**HM5513 Christianity: Narrative Theology**

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**The Image and attributes of God in Christianity throughout the centuries**

Within Christianity, throughout the centuries the beliefs surrounding the image of God has been debated with the anthropomorphising of God, with the two representations of God in the Bible as a smiteful one in the Old Testament and a softer, saviour one in the New Testament with the figure of Jesus. This debate on the nature of God coincides with ideas of the masculine and the feminine and the gender of God. Historically the emphasise on the ruthlessness of God, and the God-fearing Christians of the Middles Ages lead to and contribute to the image of God being a masculine, male, figure and a is seen as a father figure from early Christianity. However, figures such as Julian of Norwich believe that God was a feminine figure, with maternal attributes. In the contemporary, media and pop culture align with Julian of Norwich’s thinking, with songs like God is a Woman by Ariana Grande. Focusing on the feminine attributes of God or even a female God, is present in feminism to help women relate to this commanding figure and create a space for women in Christianity. The structure of most churches, however, follow a similar structure from the beginning, with (the male) God, all the clergymen or religious figures being male and the emphasise on the maleness of the Church. With beliefs such as ‘For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour,’ directly influencing and contributing to the patriarchal structure of society.[[1]](#footnote-1) This patriarchal structure is present in the belief of the trinity with Jesus Christ being half God and half man as a male figure, who conforms with the traditional view of God’s maleness and embraces the feminine qualities of God with an almost maternal presence. The Holy Spirit takes the form of more of a genderless view with this entity manifesting as a dove, or light as the helper of God.

Anthropomorphising of God has been present within the language used in describing His nature which also helps people relate and form a closer connection to God as they can envisage what this figure may look like, with their limited knowledge in order to comprehend this all powerful, all knowing, figure in their lives who watches over them. This human element of God may be a product of the Creation Story in Genesis as ‘God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds…”’[[2]](#footnote-2) Connection between God and the Trinity to humans makes the anthropomorphising of God understandable from this passage and that ‘the Lord God… breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,’[[3]](#footnote-3) This connection links with the ‘term “anthropocentric” has usually been used, in the historical development of theology, to describe an error… [however we cannot ignore] the centrality on Biblical grounds,’[[4]](#footnote-4) The centrality of man is also seen in Genesis 9:6, ‘When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God,’[[5]](#footnote-5) and this Image of God being an almost human one could be argued to be true, due to the multiple references to the connection of humankind and God in The Bible. This familiarity between humankind and Him allows Christians to be able to relate and feel a connection to the divine being, seeing Him as a fatherly figure, a protector, and a friend.

Medieval beliefs of God take a different approach to the idea of this protector and father figure, with God fearing beliefs and the servitude towards God being a prominent feature of Medieval Christianity. The clergymen served God and during the Black Death, 1346 to 1353, Christians believed that those without sin would not be made ill from this disease and that prayer and servitude would protect them. This idea of sin meaning disease could be linked to the Old Testament and the Ten Plagues of Egypt, alongside the wrathful God’s actions on the city of Sodom and sinners throughout the scripture. Reinforcing the patriarchal structure of Christianity and society as a whole, with God’s powers and will being held over them as he is in control of their lives and the belief they’ll be protected if they do not sin. The belief in the Trinity reinforces the patriarchal structure of Christianity, with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit being mainly masculine presences. With Jesus Christ being half divine, half flesh He possess the same qualities as God the father, if we consider the Trinity. When Jesus was alive, he performed miracles, healed the sick, fed the many all being quite caring and nurturing qualities, and for the time quite feminine attributes. While also igniting rebellion against the Roman rulers with more violent and forceful actions such as the turning of market stalls in the temple.[[6]](#footnote-6) Coinciding with the waiting of the arrival of a warrior like figure to help Gods people from oppression spoken about in the Old Testament. Alongside this outward, more aggressive rebellion, Jesus Christ demonstrated quiet rebellion by healing the woman with haemorrhoids which went against menstruation laws at the time, and eating a meal with moneylenders, sex workers and all those considered outcasts in the Pharisees eyes.

Alongside this view on the plague being punishment for sin and God at the time of the Black Death, and the warrior, masculine presentation of God, Julian of Norwich’s revelations led her to the conclusion that God is a maternal, caring figure that helps and cares for humankind. In her *Revelations of Divine Love,* Julian of Norwich conceived a loving and motherly God who was forgiving and merciful, ‘She wrote of God as our mother, and embraced strikingly independent theological opinions.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Julian of Norwich’s ideas of a maternal, motherly God links with contemporary religion and pop culture, with development of the idea of a feminine God or even a genderless God, with songs such as ‘God is a Woman’ by Ariana Grande.[[8]](#footnote-8) Feminist theologians have reinterpreted the Bible through a feminist lens attempting to create a space for woman in Christianity that equals men’s via scripture and creating a stronger bond with God through this reinterpretation of scripture and Jesus’ teachings. Learning about the woman in the Bible and the women who were integral with Jesus’ success and his six female disciples alongside his six male disciples.

Contemporary media and pop culture has multiple films, songs and tv shows that include God. Such as ‘Bruce Almighty’ in 2003 and ‘Evan Almighty’ in 2007 which both have Morgan Freeman cast as God, shifting away from the Westernised, white male God. While ‘Dogma’ in 1999, and. Whoopi Goldberg was cast as God in ‘A Very Merry Muppet Christmas’ in 2002, and in ‘Little Bit of Heaven’ in 2011 alongside another female God, played by Dolly Parton as an angel calling her boss a “she” in ‘Grace and Frankie’ in 2022. These films diversify what we now consider the image of God, with all having very similar, if not the same, attributes and qualities as the traditional Western view on the Christian God. Modern films also have a non-gendered, non-physical God with the ‘Prince of Egypt’ in 1998, however while represented as a flaming bush mimicking the book of Exodus the voice is loud, commanding and masculine, depicting the passage from the Bible when God was revealed to Moses. Also, the film ‘The Lorax’ in 2012 and the title character could be argued as a metaphor for God through an environmental ethics lens and the character is not able show the Onceler his powers when asked because ‘that’s not how it works.’[[9]](#footnote-9) This can draw parallels to the idea of faith over evidence in all religions, alongside the character’s powers and his descent and ascension to the “heavens.” With the heavy theme of the environment and deforestation in aid of business ethics and the economy can be linked to the idea of stewardship and dominion over God’s creation.

Overall, the image and attributes of God have been argued and developed through the ages. With the Old Testament displaying a more wrathful, angry, and masculine God and the New Testament with the introduction of Jesus and His teachings, with healing and more nurturing qualities alongside a merciful God. The contemporary world has a very diverse and many representations of God and their attributes and influence across films for all ages and music. Alongside the diversifying of worship and prayer within Christianity, such as the Quaker belief of no structure or leader, only God is above the congregation as they are a whole on the same level.

# Bibliography

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The Holy Bible. New International Version. - Ephesians 5:23 and Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:7 and Genesis 6:9

The Lorax. (Illumination, 2012)

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The Lorax (2012) reflects the traditional ideas of the attributes of God. Such omnipotence, omniscience, transcendence, immanence alongside the ideas of stewardship and dominion. Throughout the film, the town of Thneedville has no organic life besides the people that live there, with metal walls encasing the town and artificial lights on the border and a giant fan for kite flying, along with fake snow for snowboarding. Whilst making a political critique on capitalism and consumerism alongside with deforestation and the environmental destruction sue to industrialisation. With the younger generations helping heal the environment, by the main character and the people of Thneedville planting the last truffular seed after the Onceler in the present is trying to right his wrongs from his industry.

The soundtrack aids this narrative of the need for the people to look after the environment whilst the older generation helping to restore the environment to what they remember. ‘How Bad Can I Be’ shows the destruction of the valley and the success of the Onceler and his thneed business. ‘Everybody needs a Thneed’ showcases that consumerism also aides in deforestation, due to the demand and supply chain. Ted Wiggins, the main character, and his grammy knock the head off of Aloysius O’Hare’s statue, which is stood on a pillar that represents knowledge to form a crack revealing soil in order to plant the seed. Then the people of now Thneedville, used to be Greenville, sing ‘Let It Grow’ after the main character breaks down a border wall showing them the extent of pollution and destruction are outside their little bubble. Whilst singing, Aloysius O’Hare, the most poweerful man in town, he joins in with ‘let it die’, the townspeople send him away with a flying device. With the statue then O’Hare being moved out of town by the people, shows how people can help restore nature by lowering consumerism of an unevnironmentally friendly company and business man and prioritsing nature. In line with the teaching of stewardship, in looking after God’s creation and being harmonious with nature rather than destroying for personal, financial gain.

The title character, The Lorax, has divine qualities such as the ability to fly to and from the “heavens” and teaches the Onceler a lesson rather than stopping him himself. Demonstrating that belief and faith is as powerful as evidence and faith is believing with the lack of evidence. Morals that are highlighted in this Illumination film. With the Lorax descending to the Onceler again in the present day, when the Onceler is around 70 years old, to tell him that he’s ‘done good’. With the Lorax’s message ‘UNLESS’ on a stone circle, influencing the Oncler to try and be better and inspiring Ted to help the environment. Revealing the full quote at the end, ‘’UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.’ – Dr. Seuss’.

1. The Holy Bible. New International Version. Ephesians 5:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Holy Bible, New International Version. Genesis 1:26-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Holy Bible, New International Version, Genesis 2:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. G. C. Berkouwer (Gerrir Cornelis). Studies In Dogmatics. Man: The Image of God. (Eerdmans, 1962), pp.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Holy Bible, New International Version, Genesis 9:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Holy Bible. New international Version. Matthew 21:12-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Barry Windeatt in Revelations of Divine Love by Julian of Norwich. Blurb (Oxford University Press, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ariana Grande. God is a Woman (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Lorax. Illumination, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)