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Light and enlightenment

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THE symbol of light (noor in Arabic) in human tradition evokes a fascinating feeling. When we focus our gaze on a burning candle or a fire, it silences us and awakens our mind. The roots of this symbol lie very deep in the history of religions, including Islam, and its branches have spread to modern times.

Even in the physical world, light continues to dazzle scientists, thinkers, as well as mystics. Let us look at the key usages of this metaphor in selected traditions to show how this concept is one of those shared and experienced with multiple expressions in human history.

In Islamic tradition, the Quran describes the notion of light (noor) in many ways; a whole surah (chapter) has been named ‘Surah-i-Noor’, in which lies, like a jewel in a crown, the ‘ayat-i-noor’ (verse of light, 24:35). Often employed by Sufis and Muslim philosophers, the verse testifies that Allah is the “Light of the heavens and the earth”.

The beauty of the verse is that it is “both visual enough to be grasped by anyone, and yet suggests … meanings beyond any literal reading of the Book”. This verse is also seen as the primary source of one of the 99 names of Allah, Al Noor. Many interpretations have been offered by commentators of this verse, yet an enquiring mind still feels something lacking in all these interpretations, searching still for a subtler, richer and more satisfying interpretation.

The Quran encapsulates a wide range of concepts within the orbit of the symbol of noor, such as Allah as noor (24:35); the Prophet (PBUH) as noor (5:15); the Quran as noor (64:8); the Torah as noor (5:44); the Gospel as noor (5:46) and the believer as noor (57:13).

Signifying the need to search for a personal light, Allah says, “…On the day … their light will run before them and on their right side; (they would say) Our Lord! Perfect our light for us. …” (66:8).

The common symbol of noor has been used for God, the prophets and the divinely inspired books perhaps because they perform the same function as that of light — they enlighten the path of their followers. Allah brings believers out, as the Quran describes, “from darkness towards light”, while the negative forces take people “from light towards darkness” (2:257).

From early in history, Muslims have been fascinated by the way noor is described in the Quran. For example, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, Sahl al-Tustari, Ibn al-Arabi and Imam al-Ghazali have extensively dealt with the notion of noor.
Imam al-Ghazali, for example, has written a separate book (Mishkat al-Anwar) on the interpretation of the verse of light. Also, the esoterically motivated traditions have more frequently used the metaphor of noor in their discourses to show the link of this noor to what they call the Noor-i-Muhammadí (PBUH).

It is in this sense, again, that the mystic tradition has used noor to show how a spiritually enlightened imam, shaikh, pir or murshid, following the way of the Prophet, can enlighten the path of mureeds, or disciples, to reach spiritual heights.

It is not only in Islam that we see the notion of light or enlightenment; it dates back thousands of years in ancient history. For example, the Zoroastrian tradition is one that has engaged with the notion of light. When Zoroastrians built no temples, possessed no religious imagery and had no books on the teachings of the faith, light served as a comprehensive notion to help them comprehend their religion.

Light and fire were/are also seen as essential elements for sustaining life. In Greek tradition, fire was seen as one of the four basic elements. This theory continued for a long time in many traditions till the atom was discovered.

We see the significance of light in Buddhist tradition as well. We know how Siddhartha became the Buddha under the bodhi tree, by attaining enlightenment (or awakening) which transformed his life forever.

The notions of light and enlightenment are found, though in a different form and meaning, in the European movement known as the Age of Enlightenment, also called the Age of Reason. This age has been seen as the journey from darkness to light. “Dare to know” being the essential slogan, this movement has been seen as a journey also from superstition towards enlightenment.

It has been characterised as “a rational and scientific approach to religious, social, political and economic issues, promoted a secular view of the world and a general sense of progress and perfectibility”.

In this age, knowledge was seen not as an end in itself, but as a tool for liberation from darkness, or coming out of the ‘Platonic cave’ and being exposed to the dazzling light of the sun.

In Lao Tzu’s terms, knowing others is wisdom, knowing the self is enlightenment. As carrying a fire into a dark place dispels the darkness, similarly, when knowledge and wisdom reach a nation it dispels the darkness of ignorance. Light thus has been used frequently as a symbol for knowledge and wisdom.

Thus, light — noor — symbolises life in the physical world, and in the metaphysical/mystical world, enlightenment, which is a process of self-transformation from one state of being to that of another. Light is a metaphor also for knowledge and wisdom which, like light, enlighten the path of a seeker towards self-discovery.

The notion of noor thus, has been dazzling our eyes, enlightening our hearts and illuminating our souls from time immemorial.

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