

# The Phenomena of Divine Light

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## Chapter 3 Relevances of the Phenomenon of Divine Light as a Bridge for Interreligious Dialogue

We know that there is a divine light in some religions that provide enlightenment and lead the soul to God. “The spiritual visions of man confirm and illumine each other. We have *the cosmic greatness* of Hinduism, *the moral issues* of Zoroaster, *the joy in Truth* of Buddha, *the spiritual victory* of Jainism, *the simple love* of Tao, *the wisdom* of Confucius, *the poetry* of Shinto, *the One God* of Israel, *the redeeming radiance* of Christianity, *the glory of God* of Islam, *the harmony* of the Sikhs. Great poems in different languages have different values but they all are poetry, and the spiritual visions of man come all from **One Light**. In them we have **Lamps of Fire that burn to the glory of God.**”<sup>1</sup> So, what should we do after finding the light of divine in every religion? What and how is the mission of Catholic Church for creating peace in the world?

### 3.1 The Mission of Church in Interreligious Dialogue: A Light of the Love of God

Searching and discovering the Light of the Divine in Interreligious Dialogue should be situated within the mission of the Church. The Church as sign, reflects God’s light and love. Each of the elements of the Church’s mission can be seen in this light of the divine. God’s salvific love as a key to understanding the mission of the Church: “God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). This saving love of God has been revealed and communicated to mankind in Christ and is present and active throughout the world by means of the Holy Spirit.” (DM 9)<sup>2</sup>

In many religious, philosophical and mythological traditions, the light of the divine is the essence of a living being. Depending on the philosophical system, the light of the divine can be immortal and eternal.

“It is important that interreligious dialogue should be situated within the mission of the Church. It is not an optional extra. It has become part of the ordinary life and duty of every Christian community, especially in a world marked by religious plurality. It is part of the Church as sign, reflecting God’s love. **Each of the elements of the Church’s mission can be seen in this light.** The presence and witness of the faith-filled Christian community is a response to the love of God who always has the initiative. So, interreligious dialogue is a sign of the love of God which respects human liberty and allows each one to progress at his or her own rhythm on **the road toward the Truth**”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> JUAN MASCARO, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1962, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> The document of 1984, *The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions*, has a subtitle *Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission (DM)*. Cf. FRANCESCO GIOIA (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)*, Pauline Books & Media, Boston, 2006, p. 1116-29.

<sup>3</sup> MICHAEL L. FITZGERALD, “A Theological Reflection on Interreligious Dialogue”, in Karl J. Becker & Ilaria Morali (eds.), *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, Orbis Books: Maryknoll-New York, 2010, p. 385.



In the Declaration on The Relation of The Church to Non-Christian Religions, NOS-TRA AETATE, Pope Paul VI, on October 28, 1965, said:

“In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting **unity and love among men, indeed among nations**, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship. One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. **One also is their final goal, God.** His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, **until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in HIS LIGHT.** (NA 1)”

In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, DEI VERBUM, Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965 said:

“Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith, the sacred synod takes its direction from these words of St. John: ‘We announce to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we announce to you, so that **you may have fellowship with us and our common fellowship be with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ**’ (1 John 1:2-3), **by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing it may hope, and by hoping it may love.**”

### 3.2 The Importance of Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious Dialogue is very important for making the world more peaceful. Therefore, what is the aim of interreligious dialogue?

The first aim would be to help people of different religions to live together in peace and harmony. We know from experience that this is not easy, for it implies breaking down prejudices and eliminating all discrimination on the basis of religion. This very concrete aim should not be belittled, for we should remember that peace on earth, between individuals, between peoples and nations, is an anticipation of that peace which is a mark of the kingdom of heaven, to bring Light of Divine for all being.

A second aim is to foster cooperation among people of different religions in the service of humanity, fraternity, and equality. Interreligious Dialogue emphasizes this point: “The importance of dialogue for integral development, social justice and human liberation needs to be stressed ... There is need also to join together in trying to solve the great problems facing society and the world, as well as in education for justice and peace” (DP 44).

There is, however, a further aim that *Dialogue and Proclamation* indicates: “Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations. It reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one’s beliefs and a common exploration of one’s respective religious convictions. In dialogue, Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God’s personal call and gracious self-gift”. (DP 40)

The deeper aim of dialogue is conversion, not in the sense of a change of religious allegiance, but rather in the biblical sense of the humble and penitent return of the heart to God, and a more complete submission to his will (cf. DM 37). This has to be understood correctly. It would not be sufficient to say that dialogue aims at helping Buddhists be better Buddhists, Christians be better Christians, Muslims be better Muslims. The focus is on God, who has sent his Light, not on the religion to which one belongs. The possibility of a change of religious allegiance has to be left open, if this step is taken freely as a response to



what is perceived as the will of God. The emphasis lies on the importance of freedom: “In this process of conversion, the law of conscience is sovereign, because no one must be constrained to act against his conscience, nor should he be impeded in acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters” (DH 3, DM 38). Therefore a call for respecting the right to religious freedom in all its fullness, including the right to change one’s religion, will always be part of interreligious dialogue.

### 3.3 The Divine Light of Interreligious Dialogue: the communion of love in the Trinity

The unity of the three Divine Persons completely respects the identity of each. In interreligious dialogue, respect for identity, one’s own and that of the partner in dialogue, is of great importance. Of course, the degree of unity, or rather harmony, which such dialogue can achieve, falls well below the communion of love in the Trinity. To each of the Divine Persons is attributed a role in the ongoing dialogue with humankind: “In God the Father we contemplate a pervasive love unlimited by space and time ... In spite of the sometimes-violent manifestations of evil, in the vicissitudes in the life of each individual and every people there present the power of grace which elevates and is redeems” (DM 22). This is an extremely important point to bear in mind in the encounter with cultures and religions that pay much attention to ancestors. The ancestors are not automatically condemned because they did not have the opportunity to know Jesus Christ. The power of grace may well have been at work in them. It is incumbent on the Church to recognize this: “The Church has the duty of discovering and bringing to light and fullness all the richness which the Father has hidden in creation and history, not only to celebrate the glory of God in its liturgy, but also to promote among all mankind the movement of the gifts of God” (DM 22)

The Church, as the Light of the Nations, is casting an indirect light on the beauties that already exist in order to bring them into relief. This is an authentic form of witness. Of course, the original Light of the Nations is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word made flesh. “In God the Son we are given the Word and Wisdom in whom everything was already contained and subsisting even from the beginning of time. Christ is the Word who enlightens every person because in him is manifest at the same time the mystery of God and the mystery of mankind” (DM 23).

The passage then goes on to quote Pope John Paul II: “Man - every man without any exception whatever - has been redeemed by Christ. And with man - with each man without any exception whatever - Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it. Christ, who died and was raised up for all, provides man, each and every man, with the light and strength to measure up to his supreme calling” (*Redemptor Hominis* 14)<sup>4</sup>

Interreligious Dialogue turns to the Third Person of the Trinity: “In God the Holy Spirit, our faith allows us to perceive the force of life and movement, and continuous regeneration by the Spirit who acts in the depth of people’s consciences and accompanies them on the secret path of hearts toward the truth” (cf. LG 4, GS 22). The last reference is to a key passage in *Gaudium et Spes*, in which the work of salvation in Christ the new Adam, is briefly outlined. The constitution states: “All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must

<sup>4</sup> The teaching of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II is also of capital importance, and in particular their encyclicals and Apostolic Exhortations such as *Ecclesiam Suam* (ES), *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), *Redemptor Hominis* (RH), *Dominum et Vivificantem* (DoVi), and *Redemptoris Missio* (RM). Cf. CHIDI DENNIS ISIZOH, *Milestones in Interreligious Dialogue: A Reading of Selected Catholic Church Documents on Relations with People of Other Religions*, Ceedee, Rome/Lagos, 2002.



hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery” (GS 22).

Just as the Father’s love knows no limits of time or space, just as through the incarnation the Son has united himself to each and every member of the human race from its beginning to the end of time, so the action of the Spirit transcends boundaries. “The Spirit also works outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body” (RH 6; LG 16; GS 22, AG 15). “The Spirit both anticipates and accompanies the path of the Church which, nevertheless, feels itself impelled to discern the signs of his presence, to follow him wherever he leads and to serve him as a humble and discreet collaborator” (DM 24).

Spirit is present in the heart of the interlocutor, and the conversation will be all the more fruitful when this presence is recognized. Everything that is good, true, noble and pure (cf. Phil 4:8) can be attributed to the workings of the Spirit. Nor is this to be confined to the situation of individuals. As Pope John Paul explains in *Redemptoris Missio*: “The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, people, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history. It is the Spirit who sows the ‘seeds of the Word’ present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ” (RM 28, Cf. LG 17, AG 3, 15).

### 3.4 Jesus Christ: The Loving of God and True Light of the Divine

The history of salvation manifests and confirms the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. The deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.

“In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.” (*Dei Verbum* 2)

Christ is the *Transcendent One* who, creatively emanating, immanentizes Himself in His creatures. He is, thus, the radiant center of each. Dionysius the Areopagite reads His Presence in all. In the midst of all creatures abides the incandescent Christ. Dionysius is completely *biblical*, in an especially Johannine way, in his sublime preoccupation with *light*.<sup>5</sup> According to John “God is Light” (1 Jn 1:5). According to the Genesis text, ‘light’ is the first of God’s creatures. By the light of a pillar of fire, He comforted and led the Hebrews during the nights of the desert pilgrimage to the Promised Land (Ex 40:38; Num 9:16; Deut 1:33; Ps 78:14). By His interior spiritual light, He refreshes and guides the just (Ps 27:1, et al.). Jesus is the “Light of men” that “has become flesh” (Jn I :4, 9, 14). Thus, He is “the Light of the World” (Jn 8:12, 9:5), which “the darkness does not overcome” (Jn 1:5, cf. Jn

<sup>5</sup> DN 592C: “In most holy contemplation we shall be ever filled with the sight of God shining gloriously around us as once it shone for the disciples at the divine transformation” (cf. Mt 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-8; Lk 9:28-36).



13:30). He has come to bring us “out of the darkness” (Ps 107:14; Is 29:18; Col 1:13; Acts 26:18, et al.) into “His own marvelous light” (I Pet 2:9). In this way, we too can become “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14-16). At the *parousia*, “God and His Temple, the Church, will shine most splendidly with His own Light” (Rev 21:22-25).

According to Dionysius the Areopagite, Christ is “the Light of the Father”.<sup>6</sup> The Father is the Primal Light who shines forth *through* Christ in each being as a kind of light. All beings radiate from “the Father of lights”<sup>7</sup> through Christ who is the Primal Light of the Father, as Son.<sup>8</sup> All who are thus created by the Father through the Son are sustained in the Son and return to the Father only through Him. It is the Son, operating through His hierarchies, who purifies, illumines, and perfects the angelic and human persons. He has brought into being. The angels have a surpassing knowledge of God through their own being or essence. Yet they are purified of an innocent ignorance that limits them so that they might be prepared for an ever fuller illumination and perfection in union with God.<sup>9</sup> In us, there is the need of a purification, not only from an ignorance that is co-natural to us but also from sin.<sup>10</sup> Only then are we prepared for God’s illuminating Light and for deeper union with Him. By Jesus, we are rendered simple in order that we might be perfected, to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in.<sup>11</sup> The redemption is seen more as a continuation of the outflow of God’s creating, sustaining, and perfecting of His cosmos. Always, it is the same ‘kindly rays of God’ that He sheds forth to cleanse, enlighten, and assimilate all to Himself. Dionysius, though, does use the term grace and, in the fullest sense, it has the same basic meaning as the word does for Augustine, Aquinas, and others. An example of his use of the term follows: “This [Christ] teaches in a pure and divine fashion that as one becomes fit to approach these divine things (i.e., the rites of the sacraments) one is given the grace of assimilation with them and of communion with them.”<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion

Light is of a three-fold dimension: natural, metaphysical, and spiritual. Phenomenon of divine light (also called divine radiance or divine refulgence) is an aspect of divine presence, specifically as a *mysterious tremendum et fascinans*. The human encounter with phenomena of divine light and the happiness surrounding that encounter has been well documented in sacred books of many religions and many philosophers have observed it. They provide us with a new foundation for approaching the subject of human spirituality. We find an experience of the light of God which is common to people who are from entirely different religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity). Specially,

<sup>6</sup> CH 121AB. Christ, along with the Father, is the Source of all light, EH 557A.

<sup>7</sup> CH 120B: Denys is obviously quoting Jas I:17.

<sup>8</sup> CH121A: “that outpouring of Light which is so primal” EH 372B: “the blessed and ultimately divine ray of Jesus Himself”. The Father’s relationship with His creatures might be called “dialogic” in a radical way. They are, literally, *through His Word*, cf. Jn I:3, 10: “Through Him the world was made”; Heb 11:3: “that the world was created by the Word of God”.

<sup>9</sup> CH 305B-308A.

<sup>10</sup> EH 397B, 428B, 440AB, 477AB, 504AC, 536-537C.

<sup>11</sup> CH 120B-121A. Cf. also CH 209D where Denys explains the meaning of purification, illumination, and perfection: “In summary, we can reasonably say that purification, illumination, and perfection are all three the reception of an understanding of the Godhead, namely, being completely purified of ignorance by the proportionately granted knowledge of the more perfect initiations, being illuminated by this same divine knowledge (through which it also purifies whatever was not previously beheld but is now revealed through the more lofty enlightenment), and being also perfected by this light in the understanding of the most lustrous initiations.

<sup>12</sup> EH 428B; cf. DN 637B, 693BC.



mysticism has been used to describe a direct experience, love of God or even union with God. God does not mean the same thing to everyone in every religion. Other phenomena, such as the perceived separation of the soul from the body, might very well be included as aspects of the mystical experience. These are all part of a journey toward a single end: spiritual communion with the Divine and God's Love to human. The vision of spiritual light and the feeling of ecstasy lets us know that the Divine Light not only exists, but exists in resplendent and loving glory. According to Hinduism, *Upanishad* identified *the One who is formless, wonderful, all-pervading, indestructible and Lord of all*. They called the Light of Divine: *Brahman, Indra, Vishnu or Self-Shining*. Furthermore, there is an identification of *Atman* and *Brahman* in the Hindu tradition, similar to *the union of the soul with God* in Christianity and Islam. The Qur'an says that God will lead the faithful from darkness to light. It also says that *Allah* will bestow on people a light to walk in and the man from whom God withholds His light shall find no light at all.

In Christianity, we know that Jesus was and is indeed the Son of God, and has the power to grant anyone eternal life. The Profession of Catholic Faith - The Nicene Creed is said "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen. **We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven.** Jesus is the True Light because He spoke to the people and said that He is the Light of the world. Whoever follows Him will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. The 'light of the world' often denotes the sun, which renders objects visible, showing their form, nature, beauty, and sometimes, deformities. The 'light of the world' is preeminently applied to Jesus because He is to the moral world what the sun is to the natural world. The apostles, ministers, and all Christians are lights of the world, because they, by their witness, show what God requires, what man's condition is, and what way leads to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus shows the disciples that He had enlightened them so that others might also see the light and benefit from it. When a person lights a lamp, he does not conceal the light but places it where it may be of use. So, it is with God's way of life and those who follow it. God gives His truth to us to benefit others. It should not be concealed but show itself in stark contrast to the wicked world, thereby exposing and instructing it.

A Christian's righteous life, pleasant attitude, and good works, including pure conversation and faithful obedience, should not be hidden but be seen and known. We can give no light until we have received the grace of God and the enlightenment that comes through the Holy Spirit. Our lives must produce the fruit of the Spirit, reflecting the shining example of Jesus Christ. Humbly, in all communities, in all business, at home and abroad, in prosperity and adversity, it should be clear that we adhere to God's way of life. Letting our examples shine requires that we resist the influence of the world.

Those who have a mystical experience while they are members of a given tradition and religion are more than likely to interpret the experience within the doctrine of the tradition concerned. By looking at the religious experiences of traditions other than our own, we would see how others could develop different ways of looking at a common spiritual source. In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, the Church particularly examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men the Church recognises that, one is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God, His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His



saving design extended to all men, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in HIS LIGHT.

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