



The Nature of God

Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 2A

Key Concepts:

- The Bible almost wholly uses **masculine language** to describe God: 'Father', 'King', 'Lord', 'He'; The Holy Spirit is also referred to as 'he' (though the Hebrew '**ruach**' is feminine and the Greek '**pneuma**' is neuter).
- Christians believe that God chose to be incarnate as a male; all of these facts contribute to liturgy and hymnody depicting God as male.
- There is, however, some feminine imagery for God in the Bible: God is pictured as a mother in Isaiah 66:13 and Luke 15:8-10. God is personified in the Book of Proverbs as '**Sophia**' (wisdom).
- Jesus taught that God was beyond gender (John 4:24) and Genesis 1:27 implies that God includes both genders.
- **Sallie McFague** believes that God is beyond language; therefore, any description of God must involve **metaphors**, using words that are not literally applicable.
- The problem with Christian theology is that metaphorical language for God as 'Father' hardened into a '**model**' for believers which they took as literally true.
- We should speak of God using the metaphor of personhood as this helps us relate to life personally rather than abstractly. However, we must be aware of the danger of the **monarchical model**: God as an omnipotent judging parent.
- The monarchical model leads to escapism (God will solve all problems) and **militarism** (Kings invade and conquer) and is partly responsible for issues with the **environment** and human rights.
- McFague believes that a helpful metaphor is **God as mother**, focusing on God as caring, nurturing and helping people to flourish. This leads her to the complimentary metaphor of the **world as god's body** and a new interpretation of the Trinity: Mother, Lover and Friend.
- Some Christian theologians have insisted on the '**impassibility**' of God: that God is unable to suffer, is immutable (unchanging), fully transcendent.
- **Jurgen Moltmann** believes that this view merely produces an irrelevant church, impervious to real suffering; furthermore, it denies what is truly unique about the Christian message: that God suffers.
- Moltmann uses the doctrine of the **Trinity** to make the case that, as Jesus is fully God, then as Jesus suffered, God suffered.
- This means that **suffering** is a part of the God-experience and anyone claiming to be a Christian who does not suffer on behalf of the poor, the powerless and the excluded is not experiencing true spirituality.
- Moltmann's theology rejects 'religious' views of God as a ruler, a **philosophical principle** or a **moral force** as these remove God from the world; if atheists reject these notions of God, they have not necessarily rejected the God of Jesus.

Key arguments/ debates:

Some Christians reject McFague's approach because they believe that God has revealed the words in which we are to refer to 'Him'. Who are we to go against God's choices? Other Christians acknowledge feminine imagery for God in the Bible and believe that culturally embedded notions of patriarchy have shaped theology.

In the field of theology and religion 'suffering God' is often an oxymoron; to ascribe emotions and pain to God is to engage in anthropomorphising human experience. Against this, Moltmann insists that the Trinity cannot be understood apart from emotion and pain.

Key questions:

- Is it valid for Christians to refer to God as mother?
- To what extent has Christian language about God been male dominated?
- Is metaphorical theology compatible with belief in revelation?
- Has Moltmann exaggerated the role of suffering in the nature of God?
- How different is Moltmann's view of God from Deism or 'Prime Mover'?

Key quotes:

'Kings do not have to, and usually do not, love their subjects or realms; at most, one hopes they will be benevolent.'
(S. McFague)

'The cross is the really irreligious thing in the Christian faith.'
(J. Moltmann)

Key words:

Masculine language | ruach | pneuma | Sophia | Sallie McFague | metaphor | model | monarchical model | passivity | militarism | environment | God as mother | world as body of God | impassibility | Jurgen Moltmann | The crucified God Trinity | suffering | moral force | Philosophical principle

