

Nature of God

1. What is the nature of God?

When Christians talk about the nature of God, what do they mean? What is God like? What qualities does God have and how do Christians describe him? All these questions are about the nature of God; however, they are tricky for Christians to answer because most believe it is impossible to encounter God under normal circumstances. Consequently, all Christians search the Bible for clues to what God is like and although some argue that it is possible to work out things about God's nature in other ways, reading scripture is the primary source of information for most.

Omniscient

All-knowing; characterised by limitless knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

Personal

Being a person or individual with whom others are able to have a relationship.

The short answer to questions about what God is like is that he is complicated, or, to put it another way, that he is difficult for people to wrap their heads around. However, this does not stop most Christians from making various claims about what God is like. For example, God is eternal (i.e. he has no beginning or end and is indestructible), omniscient (i.e. he knows everything), and personal (i.e. he forms relationships with human beings). However, this list is far from exhaustive and there are several other things that Christians believe about God's nature. Additionally and perhaps most importantly, Christianity is monotheistic, which means that all Christians claim that God is singular: there is only one God.

Eternal

Everlasting; forever existing, indestructible and without beginning or ending.

Monotheistic

Believing in the existence of a single God and rejecting belief in other gods or demigods.

2. How does the nature of God work?

Generally, Christians believe what they do about what God is like because of the Bible, which describes God's nature in great detail. For example, God's benevolent character is presented through the life and death of Jesus (i.e. God the Son) and some Old Testament passages like Psalm 86:15, which describes God as merciful, gracious and abounding in steadfast love. Similarly, John 3:16 states, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that [we]... may have eternal life." Elsewhere in the New Testament, God's forgiving nature is presented through passages like the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Lord's Prayer. In the former passage, a father forgives his son even though he leaves home to squander his inheritance. When the son returns in disgrace and confesses his sins, his father forgives him and even kills the fatted calf (biblical slang for throwing a wild and raucous party). In the latter passage, the Lord's Prayer, Christians ask God to forgive their sins, revealing a deep conviction in God's forgiving nature.

Judge

One who decides whether another's actions are good or evil and how to respond to them.

Omnipotent

All-powerful; characterised by limitless ability, influence and strength.

Notwithstanding this, Christians also believe that God acts as the perfectly just judge. In the New Testament's Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats; here, readers learn that wrongdoers will "go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life", which is evidence of God's role at the Last Judgement. Additionally, God is widely presented as omnipotent. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, God performs several miracles through Moses, like turning the water of the Nile to blood and parting the Red Sea. Both these acts are demonstrations of extraordinary power, but omnipotence can be found all over the place, like in the creation of Earth and the miracles of Jesus.

Benevolent

All-loving; characterised by limitless compassion, kindness and supportiveness.

Forgiving

Accepting of wrong actions and thoughts; able to show mercy and pardon wrongdoers.

3. **Why** is the nature of God important?

Christian beliefs about the nature of God are important because they have a huge influence on how Christians behave. For some Christians, God's benevolent, immanent and personal nature is emphasised in Jesus, God the Son. For these Christians, the humanity of Jesus is essential, which is well-captured at his baptism and during the week culminating in his crucifixion. With these aspects of God's nature emphasised, he becomes a role model that Christians can attempt to emulate (even if they will never ultimately be successful). For other Christians, it is God the Father, the omnipotent, omniscient and transcendent judge whom they imagine in their mind's eye. Such Christians may be especially God-fearing and concerned with the impending Last Judgement. What Christians think God is like affects how they behave and worship, and the fact that different Christians emphasise different aspects of God's nature is one of the reasons why different denominations have different beliefs, teachings and practices.

Immanent

Being an intrinsic and permanent part of something (e.g. the universe).

Transcendent

Being beyond the possibility of experience or outside of something (e.g. the universe).

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So, what must we remember about what Christians think God's like? Well, he has various characteristics or qualities, and some appear to be mutually exclusive (like immanence, which involves being part of the universe, and transcendence, which involves being beyond it). For Christians, God is impossible to comprehend fully. What's more, all these characteristics or qualities are grounded in the Bible; scripture is the basis for almost everything Christians believe about God, even if it's sometimes supported by the work of philosophers and theologians using non-textual evidence. And finally, God's multifaceted nature means that different Christians inevitably emphasise various aspects of God's nature at the expense of others; this, in turn, gives rise to some major inter-denominational differences: some Christians think and do one thing, whilst others think and do another. If you understand this final point, you'll be able to avoid asking a lot of repetitive questions of your teacher. The Bible is more like a miniature library than a single book: it contains two collections of multiple books by different authors (and some books were even written by more than one person). Consequently, a vast array of views about what God's like are presented. It's impossible to reconcile all of them perfectly, and, because of this, some Christians do this and other Christians do that. Christianity is a broad church, so to speak!

