

# Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

September 2008

## God as Dazzling Light

**B**ecause of my seasonal affective disorder, I've long been acutely sensitive to the quality, intensity, and duration of light. In the summer I sit for long hours on the deck in our backyard, where I watch a sun-washed creation. In my house and in my church office, I use so-called "daylight" bulbs with a color temperature of 6500K. In the mornings from August to April, I read in front of a special light box that emits 10,000 lux. To counteract the dark brown carpet and badly lit church sanctuary in which I'm forced to worship by virtue of my job, I sit near a window so I can see the brighter light outside.

This attention to light, caused by physiological need, shapes the way I perceive God. Whereas in childhood I imagined God as an old man in long silver hair sitting on a gold throne, I'm now more apt to imagine God as intense, dazzling, and pulsating light.

**A**ccording to Philip Sheldrake, a British theologian, "The metaphors of light and its opposite, darkness, are among the richest and most pervasive in the history of Christian theology and spirituality" (*New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 408).

The theology of God as light appears prominently in the Bible. Light is the first of God's many

creations (Gen. 1:3), implying that light is the most elemental aspect of creation upon which everything else depends.

To (re)create the people of covenant, God uses the light of a burning bush to summon Moses from a sedate life of watching sheep back into the halls of power, there to confront imperial oppression (Ex. 3:1-12). God, in the guise of a pillar of fire which is both glad illumination and fierce protection, then leads Israel by unfamiliar pathways into freedom (Ex. 13:21-22).

In Psalm 19, considered by C.S. Lewis to be the finest poem in the Psalter, the sun that sprints across the sky (4c-6) complements and illuminates the study of Torah which in turn illuminates the inner person (7-13). The illumination we receive from studying Torah then cycles back and allows us to see all of creation, including the sun, with new eyes. (See William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, 81-103).

Jesus is, of course, the quintessential light (Matt. 4:12-16; Jn. 1:1-9), who in the Transfiguration dazzles (Mk. 9:2-8 and parallels), and who in a post-ascension world continuously dwells in "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16).

It would take far more space than this space allows, and more sophistication than I have, to trace the interplay of light and dark as images in the history of Christian theology.

But suffice it to say that as early as Origen (c. 185-255), the spiritual life becomes a series of three upward-moving stages toward greater light, while for Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395) the journey to God happens in cloudy darkness which nevertheless transforms us and makes our faces shine (cf. Ex. 19:16-20; 34:29-35).

The hugely influential theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite (c. 6th century) offers a nuanced understanding of God as light but also One who is beyond light.



John of the Cross (1542-1591) coined the phrase "dark night" for a peculiar experience of God's apparent absence, but then turns around and insists the dark night is caused by God's intense, brilliant light shining into the human person.

Light is a complex yet supple image for God. For me, light is a physical and psychological need, but also a deeply spiritual one. I yearn for the God who dresses in light. For ideas on hosting Light in your own life, turn the page.

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A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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## Update

In the March issue I wrote that the new list of Mennonite Spiritual Directors would soon be posted on the Mennonite Church USA website. It's now available at [www.mennoniteusa.org/Portals/0/WebDownloads/DM/Spiritual-Directors.pdf](http://www.mennoniteusa.org/Portals/0/WebDownloads/DM/Spiritual-Directors.pdf)

If you're looking for a Mennonite spiritual director in the United States, this is a great place to begin.

# Appropriating Divine Light

Here are seven ways for expanding our awareness of God as dazzling light.

**1. Watch the sunrise or sunset, or sit in the sun,** letting it symbolize the glory of God.

**2. Light a candle in the evening; and then read, recite, or chant the *Phos Hilaron*,** a 4th century hymn to God as light. Composed in Greek, *phos hilarion* literally means "hilarious light" or "cheerful light." The *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978, p. 143) renders it this way:

"Joyous light of glory: of the immortal Father; heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ. We have come to the setting of the sun, and we look to the evening light. We sing to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: You are worthy of being praised with pure voices forever. O Son of God, O Giver of life: The universe proclaims your glory."

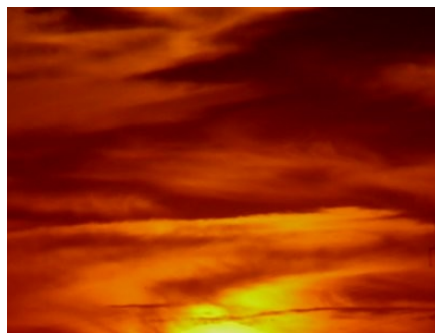
Various musical settings of the *Phos Hilarion* are widely available.

**3. Meditate on one of the Bible's many passages that refers to light or fire.** You can pair this meditation with walking, bicycle riding, gardening, or some other activity by repeating the sentence prayerfully as your body moves. Examples from the NRSV include:

- "It is you who light my lamp; the LORD, my God, lights up my darkness" (Ps. 18:28).
- "You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment...

fire and flame [are] your ministers" (Ps. 104:1c, 2a, 4c).

- "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation reach to the end of the earth" (Is. 49:6b).
- "I am the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12).



- "It is he alone [Christ] who...dwells in unapproachable light, who no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion" (1 Tim. 6:16).
- "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all (1 Jn. 1:5).
- "There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light" (Rev. 22:5).

**4. If you build a house, install lots of windows.** Thirty years ago, the people who built the house in which I now live wisely insisted on having many large windows placed strategically so that during the day sunlight streams through some part of the house. One of my favorite practices is looking out at the shifting

patterns of light and shadow on tulip trees, snow, or rabbits.

**5. Construct church buildings that make the most of light, particularly sunlight.**

I've been in too many churches with small or insufficient windows, sub-par artificial lighting, or both. The builders of ancient Israel accounted for the impor-

tance of light when they constructed the temple in Jerusalem. As the morning sun rose over the Mount of Olives, sunlight struck the temple's main entrance, illuminating the interior and symbolically announcing the arrival of God's glory. The congrega-

tion I currently belong to is in the latter stages of planning for a larger, more brightly lit sanctuary. One wall, in fact, would mostly consist of glass looking out onto a garden. If built, this sanctuary may alter our sense of worship.

**6. Gaze at the art of Impressionist or Neo-Impressionist painters** such as Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, or Seurat. Thanks partly to nineteenth century advances in the scientific understanding of optics, painters in these movements newly conceived of light and its effect on objects.

**7. View the movie "Into Great Silence."** Among other things, this film is an evocative meditation on the religious connotations of light. Produced by Philip Gröning in 2005, it was shot on location at the Carthusian monastery of the Grande Chartreuse in the French Alps.