



The Theology of *The Shack*

| *What is the theology of The Shack? What does it have to say about salvation, the Trinity, and why bad things happen to good people?*

Introduction

A surprise bestseller of 2008, William P. Young's novel *The Shack* is one of the most popular religion books of our time, addressing key theological topics in an accessible, fresh way. Like the public television drama *God on Trial*, in which a group of Auschwitz prisoners put God on trial for crimes against humanity, *The Shack* is taken up with questions of human suffering and apparent divine indifference. But unlike *God on Trial*, Young's novel does not find God wanting. Instead, human beings, bent on their own selfish desires and driven by fear, have cast a fallen creation into a despair that can only end when they begin to love and trust the God who loves them as children.

Young wrote the book as a Christmas gift to his six children in 2005, attempting to explain to them his beliefs in a God of forgiveness and mercy. Although it is fiction, not autobiography, Young poured a lot of his own spiritual journey into the novel, which deals with one man's attempt to find God even in the midst of tragedy.

Plot Synopsis

The novel centers on a seemingly ordinary Oregon family that lost its youngest daughter several years before. Through flashbacks, readers learn of Missy's kidnapping and murder at the hands of a serial killer who targets young girls. Her father, Mack, feels awash in guilt and a grief so crippling that he labels it "The Great Sadness." In the midst of this pain, Mack receives an unusual note in his mailbox inviting him to return to the shack where his daughter was killed. Curiously, the letter is signed "Papa," which is his wife's favorite



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name for God. Mack, on the brink of suicide, decides to visit the shack alone, and there embarks on a strange and fantastic adventure.

His host is indeed Papa, the Father/Mother God, who appears in the form of a substantial African American woman. Papa is accompanied by the two other members of the Trinity. Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, is described as a shimmering, almost transparent Asian woman who is always in motion and loves to garden—we learn at one point that a garden she is cultivating and pruning is actually a representation of Mack's own soul. There is also Jesus, God's beloved son, who is described as a Middle Eastern carpenter. Mack warms immediately to Jesus and through him comes to understand more about the other members of the Trinity.

During the course of the weekend, Mack begins to process some of the pain and anger in his life through long conversations with each member of the Trinity. He is furious with God for creating a world that would be so riddled with suffering and loss but eventually comes to understand Papa's dilemma in not wanting to condemn any of her children. Mack realizes he would rather die himself than see any of his children punished eternally

for sin, and God is no different. Mack begins to comprehend the heart of Jesus, and something of Jesus' sacrifice.

At this point, Mack is ready for the final stages of his spiritual transformation. After Sarayu temporarily equips him with the spiritual gift of enhanced vision through the Holy Spirit, Mack is able to glimpse creation as it was intended to be and to forgive his own father, an alcoholic who had abused him as a child. After that, Papa appears to Mack in the guise of a grandfatherly male lumberjack and leads him to the hidden cave where his daughter, Missy, is buried. It is the morning of the third day of Mack's weekend of dying to self, a clear reference to the Christ story. But Missy is not resurrected in a fairy-tale ending; rather, Mack leaves the shack with a renewed heart. After recovering from a car accident and discovering that his time at the shack was a divinely inspired dream or vision, he is able to share with others the story of his unique weekend with God. Mack also consults with the police, who recover Missy's body and use the newly discovered physical evidence to bring the killer to justice.

Spiritual, but not Religious

In many ways, *The Shack* mirrors the last few decades' movement away from organized religion to a more personal, individualized spirituality. Mack exemplifies this. He has been to seminary, goes to church regularly, and says grace at meals. But Mack wonders at times what it is all for, especially since his grief about his daughter's brutal death is not assuaged by pat answers. "Sunday prayers and hymns weren't cutting it anymore, if they ever really had," the novel explains. "[Mack] was sick of God and God's religion, sick of all the little religious social clubs that didn't seem to make any real difference or affect [sic] any real changes" (p. 66).

What Mack needs is not rote religion, but a life-changing experience with God. In *The Shack*, God is described in the same way that theologian Paul Tillich referred to God—as the "ground of all being" who is in all, through all, and uniquely real (p. 112). Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu take great pains to teach Mack the difference between religion and love. Religion is based on hierarchy and rules, which Mack learns "cannot bring freedom; they only have the power to accuse" (p. 203). Papa explains that the Bible isn't a rulebook but a "picture of Jesus,"



The question of theodicy: If God is truly omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omni-benevolent (all-good), why does it seem that God will not—or cannot—make it all better?

and that ritual is dead if it exists merely for its own sake (pp. 197 and 207). The three do not want Mack to be a rule follower; they want to permeate every nook and cranny of his soul.

Jesus himself comes across as spiritual but not religious. "I'm not too big on religion," he tells Mack with a bit of an edge to his voice. He did not come to earth to build an institution, he says, but a kingdom; the church is not intended to be an institution so much as it is created to be a community in relationship (pp. 177–79). Jesus says he wants Mack to live in him as he lives in the Father.

Throughout the story, the author puts forward the controversial theological idea that human potential is almost limitless. Mack is blown away when Jesus tells him that ordinary people have the power to perform the same miracles that Jesus did, if they only have God's spirit dwelling in them (pp. 100 and 112). With Jesus, Mack actually walks on water. Papa tells Mack that she wants human beings to realize all the intentions she has for them and what it means to be created in God's image.

The Weeping God

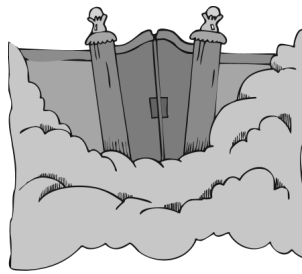
Despite the novel's upbeat focus on human potential and inner transformation, it is fundamentally about a God who embraces human pain. *The Shack* depicts a weeping God who literally meets us in our darkest places, which for Mack are represented by the titular shack. Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu mention several times that they are always in attendance when humans are suffering, even when we cannot discern their presence. Mack even learns that in her final hours Missy felt God's love and that Sarayu literally wrapped her arms around Missy to comfort her.

Mack also discovers that God has a soft spot for human tears, even to the point of collecting them. The novel's

portrayal of God brings to mind a passage from the New Testament's book of Revelation: in the new heaven and the new earth, "God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes." (Rev. 21:3–4). In the novel, God literally wipes away Mack's tears and cherishes them for safekeeping, an appealing and powerful prospect to any reader who has ever felt that God was uncaring or distant. Toward the beginning of the story, when Mack is seriously contemplating suicide, he reflects that having "no more tears, no more pain" would be a blessing (p. 79). Papa *does* bring him into a situation of "no more tears"—not by ending Mack's life but by moving with him through the unspeakable devastation of his past.

Another facet of the idea of the weeping God is one author's answer to the age-old question of theodicy: why does God allow bad things to happen, especially to good people? If God is truly omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omni-benevolent (all-good), why does it seem that God will not—or cannot—make it all better? In *The Shack*, Mack is a good man and father, and his wife is practically a saint. Why do these people have to bear the pain of losing a beloved child, especially in such a grisly way? The novel answers this difficult question by way of a discussion of power. The members of the Godhead, though all-powerful, inform Mack that they choose to limit themselves in all kinds of ways. They choose to limit their omniscience by placing temporary limits on their own knowledge, as when they ask Mack at the dinner table to tell them about his family. To him, it feels silly to discuss family matters with them when they know it all beforehand anyway. Sarayu gently explains that she and the other members of the Trinity have chosen to set these limitations in order to enter into relationship with human beings, in much the same way a parent might color a picture alongside a child, or even let a child win a game, in order "to accomplish love" (p. 106).

Likewise, the members of the Godhead limit their omnipotence and embrace weakness and mutual submission. Jesus tells Mack that he would never force his will on anyone, which also means not interfering when human beings make choices that "are not helpful or healthy." Mack finds his perspective beginning to broaden and deepen, moving beyond his former paradigm ("all I wanted was a God who will just fix everything so no one gets hurt") to a new trust. When Mack realizes that



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God "doesn't stop a lot of things that give him pain," he begins to understand that Missy's death was not part of God's plan, or a punishment for Mack's past sin.

The major theme of the story is unconditional love. Papa has a special place in her heart for everyone, it seems. Mack is not the only one of whom Papa is "especially fond"—a phrase that crops up many times when Papa is describing one or another of her children. Papa disabuses Mack of the notion that she is the fire-and-brimstone disciplinarian of the Old Testament, instead presenting an image of a God who roots for, cries over, and longs to be reunited with her children.

The Trinity for Our Times

Many Christians have expressed confusion about the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God is three beings in one. In *The Shack*, every effort has been made to expand—or possibly explode—readers' notions of God. God is alternately portrayed as black, white, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern. It's not just racial diversity that is the key here; gender balance is also extremely important. Clearly, the author wants readers to see beyond God as merely male or female. In the three persons of the Trinity, each gender is represented at least twice: Jesus appears as male, the Holy Spirit appears as female, and Papa is . . . complicated. Papa is referred to using a father's affectionate nickname and a male pronoun, but she looks like a domesticated Queen Latifah. Papa makes it clear that this guise is just that, a guise—an appearance donned for the purpose of helping Mack feel more comfortable. Papa also appears as Sophia, a wise Hispanic female judge, and an avuncular outdoorsman who leads Mack to Missy's body. The fact that the novel depicts three members of the Trinity who are essentially equal in gender composition reinforces what Papa says about the Godhead: "All love and relationship is possible for you *only* because it already exists within Me, within God myself" (p. 101).

Papa chooses to reveal God's self to Mack first in the form of a woman for the very personal and loving reason that Mack, a survivor of childhood abuse at the hands of his father, might have strong suspicions of a male deity. In her appearance as a "beaming" African American woman, Papa represents what some black womanist theologians have labeled "kitchen table theology." Papa bakes a pie and wipes a tear; Papa sings along with the radio in the kitchen; Papa conjures pancakes and fried potatoes and collard greens. God's love becomes manifest in these acts of caring, as God serves up the wisdom of the ages alongside melt-in-your-mouth scones.

Papa also expresses a postmodern concern about *relationship*. The Trinity is viewed first and foremost as a complex relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They share one another's pain in a mysterious way, Papa even bearing scars on her wrists, as Jesus does. What's more, the relationship between Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu is one of perfectly proportioned power, a "circle of relationship" rather than Mack's conception of a hierarchical chain of command (p. 122). It is an expansive, open system. This Trinity is a confederation of equals, and astonishingly enough, they desire that human beings join in their circle (p. 146).

The Hope of Heaven

In addition to the novel's appealing ideas of the weeping God and a new way of envisioning the Trinity, a third point about the book's theology has attracted readers. That is the novel's concepts of universal salvation and the hope of heaven for all people. Jesus tells Mack that those who love him come from all the world's religious and political systems: "they were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans . . . I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous." Jesus doesn't go so far as to say that all roads will lead to him: "Most roads don't lead anywhere," he says, but promises he will "travel any road to find you" (p. 179). The story stakes a claim that all people will find heaven, even Missy's killer, whom God understands was twisted and warped by his own childhood.

As expected, *The Shack* posits a beautiful afterlife. Although Mack has always had a "head knowledge"

that his daughter Missy was in heaven, in the novel he experiences a tangible vision of a happy Missy in paradise. She has forgiven everyone, including her killer, and romps with Jesus and her siblings in a land that appears custom-made for her with its inclusion of a waterfall, a reference to her favorite story. This new certainty that she is at peace emboldens Mack when, on his final day, Papa takes him to the place where Missy's remains are buried. Although it is painful to discover her body, Mack knows that the "real" Missy is in a place of love and light. Papa (in the guise of Sophia, or Divine Wisdom) has already spoken the comforting words that many readers long to hear: "This life is only the anteroom of a greater reality to come. No one reaches their full potential in your world" (p. 167).

The novel goes beyond affirming individual eternal life by making bold claims about the redemption of this physical world. At the beginning of Mack's weekend experience, even the shack itself is redeemed. In a transformation worthy of the TV show *Extreme Makeover*, it miraculously goes from being a broken-down outpost to a comfortable log cabin—"postcard perfect," as Mack puts it, and equipped with a generous front porch and a white picket fence (p. 81). The rocky shore of the lake, once overgrown with weeds, is now beautifully kept (p. 109). Once the locus of the worst of human depravity, it becomes synonymous instead with divine tenderness. God reaches into the literal site of Mack's deepest pain and the cause of his loneliness, and transforms it. This is reminiscent of another theme of the book of Revelation: that the very earth will become new in God's time, and no part of creation will be left unredeemed.

This is what Jesus tries to explain after Mack's experience seeing Missy at the waterfall. Heaven in *The Shack* is not about pearly gates and streets of gold so much as it is about home and love. What comes after life, says Jesus, is a "cleansing of this universe, so it will indeed look a lot like here" (p. 177). Families will be reunited and broken people will be made whole.

About the Writer

Jana Riess is an acquisitions editor at Westminster John Knox Press and worked for nine years as the religion book review editor for Publishers Weekly. The author of six books, she has a PhD in American religious history from Columbia University.