

Light and Dark Imagery in the Bible

At times, we in the Christian church use “light” imagery in positive ways, and “dark” imagery in negative ways. Such stark contrasts are deeply painful for Black peoples, and using light and dark in such a way contravenes the United Church’s anti-racism policy and guidelines.

Some people are confused about the reasons for this, since many dark and light references are found throughout the Bible, such as:

The people have walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)

It is true that in the Bible darkness is seen as the antithesis of light, with light being the symbol of God’s purity, glory, and wisdom. The Bible does use darkness to symbolize depravity, disobedience to God, the unenviable place of the dead, the place where the wicked sit, and a place of punishment where wrongdoers will be cast into.

In typical biblical fashion, however, symbolic language is elastic. Darkness is also the place out of which God speaks, encompassing the very presence of God. As well, it is the envelope of God’s glory. Further, it is darkness in the sky that makes it possible for the stars to be visible—including the Bethlehem star.

The problem that the United Church’s anti-racism policy is trying to address has to do with what is called the racialization of the terms “white” and “black.” This occurred when some of the leading European enlightenment philosophers, academics, and scientist arbitrarily assigned the positive and “pure” characteristics of the term “light” to White people (i.e., Europeans), and ascribed to non-Europeans, including the brown and Black peoples of the world, the “negative” characteristics of the term “dark.”

In the 1700s, German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote: “Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below...at the lowest point.” Before this time, the positive and negative aspects of light and dark were not systematically assigned to different peoples. Once this separation of peoples based on race became entrenched in education, science, economic, social, and political policies and activities of colonial conquest and enslavement, it was virtually impossible to use these terms in ways devoid of a racist agenda.

Currently, as the United Church strives to live into its commitments to racial justice and to becoming an intercultural church, examining our language—and its historical contexts—is one way of seeking transformation.

—Anthony D. Bailey, *written to supplement study resources for the Sankofa DVD*
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