

God in Our Image

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DEFINITION

Anthropomorphism: Attributing human traits or behavior to God. From *anthropos* (human) and *morphé* (form)

QUESTION

I'm reading your chapter in *A More Christlike Word* on Cassian and Ambrose. I find it helpful to see the church fathers speak about the limits of using "*anthropomorphisms*" when speaking of God.

The question that keeps rattling around as I read is that this is great to know when we apply negative attributes to God, but what about the positive? Compassion, kindness, love, delight; even grief?

I see that you note that God's love is immutable so that it doesn't waver like human passions. But how is it still not an *anthropomorphism* of sorts, if other human emotions like wrath and anger are?

RESPONSE

Great question. I think that these, too, are human projections, in the sense that we can only use human words that describe human experiences that are analogous to human actions and emotions. We recognize that this comes with severe limitations in terms of apprehending the God of the universe who is *beyond words* (ineffable) and even *beyond being*. That is, God is not just a Being among other beings. Rather, everything has its being in God (Acts 17:28).

However, *anthropomorphisms*, as shadowy analogies, are not empty or meaningless. Words like love are even difficult to nail down from human to human, BUT we rely on a few truths that allow us a meaningful approximation:

1. *Words do mean something and God isn't afraid to*

use them. So when God reveals himself as love or compassion or mercy, that's not merely a human projection. It's a self-revelation of God who wants to say something about himself using our words.

2. *To be created in the image and likeness of God in us means something*. God images something of God in us. So, again, we are analogous images of God so that at the very least, God cannot be LESS than what we are (e.g., relational) and we know that he is certainly MORE than we are (e.g., ultra-relational). As shadows of reality, human nature at its best 'gestures' toward our blueprint.

3. *That Jesus is the image of God means we have a revelation of who God is in the flesh, so **Incarnation trumps anthropomorphism***. In John 3:16, we read, "*For God so [in this way] loved the world,*" and Paul will proclaim, "*Jesus is the image of the invisible God,*" and "*Jesus is the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form.*" Jesus claimed, "*To see me is to see the Father*" and the author of Hebrews insists, "*He is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of his likeness.*"

So Jesus is the Word of God, as in *Jesus is what God has to say about himself*. Thus, *Jesus is our quality control for all anthropomorphisms*.

"The passion of anger and wrath cannot be literally attributed to the unchangeable nature of God without fearful blasphemy."

—John Cassian (360-435)

Anthropomorphisms are never the problem. God freely uses them in his self-revelation. The early Christian teachers' concern is that when we slip into reading them literally, we paint a picture of God that is not only contrary to God's nature but even to the Incarnation Image through Whom God definitively revealed himself. □

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