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The Symbol of Light in Classical Mosques.

Julie Bonnéric

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The celestial origins of light give it supernatural and metaphysical status in many civilizations (WEIGHTMAN, B. A.1996).[1] Because it comes from the sky, the domain of the gods, natural light is frequently associated with the divinity for which religions consider it the reflection, tool, or attribute (MASSON, D. 1985). Paradoxically, the symbolic signification attributed to natural light can by extension be granted to the artificial light produced by luminaries.

Beyond its theosophical symbolism, light can also be used to sacralize architecture, by materializing the divine presence in the heart of the religious edifice itself (SOULARD, Th. 2007). Because of its effects on the eyes, and because it transfigures the subjective perception of space, light can also transform how a place is experienced, making it a singular religious experience. Light can thus be worked to give order to the sacred space of a religious edifice, in opposition to the raw and uniform light distributed in profane space.

How are light and the divine symbolized and featured within the mosque in classical Islam? Quranic passages, like later Quranic exegeses, can help us to form a faithful portrait of the symbolism of light in Islam. This symbolism, as we shall see, is developed in a number of ways to sanctuarize the mosque space and that affirm the singularity of the sacred over the profane.

Light, a symbol of the divine

The symbolism of light in Islam comes from the Quran, the sacred Book of the Muslims. The Quranic occurrences, in particular the Verse of Light, have been the object of multiple commentaries and exegeses which have both developed and spread its symbolism.

Light has a large and vast lexical range, which is used in comparison or as a metaphor to refer to different meanings. Light refers in a number of instances to the stars, the sun, and the moon. The moon is thus identified as a "light" (*nūr*, 10:5; 71:16), the sun as "clarity" (*ḍiyā'*, 10: 5) or as a "lamp" (*sirāğ*, 25:61; 71:16). The term *nūr*, or light, appears in its literal sense frequently in the Quran, in relation to the shadow (2:257; 5:16; 14:1, 5; 33:43; 57: 9; 65:11), and in particular to signify the passage "from the shadows to the light" (*min al-ẓuluma ilā al-nūr*). Light is often a synonym for vision, while shadows signify blindness (13:16; 35:19-21). It can also refer to knowledge and faith, while the ignorant remains surrounded by shadows (2:17; 24:40). Because it feeds perception, light is sometimes understood epistemologically, as an instrument of knowledge, even as a symbol signifying knowledge itself. Light thus allows one to "see" clearly the truth of the world. In this sense, both of the sacred books that preceded the Quran, that is the Torah and the Gospels, include "Direction and Light" (*hudā*

1 This paper was written and submitted in 2013. I am grateful to Travis Bruce for his help in proofreading of this article.

wa nūr: 5:44 and 46), and are even identified with them (6:91). Similarly, the Book given by Moses is described as "light/clarity" (*ḍiyā*: 21:48). This is also true for the Revelation received by Muhammad (*nūr*: 4:174; 42:52; 64:8), which is identified as a light sent by God to men: "There hath come to you from Allah a (new) light and a perspicuous Book" (*ǧā'akum min 'Allāh nūr wa kitāb mubīn*: 5:15 and 7:157).

Finally, there are four references in the Quran to the light emitted by God. Thus the annexation of *nūr Allāh* ("Allah's light" 9:32 et 61:8) or *nūr rabbiha* ("the glory of his Lord (litt. "the light of his Lord": 39:69) means that light is an emanation of God, even one of his essential attributes. According to the Quran, "the Earth will shine with the Glory of its Lord": 39:69). The most prosperous Quranic reference to light bears witness to the literal assimilation of light with God (24:35). Light is not just a divine attribute, since God himself is light. In thus occurrence, annexation (*al-iḍāfa*) is replaced by a nominal sentence (*al-ǧumla al-ismiyya*): "*Allāh nūr al-sammāwāt wā al-arḍ*" ("Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth"). This verse, commonly referred to as the "Verse of Light" (*ayāt al-nūr*) is a vast comparison that makes explicit the nature of divine light by comparing it with the light of a lamp (CLERMONT-GANNEAU, Ch. 1920):

> "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His Light: Allah doth set forth Parables for men: and Allah doth know all things", *al-Qur'ān*, 24:35

This verse is without a doubt the most important Quranic reference to light, and the most well-known, and it was abundantly commented on by exegetes, philosophers, and mystics (ZINE, M. C. 2009; CORBIN, H. 1986).[2] The light of God could be interpreted as the original light that gave birth to the world by bringing it out of the void. It could also be the light of religious knowledge guiding men. Other scholars, as well as historians and geographers, occasionally refer to this verse. It seems in fact to have held particular significance for the faithful, whether they were scholarly or not. For example, in a literary work by al-Ǧāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), *The Book of the Misers*, a man of the people extolling the thrifty use of lamp oil uses this same verse to justify the use of glass lamps (AL-ǦĀḤIẒ, ed: 21). Because of its transparence, the glass lamp diffuses light better than the ceramic or stone lamp. The verse of light is cited in support of this and as a conclusion to a practical demonstration of the technical advantages of glass. The author uses this reference for his argument in a non-scholarly milieu, demonstrating that the Quranic reference could be explicit and obvious for any reader. It use in this context bears witness to the popularity of the verse of light and of the possibility of its diffusion to non-scholarly milieus.

The widespread reputation of the verse of light, as well as its propagation among all the layers of Islamic society makes possible, and even motivates the use of light as a symbol in religious buildings. Continuing this literary and Quranic tradition of identifying it with God, light can in fact be an instrument meant to sacralize space and to translate the existence of hidden realities.

2 Philosophers, exegetes, mystics such as Ibn Sīnā (m. 1037), al-Ḥasālī (m. 1111), Suhrawardī (m. 1191), Ibn ʿArabī (m. 1240)… or, later, Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī (m. 1640).

Light as a sacralizing tool

Natural light constitutes an architectural tool that can contribute to the development of an immaterial space, that maintains a particular affinity with the divine and sacred sphere. Natural light can indeed be worked to help transform the experience of a place itself into a religious experience. This kind of work can be readily observed in gothic churches (SOULARD, Th. 2007), but how does it manifest itself in the Islamic world?

During his famous travels, Ibn Ǧubayr (d. 614/1217) described the celebration of a religious festival in Mekka, with many lights, candles (*al-šumu'*), torches (*al-mašā'il*), and lamps (*al-maṣābīḥ*). His remarks demonstrate an intentional use of light within an Islamic religious space. According to the description of the sanctuary, in addition to the light of the moon, "the lights [*anwār*] lead towards He who is himself light" (IBN ǦUBAYR, ed: 141). This observation merits a number of remarks. It shows the direct association between God and light. God is not just a source of light, but the essence of light, just as the Quran explains (24:35). Ibn Ǧubayr's description also suggests that light can lead to more mystical thoughts, or at least to religious inspiration. As a faithful believer, the famous traveler feels literally transported towards God. In the mosque, the light is thus elaborated to light spirit of the believer and to strengthen his proximity with the divinity. Paradoxically, it is not natural celestial light that leads the believer towards the divine light, but artificial light. Ibn Ǧubayr mentions lights (*anwār*) to evoke the light produced artificially by lamps, which is added to the nocturnal light of the moon. Here, it is artificial light that plays an essential role in the ascension of the believer's spirit and the establishment of a communal relationship with God.

Other indications show that artificial light enjoys a privileged place regarding natural light in the sacralization of buildings. This preference probably comes from the Quran. The light emitted by God is quite often assimilated with the light emitted by lamps. Verses 9:32 and 61:8 in particular lead to believe that the light of God can be extinguished with the mouth. The verb *ṭafi'a* is generally used for a flame or fire, and so the divine light seems similar to the light produced by a flame that can be blown out. The continuation of the Verse of Light confirms moreover this assimilation of divine light with artificial rather than celestial light, reiterating the comparison by mentioning a glass lamp (*misbāḥ zuǧāǧa*) placed in a niche (*miškāt*). The Verse of Light can itself be measured against another verse (33:46) that established a connection between the Prophet of Islam and a brilliant lamp (*sirāǧ munīr*).

> "O Prophet! Truly We have sent thee (…) as one who invites to Allah's (grace) by His leave, and as a lamp spreading light (*sirāǧ munīr*)", *al-Qur'ān*, 33:46.

The parallel between these two verses allows us to identify the brilliant light in the niche with God, and the lamp with the Prophet. This double identification plays a significant role, as much for Quranic exegesis and Islamic philosophy as in Islamic society. We should note that this verse was interpreted as a synthesis of the Quranic message itself: Allāh is light (*nūr*), He manifests himself as light in the world and in Man, and he has illuminated men by sending the prophet Muḥammad. This enigmatic verse could be the source of the symbolic investment of lamps in the Islamic world. The lamp is in fact frequently employed in reference to the Prophet, who spreads divine light. This Quranic image seems to have marked the people, since in the land of Islam artificial light became a theosophical symbol capable of incarnating the image of divine force and of translating its dispersed and omnipotent character.

This symbolism of light finds its echo in certain

architectural decorations. The representation of a lamp suspended to an arch, engraved on a stone panel, or likewise, on molded ceramic panels, is preserved in some mosques, as well as some funeral constructions. The lamp is almost systematically globular. It is suspended with ropes or chains, framed inside the arch of a niche. This motif has been interpreted in a number of ways. The niche is often considered as a representation of a *miḥrab* – the concave niche in the *qibla* wall of a mosque and which indicates the direction of prayer – because of its form and placement in the mosque. These panels are sometime placed in a real *miḥrab*, as seen in the mosque of Diyarbakir in southwest Anatolia (**Fig. 1**).Moreover, these representations also appear in mausoleums, and Nuha Khoury considers that these panels should be understood in relation with eschatology and death (KHOURY, N. 1992).

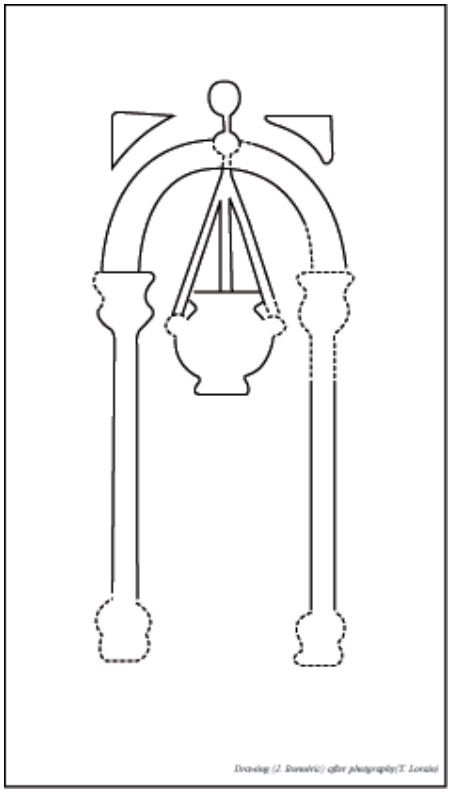


Fig.1. *Lamp suspended in front of an arch represented in the miḥrab of the Mosque of Diyarbakir (Anatolia, 12th c.). After photography by LORAIN Th.*

According to Doris Behrens-Abouseif, the lamp suspended in a niche that figures on a panel on the façade of the al-Aqmar mosque in Cairo (**Fig. 2**) represents the caliph (BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF, D. 1992).



Fig.2. *Lamp suspended to an arch represented on a window of the façade of al-Aqmar mosque (Cairo, 12th c.). After MOSQUES OF EGYPT, 1949, 28.*

The link between these representations and the Verse of Light seems evident since in both cases a lamp (*miṣbāh*) is placed in a niche (*mishkāt*). This link is particularly explicit in a fourteenth-century panel in the al-Budayriyya madrasa in Cairo (**Fig. 3**).The first section of the Verse of Light is in fact inscribed on the represented lamp: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth". The presence of these panels in religious spaces, mosques or mausoleums, attests to the desire to translate the divine presence within the edifice. The religious structure is thus blesses with the light of God, emitted in the niche with a hanging lamp. These representations signal the venerable character of the construction and contribute to making these places sanctuaries.



Fig.3. *Hanging lamp, panel from the al-Buday-riyya madrasa (Cairo, 14th c.). After HERZ BEY, M. 1896, 10, fig. I.19.*

If the featured representation of a lamp can contribute to the sacralization of a space, then lights themselves can carry a divine symbolism. In the mosque, light seems in fact to represent, more than an essential or necessary object, a signature of the religious edifice itself. Thus, in miniatures, the mosque is distinguished from secular places (hotels, palaces…) by the presence of lamps suspended from the arches of the prayer room – the presence of a minbar or of a miḥrab is optional (BARRUCAND, M. 1994). The identification of hanging lamps allows the reader to understand that the imagined scene is happening in a mosque. In the parchments discovered in the Great Mosque of Sanaʿa, figure two absolutely unique fragments that both represent a mosque. These two folios were undoubtedly placed face to face at the beginning of a Quran (GRABAR, O. 1996). In these seventh-eighth century documents, the edifice of the mosque is already characterized by its arcades and its suspended lamps, as well as by a *miḥrāb* in one of the pictures.

Lamps were in fact so necessary for religious buildings that when Saladin reconquered Jerusalem in 1187, al-Iṣfahānī (d. 597/1201) mentions the suspension of lamps as one of the elements with the essential power to re-sacralize the al-Aqṣā Mosque. Another passage by the same author is equally useful, since it establishes a direct link between the hanging lamps in the mosques and the Verse of Light. As in the al-Aqṣā mosque, the Dome of the Rock, as well as the *ṣaḫra*, were both resacralized and stripped of the Christian elements that had been imposed on them. According to the author, who was an eyewitness to the events, "the lamps scattered above it [the *ṣaḫra*] light upon light (*nūr ʿalā nūr*)" (AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ, ed: 65). Since the ṣaḫra rock was itself sacred, it was already a light. When the lamp was hung over the rock, two lights thus combined to feature this "light upon light" mentioned in the famous Verse of light (24:32).

Conclusion

There is real symbolic investment of light in the Islamic religion. Notably with the Quranic verse that carries its name (24:32), light takes on a particular significance for both the scholar and the unlearned. This signification translates the existence of other realities, such as divine omnipotence or true knowledge. In the mosque, light represents a privileged path to the sacred space, and its use within the religious edifice favors communion between the faithful and God. Natural light is nevertheless not the privileged medium for architects seeking to exalt this relationship with the divine. In the mosque, artificial light produced by lamps takes its place. This artificial light – horizontal and circular – seems in Islam to symbolize the light of God and to materialize His attributes.

In Muslim religious architecture, the use of natural light is however consciously managed,

as shown by the use of windows or stained glass. Nevertheless, this attention seems aimed at the functionality of the mosque (BONNÉRIC, J. 2013). The great mosque (*ǧāmiʿ*), even though it is a sacred space, is still a place for secular activities. In this building where God is celebrated, there are also educational, political and social activities. The architectural use of natural light is thus in part subordinated to the practical functions of the edifice. It is meant to produce a certain visual comfort, as in any secular building. In the great mosques of the classical period, light is dispersed uniformly and regularly throughout the space of the building, following the design of the mosque itself. Windows are in general uniformly and regularly distributed, and the principal contribution of natural light comes from the mosque's courtyard, which dispersed through the prayer room's columns. Mainly horizontal, the diffusion of the flux of natural light does not translate this desire to imprint the soul's rising movement towards the sky and towards God.

In the Friday mosque, natural and artificial light thus constitute a functional tool that makes a number of activities possible inside the constructed space, whether they are related to the religious ceremony or not. But this practical function of light, which allows the space to be used at night or to bring attention to certain zones within the mosque, is combined with a symbolic religious function. Artificial light can also be exploited in order to reconfigure the geography of the religious construction, placing over the material space of the mosque a space that materialized the divine presence.

The act of granting a primordial place to lights in mosques perhaps represents a means of commemorating the Prophet at the heart of the edifice without having to rely on human representation, which is theoretically forbidden in a religious building. Although the symbolism of lights belongs in the continuity of the Quranic identification of the lamp with the Prophet, it may nevertheless seem paradoxical that artificial light is privileged over celestial light in the land of Islam, especially since the relation between the divine abode and natural light seems so obvious. Representing divine light by means of an object made with the hand of man may in this sense indicate the particular status and eminent position that God, though Islam, granted man. The primacy of manufactured light in the sacralization of religious structures thus translates the essential and singular place attributed to man in God's Creation.

Abstract

Light is a foundational symbol for all three monotheistic religions. The symbolism of light is often invoked to signify the ubiquitous and omnipresent divine presence. In Christianity, God is associated with natural, vertical light from the sky, translating both the celestial origins and all-powerfulness. In Islam, this identification of celestial with divine light is treated somewhat differently. Indeed, Allah is identified first of all with the artificial light produced by luminaries and their horizontal and circular light. This symbolism of artificial light is based on the "verse of Light" (Quran 24:35). Allah is light (*nūr*), he shows himself as light in the heavens and on earth, and he shed light on men sending them the Prophet Muḥammad. This verse produced a double identification – the Light of God, and the lamp of the Prophet- that plays a significant role both in Quranic exegesis and Islamic philosophy, and in Islamic society in general. In religious architecture, the various luminaries placed throughout the mosque contribute to commemorating the divine and creating a stage for divine space. This importance of luminaries in organizing sacred space should not, however, mask the attention given to natural light in Islamic religious structures. Textual, archeological, and iconographic sources will serve in our attempt to begin answering these questions.

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