

## QUR'ĀN 24:35 (THE LIGHT VERSE)

*God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His/his light is as a niche in which is a lamp and the lamp is in a glass, and the glass is like a glittering star lit from a blessed olive tree neither of the east nor the west, whose oil would well-nigh shine even if no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guides whom He wills to His light and strikes similitudes for mankind, and God has knowledge of all things.*

The Light Verse has often been closely associated with Šūfī thought, primarily because of al-Ghazālī's well-known and influential commentary on it. Goldziher somewhat questionably stated that the verse is one of the few in the Qur'ān amenable to mystical thought.<sup>1</sup> It has been selected for discussion here because of the questions it raises concerning literal and metaphorical language, and how one can speak of God and His attributes.

### **God is the light of the heavens and the earth**

The majority of non-Šūfī classical commentators considered the expression *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* to be a metaphor or idiom which must be understood in such a way as to avoid equating God with the phenomenon of light. In his *Jāmi' al-bayān*, al-Ṭabarī states that the Ibn 'Abbās' interpretation, "God is the guide (*hādī*) of the people of the heavens and the earth," is the best of the interpretations from the Companions and Followers because it is the logical continuation of the preceding verse, *We have sent down to you signs making things clear, as a similitude of those who passed away before you, and as an admonition for those who are Godfearing* (24:34).<sup>2</sup> Another interpretation al-Ṭabarī cites suggests that the phrase means that God "governs (*yudabbiru*) the affair (*amr*) with regards to [the heavens and the earth], their stars, sun and moon," an expression taken from Qur'ānic verses 10:3, 13:2, and 32:5.<sup>3</sup> Other commentators quote additional interpretations traced back to the Companions and Followers, which make God the agent of illumination rather than light itself; that is, God is the illuminator (*munawwir*) or ornamentor (*muzayyin*) of the heavens and the earth.<sup>4</sup>

Only one interpretation cited in al-Ṭabarī retains the original wording of the phrase by suggesting a synonym for “light” (*nūr*), i.e., “light” (*diyā*).<sup>5</sup>

Al-Zamakhsharī’s commentary is one of the first to reject the literal reading of the phrase and to insist upon its being interpreted. Like other Mu’tazila, al-Zamakhsharī was intent upon protecting the unity of God by denying that there could be a plurality of eternals, that is, a power, a knowledge, or a light that have existed independently with Him for all eternity. Their preferred manner of expressing the relationship between God and His attributes was to say that God is powerful, knowing, etc., by His very essence. In other words, the attributes are not distinct from His essence, but neither are they equivalent to it. One can say, “God is powerful,” but not “God is Power,” because this would be likening God to a created thing. Therefore, Qur’ānic phrases such as *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* must be interpreted because God is not like anything created, in this case light. Al-Zamakhsharī suggests that the phrase *God is the light* is like our saying, “Zayd is generous and munificent” (*Zayd<sup>mn</sup> karam<sup>mn</sup> wa jūd<sup>mn</sup>*) and then saying, “He revives men with his generosity and munificence” (*yun’ashu al-nās bi-karamihi wa jūdihi*). The first sentence does not mean that Zayd is generosity and munificence per se, but rather that Zayd possesses these attributes. Similarly, the meaning of the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*, according to al-Zamakhsharī, is that

He is the possessor of the light of the heavens and the owner of the light of the heavens. The light of the heavens and the earth is the truth (*al-ḥaqq*), which can be compared to light in its manifestation and clarification, just as He says, *God is the friend of those who believe; He brings them forth from the shadows to the light* (2:257), i.e., from the false to the true (*al-ḥaqq*).<sup>6</sup>

The Mu’tazilī doctrine concerning the attributes of God was one of the most significant differences setting them apart from their Ash’arī counterparts who labeled them “deniers” (*mu’atṭila*) for supposedly denying the existence of the attributes of God, leaving God as an abstract symbol of unity.<sup>7</sup> In his commentary on this verse, however, the Ash’arī theologian al-Rāzī has more in common with al-Zamakhsharī than differences. Like al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī insists that the phrase *God is the light* must be interpreted. As we saw in the discussion of Qur’ān 3:7, al-Rāzī believes that the abandonment of the probable meaning of any expression in the Qur’ān requires a clear-cut indicator (*dalīl munfaṣil*) that demonstrates the absurdity of the apparent sense (*ẓāhir*).<sup>8</sup> Al-Rāzī applies the methodology to this verse, setting forth argument after argument for proving the absurdity of calling God “light.” He begins by explaining various definitions of the word “light” (in its physical sense), and then demonstrates the absurdity of applying any of these definitions to God.

Further evidence to support his rational arguments is drawn from three Qur’ānic verses, one of which is the Light Verse itself. Al-Rāzī finds a contradiction

between the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* and the phrases *the similitude of His/his light* and *God guides whom He wills to His light*, since the first phrase appears to equate light with God's essence while the other phrases imply that light is attributed (*mudāf*) to God. One of the ways in which al-Rāzī attempts to resolve this seeming contradiction is by referring to common usage of the Arabic language. He quotes the same sentences found in al-Zamakhsharī, although he does not mention al-Zamakhsharī by name.<sup>9</sup> Like al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī understands the verse as meaning that God is not "light" per se but rather the possessor and creator of light, since Qur'an 42:11 states *There is nothing like Him*. According to al-Rāzī, if God were a light, this verse would be false because all lights resemble one another. Nothing resembles Him and therefore He cannot be called light. Another verse al-Rāzī quotes to support his view is Qur'an 6:1, *He made the shadows and the light*. This verse proves that the quiddity (*māhiyya*) of light was created by God, making it impossible that the divine being could be a light.<sup>10</sup>

Based on this rational and Qur'anic evidence, al-Rāzī insists that the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* must be interpreted (*la budda min al-ta'wīl*). His preferred interpretation is the one attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and "the majority," which states that the verse means, "God is the Guide of the heavens and the earth." Al-Rāzī mentions several Qur'anic verses that support this interpretation.<sup>11</sup> He considers it the best interpretation because the last part of the Light Verse, *God guides whom He wills to His light*, "indicates that what is meant is the light of guidance to knowledge and action." Al-Rāzī briefly mentions other traditional interpretations such as God as governor (*mudabbir*), arranger (*nāzim*), and illuminator (*munawwir*).<sup>12</sup>

This discussion of traditional interpretations is followed by an extensive summary and expansion of the first part of al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāṭ al-anwār*, a commentary on the Light Verse that will be discussed in greater depth in what follows. For now however, we can state that al-Ghazālī's basic premise is that light is a word used for many different types of phenomena. The relationship between these different kinds of phenomena is a hierarchical one, and lights that are higher are more worthy of the term "light" than lights that are lower. The light of the physical eye is inferior to that of the intellect (*'aql*), a fact that al-Ghazālī proves by listing seven imperfections of physical sight when compared to rational insight; al-Rāzī expands this list to a total of twenty imperfections. Even higher than the light of rational insight is the light of God. According to al-Ghazālī, the perfection of His light is such that He alone is worthy of the term "light." God is light in reality (*ḥaqīqa*) while all other light is metaphorical (*majāz*) in relationship to His light; in truth there is no light but He.<sup>13</sup>

At first glance this view would seem to be antithetical to that of al-Rāzī, who began his own exegesis by arguing that God cannot be called light. Nonetheless, al-Rāzī concludes after his long summary of al-Ghazālī's work that no contradiction exists between al-Ghazālī's interpretation and the traditional interpretation of light as "Guide," al-Rāzī's preferred interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Al-Rāzī's acceptance of

al-Ghazālī's interpretation makes more sense when seen in the context of other discussions of God's attributes. A precedent for al-Ghazālī's statement that God is light in reality (*ḥaqīqa*) while all other light is metaphor (*majāz*) can be found in the work of the Mu'tazilī theologian al-Nāshī' al-Akbar (d. 906), who attempted to solve the problem of anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur'ān by the theory that the attributes of God, when applied to God are "true" (*ḥaqīqa*) but when applied to men are "metaphor" (*majāz*). The more common way to solve anthropomorphic problems was to say the opposite, that attributes are *majāz* with regards to God but *ḥaqīqa* with regards to mankind. But, as Heinrichs has pointed out, either theory works well to solve the problem of anthropomorphism. The first theory, however, raises an additional issue, which is whether Nāshī' al-Akbar understands the distinction between the real (*ḥaqīqa*) and metaphor (*majāz*) to be on an ontological or a linguistic level.<sup>15</sup> Nāshī' al-Akbar's view is ambiguous, but al-Ghazālī's is not. He clearly asserts that God's light, like His existence, is the only real Light and Existence. Al-Rāzī's position is less clear; while he repeats al-Ghazālī's emphatic phrase, "There is no light but He," he omits key passages explaining what al-Ghazālī means by this. Al-Rāzī's main concern is the theological problem of eliminating any possibility of equating God with the physical phenomenon that we call light.

Ibn Taymiyya wrote a commentary on the Light Verse that is structured as a rebuttal to an unnamed adversary. Many of the arguments quoted from this adversary are arguments found in al-Rāzī's *Tafsīr al-kabīr* and the section on God's name "light" (*nūr*) in his *Sharḥ asmā' Allāh ta'ālā wa'l-ṣifāt*.<sup>16</sup> The wording is similar enough to suspect that Ibn Taymiyya's opponent is, in fact, al-Rāzī, but the fact that some of the arguments quoted are not found in either of the two works of al-Rāzī, at least not in the passages studied here, makes it difficult to definitively identify him as such. Ibn Taymiyya's commentary is highly polemical; he accuses his opponent of distorting the Qur'ān (*tahrīf*), apostasy (*ilhād*) with regards to God's signs and names, lying (*kidhb*), iniquity (*ẓulm*), and enmity towards the rights of God.<sup>17</sup> Ibn Taymiyya attempts to highlight, point by point, what he deems to be the contradictions in his opponent's arguments and their pervertedness (*fasād*). For our purposes the most important material pertains to Ibn Taymiyya's response to the claim that the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* must be interpreted. Ibn Taymiyya not only rejects the necessity of interpreting this phrase, he insists that the majority of Muslims do not interpret it, this being the view of the first generations (*salaf*), the Attributionists (*ṣifātiyya*)<sup>18</sup> among the theologians, jurists, Ṣūfīs, and others. The interpretation of God's attribute "light," according to Ibn Taymiyya goes back to the *jahmiyya*<sup>19</sup> and the Mu'tazila.

Ibn Taymiyya's opponent claims that the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* must be interpreted because "light is a mode of being (*kayfiyya*) existing in corporeality, which is the opposite of darkness, and far be it from God (*al-ḥaqq*) to have an opposite"<sup>20</sup> Ibn Taymiyya understands the term "light" as possessing different meanings appropriate to different contexts. He disagrees

with the definition of light as a mode of being existing in corporeality, stating that created light can be either an essence (*‘ayn*) or an accident (*‘arād*). An example of the first is fire while the second would be the reflective light of the fire on a wall. Only the second can be said to be a “mode of being existing by means of a body.” In other words, sometimes the word light refers to a substance (*jawhar*) and sometimes to a quality (*ṣifa*). Similarly, the names of God sometimes refer to His essence and sometimes to His attributes. As an example of this, Ibn Taymiyya quotes a *ḥadīth*, “You are the real (*ḥaqq*), Your speech is the real (*ḥaqq*), the Garden is real (*ḥaqq*), the prophets are real (*ḥaqq*) and Muḥammad is real (*ḥaqq*).”<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Ibn Taymiyya understands the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* as meaning that light is part of God’s essence as well as being one of His attributes; that is to say God is both light and possesses light. Therefore, there is no contradiction between the first phrase, *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* and the second phrase *the similitude of His/his light*, and it would be wrong to interpret the first phrase to mean “God is the possessor of light,” as do al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī. Ibn Taymiyya finds further proof for accepting the exact Qur’ānic wording as it is in the *ḥadīth*, “O God, praise be to You, light of the heavens and the earth and what is in them,” and the Prophet’s reply to the question of how he saw his Lord, “I see a light.”<sup>22</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya’s insistence that God is light, however, does not mean that he rejects the metaphorical interpretations of the first generations (*salaf*) regarding this light, comments that he does not call *ta’wīl* but rather *tafsīr*. According to Ibn Taymiyya, saying that “God is the guide of the heavens and the earth” does not negate the fact of God being Himself a light. Using many of the same examples that he uses in his book on Qur’ānic methodology, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, Ibn Taymiyya explains that the custom of the first generations was to use different expressions and examples to explain the meaning of the Qur’ān. When they said, “God is the guide of the heavens and the earth,” they were making a statement regarding one of the meanings of *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*, a statement that does not invalidate its other meanings. Likewise, when they said, “God is the illuminator (*munawwir*) of the heavens and the earth,” they were not contradicting the fact of His being a light, because part of the definition of light is being something that illuminates something else.<sup>23</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, then, accepts both the interpretation that *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* as “God is the guide of the heavens and the earth” and the interpretation that insists upon the literal meaning. However, he does not explore the implications of accepting the literal meaning.<sup>24</sup>

### **Ṣūfī interpretations of *God is the light of the heavens and the earth***

It is the literal understanding of the phrase *God is light* that interests al-Ghazālī in his *Mishkāṭ al-anwār*, although the conclusions he draws regarding it are not

ones that Ibn Taymiyya would have accepted. He explains that the various interpretations of the Light Verse are due to the different definitions of light they presuppose. He judges the understanding of light found amongst the Ṣūfīs to be superior to that of other interpretations, but suggests that it is not an interpretation that should be widely broadcast. As we saw in the commentaries on Qur'ān 3:7, the Ṣūfīs asserted that the Qur'ān contains both public knowledge that should be disseminated and private knowledge that is made deliberately obscure except to those few intended to receive it. Al-Ghazālī refers to this principle in the introduction to his *Mishkāt al-anwār* and explains why, then, he is revealing some of this private information:

What is more, not every mystery is to be unveiled and divulged, and not every reality (*ḥaqīqa*) is to be presented and disclosed. Indeed, “the breasts of the free (*aḥrār*) are the graves of the mysteries.”<sup>25</sup> One of the gnostics has said, “To divulge the mystery of Lordship is unbelief (*kufr*).” Indeed, the Master of the First and the Last [the Prophet] said, “There is a kind of knowledge like the guise of the hidden; none knows it except the knowers of God. When they speak of it, none denies it except those who are arrogantly deluded by God.” And when the people of arrogant delusion become many, it becomes necessary to preserve the coverings upon the face of the mysteries. But I see you as one whose breast has been opened up by God through light and whose innermost consciousness (*sirr*) has been kept free of the darkneses of delusion. Hence, in this discipline I will not be niggardly toward you in alluding (*ishāra*) to sparks and flashes or giving symbols of realities and subtleties, for the fear of holding back knowledge from those who are worthy of it is not less than that in disseminating it to those who are not worthy of it.

He who bestows (*manaḥa*) knowledge on the ignorant wastes it,  
And he who withholds (*mana'a*) it from the worthy has done them wrong.<sup>26</sup>

With this said, al-Ghazālī proceeds to the first section of his treatise on the definition of different types of light, and his interpretation of the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*.

Al-Ghazālī asserts that the term “light” is understood in three different ways. The first usage (*waḍ'*) is that of ordinary people (*āmmī*) and indicates manifestation (*zuhūr*) to visual perception. “Light” here is “an expression for what can be seen in itself and through which other things can be seen, like the sun.” The Arabic language, however, also includes the possibility of using the word “light” to refer to the organ of perception involved, the eye, as in the phrase “the light of the eyesight of the bat is weak (*fi'l-khuffāsh inna nūr 'aynihi ḍa'if*).”<sup>27</sup> Al-Ghazālī suggests that this second definition of the term “light” is more appropriate than the first definition because the eye perceives and through it perception takes place,

whereas seen light is merely the place where perception takes place. An even more perfect organ of perception is the “eye” of the intellect (*‘aql*) and so this too can be referred to as a “light.” It is in this sense that “light” can be used to refer to the Prophet and, to a lesser degree, the other prophets and religious scholars.<sup>28</sup>

While this second definition of “light” occurs among the elect (*khawāṣṣ*), the elect of the elect (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*) have a third definition, which defines “light” as “the first light” (*al-nūr al-awwal*) and “the real light” (*al-nūr al-ḥaqq*) because it is the only light that does not borrow its luminosity from something else. The use of the term “light” for anything other than this real light is metaphor (*majāz*). God is light, there is no light but He, and He is the totality of lights and the universal light. God is hidden from us because He is pure light. In everything other than God light is mixed with darkness, allowing us to see, but God has no opposite, no darkness mixed with His light and He is therefore veiled from His creation by the very intensity of His manifestation. He is everywhere but cannot be seen.

Just as the real light (*al-nūr al-ḥaqq*) is God, the real existent (*al-mawjūd al-ḥaqq*) is God. And just as our light is “borrowed,” so is our existence “borrowed (*isti‘āra*).” Once one has recognized what is real and what is metaphor, one will understand that “there is nothing in existence except God,” and *Everything is being annihilated except His face* (28:88). The state (*ḥāl*) of seeing this is attained either by cognitive gnosis (*‘irfān ‘ilmī*) or “tasting (*dhawq*).” In the latter case there is an intoxication that overcomes the intellect and gives rise to such statements as those made by al-Ḥallāj and Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 875), but when the state ends the intellect knows that it was a state that was not the reality of unification (*ḥaqīqat al-ittiḥād*) but the ambiguity of unification (*shubha’l-ittiḥād*). The possessor of this state has been annihilated (*faniya*) from himself and annihilated from his annihilation (*faniya ‘an fanā’ihi*) because he has lost all consciousness of himself.

In relationship to the one immersed in it, this state is called “unification” (*ittiḥād*), according to the language of metaphor (*majāz*), or is called “declaring God’s unity” (*tawḥīd*) in the language of reality (*ḥaqīqa*).<sup>29</sup>

Al-Ghazālī quotes a poem here attributed to Ṣāḥib b. ‘Abbād (d. 995):

The glass is clear, the wine is clear,  
the two are similar, the affair confused,  
As if there is wine and no glass,  
or glass and no wine.<sup>30</sup>

And he adds, “There is a difference between saying, ‘The wine is the cup’ and ‘It is *as if* the wine is the cup.’”<sup>31</sup> It was just this kind of ambiguous statement which troubled critics like Ibn Taymiyya who rejected the distinction between the reality and the metaphor of unification (*ittiḥād*) and therefore could only see these ideas

as heresies, a denial of God's complete transcendence. Ibn Taymiyya believed that this denial was at the root of both the ecstatic utterances of the early Ṣūfīs and their philosophizing successors, hidden beneath the deliberate ambiguity of Ṣūfī terminology and style. Ibn 'Arabī describes the state of bewilderment (*hayra*) which occurs in the mystic when he realizes the ambiguity of existence, but Ibn Taymiyya declares this merely confusion, the result of the logical absurdities of the mystic's thinking.<sup>32</sup> In the *Mishkāt al-anwār*, al-Ghazālī anticipates this criticism, expressing his concern that what he has said will be misunderstood and suggests that those who cannot grasp this kind of knowledge should avoid it:

It may be that some people will fall short of understanding the innermost meaning of these words. Hence, they will understand the words, "God is with everything, just as light is with the things," to mean that He is in each place – high exalted and holy is He from being ascribed to place! Probably the best way not to stir up such imaginings is to say that He is before everything, that He is above everything and that He makes everything manifest. Yet, in the knowledge of those who possess insight, that which makes manifest cannot be separate from that which is manifest. This is what we mean by our saying that "He is with everything." Moreover, it is not hidden from you that the manifester is above and before everything made manifest, although it is with everything in a certain respect. However, [the manifester] is with [everything] in one respect and before it in another respect, so you should not suppose that this is a contradiction. Take an example from sensory objects, which lie at your level of knowledge: Consider how the movement of a hand is both with the movement of its shadow and before it. He whose breast cannot embrace knowledge of this should abandon this type of science. There are men for each science, and "the way is eased for each person to that for which he was created."<sup>33</sup>

For ordinary people the declaration of God's unity (*tawḥīd*) is "There is no god but God," but for the elect the declaration of God's unity is "There is no he but He."<sup>34</sup>

The *Mishkāt al-anwār* represents a type of Ṣūfī writing which uses the language of philosophy and theology to describe a view of reality based on the Ṣūfī experience of annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*). Although Ibn 'Arabī has often been considered the originator of this theoretical form of Ṣūfism, the *Mishkāt al-anwār* demonstrates that al-Ghazālī was clearly his precursor.<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere, al-Ghazālī did address the types of theological issues which are the primary focus of al-Rāzī's commentary on the Light Verse, but these are not his concerns in the *Mishkāt al-anwār*. His concerns are also different from the purely philosophical approach of Ibn Sīnā in his interpretation of the Light Verse found in *Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*. Like al-Rāzī, Ibn Sīnā declares physical light the "essential" meaning of light and the use of the term "light" in the Qur'ānic phrase

*God is the light of the heavens and the earth* “metaphorical,” a linguistic stance opposite to that of al-Ghazālī.

I say: *light* is an equivocal term (*mushtarak*) partaking of two meanings, one essential (*dhātī*) and the other metaphorical (*musta‘ār*). The essential stands for the perfection of the transparent inasmuch as it is transparent, as Aristotle said. The metaphorical meaning is to be understood in two ways: either as the good, or as the cause that leads to the good. Here, the sense is the metaphorical one in both meanings. I mean that God, the Exalted, is in Himself the good and the cause of everything good.”<sup>36</sup>

In this respect, Ibn Sīnā has more in common with exoteric exegesis on this verse than with al-Ghazālī’s interpretation, because he assumes that the meaning of the term “light” can be easily understood. For al-Ghazālī, in contrast, the true meaning of “light” contains a secret regarding the ambiguous status of man’s existence. Al-Ghazālī links this particular understanding of man’s relationship to God to problems of Qur’anic interpretation both here and in his discussion in the *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* of the meaning of the Qur’anic verse *You did not throw when you threw but God threw* (8:17). The verse was revealed after the Battle of Badr and refers to a moment in the battle when the Prophet threw dust at the enemies of the Muslims.

The external sense (*zāhir*) of this verse is clear but the truth of its meaning is obscure (*ghāmiḍ*) since it both affirms and negates the throwing. This is contradictory in the external sense unless one understands that he threw from one point of view and did not throw from another point of view, and from the point of view in which he did not throw God threw . . . The reality of this is taken from the vast ocean of the knowledges of unveiling (*‘ulūm al-mukāshafāt*). The external sense of the commentary will be of no use.<sup>37</sup>

### ***The similitude of His/his light is as a niche***

While the phrase *God is the light* was interpreted both metaphorically and literally, the phrase *the similitude of His/his light is as a niche* and the various elements of this niche was understood by all commentators as a metaphor, but a metaphor whose referents are ambiguous. Al-Rāzī lists ten different interpretations that can be grouped according to whether these words refer to God, Muḥammad, or the believer.<sup>38</sup> Although al-Rāzī includes interpretations from later commentators, all three referents can be found in the earliest interpretations transmitted from the Companions and the Followers. Al-Rāzī’s preferred interpretation, as it was al-Ṭabarī’s, is that the extended metaphor of the niche serves the purpose of describing a pure and perfect light, thereby describing, by analogy, the perfection of God’s guidance. *His light* may also refer to the Qur’ān. Another interpretation

suggests that the words mean Muḥammad, just as the Qur'ān 33:46 describes Muḥammad as *a light-giving lamp*. Muqātil (d. 767) is quoted as saying that it is a similitude for the light of faith in the heart of Muḥammad, so the *niche* is like the loins of 'Abd Allāh, Muḥammad's father; the *glass* the body of Muḥammad; and the *lamp* faith or prophecy in Muḥammad's heart. Or the *niche* can be compared to Ibrāhīm, the *glass* to Ismā'īl, the *lamp* to the body of Muḥammad, and the *tree* to prophecy and the message.

Whereas these interpretations identify the elements of the niche as referring to God's guidance or Muhammad, the other interpretations cited by al-Rāzī understand this part of the verse as referring to the believer. One interpretation suggests that the *light* is knowledge of God and the religious laws in the heart of the believer. The evidence for this interpretation is in Qur'ān 39:22, *Is he whose breast God has opened up to Islam so that he has a light from his Lord...* and verse 14:1, *in order that you might bring mankind out of the darkness into the light*. The interpretations of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sinā, which understand the *niche* as referring to the human perceptual faculties are summarized. Al-Rāzī then quotes a Ṣūfī interpretation which states that the *niche* is the breast, the *glass* is the heart, the *lamp* is knowledge, and the *blessed tree* is the angels and their inspirations which are *neither of the east nor west* because they are spiritual (*rūḥāniyya*). The oil from this tree *would well-nigh shine even if no fire touched it* because of the plentitude of their different types of knowledge and the powerfulness of their understanding of the secrets of the kingdom (*malakūt*) of God. Al-Rāzī adds critically, "It is obvious here that the thing compared (*mushabbah*) is not the thing compared therewith (*al-mushabbih bihi*)."<sup>39</sup>

Al-Rāzī does not explain why he finds this particular interpretation unacceptable. Al-Qurṭubī is clearer in his commentary that the issue is one of understanding the proper use of language. He states that metaphorical definitions of light are part of standard Arabic speech and gives examples of such from Arabic poetry to show that the statement *God is the light* refers to He who brings all things into existence, including light. He adds that the mistake of corporealists (*mujassima*) is that they follow the external sense of the verse and *aḥādīth* which seem to suggest that God *is* a light.<sup>40</sup> Metaphor, then, is part of the language of the Qur'ān. This does not mean, however, that words and expressions can be interpreted in ways that go beyond the metaphors that are a part of standard Arabic speech. Al-Qurṭubī quotes his teacher's critique of an interpretation of the elements of the *niche* similar to one of the interpretations al-Rāzī cites.

Al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī said: It is strange that there was a jurist who said that this is a similitude which God has struck for Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad, and for 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib and his son 'Abd Allāh... 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib is likened to the *niche* in which there is a candle that is the *glass* that is like 'Abd Allāh. Muḥammad is like the *lamp*, meaning that he is from their loins, so that he is like *a glittering star* which is Jupiter.

*Lit from a blessed tree* means the inheritance of prophecy from Ibrāhīm who is the *blessed tree*, meaning pure in faith (*ḥanifiyya*). *Neither of the east nor the west*, neither Jewish nor Christian. *Whose oil would well-nigh shine even if no fire touched it*. [The jurist] says, “Ibrāhīm would well-nigh speak from revelation before it was revealed to him.” *Light upon light*. Ibrāhīm then Muḥammad.

Al-Qāḍī said: All of this is an abandonment of the obvious sense (*zāhir*) and nothing in the process of creating metaphors (*tamthīl*) prevents one from expanding it.<sup>41</sup>

Al-Qurṭubī’s teacher is drawing attention to what he perceives to be the danger inherent in metaphors, their openness to endless interpretation. Yet he also states that metaphor in the Qur’ān is necessary because man can only understand that of which he already has some knowledge, namely himself and his world.

This verse is a similitude which God has struck for His light. It is only possible to strike a similitude for His exalted light as an exhortation to His creation by some part of His creation, because men, due to their limitations, can only understand by means of themselves. If that were not so, no one would know God except He Himself.<sup>42</sup>

Still confusing here, however, is the definition of the boundaries of acceptable metaphorical interpretation. Ibn Taymiyya states that the use of analogy (*qiyās*) in interpretation is acceptable if the analogies produced are in agreement with other Qur’ānic verses, sound *ḥadīth*, and *salafī* interpretations. In his commentary on this passage of the Light Verse, he quotes a Ṣūfī interpretation which he deems acceptable.

Among the sayings of the gnostics (*‘arifūn*) is that *the light* is that which illuminates the hearts of the sincere by its declaration of God’s unity and illuminates the innermost hearts (*asrār*) of the lovers by its confirmation. It is said that it is that which enlivens the hearts of the gnostics by the light of its knowledge and the souls of the worshippers by the light of its worship.<sup>43</sup>

This is the talk of some shaykhs who speak in a manner of admonition without verifying [what they say]. Shaykh Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān in *Taḥqīq al-tafsīr*<sup>44</sup> mentions allusions (*ishārāt*), some of which provide useful lessons and some of which come from invalid or rejected transmitted material. The allusions of the Ṣūfī shaykhs can be divided into allusion by state (*ishāra ḥāliyya*), which are their allusions by means of hearts – and it is this by which they are characterized – but this is not the case here; and allusions connected to teachings such as they take from the Qur’ān and the like. These allusions are in the category of consideration

(*i'tibār*), analogy (*qiyās*), and appending that which is not in a text to that which is in the text (*ilḥā mā laysa bi-manṣūṣ bi'l-manṣūṣ*). These are like the consideration and analogy that jurists use in legal judgements. But the Ṣūfī shaykhs use them for inspiration (*targhīb*) and warning (*tarhīb*), virtuous deeds and degrees of men, and things like that.<sup>45</sup> If the allusion is considerative (*i'tibāriyya*) by virtue of a sound type of analogy (*qiyās*), it is good and acceptable. If the analogy is weak, it is judged accordingly. If it is a distortion (*tahrīf*) of the words beyond their [acceptable] interpretation, it is the type of sayings of the *qarāmiṭa*,<sup>46</sup> *bāṭiniyya* and *jahmiyya*.<sup>47</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya, then, finds metaphorical interpretations beyond those transmitted from the Companions and the Followers acceptable provided they can be verified as sound by the Qur'ān, *aḥādīth* and *tafsīr* from the Companions and Followers, a process of verification he suggests the Ṣūfīs rarely do.

### **Ṣūfī interpretations of the similitude of His/his light is as a niche**

Ibn Taymiyya identifies an important point here. Ṣūfī commentaries rarely refer directly to the commentaries of the Companions and Followers of the Prophet, but this fact should not be taken to mean that they were unaware or critical of them. One of the earliest recorded Ṣūfī interpretations on the Light Verse, attributed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, reflects and expands upon all the *salafī* interpretations of *the similitude of His/his light* in its detailing of a long list of the varied manifestations of God's light and the hierarchy of those who possess it: God, Muḥammad, and the believers.

The lights are different. The first of them is the light of the protection of the heart, then the light of fear, then the light of hope, then the light of recollection, then vision by the light of knowledge, then the light of modesty, then the light of the sweetness of faith, then the light of Islam, then the light of doing beautiful acts (*iḥsān*), then the light of blessing, then the light of grace, then the light of benefits, then the light of generosity, then the light of affection, then the light of the heart, then the light of comprehension, then the light of awe, then the light of bewilderment, then the light of life, then the light of intimacy, then the light of uprightness, then the light of humility, then the light of tranquility, then the light of grandeur, then the light of majesty, then the light of power, then the light of might, then the light of divinity, then the light of oneness, then the light of singularity, then the light of eternity, then the light of endless time, then the light of eternity without beginning or end, then the light of permanence, then the light of sempiternity, then the light of subsistence (*baqā*), then the light of universality, then the light of He-ness (*huwiyya*).

Each of these lights has a people, a state (*ḥāl*) and a place (*maḥall*), and all of them are part of the lights of God (*al-ḥaqq*) that God has mentioned in his words, *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*. Each one of His servants is drinking from one of these lights and perhaps has a portion of two or three lights. These lights will not become complete for anyone except Muṣṭafa<sup>48</sup> because he stands with God by virtue of being rendered sound in servanthood and love. He is a light and is in a light from his Lord (*huwa nūr wa huwa min rabbihi ‘alā nūr*).<sup>49</sup>

The language in this interpretation can be compared to an interpretation of *the blessed olive tree neither of the east nor of the west* and *light upon light* related from the Companion Ubayy b. Ka'b. Here, the believer is compared to a tree that receives just the right amount of light just as the believer is protected from life's vicissitudes by the strength which God gives him.

He balances four characteristics: if he receives he is grateful; if he is afflicted he is patient; if he expresses an opinion he is fair; and if he speaks he is truthful. Among other men he is like a living man walking amidst the graves of the dead. *Light upon light*. He freely moves about in five different kinds of light. His speech is light, his action is light, his private affairs are a light, his public affairs<sup>50</sup> are a light, and his ultimate destination will be the light on the Day of Resurrection in the Garden.<sup>51</sup>

What distinguishes Ṣūfī commentaries, however, is not only their expanded use of the metaphor of light but also a seemingly literal way of understanding this light, as in al-Tustarī's description of the role of light in the creation of Muḥammad and the believers. In his commentary on the Light Verse, al-Tustarī suggests that *the similitude of His/his light* refers to Muḥammad. He also quotes al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as saying that what is meant is the heart of the believer. The creation of the lights of Muḥammad and the believers is described in al-Tustarī's comments on Qur'ānic verse 7:172, a verse which describes the primordial covenant between God and man.

*When your Lord took from the children of Ādam their seed (dhuriyya) and caused them to bear witness concerning themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we bear witness." That was so that you would say on the Day of Resurrection, "We ignored this."*

In his commentary on this verse, al-Tustarī describes three types of seeds representing future mankind. The first type of seed was Muḥammad who was created directly from God's light.

God Most High, when he wished to create Muhammad (the blessings and peace of God upon him), manifested some of his light. When it attained the veil of majesty, it bowed down in prayer before Allah. Allah

created from the position of prayer a great column like a glass of light, as both his interior and exterior. In it is the 'ayn (very being, essence, source, eye) of Muhammad, God's blessings and peace upon him. He stood in service before the lord of the two worlds for one thousand years with the dispositions of faith, the beholding of faith, the unveiling of certitude, and the witness of the lord.<sup>52</sup>

The second type of seed was Ādam who was created from the light of Muḥammad. The third type of seed was mankind, the children of Ādam, who were created either from the light of Muḥammad or the light of Ādam. Those who are guides, who are desired (*murādūn*) were created from the light of Muḥammad, while those who are seekers (*murīdūn*) were created from the light of Ādam.<sup>53</sup> Mankind is created directly or indirectly from Muḥammad's light and will return to the divine light from which he was created.<sup>54</sup>

The lights of God interpreted as Muḥammad and the believers are also mentioned in the writings of al-Ḥallāj. In the first chapter of his *Kitāb al-ṭawāsīn*, al-Ḥallāj repeats many aspects of the theory of Muḥammad's light of al-Tustarī, who was his teacher for a brief period of time.<sup>55</sup> In the fragments recorded of al-Ḥallāj's Qur'ānic commentary, the focus is on light as representing the qualities of the believer.

He compared the heart to a candle whose water is certainty and whose oil is patience and the sincerity which develops from it, and whose wick is trust in God and whose light is contentment. If it is characterized by this quality, the flavor of life can be found in its light.<sup>56</sup>

God made submission (*islām*) a light for His people, and faith a light for His people, and assent (*taṣḍīq*) a light in the heart of the believer. Knowledge (*ilm*), intelligence (*'aql*) and insight (*baṣīra*) are lights. All of the moral traits (*akhlāq*) of the believers are lights. All of the acts of worship are lights and the nearness of the servants to God is in proportion with their lights.<sup>57</sup>

God is both "the light of light" (*nūr al-nūr*)<sup>58</sup> and "the illuminator (*munawwir*) of your hearts until you come to know and find (*wajadtum*)."<sup>59</sup> At this point the believer becomes full of light.

In the head is the light of revelation (*wahy*) and in the two eyes is the light of intimate dialogue with God, and in the ears is the light of certainty, and in the tongue is the light of clarity, and in the breast is the light of faith, and in the humours of the body (*ṭabā'ir*) is the light of glorifying God. When something catches fire from these lights it overwhelms the other light and incorporates it into its authority. When it has subsided the authority of that light returns and you are increased by what happened. When everything catches fire, it becomes *light upon light*. *God guides whom He wills to His light.*<sup>60</sup>

Another distinctive element of these early Ṣūfī interpretations of the Light Verse is the comparison made between the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of man, a type of analogical thinking which becomes even more pervasive in the later commentaries of al-Kāshānī and al-Nīsābūrī. Ibn ‘Aṭā’, al-Ḥallāj’s contemporary, explains what it is that God illuminates in *the heavens and the earth*.

God adorned (*zayyana*) the heavens with the twelve signs of the zodiac, and they are the Ram, the Bull, the Twins, the Crab, the Lion, the Ears of Corn (Virgo), the Scales, the Scorpion, the Archer, the Sea Goat, the Water Bearer, and the Fish. He adorned the hearts of the believers with twelve characteristics: the mind, attention, explanation, intelligence, knowledge, certainty, understanding, insight, the life of the heart, hope, fear and life. As long as these signs of the zodiac exist the world will be in order and abundance. Similarly, as long as these characteristics exist in the heart of the Gnostic (*‘ārīf*), there will be the light of the gnostic and the sweetness of worship.<sup>61</sup>

Al-Wasītī shows how the microcosm, man, is illuminated directly by God.

God created the spirits (*arwāḥ*) before the bodies (*ajsād*). He illuminated them by His attributes (*ṣifāt*) and addressed them by means of His essence (*dhāt*), so they are illuminated and receive light by means of the light of His sanctity (*quḍus*). He told of it in His words *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* because He is the illuminator (*munawwir*) of the spirits (*arwāḥ*) by the perfection of His light.<sup>62</sup>

The interrelationship between the corporeal (*jismānī*) and the spiritual (*rūḥānī*) forms the basis of the cosmology and hermeneutical theory that al-Ghazālī develops in his *Mishkāt al-anwār*. As discussed in Part I of this work, the theory states that what exists in one world serves as a similitude for what exists in the other and that the similitudes of the Qur’ān can be understood by understanding the relationship between these two worlds. Al-Ghazālī gives many examples of this, one of the most significant being that of man. Man was created “in the form of the Merciful,” an allusion to a *ḥadīth* which al-Ghazālī understands as referring to man as a microcosm of the universe.

God showed beneficence to Adam. He gave him an abridged form (*ṣūrat mukhtaṣar*) that brings together every sort of things found in the cosmos. It is as if Adam is everything in the cosmos, or an abridged transcription (*muskha mukhtaṣar*) of the world.<sup>63</sup>

The *Mishkāt al-anwār* is divided into three parts. The first part is the discussion of the mystery of understanding *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*. The second part describes the two elements necessary for this understanding.

One of them is the hermeneutical theory of using similitudes which we have already discussed. The other is the structure of man himself and the relationship between the corporeal and spiritual worlds within him. This is described, according to al-Ghazālī, in the similitude of the elements of the niche, which represent the layers (*ṭabaqāt*) of the spirits (*arwāḥ*) of the human clay (*al-ḥīnat al-bashariyya*) and the degrees (*marātib*) of their lights.<sup>64</sup> Unlike most Ṣūfī commentators, Al-Ghazālī is careful to link his interpretation to *salafī* interpretations, in this case those of Ibn Mas'ūd, whom he quotes as saying, “*the similitude of his/His light in the heart of the believers is like a niche,*” and Ubayy b. Ka'b, whom he quotes as saying, “*the similitude of a light in the heart of one who has faith.*”<sup>65</sup>

According to al-Ghazālī, the first of the “luminous human spirits” (*al-arwāḥ al-bashariyya al-nūrāniyya*) is the sensory spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ḥassās*) which is found in animals and infants. It is like the niche because its lights come out of the different openings of the body such as the two eyes, ears, and nostrils, etc. The second is the imaginal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*) which is capable of remembering and is found in older children, adults, and some animals. It is like glass, a dense substance which can be purified to channel light. The third is the rational spirit (*al-rūḥ al-'aqlī*) which comprehends meanings outside of the senses and imagination and is found only in human beings. It is like the lamp. The fourth is the reflective spirit (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*) which combines part of the rational knowledge to derive a higher form of knowledge. It is like the tree because it begins from this root and then branches out. The fifth is the sanctified prophetic spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*) which belongs only to the prophets and some friends of God (*awliyā'*) and is beyond the intellect (*'aql*). It is the *oil which would well-nigh shine even if no fire touched it* because there are those among the friends of God who could almost do without the help of the prophets, and there are prophets who could almost do without the help of the angels.<sup>66</sup>

The third part of the *Mishkāt al-anwār* applies al-Ghazālī's understanding of the Light Verse to classify different types of people, by means of an interpretation of the *ḥadīth* “God has seventy veils of light and darkness. If He were to unveil them, the glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyes perceived Him.” The third part synthesizes the points made in the first two parts by demonstrating how the perceptions of the lower spirits of man lead to faulty conclusions regarding the nature of God. Al-Ghazālī defines three kinds of people who are veiled from the truth in various ways.

To summarize his categories briefly, the first type are atheists (*mulhida*) veiled by darkness; they include materialists and egotists, the latter being further subdivided into hedonists, predators, materialistic people, and status seekers.

The second type are those people who are veiled by light and darkness. Their veils correspond to the levels of the spirit that al-Ghazālī has described as the elements of the *niche*. Some of them are veiled by sensory darkness, meaning that they can only understand God as an object perceived by the senses. The objects which they perceive as divinities range from precious substances such as gold or silver, to beautiful human beings, to fire, the stars or the sun, or unlimited light.

More advanced than those are individuals veiled by imaginal darkness, who can only understand God as an imagined being sitting on a throne, having a body, existing in a certain place, etc. Finally, there are those who are veiled by the darkness of faulty rational comparisons who can only understand God in relation to their own attributes.<sup>67</sup>

The third type are those veiled by lights.<sup>68</sup> Among these are those who understand that God's attributes cannot be compared to those of humans. More advanced would be those who recognize God as the Mover (*muḥarrrik*) of the furthest celestial sphere which envelops the lower celestial spheres moved by angels. Most advanced are those who recognize that the "Mover" must still only be an angel obeying the Lord who "is a mover of everything by means of command ('*amr*), not direct contact."<sup>69</sup> Those who have arrived (*wāṣilūn*) have found God to be beyond any of these descriptions. Like Ibrāhīm, they recognize that all their previous understandings of God are faulty.

Therefore, they have turned their faces from the one who moves the heavens, from the one who moves the furthest celestial body, from the one who commands moving them, to Him who originates the heavens, originates the furthest celestial body, and originates the one who commands moving the heavens. They have arrived at an existent thing that is incomparable with everything that their sight had perceived. Hence, the august glories of His face – the First, the Highest – burn up everything perceived by the sights and insights of the observers. Thus, they find Him too holy for and incomparable with all that we described earlier.<sup>70</sup>

Some who reach this stage remain as perceivers and yet what they perceive completely disappears. Others, the elect of the elect (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*), cease to observe themselves as well; in other words, the perceiver himself disappears, as in *Everything is being annihilated except His face* (28:88).<sup>71</sup> This self-disclosure of God (*tajallī*) occurs in stages for some, as was the case with Ibrāhīm, and for others all at once, as was the case with Muḥammad.<sup>72</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's interpretation of the *niche* was clearly influenced by Ibn Sīnā's interpretation in *Al-Ishārāt wa 'l-tanbihāt*,<sup>73</sup> but while the similarities between the two interpretations are undeniable, al-Ghazālī makes significant modifications. While the five elements described in Ibn Sīnā's version are all parts of the intellect (*ʿaql*) which only man possesses, al-Ghazālī's version calls the faculties "spirit" (*rūḥ*) which opens up the metaphor to include all types of perception, even those shared with animals.<sup>74</sup> This change enables al-Ghazālī to classify faulty notions of God based on whether the possessor of those beliefs is bound by the limitations of animal or human perceptions.

Al-Kāshānī's interpretation of the Light Verse suggests a familiarity with the interpretations of both al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā. He explains the elements of the niche as the integrated physical and spiritual elements of man which combine to enable him to achieve perfection. The *niche* represents the dark body (*jasad*)

which is illuminated by the *lamp* of the spirit (*rūḥ*). The *glass* represents the heart which is both illuminated by the spirit and illuminates things other than itself.

The *glass* is likened to a *glittering star* because of its openness, its extreme luminosity, its high position, and the plenitude of its rays, as this is the state (*ḥāl*) of the heart (*qalb*).<sup>75</sup>

The *glass* of the heart is *lit from a blessed olive tree* which is the sanctified soul (*al-nafs al-qudsiyya*) whose faculties grow up out of the earth of the body through the space of the heart to the heaven of the spirit. Its fruits are morals, works, and perceptions. Every kind of mystic knowledge and states are dependent upon it. It is *neither of the east nor the west* because “the soul is more subtle and luminous than the body and more dense than the spirit.” Its *oil* is preparedness (*isti'dād*) which *would well-nigh shine even if no fire*, the Active Intelligence (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*) *touched it*.<sup>76</sup>

Al-Nisābūrī's commentary on the niche is interesting in that it gives two different levels of interpretation, one of which corresponds to the “world of horizons” and the other of which corresponds to the “world of souls.”<sup>77</sup> The first interpretation refers to the macrocosm, the Cosmos.

The *niche* is the world of bodies (*ajsām*). The *glass* is the Throne, the *lamp* is the Footstool, and the tree is the Tree of the Kingdom (*malakūt*) which is the inward part (*bāṭin*) of the world of bodies. It rises neither to the east of eternity and timelessness nor to the west of annihilation (*fanā*) and nonexistence. Rather it is created for the everlastingness in which annihilation never occurs.

*Whose oil*, which is the world of spirits (*arwāḥ*), *would well-nigh shine*, i.e., become manifest from nonexistence into the world of engendered form (*'ālam al-ṣūrat al-mutawallida*) by means of the pairing (*iztidwāj*) of the world of the unseen with [the world] of witnessing *even if no fire*, the fire of the divine power, *touched it* and that is because of the nearness of its character to existence.

*Light upon light*. The first is the light of the merciful attribute and the second is the light of the Throne, as in His saying, *The Merciful sat upon the throne* (20:5). His words, *God guides whom He wills to his/His light* is an allusion (*ishāra*) to the fact that the emanation (*fayḍ*) of the light of mercifulness is divided amongst everything which God wills to bring into existence from the Throne to that which is under the earth.<sup>78</sup>

The second interpretation refers to the microcosm, man. Like his predecessors, al-Nisābūrī understands the different elements of the niche as referring to the various faculties of man which must be developed in order to achieve perfection, a state in which man realizes the nature of the mysterious relationship between God and man. While a significant portion of the *Mishkāṭ al-anwār* is devoted to the

explanation of this concept, al-Nīsābūrī merely alludes to it through the famous *ḥadīth* of supererogatory acts, a *ḥadīth* understood by Ṣūfīs as referring to the states of annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*).<sup>79</sup>

The *niche* is the body, the *glass* is the heart, the *lamp* is the innermost heart (*sirr*), and the *tree* is the tree of spirituality (*al-rūḥāniyya*) which has been created for subsistence (*baqā'*) as has been described.<sup>80</sup> The *oil* is the human spirit (*al-rūḥ al-insāniyya*) which is profoundly receptive to the light of gnosis (*irfān*) and the *fire* is the fire of God's self-disclosure (*tajallī*) and guidance in eternity. When it is combined with the light of the intellect (*'aql*) it becomes *light upon light*. When the *lamp* of the innermost heart (*sirr*) of *whom He wills* becomes illuminated by the light of timelessness, the *glass* of the heart and the *niche* of the body become illuminated. Their rays emerge from the aperture of the physical senses (*hawāss*) and the earth of humanity (*al-bashariyya*) is illuminated, just as He said, *the earth will shine with the light of its Lord* (39:69). This is the station (*maqām*) of the *ḥadīth*, "I am his hearing, his seeing..."<sup>81</sup>

Al-Nīsābūrī's interpretation seems to suggest that, having experienced annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*), the perfected man is both illuminated by the light he receives through the fire of God's self-disclosure (*tajallī*) and in turn illuminates others by this light which emerges from the "aperture of the physical senses (*hawāss*)."

In the interpretations of Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī, al-Kāshānī and al-Nīsābūrī, each and every element of the Qur'anic verse is explained by a single term. The similarities and differences in the resulting interpretations can be seen in Table 9.1. Another approach seen in Ṣūfī interpretations of the Light Verse has more in common with that of the interpretation of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq previously quoted. Here, the words open up to larger meanings rather than one-to-one correspondences and often refer to states in the believer. The believer is both created from light and engaged in an ongoing process of receiving light. To reach the higher states of *light upon light* the believer must be determined in his resolve to avoid man's natural tendency towards laziness, to allow himself to respond to the different states through which he travels, using the tension within and between them to motivate himself to continue in his exertions. This is how the phrase *neither of the east nor the west* was understood by Ja'far al-Ṣādiq:

Neither the fear which imposes despair nor the hope which brings about delight. One should stand between fear and hope.<sup>82</sup>

Al-Qushayrī writes,

The allusion (*ishāra*) in it is to the fact that the fear in their hearts should not be separate from the hope so that one would come close to despair. Neither should their hope be separate from fear so that one would come close to complacency. Rather the two should be balanced so that one

Table 9.1 A comparison of interpretations of the elements of the niche in the Light Verse (Qur'an 24:35)

	<i>Ibn Sīnā</i>	<i>Al-Ghazālī</i>	<i>Al-Kāshānī</i>	<i>Al-Nisābūrī</i>	
				<i>Macrocosm</i>	<i>Microcosm</i>
<i>niche</i>	material intellect ( <i>'aql ḥayūlīyya</i> )	sensory spirit ( <i>rūḥ ḥassās</i> )	Body ( <i>jasad</i> )	world of bodies ( <i>ajṣām</i> )	Body ( <i>jasad</i> )
<i>glass</i>	habitual intellect ( <i>'aql bi'l-malakā</i> )	imaginal spirit ( <i>rūḥ khayālī</i> )	heart ( <i>qalb</i> )	the throne	heart ( <i>qalb</i> )
<i>lamp</i>	actual intellect ( <i>'aql bi'l-fi'l</i> )	rational spirit ( <i>rūḥ 'aqlī</i> )	Spirit ( <i>rūḥ</i> )	the footstool	innermost heart ( <i>sirr</i> )
<i>tree</i>	Contemplation ( <i>fikra</i> )	reflective spirit ( <i>rūḥ fikrī</i> )	holy soul ( <i>nafs qudsīyya</i> )	the tree of the kingdom ( <i>malakūt</i> )	the tree of spirituality ( <i>rūḥāniyya</i> )
<i>oil</i>	Conjecture ( <i>ḥads</i> )	holy spirit ( <i>rūḥ qudsī</i> )	Preparedness ( <i>ist'idād</i> )	world of spirits ( <i>arwāḥ</i> )	human spirit ( <i>rūḥ insāniyya</i> )
<i>fire</i>	Active Intellect ( <i>'aql fā'āl</i> )	(not specified)	Active Intellect ( <i>'aql fā'āl</i> )	divine power ( <i>qudra ilāhiyya</i> )	God's self-disclosure ( <i>tajallī</i> )

does not prevail over the other. Their awe (*hayba*) should come together with their intimacy (*uns*), their contracted state (*qabḍ*) with their expanded state (*bast*), their consciousness (*ṣaḥw*) with their effacement (*maḥw*), their subsistence (*baqā'*) with their annihilation (*fanā'*), their performance of the courtesies (*ādāb*) of the religious law with their realization of the all-comprehensive reality (*jawām'ī'l-haqīqa*).<sup>83</sup>

The believer's states are part of a dynamic process which combines both the believer's efforts and God's grace. *Light upon light* appears to him in his different states until he reaches a stage where words can no longer describe what has been unveiled to him. Al-Qushayrī is usually thought of as a moderate Ṣūfī, but what he describes at the end of this passage appears to hint at something like the concept of the unity of God as interpreted in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār*.

It is said that the effect of the light of the heart is the continuance of a state of agitation which does not allow one to remain lazy. One comes to his journey by the use of his reflection (*fīkr*) and God nourishes him by the light of the success He grants until none of the obstacles to spiritual effort (*ijtihād*) can hold him back, neither love of leadership, nor the inclination to evil, nor indulgence. When the truth of one's forgetfulness is disclosed and vision takes hold of his situation, knowledge will be most certainly obtained. Then he will continue to increase in certainty (*yaqīn*) upon certainty based on what he sees in the interaction of contraction (*qabḍ*) and expansion (*bast*). The reward and compensation is in the increase of unveiling (*kashf*) upon the increase in effort and the obtainment of ecstasy (*wajḍ*) when performing the litany (*wird*).

Then after it there is the light of interaction (*mu'āmala*), then the light of the mutual waystation (*munāzala*), and the broad daylight of the connection (*muwāṣala*). The suns of the declaration of unity (*tawḥīd*) shine and there are no clouds in the sky of their secrets and no fog in its air. God said, *light upon light, God guides whom He wills to His light*.

It is said that the light of appeal (*muṭālaba*) appears in the heart and prompts its owner to settle his account. When he has seen his record and his prior disobedience, the light of examination (*mu'āyana*) comes to him and he reverts to blaming himself and drinks cups of remorse. Then he rises up from this by persistence in his goal and purification from what remained with him from the times of his lassitude. When he has become upright in that which was revealed by the light of observation (*murāqaba*), then he knows that God watches over him. After this is the light of beholding (*muḥāḍara*) which are flashes (*lawā'ih*) that appear in the innermost hearts (*sarā'ir*). Then after that is the light of unveiling (*mukāshafa*) and that is by means of the self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of the attributes (*ṣifāt*). Then after it is the light of witnessing (*mushāhada*) and his night becomes day, his stars moons, and his moons full moons, and his full moons suns.

Then after this are the lights of the declaration of oneness (*tawhīd*) and at the same time disengagement (*tajrīd*) is realized by the qualities of single-mindedness (*tafrīd*). Then no expression (*ibāra*) can encompass it and no allusion (*ishāra*) can comprehend it. Explanations at that point become silent, evidence is effaced and the witnessing of another is absurd. This is the point *when the sun will be wrapped up, when the stars will become dull, when the mountains will be set moving, and when the pregnant camels will be neglected* (81:4) and *when the heavens will be split asunder* (84:1) and *split open* (82:1). All of these are different parts of the universe and that which was from nonexistence in them will end up in nonexistence. That which subsists through them is other than them and that which exists through them is other than them. Unity (*aḥadiyya*) is exalted, everlastingness is sublime, perpetuity (*daymūmiyya*) is sanctified, and the divinity is unblemished.<sup>84</sup>

Al-Qushayrī breaks through the common understanding of the metaphor of light here by focusing on its qualities of energy and movement. Rather than accepting the simple equivalence of light as guidance, he gives us the unusual image of light as something agitating to the heart. What al-Qushayrī is talking about becomes less clear as he moves from the heart to the innermost secret (*sirr*, pl. *sarā'ir*) and he gives up on language entirely when it comes to the state of annihilation.

Al-Maybudī's commentary also recalls the interpretation of Ja'far al-Šādiq, in his comments on the lights of Muḥammad and the believer.

Know that the inner lights are different in their respective degrees. The first is the light of submission (*islām*) and with the submission is the light of sincerity. Another light is faith (*imān*) and with faith is the light of truthfulness. Another light is doing beautiful acts (*iḥsān*) and with doing beautiful acts is the light of certainty. The splendor of submission is in the light of sincerity and the splendor of faith is in the light of truthfulness and the splendor of doing beautiful acts is in the light of certainty. These are waystations (*manāzil*) on the path of the religious law and stations (*maqāmāt*) of the general believers. There is another light and state (*ḥāl*) as well for the people of truth (*ahl al-ḥaqīqat*) and the brave youths (*javān-mardān*) of the way, the light of perspicacity (*firāsāt*) and with perspicacity is the light of unveiling (*mukāshifat*). There is also the light of uprightness and the light of witnessing (*mushāhadat*). There is also the light of declaring God's unity (*tawhīd*) and with declaring God's unity there is the light of nearness (*qurbat*) in the presence of "witness" (*indiyyat*).

Until the servant has been in these stations, he will be captive to his own way. From here the allurements of God (*ḥaqq*) begins again, a divine attraction (*jadhba*) which unites and connects the lights, the light of grandeur, the light of majesty, the light of subtlety, the light of beauty,

the light of awe, the light of jealousy, the light of nearness, the light of divinity, and the light of he-ness (*huwiyyat*). These are those of which the Lord of the Worlds said, *light upon light*.

The situation reaches the point where servanthood (*‘ubūdiyyat*) becomes invisible in the light of lordship (*rubūdiyyat*). In all the world these lights have only reached perfection and nearness to the possessor of majesty in the Arab Muṣṭafā. Everyone has a part of these but he has the whole because he is entirely perfect, the totality of beauty and the *qibla* of virtues.<sup>85</sup>

*The similitude of his light.* One group of commentators has said that the pronoun “his” refers to Muṣṭafā, since his character was light, his robe of honor light, his lineage light, his birth light, his witnessing light, his interactions light, and his miracle light. He himself was in his own essence *light upon light*. His superiority was such that in his face was the light of mercy, in his eyes the light of admonition, in his speech the light of wisdom, in the space between his shoulders the light of prophecy, in his palms the light of munificence, in his feet the light of service, in his hair the light of beauty, in his disposition the light of humility, in his breast the light of contentment, in his secret the light of purity, in his essence the light of obedience, in his obedience the light of declaring the unity of God (*tawḥīd*), in his declaring the unity of God the light of realization (*taḥqīq*), in his realization the light of God’s good fortune (*tawfīq*), in his silence the light of exaltation, in his exaltation the light of declaring surrender (*taslīm*). A poem:

A sword of Indian steel drawn from amongst the swords of God.<sup>86</sup>

Al-Maybudī combines this style of interpretation with the relating of *aḥādīth* and traditions from the Companions and the Followers of the Prophet which illustrate the light possessed by believers. More so than any of the other commentators studied here, al-Maybudī uses and develops the literary quality of this material. The first *ḥadīth* he cites is an appealing anecdote from the Prophet concerning the superior light of those believers who have suffered the most.

It is related that Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī<sup>87</sup> said: I was among a group of poor emigrants, some of whom were veiling others from their nakedness. We were listening to the recitation of the Qur’ān. The Prophet came up and stood over us. The reciter saw him and became silent. He greeted him, saying, “What are you doing?” We said, “O Messenger of God, the reciter is reciting to us and we are listening to his recitation.” The Messenger of God said, “Praise be to God who has made those in my community towards whom I have been commanded to make myself patient.” Then he sat down amidst us in order to occupy himself with us . . . The faces [of the poor emigrants] became illuminated . . . The Prophet said, “Rejoice you who have nothing! You will enter the garden in perfect light before the wealthy believers by half of a day whose reckoning will be five hundred years.”<sup>88</sup>

The next *ḥadīth* which al-Maybudī cites is, “God created His creation in darkness, then cast some of His light upon them.”<sup>89</sup> Al-Maybudī expands the imagery of the *ḥadīth* and links the primordial event it describes to the possibility of states in the believer in this world.

The similitude of this light is such that Muṣṭafā has said, “God created the creation in darkness then sprinkled upon them some of His light.” Mankind was a handful of dust remaining in their own darkness, a darkness whose quality had become bewilderment, remaining unaware in the veil of creation. Everything in the pre-eternal heavens received the rain of the lights of eternity. The dust became narcissus, the stone became the jewel, the color of the heavens and the earth followed in each other’s footsteps. It is said that the quality of “dustness” is everything which is darkness but a quality is everything which should be bright and pure. A subtle substance (*laṭīfa*) became joined to that quality, and the expression for that subtle substance is found in “He sprinkled upon them some of His light.” They asked, “O Messenger of God, what are the signs of this light?”<sup>90</sup> He said, When the light is made to enter the heart, the breast expands.” When the standard of the just sultan enters the city, no seat remains for the crowd. When the breast becomes open with the divine light, the aspiration (*himma*) becomes high, the sad becomes tranquil, and the enemy the friend. Dispersion becomes union (*jamʿ*) in the heart, the carpet of subsistence (*baqāʾ*) is spread out while the mat of annihilation (*fanāʾ*) is rolled up, and the cloister of the anxiety is bolted while the garden of union (*wiṣāl*) is opened.<sup>91</sup>

Al-Maybudī’s last illustration is a long story which he says is taken from the traditions concerning an unnamed scholar among the Followers of the Prophet. The scholar had been captured while participating in one of the military campaigns against the Roman army and remained among the Romans for some time. One day he was present with some 30,000 Romans who had gathered in the desert to hear a bishop who came out of his monastery once every four years to give advice to the people. The bishop ascended the pulpit but stood there without speaking. Finally he told his audience that he was unable to speak to them because of the Muslim amongst them. The people did not know who this was and the Muslim was afraid to identify himself, but the bishop was able to find him by looking closely into the faces of the people. He asked him to come and speak with him.

[The narrator of this tale said]: He said to me, “You are a Muslim?”

I said, “Yes, I am a Muslim.”

He said, “Are you among those who are knowledgeable or ignorant?”

I said, “Regarding that which I know I am knowledgeable and that which I do not know I am a student. I am not one of the ignorant.”

He said, “I have three questions I would like to ask you and have you answer.”

I said, “I will give you the answers on the condition that you tell me how you recognized me and on the condition that I may ask you three questions.” The two made a pact and a promise.

[The narrator continued.] Then the bishop put his mouth to my ear and softly whispered in a voice hidden from the Romans, “I knew you by the light of your faith. I recognized the light of faith and unity in you which shone from your face.” Then in a loud voice he questioned me. “Your messenger has said to you that Paradise is a tree of which every lofty chamber is a branch. What is the similitude of that in the world?”

I said, “The similitude of that tree in the world is the sun, with an orb every ray of which is a branch.”

The bishop said, “You have spoken truly.” He asked the second question: “Your messenger said that the people of Paradise consume food and drink but no defilement comes out of them. What is the similitude of that in the world?”

I said, “The embryo in the womb of its mother who eats but does not defecate.”

The bishop said, “You have spoken truly.” He asked the third question. “The messenger of God said that on the Day of Resurrection every morsel, atom and grain of alms will be like a great mountain on the Scales. What is the similitude of that in the world?”

I said, “When the sun rises at daybreak or sets in the evening it causes the ruins of a house which is in reality short to appear tall.”

The bishop said, “You have spoken truly.”

Then the Muslim asked him, “What is the number of the doors of the Gardens?”

He said, “Eight.”

He said, “What are the numbers of the doors of Hell?”

He said, “Seven.”

He said, “What is it that is written on the door of the Garden?”

The Muslim said that when he asked this of him, the bishop was unable to give an answer. The Romans called out to him to give an answer so that this stranger would not say that the bishop did not know. The bishop said, “If this answer is forced, it will not bode well for the belt (*zunnār*)<sup>92</sup> and the cross.” He tore open his belt and threw down his cross and said in a loud voice, “It is written on the door of the Garden that there is no God but God and Muḥammad is the messenger of God!”<sup>93</sup>

When the Romans heard this they began to throw rocks and insults at the bishop. The bishop wept and called out to tell the people that 700 angels were coming to carry 700 martyrs to their deaths, and it did come to pass that 700 Romans joined the bishop that day in becoming Muslims and were killed by their fellow Romans. Al-Maybudī tells us that

the point of this tale is that the light of one believer who declared the unity of God shone amongst the handful of fighters and infidels so that the bishop saw and did what he did.<sup>94</sup>

In this story the inner light of the believer is not merely a metaphor for faith, but a perceptible light which can be seen, at least by some.

What unites the very different styles of the Şūfī commentaries cited here is the way in which they avoid using the word “light” in this Qur’ānic verse as a simple metaphor for “guidance” or something similar. The issue, as Izutsu explains in an article on metaphorical thinking in Iranian Şūfism, has to do with the relationship between language and one’s understanding of reality. Aristotle defines metaphor in his *Poetics* as a linguistic sign functioning in a dual role by pointing simultaneously to a literal or conventional meaning and to another figurative meaning or non-conventional. Izutsu suggests that this is a problematic definition for Şūfīs because, for them, what would ordinarily be the figurative meaning is, in fact, the more literal or “real” meaning and correspondingly, the conventional meaning is the more figurative. He is not saying that Şūfīs never use metaphors in the Aristotelian sense of the term, but he distinguishes these from what he calls “archetypal metaphors” like light and darkness. Archetypal metaphors are not artificially or artistically created but rather are the result of mystic experience. When the mystic experiences spiritual light, he is not perceiving something similar to light, but rather sees a light far more powerful and “real” than physical light. The mystic does not choose a metaphor to describe his visionary experience; the metaphor or symbol does not point to something other than itself but rather is an indicator of its own self and the mystic has merely perceived this reality. Seen from the outside, the mystic’s description of this reality appears to be a metaphor, but this is only because the observer has not grasped the true nature of things.<sup>95</sup>

The use of the word “light” in the manner described by Izutsu does seem to occur in many of the Şūfī interpretations cited here. However, the interpretations are best characterized as expressing more than one type of language use, by both an acceptance and elaboration of the meaning of “light” as “guidance” and a description of another, more literal, meaning similar to the Prophet’s statement, “I see a light.” The acceptance of interpretations based on this literal understanding of “light” will depend on the reader’s acceptance or rejection of subjective mystical experience.

## CONCLUSION

Although the styles of the Ṣūfī commentaries studied here are quite different, there is a shared hermeneutical base of assumptions concerning the nature of the Qur'ānic text, the way in which knowledge of its meanings is acquired, and the nature of the self who seeks understanding. The first of these assumptions is that the Qur'ān is a multi-layered and ambiguous text open to endless interpretation, a concept most frequently illustrated by the metaphor of the ocean and its treasures. However, this insistence upon the infinite possibilities of the text is not considered license justifying the production of any and all interpretations. The fact that the ocean can be a dangerous place corresponds, in this metaphor, to the dangers that Ṣūfīs identify in attempting to understand God's words. Al-Ghazālī, as we have seen, suggests that those who are not good swimmers should not even try. Al-Simnānī's use of the *ḥadīth* prohibiting interpretation by mere personal opinion (*ra'y*) locates the possibility for error at each level of interpretation.

The problem that open-ended interpretation presents is seen as both spiritual and political by Ṣūfīs in that it comprises both a fundamental danger to one's eternal soul and a more immediate danger in this world from other Muslims who consider Ṣūfī interpretations as a distortion of the true meanings of the Qur'ānic text. Al-Ghazālī's defense of Ṣūfī interpretation in his *Fayṣal al-tafrīqā* is an attempt to protect Ṣūfīs from the serious legal reprisals connected to the charge of disbelief (*takfīr*). The weaknesses of his arguments in this book result from the fact that he attempts to rebut his opponents on their own terms rather than questioning their basic assumptions. His strongest argument, found in the *Ihyā' ulūm al-dīn*, is the simplest, namely that restricting the meaning of the Qur'ān to what has been transmitted from the Companions and Followers amounts to an unacceptable restriction of the Qur'ān's potentiality. Although most obvious in al-Ghazālī, the political tension that Ṣūfī interpretations created is apparent in other writings studied here as well, in the use of the terms "common people" (*'awāmm*) and "elite" (*khawāṣṣ*), a somewhat defensive dichotomy reflecting judgment on if not outright disdain for those who disagree with Ṣūfī concepts and methodology. The references to the Ibn Mas'ūd *ḥadīth* and the traditions from 'Alī and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq serve to legitimize the Ṣūfī approach by showing its conformity with the views of the Companions and Followers.