

TRANSMISSION OF MYSTICAL LIGHT FROM GREEK CHRISTIAN EAST TO THE WEST

Seweryn Blandzi

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Abstract: BLANDZI, SEWERYN. *Transmission of Mystical Light from Greek Christian East to the West*. Plato's and Aristotle's investigations based on the very concept of wisdom and the relationship between *sophia* and *saphia* lead us to the metaphysics of light, developed later in Christian thought and neoplatonism, the beginnings of which we observe in the early Greek thinkers and authors and exegesis writers of books that are the foundation of various religions. The metaphor of light permeates the entire Mediterranean philosophical and mystery reflection from Parmenides and Plato to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. First and foremost light was the essential element in the philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite who provided Christian thought with rich presuppositions and themes. His metaphysics of light contained imagery that inspired Abbot Suger, the builder of first French gothic cathedral in Saint Denis abbacy. Suger applied the Dionysian vision and transformed mystical wisdom into the real world. The main purpose of the article is to highlight the gnostic aspect of the reflection on the light in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.

Keywords: *Parmenides, Plato, neoplatonism, metaphysics of light, Ps. Dionysius the Areopagite, abbot Suger, St. Denis monastery*

ἀγαθὸν γὰρ εἶρηται διὰ ἄγαν θεεῖν ἐπὶ αὐτὸ πάντα
Elias, *Prolegomena philosophiae*

One could say that symbolism of light permeates Greek philosophy from its very beginnings. See, for instance, Parmenides' proemium where Eleatic poet and thinker describes his upwards journey to the gates of Night and Day to see the eternally luminous brightening realm of transcendent Truth-Being expressed in Plato's language as ὑπερουράνιος τόπος of οὐσία ὄντως οὐσα (Plato. Phaedrus, 247c – 248c).

In philosophical terms, this particular value of light was most poignantly formulated by Plato. In Book VI of *The Republic*, the most luminous of all principles, the idea of Good, is defined both as the principle of knowledge and of existence. Therefore he compares them to sunlight, which begets everything and at the same time remains, as the source, entirely transcendent: "the sun is only the author of visibility in all visible things, but of generation and nourishment and growth, though he himself is not generation" (Plato. *The Republic*, 509b ; Plato 1892, 210).

Plato demonstrates the correspondence between the structure of the noetic world, where the idea of Good reigns, and the sensual world, where the supreme role is that of the visible Sun. The author of *The Republic* makes it particularly clear by means of a parable of the cave. This image, together with its metaphysical and epistemological message becomes a foundation of considerations both for Neo-Platonist and Christian thinkers. The central motive is the pursuit of truth-source by transcending opinion and actual spiritual effort. Light is understood here as the most perfect manifestation of Good itself, which begets beingness and illuminates our mind

so that it could become acquainted with truly beings (τὰ ὄντως ὄντα): “in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, it is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, a parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual (ἐν τε ὁρατῷ φῶς καὶ τὸν τοῦτου κύριον τεκοῦσα, ἐν τε νοητῷ αὐτῇ κυρία ἀλήθειαν καὶ νοῦν παρασχομένη); and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed” (Plato. *The Republic*, 517b 8 – c6; Plato. 1892, 217).

The metaphor of light as the factor that animates and enables true cognition will be creatively developed in the philosophy of Plotinus, who compares the process of the emanation of the Absolute to radiation and sunlight [περίλαμψις] (Plotinus. *The Enneads*, I,7,1; Plotinus 1917 – 1930, 64). “The entire intellectual order may be figured as a kind of light with the One in repose at its summit as its King; but this manifestation is not cast out from it: we may think, rather, of the One as a light before the light, an eternal irradiation resting upon the Intellectual Realm; this, not identical with its source, is yet not severed from it nor of so remote a nature as to be less than Real-Being” (Plotinus. *The Enneads*, V,3,12; Plotinus 1917 – 1930, 393-394); “What is present in Intellectual-Principle is present, though in a far transcendent mode, in the One: so in a light diffused afar from one light shining within itself, the diffused is vestige, the source is the true light; but Intellectual-Principle, the diffused and image light, is not different in kind from its prior” (Plotinus. *The Enneads*, VI, 8, 18; Plotinus 1917 – 1930, 610). Instead, the soul’s way upwards is described as a gradual illumination and ever increasing participation in “a different, stronger light” [φωτὸς κρείττονος ἄλλον] (Plotinus. *The Enneads*, VI, 7, 22; Plotinus 1917 – 1930, 578).

The motive of light as an independent *proemium* to the “metaphysics of light” can already be found at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, in the description of Creation. This well-known passage mentions “the beginning”, when darkness reigned over the created waters and land, “and God said: ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light, that *it was* good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night” (Gen 1: 3-5; NKJ).

Light, the first to have been called Good by its Creator, will become a metaphor for descriptions of divine acts, and even for the nature of God himself. The Bible contains numerous expressions to describe the essence of God by the metaphor of light, e.g. “Who cover Yourself with light as with a garment” (Ps 104: 2; NKJ) or “dwelling in unapproachable light” (1 Tm 6: 16; NKJ). In the language of the Old Testament Light often means life in happiness and prosperity, while in the supernatural sense it means God’s grace and His guidance in following the Law (Ps 27: 1; 43: 3; Prov 6: 23; NKJ). In the New Testament, the symbolism of light is inseparably connected with the person of Christ, even identified with God-Man. In the Old Covenant, it is hidden under the name of “Wisdom”, which is a “a reflection of the eternal light” (Wis 7: 26; NJB) foretold by the prophets, awaited by humanity that sits “in darkness and the shadow of death” (Lk 1: 79; NKJ) appears on the Earth as the Word incarnate. It is “the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world” (Jn 1: 9; NKJ). Christ confirms these words: “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (Jn 8: 12; 9: 5; NKJ). John the Evangelist says directly: “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all”(1 Jn 1: 5; NKJ).

One of the fundamentals of all Christian mysticism and divine theology of divine light is the description of the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor (Mt 17: 1; Mk 9: 2; Lk 9: 28; NKJ). For philosophers and theologians who interpret this passage, light becomes the model epiphany of divinity, and the possibility of spiritual interpretation of divine light is tantamount to participation, acquaintance with divine energies, i.e. divine acts [actualizing acts] (Eliade 1965, 56-64).

Equally numerous are liturgical testimonies that speak of God's light, exalt its glory in hymns, and show its sacramental symbolism. Mystic light plays a particular role in the first of the sacraments, which is a kind of impulse that stimulates the soul to seek its prototype. As M. Eliade writes in one of his studies, the symbolism of baptism is, undoubtedly, extremely rich and complex, but the photic ($fw=v$ – light) and fiery elements play an exceedingly important role in it. Justin, Gregory of Nazianzus and the Fathers of the Church define baptism as φωτισμός (*illuminatio*): based on two fragments of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb 6: 4, 10: 32; NKJ) where the baptized were called the φωτισθέντες – “the enlightened” (Eliade 1965, 56).

These ideas were soon accepted by the Christian world. We find them in Augustine's epistemology, in Robert Grosseteste's and Bonaventura's physical and aesthetic cosmology, in Albert the Great's and Thomas Aquinas' ontology. But in the Christian thought the founder of this metaphysics, where light is the first principle of being as well as of cognition, is Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

In the Middle Ages there were reasons to call the Areopagite the “eulogist of light”. His works, translated by Johannes Scotus Eriugena, were kept in the St. Denis monastery. The Saint was supposed to be the founder of this convent and at the same time to be a disciple of Christ. Influenced by these works, Suger, the Frankish abbot of St. Denis, rebuilt the choir. He revolutionized architecture and gave a powerful stimulus for a new style, the Gothic openwork with its extraordinary stained-glass windows. Pseudo-Dionysius' metaphysics of light and its message became the key to the new art, epitomized by the church built by Suger. The fact that the reconstruction of the abbey was no accident, but a thoroughly thought-out concept, is demonstrated in the treaties of the abbot, *Libellus alter de consecratione Ecclesiae Sancti Dionisii* and *Sugerii Abbatis Liber de rebus in administratione sua gestis* (Suger 1867). The latter, not being a treaty nor theology nor aesthetics, however, it reveals a profound impact on both fields of thought Abbot St. Denis. He confesses, by using Dionysian terminology: “Thus when out of my delight – in the beauty of the house of God – the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy mediation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred issues; then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which exists neither entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the Grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner” (Suger. *De rebus*; Frish 1987, 9).

The first and the most important postulate of Suger, a man well-read in Pseudo-Dionysius' works, was the idea to rebuild the church in such a manner as to turn it into the most perfect symbol of the Absolute. But for the abbot, that meant flooding the building with light, and the center of the aesthetic transformation was the choir. It was to be the focus of light as the place where liturgy is performed, a central part of the church, oriented eastward. Here Suger decided to remove the walls and ordered the builders to use all the possibilities afforded by the rib vault, i.e. by something that had hitherto been a mere architectural trick. A new style was born. Thanks to the changes in the structure of the vaults, large windows were installed and the walls were replaced by piers. Chapels arranged on a semi-circle with a wall pierced with enormous stained-glass windows gave a visible shape to Suger's dream: “the entire church shone with wonderful, continuous glow from the windows, filled with light as no others” (Suger. *De rebus*; DUBY 1986, 122).

Pseudo-Dionysius proclaimed the unity of the universe filled with light and its radiation. It became necessary that the light should fill the entire interior from the choir to the entrance door, so that the construction became a symbol of Creation. Suger ordered the lectorium to be removed, which, dark as a wall, cut through the nave and was an obstacle that overshadowed the beauty and magnificence of the church (Suger. *De rebus*; DUBY 1986, 123). The partitions that blocked the light within the church were torn down and Suger could triumphantly declare: “When

the new eastern part is connected with the forward part, the church glows, lit up in the centre. Bright combines with bright and the work shines with the new light that permeates it” (Suger. *De rebus*; Duby 1986, 123).

Abbot Suger’s choir was originally ringed by a double bypass of nine chapels. When these were rebuilt, only shallow and shell-like conches large enough for an altar to be fitted in were left. The rest was incorporated into the circular bypass. The walls of each chapel were fitted with two enormous windows, which reduced the size of the wall to that of a frame. Precisely through these shallow chapels light, unobstructed, entered the bypass. According to Suger’s aesthetic and precise description, the church glows with wonderful continuous light that penetrates through the holiest of windows¹. These are, naturally, abbot Suger’s famous stained-glass windows, which mark the dawn of the history of medieval stained-glass painting².

The Frankish abbot was undoubtedly stimulated by a fragment in which Pseudo-Dionysius elaborates on the motive of light as one of God’s names. The supreme manifestation of divinity is Good, the principle of all being, which permeates the entire universum, and at the same time it is completely transcendent of them³. What good manifests itself through to all creatures is precisely light, but its transcendence is completely intact by virtue of the archetype–visible icon relation: “Light comes from the Good, and light is an image of this archetypal Good” (Pseudo-Dionysius. *DN*, IV, 4; Pseudo-Dionysius 1988, 74).

Light is therefore energy emanated by Good, which at the same time reveals the cause of its existence and leads towards it. This return is effected according to a definite order, because Good is the source of the hierarchy and the system of forms. Higher beings transfer good and its gifts to lower beings, thus enabling their ordered elevation to God’s Authority (Pseudo-Dionysius. *DN*, I, 2; Pseudo-Dionysius 1990). Good is therefore the ultimate cause (*causa finalis*), the source of life, understood as a constant desire to return to its cause, a constant desire of good and, at the same time, the fulfillment of a given entelechy, according to its internal capabilities. Good is the effective cause (*causa efficiens*), which first creates its own actualizations – *energiai* and then confirms them by redirecting them toward itself. The Good returns all things to itself and gathers together whatever may be scattered, for it is the divine Source and unifier of the sum total of all things. Each thing looks to it as a source, as the agent of cohesion, and as an objective (Pseudo-Dionysius. *DN*, IV, 4; Pseudo-Dionysius 1990).

The above fragments concerning the aesthetic reception of Pseudo-Dionysius’ thought make one sufficiently aware how big a mark his ideas left on the minds of the people of the era. Not only

¹ Suger. *De consecratione Ecclesiae*, 4; Simson 1956, 140: “Illo urbano, et aprobato, in circuicit oratorium incremento, quo totasacratissimarum vitearum luce mirabli et continua interiorem perlustrante pulchritudinem entiteret”.

² The abbot ordered them from the artists from Lorraine and the Rhine region. Their works glittered like amethysts or rubies, and thus were to render the noble beauty of God’s light and guide toward it in the human mind “by way of anagogic meditation”. Suger was not the first to see in the stained-glass window special opportunity to demonstrate this “anagogic theology” (i.e. one that lifts up the soul). The metaphor of the stained-glass window was employed already by Hugh of St. Victor (Hugh of St. Victor. *In didactione ecclesiae. Sermones*, PL 177, 904). However, Suger gave the long-known element a completely new meaning. For him, windows were not holes in the wall, but lit-through walls, which in a most perfect manner expressed the aesthetic sensitivity of the people of the time.

³ Pseudo-Dionysius. *DN*, IV, 4; Pseudo-Dionysius 1988, 74: “The goodness of the transcendent God reaches from the highest and most perfect forms of being to the very lowest. And yet it remains above and beyond them all, superior to the highest and yet stretching out to the lowliest. It gives light to everything capable of receiving it, it creates them, keeps them alive, preserves and perfects them, everything looks to it for measure, eternity, number, order”.

were the Areopagite's works translated and commented on, but the face of the world was changed, alongside the existing worldview and the aesthetic canon in line with the ideas of the "Great Dionysius." One could say that Pseudo-Dionysius found Europe Romanesque – heavy and dark, and left it Gothic – aerial and full of light⁴.

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OLD TESTAMENT ABBREVIATIONS

Biblical references to New King James Version (NKJ)

Gen 1: 3-5; Genesis

Prov 6: 23; Proverbs

Ps. 104: 2; Psalms

Wis 7: 26; NJB; Book of Wisdom, New Jerusalem Bible

⁴ Giorgio Vasari (1511 – 1574; Italian painter, architect, writer, and historian) was the first to use the term Gothic Art (but in the highly pejorative meaning) in his famous *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* (*Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*), dedicated to Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, first published in 1550. Vasari is responsible for the modern use of the term Gothic Art, although he only used the word 'Goth' pejoratively, associating it with the "barbaric" German style. It is as well worthy to remember that Vasari was the first to use the term "Renaissance" (*rinascita*) in print, in *Lives*, his encyclopedia of artistic biographies. The Renaissance, as a continuation of the Greek and Roman classical styles, was for him a model and criterion for assessing other styles, which is why Gothic buildings devoid of classic proportions were unacceptable to him.

NEW TESTAMENT ABBREVIATIONS

All biblical references to New King James Version (NKJ)

1 Jn 1: 5; 1 John

1 Tm. 6: 16; 1 Timothy

Heb 6: 4, 10: 32; Hebrews

Jn 1: 9; 8: 12; 9: 5; John

Lk 1: 79; 9: 28; Luke

Mk 9: 2; Mark

Mt 17: 1; Matthew

prof. Seweryn Blandzi
Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Head of Dep. Of Ancient Philosophy
And History of Ontology
Nowy Swiat 72,
00-330 Warsaw
Poland
rekta@pro.onet.pl
www.ifispan.pl