

A Journey from Darkness towards Light: the Quranic Perspective on the Concept of Light - Part I

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Spirituality has a significant role in man's life without which life will become monotonous and unsatisfying. Everyone seeks spirituality in his life, even though he may not be aware of this fact. A question rises at this point as to what can be achieved through spirituality. The Quran being the word of the Creator of the universe is of great help in understanding the answer to this question. It can be understood from the Quran that the whole point in spirituality and piety is the purification of one's heart and mind from all deficiencies and impurities.

The Quran, however, uses a special terminology about spirituality. There are verses in the Quran where God talks about moving from darkness towards light. This movement from darkness towards light, indeed, is the same reality as the purification of the soul. Once in the dark state, one is surrounded with impurities. The more he moves towards the light, the more pure he becomes.

Before discussing the concept of light, it is appropriate to have a reflection on these verses of the Quran. In the famous verse of sura *al-Baqarah* known as Ayat al-Kursi, God says,

الله ولي الذين ءامنوا

God is the Master of the faithful (Quran 2:257)

Of course, God is the guardian of everyone. However, since the believers accept God's guardianship and submit themselves and their affairs to Him, God provides them with His special guidance and support. Those who do not believe in God or do not believe in Him whole-heartedly do not really see themselves in need of God's support. The Korah is a good example of such people. The Quran says about him,

وَآتَيْنَاهُ مِنَ الْكُنُوزِ مَا إِنَّ مَفَاتِحَهُ لَتَنُوءُ بِالْعُصْبَةِ أُولِي الْقُوَّةِ

We had given him so many treasures that their keys indeed proved heavy for a band of stalwarts. (Quran, 28: 76)

According to the Quran, people used to tell him,

وَابْتَغِ فِي مَا آتَاكَ اللَّهُ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ

By the means of what God has given you, seek the abode of the Hereafter (Quran, 28: 77)

But his reply was

قَالَ إِنَّمَا أُوتِيْتُهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عِنْدِي

He said, "I have indeed been given [all] this because of the knowledge that I have." (Quran, 28: 77)

It was at this point that God punished him and made him a lesson for others.

The attitude of people like Korah and even many of the believers towards God is that they think they can do fine without Him and manage their lives. Sometimes they even think that they know how to handle their affairs better than God. This is why they do not listen to Him. These are the people that adopt the satanic powers as their guardians.

In other words, although God is the guardian of everyone, only the believers who submit themselves to God benefit from His guardianship. As the Quran states in Ayat al-Kursi,

يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ

He brings them out of darkness into light. (Quran 2:257)

The term *zulumat* (darkness) in this verse is used in plural form. This shows that there are different types of darkness. On the other hand, *nur* (light) is not plural or it would have been *anwar*. The reason behind this is that, as it will be explained later, light is only one. There is only one true and real light. However, several types of darkness exist. In order to benefit from the light of sun, there is only one way: to remove any barrier in the way of sun's light, but there are many ways to make a place dark. One can close his eyes, put a handkerchief on his eyes, put curtains, or do other actions that make him not see the light. Nevertheless, there is only one way to reach the light. Thus in the Quran *sirat al-mustaqim* (the right path) is one.

The right path towards light

Unlike the right path, there are millions of paths towards the wrong direction. If one wants to go from city A to city B, there is only one direction (*sirāt*), even though he can take different routes (*sabil*), one of which may be shorter than the others. But if he does not want to go to city B, there are millions of other places he can go. He can even go to the exact opposite direction of city B. Likewise, light is only one, but darkness can be as many as you can imagine.

In the following lines of Ayat al-Kursi we read,

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَوْلِيَاؤُهُمُ الطَّاغُوتُ

As for the faithless, their patrons are the tyrants
(Quran 2:257)

Elsewhere, the Quran interestingly says that the people who have adopted anyone other than God as their guardians will finally end up having no guardian:

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ مَوْلَى الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَأَنَّ الْكَافِرِينَ لَا مَوْلَى لَهُمْ

That is because God is the master of the faithful, and
because the faithless have no master. (Quran, 47: 11)

In this verse we read that God is the guardian of the believers and those who do not believe have no guardian. However, in the previous verse it was said that those who disbelieve have tyrants as their master. Considering these two verses, a delicate point can be understood. That point is that disbelievers try to adopt the aggressors (*taghut*) as their guardians. However these aggressor guardians are not to help or support them. This is due to the fact that these satanic people do not care about their followers. A very painful reality that happens on the

day of judgment is that those evil leaders, who have been followed by disbelievers, will disassociate themselves from them. Therefore, disbelievers are left on the day of judgment without any guardian to protect them.

After talking about disbelievers' guardians, the Quran says:

يُخْرِجُونَهُمْ مِّنَ النُّورِ إِلَى الظُّلُمَاتِ أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ

God drives them out of light into darkness. They shall be the inmates of the Fire, and they shall remain in it [forever]. (Quran 2:257)

This is the summary of the whole history, life, and destiny of mankind; there are people who believe in God and He takes them towards the light, and there are people who do not believe in Him and are taken by their leaders and masters from light to darkness and will remain there forever.

The issue of purification now is given a new interpretation, darkness and light.

The relativeness of departure point of the believers and the disbelievers

One of the important points in Ayat al-Kursi is the fact that it describes the journey of the believers as being from darkness towards light and that of disbelievers as being from light towards darkness. Does this mean that the believers and the disbelievers start from different stations? Does it mean that the disbelievers start from a better position?

The answer is that the concept of light and darkness is relative.¹ If we compare a bright place to a brighter one, we can say that the second place is brighter or say that the first one is darker. When we are in a room, enlightened by a lamp, which is bright enough for reading, we regard it as a bright place, but if we compare this room to the outside environment in the sunlight, we will find the room dark. Thus, if we move from that room to outside we have gone from darkness towards light. Sometimes, when we go to a place with less light, we find it so dark that we cannot see for a short period of time, but when our eyes get used to it, we start to see everywhere.

At birth, every human being is given some light. This is the initial light that God gives everyone, the light of the creation of God (*fitrah*). This light which is the light of reason and conscience is, and will remain, in all of us. Without this light, no one can ever take a step forward. The believers are those who strengthen this light and go to the brighter stations; they distance themselves from darkness and go towards the absolute light which is God. However, those who do not believe take the opposite direction; they lose the initial light they were given and end up with absolute darkness.

Other verses about this issue

The issue of taking people from darkness to light has been mentioned in the Quran several times. One of the verses in this regard is the following verse, in which God says about the Quran,

¹ When comparing two different things, we use relative adjectives. For instance, sometimes we say that a person is better than another, while none of them are really good people, but what we mean is that the first person is less evil than the second person.

يَهْدِي بِهِ اللَّهُ مَنِ اتَّبَعَ رِضْوَانَهُ سُبُلَ السَّلَامِ وَ يُخْرِجُهُمْ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ
بِإِذْنِهِ وَ يَهْدِيهِمْ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

With it God guides those who follow [the course of] His pleasure to the ways of peace, and brings them out from darkness into light by His will, and guides them to a straight path. (Quran 5:16)

It can be understood from this verse that to benefit from God's guidance, one has to seek His pleasure. He provides everyone with guidance. Some people do pay attention and appreciate His guidance and then try to please Him, but some do not. At this point, one might wonder how someone can possibly please God. Pleasing Him is not like pleasing an oppressor ruler who asks for things that are not for your benefit. Pleasing God is like pleasing a teacher by studying well. Whenever one tries to please God, indeed, he works in his own interest. He is not doing any good to God.

Subul (ways) is the plural form of *sabil* (way). As it was mentioned earlier, *sabil* is different from *sirāt*. We said that there is only one right path (*sirāt*), which is the direction, but that there are different routes (*sabil*) in that same direction. God takes the people who seek to please Him and follow His guidance from darkness to light.

As the Quran states, this guidance towards light is by God's leave. This is very important, for it indicates that no one would be able to guide people without God's leave. In the Quranic sense, the guide (*al-hādī*) is the one who is specifically appointed by God to guide people. Therefore, not everyone who teaches something is regarded as a guide in the Quranic viewpoint. From the Quranic perspective, the guide himself must not be in need of guidance:

قُلْ هَلْ مِنْ شُرَكَائِكُمْ مَنْ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ قُلِ اللَّهُ يَهْدِي لِلْحَقِّ أَفَمَنْ يَهْدِي إِلَى
الْحَقِّ أَحَقُّ أَنْ يُتَّبَعَ أَمْ مَنْ لَا يَهْدِي إِلَّا أَنْ يُهْدَىٰ فَمَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ

Say, “Is there anyone among your partners who may guide to the truth?” Say, “God guides to the truth. Is He who guides to the truth worthier to be followed, or he who guides not unless he is [himself] guided? What is the matter with you? How do you judge?”
(Quran, 10: 35)

According to this verse, the people whom themselves must be guided and taught are not to be regarded as guides. A guide in the Quranic sense is either God Himself or the prophets and Imams who have received guidance from God directly. They are not in need of being taught or guided by people. What is meant by guidance is taking people from darkness towards light. Guidance is of two types: (1) to show the way and (2) to take a person to his destination. The latter is what only God, the prophets, and the Imams can do. They accompany us and take us to our destination. This is why, when talking about people on whom God has bestowed His favours, the Quran says.

صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ

[T]he path of those whom You have blessed (Quran, 1:7)

Who are these people that God has bestowed His favour upon them? The Quran answers this question:

وَمَنْ يُطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ وَحَسُنَ أُولَٰئِكَ رَفِيقًا

Whoever obeys God and the Apostle they are with those whom God has blessed, including the prophets

and the truthful, the martyrs and the righteous, and excellent companions are they. (4:69)

These four groups of people are the ones we ask God to be with them and to follow their path. They are referred to as good companions by God; they kindly invite all of us to accompany them on their journey towards light. The only thing we have to do is to accept this invitation. They do not ask us for any reward, but they want us to be with them on this journey with all our hearts and minds. Many people would want to go towards heaven but only with their bodies. However, this is a journey that has to be taken with hearts and minds.

In sura Ibrahim, God says,

الر كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ لِتُخْرِجَ النَّاسَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ إِلَى صِرَاطِ
الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ

Alif, Lam, Ra. [This is] a Book We have sent down to you that you may bring mankind out from darkness into light, by the command of their Lord, to the path of the All-mighty, the All-laudable. (Quran, 14:1)

In this verse, God says that the philosophy behind the revelation of the Quran is “*to take them from darkness towards light.*” We also know for sure that the task of the Prophet (s) was to recite Quranic verses to people to purify them and teach them the book and wisdom. Considering these two verses together, we can conclude that the whole point in reciting the Quran, teaching people, and purifying them is to take them from darkness to light. It is important to remember that this is all with the leave of God. God is our Lord, and He has commanded the Prophet (s) to take us from darkness towards light, just like a father who asks a friend to look after his children going to a park.

In this verse two destinations are mentioned: from darkness to light, and then to the path of God, who is the Almighty and All-praised. The journey towards light is nothing other than following the right path. This is not only about Prophet Muhammad (s) but also about all the prophets. In sura Ibrahim God says about Prophet Moses (a):

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِآيَاتِنَا أَنْ أَخْرِجْ قَوْمَكَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ وَذَكِّرْهُمْ بِآيَاتِنَا
اللَّهِ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّكُلِّ صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ

Certainly We sent Moses with Our signs: ‘Bring your people out from darkness into light and remind them of God’s [holy] days. There are indeed signs in that for every patient and grateful [servant].’ (Quran 14:5)

Thus the whole story of Prophet Moses (a), his conversation with Pharaoh, taking people out of Egypt etc. can be summarized in one point; He wanted to take people from darkness to light.

In sura al-Hadid God says,

هُوَ الَّذِي يُنَزِّلُ عَلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ لِّيُخْرِجَكُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ وَإِنَّ
اللَّهَ بِكُمْ لَرَءُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ

It is He who sends down manifest signs to His servant that He may bring you out of darkness into light, and indeed God is most kind and merciful to you. (Quran, 57: 9)

In sura al-Taghabun God says:

فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَالنُّورِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلْنَا وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ

So have faith in God and His Apostle and the light which We have sent down, and God is well aware of what you do. (Quran, 64: 8)

In sura al-Talaq God says:

رَسُولًا يَتْلُو عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ مُبَيِّنَاتٍ لِيُخْرِجَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ

an apostle reciting to you the manifest signs of God that He may bring out those who have faith and do righteous deeds from darkness into light. (Quran, 65: 11)

It can be understood from these and other Quranic verses that will be mentioned later that this is a very profound theme in the Quran, not just a metaphorical statement. Following this path is one of the best ways for anyone who wants to get closer to God or help others in getting closer to Him. This is because every person by nature loves light. No one in a good mental state likes to live in darkness. If a person is forced to remain in an absolutely dark room for a short period of time, he will greatly suffer, let alone for some months or years. Everyone desires light and dislikes darkness. Therefore, using this terminology is very helpful. God in the Quran introduces a whole system of theology based on the concept of light.

Philosophy of Suhrawardi based on the concept of light and darkness

We pointed out that a system of theology could be provided based on the concept of light. Actually, one of the prominent Muslim philosophers, Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (d. 1191) has founded his philosophical system upon this concept. Suhrawardi, who is the founder of the illuminationist school in Islamic philosophy, regarded

God as “the light of the lights” (*nur al-anwār*) and believed that every other being has some degree of light.

He was inspired by the Quran and was also aware of ancient Iranian philosophers who also had the same understanding of being. Thus, existence for him can be identified as light. Everything which exists has some portion of light. Suppose you have lit some candles with different sizes. Among them some might have stronger brightness, but they all have some degree of light. Above them all there is the sun that has much more light than they do. Thus, there are different types of light; some are stronger and some weaker. God is the light of the lights. This is Suhrawardi’s philosophy, whose details can be found particularly in his book *Hikmat al-Ishraq* (The Philosophy of Illumination).

As a result, Suhrawardi believed that the best way for understanding philosophy and actually doing philosophy is to purify yourself and let this light illuminate in your heart. It is not just a matter of studying and thinking and contemplating. Actual purification is needed so that this light can shine in your heart. In some ways, he disagreed with philosophers like Avicenna and Farabi who followed the peripatetic philosophy. This is a very significant point that deserves to be considered carefully.

However, trying to establish the framework of this new system based on light, he did not go through all aspects of life. Here we will further discuss some aspects of light that might have been neglected, like the light of belief (*imān*), the light of worship, and the light of remembrance of God.

The Theological System based on Light

It became clear that the whole Islamic theology can be introduced using the concept of light. At this point, in order to expand and deepen our understanding, we have to see what the Quran has to say on this concept. There is a sura in the Quran called light (*Nur*) after one of its verses known as the Verse of Light:

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. (Quran 24:35)

This verse is one of the most beautiful and deepest verses of the Quran. Without any contemplation, we can briefly understand that God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. However, the comprehension we have at this level is vague. The true meaning is that He is the source of the light; he is the original light. Everything else which has light, has received its light from Him in a limited way. Thus everything has some light according to its capacity. In Dua Kumayl we read:

و بنور وجهك الذي اضاء له كل شيء

Everything has light because of the light of God

Being the signs of God, every creature including human beings, animals, plants, stones, wood and all other creatures have some light. Everything is like a mirror that reflects God. However, these mirrors are different in the amount and quality of the image they reflect. In order to understand this better, let us give an example: In order to introduce someone, you can write his name on a paper, draw a picture of him, play his voice, or show a video of him, which are all signs that lead to him. You can show the person himself too. All that many

human beings know about God is like as if they have only read the name of a person. On the other hand, those who are very close to God encounter God. When one is performing his daily prayers, it is as if he is standing before God; when he or she does *sajdah* it is like hugging God. While in *hajj*, when one touches the Black Stone, it is as if he is shaking hands with God. Everything has a capacity to reflect God. Everything has some light but is different from other things.

مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ

The parable of His Light is a niche (*mishkāt*) wherein is a lamp (*mishbāh*). (Quran 24:35)

Mishkāt is a tool which was used in the past to make a place in a wall that was between two different rooms or between inside and outside of a house. They made a cupboard-like place inside these walls with glasses on the sides. Then they would put lantern inside it so the people in the rooms or in the house could benefit from this light. Since it was surrounded with glasses it was safe and wind could not extinguish it. This was called *mishkāt*, and the light or the lantern put inside it was called *mishbāh*.

فِي زُجَاجَةٍ

The lamp is in a glass. (Quran 24:35)

Glass was used to protect the light, and since it is transparent, light could shine through it. If a dark object had been used, it would obstruct all or most of the light. Of course, even the glass reduces the light, but comparing to other objects it was the best possible choice.

A beautiful point here is that the glass that God refers to in this verse is shining by itself:

الرُّجَاحُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ

... the glass as it was a glittering star lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western. (Quran 24:35)

Not only it does not reduce the light, this glass has the ability to shine by itself. Its light comes from a blessed olive tree. In the Quran, olive is a blessed fruit. In sura Tin, God swears by olive, showing its importance. This blessed olive tree is neither directed nor leaned towards east or west. It is straight.

يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ

... whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it. (Quran 24:35)

Oil does not shine by themselves, but this oil is different. This oil is likely to shine even if you do not light it. Even before you light it, it is shining. This might be the reason it can be found easily. When you go to a dark room you cannot find the switch to turn the light on. However, this light has an oil that has the ability to shine so you can find it.

نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ

Light upon light. (Quran 24:35)

This is the opposite of what God says while talking about disbelievers:

ظُلُمَاتٌ بَعْضُهَا فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ

[Layers of] darkness, one on the top of another
(Quran, 24: 40)

However, when it comes to God, it is light over light. The oil is shining, the glasses are shining. Everything is helping.

يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ

God guides to His Light whomever He wishes.

He guides people whom He is pleased with. Of course, this is not arbitrary; this is not based on anything other than people themselves appreciating this. Those who appreciate God's guidance are guided by Him towards His light.

وَ يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

God draws parables for mankind, and God has knowledge of all things. (Quran, 24: 35)

In the next verse of this sura, God speaks about where this light can be found in this world, but we will discuss this verse later in this series.

So far, we understood that God is light. This is not a description given by a human being and subject to error. God Himself is saying that He is the light and that everything has a light which comes from Him.

In two more verses, "the light of God" has been used, but it does not refer to God Himself. The Quran says:

يُرِيدُونَ أَن يُطْفِئُوا نُورَ اللَّهِ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَيَأْبَى اللَّهُ إِلَّا أَن يُتِمَّ نُورَهُ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْكَافِرُونَ

They desire to put out the light of God with their mouths, but God is intent on perfecting His light though the faithless should be averse. (Quran, 9: 32)

This is what the faithless think they can do. They think that this light can be extinguished. Nonetheless, God refuses except to complete His

light. Not only they cannot extinguish it, but also these lights get increased by God. When you blow a fire, it becomes more. So those who want to oppose God what they do is that finally God's light becomes more manifest. Even if the disbelievers dislike this. Whatever enemies do against the truth will finally be to their own loss. This is why God in many occasions has used expressions like "though the faithless should be averse." This is the nature of this light, which is from God and no one is able to extinguish it.

In sura Saff, God states a similar point:

يُرِيدُونَ لِيُطْفِئُوا نُورَ اللَّهِ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَاللَّهُ مُتِمُّ نُورِهِ وَ لَوْ كَرِهَ الْكَافِرُونَ

They desire to put out the light of God with their mouths, but God shall perfect His light though the faithless should be averse. (Quran, 61: 8)

Here also "the light of God" means the light that comes from God and is created by Him. The light of Islam, the light of the Quran, and the light of the truth are instances of this light. This is a branch that comes from a root which is God Himself.

Thus, the light of God is the light that comes from God, not the light that is God Himself, since no one would think about extinguishing God Himself. Therefore, it seems that there is only one verse in the Quran that refers to God Himself as the light and that is the Verse of Light in the Chapter of Light..

This discussion will be followed up in the next parts of this series.

