

ARTICLE

‘Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light’: Re-thinking Advent Themes of Darkness with Gregory of Nyssa

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Abstract

This essay addresses challenges that emerged during Advent through recent experience of lecturing at Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale. For many of my students, Advent 2020 presented particular challenges since they found that the recurring utilization of ‘darkness’ as a metaphor for sin and death did not sit easily with their commitment to anti-racist thought and practice. This essay does not attempt to provide a definitive model for how Anglicans might engage fully with Advent themes, but serves as a paper to ‘think with’ in which the author (a) engages with Michael Battle’s work on Anglican spirituality and (b) describes how her own expertise on Gregory of Nyssa was brought to bear on present needs. The Advent focus on darkness and light, I propose, does not need to be circumvented but provides Anglicans who are attentive to the problems of racism with an opportunity to examine further their own approach to ‘darkness’.

Keywords: Advent, darkness, Gregory of Nyssa, light

Introduction

Turn to page 211 of *The Book of Common Prayer according to the use of the Episcopal Church* and you will find the Collect for the First Sunday of Advent:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead,

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we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*²

This collect prompted a number of my students to reflect upon approaches to ‘darkness’ in Christian spirituality as they were preparing to lead worship during Advent 2020. Crudely put, Advent depicts darkness as ‘bad’ and light as ‘good’. Formed by various versions of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the students were accustomed to praying collects such as this; however, a heightened awareness of racism, along with a desire to pursue anti-racist thought and practice, grew among the faculty and students at Berkeley Divinity School following George Floyd’s murder in May 2020. When some of my students asked for help in journeying through Advent, after some conversations, I offered reflections from my wider work on Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. These ancient sermons provide a theological vision of darkness that, I propose, shifts the focus of traditional Advent themes.³

As a scholar who seeks to pursue academic work as that which contributes to her own spirituality, I prayed my way through the texts before beginning work on them.⁴ This activity brought to the fore some of my own unconscious bias with respect to darkness, and it was from this perspective that I commended Gregory’s homilies to my students. I will begin by problematizing the use of darkness in Anglican spirituality in conversation with Michael Battle’s work on this pursuit, after which I will turn to Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. In these, readers encounter darkness depicted in approximately three modes, I argue, ranging from the most negative utilizations to the most positive.⁵ The homilies, I propose, provide Anglicans attentive to the problems of racism with an opportunity to examine their own approach to ‘darkness’.⁶

²Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church Together with The Psalter or Psalms of David According to the use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), p. 211, italics original. This essay emerged from many hours of conversations and prayers with excellent students and I am indebted to them for furthering my way on this journey. Many thanks also to Ben Fulford and Kyle Lambelet. Each asked me difficult, but important questions and pointed me to necessary secondary literature; my colleague at the time, the Right Reverend Andrew McGowan read an early draft and blessed it for publication. Finally, thank you to my two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback.

³Andrew Prevot wrote an excellent essay exploring similar themes (although he does not begin with liturgy), but he advocates against drawing on mystical theology for conversations on race; ‘Divine Opacity: Mystical Theology, Black Theology, and the Problem of Light-Dark Aesthetics’, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 16.2 (2016), pp. 166-88. Since I write here from an Anglican perspective, I am seeking to utilize the gifts of the broader tradition. I intend, however, to pay attention to what could be construed as ‘racist’ to a modern ear.

⁴On the integrity of theology and prayer, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, ‘Theology and Sanctity’, in *Explorations in Theology, Volume I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), pp. 181-209; Rowan Williams, ‘Theological Integrity’, *New Blackfriars* 72.847 (1991), pp. 140-51.

⁵Commentators often focus either on darkness as ‘bad’ or darkness as ‘divine’, but rarely on the full breadth of Gregory’s vision. To the best of my knowledge, no scholars have identified three modes of darkness in the homilies. For examples of singular approaches, see Mark S.M. Scott, ‘Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa’s Soteriological Exegesis of the “Black and Beautiful” Bride in Song of Songs 1:5’, *Harvard Theological Review* 99.1 (2006), pp. 65-83; Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 277.

⁶I hesitated over whether to write ‘their’ or ‘our’ above, since I identify as an ‘Anglican’.

‘Does Praying this Collect Make Me a “Racist”?’

A student came to me with this question in the week preceding Advent: ‘Does praying this collect make me a “racist”?’ At the same time, it became clear from social media that my students were not alone in experiencing – as a stumbling block – Advent prayers and themes. My Twitter feed comprised a mixture of theologians, lay Anglicans, and clergy wrestling together with how to approach the ‘darkness’ in Advent after summer 2020. Related to this, The Very Revd Dr Michael Battle talked on ‘Black Lives Matter: A Spiritual Response’ at Berkeley Divinity School following the murder of George Floyd.⁷ As a professor at the seminary, I attended his lecture, inspired by the myriad possibilities he presented.

I was particularly struck by Battle’s central proposal in which he sought to learn from saints who, he argued, utilize ‘complex themes of light and darkness in Christian spirituality’.⁸ Battle later published his lecture, which explores these themes with respect to the lives of Saints Antony of Egypt and Hildegard of Bingen. He begins by turning to Jn 3.19 to describe his own experience as a black Anglican priest in the USA: ‘For me it is complicated because when John implies that darkness is evil, I begin to think about my own darkness.’⁹ Battle’s testimony resonates with the questions raised in this essay. For those alert to the problems of racism Battle problematizes the use of darkness in Anglican spirituality while also providing a way into the conversation for those who are not so inclined. He recalls what life is like for him after the public murder of George Floyd: ‘Every time I see a police car in my rearview mirror, I feel a knee on my neck.’¹⁰ Added to this, Battle does not shy away from the ways in which ‘light and whiteness came to be synonymous with white people’ in his ‘own Anglican tradition’.¹¹ Through his testimony, Battle demonstrates that the social imaginary regarding white bodies and bodies of color is implicated through contextualizing darkness negatively.¹² This highlights the importance of Anglicans re-imagining how we engage with themes of darkness and light during Advent.

Following descriptions of his own context and experience, Battle turns to discuss the harmful use of darkness in early Christian spirituality, interrogating the appearance of a demon in the form of a black boy in *The Life of Antony*.¹³ Drawing on an earlier article, Battle asks whether the demon ‘depicts racism’ in either Athanasius or

⁷The Very Revd Dr Michael Battle currently serves as the Herbert Thompson Professor of Church and Society and Director of the Desmond Tutu Center at General Theological Seminary in New York. He was appointed Six Preacher in 2010 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in recognition of his service to the Church. For his personal website, see <https://michaelbattle.com>, accessed December 13, 2021.

⁸Michael Battle, ‘Black Lives Matter: A Spiritual Response’, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 21.1 (2021), pp. 20–35 (21). Battle employs both ‘darkness’ and ‘blackness’ interchangeably in his article.

⁹Battle, ‘Black Lives Matter’, p. 28. Jn 3.19 NRSV: ‘And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.’

¹⁰Battle, ‘Black Lives Matter’, p. 31.

¹¹Battle, ‘Black Lives Matter’, p. 20. For an account of how racism became ingrained in the United States, see Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), ch. 1.

¹²Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 183.

¹³Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life* (trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003), para. 6.1, p. 69.

Antony?¹⁴ After surveying theories of ethnicity, Battle concludes that there is no universal approach in *The Life of Antony* that compares to the ‘modern associations of the word “black” – associations linked closely with the oppression and enslavement of Africans’.¹⁵ He continues, ‘When Athanasius speaks of blackness, he is talking about finitude and death; he is not talking about the identity of Africans – and, obviously, still less of African Americans. We change his sensibility and meaning by imposing our slave history upon him.’¹⁶ Battle’s argument and concluding claim – ‘Athanasius’s Antony is innocent of modernity’s obsession with blackness as a racial criterion in his internal and external struggle against evil’¹⁷ – sits within a contentious debate on race, ethnicity and blackness in early Christianity. Although it is not my purpose to resolve this debate, I will comment on its complexity in order to underline Battle’s proposal.

Conclusions regarding the intention of the early Christian writers depend, to a certain extent, on the methodologies and theories applied.¹⁸ For example, anthropologist Nina Jablonski argues that early Christian and medieval Western thought establishes a lasting concept of blackness that emphasizes ‘otherness, sin, and danger’.¹⁹ Added to this, a scholar of early Christianity, Matthijs Den Dulk, demonstrates that for Origen there are superior and inferior peoples in the world, and that the individuals who are inferior have merited their lower status. ‘Geographical location and ethnic inferiority are [also] interrelated’.²⁰ He concludes, ‘Origen defends a number of positions that exhibit substantial similarities with later racist modes of thinking.’²¹ Whatever the intention of the early Christian writers, as Joel Kemp has established, the negative symbolism of blackness was employed to full effect as an argument for ‘enslaving kidnapped Africans in later centuries’.²²

Battle does not deny such claims but suggests further work on sin as darkness.²³ Speaking from his own experience of walking through a dark night, Battle

¹⁴Michael Battle, ‘The Problem of the Aethiop: Identity and Black Identity in the Desert Tradition’, *Sewanee Theological Review* 42.4 (1999), pp. 414-28 (414).

¹⁵Battle, ‘Problem of the Aethiop’, p. 420.

¹⁶Battle, ‘Problem of the Aethiop’, pp. 424-25.

¹⁷Battle, ‘Problem of the Aethiop’, p. 416, italics original.

¹⁸For engagement with this theme that embraces the complexity of this concern in conversation with the historical context, see David Brakke, ‘Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10.3/4 (2001), pp. 501-35; Gay Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁹Nina Jablonski, *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2012), p. 135.

²⁰Matthijs Den Dulk, ‘Origen of Alexandria and the History of Racism as a Theological Problem’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 71.1 (2020), pp. 164-95 (172). Also see Aaron P. Johnson, ‘The Blackness of Ethiopians: Classical Ethnography and Eusebius’s Commentary on the Psalms’, *Harvard Theological Review* 99.2 (2006), pp. 165-86.

²¹Den Dulk, ‘Origen of Alexandria’, p. 164.

²²Joel B. Kemp, ‘Racializing Cain, Demonizing Blackness, and Legalizing Discrimination: Proposal for Reception of Cain and America’s Racial Caste System’, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 48.4 (2021), pp. 377-99. In a further approach to this question, Anna N. Williams argues that Christian theology has no need of ‘othering’ and therefore might apply blackness positively; see ‘Assimilation and Otherness: The Theological Significance of *Négritude*’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.3 (2009), pp. 248-70.

²³While Battle does not claim to read the texts reparatively, it seems to me that his method is similar to the reparative reading of texts proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She writes, ‘Because there can be terrible

comments that ‘Africans do not like blundering around in the dark any more than Europeans’.²⁴ He argues that it is important to differentiate between ‘blackness’ as it relates to bodies and ‘blackness’ as it equates to ‘walking in darkness’. Battle argues that in order to transcend ‘the oppressive existence that we may . . . appropriately call “black” – “walking in darkness”’, we need ‘more explicit development’ on ‘this kind of “blackness” with sin’.²⁵ In response to Battle’s proposal, let us turn to Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. The breadth of Gregory’s theological vision of darkness, I argue, contributes to how we understand darkness as sin, while also complexifying the Advent themes in which, crudely put, darkness is depicted as ‘bad’ and light as ‘good’.

Darkness in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*

Themes of darkness weave through Gregory’s homilies. On each occasion, Gregory responds to what is written in the biblical text and does not introduce these themes arbitrarily, albeit he develops them with remarkable theological imagination. First, let me pause to note that my aim is neither to defend Gregory from accusations of racism, nor do I aim to accuse him.²⁶ Along with Battle, I am interested in what we can learn from early Christian spiritual writers.²⁷ That said, as a white woman who aims to pay attention to the sins of racism, I experienced great discomfort while reading some of Gregory’s depictions of darkness. To describe Gregory as ‘racist’ is anachronistic, at the same time I do not want to deny the effect of sin symbolized as ‘darkness’ in our time. With this in mind, let us turn to Gregory’s hermeneutics to establish how these ground his interpretations of darkness in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, before moving on to examine the theological breadth of darkness.²⁸

surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did’ (*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003], p. 146).

²⁴Battle, ‘Problem of the Aethiop’, p. 426.

²⁵Battle, ‘Problem of the Aethiop’, pp. 427–28. Battle connects spirituality to race in ‘Race, Spirituality, and Reconciliation’, in Mark Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke, and Martyn Percy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 545–58. For further reflection on Anglican spirituality, see Ann Loades, ‘Anglican Spirituality’, in Chapman *et al.*, *Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*, pp. 149–64.

²⁶Scott discusses Gregory’s use of darkness as a symbol for sin in ‘Shades of Grace’, pp. 65–83. Scott’s essay does not reach into the varied forms of darkness but focuses on that which might be construed as ‘racist’.

²⁷Also see J. Cameron Carter on Gregory as a ‘fourth-century “abolitionist” intellectual’. Carter is interested in the ‘defining features of Gregory’s vision of the just society’ (*Race: A Theological Account* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], p. 231).

²⁸Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs* will be referenced using *GNO*. The Greek text used throughout this essay is Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum*, in Hermannus Langerbeck (ed.), *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (Leiden: Brill, 1952), vol. VI. Unless noted otherwise, the English translations cited are taken from *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* (trans. Richard A. Norris Jr; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2012).

Readers find an account of Gregory's approach to color in the Song of Songs – including 'black' – halfway through his first homily.²⁹ Here, Gregory describes with broad brush strokes his spiritual interpretation of the Song. Pointing to King Solomon, Gregory argues that the Song is not titled arbitrarily but intended to inspire awe through association with Solomon's wisdom (Homily 1; *GNO* 6.1.28). To strengthen his point, Gregory turns to the art of portraiture. He describes how this informs his interpretation of color in the scriptural text, proposing that as one gazes at a portrait and sees the greatness beyond the painting itself, so should one read the Song of Songs.³⁰

In the art of portraiture, there is a piece of wood that, when touched with different colors, presents an imitation of a living thing, but the person who looks at the image that art has created with colors does not dwell upon the sight contrived by dyes painted on the tablet. Rather, he looks solely upon the form that the artist has used colors to indicate. In the same way, where the writing now before us is concerned, the right thing is not to attend to the material stuff of the 'colors' contained in the words but rather to discern in them as it were the royal form traced by pure thoughts. According to their obvious sense, these words mean white or yellow or black or red or blue or some other color; they mean mouth and kiss and myrrh and wine and the names of parts of the body and a bed and young men and the like. But the form that is delineated by these words is blessedness and impassibility and fellowship with the Divine and alienation from evil and assimilation to what is truly beautiful and good. (*GNO* 6.1.28-29)

This account of Gregory's interpretation leaves little undecided and explains why he interprets 'black' so broadly, stretching from negatively symbolizing sin through to positively describing the mysteries of Christ's sayings and the glory of God. The emphasis is not on color as materiality but on its form. Gregory's comment on Saint Paul's transformation exemplifies this. Paul is 'the bride of Christ who was dark and later became bright . . . not calling the righteous to himself but calling sinners to repentance (cf. Matt 9:13/Luke 5:32), whom he caused to shine like stars by the laver of rebirth (cf. Tit 3:5) when he had washed off their dark appearance [*to zophōdes*] with water' (*GNO* 6.1.47-48). Gregory refers not to Paul's flesh but to his soul.

As we turn to Gregory's utilization of darkness, readers will encounter darkness depicted both negatively and positively and, I argue, in three modes. First, we will see that Gregory employs darkness to depict an apophatic epistemology, to represent the sayings of Jesus. Secondly, Gregory utilizes darkness as metaphor for both sin and the devil. Ignorance also belongs to this second group since, as Gregory

²⁹For an overview of the homilies, see Giulio Maspero, 'The *In Canticum* in Gregory's Theology: Introduction and *Gliederung*', in Giulio Maspero, Miguel Brugarolas, and Ilaria Vigorelli (eds.), *Gregory of Nyssa: 'In Canticum Cantorum'; Analytical and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the 13th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Rome, 17–20 September 2014)* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 3-52.

³⁰For discussion on how Gregory locates his description of portraiture in the well-established conversation on the role of art and imitation; see Daniele Iozzia, *Aesthetic Themes in Pagan and Christian Neoplatonism: From Plotinus to Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 25-38.

explains, it leads to sin and death while serving as a means of manipulation for the devil. Lastly, 'divine darkness' is the place where those who journey the way of the Song encounter the glory of God. With this in mind, let us turn first to the 'dark' sayings of Christ.

Interpreting 'Dark Sayings'

Our theologian embarks upon crafting his homilies after studying Origen's allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs.³¹ In his introduction to his Commentary on the Song of Songs, Origen groups together the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon (Song of Songs). Due to the emphasis on wisdom in these texts, he believes that the three books were composed by King Solomon and that they should be read in sequence for Christian formation. Gregory of Nyssa (and later, Augustine) continues this endeavor by writing on all three books in sequence. Both Origen and Gregory develop a commentary that envisions the erotic love of Christ the Bridegroom wooing the bride – namely, the people of God. Inspired by Origen, Gregory's interpretation comprises a twofold approach – the 'plain meaning', and the meaning found 'below the surface' (Preface; *GNO* 6.1.5). He explains that not all church leaders appreciate the 'below the surface meaning' within Scripture since some 'stand by the letter of the Holy Scriptures in all circumstances' (Preface; *GNO* 6.1.4). For Gregory, Christ's followers must grapple with what lies beneath the surface because Jesus speaks to his disciples in parables and 'dark sayings' (*GNO* 6.1.5, 8). Note that 'dark saying' does not speak of a warning but refers to teaching that requires a depth of interpretation: 'such passages we turn over in our minds, just as the Word teaches us in Proverbs, so that we may understand what is said either as a parable or as a dark saying or as a word of the wise or as an enigma' (*GNO* 6.1.5; cf. Prov. 1.6). In sum, the first application of darkness bears no negative connotations but drives Christ's followers toward the heart of their Beloved – unlike the second.

Darkness as Ignorance, the Devil, and Sin

Let me begin this section by briefly recalling Michael Battle's exhortation. As already noted, Battle differentiates between 'blackness' as it relates to bodies, and 'blackness' as it equates to 'walking in darkness'. He argues that in order to transcend 'the oppressive existence that we may . . . appropriately call "black" – "walking in darkness"', we need 'more explicit development' for 'this kind of "blackness" with sin'.³²

³¹Gregory notes that he has studied Origen's commentary (Preface; *GNO* 6.1.13). For a discussion on dating the text see the excellent table in Raphael Cadenhead, *The Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa's Ascetical Theology* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 163-78. On discussion of Origen as the sole innovator of the mystic ascent into darkness see Bernard Pottier, 'Le Grégoire de Nysse de Jean Daniélou', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 128.2 (2006), pp. 258-73. On the differences between Origen and Gregory, see Anthony Meredith, 'Licht und Finsternis bei Origenes und Gregor von Nyssa', in T. Kobusch and B. Mojsisch (eds.), *Platon in der abendländischen Geistesgeschichte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), pp. 48-59; Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 125.

³²Battle, 'Problem of the Aethiop', pp. 427-28.

Gregory's theological reflection on darkness contributes to the kind of 'explicit development' for which Battle calls. In what follows, I will aim to establish that Gregory puts 'darkness' to great effect through weaving together ignorance, the devil, and sin, all of which lead to greater darkness and death. The devil is able to work toward humanity's destruction because 'the world ruler of the power of darkness (Eph 6:12) ... has the power of death (Heb 2:14)' (Homily 5; *GNO* 6.1.165). According to Gregory, ignorance is dangerous because it holds a space for the ruler of the powers of darkness (*ho kosmokratōr tēs exousias tou skotous*) – vis-à-vis the devil – to manipulate, tempt, and deceive the soul.³³ Ignorant souls who succumb to the enemy's advances are quickly locked into patterns of sin, the consequence of which is that their thoughts become dark (*skotos*) (Homily 6; *GNO* 6.1.192).

Gregory's theological reflection on negative forms of darkness emerges through his engagement with Song 1.5: 'I am black and beautiful [*melaina eimi kai kalē*], O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.'³⁴ Gregory explains, 'The word "Kedar" means darkness', and, therefore, the 'daughters of Jerusalem' were called 'the tents of Kedar' because 'the Ruler of the power of darkness' dwelled within them (Homily 2; *GNO* 6.1.47). Drawing a connection between the indwelling of the devil and human sin, Gregory speaks of the soul as the site of 'civil war', in which the soul itself is made into a 'territory in dispute with its interior Enemy' (Homily 2; *GNO* 6.1.56). In sum, Gregory interprets the bride's darkness as sin, brought about through ignorance, and through failing to resist the devil.

The bride did not walk in darkness in the beginning, however. Against the backdrop of Genesis 1–3, Gregory describes human nature at creation as 'a copy of the true light, far removed from the marks of darkness and resplendent in its likeness to the beauty of its archetype' (*GNO* 6.1.51). In a beautiful passage, the Maker gives to human beings their identity as the image of God:

Have a care to yourself, for this is the sure safeguard of [your] good things. Know how much you have been honoured by the Maker above the rest of the creation. Heaven did not become the image of God, nor the moon, nor the sun, nor the beautiful stars—nor a single other one of the things that appear in the created order. Only you came into existence as a copy of the Nature that transcends every intellect, a likeness of the incorruptible Beauty, an impress of the true Deity – a model of that true Light in the contemplation of which you become what it is, imitating that which shines within you by the ray that shines forth in response from your purity. None of the things that exist is so great as to be compared to your greatness. . . . For he is the One who says, 'I will dwell within them' (Homily 2; *GNO* 6.1.68).³⁵

³³Homily 2 (*GNO* 6.1.47); Homily 5 (*GNO* 6.1.165, 167); Homily 10 (*GNO* 6.1.300); Homily 13 (*GNO* 6.2.392); Homily 14 (*GNO* 6.2.421). When speaking about the dark, Gregory uses interchangeably *skotos*, *melaina*, and *zophos*. All three words can denote both dark and black.

³⁴Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart (eds.), *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, rev. edn, 2006). Note that Norris translates *melaina* 'dark' (*GNO* 6.1.42), whereas the translators of the *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) prefer 'black' (p. 662).

³⁵Gregory speaks of the divine image on at least seven occasions in *Homilies on the Song of Songs: GNO* 6.1.68, 150, 160, 289; 6.2.385, 439, 458. For a full-length study on the divine image according to Nyssa, see

Drawing on scriptural symbolism of God as Light, Gregory builds on the contrast between light and darkness to emphasize the effects of ignorance.³⁶ As God's image, the human is 'a model of that true Light'; however, because she fails to recognize this, she neglects to protect her 'divine goods' from the devil's advances. For 'how shall anyone guard what they have no knowledge of?' (Homily 2; GNO 6.1.63). Commenting on Song 1.8 ('If you do not know *yourself*, O beautiful one among women'), Gregory teaches that the pursuit of self-knowing is central to the protection of the divine goods given by God at creation (Homily 2; GNO 6.1.54). Followers of Christ must 'distinguish clearly between themselves and the things around their edges, so that they may not end up keeping guard over what is alien rather than over themselves' (Homily 2; GNO 6.1.63). When the bride fails in self-knowing, she cannot guard the divine goods, and, consequently, she becomes dark.

According to Gregory, the correct response to this is to lament: "These things, therefore, the Bride laments and says, "This is why I became dark – because I guarded the weeds and wicked vines of the Adversary and took care of them but did not guard the vineyard that is mine"" (GNO 6.1.59).³⁷ Being driven to prayer and lamentation is at the heart of Gregory's response to ignorance and sin – I will return to this later when I suggest how the homilies help Anglicans examine their approach to darkness.

My final point about Gregory's threefold negative vision of darkness relates to the life of the Church. In addition to lamentation and prayer, an incontrovertible step in walking away from darkness is to be baptized. In Homily 11, Gregory returns to his reflection on the 'black and beautiful' bride (Song 1.5), developed at length in the second homily. Extolling the benefits of baptism, he reflects once again on themes of ignorance, the devil, and sin, weaving them together within the symbolism of 'darkness':

There was a time when the Bride was *dark* [*melaina*], cast into darkness by unenlightened beliefs, by reason of the fact that the sun looked askance at her and by temptations scorched the seed that lay rootless on the rocks; when she did not *guard* her *vineyard*, being weakened by the forces waging their war within her; when, ignorant of herself, she shepherded the herds of goats instead of sheep. But when she separated herself from any kinship with evil and sought, in that mystical kiss, to bring her mouth to the fount of light, then she became beautiful and good, illumined by the light of truth and cleansed by water from the darkness of ignorance. (Homily 11; GNO 6.2.323, italics original)³⁸

It is not surprising that Gregory contrasts the illumination of baptism with the darkness of ignorance since the former is an established metaphor for baptism by

Roger Leys, *L'image de Dieu chez Saint Grégoire de Nyse: Esquisse d'une doctrine* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1951).

³⁶For further discussion of Gregory's reflection on creation, see Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 166–81. Genesis 1 informs Gregory's work more broadly; for examples, see Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 154–55.

³⁷Also see GNO 6.1.113, 129, 159, 315 for similar themes.

³⁸The dark bride then becomes 'lovely and full of light' (Homily 2; GNO 6.1.61). Also see Homily 9 (GNO 6.1.280).

the fourth century.³⁹ Baptism is an important step toward the ‘light of truth’, serving to separate the bride from her previous kinship with the devil. This does not represent the end of wrestling with sin since the devil’s antipathy toward believers only increases after baptism. However, wrestling with this kind of darkness does not happen in isolation since Gregory’s vision of the Church in the *Homilies of the Song of Songs* is, as Lewis Ayres puts it, ‘of Christ’s body as a body constituted by mutually informing and manifesting activities of virtue’.⁴⁰ This reminds us that, as members of Christ’s body, individuals sharpen one another as we endeavor to pursue anti-racist thought and practice.⁴¹ We do not journey along this way as a disparate collection of individuals. As I will discuss shortly, this has implications for how we approach themes of darkness and light in Advent. Before this, let us turn to the third mode of darkness: Gregory’s glorious depiction of ‘divine darkness’.

‘Divine Darkness’

Scarcely even in this way shall we be able to bear the voice of that trumpet (Exod 19:16, 19), which makes a sound that is great and portentous and above the capacity of those who hear it – a voice preceded by the very darkness [*ho gnophos*] of obscurity, in which there is found the God who, on such a mountain, burns up every material thing with fire. (Homily 1; *GNO* 6.1.26)

Gregory’s vision of divine darkness begins in the very first homily and winds its way through to the close. This kind of darkness is radically different from the darkness of ignorance, sin, and the devil. Having established its theological significance in the first homily, Gregory returns to this in the sixth, in which the bride receives words from the Word directly and not from his intermediaries (Homily 6; *GNO* 6.1.179). To characterize darkness positively as ‘divine darkness’, Gregory turns to the scene in Exodus where Moses receives the Ten Commandments from God. After this, the people stood at a distance while Moses drew near to the thick darkness (*gnophos*) where God was.⁴² Following the Septuagint translation of Exodus 20.21, Gregory develops his own spiritual vision of the darkness in which God ‘is’:

³⁹For an overview of Gregory’s baptismal practice and theology, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 603–16. For a discussion of how baptism separates the human person from evil, see Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Christian Church* (London: SCM Press, 1981), p. 49. For a similar approach to baptism in Gregory Nazianzen’s thought, see Gabrielle Thomas, *The Image of God in the Theology of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), ch. 5.

⁴⁰Lewis Ayres, “Forming the Face of the Church”: Divine Manifestation, Self-Knowing and Ecclesiology in Gregory of Nyssa’s *In Canticum Canticorum*’ (paper presented at ‘Gregory of Nyssa: *In Canticum Canticorum*, 13th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa’, Rome, September 17–20, 2014), pp. 1–14 (12).

⁴¹Many Christian groups are already engaged in this kind of work – for example, the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing offers courses aimed to develop anti-racist practices; see <https://www.centerforracialhealing.org> (accessed December 19, 2021).

⁴²Also see Homily 11 (*GNO* 6.2.323).

Now the word *night* points to contemplation of things unseen, just like Moses, who entered into the darkness in which God was (cf. Exod 20:21) – God who, as the prophet says, ‘Made darkness his hiding place round about him’ (Ps 17:2). (Homily 6; GNO 6.1.181)⁴³

Through his groundbreaking *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, Jean Daniélou identifies ‘purgation, illumination, and unification’ as the three stages of Christian progress in the Gregory’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.⁴⁴ Traditionally, purgation includes the transformation from darkness to light and the moment of leaving behind ignorant beliefs about God. This is commonly connected to Moses and the burning bush (GNO 6.1.322). Illumination is where the soul contemplates hidden realities and is like a ‘cloud that casts a shadow on everything that appears but yet induces and accustoms the soul to look upon what is hidden’ (GNO 6.1.322). Lastly, when the soul reaches unification, it is ‘entirely seized about by the divine darkness’ wherein ‘only the invisible and incomprehensible God remains for the soul’s contemplation’ (GNO 6.1.323).⁴⁵

Commentators have debated since Daniélou’s work how Gregory understands the nature of the soul’s encounter with God, his approach to the limitations of human knowledge, and the conception of mystical ascent.⁴⁶ For example, according to Andrew Louth, Gregory’s depiction of the soul’s ascent is not linear; instead, it includes three successive ‘moments’ – light, cloud, and darkness – in which darkness marks the pinnacle of the soul’s journey to God.⁴⁷ Martin Laird has challenged this, arguing that Gregory’s utilization of darkness ‘is tied exclusively to his interpretation of specific scriptural texts’.⁴⁸ He demonstrates that Gregory speaks of the bride’s divinization in light rather than darkness when ‘commenting on other scriptural texts [. . .] not part of that limited set of divine-darkness texts’.⁴⁹ While Laird aims to show that light is as important to Gregory’s overall approach to themes such as deification and union with God, his argument does not undermine Gregory’s vision, which remains significant for journeying through Advent.

When the soul enters the darkness where God is, she comes face to face with her own imperfections. In this space, the bride realizes that ‘she was as far from arriving at perfection as those who had not yet made a beginning’; instead, she says:

⁴³See also Gregory’s *The Life of Moses* (2.162-164) which also explores darkness as the place where the follower of Christ encounters God.

⁴⁴Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Gregoire de Nyssa* (Paris: Aubier, 2nd edn, 1953), pp. 175-314.

⁴⁵According to a Thesaurus Linguae Graecae search, *ho gnophos* (‘the cloud of darkness’), used by Gregory to depict ‘divine darkness’, features on eight occasions through the fifteen homilies.

⁴⁶For an excellent review of the literature relating to Gregory’s mysticism of darkness, see Martin Laird, ‘Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration’, *Journal of Religion* 79.4 (1999), pp. 592-616.

⁴⁷Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 78-84.

⁴⁸Laird, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’, p. 594.

⁴⁹Laird, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’, p. 594.

When I have entered into the Invisible, with the world of sense left behind me; when, surrounded by the divine night, I am seeking what is hidden in the darkness – that is when I have indeed laid hold on love for the one I desire, but the object of my love has flown from the net of my thoughts. (Homily 6; GNO 6.1.181)

The bride goes on to explain that while she could find God, she learned through calling out for him that there is ‘no limit of his splendor, his glory, and his holiness’ (GNO 6.1.182). Because God has no limit, the soul continually stretches toward God even after death and throughout eternity. Gregory calls this perpetual movement of the soul toward God *epektasis*. This finds its beginning in the words of Saint Paul: ‘Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward [*epekteinomenos*] to what lies ahead’ (Phil. 3.13). *Epektasis* establishes a crucial difference between Creator and created: God’s perfection consists in immutability. This contrasts with the perfection of the human person, which exists in mutability moving ever closer toward God.⁵⁰ This doctrine, which is so closely related to divine darkness, works on the principle that God is Love. The soul constantly desires to know God more clearly but reaches no point of satisfaction because God’s love is limitless, experienced in the darkness. Gregory does not set out a clear path consisting of varying degrees of ascetical effort; rather, he presents a life lived through falling more and more in love with Christ: ‘the one who finds any good finds it in Christ who contains all good’.⁵¹ This has important implications for how we approach darkness in Advent.

Attention to Darkness during Advent as an Anti-Racist Practice

During Advent, crudely put, darkness is traditionally considered as ‘bad’, contrasted with light which is ‘good’. Against this backdrop, I began by problematizing the use of darkness in Anglican spirituality. To this end, I brought into conversation Michael Battle’s work on the theme of darkness with my students’ concerns. As Battle confirms, the social imaginary with respect to black and white bodies is implicated through utilizing darkness negatively. My aim was to complexify the vision of darkness prevalent in Anglican spirituality by analyzing Gregory’s theological account of darkness through his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.

Readers of Gregory’s homilies encounter darkness depicted in approximately three modes. First, Gregory employs darkness to depict an apophatic epistemology, where darkness represents the sayings of Jesus. Secondly, Gregory utilizes darkness as metaphor for ignorance, sin, and the devil. Lastly, ‘divine darkness’ is the place where those who journey the way of the Song encounter the glory of God. Across the fifteen homilies, a theological vision of darkness emerges that reaches beyond the traditional Advent approach.

⁵⁰For an excellent literature review of Nyssen’s doctrine of *epektasis*, see Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 125–34. Also see Paul M. Blowers, ‘Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of “Perpetual Progress”’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992), pp. 151–71.

⁵¹Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Fergusson (eds.), *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (Classics of Western Spirituality 4; New York: Paulist Press, 1978), bk 2, ch. 248, sec. 118.

Let us return to the question asked by my students: ‘Does praying this collect make me a “racist”?’ The Advent focus on darkness and light, I propose, does not need to be circumvented but provides Anglicans attentive to the problems of racism with an opportunity to examine further their own approach to ‘darkness’. As one response, Anglicans, prompted by the symbolism in the collects, might choose to engage with the utilization of darkness in Gregory’s homilies to help problematize our binary approaches to darkness. For those who are able, I suggest reading through the homilies with the aim of fixing attention on the vision of darkness that lies therein. While reading, note that these homilies have one goal: to pursue the Beloved for only through him may we be transformed.

Let me close by following Michael Battle’s example of reading early Christian spiritual writings from the context of his own experience. For me, reading as a white woman, it was extremely uncomfortable to journey with the second mode of darkness as ignorance, sin, and the devil. As a priest aiming to attend to my own soul, I read the second homily as the one who has not recognized fully God’s image. Following the example of the bride, I lamented and confessed my sin, praying for the Spirit to show me where I had failed to recognize black bodies as God’s image bearers. During the following Advent, I repeated this practice with a group of Anglicans, conscious that these homilies are written for the Church rather than for one or two individuals.

During our reading, we paid attention not only to the different modes of darkness but also to the lack of linearity. Gregory does not launch the homilies with a negative interpretation of darkness, moving on to conclude, in the fifteenth homily, with a darkness that is divine. Instead, he weaves each of the three modes of darkness in and out of the homilies depending on the scriptural text to which he is responding. This reflects the experience of most of us who call ourselves followers of Christ. We do not walk a linear path toward holiness; nor is there one toward an anti-racist spirituality. Just as we will continue to wrestle with this sin, we will also experience moments of gazing at God’s darkness a little more clearly. Paying attention to the sins of racism, both our own and those done on our behalf, is an ongoing work.