

Cosmic colors: High-risk faith

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

Though liturgical colors for vestments, altars and pulpits are traditional, their color spectrum is not tamper-proof. It is time to take a fresh look at the choices.

Challenges come from three directions: Tom Ridge, director of Homeland Security, provides a scale with five scary color possibilities; Thomas Miller of Razorfish, a Web site designer, casts out pastels and speaks up for vivids; John Hopkins University scientists Karl Glazebrook and Ivan Baldry have discovered that the universe is beige.

My liturgical reference books list green, blue, red, white, black and purple as Christian colors. The color experts mentioned above do not bother with purple. Beyond that, how do the old-time Christian schemes stand up? Green, for Ridge, is “low risk,” and we like that. For Razorfish it has a “calming effect, can connote youthfulness and growth.” In church, green appears after Pentecost in a long season called “ordinary time.” Low risk? OK. It fits.

Next, blue. For Ridge this signals a “guarded condition,” while Razorfish says it is “the safest” color, “all about stability.” Some Christians use it in Advent, anticipating the observance of the first and second comings of Christ. Here blue is hardly safe or stable, but “guarded,” yes. Keep it.

Red. Liturgy books connect this with martyrs’ days, Pentecost, All Saints, pastoral and churchly observances. Razorfish says red “creates attention, a plus, but dominates others.” Ridge might add that it had better grab attention and block out other shades. It will continue to serve in church.

White. Razorfish says it is for “purity and innocence, cool, refreshing,” and shows a “sense of pristineness.” Homeland Security can never enjoy the luxury of using white. The church likes it in Easter season. As for black? According to Razorfish, it is “the opposite of white,” which we knew. “Dark and negative,” it can “speak with authority and power” and does, in its own way, on Good Friday. It is also “sophisticated,” which Good Friday is not. Homeland Security does not use it. If “red” goes wrong, think “black” as in: it’s all over. This is all right in church one day

of the year.

Miller advises against wishy-washy stuff on the Web, where “light hues and pastels look washed out.” But have you noticed that market-oriented church-growth churches, those that shun offensive symbols like the cross, favor such tints? Since they know more than other churches and I do about the decor that attracts new customers, we will not think of criticizing their savvy choices. But they need better names for their colors.

Here is where the John Hopkins folk come in. Glazebrook and Baldry asked the public for new color names, and respondents offered great suggestions in the June 2002 issue of *Harper's*. Color names hinted at everything from Genesis 1 (“Big Bang Beige,” “Ethereal Fog”) through Exodus and the wilderness (“Infinite Sand”) to Colossians 1:17 (“Cosmological Cream” or “Univeige”).

Still, something is missing. Neither Razorfish nor the liturgy refer to yellow and orange, but Homeland Security does. Yellow for Ridge means “significant risk” and orange is “high risk.” These belong in church, and I nominate them for consideration by liturgical commissions. The prophets, evangelists and epistle writers often expose congregations to significant risk. Annie Dillard once said that one should wear a crash helmet to participate in liturgy. If I had my way about liturgical colors, on some days we would have to wear dark goggles. Or be blinded.