

## Article

## Representations of Light in Western Culture

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**Abstract:** In physical terms, light is a wave radiating from an energy source, yet different cultures in different periods have also attributed metaphysical properties to light that are outside of nature. Even in today's secular discourse, we often resort to using imagery of light to symbolise a variety of virtues, whereas 'New Age' discourse raises light to a renewed metaphysical status. In this article, we will use the genealogical method to examine the origins of the popular Western conception of light as representative of knowledge, goodness, wisdom and sanctity by looking at the great myths and the foundational texts of Western culture. This understanding of light is a deep structure, originating in religion, that persists in secular culture: from ancient Near Eastern mythologies, to Plato's parable of the cave, to the Judeo-Christian narrative and the Enlightenment and culminating in the role of light in New Age culture.

**Keywords:** light; knowledge; mythology; New Age; Judeo-Christian narrative

## 1. Introduction

Light is a distinct physical phenomenon: a wave radiating from an energy source (a light emitting body) ... At the same time, different cultures in different periods of human history have also attributed metaphysical properties to light that are outside of nature and beyond our experience. Since the dawn of culture, light has always been a subject of great curiosity, one to which various hidden or mystical qualities have been ascribed. Even in today's secular discourse about knowledge, wisdom, truth and sanctity, we often resort to using imagery of light and enlightenment metaphorically, whereas in 'New Age' discourse, light is once again raised to a renewed metaphysical status. In this article, I will use the genealogical method to examine the cultural origins of the popular Western conception of light as representative of the above-mentioned virtues. I will do so by examining the role attributed to light in the great myths and foundational texts of Western culture.

The purpose of this article is to identify motifs for how light is conceived of in cultures' early religious and mythological foundations. The hypothesis of this genealogical study is that in the various mythologies and religions of the region in which Judaism and Christianity emerged, light was perceived in a metaphysical way, not only as radiation emitted from a physical body. It would be interesting to investigate this conception of light as an autonomous entity in the various mythologies that serve as the cultural basis for religious discourse and metaphorical secular discourse. Alongside the investigation of light as a metaphysical entity, I will inquire into how light is represented in the context of concepts such as wisdom, holiness, knowledge and purity. These basic cultural representations may be rooted in humans' physiological fear of the dark. However, since it is impossible to examine the causal relationship between a discourse and its source, I will focus on the cultural foundations of the concept that are still present, even though the structure of this conception has changed in secular discourse.

Examining the genealogy of a subject involves telling a story about its past, its origins, its evolution up to the present moment (Rusinek 2004, p. 410). The purpose of genealogical research is to point out processes that have distorted human productions or created ideals in the process of moving away from actual, physical life. Humanity lives in a self-created



**Citation:** Nir, Bina. 2022.

Representations of Light in Western Culture. *Genealogy* 6: 85. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6040085>

Received: 14 July 2022

Accepted: 11 October 2022

Published: 17 October 2022

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prison of metaphors, without any memory of having once created this prison with their own hands (Eilon 2005, p. 36). In Nietzsche's words (Nietzsche [1896] 2005, p. 21) "The drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive ... a regular and rigid new world is constructed as its prison from its own ephemeral products, the concepts".

The genealogical researcher strives to understand current reality through a reinterpretation of the past. In adopting the genealogical method, I will turn to the ideas of Nietzsche and Foucault. Nietzsche is thought to be the father of genealogy as a method of criticism, while Foucault elaborated upon Nietzsche's ideas and applied them to a wide range of subjects. As a genealogist, Nietzsche took it upon himself to write the history of the formation of the psychological and sociological structures of his research subject (Deleuze 2006, p. 2). Foucault, on the other hand, proposes to reconstruct the genealogy of order, up until the moment of this order's emergence in society (Arbel 2006, pp. 16, 140).

Nietzsche rejects the search for the true visage of the world with the argument that the very concept of "the true visage of the world" is moot and nonsensical (Parush 1995, p. 128). "Here, it becomes clear" he writes, "how badly man needs ... in addition to the monumental and antiquarian ways of seeing the past, a third kind, the critical ... He must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: this he achieves by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it" (Nietzsche 1980, pp. 21–22).

At the basis of Nietzschean thought reside the psychologist and the evaluator, the writer-thinker pondering customs, thoughts, and behaviors (Blondel 1994, pp. 309–10). His genealogy is a hermeneutic strategy that demands meticulous attention to our historical traces (Conway 1994, pp. 321–28). It is a criticism wherein the critic establishes their own criteria.

A genealogical-interpretative analysis of mythological texts does not aim to be objective or definitive; rather it attempts to contribute to our cultural understanding of the present moment. Ancient cultures grappled with questions about nature, the universe and existence, questions that drove them to invent cosmologies (Graves 1975, p. 5) that would then serve as the basis for their religious beliefs (Naydler 1996). These cosmologies influenced the development of all human thought and continue to influence it to this day.

Religion is an essential marker of culture; its doctrines reflect the systems of thought and values of any given civilization (Durkheim 1971, pp. 418–21). Every human society or culture has its own proper mythology, and that mythological heritage constitutes an indivisible part of religion, since some aspects of reality require mythical conceptualization. It is a way of imposing order on a world that does not make sense (May 1991, p. 21). Eliade (1959) maintains that religious myths not only provide a framework for explaining the cultural behaviour of human beings and attest to past experience, they also construct the paradigm for future endeavors and aspirations. In fact, in his eyes, myth may be considered more 'real' than 'historical truth' in that it has deeper, richer and more long-lasting implications (Eliade 1959, pp. 42–43).

The Western-Christian world grew out of soil laid down by two more ancient traditions: that of the Old Testament and that of the Greeks. The two major outputs of Western culture—the Jewish Bible and the Homeric epics—served as the foundation upon which the next layers of religious and cultural production would be built (Knohl 2008, p. 15), even though scholars have pointed out mutual influences between the cosmologies of the ancient Near East and the Judeo-Christian narratives of the Old Testament (Walton 2010). As mentioned, this article examines the reference to light as an expression of knowledge, goodness, wisdom and sanctity and explores whether this perception is a through-line that traverses different periods in Western culture and therefore is a thoroughly entrenched deep structure originating in religion and continuing on in secular culture, through the metaphorical use of light in contemporary discourse, or New Age beliefs and practices, for example. As Jung (1949) maintains, when worldviews are deeply rooted in the religious experience, they have the latent ability to persevere within the secular experience.

## 2. Light in the Old Testament

In Genesis, which recounts Western culture's seminal myth of the creation of the world, God is depicted as an all-powerful higher being who is not subject to the laws of nature and does not require the sun, the moon or the stars in order to make light. Light in Genesis is created before the creation of the celestial bodies; it exists even though it is not emitted by any physical source: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . . And God said, "Let there be light", and there was light' (Genesis 1:1–3; this and all subsequent biblical citations are taken from the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise specified). It therefore cannot be considered a physical phenomenon. The differentiation between day and night at this point of the creation myth is also unrelated to the celestial bodies: 'And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day' (Genesis 1:8), for only on the fourth day does God create the 'two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night' (Genesis 1:16). This distinction between the creation of light and the creation of the sun as the source of light, made in the very early stages of the creation story, endows light with metaphysical properties, and the same properties are attested to by hundreds of later instances in the Old Testament. Light in the Jewish Bible is not emitted by any earthly or heavenly source; it is rather a product of divinity or of the divine spark attributed to those who are sanctified. Light is thus used to symbolise wisdom: 'A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine' (Ecclesiastes 8:1, KJV), morality and righteousness: 'Even in darkness light dawns for the upright' (Psalms 112:4), the favour of God: 'Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us' (Psalms 4:6, KJV), and the sanctity of divinity: 'Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord' (Isaiah 2:5), 'I will also make you a light for the Gentiles' (Isaiah 49:6), 'the Lord will be your everlasting light' (Isaiah 60:19), to quote but a few of the countless examples. The importance of light is also manifest in the many synonyms for light in the Hebrew language employed in the Old Testament, such as *noga* ('radiance'), which appears in the context of holiness and sanctity: 'Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him' (Ezekiel 1:28), *zohar* ('shine' or 'brightness') in the context of knowledge and wisdom: 'Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens' (Daniel 12:3) and *barak* ('glow' or 'lightning') in the context of awe and divinity: 'His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles' (Psalms 97:4), to name a few.

Just as light in the Old Testament is used to symbolise goodness, righteousness and wisdom, so darkness, in turn, symbolises not just the absence of light, but often the presence of evil: 'He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light' (Lamentations 3:2); 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness' (Isaiah 5:20); 'So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we look for light, but all is darkness' (Isaiah 59:9). In the creation story, God designates light as good and separates it from the darkness: 'God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness' (Genesis 1:4). In the Book of Isaiah, however, this distinction is phrased somewhat differently: 'I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things' (Isaiah 45:7). Yet, if darkness is the absence of light and has no substance of its own, how could God 'create darkness'? Most interpretations of this verse focus on the differentiation between light and darkness. Isaiah is thought to have been written around the same time period as the Zoroastrian religion, founded in Iran by Zarathushtra, whose activity is dated by some scholars to the beginning of the first millennium BCE (Eliade 1978, pp. 303–4). The Zoroastrians believed in two divine forces: the good god who created light and all the good in the world, and the Evil Spirit who created darkness and all the evil in the world. The aim of the verse from Isaiah is to emphasise that there are not two separate authorities; there is only one Creator and he created one world which contains both light and darkness, good and evil. The monotheistic dialectic that has imprinted itself on the West establishes a dichotomy between light, which represents good, and darkness, which represents evil. The prophet Isaiah is thus contrasting the Zoroastrian dualist worldview with the opposing

monotheistic dogma. Darkness, accordingly, is not just the absence of light, and evil is not just the absence of good; rather, both are representative of unrestrained and uncivilised forces, the primeval chaos out of which creation emerged (Schweid 2009, p. 147).

### 3. Light in Ancient near Eastern Mythologies

The story of creation in Genesis and its description of light as separate from any physical source must be understood within the context of the ancient Near East. The Old Testament was not written in a vacuum, but developed and grew out of mythologies that preceded it, and was in continuous dialogue with its cultural environment (Darshan 2018, pp. 8–27). Just like in Genesis, the ancient Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, also depicts light as appearing before the creation of the sun, the moon and the stars. Night and day, too, occur before the celestial bodies are brought into existence (Miller and Soden 2012, p. 130).

A similar dissociation between light and the sun can be found in the creation myth of ancient Egypt. The ancient Egyptian mythology is the oldest in the Mediterranean and known for its multitudes of gods, sacred animals and symbols. The ancient Egyptians worshipped the major forces of nature. The sun, chief among them, had many names, and the interpretations of their meanings are many and varied (Viaud 1975, pp. 9–11). The god of the sun was mainly known as Ra or Atum, while the actual physical orb of the sun was known as Aten. In ancient Egypt, the sun god was though responsible for all creation and a temple was devoted to him in Heliopolis. As Atum, he lay dormant in the ancient ocean preceding creation, with all the seeds of creation already within him. To prevent the water from extinguishing him, he hid inside a lotus flower until one day, by an act of will, he emerged out of the depths in his full glory and illuminated the world with his light as Ra. He himself begot the first cosmic couple, Shu and Tefnut, and they in turn begot the eight main gods of the ancient Egyptian pantheon. In this creation myth, even though the sun god is the main creator and the origin of light, the light of the blue sky is actually attributed to the god Shu, the god of light and air, who was symbolic of the separation between light and darkness, as well as between the worlds of the living and the dead (Viaud 1975, p. 12). The sky itself was created after light, as the goddess of the firmament Nut is the daughter of Shu, the god of light (Naydler 1996).

It is likewise pertinent to mention, in this context, the myth of Mithra the Persian sun god. Mithra is an important god in Persian mythology, reminiscent in many ways of the Greek god Apollo, the sun god in Greek and Roman mythology, as well as of the God of the Old Testament. He has unparalleled military skill and is the universal source of knowledge. His essence is light; he drives the sun's chariot across the sky and bestows victory and knowledge upon his worshippers. He is likewise the god of justice, wrathful and merciless in the face of corruption and deception. Nothing escapes his ever-watchful eye (Masson-Orsel and Morin 1975, pp. 309–22). As we can see, the characteristics that define Mithra, the god of light, are very much in line with the symbolic virtues associated with light in the Old Testament: knowledge, righteousness and divine sanctity. He is also an expression of a drastic dichotomy between good and evil typical of Zoroastrianism, which, as mentioned previously, is an explicitly dualistic religion. Mithra thus remained an important figure in Zoroastrianism. Knohl (2008, pp. 168–69) posits that the beliefs laid out in the Old Testament were shaped by contact with the ideas of Pharaoh Akhenaten of Egypt and Zarathushtra of Persia (see also Boyce 2001, p. xvii).

The Greek myth of creation is another text where we find primordial light in existence before the creation of the celestial bodies. The first account of the origins of the universe and the genealogy of the gods appears in Hesiod's *Theogony*, composed in the 8th century BCE, approximately two hundred years before Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Guirand 1975, pp. 87–90). In the beginning, Hesiod tells us, there was Chaos, vast, dark and formless, then came Gaia (the mother goddess, the Earth), followed by Tantalus and Eros. The two deities that spontaneously arose out of Chaos were Erebus (darkness) and Nyx (night). These two then spawned Aether (brightness) and Hemera (day). Thus, we can see that day

and night are created separately from the celestial bodies. On the other hand, according to the theogony of the Orphic cult, which worshipped Orpheus and was revived in the Roman empire during the decline of the Hellenistic religion (Guirand 1975, p. 90), Chaos was enveloped in darkness (night) (Hockney 2013, p. 9). Under the cover of night, the creative activity of Aether began to organise ‘cosmic matter’. This matter eventually took on the shape of a giant egg, with night as its shell. At the center of the egg was the first creature: Phanes—light. It was when this light united with the darkness that they created the earth and the heavens. Zeus, the first Olympian god and ruler of Olympus, was also born of the light. Thus, while the monotheistic creation story separates light from darkness, the Orphists imagined creation as the result of the union between the two.

The god of the sun, as well as of light, prophecy, healing, music and poetry, in Greek and Roman mythology is Apollo. He is depicted as the ideal of male beauty, often holding a lyre (Guirand 1975, pp. 109–10). The muses are his companions, inspirations to all those who devote their time to science and the arts. He is one of the ten Olympic gods. In ancient Greece, prophecy was considered a gift that only Apollo could give to those he favored. It is important to note that while Apollo possesses some of the sun’s properties, such as its light and energy, he is not an embodiment of the sun. Thus, here too we see light conceived as separate from the sun. The sun itself, as a celestial orb, is represented by Helios, an older god whose chariot sets out every morning from the East and rides across the sky to the West where he vanishes into the ocean.

In Nietzsche’s analysis of Hellenistic culture, Apollo represents one of two opposing principles, the other represented by Dionysus. The Apollonian component of Hellenistic culture, as Nietzsche describes it, dictates the use of moderation, whether in ethics or in aesthetics. Apollo, the god of light, is the god of self-awareness, self-control and restraint; Nietzsche calls him the god of consciousness and reason, an ‘ethical divinity’ (Nietzsche [1999] 2007, p. 27).

#### 4. Light in the Judeo-Christian Narrative

As we saw earlier, the Old Testament contains a plethora of instances in which light represents sanctity, goodness, wisdom and justice. The Christian religion and culture of the West were based on the Jewish scriptures that were transmitted throughout the different regions of the Roman Empire. Christianity preserved and diffused the books of the Old Testament canon (Malkin 2003, p. 44). Both religions view the Old Testament as a holy text, as the absolute truth, the product of divine revelation. While the Catholic Church mitigated the authority of the text with the authority of tradition, the Lutheran Reformation magnified the importance of the written word and in doing so placed the Jewish holy books at the heart of European identity (Hacohen 2006, p. 23; Eliav-Feldon 1997, p. 30), along with their conception of light, which was part of the foundation on which Christian tradition was formed.

The light radiating from Moses’s face as he descends from Mount Sinai, for example, as described in the Book of Exodus—‘when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord’ (Exodus 34:29)—appears in multiple depictions, in both religious and secular art and culture, as a halo or as a ring of light surrounded by angels, righteous men and saints. Christian iconography replicated this image in countless examples of Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist and other Christian saints and holy figures all depicted with halos around their heads (Bruyere 1994, p. 17). The halo is usually represented as a full golden circle behind the figure’s head.

The Judeo-Christian myth sees God as the master of creation, outside of its boundaries and not subject to its laws (Zakovitch 1991, p. 61). The absolute dominion of the Lord God over the heavenly bodies is demonstrated in the Book of Joshua when God stops the motion of heavenly bodies in order to magnify the Israelites’ victory over the Amorites: ‘And he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon’ (Joshua 10:12). In Isaiah too we see a similar example of the sun changing



its course as a sign from God to King Hezekiah: “‘I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz’”. So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down’ (Isaiah 38:8). This control that God has over the heavenly bodies bolsters the notion that light originates not from the sun or the moon or the stars, but from God himself, for he is their master and creator and can change their motion or stop them altogether at any moment, a notion that also appears in the Christian texts. The New Testament describes three hours of supernatural darkness occurring on the day of Jesus’s crucifixion as a result of an eclipse: ‘Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? ... Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost’ (Matthew 27:45–50, KJV). As Tertullian describes the event in his Apology: ‘Moreover, in the same moment He dismissed life, the light departed from the sun, and the world was benighted at noonday’ (Reeve and Collier 1890, p. 65).

As opposed to the darkness that marks his death, Jesus’s birth is marked by light, in the form of the famous Star of Bethlehem: ‘Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him’ (Matthew 2:1–2, KJV). This star then guides the wise men to the infant messiah: ‘and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy’ (Matthew 2:9–10, KJV). It is based on these verses that, according to Christian tradition, people light candles when the first star appears in the sky on Christmas Eve and light pours out of the windows of Christian homes.

The lighting of candles symbolises the triumph of light over darkness, of life over death. Jesus is described as one who brings light to the people:

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. (John 1:3–10, KJV).

Jesus himself is quoted in the New Testament regarding his own sanctity and the light that he embodies: ‘Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life’ (John 8:12, KJV). Candlelight became a spiritual religious symbol both in Judaism and in Christianity. In Judaism, candles are lit as part of the Sabbath ritual and for every holiday, especially Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, where lighting candles constitutes the main part of the festive ritual. Turning back to the sources, the Old Testament commands Jews to always light candles in the Tabernacle (later to be replaced by the Temple in Jerusalem):

Command the children of Israel, that they bring unto thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamps to burn continually. Without the vail of the testimony, in the tabernacle of the congregation, shall Aaron order it from the evening unto the morning before the Lord continually: it shall be a statute forever in your generations. He shall order the lamps upon the pure candlestick before the Lord continually. (Leviticus 24:2–4, KJV)

In the original Hebrew, the word for lamp is the same as the word for candle (ner), even though here the text probably refers to providing oil to light lamps. (The KJV is the only translation to mention candles with the word ‘candlestick’.) On the night before Passover, candles are used to burn the chametz (food that is not kosher for Passover) in order to comply with the precepts ‘nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you’ (Exodus 13:7)

and ‘no yeast is to be found in your houses’ (Exodus 12:19). Memorial days are another category of occasions in the Jewish tradition that are marked by the lighting of candles, specifically Yahrzeit candles (called ‘soul candles’ in Hebrew) since the light of candle has connotations of holiness and is linked with the soul: ‘the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching all the inward parts of the belly’ (Proverbs 20:27, KJV).

The Talmud puts a special emphasis on the duty of lighting candles in honour of the Sabbath. The Rava says to his companion Abaye: ‘I say that kindling Shabbat lights is an obligation, and one is required to eat specifically by that light in deference to Shabbat. As Rav Nahman bar Rav Zavda said, and others say that it was Rav Nahman bar Rava who said that Rav said: Kindling the Shabbat lamps is an obligation’ (Bavli, Shabbat 25b; all Talmudic passages are quoted from [Steinsaltz 2017](#)). The fact that the Rava starts his argument with the words ‘I say’ leads us to believe that this decree was not known as an obligation at the time of the Amorites. Following the Gemara, which defined lighting the candles as an obligation, the Rambam writes: ‘The kindling of a Sabbath lamp is not a matter left to our volition—i.e., if one desires, one may kindle it, but if one does not desire, one need not. Nor is it a mitzvah that we are not obligated to pursue . . . Instead, it is an obligation. Both men and women are obligated to have a lamp lit in their homes on the Sabbath’ ([Touger 2010](#), ch. 5, p. 1).

Catholics likewise have a custom of lighting candles when visiting churches, and the Christian world in general, as mentioned previously, holds candles to be symbolic of the birth of Jesus and uses them as decorations at Christmas time, sometimes painting them in the colors of the holiday: red, white and green. Greek Orthodox Christians hold an annual fire-lighting ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher ([Burstein 2005](#), p. 276). They believe that once a year fire bursts out of Jesus’s tomb. The Orthodox priests light a candle from this fire and this candle is brought outside to the worshippers. The worshippers then light their own candles from the miracle flame, to which they attribute mystical properties. Another series of candle lighting occasions in the Christian tradition is All Saints Day and All Souls Day, celebrated on the first and second of November, respectively. These are memorial days for all the saints and the souls of the dead that do not have their own special day in the Christian calendar ([Burstein 2005](#), p. 257). The ritual consists of visiting the graves of saints and relatives, placing flowers and lighting candles on their tombs.

## 5. Light in Western Thought

The great mythologies of the Middle East and the Mediterranean are not the only sources where such dichotomous representations of light and darkness can be seen; they can also be found in the early philosophical texts of Western culture. Light as a metaphor for knowledge and, conversely, the absence of light—darkness—as a metaphor for ignorance is perhaps most famously and powerfully represented in Plato’s allegory of the cave ([Plato 2000](#), pp. 220–26). This well-known fable describes a reality of ignorance in which people who remain in the darkness of the cave cannot see the light of wisdom. Light is equivalent to knowledge, and the process of emerging from darkness into the light, the process of coming out of the cave, is one that requires gradual acclimatization. If one of the prisoners in the cave was ‘untied, and compelled suddenly to stand up, turn his head, start walking, and look towards the light, he’d find all these things painful’, and he would not be able to see anything ‘because of the glare’ ([Plato 2000](#), p. 221). As time went by and the prisoner became accustomed to the light, he could start looking around and seeing the true forms of ‘the things whose shadows he used to see before’ ([Plato 2000](#), p. 221). This prisoner would have undergone a process of coming out of ignorance into an understanding of the truth, represented here by light. ‘The last thing he’d be able to look at, presumably, would be the sun. Not its image, in water or some location that is not its own, but the sun itself. He’d be able to look at it by itself, in its own place, and see it as it really was’ ([Plato 2000](#), p. 222).

This brings us, of course, to the concept of enlightenment in Western thought. No myth emblemizes enlightenment quite as poignantly as the myth of Prometheus, which has become a powerful symbol and an indelible staple of Western thought about light

and knowledge. In Greek mythology, the titan Prometheus is responsible for stealing fire from Olympus to bring it down to Earth for the sake of humanity. For his trespass, he is punished by Zeus and sentenced to be chained to a rock where an eagle comes every day to peck at his liver, which is renewed at the end of each day, and thus the torture continues endlessly (Raggio 1958). Prometheus brought to humanity light, which indeed arose from a natural source, but through it he teaches them advanced arts and crafts, imbues them with hope and curiosity, and gives them the ability to learn, to develop, to strive toward progress. It is no wonder then that this myth came to epitomise the spirit of education and enlightenment and to embody, for thinkers from Fichte to Schelling, from Marx to Camus, proud, enlightened and rebellious humankind (Ohana 2000, pp. 3–25). As Frederick the Great put it, in referring to the spirit of his age, the Enlightenment is Prometheus (Ohana 2000, p. 6).

The Enlightenment began in the 17th century, with various thinkers and authors in Western and Central Europe beginning to propose new principles for shaping the values of society, nation and religion. They felt that the Middle Ages were a ‘dark’ age for humanity, whereas now a new age was dawning wherein the human spirit would once again bloom and progress would resume. They called their time the Age of Enlightenment to mark a decisive break with the ‘Dark Ages’, as historiographers used to call the Middle Ages up until recent years. The motto of the Enlightenment movement was coined by Immanuel Kant:

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding! (Kant 2013, p. 6)

Light is therefore associated here with independent thought, with reliance on one’s own wits, but also with bravery and rebellion, since the immaturity that was characteristic of pre-enlightened humanity was not a question of intellect, but of passivity.

Nietzsche, the genealogist, sees the Promethean myth as the cultural basis for people’s ambition to become divinities themselves. He dubs Prometheus ‘the great lover of mankind’ (Nietzsche 2000, p. 42) and describes him as illuminated by ‘the glory of activity’ (69). At the core of the myth, Nietzsche argues, is the supreme value humanity has attributed to fire as a protector of all culture. Modern humanity, according to Nietzsche (2000), controls fire at will, and is therefore the creator of light (70–71). Since the beginning of time, humans were behind the creation of their own gods, and like Prometheus, they were punished for stealing light only to discover, retroactively, that they themselves had created the light by the very act of coveting it (Nietzsche 1974, pp. 240–41). This is the great gift of modernity—to be able to create the world in one’s image without the intervention of God or of Judeo-Christian morality. The death of God is, according to Nietzsche, the birth of modern humanity.

## 6. Conclusions and Epilogue: From the Great Myths to the New Age

Throughout the different ages of human culture, humanity looked upon the phenomenon of light with wonder, curiosity and admiration. In the course of our discussion, we saw that this was the case in the great myths of the ancient Near East. These myths, which laid the foundation for the Jewish and later the Western-Christian cultures, tell us by and large that light existed before the creation of the sun and the stars, thereby stripping it of its basic physical property: that, in order to exist, light must be emitted from an energy source. Another conclusion that emerges from this interpretive observation of myths is that the gods of light are energetic: they are gods of action, warrior gods who fight and defeat those who dare go against the laws of righteousness. They are gods of supreme wisdom and perfect knowledge of all that takes place, from the beginning to the end of time. The great mythologies of the ancient Middle East see light as representative of knowledge, wisdom, justice, prophecy and sanctity. Darkness, on the other hand, represents more than



just the absence of light; more often than not it represents the opposite qualities to those associated with light.

This representation of light, as was shown in the genealogical study, also appears in the Old and New Testament and is very much present both in the Judeo-Christian narrative and in Western philosophy throughout the ages, including rituals, holidays and religious symbols, which have transitioned into secular culture over time, especially thanks to the ideas and spirit of the Enlightenment. For example, the custom of lighting candles, which originated in religious ritual and the strong conceptual link between light and holiness, still persists until today in contemporary Western culture under the guise of secular rituals such as lighting candles on a birthday cake, romantic dinner by candlelight and our use of candles in public spaces (such as spas or restaurants) and in the home.

In accordance to what we found in the great myths at the beginning of culture, the fundamental attitude towards light as separate from a physical source of light, still exist today in cultural awareness and discourse, despite the deep physical understanding we have currently about light and its essence. In recent decades, 'light' has been making a comeback in contemporary culture, not just as a metaphor representing all the virtues we have discussed above, but with a renewed status of holiness, purity, knowledge and truth in the subculture we know as 'New Age', albeit distinct from its position in the Judeo-Christian narrative. The New Age phenomenon has been called many things, including a religion, a cult, a state of mind, a lifestyle and a social movement. Some even consider it a counter culture, or a form of cultural criticism (Ruach-Midbar 2006). The research literature regarding this movement places its origins at the end of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th centuries). However, the movement and its offshoots really begin to blossom in the 1980s in the United States, where it is characterised, among other things, by the sanctification of the self, the consolidation of feminist ideas and an increased ecological awareness (Bruce 1996). Hamilton (2000) dubs New Age the 'do-it-yourself religion', while Baerveldt (1996) calls it a 'pick-and-mix religion', since it is difficult to find any uniform outline or rigid principles that define this subculture. Nevertheless, the very wide array of texts included under the umbrella of New Age literature have a few central themes, one of which is the dualistic narrative of the 'people of light' versus the 'people of darkness'. The term 'light warriors' or 'light family' are epithets that one sees often repeated across a variety of New Age texts, yet light here has different connotations than in the foundational religious texts of the West. For the most part, the word 'light' does not represent divinity, at least not in its Judeo-Christian manifestation; instead, light is conceived as something internal, as humanity's potential for self-improvement and development, which is connected to the great and sacred goodness that does not emanate from God as a separate entity external to humankind.

The New Age author Paolo Coelho (2003) describes the 'warrior of light' as a person able to accept their failures without being crushed by defeat (101). As far as the warrior of light is concerned, there is no impossible love. They are not deterred by silence, indifference or rejection. They persevere in their quest for the love of others (Coelho 2003, p. 54). These motifs are repeated across many examples of New Age literature, such as Barbara Marciniak's *Family of Light* (Marciniak 1999) and *Bringers of the Dawn* (Marciniak 1992). The image of inner light as a spiritual energy embodying human potential for development can also be found in Lee Carroll's *The Twelve Layers of DNA* (Carroll 2010), and Doreen Virtue, in her 1997 book *The Lightworker's Way* (Virtue 1997), describes the 'keepers of the light' as people with a mission who have volunteered to help the Earth and humanity to heal from fear and the various material temptations through the application of spiritual techniques.

It would seem then that, after all of its various incarnations in Western culture from antiquity and until the present day, and although contemporary science has a rather firm grasp on its physical essence, light is still present in the discourse of Western culture along with the metaphysical properties we have assigned to it since the dawn of civilization.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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