LIGHT FROM LIGHT

Scientists and Theologians in Dialogue

Edited by

Gerald O'Collins, S.J., & Mary Ann Meyers

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“Light from Light”: The Divine Light Reflected in and by the Son and the Holy Spirit

Gerald O’Collins, S.J.

Only a few miles from where the Templeton Foundation symposium met in Istanbul (April 2009) is the museum of Chora, with its glorious fresco of the “Anastasis.” In a pure white robe Jesus has descended into the netherworld. He has battered down the gates of Hades and is pulling Adam and Eve out of their tombs. To the left, kings wait for their deliverance and so too does Cain on the right. The fresco pictures Jesus himself within a luminous frame ornamented with stars. In his vision of Jesus, the artist has built luminosity into this fresco. The victorious Jesus is the light of the netherworld.

The glorious Jesus ascends, rather than descends, in the astonishing resurrection painted by Matthias Grünewald on the Isenheimer altarpiece (1512-16), which is now kept in Colmar (France). Pictured as scarlet and gold and with his arms lifted in ceremonial grace, Jesus rises into the sun and is himself the sun. The other figures are not saints of old but soldiers posted to guard his tomb; they are now crushed with the wind of his ascent as he rushes upwards. His face has become like light itself; he seems pure luminosity as he scatters starlike sparkles into the sky. The heavens have been transfigured by his new brilliance; the earth, it seems, must either accept this brightness or lapse into decay. Viewers look with awe at this vision of his transformed humanity, gazing at what they hope to become in him. As with the Chora fresco, this work mirrors forth in art what faith believes.

Surprisingly, none of the Easter narratives in the Gospels depict the risen Jesus in a glorious, luminous form. The closest they approach to doing so is through a kind of “stand-in,” the “angel of the Lord,” who descended from heaven, rolled away the stone closing the tomb of Jesus, and
sat down on the stone. "His face," Matthew adds, "shone like lightning" and "his garments were white as snow" (Matt. 28:2-3). Yet this is not said of the risen Jesus himself, neither when he met "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" (Matt. 28:9-10) nor when he kept a rendezvous with "the eleven disciples" on a mountain in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20).

The Book of Acts introduces light, when it three times tells the story of Paul’s encounter on the road to Damascus. Since in the Lukan scheme the risen Jesus had already "been taken up into heaven" (Acts 1:9-11) to sit "at the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33-35), his meeting with Paul did not exhibit the everyday, earthly traits of the Easter appearances in Luke 24 and Acts 1. Paul experienced a "light from heaven" that suddenly flashed about him (Acts 9:3), and was qualified in the second account as "a great light from heaven" (Acts 22:6) and in the third account as "brighter than the brilliant sun" (Acts 26:13). It was from the light of God that the gloriously risen Christ came to meet Paul on the Damascus road.

What Acts implies, the Letter to the Hebrews states more explicitly when it calls the incarnate Son "the radiance of God’s glory" and "the imprint of his very being/substance" (Heb. 1:3). Here the language of the New Testament comes closest to the Nicene Creed of 325 and its confession of Christ as "Light from Light."¹

In this chapter I want to do four things: (1) recall some major themes about light from the Hebrew Bible; (2) sketch the New Testament recognition of Jesus as "the light of the world" (John 8:12); (3) retrieve some relevant material from the Christian tradition about Christ and the Holy Spirit as light; and (4) signal some links between my presentation of the Holy

Trinity as the ultimate mystery of light and some other chapters in this book — above all, the one by Kathryn Tanner.

1. The Hebrew Bible

The Israelites knew nothing about the speed of light (see chapter by Robert Boyd) and the "counterintuitive properties" of the "wave/particle duality" (see chapters by John Polkinghorne and Andrew Steane). Yet they could hardly have valued light more highly.² The psalmist pictures God as surrounded by radiant light: "Lord God, how great you are, clothed in majesty and glory, wrapped in light as in a robe" (Ps. 104:1-2). God’s "countenance is light" (Ps. 89:15). God is described as "shining forth": "out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (Ps. 50:1-2). The psalmist prays that the Lord would "shine forth" (Ps. 80:1; 94:1) and manifest himself. Repeatedly the divine manifestations or theophanies show God surrounded by light, fire, and flashes of lightning. It is in a "burning bush" that God reveals himself to Moses (Exod. 3:1-6).

In biblical imagery "light" comes across as thoroughly interconnected with "glory," or the splendor/radiance of the divine presence. One can describe "glory (kabod) as the light streaming from God and thus as the glory that makes its home in the Temple (Ps. 26:8). Hence the psalmist yearns to gaze on God in the sanctuary and see the divine power and glory (Ps. 63:2). The "glory of the Lord" visibly manifests and expresses the divine presence, the overwhelming power and majesty that settles on Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24:16), appears at the Tent of Meeting (Num. 14:10; 16:19), fills the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-35), and eventually permeates the Temple built by Solomon (1 Kings 8:10-13). "Glory," for all intents and purposes, designates the divine reality.

At the time of the Babylonian exile, the prophet Ezekiel lamented the departure of the Lord’s glory from the Temple (10:1-22; 11:22-25), and yearned for the divine glory to return to the restored Temple (43:2-5; 44:4). Within the Temple a seven-branched lampstand symbolized the divine glory and presence. Hanukkah, the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple, was the Feast of Lights.

Human beings, while they cannot see the deity as such, can perceive the glory that symbolizes God's presence. Moses is granted a fleeting glimpse of God's "glory" (Exod. 33:18-23). This visible divine glory serves as a kind of envelope for the unearthly bright light that, paradoxically, veils God's being. One of the New Testament's pastoral letters expresses this conviction: "God dwells in unapproachable light; him no one has ever seen or can ever see" (1 Tim. 6:16). A screen of light hides God, who is utterly holy and beyond human perception. God remains an invisible figure. "Light" articulates and symbolizes this divine otherness and holiness.

Besides associating light and glory with the divine presence, the Scriptures represent God as the creator of light (Isa. 45:6-7). Even before making the heavenly luminaries (Gen. 1:14), in the primal chaos and darkness God spoke and created light ("let there be light"). "Immediately and without resistance," light "filled the world," which had been "flooded by chaos." By starting the work of creation with the creative command "let there be light," God shows — within the scheme of the Book of Genesis — that light is the most basic, general, and even perfect manifestation of the divine reality and operations. From among all the gifts through which God creates and then blesses creatures, light, the firstborn of creation, proves the most sublime: a power provided for the benefit of human beings and their world. By creating light, God "makes possible the basic cycle of time and order." The separation of light and darkness "sets in motion the march and rhythm of time." In this presentation of creation, "time takes precedence over space ... creation does not begin with the division of space, but with the division of night and day as the basis of time."

A classic hymn goes beyond what the text of Genesis explicitly says to associate each of the three persons of the Trinity with the decree "let there be light." This hymn, "God, Whose Almighty Word," helps worshipers to appreciate how the sublime creation of light is due not only to the Word of God but also to the Father Almighty and to the Holy Spirit.

Created by God, light not only symbolizes God but is also an image of divine salvation and deliverance. Where darkness symbolizes illness (especially, blindness), death, and the forces of evil, light symbolizes life, health, and the presence of God. Yet, as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware notes, through a coincidencia oppositorum of the light/darkness symbolism, God is also revealed in "mingled light and darkness" or in "divine darkness." David Brown prefers to talk of the symbols of light and darkness being "subverted."

The biblical expression "seeing the light" amounts to "being alive." We can unpack the expression "the light of life" as "the light which is life and the source of life" (Eccles. 11:7; Ps. 49:19; Job 3:20). When the divine light shines on human beings, they experience "liveliness" and happiness. That is the sense of "in/by your light we see light" (Ps. 36:9). When the psalmist prays "show us the light of your face" (Ps. 4:6), he is asking for the grace to see/experience happiness.

"The commandment of the Lord," the psalmist knows, "is pure and gives light to the eyes" (Ps. 19:8). The longest psalm celebrates the Torah or Law of God: "Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light on my path" (Ps. 119:105; see 119:39). This is a light that brings and even embodies order and salvation. The righteous experience God's light as their saving guide: "the Lord is my light and my salvation" (Ps. 27:1). The king knows how the Lord is his "lamp," the God who "lights up my darkness" (Ps. 18:28).

Through the gift of God, Jerusalem is a zone of light in the surrounding darkness: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and dark night the nations, on you the Lord shall shine and over you his glory will appear; nations will journey towards your light and kings to your radiance" (Isa. 60:1-3). By twice setting "light" and "glory" in parallelism, this passage implies a functional identity between the glory of God and the light of God.

These pages should suffice to illustrate some of the rich ways in which the Hebrew Bible associates God with light and the divine gift of light to creatures. The First Letter of John will firmly bring together the key Old Testament themes on light by declaring: "God is light and in him there is

3. G. von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary, trans. J. H. Marks, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 51. As David Jones has pointed out to me, St. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) suggests that the angels were created when God said, "let there be light" (The City of God, 11:6). The angels are illuminated by God, the eternal light, who is all wisdom, understanding, and love. The angels participate in this light, which brings them understanding. It is in this sense, according to Augustine, that angels are beings of light.


6. John Marriott wrote the text of "Let there be light" (first published in 1825); the tune is taken from an eighteenth-century Italian hymn.
no darkness" (1 John 1:5). What then of the New Testament and its part in initiating talk about Christ as "Light from Light"?

2. The New Testament

The first New Testament writer, St. Paul, draws on Genesis to express the way the divine light (or its equivalent, the divine glory) has been revealed in Jesus Christ: "God who said, 'out of darkness let light shine,' has caused his light to shine in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Two verses earlier Paul writes of seeing "the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). We could well detect here a genitive of identity: "the light of the Gospel" that is "the glory of Christ." The Second Letter to the Corinthians (written around 57 CE) anticipates the theme that Jesus was/is the divine light — a statement that years later will emerge fully in John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation.

Naturally Paul adopts the language of light when exhorting his addressees: "You are all children of light, children of the day. We do not belong to night and darkness. We must not sleep like the rest, but keep awake and sober" (1 Thess. 5:5-6). "Darkness" constitutes sin and evil, while the "enlightenment" brought by faith means turning from such darkness to walk in the light. A few years later the apostle exhorts the Christians of Rome: "It is far on in the night; day is near. Let us therefore throw off the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light... Let Christ himself be the armor that you wear" (Rom. 13:12, 14). The kingdom of the Son of God, so Paul (or one of his followers) assures readers, is a domain of light (Col. 1:12-13).

Turning to the Gospels, we find Matthew interpreting the ministry of Jesus to fulfill a passage in the prophet Isaiah: "the people that lived in darkness saw a great light, and on those who lived in the land and shadow of death a light dawned" (Matt. 4:16). In Luke's Gospel the hymn of Zechariah adopts similar language on the occasion of the birth of Jesus' precursor, John the Baptist: "by the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine on those who sit in darkness and un-
der the shadow of death" (Luke 1:78-9). When Jesus was born, "the glory of the Lord shone" around the shepherds (Luke 2:9). On the occasion of the Christ Child being presented in the Temple, old Simeon said: "my eyes have seen the salvation you have prepared in the presence of all nations: a light that will bring revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32).

According to the Synoptic Gospels, the ministry of Jesus featured an episode on a high mountain when, in the presence of Peter, James, and John, Jesus was "transfigured" and his clothes became "dazzling white" (Mark 9:2-8) — in the "light of Tabor," as John Behr's chapter explains. Matthew introduces more luminosity into the scene, by stating that the face of Jesus "shone like the sun" and the cloud that overshadowed the three disciples was "bright" (Matt. 17:1-8). Luke goes further by saying that the disciples saw "the glory of Christ and of the two heavenly companions who had appeared with him, Moses and Elijah: "they appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem" — a clear indication that the glory of the transfiguration should be understood as a preview of the glory to come with the crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 9:28-36). Luke thinks of glory as preeminently associated with the post-resurrection situation of Jesus: by rising from the dead, he enters into his glory (Luke 24:26).

Further New Testament witnesses share the same scheme. What is apparently a quotation from an early Christian hymn celebrates the risen Christ as "taken up into glory" (1 Tim. 3:16). The Letter to the Hebrews likewise speaks of the "glory" that characterizes the crucified and exalted Son (2:7; 9:3; 3:21) and that will be the goal of the people he leads (2:10). First Peter adopts a similar pattern: "God raised him [Jesus] from the dead and gave him glory" (1:21; see 1:11).

Other New Testament authors follow the same scheme by speaking in terms of the "glory" that belongs to the risen and exalted Christ, enshrined now and to come at the end: "our Lord Jesus Christ reigns in glory" (James 2:1); "we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). Since Christ embodies and fully expresses the glory of God, "the Glory of God" might serve as a title for him. Jesus is "the Glory of God," just as he is elsewhere called "the Mystery of God" (Col. 2:2).

Right from its prologue, John's Gospel differs by simply identifying Jesus (under the title of the Word) and not the Torah as "the Light" (John 1:4-5. 7), and announcing: "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was
coming into the world” (John 1:9). He is the “genuine source of illumination, universal in its scope, enlightening every person.” The prologue climaxes with one of the most famous and cherished claims made in the New Testament. In Jesus divine glory was present from the beginning for those who had eyes to see it: “the Word became flesh, and made his home among us. We saw his glory, such glory as befits the only Son of the Father” (John 1:14). God is invisible (“no one has ever seen God” — John 1:18), but the incarnate Son of God is visible and revealed as “the light of the world” (John 9:5) and the “glory of God.” “Walking in the light” means seeing the “signs” of his divine glory (e.g., John 2:11), believing that Jesus is the unique revelation of the invisible God and so, through this faith, enjoying “the light of life” (John 8:12; 12:46).

Light and water imagery distinguished the Jewish Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles) held in the Temple: in particular, four large “menorahs” or lampstands were set up in the Court of the Women and provided light for celebrants to dance through the night. Present on the last and greatest day of this festival, Jesus disclosed that in his person he embodied what the festival celebrated in its light and water imagery (John 7:37-9). He has replaced the significance of the Feast of the Booths; he is the light illuminating not merely the Temple and Jerusalem but also the whole world (John 8:12).

Unlike the other three Gospels, John sees the whole of Jesus’ life as manifesting his divine glory. During the public ministry seven “signs” reveal this glory: from the miracle at Cana (John 2:11) to the raising of Lazarus (John 11:4, 40). Since the entire mission of Jesus is suffused in glory, it would make little sense to include an account of the transfiguration as a preview of his future glory. The glory manifested right through the ministry of Jesus reaches its climax at his crucifixion and resurrection. What could seem the depth of deadly humiliation is in fact “the hour” or supreme manifestation of his glory (John 12:23; 13:31-32; 17:1). The divine glory that the Son enjoyed in his Father’s presence “before the world ex-

8. This verse could be translated: “he was the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world.” On the opposition of light and darkness that we find in John’s Gospel and 1 John, see G. Strecker, The Johannine Letters, trans. L. M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 26-28.
10. Lincoln comments: “faith finds in Jesus the glory of the divine presence” (John, p. 105).

isted” has also distinguished the Son’s mission on earth and led to the glory that he will share forever with his Father (John 17:4-5, 24).

Before leaving John’s Gospel, we should note that it associates not only “light” and “glory” with Christ but also beauty. As commentators have often observed, the “good (kalos)” shepherd is equivalently the “beautiful shepherd” (John 10:14).

Finally, the Book of Revelation opens with a vision of the exalted Christ among seven lampstands of gold, his eyes flaming like fire and his face shining “like the sun at full strength” (Rev. 1:13-16). The book finishes with a vision of the New Jerusalem, a city that did not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, “for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23; see 22:5). Then the glorious Jesus himself speaks: “I am the bright star of dawn” (Rev. 22:16).

3. Bible Survey Conclusions and Questions

When we survey the sweep of biblical testimony to light, we face two startling developments. The first is the shift from Genesis to 1 John. When saying, “let there be light,” God creates the most sublime gift for many further beings that then will be created in their turn. Yet light is “other” than God and totally dependent upon God for its existence. Nevertheless, “let there be light” will move beyond providing an image for understanding God’s creative act to providing an image about God himself. In a metaphorical statement 1 John makes the simple identification: “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). The least we can say is that for 1 John light is a most basic and perfect manifestation of the divine reality. This statement can hardly be intended to define strictly God’s essence, any more than the other (and related) statement that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). Rather the author wishes to describe something of the nature of God. Georg Strecker comments: “As light is the source of all illumination, so God is the source of all that makes human life bright. God’s being light means the fulfillment of meaning in human life, to which, in the eschaton, God gives a basis, a measure, and a goal. If God is understood as ‘light,’ this means that God is acknowledged as the giver of eschatological salvation.” Add too what Metropolitan Kallistos Ware observes in his chapter: darkness is never used positively by John or any other New Testament author to symbolize God.

The second striking development in the biblical story of revelation comes with Jesus himself being identified in John's Gospel as "the light of the world." This provides a starting point for the eventual emergence of the credal confession of him as "Light from Light."

In retrieving the biblical data about light, I have also paid attention to the closely related theme of "glory." Without being strict synonyms, "light" and "glory" also overlap with "beauty." For Paul to say that he had seen "the glory of God in the face of Christ" was close to saying that he had seen "the beauty of God in the face of Christ." For John to declare "God is light" was close to declaring that "God is beauty."

In The Glory of God Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-88) would bring firmly together "light" and "beauty": "The light of God, which is the simplest of all light . . . is also original beauty." Balthasar reaches for an even stronger qualifier, "absolute" rather than simply "original": "as the absolute light" God is also "absolute beauty." He then introduces a further adjective ("eternal") to express the Incarnation in terms of beauty: "God's eternal beauty becomes a man." Balthasar does not say this, but his language suggests enlarging the Creed to confess Christ as "Light from Light," "Glory from Glory," and "Beauty from Beauty."

Balthasar's reflections could encourage (1) examining the post-New Testament tradition and establishing to what extent earlier and later Christian thinkers have associated the light, glory, and beauty of God. (2) Another line of research could lead us to trace the symbolism of light in the Christian liturgy: the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil and the "sol invictus" (unconquered sun) at Christmas and the Epiphany. Yet again one might move beyond the New Testament to investigate (3) the metaphysics of light according to neo-Platonic, Augustinian (see the chapter by Robert Dodaro), other Church Fathers, theologians of the Middle Ages (see the chapter by Kathryn Tanner), and modern theologians (see the chapter by George Hunsinger). Or one could fruitfully examine (4) the theme of light according to Christian mysticism down through the centuries, both Western and Eastern. Hesychasm was an Eastern tradition of mystical prayer that reached its full expression with St. Gregory Palamas (d. 1359) and others in the fourteenth century. Hesychasts hoped to reach through God's grace and unceasing prayer a vision of the Divine Light, which they believed to be identical with the Light that surrounded Christ at his transfiguration. In a tour de force, the chapter in this book by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware takes readers through the complementary themes of light and darkness, as found in the mystical theology of the Greek Fathers, down to Palamas.

Rather than pursue any forms of these four attractive options, I want to explore some of the Christian answers to the question: To what extent is the ultimate mystery of God, the Holy Trinity, to be understood as a or rather the mystery of light? Positive replies to that question entail recognizing the full and true divinity of Christ; otherwise he could not be "Light from Light." They also entail associating light with the Holy Spirit and acknowledging the Spirit to be not only "the Life-giver" but also "the Light-giver."

The New Testament repeatedly links the Holy Spirit with life (e.g., Rom. 8:11-17) and with truth: "the Spirit of truth" will guide Christ's followers "into all truth" (John 16:13). Further, all the manifestations of the Spirit, according to Paul, reach their climax with love (1 Cor. 13:11-13); through the Holy Spirit, God's love "floods the hearts" of believers (Rom. 5:5).

Direct links of the Holy Spirit with "glory" and "light" are less apparent. While often linking "glory" to the Father and the Son, the New Testament does so only once in the case of the Spirit: "the Spirit of glory" rests upon believers (1 Pet. 4:14). Where Mark reports John the Baptist as saying of the "mightier one" to come after him that "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," Matthew and Luke add a significant phrase: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16). In the event neither Mark nor Matthew reports any coming of the Holy Spirit, as does Luke (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4), who also includes a reference to the "fire" Spirit (Acts 2:3, 19). Matthew will include a mandate to baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

13. Light was to form an essential part of the classical account of beauty offered by Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) in his Summa theologica, 1.39.8: integritas sive perfection (integrity or perfection), proportio sive consonantia (proportion or harmony), and claritas (splendour).


18. A further option would be to compare and contrast the light of God in the Christian tradition with what we find in the mystical experiences of Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and followers of other world religions.
Matthew may understand being “baptized with fire” to be the judgment facing those who fail to respond appropriately to the call for repentance (Matt. 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:9) when the Son of Man comes to judge all people (Matt. 25:41). Luke clearly refers being “baptized with fire” to the fire of the Spirit at Pentecost. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost involved the Spirit being manifested not only by a strong wind but also by “flames like tongues of fire” (Acts 2:2-3). Thus the New Testament provided some platform, albeit a limited one, from which to link the Holy Spirit with “glory” and “light.” Let us take up first some of the developments that led to Christ being confessed as “Light from Light.” We can then turn to the road that led to the Spirit being acknowledged as Light-giver and completing a vision of the Trinity as the ultimate mystery of light.

4. Christ as Light from Light: The Road to Nicaea

A verse from the Letter to the Hebrews made a key contribution to the development towards “Light from Light”: “He [the Son] is the radiance (apaugasma) of God’s glory (doxa), the stamp/imprint (character) of God’s very being/substance (hypostasis)” (Heb. 1:3). How does this verse — in particular, its first part — represent the Son's relationship to God (the Father)?: From a grammatical point of view, two possibilities open up: either “the Son actively radiates divine glory ‘out from’ God” or “he more passively reflects ‘back’ divine glory, like a mirror.” Does he radiate or reflect God's glory? Craig Koester points out that we face a similar ambiguity in Wisdom 7:25-26, where apaugasma is used alongside ‘emanation’ (aporroia) and ‘mirror.’ Apropos of apaugasma in Hebrews 1:3, the ancient and many modern commentators prefer the active meaning. But, as Koester rightly points out, “the text does not deal primarily with God’s relationship with the Son. The Son is the one through whom God’s power and presence are brought into the realm of human experience.” From the second century of the Christian era, however, the relationship of Father and Son became paramount for theological reflection. In the run-up to the First Council of Nicaea (325), the contributions of St. Justin Martyr (d. around 165), Tertullian (d. around 220), and Origen (d. around 254) guided thinking about the Son’s being “Light from Light.”

In his Dialogue with Tryphon Justin explained that “God has begotten of himself a rational Power,” which the Scriptures called by various titles: “sometimes the Glory of the Lord, at other times Son, or Wisdom, or Angel, or God, or Lord, or Word” (6.3; see 61.3). To interpret the generation of the Word, Justin appealed to the sun sending forth its rays or a fire kindling other fires. Just as in these analogies, the begetting of the Son did not mean an “amputation, as if the essence (ousia) of the Father were divided” (Dialogue 128.3, 4). Here Justin raised a question that was to be much debated in the fourth century, the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son (or Word) in sharing the same substance, essence, or ousia. By that time, thanks to Tertullian, Origen, and others, Justin's image of "Light from Light" had entered the official creed of the church.

Justin himself, as Jaroslav Pelikan points out, took the image “to mean that as fire could be ignited from fire without diminishing that from which it was taken, so the Son was derived from the Father without losing in the deity of the Father. Here the accent was not so much upon the coessentiality of the Father and the Son as upon the inviolability of the Father despite the generation of the Son.” In the fourth century Athanasius was to recognize that “the image of fire kindled from fire suggested that the new fire or firebrand was something external to the old, created and wrought by it but separate from it.” If “light from light” was to express the confession that Christ was “true God from true God,” “it had to be disengaged from the image of fire from fire.”

Some decades after Justin, Tertullian in his Adversus Praxeum wanted to show how God is a differentiated, triune unity; the divine substance is extended, with the Son and the Spirit sharing in it and being distinct persons, yet without being separated. He introduced three “material” analogies: a root producing a shoot and fruit; a spring issuing into a river and a canal; the sun producing a ray and the point of focus of a ray. “God,” he wrote, “produced the Word . . . as a root produces the shoot, a spring the river, the sun a ray . . . . The Spirit makes the third from God [the Father] and the Son, as the fruit from the shoot is the third from the tree, the canal

from the river the third from the source, the point of focus of a ray the third from the sun. But none of these is divorced from the origin from which it derives its own properties. Thus the Trinity derives from the Father by continuous and connected steps” (8). The three analogies maintain that the Son and the Spirit are distinct from the Father as individual persons but they are not other in substance from the Father. The Son and the Spirit remain derived from the Father without a real separation taking place. The three divine persons are linked through dynamic relationships of origin that do not separate them. For our purposes we see here light (namely, the light of the sun as understood by the science of Tertullian’s day) being one of the three analogies used to present the origin of the Son and the Spirit from the Father. In particular, just as the sunbeam, while it extends the substance of the sun, remains one in substance with the sun and yet differs from it, so too the Son remains one in substance with the Father and yet is distinct from the Father.

I have already quoted a famous fragment from Origen’s commentary on Hebrews, in which he related Hebrews 1:3 to the question of the eternal existence of the Son (text in note 1). There is only one principle of divine Light, with the Father as the eternal, unbegotten Light, and the Son as the eternal, begotten, or generated Splendor of that Light. In this fragment Origen prepared the terminology to be used at the First Council of Nicaea about the Son: not only “Light from Light” but also “there was never when he was not” and his being homousios with the Father or sharing his essential reality (ousia). One should add that this clearly stated doctrine of “consubstantiality,” or “community of substance,” between the Father and the Son may owe something to the translation by Rufinus of Aquileia (d. 411). We do not have Origen’s original Greek text but only the Latin version that Rufinus made long after the Council of Nicaea had become accepted orthodoxy.23

Prompted not only by Hebrews 1:3 but also by Colossians 1:15 (Christ as “the image of the invisible God”) and Wisdom 7:25–26 (Wisdom as “the pure outflow” of God’s glory), Origen repeatedly portrayed the Word/Son as eternally reflecting God’s glory and light. “There is,” he wrote, “an eternal and everlasting begetting, as brightness/radiance is begotten from light.” Since God is light (1 John 1:5), the Son is “the brightness/radiance of this light, proceeding from the God without separation, as brightness/radiance from light.”24 God could never be without the radiance of his glorious light.

5. The Council of Nicaea and Its Aftermath

“Light from Light” was one of the ways in which the Nicene Creed took a stand against Arius and his followers to confess that the Son, while begotten by and derived from the Father, shares the same Godhead, is co-eternal with the Father, and is not a creature made in time. He is eternally begotten from the Father and enjoys essential divinity (and not merely participated “divinity”), because the Godhead has been fully communicated to him. As originated from the Father, the divinity of the Son is identical with that of the Father. Hence the Son should be called “God from God,” “Light from Light,” “true God from true God” and “of one being/substance (homousios) with the Father.”

St. Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373), who attended the Council as a deacon and secretary of his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria (d. 328), summed up years later the central motivation behind the stand taken against Arius: “The Word could never have divinized us if he were merely divine by participation and were not himself the essential Godhead, the Father’s veritable image” (De Synodis, 51). To put this in equivalent terms, it took the natural Son of God to make human beings the adopted children of God, who are “divinized” by participation.25

A classic defender of the Nicene Creed, Athanasius repeatedly introduced “his favourite analogy of the light and its brightness, which, while distinguishable as two, are one and the same substance.”26 The derivation of the Son (the Radiance) from the Father (the Light), far from implying any Arian-style subordination, conveys their unity and equality. Athanasius declared the Son to be “the Radiance” and the Father to be “the Light” (Contra Arianos, 2.41). Echoing even more clearly Hebrews 1:3,

25. In the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea, St. Ambrose of Milan used extensively the imagery of light in his Trinitarian theology; see R. Morgan, The Imagery of Light in St. Ambrose’s Theology (Melbourne: Carmelite Monastery, 1998).
26. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, p. 245; see Athanasius, Contra Arianos, 3.11; De Decretis Nicennar Synodi, 23–24. In De Sententia Dionysii Athanasiius wrote: “if anyone . . . dares to separate the radiance from the light and say that the radiance is of another essence, let him join Arius in his insanity” (24).
Athanasius stated: “He [the Son] is the very stamp of the nature of the Father and light from light and the true image of the essence of the Father” (Contra Arianos, 1.9). Where the Letter to the Hebrews called the Son “the Radiance” of the Father, this meant, according to Athanasius, “that the radiance cannot be separated from the light but is proper to it by nature and co-exists with it” (Epistola ad episcopos Aegypti et Libyae, 13). The co-eternity of Father and Son follows. God, Athanasius wrote, “can never be without his Word, any more than the light can cease to shine” (Contra Arianos, 2.32). Or, more concisely, “He who is light, was he ever not radiant?” (Contra Arianos, 1.24; see 1.13, 25).

Arius had little to say about the Holy Spirit, and correspondingly, the Council of Nicaea simply confessed, “we believe in the Holy Spirit,” and left it at that. Right from New Testament times the liturgy (for instance, baptism “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”) and the doxology (“glory be to the Father with (meta) the Son, together with (sun) the Holy Spirit”) expressed or at least implied a “high” view of the Spirit’s identity. Prior to the fourth century such Christian thinkers as Tertullian and Origen had initiated theological reflection on the Spirit. But from around 360 CE, various groups (often lumped together under the name of “Pneumatomachians”) began challenging the truly divine status of the Holy Spirit. These challenges prompted St. Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. around 395), and others to reflect seriously and at length on the Spirit as sharing the divine substance/essence (being “consubstantial”) with the Father and the Son. The First Council of Constantinople (381) developed at length the third article of the Nicene Creed in expressing the divinity of the Spirit, the “Lord” and “Life-giver” who is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son.27

Those who championed the Holy Spirit followed Tertullian (see above) in applying the language of light. Basil declared that the Holy Spirit shines on believers and illumines them like the sun (On the Holy Spirit, 26.61). Gregory of Nazianzus called the Spirit “Life and Life-giver, Light and Light-giver” (Oration on Pentecost, 9). St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) described the work of the Spirit as “the true Enlightener,” who brings “beams of light and knowledge” to “enlighten the mind” (Catechetical Lectures, 16.16). But, in the event, the Council of Constantinople inserted in the Nicene Creed a recognition of the Holy Spirit as “Life-giver” but not as “Light-giver.”


6. From Eriugena to Dante

By acknowledging the Holy Spirit to be “of one being/substance (homoousios) with the Father,” Basil and the other Cappadocians faced the challenge of distinguishing between the Son and the Holy Spirit in a way that showed they are not divine “Siblings.” The Father does not have two Sons. What differentiates the mode of origin of the Son from that of the Spirit? The distinction between the divine persons is grounded in their origin (in the case of the second and third) and in their mutual relations. The difference between two verbs proved vital: the Son is generated by the Father, whereas the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father (see John 15:26), with the Son somehow involved in this “procession.” Gregory of Nyssa wrote of the Spirit proceeding “out of” the Father and receiving “of/from” the Son, and of the Spirit proceeding out of the Father through the Son.28 In terms of our central topic, he used the analogy of a torch imparting its light first to another torch and then through it to a third.29

To complete this sketch of the Holy Trinity as a mystery of light, we can cite some further witnesses up to Dante. First, John Scotus Eriugena (d. around 877) described the inner life and the outer activity of the Trinity in terms of light. In the opening chapter of his Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, he wrote of the threefold light of the Trinity: “the first and intimate light (lumen primum et intimum)” of the Father, “the true light (lumen verum)” of the Son, and “the gifted light (lumen donativum)” of the Spirit. This threefold light pervades the universe, “shining in all things that exist, in order that all might be brought back into the love and knowledge of its beauty (splendor in omnibus que sunt, ut in amore et cognitione pulcritudinis suae convertatur omnia).”30

The spiritual experiences of St. Symeon the New Theologian (d. 1022) featured the breaking in of light that he identified as the “light of the Holy Spirit.” This led him to introduce his hymns with a prayer to the Spirit: “Come, true Light” and “Come, Light that never ends.” Yves Congar writes: “Symeon’s mystical experience was above all an experience of light and an

29. Contra Eunomium, 1.42.
experience of the Spirit.” One might sum up Symeon’s message as “the Spirit is light.”

The “Golden Sequence” for Pentecost, “Veni Sancte Spiritus,” almost certainly written by an Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton (d. 1128), calls the Spirit “lux beatissima” (most blessed Light) and prays, “veni, lumen cordium” (come, Light of hearts).

Like Eriugena, St. Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) depicted not merely the Holy Spirit but the whole Trinity as the divine mystery of light. She wrote of a vision of a bright human figure (the Son) surrounded by light that is both white (the Father) and red (the Spirit) (Scivias, 22).

The greatest of all medieval poets, Dante Alighieri (d. 1321), lent his weight to such visions of the Trinity as the mystery of light. At the end of his Paradiso, Dante envisions God as utterly active, with “spinning” or “circling” symbolizing the completely actualized divine perfection: “in the profound and clear ground of lofty light there appeared to me three spinnings (circlings) of three colors and of the same extent. The One seemed reflected in the Other as rainbow by rainbow, and the Third seemed fire breathed forth equally from the One and the Other” (Canto XXXIII, 115-20). Dante’s “luminous” picture of the Trinity as rainbow/rainbow/fire is, however, “shaded” or “subverted” by an intense vision of God as light that forces the poet to close his eyes in wonder (see the chapter by David Brown). Let me pass to some concluding reflections on the Holy Trinity as the ultimate mystery of light and do so in dialogue with Kathryn Tanner’s chapter.

7. Conclusion

Over and above those whom I cited from the Christian tradition, Tanner has added further voices who witnessed to the Trinity as mystery of light: Gregory of Nyssa, Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure. What I have expounded corresponds largely to the first theme she develops: the imagery of light as providing analogies for the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity. She has gone further by drawing our attention to some limits in the analogy of light: for instance, that it may give the impression of the divine persons not being sufficiently distinct.

Her second and third themes take up the value and limits of the light analogy when expounding, respectively, the creative work of God and the divine presence in the world. It is only briefly and in passing that I touched on these two themes, and did so mainly in my final section, “Eriugena to Dante.”

Light may be the most basic, general, and even perfect manifestation of the divine reality and operations (in creation and in the divine presence to all creatures). But, as Tanner rightly illustrates, we need to note the limits as well as the values in the perceived properties of light as a theological analogy.

Across many traditions God is experienced in light and as light. Using here the language of light seems thoroughly intercultural. Yet, strictly speaking, light is an impersonal analogy, unlike the analogies of “word” and “love” that have long been pressed into service when speaking of the Trinity and their relations.

In his superb hymn “How Wonderful the Three-in-One,” Brian Wren does speak of the Trinity’s “energies of dancing light,” but the emphasis falls on “the comming love in shared delight.” Wren draws above all on Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173) to develop the personal analogy of “Lover, Beloved and Equal Friend.”

32. Dante followed Revelation 4:1-11 in associating the image of a rainbow with God. There the rainbow around the throne evokes the glory of God, while some precious stones (jasper, cornelian, and emerald) intensify the light and reflect the unapproachable brightness/glory that surrounds God.