

The true and the gray: Ambiguity in the human condition

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

Like most artists, the sculptor and painter Anselm Kiefer favors certain hues and materials. His chosen hue is gray, in all its shades, and gray is nothing if not shaded. His favorite material is lead, which is, yes, grayish. His maxim: “The truth is always gray.”

Gray does not show up among the liturgical colors of the Christian year. Advent, which formerly called for purple, is now the season of blue. Red and green are not colors for inside the sanctuary as of Christmas Eve or Morning, but they do complement the proper white. Like white, black has its annual moment, but that is a very brief one. But no gray. Should there be? Should Kiefer be an artist for the church as well as the gallery?

The one who says “the truth is always gray” will not always be treated as a truth teller. He will be scorned by the absolutists. Those who say reality calls for an appreciation of gray will be dismissed by many as temporizing, wishy-washy or compromising. The scorers of gray often get the plaudits these days. We have heard orthodox religious hard-liners speak appreciatively of the black-and-white polarizers: “By God, at least *they’ve* got convictions!”

If Islamic militants are dead sure that they are right, then we, it is said, had better be democratically and Christianly right—or else. The patron saint of the absolutists is the person observed by Mr. Dooley: the fanatic is someone who knows he’s doing exactly what the Lord would do if the Lord were in possession of the facts.

Because ambiguity, contradiction and paradox are the human condition, the truth about it is gray. Half a century ago, theologian Paul Tillich was celebrating the dialectic so much that the press—I think of a *Time* magazine cover in 1959—treated him as one who balanced Yes and No so evenly that even his thoughts about Christ were colored gray. Jerald Brauer, who had once been an assistant to Tillich, pointed me to an article by Tillich (in *The New Being*) which showed another side of him:

“Yes alone is the advice of a self-deceiving confidence which soon will be shaken by the No of the three gray figures: emptiness, guilt, death. No alone is the advice of a self-deceiving confidence. . . . Yes alone is the arrogance which claims that its limited truth is the ultimate truth, but which reveals by its fanatical self-affirmation how many hidden No’s are present in its ground.”

Then to the point: “There is only one reality where there is not Yes and No but only Yes: Jesus as the Christ.” His birth and what follows represent the decisive Yes over against the gray No figures of emptiness, guilt and death.

For Kiefer, “The truth is always gray,” but in faith and hope and love it can be illumined. When we celebrate the nativity of Jesus, the event of the incarnation, we will hear John 1: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us [dwellers in the gray area] and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” All truth except one, then, is gray: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Tillich moved beyond that abstraction when he preached on Jesus Christ, who as Paul said “was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:19-20). Having witnessed that in the sanctuary, we can be more ready to return to the world where “the truth is always gray,” and illumine it. So we were promised.