

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'Who is God?'.
For more information about this video or the series, visit
<https://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/study-here/open-days/cambridge-your-classroom>



Who is God?

Dr Ruth Jackson
Ravenscroft, Faculty of
Divinity

A number of religious traditions recognise God to be transcendent: beyond all human knowing.

But if God is too awesome to speak about — if no human mind can comprehend or understand the nature of God — then how on Earth do we know what God is like?

My name is Ruth Jackson Ravenscroft and I'm a theologian at the University of Cambridge. That means that I get to study the questions you think about in R.E. all the time as my job! And one of the questions that really interests me is: 'What is the nature of God?' Now, you may think that in the Christian tradition, people are absolutely certain about what God is like, but actually, throughout history, people have indicated that this isn't something that one can just simply know, and definitely not in the same way that we know what our friends and family are like.

For example, Saint Augustine of Hippo, one of the most famous Christian

theologians of all time, who you might have heard of because of his response to the problem of evil, began his most famous book asking: 'How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord?' 'Who then are you, my God?' Of course, a key part of the answer to this question is that Christians know what God is like through the Bible. It is through deep reflection on the Bible that Christians ground their belief that God is Trinity. To speak about the Trinity means that there is One God, but this God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is a teaching utterly unique to Christianity.

The Bible also tells Christians about the person of Jesus Christ, the son of God, the second person of the Trinity who, in order to save humanity, became incarnate, which means 'put on flesh, became human'. However, there's a whole list of words that the Christian tradition uses to describe God, which you can't find in the Bible, although many thinkers, like Augustine, are happy to use

them alongside biblical terms. And you'll have heard of some of these words already like 'eternal', 'omnipresent', 'omnibenevolent'. Is

We shouldn't think of these attributes — words that describe God — as 'bits' or 'aspects' of God's nature. God is not omniscient and omnipotent in the same way that your school teacher is knowledgeable and strict, sometimes more so, sometimes less so. God is *always* completely omniscient and omnipotent. In fact, all of these words reflect the Christian belief that God is the creator of all things, and that God creates everything in the universe out of nothing.

As such a creator, God is the absolutely ultimate being: 'Being beyond being!'.

God doesn't exist 'inside' time and space, since God creates time and space. Therefore God cannot be labelled or measured using the same categories as those we might apply to the creatures that we see around us. Transcendent God is not a being, amongst other beings, or an object amongst other objects. So, unlike us humans, God doesn't have any sort of body. God isn't a boy or a girl, or short or tall, but exists beyond all categories of sex and gender, height and weight.

God doesn't need to take time to learn things, because God knows absolutely everything there is to know eternally and always. Nor is the Christian God anything like the gods worshipped by the Ancient Greeks who lived on Mount Olympus and fought amongst themselves and meddled in human affairs. And remember that I said for Christians that God is Trinity: one God in three persons? Well, we also have to make sure that we don't think about those 'persons' like human people either. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But none of these persons is older or more powerful or more knowledgeable than the other.

The three persons are eternally one, equal, united in everything. What you may have noticed about these words that Christians use to describe God, like eternal, omniscient etc, etc, is that they're really useful for helping Christians describe what God is *not*. God doesn't get ill. God doesn't age. God doesn't forget things. These words help Christians to avoid silly or bad ways of speaking about God. They're tools for the human imagination.

It's speaking of the imagination that I'd like to introduce you to a theologian you may not have heard of before. A Christian writer from the late Medieval Period, the time of the Black Death, a great and terrible plague causing death and suffering for hundreds of millions of people.

This writer's name is Julian of Norwich, or at least that's the name that we now know her by. Julian tells us very little about herself in her writings, so we can't be sure, but it may be that she took the name of the church in Norwich, St. Julian's, in which she lived for most of her life. Yes — she lived in a church! Mother Julian was quite a special woman. She was anchoress, which means she'd taken vows devoting herself to prayer and worship, anchored to just one room. Julian chose to live closed off from the world, in a small cell dependent on others for food and for drink, and during her life she became known in her community for her wisdom, and she would offer advice and spiritual counselling.

Julian's writing was also distinctive because instead of relying on the more philosophical language of the attributes to speak about the nature of God, she always began with the human experience. She used images and metaphors linked to human bodies and relationships, as well as to the everyday objects that we see around us. Julian was a mystic, meaning that she came to know

God and became conscious of God's presence through a series of special visions, everyday experience, prayer and meditative practice. And through these immersive, embodied experiences, one attribute to describe God stuck out to Julian much more than all of the rest.

And that attribute, quite simply, was 'Love'.

In her book 'Revelations of Divine Love', Julian writes about a series of visions that she had in the midst of a very serious illness when she was thirty years old.

These visions tell Julian about God's love for humanity, and central to them is the image of the crucifix: Jesus Christ dying on the cross. This is a vital image for her, because it demonstrates God's compassion for human beings. For Julian, who knew her Bible very well, God is Love.

This statement, which you can find in 1 John 4:8 is, in her view, the foremost expression of God's nature and purpose. Julian treasures the idea that God sent his only son into the world to be the Redeemer and Saviour of mankind. But also to love and suffer with human beings. She writes the following: 'Before God made us, he loved us, and this love has never faded, nor ever shall. And in this love, he has done all his works and in this love he has made everything for our benefit and in this love, our life is everlasting'.

Elsewhere in her text, Julian also turns to the familiar imagery of a mother nursing and caring for her children to describe God's care for us. But we shouldn't think that Julian abandons any notion of God's transcendence. The image you saw at the beginning of this video of a hazelnut in the palm of a hand? Well, this image, says Julian, can tell us about the smallness and the vulnerability of the universe compared to the awesomeness

and majesty of God. Think about how tiny, how insignificant that little nut is. 'That is like all of creation', Julian says, 'seen from the perspective of the creator, God. And how remarkable that God would therefore choose to sustain and protect this little thing'.

These questions about the nature of God in Christianity are foundational for all sorts of further questions in Christian theology. So questions about the meaning and the reach of religious language, questions about how to worship God, questions about sin and evil, and the problem of evil. Crucially, however, Julian of Norwich suggests to us that we needn't leave our houses to be theologians and we needn't lose sight of basic human realities in order to start talking about the nature of God. God can be known even in the mundane and the everyday, because according to Mother Julian, above all, God is Love. And everyone can experience love and feel its effects, even though they might be unable to define it, or get to the bottom of it.

What do you think?

How do you think Christians might incorporate Julian's writings and ideas into their lives and practices today?