

HIS LIGHT

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*“Allah is the Light of the heavens
and the earth...Light upon light! God guides
whoever He wills to His light...”*

— Quran, Sura An-Nûr 35



“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Historians believe the disciple of the apostle John, who likely wrote the epistles by the same name, made this declaration to a community facing schism. “They need[ed] to pull together...as never before”¹ and it was through this letter and the two following that the disciple endeavored to provide encouragement to those who believed and followed the teachings of Jesus. The message was clear: God is light, dispelling the darkness; salvation comes through Jesus; we are to love one another; and God is love.

Given its close ties to Christianity, it is not surprising that we find similar revelations in the Quran. The chapter on Light (An-Nûr) reflects this theme, as does the chapter titled The Cow, which states, “Allah is the Guardian of those who have faith; He brings them out of darkness into the light...” (Quran, Sura Al-Baqarah 257).

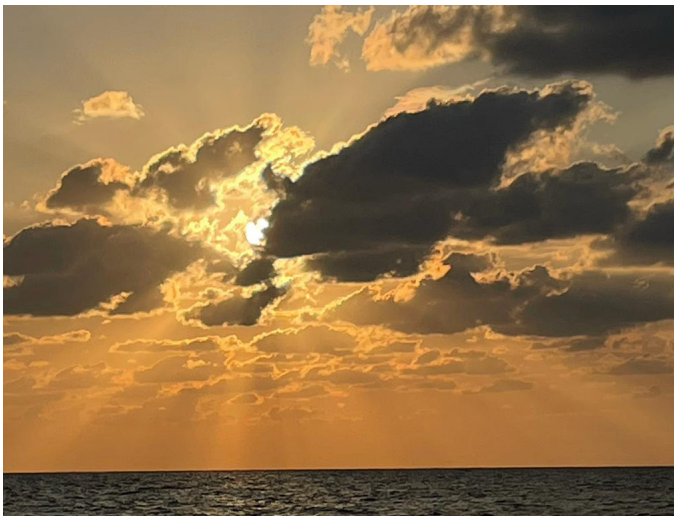
“Light is one of the enduring symbols for God in our sacred texts,” says Rabbi Lauren Eichler Berkun. She quotes the Conservative chumash, Eitz Hayim, which, as she observes, “offers a profound commentary on the lighting of the menorah in the Tabernacle and the Eternal Light which adorns the ark of every synagogue”:²

“Why has light been such a favorite symbol of God? Perhaps because light itself cannot be seen. We become aware of its presence when it enables us to see other things. Similarly, we cannot see God, but we become aware of God’s presence when we see the beauty of the world, when we experience love and the goodness of our fellow human beings.”³

The use of light as a metaphor for the divine has a long history. The pagan use of lamps in their temples to various gods and goddesses may have initially caused early Christians to shun the practice of using ceremonial lights, despite a rich Jewish tradition of doing so.

The symbolism of fire and light is strong. The connection is so strong that some Christians kept the practice of lighting lamps for their ceremonies surreptitiously. Eventually, in the 4th century, St. Jerome approved the use of lights, provided they were not done for idols or became idols themselves. Instead, they were purely symbolic, often as an indication of the presence of God.⁴

We find these uses of candles and lights still being explained in clergy handbooks today. “Candles are not decorative in liturgical celebrations. They have a purpose, either to give light for reading or to signify a special action or place of devotion.”⁵ Handbooks provide several examples of these situations, such as Gospel processions, the Great Vigil of Easter, Candlemas, or Christmas Eve Candlelight services. Interestingly, caution is still given to practice discretion and not “overuse” candles. However, there is commonly a white or red candle or lamp kept burning before an aumbry or tabernacle to indicate that the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, signifying Christ’s presence.



Christ is present in another way for people of the Baha’i faith. They see divine Messengers of God, founders of the world’s great religions, as manifestations of God. They “manifest in their own lives attributes of God, such as love, mercy, justice and power, to a degree far above the capacity of ordinary human beings.”⁶ Christ is one of the Manifestations of God. “If we liken God to the sun, a Manifestation of God is like a perfect mirror that reflects the light, heat, and the life-giving powers of the sun. Baha’u’llah says: Through them is transmitted a grace that is infinite, and by them is revealed the Light that can never fade.”⁷

While not like the sun, the flaming chalice of the Unitarian Universalist tradition is a light indicative of identity in the community. It also reminds participants of the transformations that take place when they are held within religious community. “When we light the chalice in worship, we illuminate a world that we feel called upon to serve with love and a sense of justice. The flame is what one of our beloved congregational hymns terms ‘The Fire of Commitment,’” says the Rev. Susan Ritchie. The symbol is relatively new to the tradition, entering into use in the 1980s, although it has origins with the Unitarian Service Committee (USC), which helped Jewish refugees in World War II, and also resembles the oil lamps of Greek and Roman times.⁸

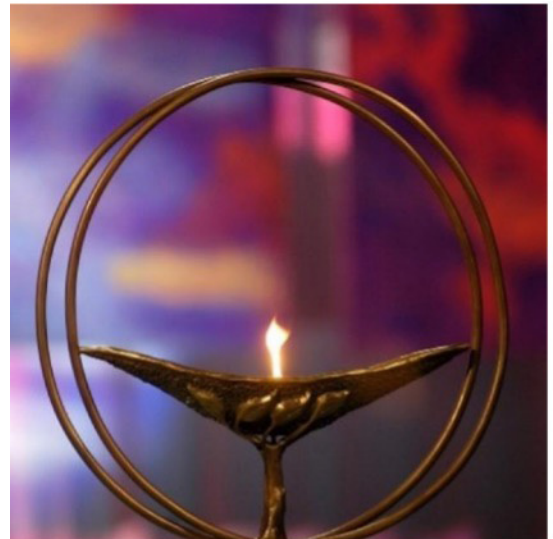
Indeed, light is everlasting. From the beginning of time, people have needed and used light to see, to reveal knowledge, and to give meaning to experience. Let us give thanks for the light that brings us out of darkness.

“ Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light.”

— Dr. Albert Schweitzer



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¹ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. 2nd Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018, 513.

² Berkun, Lauren Eichler. “The Symbolism of Light” published on The Jewish Theological Seminary website on December 27, 2003: <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-symbolism-of-light/> accessed November 2022.

³ Berkun, Lauren Eichler. “The Symbolism of Light” published on The Jewish Theological Seminary website on December 27, 2003: <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-symbolism-of-light/> accessed November 2022.

⁴ Johnson, Kevin Orlin. *Why Do Catholics Do That? A Guide to the Teachings and Practices of the Catholic Church*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994, 228-230.

⁵ Michno, Dennis G. *A Priest's Handbook: The Ceremonies of the Church*. Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc., 1983, 27.

⁶ Faizi, Gloria. *The Baha'i Faith: An Introduction*. New Delhi, India: Bahai Literature & Publication Trust, 2003, 31.

⁷ Faizi, 31-32.

⁸ Ritchie, Susan J. “The Flaming Chalice” published on the UU Bookstore website: <https://www.uuabookstore.org/The-Flaming-Chalice-P18184.aspx> accessed on October 2, 2024.