

1 Beliefs about deity

Activity

- 1 Look at these pictures which show different ways in which artists have tried to represent God – decide which one is most convincing and explain why.
- 2 Suggest what would be the most suitable way to represent God in art and explain why.
- 3 Reflection – why do you think it is so difficult to describe/imagine/show images of God? Why do you think some people believe it is wrong to show images of God?

This chapter will help you answer questions on:

- ◆ What Christians believe about the nature of God
- ◆ What reasons they give in support of this belief
- ◆ What Christians believe about miracles
- ◆ How Christians believe God intervenes in the world through miracles.
- ◆ What Christians believe about Jesus and the Holy Spirit
- ◆ How Christians believe God intervenes in the world through Jesus and the Holy Spirit

Introduction

These are some of the questions people ask about God.

- Is there a God?
- What does God look like?
- Is God male or female?
- How can we describe God?
- If there is no God, how did we get here?
- If there is no God, what is the point of life?



The *Creation of Adam* fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Buonarroti Michelangelo

Beliefs about the nature of God

This topic will help you answer questions on:

- What Christians believe about the nature of God
- What reasons they give in support of this belief

What is God like and how can we describe God?

People find it very difficult to say what God is like because God is beyond human understanding. When people talk about God they tend to use pictures, symbols or symbolic language to describe God. Sometimes people describe God by saying what God is 'not' like: e.g. God is not jealous, God is not cruel.

The writers of the Bible often used picture images – God is called a shepherd, a warrior, a judge, a king, a father and a mother hen. However these are human images, and so can limit God as God is not a human being or an animal, and to say that he is makes him less than God. This way of explaining God is called anthropomorphism.

People also use other words to explain God:

- **Omnipotence** – God is all-powerful
- **Omniscience** – God is all-knowing
- **Omnibenevolence** – God is all loving
- **Omnipresence** – God is present everywhere at the same time
- **Transcendence** – God is above all
- **Immanence** – God is within all.

These words can be difficult to understand, and some seem contradictory – an immanent God acts in human history; past, present and future: a transcendent God does not, and so humans have to act for God.

Some Christians will talk of God as **impersonal** and somehow mysterious and holy, a sort of force for good, while others will see God as very **personal**, rather like a friend who is concerned about peoples' needs and feelings.

All these views of God can be found in the Bible, but they all have problems if taken alone. Christians need to combine all these different beliefs about God, but sometimes they stress one belief more than the other. This means that talking about God can lead to misunderstandings, and so Christians use many different ways of talking about God.

Here are some of the ways they use language to describe God:

Analogy

This uses words symbolically to suggest something else. This means that words do not mean quite the same thing when applied to God. For example: to say 'God is good' is different from saying 'My dad is good,' or 'My dog is good'.



Fresco detail from Chiesa di S. Pietro e Paolo, depicting *God the Father* by Pietro da Vincenza

Exam tip

You need to make sure that you can use these words correctly and understand why Christians use them.