

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Christian Education: Religious Identity and Anglicanism

In the first two sessions of our six week course, we will focus on very general categories of religious identity. The very word “religion” comes from the Latin *religio*, “that which binds [again]”. Religion, therefore, can be thought of as the practice of faith, a practice intended to strengthen us in our faith. But this still begs the question of what is the content of our faith, and how we learn about who God is and what our relationship with Him is.

Definitions: Religious belief can be classified as dogma, doctrine or discipline.

1. DOGMA is a confession of faith that cannot be questioned absent apostasy (denial of the Lord) or heresy (false teaching about God). For example, that Jesus rose from the grave is a dogmatic statement. The statements found in the Creed are dogmatic.
2. DOCTRINE involves a proposition of faith which can be argued. For example, it is a dogmatic statement that Jesus atoned for our sins, but *how* this happened is a matter of doctrine, with theologians and churches taking different positions.
3. DISCIPLINE involves how we do things. Do we use a prayer book, or not? Can a priest be married, or not? Can women be ordained, or not? Most argument between denom-inations is over matters of discipline or over what is discipline.

Revelation: The first thing we need to notice about our knowledge of God is how we acquire this knowledge. God, being the source and summation of all Being, is beyond our capacity to define in any way. We learn about God through how He reveals Himself and His will for us; with this important qualification. God has made us in His image and likeness (Gen. 1.26), and has thus given to us the capacity to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him, albeit with partial knowledge in this world (1 Cor. 13.12).

Our capacity for receiving revelation can be explored by two pathways. The first is known as the *via positiva* (“positive pathway”), often referred to as “kataphatic spirituality” (from the Greek words for “according to” or “by” and “state of being,” *kata* and *phasis*). This can be compared to a statement embodying the phrase “God is like _____,” such as when the apostle writes “God is love” (1 Jn. 4.8), and when Jesus says “I am the way, the truth, and the life ...” (John 14.6).

The second mode of revelation is “apophatic” (*apo* = “against; opposed to”) or the *via negativa*. In apophatic spirituality, we seek to strip away from our own lives all those things that are not God, that when all else is removed we may find how God reveals Himself. A famous example is found in 1 Kgs. 19.9-12, in which the prophet Elijah encounters the LORD not in wind or fire or earthquake, but in the “still, small voice” that speaks to him when he focuses no longer on the cataclysm around himself.

General Revelation: In observing nature we observe a created order, whether we chose to classify this in terms of Natural Law, the Theory of Natural Selection, or by some

other scheme. When we pay attention, we notice evidence of a Creator. In Anglican belief General Revelation embodies Reason. Reason is not about cognition only; it is not a reference to how we think but to how we perceive and learn. Reason is a form of Natural Law, a participatory knowledge. To know something is to experience it, to share or participate in something. As such, Reason may be best understood as a practical wisdom.

Special Revelation: Our capacity to gain knowledge of God through observation is limited. Most of what we know of God is revealed specially, with special revelation encompassing Scripture and Tradition.

Scripture is God's holy word as found in the Bible. It includes all of the Bible, including those parts we consider to be foreign from our own experience and sensibilities. Tradition is not the same thing as convention ("how we have always done things"). Tradition (capital "T") embodies the guidance of the Holy Spirit in instructing the Church when the Church is assembled in ecumenical council. The Creeds are part of Tradition; whether we use candles, bells or incense are not.

General and Special Revelation in relation: Scripture, Reason and Tradition are not to be used independently of each other. They each comprise a form of revelation, with Scripture and much of Tradition being defined to be "special revelation," and Reason being defined as "general revelation". Scripture is considered a higher authority than Tradition in the sense that Tradition cannot contradict Scripture. Both Scripture and Tradition are considered consonant with Reason (with general revelation), but to the extent that Reason cannot reveal to us the mysteries of faith (*e.g.*, the working of miracles, the final judgment), Reason is considered incomplete.

The Creed: The Creed (including the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed) was codified and developed in the first four ecumenical councils of the Church, between the years A.D. 325 and 451. The Creed is a form of special revelation (Tradition), but each phrase may be related to a statement in the Bible. For example, writing about two decades after Jesus' resurrection, and about a decade *before* the first written record of this in the first written gospel, St. Paul states "... I delivered to you as of first importance what I also *received*, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures ..." (1 Cor. 15.3-4, *emphasis supplied*). In other words, even before the New Testament has been written, Paul, referring back to the "scriptures" which we now call the Old Testament, evaluates what he has already been told by those in the Church, and Paul's language used in doing this will later be used in the Creed. Matthew, writing several decades later, recalls the words of Jesus in revealing the Names of the persons of the Holy Trinity (Mtt. 28.19).

The special revelation found in the Creed does *not*, however, change us except to the extent that we profess faith in what we confess in the Creed. Faith involves trust in God and mental assent to the propositions of faith. Thus, faith involves the use of our powers of observation and analysis; it involves Reason as participatory knowledge.

The Three-legged Stool and other Christians: The combination of Scripture, Reason and Tradition as fundamental to Anglican belief is the so-called "Three-legged Stool".

Unlike other Christian movements, Anglican doctrine is neither established by a magisterium (the teaching office of the Vatican), nor derived from the theology of an eponymous founder (such as Lutheranism or Calvinism), nor summed up in a confession of faith (beyond that of the Creed). Instead, the earliest Anglican theological documents are its prayer books, which were themselves the products of profound theological reflection and compromise. It is within the *Book of Common Prayer* that Anglican doctrine was originally expressed in the selection, arrangement, and composition of prayers and exhortations, the selection and arrangement of daily Scripture readings (the Lectionary), and in the stipulation of the rubrics for permissible liturgical action and any variations in the prayers and exhortations. The principle of looking to the prayer books as a guide to the parameters of belief and practice is called by the Latin name *lex orandi, lex credendi* ("the law of prayer is the law of belief"). Within the prayer book are the so-called fundamentals of Anglican doctrine: The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, Scripture (*via* the lectionary), the sacraments, daily prayer, the *Catechism*, and apostolic succession in the context of the historic threefold ministry (of bishop, priest and deacon).

The origin of the Three-legged Stool is found in *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, published beginning in 1593 by Richard Hooker. This position argues against both the Puritans and Roman Catholics. The Puritans of Hooker's day (and their modern descendants in Fundamentalist churches) claim too much in proposing that Scripture provides the only source of knowledge, including knowledge about all matters of church order and discipline. Fundamentalists claim (with varying degrees of rigor) that unless something is allowed specifically in Scripture it is to be banned. For example, the use of musical instruments in church services was banned by the Puritans, and modern Baptists do not use the Creed because "it's not in the Bible".

In turn, Anglicanism argues that the Roman Catholic Church claims too much in believing that the Church has infallible understanding of faith (as given by the Pope speaking in Council), much less of the order and discipline of the church. The Roman Catholic position has tended to be one of "If something is not banned in Scripture, then it is allowable." This position is consonant with that adopted in Anglicanism. A key difference between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism relates to how something which is not banned is defined as doctrinal or dogmatic, with Rome tending to pronounce that which is not banned as comprising special revelation which may not be changed. In other words, the Roman church tends to classify matters of mental assent into doctrine which must be believed and cannot be argued about (*i.e.*, doctrine is defined as dogmatic), with Anglicanism restricting dogma to the propositions of faith found in the Creed.

Anglicanism seeks, in effect, a middle way, the so-called *via media*, between an overreliance on Scripture and an overreliance on Tradition. It is not by accident that Reason is the second of the three legs of the stool. Anglicanism recognizes the teaching authority of the Church, and yet recognizes as well the ability of each individual to learn about God through his or her own study of Scripture, and the use of his or her own reasoning faculties.

The "solas": The Puritans and their heirs argue for *sola scriptura* (by the Bible alone), that all revelation is found in Scripture (*i.e.*, Tradition and Reason are not accepted as forms of revelation). This is not to be confused with the doctrine of *sola fide*, which is a

key belief in most Protestant churches. *Sola fide* (by faith alone) is the doctrine that a person is saved solely by virtue of his or her faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. Like the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, Anglicans believe that salvation is effected by God not just by our faith in Him, but by how we participate in His Being through the sacraments.

The sacraments are vehicles of God's grace. In Baptism we participate in Jesus' death and resurrection, and are reborn into new life by the Holy Spirit (*BCP* 306). In Holy Eucharist we pray that we become "... living members of the Body of [Jesus]" (*BCP* 366). In other words, our salvation is effected by our participation in the Being of God, but we cannot do this absent our faith in God.