



GTU

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

The Journal of the Graduate Theological Union

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Volume 1, Issue 1

ISSN 2380-7458

Karen Lebacqz Lecture on Ethics, Pacific School of Religion

The Rainbow of Justice: Illuminating the Character and Manifestations of God's Justice

Author(s): Karen Lebacqz

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 1, no. 1 (2015): 8-25.

Published By: Graduate Theological Union © 2015

Online article published on: February 28, 2018

Copyright Notice:

This file and its contents is copyright of the Graduate Theological Union © 2015. All rights reserved. Your use of the Archives of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology (BJRT) indicates your acceptance of the BJRT's policy regarding use of its resources, as discussed below.

Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited with the following exceptions:

- You may download and print to a local hard disk this entire article for your personal and non-commercial use only.
- You may quote short sections of this article in other publications with the proper citations and attributions.
- Permission has been obtained from the Journal's management for exceptions to redistribution or reproduction. A written and signed letter from the Journal must be secured expressing this permission.

To obtain permissions for exceptions, or to contact the Journal regarding any questions regarding further use of this article, please e-mail the managing editor at bjrt@ses.gtu.edu

The Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology aims to offer its scholarly contributions free to the community in furtherance of the Graduate Theological Union's scholarly mission.

The Rainbow of Justice:

Illuminating the Character and Manifestations of God's Justice

Karen Lebacqz

*Pacific School of Religion
Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

The 1st Karen Lebacqz Lecture on Ethics, Pacific School of Religion

Karen Lebacqz is professor emerita of theological ethics at the Pacific School of Religion, as well as a former member of the GTU's core doctoral faculty. She received her Ph.D. in religion from Harvard University, and has taught at PSR for more than 30 years. She is also an award-winning quilter. In recognition of her scholarly and teaching work, the Karen Lebacqz Lecture in Ethics was established in 2014, with Professor Lebacqz herself as the inaugural lecturer. This article is a revised version of the lecture and includes a photograph of her quilt that accompanied her lecture.

Published in: BJRT, vol. 1, no. 1 © Graduate Theological Union, 2015



Rainbow of Justice by Karen Lebacqz

The symbol of God's covenant with humankind is the rainbow.¹ Biblical people worship a God who loves color and gives us color as a reminder of God's presence among us. Since retiring from Pacific School of Religion and the Graduate Theological Union, I have had occasion to think a great deal about colors and their roles and meanings in our lives. My hobbies of photography and quilting both urge me to dwell on the subtleties and nuances of color. As a member and former President of the Ocean Wave Quilters of Fort Bragg, California, I typically make at least four small quilts a month to be donated to the hospital, the nursing home, the adult day care program at the Senior Center, the animal shelter, or other humanitarian concerns.² All this quilting means that color is my constant companion.

I will propose here that we can take each color of the rainbow as signifying something about biblical justice. As the rainbow is the symbol of God's covenant with humankind, what could be more perfect for a theologically-based approach to justice than to look for – and at³ – a rainbow of justice? I will further propose, though I cannot develop the argument in detail, that biblical justice understood through the lens of color is vastly different from most philosophical approaches to justice.

Following Sir Isaac Newton, rainbows traditionally thought to have seven colors.⁴ Controversies emerge over choices and names of colors in the rainbow. "Orange," for example, did not exist as a color in its own right for many centuries – it was simply called "yellow red." There remains today a dispute as to whether "indigo" belongs in the rainbow at all, or whether Newton simply added it in order to have seven colors to match the seven

¹ Genesis 9:13 – "I have set my rainbow in the clouds and it will be the sign between me and the earth."

² I also had the privilege of being a visiting scholar at the University of Victoria in British Columbia in 2011, where I studied the history of quilting and its role in women's oppression and women's liberation.

³ This essay is accompanied by a picture of the "Rainbow of Justice" quilt that I made (see p. 9). When I first gave the lecture, each panel was separate and I was able to display them one at a time. This also explains why each panel has at the top only the colors that would have been discussed up to that point. A color version of the quilt is available on the back cover of this journal issue.

⁴ The seven colors were named by Sir Isaac Newton in 1672. Originally he named five: red, yellow, green, blue, and violet. Later he added orange and indigo. See Wikipedia (accessed 9/23/2014).

days of the week and the seven planets known in his time. I ignore these controversies here in order to focus on what each color might mean for a biblical perspective on justice. Granted, my perspective is Western and reflects primarily the associations that Western cultures have with different colors. Each color is also potentially paradoxical, with both good and bad associations. I cannot treat all of those here. With these caveats in mind, let us begin.

RED

The first color in the rainbow is Red. Red is the color of passion. It can connote both the passion of love – of Valentine’s hearts and roses – and also the passion of anger – “seeing red,” we say in English when we are particularly angry about something.⁵

Some thirty years ago, Carter Heyward wrote a book entitled, *Our Passion for Justice*.⁶ There is much in her volume that remains true and compelling. “We must make no peace with any oppression,” writes Heyward.⁷ I would certainly concur! To be passionate, Heyward suggests, is to be spilling over with the Spirit of God: red is, after all, the color of Pentecost, of the Spirit descending on us in flames – and anything less than spilling over with the Spirit is not sufficient.⁸

I suggest that those flames are meant to “burn” in our hearts – to cleanse us as only fire can cleanse. Every year California endures forest fires that consume hundreds of acres of precious trees. There is a place near my home in Mendocino where the entire sweep of headlands is full of dead, burned trees. My heart breaks to see it, yet I know that fire brings renewal to forests – it allows new vegetation to grow, it brings new habitat for animals and birds. Just so will a passion for justice sometimes burn us,

⁵ Indeed, my quilt club has been asked not to put too much red into the quilts we make for Senior Day Care, as red can agitate already disoriented seniors.

⁶ Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984).

⁷ Heyward, 5.

⁸ Heyward, 21.

cleansing us in ways that are heart-breaking at the time, but that do portend renewal.

Passion, of course, means suffering, or bearing with, and in the struggle for justice there will be suffering indeed. A modern example is young Malala Yousafzai – the Pakistani girl shot by the Taliban who was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Malala’s passion for education for girls has only been heightened by her horrific experience and by the danger now hanging over her head. “One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world,” Malala declares. I devoted my working life to teaching in the belief that one teacher can change the world, as Malala claims.

So the first demand of a biblical approach to justice is the passion that is represented by the color red. “real red,” I call it with my love of alliteration. I have therefore constructed my red quilt panel with flames coming down as the Spirit does at Pentecost and also with flames burning out of two hearts entwined. I have also added flames coming up, representing the eruption of the passion for justice when injustice rules on earth.

ORANGE

Next to red in the rainbow is orange.⁹ Recently, one of my best quilting friends was asked to make a lap quilt for a friend’s aged mother. “Of course,” she agreed eagerly and then asked, “What is her favorite color?” “Bright orange,” she was told. “Oh no,” thought my friend, “a whole quilt in bright orange sounds like a nightmare!” Indeed, she confessed, she had no oranges at all in her quilting stash.

I do. In fact, I have lots of oranges, in different hues and styles. Before I became a quilter, orange was never one of my favorite colors. But a tiny touch of orange can brighten an otherwise dull quilt. Vincent Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, “there is no orange without blue,” but he

⁹ According to Wikipedia, the color orange was not so named until 1512; prior to that time, it was simply known as yellow-red. (Accessed 7/11/14)

might just as well have written, “there is no blue without orange,” because orange makes other colors stand out. It was a favorite color of impressionists such as Matisse and Toulouse-Lautrec. Because orange stands out so strongly against blue, it is used for life vests, for the famous “black box” in airplanes, and for our very own Golden Gate Bridge, which must show in grey fog.

So it is with justice: true justice makes other values “pop.” When situations are shrouded in clouds of injustice, values such as loyalty, humility, and service cannot stand out. Justice must be “orange” in the sense that it stands out and brings out the true hues of other values. Justice is not the first of the cardinal virtues – that honor belongs to prudence, correctly understood – but as Josef Pieper says, “Justice is the highest of the three moral... virtues: justice, fortitude, and temperance.”¹⁰ Justice, therefore, is “literally the fundamental virtue.”¹¹ The virtue of justice illumines other virtues just as orange illumines other colors.

Nature is remarkably full of orange.¹² From tigers to monarch butterflies to those gorgeous maple leaves in a New England fall, nature offers us an amazing display of orange colors. Orange is a bright, happy color. According to Wikipedia, in Europe and America orange is often associated with play and spontaneity, while in Buddhist and Hindu cultures, it is associated with renunciation of the world and with the holy – hence, the orange robes worn by some monks.

For me, orange is, above all, the California poppy.¹³ Poppies are surprising and tenacious. They show up in places where one would not

¹⁰ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 64.

¹¹ Pieper, 65.

¹² Politics is also full of orange. Orange appears in many flags; it has been used in the name of several revolutionary groups; and it is associated with Protestantism through the “House of Orange” historically. See Wikipedia (accessed 7/11/14). Of course, there are negative associations: “agent orange,” used during the war in Vietnam, was not in fact orange but carries connotations of death and destruction.

¹³ Of course, one cannot be of my generation without also associating orange with Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962). In the introduction (“A Clockwork Orange Resucked”) written in 1986, Burgess complains of two things. First, the

expect them to be able to grow. In my little house in Mendocino, I put in a pathway that is called “hard pack.” Sand and grit are packed so tightly and pounded down so hard that nothing is supposed to be able to grow in it. It suppresses weeds – or so they say. You can imagine what grew in my path: a magnificent bunch of California poppies! They grew and grew. They grew so big that they covered the whole path. Finally, they had become too big for me to leap over, and I decided that I had to pull them out. But they are tenacious beyond belief, and they just keep coming back year after year, no matter how often I pull them up.

The tenacity of my poppies reminds me of a poem Dom Helder Camara wrote.¹⁴ It was a tribute to the weed that had appeared in his driveway:

They wanted to mend my pavement.
I hadn't even noticed
it was broken.
I like
the humble little weed
which has sprouted there.
How can I make them understand
that it is far more lovely,
more alive,
than the cold cement
my friends want me to have?
If cement wins the day,
it will be a tombstone
invisibly inscribed:
“Here lies
the liveliest,
most tenacious,
cleverest little weed,
for miles around.”

original 21st chapter was omitted from the American publication of this book. This chapter was important because in it the protagonist grows up and faces genuine moral choice between good and evil. Second, the meaning of the title has been much distorted by people who do not know its origins in “the speech of old Londoners.” The image of a “clockwork orange” was used there for something bizarre. Burgess writes, “I mean it to stand for the application of a mechanistic morality to a living organism oozing with juice and sweetness.” One who is either all good or all evil and cannot exercise moral choice between good and evil is a “clockwork orange” – a thing that has the appearance of something lovely with color and juice but that is in fact only a mechanistic clockwork toy.

¹⁴ Dom Helder Camara, *A Thousand Reasons for Living* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 82.

When all the grass in California has turned brown – our wonderful “golden” hills! – lo and behold, there will be bright orange poppies dotting the hillsides. Such surprise is part of God’s presence among us. In *The Color Purple*, author Alice Walker puts the following words into Shug’s mouth: “[God] always making little surprises and springing them on us when we least expect.”¹⁵ And what, of course, could be more surprising than a “Lord of lords” and “king of kings” as Handel’s *Messiah* has it than to find that the savior of the world comes in the form of a helpless, tiny baby? Like the poppy, God’s justice is both surprising and tenacious. Perhaps the uprisings around the world are not so surprising when we know the conditions in which people are forced to live, but the tenacity of the cry for justice is itself sometimes surprising. The longing for justice will bloom in the harshest conditions. And like the poppy, justice will be beautiful!

YELLOW

Our next color is yellow. Wikipedia begins its description of this color by saying that “yellow is the color of gold, butter, ripe lemons, and the sun.” In my quilt, I substituted baby chicks for the butter partly because they are cuter and partly because the yellow color of our butter can be an artificial color due to food additives and there is never anything artificial about God’s justice! Yellow is also the color of daffodils, ripe bananas, egg yolks, some birds, buttercups, school buses, caution flags, taxicabs, and many national flags. In China, yellow is associated with happiness, glory, and wisdom. Elsewhere, it is associated with optimism and pleasure. For me, it is a warm, welcoming color.

With his penchant for paradox, Reinhold Niebuhr once famously opined, “any justice which is only justice soon degenerates into something less than justice.”¹⁶ For Niebuhr, human justice is typically the “nicely

¹⁵ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 178.

¹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1932), 258.

calculated less and more” of balancing claims. True justice requires something more – equity and fairness, to be sure, but also mercy and compassion. Hence, “love must be regarded as the final flower and fruit of justice.”¹⁷ Following Niebuhr, we can say that Biblical justice is never the “tit for tat” of philosophical justice. It is richer and deeper than a simple “give to each what is due.” And so I think justice is also yellow – or, as I like to think of it, “yes yellow” – a color that invites and includes, encourages and emboldens. Dom Helder Camara writes: “Teach us to make our Noes still have a smack of Yes and never to say Yesses that have a smack of No.”¹⁸ This is what yellow connotes.

Yellow is the color of warmth, of welcome, of compassion, of openness, of the light that bathes everything in healing power. In Micah’s famous “What does the Lord require of you?” (Micah 6:8), justice comes first, but is immediately followed by the injunction to “love mercy.” It is my understanding that the Hebrew term can also connote the keeping of commitments. The love spoken of in Micah 6:8 is *Hesed* – the kind of love that makes and keeps promises, the kind of love that endures through thick and thin, the kind of love that bespeaks a covenanting God. “A compassionate person lives in such a way that her passion for life, for human dignity, for God’s justice manifests itself as a sturdy, unbreakable connection to other people,” writes Heyward.¹⁹ To be in covenant with others is to understand that the common good is also *our* good – that we are at root relational and must see ourselves as social beings. Justice requires not only the *passion* that I associated with red but also *compassion* – a vision that connects us to the social whole and a willingness to suffer with others when they suffer. This is what yellow brings to justice.

¹⁷ D. B. Robertson, ed. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), 283. Niebuhr’s concept of the interaction of love and justice is complicated and far more complex than can be discussed here, but it is clear that justice and love are complementary terms that may apply to different realms but nonetheless must inform each other.

¹⁸ Camara, *A Thousand Reasons for Living*, 104.

¹⁹ Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice*, 236.

GREEN

Warmth and openness permit new growth, which for me is always the color green. The big fir tree in my back yard is mostly dark green, but in the spring the ends of the branches sprout the loveliest bright green. It almost dances in front of the older growth. Green is vibrant, verdant, life affirming, life announcing.

As a quilter, I am staggered by the many shades and hues of green. There are yellow-greens, grey-greens, blue-greens, forest greens, grass-greens, bright greens – the list is never ending. The variations are so manifold that I never seem to have exactly the right color of green for a quilt. But all of them are, for me, “great green” – the color of growth and new life and abundance: “I have come so that you may have life abundant.” (John 3:16) Biblical justice is not the nicely calculated less and more of what is due to each; it is a generous opening to life and forgiveness, and newness. God’s justice is green: it requires and creates *abundant* life for all.

Indeed, my chosen field of ethics seems to me sometimes stunted in this regard. In my work in the field, and especially in my teaching, I stressed logical thinking. I asked students to avoid questionable moves from premises to conclusions, to challenge shaky premises, and to be able to give solid reasons and muster good evidence for their arguments. All of this is the “stuff” of ethics, and I absolutely affirm it. But tight ethical argument is not enough. I have seen how tight ethical argument can be used to stifle and crush human spirits rather than to give new life, and this is wrong. I have experienced this particularly in the arena of arguments about abortion, stem cells, and the value of fetal life. Ethicist sometimes seem to think that *all* that matters is creating an air-tight argument about the rights of the fetus and its status as a human being. They fail to attend to the *effects* of that argument on the lives of women and children. Mark Jordan’s *The Silence of Sodom* is a good reminder to us of how language itself can be life-denying.²⁰ Theological arguments, Jordan notes, are framed in

²⁰ Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago:

rhetorical structures and this is what gives arguments their force. But those very structures can be stifling, dangerous, and stultifying. True justice will never be life-denying; it will be green – life-giving, renewing, engendering.

BLUE

Below green in the rainbow is blue – the color of robin’s eggs, of blueberries and of some flowers and birds and, most of all, the color of the sky.

As with the other colors, blue is a somewhat ambiguous color.²¹ On the one hand, we say we are “blue” when we are feeling sad. So there is a hint of regret or loss associated with blue. Is there a hint of loss or sadness in doing justice? Again, I turn to Reinhold Niebuhr who recognized that every justice is also an injustice. Once things have gone wrong and we try to set them right, someone is almost always going to lose something. Or, as Dom Helder Camara puts it, “Once you button a button in a button-hole not the right one, it then becomes impossible to button up the other ones right!”²²

Consider, for instance, the biblical call to return lands to their original owners during the Jubilee year. This is good news indeed for the original owners. But what about the loss to those who had come into possession of those lands? The house that I own – that I worked so hard for so long to acquire in my retirement and that I love so much: should it be returned to the Pomo people who once inhabited the north coast area where I now live? To do so might be what justice requires. The compelling book *One Hundred Million Acres*²³ chronicles the treaties that promised lands to Native Americans and the violations of those treaties. Long ago that book convinced me that much of our land in America is wrongly owned by later settlers such as I. So indeed, true justice might require that my house and land be returned to the Pomo people. Yet I bought my house in accordance

University of Chicago Press, 2000), 23.

²¹ For instance, we speak of being “green with envy” or “yellow-bellied” with cowardice. Space does not permit a full discussion of these negative associations with the various colors.

²² Camara, *A Thousand Reasons for Living*, 49.

²³ Kirke Kickingbird and Karen Ducheneaux, *One Hundred Million Acres* (New York: MacMillan, 1973).

with all the rules and regulations of the state of California, and surely taking it away from me would also be an injustice to me in some way, even as it might bring about justice for others. Every enactment of justice may include a seed of injustice,²⁴ and therefore should bring with it both jubilation but also a somber assessment of loss and grievance. The color blue and its association with sadness and loss can remind us of this aspect of justice.

But of course blue also has its positive associations. Blue is one of my favorite quilting colors. My blue fabric stash final grew so large that it simply would not fit in the shelf allotted to it no matter how many times I tried re-folding the fabrics! It spread upward into the green shelf and downward into the purple shelf until finally I decided that I simply had to make a series of blue quilts to reduce the stash. Some of those quilts were just blue and white together – just blue and white, nothing else, because blue and white together have a crispness, a clarity, a transparency, that can be very beautiful and very comforting. We call someone “true blue” when we know that they have qualities of faithfulness and courage of their convictions. Blue has its positive associations that help us consider the demands of justice: transparency, clarity, crispness, the courage of convictions.

We also think of blue as a “cool” color, compared to the “heat” of red, orange, or yellow. This “coolness” is also crucial for justice: we should have a passion to do justice, but sometimes we need a cool head to know what justice requires. An interesting recent article in *The American Scholar* tackles the question of intergenerational justice.²⁵ Lincoln Caplan points out that fears of economic chaos as baby boomers retire and grow old have fueled fights against Medicare and other programs to assist the elderly. These fears, he suggests, are based on formulas for thinking about old age that no longer apply. Older Americans may indeed be on Medicare, but also remain productive citizens who give as much to communities as is taken away in the form of medical care or other services. True justice requires

²⁴ See Karen Lebacqz, *Justice in an Unjust World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1987)

²⁵ Lincoln Caplan, “The Fear Factor,” *The American Scholar* (Summer 2014): 18-29.

that we think carefully and thoroughly about what is fair, and gather our facts before jumping to conclusions. As a cool color, blue reminds us to keep a cool head connected to our passionate hearts.

Because blue is the color of the sky and of ocean, it connotes both breadth and depth.²⁶ For more than ten years, I have thought of it as “bold blue.” I was surprised to see how often the theme of *boldness* appears in Heyward’s *Our Passion for Justice*. “We must be bold,” she writes at the outset;²⁷ she speaks of expressing our experience “thoughtfully and boldly”;²⁸ and near the end of the book she prays, “May we approach the mountains boldly.”²⁹ To be bold, justice must be blue: it must be wide, and deep.

But there is yet more to the color blue. Blue is the rarest of nature’s colors. Green, red, orange and even yellow are quite common, but very few of God’s creatures are blue. More importantly, when blue does occur, it is often created through unusual means.³⁰ Most colors are chemical in origin: pigment molecules absorb some wavelengths of light and reflect others. The colors we see are the reflected ones. But in some cases blue is not a reflected color, but a *structural* color: there is something in the structure of the creature (for instance, in the shape of the structure of a bird’s wings) that causes the wavelengths that correspond to blue to be amplified as they bounce back and forth from one “ridge” to another. In other words, we see the color not because an item *absorbs* certain wavelengths, but because the structure of the item *magnifies* or intensifies certain wavelengths. Blue, in other words, can be not only *reflective*, but *structural*. Furthermore, while pigments can fade, structural colors do not fade. Blue can therefore be our reminder that true justice must be structural justice³¹ and it must not fade over time.

²⁶ The sky is blue because molecules in the air scatter blue light more strongly than red light. Similarly, deep water is blue because its molecules absorb red light and reflect the blue.

²⁷ Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice*, 5.

²⁸ Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice*, 40.

²⁹ Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice*, 252.

³⁰ Here I draw from *Harvard Magazine* (July-August 2014): 12.

³¹ It cannot, therefore, simply be commutative justice, or justice in exchange, as Robert Nozick would have it in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

INDIGO

Next to blue in the rainbow is indigo. “Indelible indigo,” we might call it, as the original dyes from which indigo was made left indelible marks on the dye maker. Indigo is the color of the depths of the ocean and the night sky at dusk. Located somewhere between blue, violet, and black, indigo is a controversial color. There is disagreement as to exactly where it is on the spectrum, whether it is close to blue or to violet or to black, and so on. Indeed, as noted above, some think indigo does not belong in the rainbow at all, but as simply added by Newton because he wanted seven colors because of the significance of the number seven.

Indigo has been the subject of another “New Age” fad – the notion that there are “indigo children” who are smarter than others and have spiritual qualities that set them apart. This theory was popular a few years ago when I first started studying rainbow colors in earnest. I am happy to say that the theory seems to have fallen out of popularity now – perhaps because one theorist argued that 95% of all children born during a specific chronological period were “indigo” children, and that theory would rather undermine the notion that “indigo” children are so rare and special: if 95% of children are indigo children, then indigo is the norm, not the exception.

Putting this dubious new age theory aside, I see two connections between indigo and our subject of biblical justice. First, indigo is the color of our everyday blue jeans. It reminds us that everyday things, such as the very clothes that we wear, are matters of concern from a justice perspective. I often taught my introductory ethics class at 8:00 am. Very few of my students were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at that hour. When they came straggling into class dragging their feet and clutching their cups of coffee, I would ask them, “How many of you have already made an ethical decision today?” Invariably, they would look at me as if I were crazy. “My eyes aren’t even open; how could I have made an ethical decision already?” “Well,” I would reply, “let’s talk about that cup of coffee in your hand. Who grew and harvested the coffee beans? Under what conditions did those people work?”

How did the coffee get from there to here, since Berkeley, California, is not a coffee-growing region?” Our everyday actions are matters of justice.³² So, in a biblical, rainbow-inspired approach to justice, indigo reminds us, as Beverly Harrison so powerfully did, to make the connections.³³ Ordinary, everyday things connect to powers and principalities that should push us towards larger considerations about how people live and how we are dependent upon their labors and the risks that they take.³⁴

Second, indigo is a very dark color – such a dark blue that it almost borders on black. While many blues have a quality of transparency, as noted above, it is difficult to see through indigo. Heyward asks, “[What if,] in seeking God always as light, we are missing God as darkness?”³⁵ Do we seek a comfortable justice that we can see clearly, and miss the complexities and even the beautiful “darkness” of justice – the times when the demands of justice are not transparent and when we must wade in murky waters in order to do justice? Indigo justice is dark justice.

Today, especially in philosophical circles, it has become common to argue that justice can be achieved by setting up proper *procedures*.³⁶ Justice has become, in my view, too procedural. We set up “ethics” committees in hospitals to determine whether to “pull the plug” on a dying patient. The idea is that if we get the right people together in a committee, they will determine what is right and wrong. But what if committee A says an action is ethical and committee B says it is not? Does this mean it is right in one place and wrong in another? How can we recover a sense that

³² Indeed, if Iris Marion Young has it correctly, our everyday *reactions* that we think of as not even in the realm of reason are nonetheless matters of justice! See Chapter 5 of Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

³³ Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

³⁴ I say risks here in part because the history of indigo as a dye for clothing present some justice issues. Several centuries ago, slaves in the United States were often the ones who worked with the very dangerous lye and other chemicals needed to manufacture indigo. Today most “indigo” is synthetic, of course, but originally it came from the *indigofera tinctoria* plant in India.

³⁵ Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice*, 27.

³⁶ The most famous philosophical argument for procedural justice is John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971; rev. edition, 1999).

we should accept some outcomes and actions but not accept others? Justice needs to be substantive as well as procedural, so that we can name injustices. The “darkness” of indigo is a reminder of the difficulties of seeing clearly but also of the necessity of tackling the hardest issues and not being afraid of the murkiness of justice issues and the need to struggle for substance rather than simply content ourselves with procedure.

PURPLE

And so, of course, we come finally to “the color purple.” Purple is the color of “mountains majesty,” as we sing in “America the Beautiful.” It is the color so often associated with royalty. Purple is a color to inspire awe. Roman Catholic cardinals originally wore purple, according to Wikipedia, though now purple is reserved for bishops and the cardinals wear red.

Purple itself does not have its own wavelength and is therefore not a “spectral” color. Violet is the color that Newton named as part of the rainbow. But the flowers we call “violets” are in fact purple. Purple is the color that sits mid-way between blue and red, and is made today by mixing red and blue pigments. It is an ancient color – made in antiquity from the mucus of the spiny sea snail “murex,” it is mentioned in the book of Exodus (25:4), where blue, purple, and scarlet yarn are to be brought as an offering to God. Purple is a favorite color of some artists, such as Gustav Klimt.

Purple is associated with women’s suffrage and with feminism: “When I am old, I shall wear purple.”³⁷ Purple has been associated with the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.³⁸ Purple is the color of altar cloths at Advent – when we wait for the royalty that will come to us in such surprising form. (And one should never underestimate the power of orange and purple next to each other as colors, just as the royalty that comes at

³⁷ This phrase is from the poem entitled “Warning,” written by Jenny Joseph. It became a catch-phrase to describe women breaking free from restraints and expectations.

³⁸ The “Purple Rain Protest” of Sept. 2, 1989, began when government forces decided to put purple dye into the water that was sprayed on protesters; the protesters got hold of the hoses and turned the purple water into “rain” on government buildings. See Wikipedia.

Christmas comes in such surprising form.) Purple is the color of the “heart” medals that are given to our brave soldiers who are wounded in action or to their families if the soldier has died.

Alice Walker’s award-winning novel *The Color Purple* in fact says very little about purple. But in a crucial passage, Walker writes in Shug’s voice: “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.”³⁹ This passage suggests that the color purple can be our reminder to be attentive to the smallest flower in a field even as we look toward those distant majestic mountains. I therefore put into my purple panel in the rainbow quilt both the distant “mountains majesty” and a path through a field of purple flowers.

Since mountains take on their purple hue from a distance because of the way light refracts colors through space, perhaps purple is also a color that should remind us of the distance between ourselves and God. The idea of a distant God is not a popular idea today. Today we speak largely of a God who weeps with us, walks with us, and is our friend. Certainly, I would not want to ignore the immanence of God nor the many ways in which God is incarnate in our lives. But the God whose justice rings through the Bible is a transcendent God – the great “I am,” larger than all human language and so deep in meaning and purpose and power that we have no words adequate to talk about God.⁴⁰ Perhaps all we have is the color purple with its reminders of royalty, its hints of the vastness of God and its cautionary advice to walk humbly. If justice is to be *God’s* justice, then it will always have a purple hue – a sense of majesty, of mystery, and of a power that glows in the smallest of God’s creations and yet soars beyond human understanding.

The justice that I have described with this rainbow and tried to depict in my quilt is passionate and compassionate, surprising and

³⁹ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 178.

⁴⁰ The book of Job (38:4) makes this clear: “where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?”

tenacious, life-giving, transparent, and deep beyond transparency, majestic, mysterious, and yet ordinary and commonplace. It cannot be encapsulated by formulas such as “give to each what is due” or “treat similar cases similarly.” Or perhaps it would be better to say that in order to know what is “due” we must look with eyes of compassion, with an orientation toward growth and new life, with a heart burning and filled with the Spirit of God, with a perspective as wide as the sky and as deep as the ocean itself. We must bring a justice that contains majesty and yet attends to the smallest of things around us. This is Amos’ justice: it will roll down like waters, washing away everything in its path and creating opportunities for new life and abundance. This justice requires commitment, character, humility, hope, faith, and love. This justice comes from a rainbow that should arch over the entire sky, all the time! As rainbows come out after storms, I venture to suggest that we live in the midst of many storms; we can only hope for many rainbows of justice to follow.

Bibliography

- Camara, Dom Helder. *A Thousand Reasons for Living*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
- Caplan, Lincoln. “The Fear Factor.” *The American Scholar* (Summer 2014): 18-29.
- Harrison, Beverly Wildung. *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. Edited by Carol S. Robb. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- Heyward, Carter. *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation*. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984.
- Jordan, Mark D. *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Kickingbird, Kirke and Karen Ducheneaux. *One Hundred Million Acres*. New York: MacMillan, 1973.

Lebacqz, Karen. *Justice in an Unjust World*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1987.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

Pieper, Josef. *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966.

Robertson, D. B. editor. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1982.