-Ghazali assures his readers that this understanding of God's two names, "the Light" and "the Manifest," will help them to avoid the "extreme views" (*ta'assufat*) that others held, possibly referring back to the likes of Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Hisham b. al-Hakam. God may be referred to as light, and there is a functional analogy: both God and light make manifest. But God must not be thought of as an actual beam of light. This line of thinking is continued by later theologians, such as the influential Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209). "The term 'light'," al-Razi submits in his exegesis of Qur'an 24:35 (al-Razi 1981/1401, 23: 224), "is a linguistic convention (*mawdu' fi l-lugha*) to indicate the quality (*kayfiyya*) emanating from the sun, the moon and the fire onto the earth, walls and other objects. It is impossible that this quality be a divine being (*ilah*)."

Al-Razi goes on to list several arguments to prove this contention. Some of these arguments hinge on the notion that light is created and divided in parts (*munqasim*), neither of which can be said to apply to God. Al-Razi also argues against God being light on the basis of the *sensual* nature of light. "If this palpable light [i.e., of the sun, the moon and the fire] (*hadha l-nur al-mahsus*)," he writes, "were God, then it would be necessary for this light never to fade, for it is impossible for God to fade (*li-imtina' al-zawal 'ala Allah*)." In sum, al-Razi states, these arguments disprove the Manicheans, who believe that God is the Great Light (*al-nur al-a'zam*). But also those who, unlike the Manicheans, believe the Qur'an to be holy scripture have got it wrong when they claim that the expression, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth," means that God is light in His essence (*annahu fi dhatihi nur*). Rather, al-Razi argues, one should stick to the position that the Qur'an uses light figuratively to speak of God, as demonstrated by the second sentence of Qur'an 24:35, which talks of "the likeness of His light" (*mathalu nurihi*).

To return to al-Ghazali, in the passage quoted above we see him metaphorically transposing the Qur'an's light verse into a philosophically grounded theory of creation and existence. In doing so, he uses the Avicennian concept of "necessary existence" (*wajib al-wujud*) and the Neoplatonic terminology of "emanation" (*fayd*). This philosophical theology, which hinges on the idea of "existence," is picked up and developed further by al-Razi (Eichner 2016, 500) and other later Muslim theologians. However, in some of his other works, written in the later phase of his life, after his mystical turn, al-Ghazali writes about light as the substantial being, rather than the name, accident, or attribute, of God. In *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkat al-anwar*), he boldly states that "the real light (*al-nur al-haqq*) is God, and the name 'light' for everything else is sheer metaphor, without reality" (Ghazali 1998, 3). Elsewhere, al-Ghazali connects this divine light to the third type of sacred light, as discussed at the beginning of this essay, the light illuminating the holy person. In his autobiographical work *The Deliverance from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-dalal*), al-Ghazali suggests that God shares His light, in the form of a kind of intuitive and experiential knowledge, with certain human beings. Security (*aman*) and certainty (*yaqin*) occurred to



his soul, al-Ghazali writes, not by rehearsing the arguments of the philosophers and theologians, but “by a light that God cast in my chest”, which is “the key to the greater part of knowledge” (Ghazali 1996, 86 [tr. 25]).

The “multiple parallels” between al-Ghazali’s doctrine of light in *The Niche of Lights* and al-Suhrawardi’s ontology of light in *The Philosophy of Illumination (Hikmat al-ishraq)* have been studied, amongst others, by Nicolai Sinai (Sinai 2016, 285). While clearly showing the formative influence of al-Ghazali on al-Suhrawardi, Sinai also highlights important differences between the two thinkers. Al-Suhrawardi (287–8), to whom we will turn at the end of this article, seems altogether less bound by the strictures of traditional Muslim theology. As for al-Ghazali, he keeps closer to a mainstream, albeit philosophically grounded, view of God’s light, at least in *The Splendid Goal*. By contrast, what he says about God’s light in *The Niche of Lights* and *The Deliverance from Error* opens up a new vista. However, al-Ghazali’s light-thought did not bring about a profound shift in Muslim theology but rather, it met with much resistance, getting him into trouble with his fellow theologians, who launched a campaign against him denouncing him as a heretic at the sultan’s court (Garden 2005, 103, 106). In response, al-Ghazali wrote several letters, in one of which he responds, specifically, to the accusation that calling God the “real light” is the position of an unbelieving philosopher (Ghazali 1971, 79).

## God as light in Muslim eschatology

As the preceding discussion has suggested, in the centuries intervening between Ibn al-Muqaffa’ and al-Suhrawardi, no attempt to define God as light was able to gain the upper hand in Muslim theology. However, there is one arena of religious thought in Islam in which the imagery of divine light flourished throughout this period: narrative eschatology, that is, the body of narrations (*hadiths*), attributed to the Prophet or other early authorities, that describe the world-to-come. It is conceivable that al-Suhrawardi received an important stimulus from this body of literature, prompting him to make light the linchpin of his theology and cosmology.

The three centuries before the death of al-Suhrawardi witnessed a “period of expansion” (Lange 2016, 83) of eschatological *hadith* literature, giving birth to works like the sprawling compilation *What Paradise is Like (Sifat al-janna)* by the Ash’ari scholar from Isfahan, Abu Nu’aym al-Isfahani (d. 1038). References to God as a light experienced in the hereafter occur not only in Ash’ari, but also in Mu’tazili-Shi’i *hadith* compilations about the afterlife. Two late-medieval compilations of eschatological *hadiths*, al-Suyuti’s (Egypt, d. 1505) *The Shining Full Moons of Eschatology (al-Budur al-safira fi umur al-akhira)* and the chapters on eschatology in al-Majlisi’s (Persia, d. 1699) *Oceans of Light (Bihar al-anwar)*, are apt to illustrate this. Both works are fairly late compilations, but both include earlier material. As such they represent the mature phase of Muslim (narrative) eschatology (Lange 2016, 120).

Already the mention of *Full Moons* in the title of al-Suyuti’s work points to the importance of light in his view of the afterworld. “You will see God,” the Prophet was reported to have declared, “like you see the full moon at night” (Tirmidhi 2000, 689), that is, like a well-circumscribed beacon of light, or a lamp. Al-Suyuti adds a tradition that elaborates that the faces of the inhabitants of paradise will be “shining” (*nadira*), as it is stated in the Qur’an (75:22), because they are illumined by the divine light (Suyuti 1996, 601). The grandiose description, related from the Prophet on the authority of the Companion Anas b. Malik (and therefore known as the *hadith Anas*), of how God appears to the blessed in paradise

every Friday, the “Day of Surplus” (*yawm al-mazid*), also places God in a scenery of light (Abu Nu’aym 1995, 3:226; Suyuti 1996, 620):

Your Lord has set apart a valley in paradise that smells of white musk. Every Friday, He descends from the Highest (*‘illiyyun*), [sitting] on His throne. Then He surrounds His throne with *minbars* of light, and the prophets come and take a seat on them... Then arrive the inhabitants of paradise and take a seat on the dune [in the valley], and their Lord reveals Himself to them so that they look at his face.

God’s self-revelation (*tajalli*) to the inhabitants of paradise, as the *hadith Anas* details, is bathed in light. Through the light, the paradise-dwellers see His face.

Ash’ari theologians such as Abu Nu’aym al-Isfahani and al-Suyuti generally agreed that the vision of God (*ru’yat Allah*) in the afterlife occurs “by the eye” (and not just “by the heart”, as others maintained), and that God will be visible in a rather concrete, albeit luminous, form (Tuft 1983). Mu’tazili theologians, by contrast, insisted that God cannot be seen in a form that circumscribes Him, or indeed in any form whatsoever; He can only be seen, or imagined, “by the heart.” Shi’i theologians, though espousing many Mu’tazili principles in other respects, preferred to speak of the vision of God as a light (Vajda 1986). Al-Majlisi’s *Oceans of Light* provides several examples. Thus, in a variant of the *hadith Anas*, God manifests Himself (*tajalla*) to those present in the heavenly audience on Friday, but everybody falls down in prostration, blinded by God’s light. Subsequently, when the blessed return to their dwellings, they are greeted by their spouses with the words: “You never looked better than today!”—to which they respond: “It is because I saw God’s light!” In his commentary on this narrative, al-Majlisi explains that God’s self-revelation to the inhabitants of paradise “means that [they see] the lights of His majesty” (Majlisi 2008, 8:350). Elsewhere, in another narrative related by al-Majlisi, it is made clear that the inhabitants of paradise see “the light of His face, which [itself] remains hidden from sight” (Majlisi 2008, 8:414).

Light, in the narratives al-Suyuti and al-Majlisi relate, permeates all of paradise. In a tradition reported by al-Suyuti, it is maintained that there is no night in paradise, the sun always shines, while in hell there is only darkness; not even the flames of hell-fire provide light (Suyuti 1996, 429). In al-Majlisi’s account, light also penetrates the bodies of its inhabitants. “When God created paradise,” al-Majlisi quotes the Prophet, “He created it of the light of His throne, then He took a third of that light and applied it to ‘Ali and the members of his family; who catches some of this light will be rightly guided” (Majlisi 2008, 8:394). In other Shi’i works of eschatology, the idea is further developed. There, we read that the face of ‘Ali shines upon the inhabitants of paradise “like the morning star that shines on people on earth” (Bahrani 2007, 3:53). The blessed, we learn from another tradition, see a light that shines on them, emanating from ‘Ali and Fatima, both of whom laugh (3:60).

## Beams of light from the otherworld

It is a common fallacy to think that eschatology is exclusively concerned with things to unfold in the far future. In Islam as in other religious traditions, the hereafter and life on earth are intimately intertwined, so that there is continuum, rather than a break, between life in the otherworld and life on earth. In complex ways, the hereafter is made to be present in the lives of Muslims, whether in a spiritual and intellectual manner or in traditions of sacred



geography, art and architecture, or ritual (Lange 2016, 277-8). As has been noted, in Islam the audition of God has generally been emphasized more than His vision: God speaks to Moses, according to the Qur'an, but He does not allow him to see Him (Ritter 1955, 440). Still, glimpses of God's luminous being were not beyond the reach of Muslim eyes on earth.

To give an—admittedly notorious—example, in various periods and places in Islamic history, contemplating the beautiful faces of male youths was said to equal the vision of God's face in paradise, as in the *hadith Anas*. Such ideas and practices were never part of the religious mainstream, but the ritual of *shahidbazi* (lit. "playing the witness") enjoyed considerable popularity in medieval Persian Sufism, as the examples of Ahmad al-Ghazali (d. 1126), 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadhani (d. 1131), Awhad al-Din Kirmani (d. 1237 or 38), and Fakhr al-Din 'Iraqi (d. 1289) demonstrate (Ridgeon 2012). In Sufi séances (*sama's*), "moon-faced youths" (Pers. *kudak-e mah-e ru'i*), playing the role of "witnesses" to God's beauty, were presented to the admiring gaze of the crowd that gathered around them. According to certain accounts, young boys were given a candle in their hands, which illumined their faces from below, and made to sit behind a curtain, while the public sat in the dark. When the curtain was drawn, "the moon rose" (van Ess [2007] 2018a, 1705).

In one of the narratives related by al-Majlisi, it is stated that God's light can be "caught" by the believers on earth. Many interpreters of this tradition are likely to have understood the expression figuratively as an inner light. But believers certainly were invited to entertain more concrete, sensual associations. Certain objects of Islamic art are designed to "catch" God's light. One finds the famous "light verse" inscribed, and reflected in a subtle play of analogy, in the glass lamps that are so typical of Near Eastern mosques, from which they have been exported to other parts of the Muslim world (Shalem 1994; Bonneric 2013, 123–166). It also bears mentioning in this context that one finds depictions of lamps in the decoration of prayer niches (*mihhrabs*) and tombstones all over the Islamic world. For some, in other words, God's light materialized in this world in lamps, whether real or painted. Others, by contrast, appear to have found the association with lamps, oil, wicks, and fire rather worrisome. "O lamp of the highest heaven," the Persian mystic 'Attar (d. ca. 617/1221) wrote, "avoid this gloomy niche [i.e., the world], so that you become light upon light, untouched by fire" (Attar 1967, 774).

In Islamic painting, God's light was occasionally depicted. Especially Timurid and Safavid painters of ascension scenes "symbolically associated God with effulgent light," depicting a gold bundle of flames as a "stand-in for the divine" (Gruber 2019, 145-6). In the famous Uighur manuscript of the Prophet's ascension (*mi'raj*), produced in Herat around 1400 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS supplément turc 190), Mohammed, prostrating before God, is shown engulfed in golden clouds, an ingenious way of pointing to God's *aperigraphos* luminous flux in a visual way (Séguy 1977, plate 34). By contrast, in the numerous paintings of Judgment Day and of paradise, such as one finds in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal *Books of Omens (Falnamehs)*, one looks in vain for rays of God's light entering the picture (Farhad 2009). In order to locate God's luminous presence in works of Islamic art, a study of the "luminous geography" (Bonneric 2015, 74) of sacred architecture, which is supported and enhanced by ritual, also recommends itself. One thinks of the glittering interior walls of burial shrines in the Islamic world. For example, one might see in the dazzling, mirror-, glass- and lamp-studded walls of the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, Iran, a visual realization of the title of al-Majlisi's work, *Oceans of Light*. Or consider how the Spanish traveler Ibn Jubayr, during his visit to Mecca in 1183, describes the light-filled beauty of the Holy Precinct: "Candles, torches and lamps were set alight, and

the splendid sky-lamp, the moon, shone its light on the earth, spreading its rays. Thus were conjoined the lights in this noble sanctuary, which in its essence is light” (Ibn Jubayr 1907, 141). In Ibn Jubayr’s description, it is as if God’s presence (Arab. *sakina*) materializes in the halo of light surrounding Islam’s central sanctuary, the Kaaba.

## Eternal sunshine

Around the time of Ibn Jubayr’s journey to Mecca, a little less than a century after al-Ghazali’s attempt to revivify the idea of God as light, Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191), the “Master of Illumination” (*shaykh al-ishraq*), went the full distance, devising a theological system that hinged on light as its very core idea (Walbridge 1992, 40–78). As has been suggested (van Lit 2017), this system, which is outlined in al-Suhrawardi’s *The Philosophy of Illumination* (*Hikmat al-ishraq*), was created by al-Suhrawardi partly in order to solve an eschatological conundrum, namely the question of how to conceive of the afterlife in terms that safeguard its spiritual nature—vehemently defended by Muslim philosophers—but also pay tribute to the corporeal aspects of traditional eschatology, including the notions of a bodily resurrection, of material pleasures and torments in the afterlife, and of the vision of God in paradise, as narrated in the *hadith Anas* and other texts.

Al-Suhrawardi’s thought is highly original and dense. Here, only a summary sketch can be offered, with the simple aim of demonstrating the centrality of light in al-Suhrawardi’s system. Al-Suhrawardi envisioned a hierarchy of lights connecting God on top, called “the light of lights” (*nur al-anwar*), with the “regent lights” (*al-anwar al-mudabbira*), that is, the souls of material beings, which spend their lives imprisoned in the sublunar, material world of darkness, called “the world of barriers.” Situated between “the light of lights” and the “regent lights”, according to al-Suhrawardi, is the intermediary, celestial sphere of the “victorious lights” (*al-anwar al-qahira*), the realm in which angels (who are made of light according to Muslim tradition) reside. Al-Suhrawardi’s ontology of light bears resemblance to Neoplatonic cosmology, where God, the One, ‘emanates’ His intellect to a series of lower intellects, all the way down to human intellects in the sublunar sphere. However, according to al-Suhrawardi, God, who is Himself light, emanates light, not intellect. While al-Suhrawardi reprises some of the ideas of al-Ghazali, his system is strikingly original, adding up to a comprehensive light ontology, in which all existents are defined by “the degree of their luminous intensity within the ontological... ‘grades’ of light, from the noblest of light, the Light of Lights (God) to the absence of it (matter)” (Marcotte 2019).

The “regent lights” that illumine human souls are connected to the lights of the higher spheres, be it temporarily (in visions or dreams) or lastingly after death, when they leave their material bodies and move into the heavenly realms of light. Simplifying things a great deal, after death there are two possibilities. Either the “regent lights” move up into the intermediary world of the “victorious lights,” in which they experience paradisiacal and infernal sensations, the memory of which they carry with them: food and drink, music, bodily pain, and so forth. In this way, an embodied post-mortem existence, on which mainstream Muslim theology insists, is safeguarded, even if the “regent lights,” in their post-mortem state, do not dispose of bodies, their experience being tied to celestial “places of manifestation” (*mazahir*, sg. *mazhar*)—a theory that can be traced back to Avicenna (d. 1037) but which, for lack of space, we cannot explore here in more depth (see Michot 1986, 190–218). The other option—the one that is preferable, according to al-Suhrawardi—is that the “regent lights” move up to an even higher level, into the world of pure intelligibles,

where they experience nothing but immaterial, spiritual joys and where, as “pure lights,” they are in direct communion with God, the “light of lights.”

In this exalted state, the “pure lights” are thoroughly immaterial and immersed in unadulterated spiritual bliss; they become, to use Pope’s expression, “spotless minds,” like the mind of Heloise, unencumbered by memories of their somatic past and completely oblivious to all former sensual needs and passions. It is this ultimate state of luminosity that all humans, according to al-Suhrawardi, must strive to achieve. Thus, like Ibn al-Muqaffa’ did centuries before him, in *The Temples of Light (Hayakil al-nur)* al-Suhrawardi addresses a light hymn to God, opening his work with the following lines (Suhrawardi 1991, 77):

O God Self-Subsisting,  
 support and strengthen us with light.  
 Resurrect us towards light. [. . .]  
 We have darkened our own souls,  
 [while] You are liberally emanating [light].

## Conclusion

Ibn al-Muqaffa’ and al-Suhrawardi were both Persian courtiers serving Sunni rulers, the former at the governor’s court at Basra in Iraq, the latter in the service of Sultan Saladin at Aleppo. Both endeavored to inject a theology of light into Islam; both authored prayers, echoing the first chapter of the Qur’an, in which they addressed God as light. Like his light-worshipping predecessor, al-Suhrawardi was executed for his views, considered heretical by those posing as the defenders of orthodoxy around him.

Yet al-Suhrawardi was incomparably more successful than Ibn al-Muqaffa’ in spawning a school of followers. In the later history of Islamic philosophy, he was more successful, too, than his contemporary, the Andalusian Averroes (d. 1198). Thinkers such as al-Shahrazuri (d. ca. 1288), Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi (d. 1310), and al-Davvani (d. 1502) did much to spread al-Suhrawardi’s ontology of light in the learned circles of the post-Mongol period of Islamic history, up to the present (see van Lit 2017). Mulla Sadra (d. 1641), in his commentary on the “light verse,” states that light is not just an accident of God, but identical with Him. As he puts it, “The reality of ‘light’ and ‘existence’ is the same thing” (Sadra 2004, 43). It is important to note that not just the learned elite came under the sway of al-Suhrawardi’s thought. His “philosophy of illumination,” as has been claimed, became one of the “most socially pervasive and consequential thought-paradigms in the history of societies of Muslims” (Ahmed 2016, 26).

As we saw, the theology of light first announced by Ibn al-Muqaffa’ and outlined by al-Ghazali becomes, by way of eschatology, an ontology of light in al-Suhrawardi. It is important to remind ourselves that, as noted above, al-Suhrawardi’s “regent lights,” the luminous souls of humans, connect with the higher spheres of light after death; but they also do so *during* their lives on earth, for example in visions and dreams. God’s light, thus, becomes the very light of the human soul. From the first sacred light in Islam flows the third sacred light, or rather, the divine flux and the light of illumined souls coincide. The human being becomes a being of light, *l’homme de lumière*, as in the title of Henri Corbin’s study of light in the Iranian tradition (1971).

To conclude, against initial impediments, and supported by the light imagery of Muslim narrative eschatology, around the twelfth century light emerges as a powerful topos in Muslim theological, ontological, and anthropological thought. After al-Suhrawardi, this tendency is most fully articulated in the thought of Shi'i thinkers and mystics. In Persia, as Hossein Nasr noted in a lecture given at Harvard University in 1962, the *Philosophy of Illumination* "has always been a basic text in the *madrāsas*" (Nasr 1969, 149 n11). In the Arab world, by contrast, al-Suhrawardi was largely forgotten in modern times; modern-day Salafis seem simply to ignore him altogether. In the second half of the twentieth century and up to the present, al-Suhrawardi's ideas received some attention by Egyptian and especially, by Lebanese scholars who, following Henri Corbin, constructed his philosophy as an "Oriental alternative" to Western rationalism (see e.g., Hatem 2003)—an interpretation that does not do justice to al-Suhrawardi's thought (Sinai 2011, 231). But this is another topic. This essay has attempted to trace the contours of the premodern history of light in Islamic theology. Al-Suhrawardi's ontology of light, I have argued, is the pivotal moment in this long and complicated history. Building on his predecessor al-Ghazali and on the light-drenched imagery of traditional Islamic eschatology, his thought and that of his followers brought light back into a strongly anti-anthropomorphist and transcendentalist theological tradition, thereby enabling human sensations of divine light not just in the next, but already in this life.

## ORCID iD

Christian Lange  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4605-1052>

## Notes

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2. Arab. *mubin*. Jones translates as "clear," but form IV of the root b-y-n, I feel, is better translated in a causative sense, that of "making clear, elucidating." *Mubin* and the related concepts of *bayān* and *tibyan* all connect to the "enlightenment" brought by the Qur'an, a text replete with light metaphors. The light of the Qur'an, in fact, might be considered a fourth kind of sacred light in Islam.
3. The authorship of Ibn al-Muqaffa<sub>c</sub> has been called into doubt by, among others, John Wansbrough. See Wansbrough 1977, 166. However, recent scholarship, following Josef van Ess (see van Ess [1981] 2018b, 966), has been more positive. For a new edition and translation (into French) of the hymn, see Kristo-Nagy 2013, 287-325, 438-451. On Ibn al-Muqaffa's philosophy of light and darkness, see further Kristo-Nagy 2008.

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### Author biography

**Christian Lange** (PhD Harvard, 2006) is Chair and Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His publications include *Justice, Punishment, and the Medieval Muslim Imagination* (2008) and *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* (2016).