

Enlightening religion: Light and darkness in religious knowledge and knowledge about religion

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Abstract

This introduction elaborates how the relationship between religion and light can and should be addressed as a key theme for the critical study of religion. It synthesizes the principal arguments of the six articles collected in this special journal issue and locates them in a broader theoretical framework, focussing especially on the politics of knowledge production.

Keywords

Religion, light, enlightenment, epistemology

Associations between light and divine presence are ancient and widespread and can be found in religious traditions around the world, including cults devoted to solar deities, such as the Ancient Egyptian Ra or the Aztec Tonatiuh, among many others. As a perceptual experience, a metaphor, and an instrument of devotional practice and mystical technique, light in its various modalities—clear, colored, radiant, glowing, shining, and even blinding—has played a central role in histories of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Manichaeism, and Neoplatonic mysticism, as well as in Buddhist and Hindu esoteric traditions, to name only the most well-studied (see e.g., Eliade 1958; Kapstein 2004). The association of light

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with knowledge, wisdom, insight, justice, and the good, and the absence of light (darkness) with ignorance, secrecy, deception, corruption, or evil are likewise familiar tropes that can be found in diverse religious contexts, not least in the case of missionary projects across the world (cf. Lambertz 2021).

However, despite its apparent centrality, the theme of light remains significantly underdeveloped as an entry point for critical research in the field. Scholars of religion have tended to focus on the formation and application of light metaphors as they are developed within particular religious traditions, and even more narrowly, as they operate within specific sacred texts or theological discourses. The aim of this special issue is to call for more attention to the nexus of religion and light, in ways that move beyond a taken-for-granted metaphorical framing of light as the prime natural symbol used to represent the divine. While that idea is not wrong *per se*, it may blind us to a deeper exploration of the existential, epistemological, and performative dimensions of light in relation to religion.

Such a reexamination of the relationship between religion and light might profitably begin with the notion of enlightenment. In the history of Western metaphysics, culminating in so-called Enlightenment philosophy, ‘clear’ light serves as a common metaphor for the mind’s capacity for orderly thought, true perception, and self-awareness, and ‘transparency’ provides the metaphorical ground for identifying that which can be known and shared, and thus a fundamental condition for the possibility of democratic deliberation. Embedded in Enlightenment critiques of religion, metaphors of light and darkness have also been employed to relegate the forces that populate the unseen—spirits, witches, demons, and other “old denizens of the night” (Koslofsky 2021, 127)—to the category of superstition. As Craig Koslofsky (127) shows, in his contribution to this issue, early Enlightenment philosophers developed their notions of civility and reason against the backdrop of a new racial economy of ‘darkness and light,’ in which non-white, non-European persons and the colonial frontier spaces inhabited by “the benighted pagan peoples of the world” were understood as sources and places of superstition. Savagery, the darkness of night, irrationality, and dark skin color were all densely articulated together ‘offshore’, to use Koslofsky’s term, as evidence of non-European inferiority and unreason.

This rift between those who employ the light of reason to disenchant the world and those held to remain ‘in the dark’ has long been invoked to affirm the presumed superiority of the former over the latter, as one can trace through the Enlightenment’s entangled history with projects of European imperial outreach and colonization (Tonda 2015). These same tropes of light and darkness are also deeply ingrained in scholarly theorizing about comparative religion, according to which ‘superstitious beliefs’ and the practices of ‘pagan’ and ‘primitive’ others are relegated to religion’s dark side (Hanegraaff 2016, 592-594). As such, light is not just an interesting theme for scholarly inquiry but also, more fundamentally, a uniquely instructive starting point for tracing the provenance of those ‘shadows’ cast by the Enlightenment-based epistemologies that shape the modern study of religion itself. Koslofsky’s discussion of early Enlightenment thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza, Balthasar Bekker, and Cotton Mather thus opens up a path for further exploration of the ways the ‘enlightened-superstitious’ dualism underpins the production of knowledge about a world encroached upon by European influence.

But as this special issue also aims to demonstrate, even the sort of ideology critique suggested above leaves open questions of what sort of work is accomplished through the mobilization of metaphors of clarity, transparency, darkness, and so on. Light, we might generalize, is a crucial mediator of human perception and a fundamental condition of the

possibility for imagination, representation, and knowledge. Yet it is far from clear where or how to locate it within a scheme that divides the universe into such categories as nature and culture, subject and object, or materiality and immateriality. How can light be both something one can see and also the medium by which seeing is made possible? How can it be both visible and invisible, contained and yet uncontainable, instrumentalized and yet ultimately beyond human control? These ambiguities cannot simply be resolved with recourse to natural scientific definitions of the propagation of light, since we are still left with the problem of how light is constituted *within* human experience, where it serves both as an object and a means of (visual) perception. The question, ‘what is light?’ is thus ultimately inseparable from the question of its presence or absence in our all-too-human horizons of intelligibility, imagination, and even normative judgment. At the same time, however, light cannot simply be reduced to discursive frames of meaning-making since it also, inevitably, points to something beyond. As such, common approaches to the study of ‘metaphors of light’ as elements within a given system of cultural or religious meaning risk passing too quickly over more discomfiting questions about the status of light as something that we both work with and work through—in short, to consider light in relation to questions of practice, ontology, cosmology, or for that matter, theology.

Metaphors are techniques for comparing things by virtue of a common feature, although the force of such attempts to compare ‘like with like’ is at best ephemeral. Frequently contrasted with so-called literal speech, metaphors are said to point at things indirectly, and for this reason they are often assumed to consist merely of rhetorical flourishes or ornamentations of descriptions that could otherwise be stated more plainly. But even if we were to accept this distinction between metaphorical and non-metaphorical modes of signification, we are well served to recall here that metaphors do not only serve descriptive functions; they also work to organize our experience of the world, by enabling and structuring courses of action through particular modes of discipline and habituation. As Lakoff and Johnson long ago argued, the work performed in and through metaphors cannot strictly be defined as either thought or action because it is an amalgam of them both (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Attention to this practical or performative dimension of the work of metaphors opens up a wide range of avenues for investigation. In the case of light, tropes of darkness or gentle glow, of flashing brilliance, or the operation of subtle rays that hover at the edges of the visible spectrum, can all be understood as iterations of a larger syntax by virtue of which different sorts of action can be orchestrated—including, for instance, the activities of prayer, contemplation, healing, spectacle-making, and other practices generally considered central to the lifeworlds of religious actors. But in each such instance, religious actors do not simply mobilize metaphors but also grapple with the limits of metaphor to contain the world within its play of signification.

One fruitful (but still quite underdeveloped) line of inquiry that invites precisely this sort of rethinking of the relationship of religion and light focuses on the actual uses of light-bearing technologies—from mirrors and candles to electricity—and material practices of manipulating light, as they unfold on the ground among particular groups of actors engaged in religious practice. Elsewhere, we have begun to redress this gap in the literature by introducing new research that explores some of the varying material conditions of illumination and light projection as deployed in the contexts of ritual performance, church architecture, and missionary work, among other sites of religious activity, both historically and in the present day (Meyer and Stolow 2020; Kessler and Lenk 2020; Pentcheva 2020; Rakow 2020; Verrips 2020). This issue of *Critical Research on Religion* further elaborates how the

topic of light matters for the study of religion, focusing especially on questions of the ways the language of light operates as a mode of theological imagination and cosmological speculation, as well as exploring how light and darkness figure within diverse practices such as healing, mystical contemplation, and prayer.

As several of the articles in this issue demonstrate, light—constituted as an unavoidable ontological presence—presents a recurrent theme in religious discourses and theologies, and thus shapes ideas about personhood and being in the world. As Christian Lange shows in his discussion of the premodern history of light in Islamic thought, it would be mistaken to assume that in early Islam, light simply lent itself to express the transcendent presence of God, even though the analogy is drawn in the Qur'an between God and light—*nur Allah*—and views of Muhammad as reflecting divine light echo biblical views of Jesus as “light derived from light” (Lange 2021, 143). Notably, early Muslim theologians were reluctant to develop a theology of light and at most accepted its use as a metaphor—for instance, as a name of God, but not as a substantial attribute. This was deemed important in order to avoid imagining God in corporeal terms, let alone equating him with the sun. One key thinker of the period, al-Ghazali, was criticized for having shifted from treating light as a metaphor for God to proposing a mystical idea of light as the existential being of God that illuminates the holy person's soul. While this theology remained contested, references to light abounded in the eschatological narratives of the *hadiths*, where paradise was often described as beaming with a bright light that might be ‘caught’ by Muslims on earth. Similarly, Eyad Abuali, in his exploration of light as a discursive tool among Sufis, points at a view of “the soul as a light that was attached to the dark substance of the body” (Abuali 2021, 163). He notes that for Sufi mystics, the trope of light served both as a metaphor to describe the soul's composition as a subtle body and also an element within a habituated sensory regime of what he calls ‘ocular contemplation’. Here, too, the invocation of light is not simply a matter of figurative speech but also, at the same time, an understanding of the soul as a substance composed of light: a medium through which Sufis can reach out towards a higher spirituality and knowledge.

Both Lange and Abuali's articles highlight the central place of light within Islamic theology, noting some of the diverse ways its use can be accommodated within basic theological convictions and mystical experiences. But both authors embrace the conceptual concerns of comparative religious studies by transcending the conventional text-centeredness of Islamic studies. This felicitous move offers a model for scholars in religious studies, showing how, through close examination of Islamic theology—including eschatology and mysticism—one can arrive at intriguing insights into longstanding attempts to negotiate between the ontological and the metaphorical, thereby illustrating one of the key concerns of this issue. Focusing on debates within Islam, Lange and Abuali refer only in passing to alternative theologies of light in other religious traditions, such as Manichaeism, Judaism, and Christianity. But their approach offers an instructive entry point for future comparative research addressing the wide range of views about divine illumination, including, for instance, its elaboration in the history of Christianity (e.g., Pérez-Zapico 2021; Pentcheva 2020; Rakow 2020; Verrips 2020).

Whereas Lange and Abuali focus on medieval Islamic texts that seek to understand the nature of light in relation to God, André Chappatte's article examines how long-standing Sufi ideas about God as light (*yeleen*) are mobilized on the ground, among Muslims in contemporary Odienné, Ivory Coast. In his phenomenological ethnography of the Sufi scholar, Madou, performing *zikr*, a devotional practice of concentration, in the midst of

the night, Chappatte documents a Sufi theology of light at work. Dark and silent, the night is the moment par excellence to work towards an experience of the spiritual light of God that illuminates the soul. Practicing *zikr*, the body becomes the center of a ‘devotional space’ that opens up towards experiencing divine light. Exceeding the domain of metaphor as a figure of speech, this corporeal experience brings about a deeper union with the divine in which the “light of God is lived and forged in the concentration” (Chappatte 2021, 179). In line with the arguments of Islamic scholars discussed by Lange and Abuali, Madou insists that while God is ‘beyond darkness and light’, the performance of *zikr* nevertheless produces the effect that ‘You are within light’. This particular form of light, in other words, is constituted as a corporeal experience generated through nightly devotion and is not visible as such.

Moving from the Ivory Coast to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the contribution by Peter Lambertz also focuses on an invisible kind of light called *Johrei*, which is manipulated for purposes of healing and spiritual protection by members of the Église Messianique Mondiale: a movement from Japan active in Kinshasa’s religiously plural environment. Noting a convergence between the vitalism propounded by this Japanese new religious movement and Central African notions of invisible energy and divine force, Lambertz unpacks an underlying discourse on power and precarious personhood, according to which the soul is like a SIM-card that can be unlocked by *Johrei* so as to be able to shine, as a radiant aura. Here, again, light—even though it is said to be invisible—is not understood metaphorically, but rather as a (‘scientifically’ credible) subtle energy source that operates in the realm of the unseen. While its origin lies in the Shinto goddess of the sun, Amaterasu Omikami, *Johrei* operates in occlusion. Unlike the sun, as the cradle of all light and thus of the possibility to think with and about light, the radiance of the divine—be it *Johrei* or *nur Allah*—remains invisible to the naked eye yet is imagined to enlighten the inner space of the soul.

In the Catholic theology of light explored by Daniel Pérez-Zapico, God is taken to be the source of all light in the universe. The Church has a long history of deploying illumination technologies such as candles, oil lamps, and stained glass to induce experiences of light in Catholic ritual and sacred space for believers (Pentcheva 2020; Verrips 2020). Pérez-Zapico examines the history of Catholic debates over the legitimacy and role of electrical illumination in churches in Spain over the course of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries (cf. Kessler and Lenk 2020). As he demonstrates, the Spanish Catholic church was far from uniform in its response to the arrival of electricity and the new possibilities it offered to illuminate church spaces, generate spectacles, or reorganize ritual practices. Rather than simply resisting electrification as a ‘secularizing’ influence, foreign to Catholic sensibilities, Pérez-Zapico notes how electrical illumination in particular presented both opportunity and risk: on the one hand, threatening to dissolve the dignity of traditional ritual practices (which depended on older illumination technologies), but on the other hand, forming a new mobilizing horizon, in which spectacular lighting effects could help visualize the Church’s public presence, and support its theological emphasis on the sensory experience of revealed Truth. In so doing, the Church pitched its theology of light against rationalist and secular invocations of light according to which believers “were deemed to remain in the dark, while those who supported reason were the ones who were truly enlightened” (Pérez-Zapico 2021, 216).

With these words, we return once more to Koslofsky’s discussion of the role of light in the Enlightenment, and in particular its reliance upon oppositions between true religion and superstition, and ultimately, between religion and secularity. We hope that this special issue

will likewise ‘enlighten’ its readers about the repercussions of these same oppositions that underpin religious studies in our time, and thereby allow for a fresh investigation of the complexity of ‘light matters’ in religious discourses, theologies, and practices, as well as in their attendant knowledge politics.

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