CHAPTER II

SYMBOLISM OF LIGHT IN
WORLD RELIGIONS
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This chapter will deal with the symbol of "Light" in the scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, and their mystical literature. What place 'light' does occupy as a symbol in these religions and how it has been used or understood by the mystics will be our main concern.

(H) HINDUISM:

In the Vedas and the Upanisads and also in the other important books of Hinduism the term "light" is used as a symbol opposed to "Darkness". The contrast between light and darkness has also been depicted in many places. The representative of light, life freedom and goodness was to the mind of ancient India Usak the goddess of dawn, and her rival was symbolized by Ratri, the night, that is in a sense averse to human life, tamas, the darkness. The imperishability of light round its expression in the personification of Aditi that is explained by some other scholars as eternity.¹

The great Hindu sage, Sri Bharati Krsna claims that the concept of light may be in the
traded of the ancient India. He analyzes the word
'bharata' pointing out that Bha means light and
knowledge, rata means devoted; Bharata means devoted
to light as against darkness. He adds that Bharata
stands for every individual soul that has this ideal
light, the dedication to the light, as against immer-
sion in darkness. 2

In a verse of the Rig Veda "Sing praise to Him,
the Lord of light" the word 'light' has been used
symbolically. In another verse the Supreme Being asks,
'Create the light for which we long'. 3 It may be asked
here as to what is this light which the Supreme does
long. In both the cases the word 'light' has some
inner or hidden meaning. It is not used literally.
The 'Lord of light' perhaps suggests the Lord of righteous-
ness, goodness, life, and guidance. And when man
is asked to create light, here again light seems to
allude to the same qualities.

2. Sri Bharati Krsna Vedic Metaphysics (Delhi,
Varanasi, Patna; (Motilal Banarsidass, 1983) pp. 54-55.
3. C. S. I. Sen, Glorious Thought of the Vedas (New
In the Upanisads, light itself is used repeatedly as a symbol of Brahman. The Mundaka, for instance, conceive of Brahman as a light. According to it, Brahman is the Light of lights—its radiance illuminates all this world. It can only be known by those who know the Atman. In the Chandogya, Atman is considered to be 'light which shines there beyond the heaven, behind all things, behind each, in the highest worlds... that is assuredly this Light which is here within, in men. Now, what is the meaning of this Light of lights? How can it be interpreted? The solution to this problem may be found in another immediately following mantra which reads as follows:

"The sun shines not there, nor the moon, nor do the stars. Everything shines only after him. By his trustee all this is illuminated".

4. Mundaka, ii: 2: 7,8,10,11

5. Chandogya,iii,13: 7 Cf.Spencer,opcit., P. 22,
Mundaka,ii,2.11; Katha Upanishad,ii:2.15;
Upanisad VI: 14
Cf. Satpraka.banda, Methods of Knowledge (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965), P. 87;
C. Sing, Cpcit, P. 205.
There are some suggestions about the nature and functions of this light in the Brhadaranyaka, in which King Janaka asks Yajnavalkya regarding the light that helps man when all the other lights are ceased. To begin with he asks about the light with the help of which man ordinarily sits, moves, acts and returns. The answer of the sage is that with the help of the sun man does all these things.

When the king wants to know about the light with the help of which man performs all these activities when the sun is not shining. The sage answers that in such a circumstance man takes help from the light of the moon in doing all this. The king again enquires about the light with the help of which he does all these things when even the moon is not there. The sage replies that in such a circumstance it is fire on which he depends to do all these things. The king again puts the question about the light which serves him when even the fire is missing. In such a circumstance, the sage answers, speech serves as the light. The inquisitive king poses once more the same question in stating the circumstances in which speech is ceased to exist. At that stage, the sage refers to Atman as a principle that serves the purpose of light. When asked...
about the nature of Atman, the sage describes it as the all-pervading. Being that is identified with the cognitive mind and is in the midst of the organs, the self-effulgent light within the heart (the seat of consciousness).\(^7\) If a comparison is made between the two accounts of the 'light' occurring in Brhadaranyaka and Mundaka, it would appear that both broadly refer to the same object, i.e. Atman, as the light. In this connection it may also be added that speech as light is mentioned not only in this Upanisadic passage but is also referred to in a similar way much earlier in the Tandya Maha Brahman. The Brahmana states:

Prajapati released the creatures. After having released the creatures, he got tired. Speech took hold of his light. He asked about the person who took hold of his light. It is your own speech" said (his speech).\(^8\)

Cf. Archibald Edward Gough,


From this it appears that on one hand light was the part and parcel of the primeval Creator and on the other it could be transformed and absorbed in speech. Light seems to represent the luminosity or pure consciousness while speech is the vocal form or the conceptualized consciousness. When the luminosity of consciousness tends to be creative, it naturally gets conceptualized and vocalized. Prajapati is the pure consciousness, creation is the conceptualization of his own potentialities, while absorption of his light in speech is the vocalization of the concept. Thus, by virtue of being the vocalized concepts, which themselves are just formations of consciousness, speech is regarded as a form of light and a symbol of Brahman.  

The Upanisadic concept of Ultimate Reality, as Dr. Radhakrishnan observes, is grounded in faith in only one-almighty, infinite, eternal, incomprehensible, self-existent, the creator, the preserver and the destroyer of the world. And that Being is the light of the universe. In the Upanisad the world of change (a-sat) is compared with darkness which is non-static,

always subject to change, and the real ( sat ) with light. But the Universal self ( Atman ) is the Central Light 11 which illuminates all individual souls. In Ramanuja's observation, manifestation of the Brahman is the permanent steady light of consciousness by which the unreal appearance of Maya blurs into being and are made known. 12

Chennagavac Gita is also in agreement with the Upanisads on the substantial characteristics of God. Here also God, the ultimate Being, which is in the language of the Upanisad's Brahman or Atman, is the light of all lights, the imperishable, the Supreme. 13

Thus, it appears that in Hinduism the symbol 'light' has mainly been used for the Supreme being who is the source of worldly lights as well as the lord of the spiritual illumination.

In Buddhism, like other religions, "Light" as a symbol has been used in some contexts. Buddha after *Buddha*, has light as one of his attributes, or some manifestation of light appears in the course of his life. As it is reported five colours flashed at his birth, and flame burst from his dead body. This is also held by the adherents of Buddhism that **Buddha** has among his characteristics, a circle of hairs between his eyebrows by which he can illuminate the universe.

'Light' and brightness' often appear in the names given to different Buddhas, as well as occasionally to others, and to different objects. Among the names of the Buddhas, present or to come, supposed to be real or fictitious, are such as "Brightness of the Law", "one whose feet display myriads of luminous figures", 'the Buddha Effulgence of Sun and Moon: the 930th Buddha of the present *Kalpa*. The 'Realm of Great Light' is a realm mentioned in Buddhism.

15. Ibid., P. 188.
16. Ibid., P. 38.
17. Ibid., P. 170.
The symbolism of light has even been applied to some of the sixteen (or eighteen in Northern Buddhism) celestial worlds. One among them is the world of 'Light and Sound' and another is that of 'Unlimited Light'. Buddhism has five 'Luminous Treatises'. A fictitious degree of Samādhi is called 'Pure Light and Brightness', and another 'Pure Light'.

In Northern Buddhism, the 'Buddha of Boundless Light' is diffusing great light, and was thought of as first impersonal. He is the most popular of all the Buddhas among the Chinese people. In his heaven, the wonderful and glorious Paradise of the west, two Buddhas 'radiate light' over three thousand 'great worlds'.

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18. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. viii, P. 52
19. A general name for all the higher trance like states is Samādhi and by the practice of Samādhi the six transcendent faculties (Abhinna) might ultimately be obtained, viz., the inner ear, or power of hearing words and sounds, however distant (clairaudience, as it might be called); the inner eye, or power of seeing all that happens in every part of the world (clair voyance); knowledge of the thoughts of others; recollection of former existences, the knowledge of the mode of destroying the corrupting influences of passion; finally, the supernatural powers called Iddhi. Sir M. Monier Williams, Buddhism in its connection with Brahmanism and Hinduism, in its contrast with Christianity, 1890, P. 234.
poem singing his praises emerges as follows:

'..... Halo of light encircle his head,
The sun at monday is less glorious than he' 22

As to those who enter that heaven
'The material body of man while on earth
In exchanged for another ethereal and bright
That is seen from after to be glowing with light' 23

But in which sense Buddha is the Light of the
world is an important to be elaborated. The main idea
implied in Buddhist symbolism is intellectual enlighten­
ment. Buddhism, before all things, stresses on en­
lightenment of mind, resulting from intense self­
concentration and introspection, from intense, abstract
meditation combined with the exercise of a man's own
reasoning faculties and intuitions.

Of what nature, then, was the so-called light
of knowledge that radiated from the Buddha? Was it
the knowledge of his own utter weakness of his original
depravity of heart, or the origin of sin? Budha's
light was, as Sir Williams observes, in this respect
profound darkness. He confessed himself in regard to
such momentous questions that he was a downright agnostic.

22. Ibid., P. 173.
23. Loc. cit.
The primary origin of evil—the first evil act—was to him an inexplicable mystery.  

Was it, then, a knowledge of goodness, justice, holiness, and omnipotence of a personal creator? No, Buddha's light was in these respects also mere and sneer darkness. In these respects, too, he considered himself to be a thorough agnostic. He acknowledged that he knew of no higher being than himself.  

The Light that broke upon Buddha, and the enlightenment which has been so much written and extolled were that what he claimed to have discovered the origin of suffering as well as the remedy for eradicating suffering. All the light of knowledge which he attained downed upon him gradually through the following stages:

"that suffering arises from indulging in desires, especially the desire for continuity of life; that suffering is inseparable from life; that life is suffering; and that suffering is to be got rid of by the suppression of desires and by the extinction of personal existence."  

25. Loc. cit.  
26. Ibid., PP. 544-545.
Control of the sensual lusts and desires is essential for total inner enlightenment. As it is reported, Buddha said to one of his closest disciple, Ananda, 'if your all sense organs are rooted out, your inner light will appear, all transient sense data as well as the changing conditions of the material world will vanish, like ice melted by boiling water, and you will realize Supreme Bodhi instantly'. In the light of all this it is apparent that the inner light can only be developed after the suppression of all kinds of sensual activities, which ultimately lead to Supreme Bodhi.

27. The Āṭṭhaka Sūtra (Leny yen Ching): Chinese Rendering by Master Paramiti of Central North India at Chih Chih Monastery, Canton, China, A.D. 705, Commentary (abridged) by Chiin, Chian Master Han Chian (1546-1623), translated by Upasaka Lukuan Yu (Charles Luk) (London: Rider & Company 1966), P. 112.
(C) ZOROASTRIANISM:

In Zoroastrianism the term "light" has various uses and in most cases it possesses a symbolic character. It has been supposed from early period, particularly by the Greek authors, that Zoroastrianism is a defender of dualistic system and upholds the concept of two Gods, Ahura-Mazda and Angramaiyun or Anriman - one is good and the other is that of evil. But the Zoroastrian writers discard this view as fallacious. To them Zoroastrianism is a purely monotheistic religion based on the worship and adoration of Ahura-Mazda, the "All-knowing Lord". Ahura Mazda is considered by them to be the Creator, the Protector, i.e. all the attributes that are believed to be the essential qualities of God in the other religions are also attributed to Him.

He is regarded as the Light and source of light. He is the Wisdom and Intellect. About Ahura Mazda it is also claimed that for infinite time He was ever in the light. The light is the space and place of Ahura-

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30. ...c.cit., P. 22.
Mazda: Some call it Endless Light and it is called so because of its height which is indeterminable and has no end.\footnote{C. Zeehner, The Teachings of the Magi: a compendium of Zoroastrian beliefs (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956) PP. 34-35. Cf. Sanjana, Op.cit., P. 119.} Objects like fire, the sun and the moon, and other glorious objects filled with splendour and light are considered to be manifesting the glory of God; and it is He who created fire and flame, whose brilliance is derived from Endless Light which is on the top of all Creation.\footnote{Zeehner, Op.cit., P. 41.} And in the Endless Light lies all bliss.\footnote{Ibid., P. 135.}

In the Avesta, sayings about light occupy a good space and it has been the favourable object of appreciation to the sacred writers. According to the Avesta, the Celestial Light considered in itself to be the most important and most interesting of all objects of manifestations of Ahura Mazda. It is treated as a sublime element which through its principal boons of illumination, beauty, life and sustenance, attracts to itself to the love of the whole universe; it is called in the Avesta as the designation

of Mithra; the word having for its root mit= to unite, and signifying that which unites.\(^{35}\)

Mithra, as it is conceived in the Meher Yasht, is represented as the first born, matchless, the most powerful, the greatest and the fairest creature of Ahura Mazda. It (Mithra i.e. light) is highly exalted above all things. In the order of affection and respect of all humanity Mithra comes next to God. Ahura and Mithra are both invoked together. Mithra, in fact, represents Ahura Mazda; for Ahura Mazda is full of light. Yasna xxxvi, 6 and LVIII, 8, inform us that the most majestic of all lights, such as that of the sun, forms the beauteous body of Ahura Mazda. No darkness dwells in the abode of Ahura Mazda. There is light round about Him.\(^{38}\)

The important point to be clarified is that in the Avesta, light, as it is realized by R.E.D.P. Sanjana, is not a separate object of devotion and worship but the only status it occupies is as the symbol of Ahura Mazda. Light is so chosen because

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36. Ibid., P. 173.
37. Ibid., 174.
38. Loc.cit.
it possesses the most superior and glorious qualities among all the objects. Light is supposed to be the bloom of colours, the beauty of the world, the smile of heaven, the joy of nature, the image of God, the life of all things, the delight of eye and soul, the encircling bond of the universe. Its first and primary applause consists in its having been the first ornament of the world in creation, which dispelled chaotic darkness and disorder on earth and therefore was praised by the Creator Himself as a great good. It makes the world bright, and is hostile to the demons of Ahriman, if there were not always light of the fire, no man could survive in the world.\footnote{Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. viii, P. 62.}

The problem of the relation between light and darkness found in the ancient Iranian texts gave rise to philosophical speculation which ultimately resulted in the formation of different zoroastrian sects. The Gayomatrian sect maintained, according to al-Sharastānī in al-Milal wa al-Nihal, that light had no beginning it has been eternal, while darkness was created. The question then arises how could darkness come into existence. As light being full of goodness, it cannot

\footnote{Ibid., PP. 174-75.}
produce anything even partially evil. The naive solution of this problem is sought in the explanation that Ahura Mazda thought to Himself. 'If I had an opponent, how would he be formed?' From this thought, which did not harmonize with goodness of light, Angra Mainyu was produced. The mingling of light and darkness was due to that the light offered men, before they were embodied, the choice of either degradation to the realms of Angra Mainyu or to battle with him. They chose corporeal existence with a will to battle, on the condition that they were aided by the light to eventual victory and the final resurrection, at their defeat. 42

According to al-sharastānī, the zoroastrians entertained the view of light and darkness on the basis of Avesta and other Pahlavi tents. He holds that both light and darkness have been existing from the beginning. Good and evil, purity and impurity etc. had arisen from the mingling of light and darkness; and, had there been no such mingling, the world would have ceased to exist. God is the source of both, and His wisdom has mingled them; but light alone is real, darkness in fact, is only its necessary antithesis. And, since they are antitheses of each other, they must fight against one another until the light shall be victorious over darkness. 43

42. Loc.cit.
43. Loc.cit.
Thus, it appears that the term "light", in Zoroastrianism, first of all stands as a symbol for the Ahura Mazda, the creator and the protector of the universe. As a Mithra, next to God, it is elan vital of every living being and it also symbolically represents all good things, i.e. good, truth, justice, etc.

(D) JUD'AISM:

The term 'light' in the Judaic tradition, like other religious traditions, has got some symbolic references. The Jewish mystics have used this term in divulging their religious experiences. It is reported on the authority of the prophetic teacher of the exile that the true God says, "I am Yahwe- and there is none else-who formed light and darkness" (Is 4 56r ). This passage suggests that God is the creator of all kinds of light and darkness, may it be material or spiritual. It was the view of the people of alostino that the special character of primal light was created on the first day of creation and it had been identifies with wisdom; both light and wisdom are

referred to in the same fashion in Tannaitic-abbincic literature. It is, however, true that primal light was not interpreted in noetic and cosmological terms, but eschatologically. It is also claimed that God has kept it for the time of 45 .messiah.

In some traditions it is also seen that Yahwe himself is called the 'Light of Israel'. When He reveals Himself the created light must fail. An ancient seer, Abraham, is said to have sung a song, when he ascends to heaven with the angel Yahoeil, his celestial guide, as regarded in the Apocalypse of Abraham, written in Palestine towards the end of the first century in the praise and adoration of God:

"Thou art He whom my soul hath loved (he cries to God), eternal Protector, shining like fire. Thou O light, shinest before the light of the morning upon Thy creatures. And in Thy heavenly dwelling places there is no need of any other light than that the unspeakable splendour from the light of Thy countenance". 47

47. Spencer, Mysticism in World Religion, P. 176.
This passage hints that the ancient seers of Judaism considered God to be the Ultimate immaterial light, and also symbolized His blessings and guidance as light. In the Zohar, which is a record of the discourses of Rabbi Simeen ben Yohai (who lived in the second century) and of his disciples, God is conceived as Or En-Sof-'the infinite Light' - and from the unutterable radiance of His light there spring the ten lights of the Sefiroth which illuminate the minds of man. The world of Sefiroth is the World of divine language that underlines the phenomenal world. The Sefiroth are the channels or flowing of the divine light whereby the transcendent God becomes immanent in the world. Good and evil are symbolized as light and darkness by the 16th century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria. He also traces the origin of these two opposite forces. The divine light, according to him, flowed into primordial space in the form of sefirot. From the lights of Sefiroth was formed the primal man, Adam Kadmon. The light then flowed forth from Adam Kadmon into certain vessels corresponding to the three highest Sefiroth which it gave shelter. But the light corresponding to the other seven shattered the vessels containing it. The breaking of the vessels are the turning point in the cosmic process; as the outcome of it, the harmony of the universe was destroyed.

48. Ibid., P. 191.
49. Ibid., P. 190.
The light streaming from God broken up into sparks, which could illuminate only certain parts of creation, leaving other in darkness. This light does symbolize all the good things and the part of darkness stands as a symbol for all evil doings of the phenomenal world.

Many of the Kabbalists consider the Torah, to be the light. It is also claimed that its every word shines as a light. Abraham bar Hiyya says: "Every letter and every word in every section of the Torah have a deep root in wisdom and contain a mystery from among the mysteries of (divine) understanding, the depths of which we cannot penetrate". It is also said that the light and the mystery of the Torah are one, for the Hebrew word 'or, light, and the Hebrew word raz, mystery, have the same numerical value, 207. According to the author of the Midrash ra-Ne'elam, when God said, 'Let there be light', he meant the mystery that shines in the Torah. To every man it is a ray of light. It is also supposed to be the 'light of the inexhaustible light' by some Kabbalists. The application of the term 'light' to the Torah

50. Ibid., p. 19.
52. Loc. cit.
is symbolic. What the "light" does suggest would be a point of interpretation. The most probable interpretation of the symbol 'light' with reference to the Torah is wisdom. It is through wisdom that all the darkness of ignorance is dispelled and the mysteries of the heaven and earth may be fathomed. Another supplementary interpretation of light in this issue may be the divine guidance. When the Torah is termed as divine light, it seems to suggest by this the divine guidance. Because the Torah being a revelation of God to human beings its principal task will be to guide them in proper direction. And guidance requires wisdom. When term 'light' is applied to the Torah it appears to symbolize both wisdom and guidance.

(E) **CHRISTIANITY:**

In the New Testament some passages are found where 'light' has been used as a symbol, and denotes knowledge, truth, and holiness; and darkness denotes ignorance, sin ignorance in all its phases being included in the later simile: absence of knowledge, spiritual blindness, error, and wickedness. It is also seen that the name light is given to God. Not only
light is a gift of God, but He is by nature 'light'. In Him there is no darkness. God is also called 'Light of Israel' and the 'Father of all lights'. Augustine in the Confessions, considers God the true light which lights every man who comes into world. He also conceives Him as the Unchangeable Light, different from all kinds of light. Augustine is of the opinion that he who knows the truth knows that Light. He constantly tries to bring out the point that 'God is the Father of lights'. From Him as our central sun, all light, whether of wisdom or knowledge, proceeds. He is the source of all goodness, righteousness and the Guide of all human beings—the spiritual creature. Those who detach themselves from God's Light fall in the abyss of darkness.

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54. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. VIII, p. 53, Cf. 1 JNI
55. Loc. Cit.
57. Ibid., p. 102.
58. Ibid., P. 54.
59. Ibid., P. 229.
In the Gospel of John, life is said to be the light of men — the light shining in the darkness. Here darkness, as Duncan Greenless interprets it, means universal sensation. The lower passions are to be overcome by the spiritual Light of God’s Wisdom. According to Greenless, God poured His Light upon the outer "darkness" of ignorance and evil, and stimulated light therein; the Light mingles with darkness and awakens Life, struggling to attain freedom amid corruptibility. Evil for ever cannot resist Divine good and the light of spirit cannot be wholly quenched by darkness. Light is faith and Christ, he claims, is the light, who came into the darkness of the mortal world to bring in it the true life spirit. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus said of himself, 'I am the light of the world' and all his followers would possess the 'light of life'. In another place he claimed "I, light, have come to the world so that no one who trusts in me should remain in the darkness'. At

61. Ibid., P. 1.
62. Ibid., P. 2.
another place he said "So long as I am in the world I am the light of the world". Jesus calls all who want to become the children of light, to trust in the light, i.e. he himself.

In the interpretation of the above utterances of Jesus, Greenless says that he (Jesus) has come to the world to dispel moral darkness; only those who look to his light can avoid sin and error; for all reliance on the self leads to failure. Jesus is the guiding light of all the human lives, to be followed during the darkness of this world until the Day-star shines out and calls the soul into God's eternal light.

The equation of God with Absolute and pure light finds expression in the Christian creed where the Son (Christ) is described as God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God". The Logos is also described as light in the prologue to the Gospel of John. The first creation of God as it is written in

64. Ibid., P. 118, Cf. J. 12: 46, J. 5, 65.
66. Ibid., P. 120.
the chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, was light. The sun, the moon, the stars, and other lights which we know of in the physical world around us, were yet to be created. The creation process begins at God's saying: "let there be light, and there was light". Carlyle, the famous author of England, poses this question, "What is the kind of light that is referred to as the first creation? The sun, the moon, the stars are yet to be created, and before that the creation starts with light. Carlyle observes, that light cannot bear any meaning if it is taken in the literal sense. That light, he proposes, only imaginable, could be the light of knowledge, the light of reason, the light of wisdom and the light of self introspection.

Jesus himself, as it is written in the Gospel according to Luke, uses light as a symbol to explain goodness and righteousness. He starts with physical light and goes on to speak metaphorically of the light within a man. The function of light is to shine. Nobody kindles a lamp and then places it where it cannot be seen. On the contrary it is kept in such a place where its light may be seen to the best advantage. The eye is the

organ that receives light and Jesus considers it the lamp of the body. When the eye reacts to light in a normal process, the whole body gets benefit. A man can perform almost any bodily function when he has good illumination. But if his eyes are impaired so that he fails to make use of the light, almost every function is impaired. The failure of the eyes affects for the worse everything the man does. There is a spiritual parallel. It is possible for the eye to be sound, where the Greek means 'single'. A man's eye may be single-mindedly fixed on the good; then the whole man is full of light. But when the eye is not sound (the Greek word can mean 'evil'), when the man's attention is focused on evil, then the whole man is corrupted. He is full of darkness. It is warned by Jesus that since the whole life is concerned and may be given to right or to wrong, men must be very careful about the light in them so that it may not turn into darkness, which is the ultimate disaster. But Jesus finishes with the

encouragement that a man may be 'ful of light', 'having no part dark'. He will then be 'wholly bright'. The shining lamp is an example of this. Jesus uses the term 'light' here as goodness and righteousness. A man will be the man of light when he attaches himself with good and right things, and avoid what is evil and wrong. Thus, in Christianity God is supposed to be the primary light, the originator of all kinds of light, then Jesus is the light of the world by whom everything becomes enlightened, and then goodness, righteousness, justice, i.e. all good activities also been described as light.