



RECLAIM THE RAINBOW

(Disseminated by Bishop Robert Barron, Word on Fire)

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“The rainbow flag has become ubiquitous in public life—and more prominently so during the month of June, so-called “Pride Month.” As I have argued, Pride’s vision of love, that “love is love,” is a deeply flawed rejection of the Christian humility and its teaching that God is love. While many of Pride’s celebrants don’t necessarily subjectively intend it, Pride’s use of the rainbow as a symbol of its vision of love is therefore nothing less than ... mockery of God’s symbol.

[The Bible first mentions the rainbow in Genesis 9:12-17, where it serves as a sign of God's covenant with Noah and all living creatures, ensuring that a global flood will never happen again. It also appears in Ezekiel 1:28 and Revelation 4:3 and 10:1, where it is associated with God's glory and majesty.]

It is long past due for the true meaning of the rainbow to be recovered. The beginnings of such a recovery can only be limned here—but there are some hints of recovery apparent in popular culture. Still, the proper starting point for sound principles by which the wheat can be sifted from the chaff is Sacred Scripture.

At the outset, a materialist might object that ours is a fools’ errand since, “scientifically” speaking, rainbows are not objectively “real” phenomena. Rather, the argument goes, a “rainbow” is just a name we give to merely subjective perceptions of light refracting out of tiny water droplets to observers who happen to be at the correct angle relative to the droplets and the sun.

In reply, it can be admitted that the “same” rainbow you and I observe standing side-by-side may not be constituted by an identical set of water droplets. ... The peacock fan you and I observe from different perspectives may not generate an identical image of the fan in our brains if we do not see all the same barbs of each feather of the train. It simply does not follow that there isn’t really a peacock fan there. So also with a rainbow: There is a set of perhaps billions of water droplets that have what we might call “rainbow-potentiality,” which become actualized under certain conditions—just as a peacock’s tailfeathers carry with them a “fan-potentiality” that becomes manifest under certain conditions. And, at any rate, a description of a rainbow in terms of light, water, rods, and cones is fine on the planes of material and efficient causation.

God's eternal beauty is attested to by the uniquely sublime phenomenon.

The first time the rainbow appears in the Bible is, famously, after the flood. We cannot fathom the literal import of such a destructive event. While “young Earth” and “old Earth” creationists debate the timing and evidence for the flood, there is wide agreement among orthodox Christians that the Bible’s narrative is based on a real event. Meanwhile, skeptics of the Bible in general have good reasons to hesitate before dismissing the flood. We have nonbiblical sources aplenty reporting some version of a destructive deluge, from the Epic of Gilgamesh to ancient Cheyenne tradition. They all report that God or the gods warned a select hero to build a boat to survive a massive calamity that threatened to destroy mankind.

According to the Bible’s report, God establishes a new covenant with Noah and his sons and their wives, promising to bless them on the condition that they follow his commands, as well as promising to never again flood the earth nor radically upend the order of the seasons. ***The rainbow, Scripture emphasizes***, is uniquely possessed by God, and uniquely his to give: “I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (Genesis 9:13, emphasis added).

The covenant is not only between man and God, but between God and all creatures great and small that never again would the world be flooded. Supposing the Bible’s account to be accurate, it would not be surprising to find echoes of the true account in the ancient flood myths, comparatively garbled though they may be. For example, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the goddess Ishtar vows to always remember the inundation, and that her necklace of lapis lazuli jewels would be the sign. It isn’t hard to imagine this as a symbol of the rainbow, for a rainbow forms a full circle when seen from an elevated perspective, a heavenly circlet.

Later in the Bible, in a mystical vision of Ezekiel of the Lord upon his celestial throne, the rainbow appears again as revelatory of God’s nature: “There was a radiance around him. Like the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezekiel 1:27–28). The glory of God upon his throne is like that of the rainbow in the New Testament too, in [the writer] John’s apocalypse (Revelation 4:3).

Some of the greatest works of Christian poetry have picked up on the imagery as well, as in Dante’s *Paradiso*, in which the glory of the Holy Trinity is as rainbow is from rainbow, and fire proceeding from both, or in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where the rainbow is the “brow of God appeased.”

Rainbow imagery can of course be found across Western art and literature, invoked for all sorts of purposes and meanings. And it shouldn’t be surprising that in our post-Christian culture, its meaning has often become [distorted and] bastardized. Still, in the spirit of the classical philosophers, it isn’t misguided, in the search for truth, to begin with opinions commonly held in the culture and proceed dialectically, anchored in fundamental revealed truths. And indeed, we shouldn’t be surprised to find that in a post-Christian culture, Judeo-Christian remnants can be found in the popular culture.

Consider, for example, the cover of Coldplay's newest album, *Moon Music*, upon which a lunar rainbow is prominently displayed. One of the songs is titled not with English words but with a rainbow emoji. The ethereal melody accompanies what I would argue is a postmodern hymn to God:

*As much as I could
As much as I tried
I just couldn't seem to find the light
It glows
In your eyes
Everything that lives
All the stars in the sky
Sunshine every time I look at you
To all, all of us
No, don't give up
Storms pass, love lasts
It all goes by so fast.*

The singer is apparently lost, adrift in darkness, the predicament of late modern man. But there is light to be found. Or, better, the Light seems to have found him. The source of light is not merely physical but transcendent, since it shines through not only in stars and sunshine but “everything that lives.” And then, the [composer and] singer exhorts the adrift listener to endure the storm, the darkness. The suggestion is that the Light will find them too. And it is hinted that this source of Light is Love itself. That God is the source of the light is confirmed in the following verse.

Strikingly, it was also sung about by Maya Angelou, in a stylized remix of an interview in which she discussed an old African American hymn about the rainbow.

*There is an African American song nineteenth century
Which is so great, it said
'When it looked like the sun would not shine anymore
God put a rainbow in the clouds
God put a rainbow in the clouds.'*

The hymn points us back to Sacred Scripture, and the ideas of fear and despair in the face of tribulation, and the encounter between man with God.

Putting these pieces together, I posit that in the first instance, the rainbow is a sign of various aspects of God's own being, to which it attests in a special way. God's justice is attested to in that the first rainbow followed the completed destruction of the wicked and the Nephilim. His goodness is attested to in his mercy toward Noah, his family, the animals, and in his continued benevolent gift of life. His truthfulness is attested to in the solid endurance of the order of nature. The mysterious ways of his providential governance of the universe are attested to, for not even the boldest meteorologist will attempt to forecast a rainbow. God's eternal beauty is attested to by the uniquely sublime phenomenon. And it ever attests to the tender love and care God has for all of his creatures. The rainbow is an everlasting sign that “**God is love**” (1 John 4:8).

Angelou's African American hymn also suggests the rainbow is a symbol of the theological virtues, particularly the theological virtue of hope. The theological virtue of hope is distinguished from the passion of hope. The passion of hope consists in the desire for some future good which is arduous or difficult to obtain.

So, if your favorite baseball team is down one run in the bottom of the ninth, with no outs and the bases loaded, you'll feel *hope* that your team will win. On the other hand, if the future arduous good seems impossible to attain, you will experience a withdrawing emotion contrary to hope. Thus, if your team is down ten runs in the bottom of the ninth with two outs, you will *despair* of victory. But, whereas victory in baseball is a temporal good, human beings are destined for a more than merely material-temporal good: the only good that will satisfy the longing in every human heart—namely, God himself. We cannot hope to attain that end of our own will. But with the gift of hope, we can: “for in hope we are saved” (Romans 8:24).

God is the cause and object of the theological virtue of hope, the habit by which we desire eternal life, and rely upon God in our journey to him. And this virtue necessarily is faith-based, for how can one rely upon God unless one believes what he has revealed, even though unseen?

While the flood story has a real historical predicate, its allegorical and spiritual significance in light of Christ is more important. The forty days and nights of rain and darkness are as the trials, tribulations, evils, and sufferings that every wayfarer must endure in his journey to God. By faith, Noah trusted God's word and built the ark—and by hope, he trusted God for deliverance.

The ark is as the Church that Christ established and that the apostles built through faith and hope.

The Barque of St. Peter is the only sure vessel that can ride out the tempestuous storms of the world and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is piloted by Christ's chosen, the successors to the apostles, the royal priesthood whom Noah prefigured.

Just as Noah could not call upon the wind and sun to dry the land, so we do not suffice to land ourselves in port. That is, we are insufficient to save ourselves from eternal separation from God. In the face of despair that sunlight would ever shine again, God put a rainbow in the clouds.

Similarly, when in the darkness of sin humans despaired of attaining its end, God sent his Son to save mankind. He, who invaded the world under cover of darkness then ascended and will return in the clouds with a countenance shining with all the brilliance of God's bow, is the only hope of salvation for every man.

Every time we see God's bow, we are reminded of the impossibility of saving ourselves and of our need to rely on the generous gift of his Son as the light of the world, his Church, and the instruments of grace it administers, by which he brings us to our rest.

**Let us reclaim the rainbow in the name of Him to whose
existence, goodness, justice, truth, providence, and beauty it attests.
Let us reclaim the rainbow in the name of Our God of love who gives the gift of hope.”**