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### Theology for Everyone

By Timothy Beal

In today's book market, some might behold the huge success of William Paul Young's evangelical Christian novel, *The Shack*, as something of a miracle. Originally self-published in a garage by Young and two friends who maxed out their credit cards to pay for printing and distribution, it has now sold more than 10 million copies and has been translated into 34 languages. It has been on *The New York Times* best-seller list for 84 consecutive weeks, mostly at No. 1. Book groups everywhere—most religious, many not—are reading and talking about it. People are passing their copies on to others until they wear out. *The Shack* has a serious buzz going, and it looks like we'll be hearing about it for a good long while.

What is it about this book that is grabbing so many people so powerfully? It's not the writing. *The Shack* is not *The Road*. No one, including its modest author, is heralding it as a literary masterpiece. What has its readers buzzing is its theology, which is not your run-of-the-mill pop God-talk.

I recently attended a public discussion of the book at a local Presbyterian church. The 40 or so in attendance represented a mix of religious leanings, from agnostic to liberal moderate to conservative evangelical. All had read the book and were eager to talk about it. But they weren't interested in the story or the characters. What they wanted to talk about were three interrelated theological elements in the book, all of which were unfamiliar to most of them: first, its nontraditional, nonbiblical metaphorical models of God; second, its representation of the Trinity as a nonhierarchical communion; and third, its theology of universal salvation. Those are the very same topics that dominate discussions of the book in countless *Shack* blogs, book groups, customer reviews, and study guides. None of them are familiar elements in popular Christian fiction, devotional literature, or mainstream evangelical theology. In fact, all three are rooted in liberal and radical academic theological discourse from the 1970s and 80s—

work that has profoundly influenced contemporary feminist and liberation theology but, until now, had very little impact on the theological imaginations of nonacademics, especially within the religious mainstream.

What are those progressive theological ideas doing in this evangelical pulp-fiction phenomenon? Unbeknownst to most of us, they have been present on the liberal margins of evangelical thought for decades. Now, lo and behold, *The Shack* is opening up a space in popular culture for those ideas to be explored, and in the process is reminding us that evangelicalism is by no means the monolithic, univocal, conservative movement that it often appears to be. It is a dynamic theological discourse that is rife with lively tensions and disagreements, bearing the influences of ideas from a variety of intellectual traditions, including some that most assume are antithetical to it. Progressive elements from that discourse are now trickling into popular culture by way of *The Shack*, indicating that there is a lot more interest in serious theological alternatives to sappy, simplistic devotional and religious self-help books than many would have presumed.

*The Shack* is the fictional story of Mack, a nice family guy with a seminary background whose faith falls apart when his 7-year-old daughter is kidnapped and murdered in an old shack in the Oregon woods. Four years later, he returns to the shack to confront God, face to face—or rather, face to faces. Mack meets God in three persons, as the Trinity.

The first person is Elousia (Hebrew 'El, "God," plus Greek *ousia*, "essence"), a large, affectionate African-American woman who loves Bruce Cockburn music, is happy to go by many other names, and suggests that Mack call her "Papa," his wife's favorite divine epithet. The second is Jesus, an unpretentious, somewhat clumsy Jewish handyman who loves fishing. And the third is Sarayu (Sanskrit for "wind" or "air"), a petite, fluttering Asian woman with a green thumb who loves fractals and seems "almost a shimmer of light." The rest of the book, about three-fourths of its total length, is composed of a series of dialogues in which Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu take turns talking theology with Mack, gradually bringing him to a place of renewed faith. What they talk about are the same three progressive theological ideas that readers can't stop talking about.

The first is metaphorical theology, which asserts that theological

language is fundamentally metaphorical. Papa, the lead professor in this team-taught course, makes the point most clearly vis-à-vis her own appearance to Mack: "For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me 'Papa' is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning. ... To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes."

Within academic theological discourse, this line of thinking has its roots in the ecofeminist-co-feminist theologian Sallie McFague's groundbreaking *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1982). Drawing from literary theory and the work of Paul Ricoeur on the metaphorical language of biblical parables, McFague explored religious language as an unstable discourse of "indirection" that shatters theological simplification and reduction. Her theoretical framework encouraged a critical stance toward inherited theological language, resisting models of God such as "father" that have become dead metaphors of patriarchal idolatry. McFague also aimed to inspire the creation of new divine metaphors, such as "friend" and "mother" (two of several models she developed in her next book, *Models of God*). Which is what *The Shack* tries to do and what Papa tries to explain.

Granted, the book backs away from the more radical implications of metaphorical theology. There is no suggestion that Jesus himself is metaphorical—a "parable of God," as McFague and Ricoeur consider him. And Papa says it is her work, not that of human beings, to invent and mix metaphors as a way of connecting with people on their own terms. She suggests that the predominance of masculine, fatherly metaphors is not a reflection of religious patriarchy but rather a divine effort to provide positive role models for men, who seem to need them more than women do. But readers will surely note that it is an author-created metaphorical model of God who is telling Mack that God chooses the metaphors. Once metaphorical theology is introduced, its implications are everywhere unavoidable, even for our metaphor-mixing Papa.

The second central theological concept in *The Shack* is that of the Trinity as a nonhierarchical communion of love within the divine. As Papa explains, this "co-union" is the necessary condition for love among human beings: "If I were simply one God and only one person, then you would find yourself in this creation without

something wonderful, without something essential even. ... All love and relationship is possible for you *only* because it already exists within me, within God myself." Later, Sarayu elaborates, "We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a *circle* of relationship, not a chain of command. ... What you're seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power ... you humans are so lost and damaged that to you it is almost incomprehensible that relationship could exist apart from hierarchy. So you think that God must relate inside a hierarchy as you do. But we do not."

Reading those lines, most theologians will immediately recall the idea of the Trinity as *perichoresis*, a dynamic, intersubjective circle of interrelationship, as developed by the liberation theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff. As Boff argues in *Trinity and Society*, this perichoretic "exchange of love" among the persons of the Trinity is the archetype for all social relations and organizations. Social inequality "offends the Trinity." Sarayu would have to agree.

The third theological concept introduced in *The Shack*, and the one that has attracted the most criticism from conservative and fundamentalist Christians, is universalism. That theology, deriving from Calvinism via Karl Barth, argues that all people are saved by divine grace, no matter what they have done or left undone, and, as Barth put it, "quite independently of whether we ... believe it or not." Contrary to conservative evangelical doctrine, salvation is not a matter of personal faith, and there is no hell for those without it. It's not up to people, who may not live in circumstances that afford them the liberty to believe. It's up to God, who has in Christ reconciled all of creation to Godself. Or, as Papa puts it: "Honey, you asked me what Jesus accomplished on the cross, so now listen to me carefully: Through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world." Assuming the standard evangelical qualifier, Mack responds, "The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?" Papa reiterates, "The whole world, Mack."

At another point, when Jesus says he has followers among all religions and has "no desire to make them Christian," Mack asks, "Does that mean that all roads will lead to you?" Jesus answers, "Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you." For Mack, that is not an abstract theological concept. Its test case is the serial killer who murdered his daughter. But in the course of several conversations, he begins

to understand Papa when she insists that "he too is my son," that she loves him "not for what he's become but for the broken child that has been twisted by his pain," and that reconciliation is ultimately for him, too.

*The Shack's* universalist theology appears to be inspired primarily by the late Jacques Ellul, whose *Anarchy and Christianity* is quoted in an epigraph and who is the first of several "old dead guys" listed in Young's acknowledgments. A French Marxist philosopher who converted to Christianity after reading Barth, Ellul believed that "all people from the beginning of time are saved by God in Jesus Christ, that they have all been recipients of his grace no matter what they have done." He argued that the belief among many Christians that the good who are unhappy in this world will be rewarded in the next, and that the wicked who are happy now will be punished later, is not only wrong but allows religion to function as the opiate of the masses. And that makes for hell on earth. Jesus couldn't have said it better.

There's an apocryphal story about a conversation between an astrophysicist and a theologian. In some versions the theologian is Barth and the conversation takes place on a plane to Boston; in others he's in a Q&A session after a public lecture at a distinguished American university. In every version, the astrophysicist, who hadn't followed much of what the theologian was saying, declares that he doesn't know much about theology but that he thinks it can be summed up as, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." To which the theologian ripostes that he doesn't know much about astrophysics but thinks it can be summed up as, "Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are." Theologians get tired of being thought of as pious Sunday-school teachers. As an outsider who appreciates academic theology, I can attest that it is among the most intellectually complex and rigorous discourses I have encountered.

*The Shack* is not academic theology. But neither is it "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" or "Jesus Loves Me." It represents a serious attempt by a lay theologian to communicate some theological concepts in a way that is turning out to be intellectually challenging and exciting for a lot of people with little or no academic background in theology. Who knew that a nonhierarchical, perichoretic model of the Trinity based on an exchange of love could become such a big hit?

Granted, many readers of *The Shack* will continue reading other Christian best sellers like the *Left Behind* series and *The Purpose-Driven Life*, which represent the more common, conservative theological perspectives. But Papa's voice doesn't blend well with theirs. *The Shack* is a real alternative, a serious theological countervoice. Its popularity suggests that there is an openness, even a hunger, for alternative theologies, even if it takes decades for them to bubble their way up to the mainstream.

Will some readers delve deeper? I imagine so. Ellul's work appears to be enjoying a well-deserved boost in popular attention, and so is the music of Bruce Cockburn. Only time will tell how many will go deeper still, finding their way into the likes of McFague or Boff, and from there to more-recent radical theological overtures by the likes of Catherine Keller or Kwok Pui-lan. Many, we can hope. Next time I walk past an end-aisle display of *The Shack* at Target, that'll be my prayer.

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