

## Philip T. Nicholson

### Visions of Light, Limbic Seizures and the Origins of Human Religions

The evidence available in traditional sources suggests that the founders of all of the world's major religions—Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Manichaeism and Islam—were inspired by seeing flashes of a fiery light. Most of these founders also saw visions of a different kind of light, visions of green light-rings or dark blue whorls. This presentation by a medical writer will trace how these two types of visionary experience are connected, not only in those traditional sources, but also by virtue of a neurologically-grounded analysis of what has to take place in the human brain in order for light sensations with certain specific characteristics to appear in the visual field. The virtually universal distribution of references to light visions in ethnographic and historic studies of human religions, religious texts, mystic narratives and prehistoric rock art supports the hypothesis that an ability to see these visions has often been a prerequisite for being recognized and celebrated as a charismatic prophet, priest, shaman or guru.

The presentation focuses first on the visions of fiery light seen by founders. Similar metaphors are used to describe these visions—lightning flashes, dancing flames, direct glimpses of sun, or bright moonlight reflecting off a pond. These descriptions are consistent with the eruption of a seizure at the terminal regions of the visual pathways, i.e., in the hippocampus, that then spreads contralaterally and into adjacent temporolimbic regions. Limbic seizures often evoke dramatic changes in emotions and behaviors, changes that overlap what pious believers expect to see in the saints of their religions.

The link between the extraordinary, paroxysmal visions and the more prosaic visions of green light-rings and dark blue whorls can be explicitly traced in the meditation texts of ancient India, China and Tibet. In India, dating from the Soma ritual described in the Rig Veda through the Upanishads to the Tantras, there is consensus that expert meditators will see a predictable progression of light visions that begins with visions of green light-rings, then visions of dark blue whorls, then, after a few intermediate visions, the vision celebrated as the ultimate in mystical experience—the ecstatic vision of lightning-like flashes. A similar progression of meditation-induced light visions is described in Tibetan Buddhist texts and also in some early Chinese Daoist texts.

Visions of green and dark blue lights assume important roles in many human religions other than those discussed. In ancient Egypt, priests painted a ring on the forehead of a dead pharaoh and summoned "The Eye of Horus, The Green One," to carry the soul into the *Dwat*. In Australia, aboriginal Wise Men use visions of rings, "Sacred Waterholes," to enter the Dreamtime where they see visions of green and blue "Eye-Things" that represent the body of the "Rainbow Serpent" stripped of the fiery yellow and orange lights that burn the Serpent's back during rainstorms. The Mayan god of transformations, "K'awil," sends dead kings to the stars through green and blue "feathers" lining the gullet of his spirit-helper, the "Plumed Vision Serpent."