

An Infinite God

We are a covenantal religion rather than creedal religion.

We do not ask people to adhere to any creed or statement of faith, like the Nicene Creed or the Apostle's Creed or the Athanasian Creed or, as in the Muslim faith, the Shahada.

We do not require our members to believe a certain doctrine or philosophy.

We will not ask our congregation to recite anything in which they don't believe.

We do not take any type of faith tests.

When you join our church, we will not require that you agree with the minister about his concept of God or interpretation of Holy Scriptures.

Our community, our church, is not based upon a certain set of beliefs. Our church is instead based on a covenant, an agreement, or a promise among our members.

We covenant together to help one another on our spiritual paths.

We covenant together to help each other and those in need.

We covenant together to respect all people and life.

We covenant together to promote social justice and equality for all.

We covenant together to celebrate life and joy and wonder.

We covenant together to make the world a better place.

I bring this up because not having a creed can make it hard to describe to other people exactly what we, as Unitarian Universalists, believe. When we are asked "What does your church believe in?" we don't answer "We believe that what is sacred and holy is revealed to everyone in different ways."

We don't answer that "We believe there are many paths to Understanding and Salvation and that the journey rather than the destination is what is important."

We don't answer that "We believe that Grace and Mystery is freely present in the Universe."

We don't answer that "Our faith teaches us to look for the holiness and sacredness present everywhere in the world."

We don't answer that everyone has the right and ability to encounter and understand the Mystery that is God in whatever terms and images and concept that best sings to their souls."

We do not even answer with the short and sweet "One God, No Hell."

We do not say any of that. We do not answer with what we believe.

Instead, We answer with what we do not believe - with what we are not.

We say "We don't have a definite set of beliefs."

We say "We do not believe in Hell."

We say "We do not believe in the divinity of Jesus - Oh wait a minute - those pesky UU Christians. Okay "We do not believe in the divinity of Jesus, except for those of us who do."

We say "We do not believe in the Trinity -except for those of us who do."

We say "We do not believe in reincarnation - except for those of us who do."

We say "We do not believe in a God who intervenes in our lives - except for those of us who do.

We say, "We do not believe in the infallibility of the Bible." - Actually most of use agree with that statement.

So when we are asked to describe ourselves, we define ourselves by what we don't believe rather than what we actually believe.

I have brought this up, because the topic of my talk, "An Infinite God," is about the Apophatic description of God. Apophatic theology is often called Negative theology, because, in Apophatic theology, God is described by what he is not. This is in contrast to Cataphatic Theology, which describes God by what he is. Don't worry - there won't be a vocabulary quiz at the end of this Service - I can barely remember the terms. I thought since the members of our church are always describing our church in terms of what it is not, I thought that it would fit right in, if we described God in terms of what he/she/it is not.

In Apophatic or negative theology it is accepted that experience of the Divine is too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words. To experience God is to experience the holy in an intuitive and abstract way. Each person's experience of God is different. Also Human Beings cannot define the Divine, in its immense complexity. As a result, *all* descriptions will be ultimately false; therefore, any and all conceptualization of God should be avoided.

However the ultimate example of trying to describe God with negative theology can be found with theologian John Scotus Erigena (a 9th century Irish theologian). Erigena used to reason thusly: God exists. But since we don't quite understand what existence is for God, we must make the negative statement. God does not exist. And finally we will arrive at the conclusion: God is more than existence. This leads to Erigena's most famously statement about the nothingness of God. "*We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.*"

To better illustrate this, the Blogger Marika, who is a Ph.D. student at Durham University, gives the following example:

"Imagine you got crafty and made something, say one of those papier maché Tracy Islands they used to show you how to make on Blue Peter. And say that your little papier maché Tracy brothers started to try and speak about their creator. Their whole world is made of papier maché, and so they'd have to talk to you in terms of their

world: our creator is like the glue that holds the island together. She is like the newspaper that is the ground of our being. She is like the paint that makes everything beautiful. And those things might say something true about you, but they wouldn't capture the whole of your complexity, and they wouldn't be able to think of you except in terms of paint, glue and newspaper, which would be fairly inappropriate as a description of your essence."

At this point I want to point out that the apophatic tradition is often, though not always, allied with mysticism. And, as such, focuses on a spontaneous or cultivated individual experience of the Divine beyond the realm of ordinary perception. An example of course is Sufi Islam. The teacher, Rumi, taught that the purpose of life is reconciliation and reunion with the divine. The Jewish philosophy of Kabbalah is also apophatic.

When we discuss God, here among ourselves, we usually use positive or Cataphatic Theology. Why? Well simply because the Western Church has always been a big proponent of positive theology. Oh they give lip service to "God is unknowable," but then they are right back to their positive descriptions of God. There have been countless theological papers by countless theologians written about the nature of God and his relationship with man. All of these theologians spending their lives trying to describe: What God is. What God wants. What God desires from us. Trying to make sense of God. And so we get such statements such as God is "Love." God is "Wisdom." God is "Good." God is the "Father." Jesus is God. God is "All-powerful." We also get such statements as God is "Wrathful." God is "Vengeful." God is "Jealous." And of course, we get tons of theology about the Virgin Birth, Original Sin, Inherited Depravity, Substitutionary Atonement, and the Nature of the Trinity.

Interestingly there is a story about Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas dedicated years of his life to writing the Summa Theologiae, writing thousands of pages, asking, analyzing and answering hundreds of questions and addressing thousands of objections. Then one day, he had a mystical experience during Mass and he suddenly refused to write any more, and when asked why, said, 'It is all straw.' He died shortly afterward.

However even though the Western Church tends towards positive statements and trying to define God, the Eastern Orthodox Church is very much apophatic. This is a quote from OrthodoxWiki on the nature of God:

"When an Orthodox theologian makes a cataphatic statement such as "God is everywhere" his apophatic approach would feel this too limiting, and would also say that God is also outside creation, and we don't know everywhere that God is. Even the statement "God exists" must be countered with the apophatic statement that God's existence is altogether different than any existence that we can imagine."

Now I am not going to go deeply into Orthodox theology; it is too big a topic to go into right now. But when I was researching this article, I typed in Christian

Theologians into Google and got a whole list of Christian Scholars, many of them I had actually heard of. Then I typed in Eastern Orthodox Theologians, and I also got a huge list, mostly of names I had never heard of. When I investigated the list, I found that the vast majority of them were modern scholars. Only a half dozen or so of them were theologians from before the 20th century. And when I looked at their bios on Wikipedia the words used to describe them were things like: teacher, monk, mystic, poet, wonder worker, exorcist, aesthetic, and even "had a personal experience of the vision of God". And their writings focused on things like Hymns of Divine Love, or Contemplative Prayers, or the Organization of Monasteries.

Theology in the Eastern Orthodox Church is not treated as an academic pursuit, instead it is based on revelation, This means that Orthodox theologians are validated by ascetic pursuits such as meditation, rather than academic degrees and scholarly writing. The most important Orthodox theologian was probably Gregory Palamas who wrote about using contemplative prayer or what we might call meditation to experience God by filling oneself with the light of the Holy Spirit. This practice certainly borders on mysticism.

So why is Apophatic theology important? Why should we embrace a negative description of God? I bet a bunch of you are probably wondering why it matters if you talk about what God is or if you talk about what God isn't. There is still a God. There is still a religion. Why are we worrying about it? It matters because how you describe God influences how you view God. It influences how you worship God. It influences how you view your role in the world. Anyone who thinks that God is a Vengeful and Wrathful God is going to treat others in a vengeful and wrathful way. Anyone who thinks that we should fear God, will attempt to rule others through fear.

But first and foremost, anytime that you discuss God in terms of what God can do or what God needs or what God wants, you have limited God. You have anthropomorphized God. You have brought God down to our level. My God is a God without limits. My God is an unknowable God. My God is an infinite God. Any idea that I have about what God is or what God wants or what God needs me to do will be entirely off the mark. Positive theology, or defining God, creates a God in our image. Maybe it is an image of the best in us, but it is still an image of us. Thus, even though I use human words - words that cannot touch the essence of God, it is important to remember that God is infinite Supply, not infinite Need. God is infinite Grace, not infinite Demand. God is infinite Love, not infinite Fear or Judgment.

Furthermore it is important to remember that God himself is both Infinite and Nothing. He does not need us to do things for him. God's existence is outside our needs.

God doesn't need us to understand him.

God doesn't need us to define him in a specific way.

God doesn't need us to defend him.

God doesn't need the death of Jesus for us to be absolved of our sins.

God doesn't need us to tell another person about either him or Jesus.

God doesn't need to send anyone to Hell.

God doesn't need a Christian Nation.

God doesn't need money, or armies, or guns or holy wars.

God doesn't need us to deny ourselves our passions and our pleasures.

God doesn't need us to decide who is moral or who is not.

God doesn't need us to believe in him.

God doesn't need the Bible.

God doesn't need the church.

God is just fine without any of the activities that we do in his name.

So in conclusion of my talk today, I would ask other people to dare to worship in a different way. One day just sit in a favorite spot and drink in the joy and wonderfulness of it all. You don't have to think about God. Watch the birds, or the deer devour your yard, or the wind through the trees, or your children as they sleep. Stay in the moment for just a few minutes and drink in the Holiness. Remember that Elijah found God not in the wind or the earthquake or in the fire, but in the "sound of sheer silence". As Psalm 46 says, "*be still and know that I am God*".