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William P. Young. *The Shack: A Novel.* Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007. 249 pp. $14.99 (paper), ISBN 9780964729230.

Reviewed by Larry Poston, Department of Religion, Nyack College

I became aware of *The Shack* by William Young (Windblown Media, 2007) the way I learn about many new books that I would probably never hear about otherwise: the father of one of my students sent me the novel via his daughter along with a request for an evaluation of its contents. It had not yet become the best-selling phenomenon that word-of-mouth and media hype made it eventually, and the few people that I could find who had read it had very diverse opinions. It is not difficult to understand why: the story is a veritable hodge-podge of every family's worst nightmare (the kidnapping and murder of a young and innocent child), a highly novel presentation of Christian theology, an array of philosophical and theological discussions concerned mainly with the problem of evil and the difficulty of forgiveness, with several Eastern and "New Age" concepts thrown in for flavoring. There is enough in the book to intrigue anyone (with the exception, perhaps, of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens) and – at some point – anger everyone. This is a fairly significant accomplishment by itself for a first novel.

The back-story about the book's conception has become widely known as well: the author's means of processing through a personal faith crisis resulting from an affair with a friend of his wife. Despite encouragement from friends who believed heartily that the novel had potential, no publisher felt the same (a Frank Peretti *redux*, so to speak, Peretti being the author who kicked off the conservative Christian fiction phenomenon with *This Present Darkness* in the mid-1980s). Undaunted by rejection, Young and friends scraped together funds to produce a self-published initial run of 10 thousand copies. By September 2008, when some 3.8 million copies were in print, I suspect that many of those publishers were having some painful second thoughts.

So – a book that no reputable publisher wanted to print that has become a national bestseller and that evokes cries of "Glorious!" and "Blasphemy!" in equal measure. What is the story? Mackenzie Phillips – "Mack" to his friends – has been plunged into a deep psychological depression (also known as "*The Great Sadness*") due to the loss of his youngest daughter to a serial killer who preys on children. At the outset of the narrative we find our hero consumed by an all-encompassing grief mixed with rage in a matrix of isolationism and self-pity. In the midst of this despair, an unstamped, no-return-address letter appears in his mailbox, directing him to return to the abandoned mountain cabin where his daughter's blood-stained dress had been discovered. Signed simply "Papa," the missive is perceived to be either a cruel joke or a revelation from Providence.

Convinced that it might possibly turn out to be the latter (and since it would not, of course, be good form to ignore a summons from God), Mack heads to the shack one weekend. Upon his arrival he finds himself transported suddenly into a spiritual dimension where he encounters the members of the Christian Trinity. Young's portrayal of the Godhead, however, is unique. God the Father turns out to be a matronly, kitchen-inhabiting African American woman, cloned rather obviously from the Wachowski brothers' Oracle in *The Matrix*. Nevertheless, she is called "Papa." Jesus appears as a tool-belted carpenter whose clumsiness and childlike, homespun simplicity are always good for a laugh. And the Holy Spirit is a small Asian woman who is somewhat translucent in form and who bears the Sanskrit name of an important river from the Hindus' *Ramayana*. The stated purpose of this eclectic

portrayal is to keep our hero from "falling so easily back into [his] religious conditioning" (93). There is certainly not much chance of that happening here.

Much of the narrative consists of dialogues between Mack and the various members of the Trinity. The reader comes away with the impression that he or she has encountered very deep, very profound thinking, since the conversations deal with issues that touch on humanity's most fundamental experiences: loss, grief, pain, suffering, death, recovery, forgiveness and the like. Woven into these discussions are several theological topics including the sovereignty of God, human free will and responsibility for decisions, the meaning and role of religion in daily life, matters of biblical interpretation and so on. But many – perhaps even most – of the dialogues will leave the reader with more questions than answers, due mainly to the plethora of dubious theological suppositions. My guess is that few, if any, readers will be able to state with any precision what they have learned upon completion of the book.

A primary difficulty, of course, is Young's portrayal of God. Of the four manifestations of the Deity (the Trinity plus "Sophia" – who is the personification of Wisdom seen in the Septuagint translation of the opening chapters of Proverbs), three are female. Why the author chose to flout the longstanding patriarchal traditions associated with the Bible and historical Christianity is never made clear, and accusations that he has simply bowed the knee to the gods (or goddesses) of political correctness are probably too facile at this point in history. It is an interesting contrast, though, to what has been the general orientation of Christianity since the high Middle Ages. The "bridal mysticism" introduced by the monastic orders "feminized" the members of the Church – including the males – by emphasizing the role of the Godhead as "husband" with the Church as "bride." In *The Shack*, a reversal occurs in which God becomes mainly female, while the blue-jeaned and flannel-shirt wearing, pistol-packing and Jeep-driving Mackenzie is the quintessential "male." An interesting twist, to be sure – but one that fails completely for biblical literalists, for whom "The Father" and the Holy Spirit (represented by the masculine pronoun in the Greek New Testament) are always male – never female. Nor does the unmistakable nod to multi-culturalism – with the African American Papa, the Middle Eastern Jesus, the Asian Sarayu, and the Hispanic Sophia—serve any clear purpose other than to satisfy theological "liberals" while alienating "conservatives" further. Young has simply gone much too far out onto the proverbial limb; a seasoned author would have concluded (rightly) that such a device detracts from rather than enhances the book's agenda.

I am sure that some will claim that the book was, after all, written originally for a specifically Christian audience, and therefore such "spiritual" concepts as the ones mentioned above will be difficult for those outside the faith to grasp. This claim may serve to let some aspects of the writing off the hook, but certain constructions will still be extremely confusing to Christians (and utterly incomprehensible to non-Christians). For instance, Young has Jesus speak at one point of "bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians" (182). "I have no desire to make them Christian," Jesus says, "but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved" (182). This statement prompts Mack to inquire whether "all roads lead to heaven," to which Jesus responds that "most roads don't lead anywhere" (182). He assures our hero, however, that he would "travel any road to find [him]" (182). This seemingly noble statement actually contains a number of problems. First, a denial of inclusivism should be followed logically by an affirmation of exclusivism—but Young appears unwilling to take a stand on either side. Instead he tries to make Jesus appear "über-wise" but in actuality intro-

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duces a confusing discussion that a certain stream within Christianity might be able to master (for example, those who are convinced that the word "Christian" has come to mean so many different things that the term is useless and should be discarded), but that will only frustrate the majority of readers.

In another conversation Young draws from a contemporary Pentecostal/charismatic teaching when he presents Jesus as the God-Man who "has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything" (99). Jesus' "miraculous" works were performed using powers and abilities drawn from his permanent connection with his Father – an ability that any follower or disciple allegedly has as well. Jesus was "just the first to do it to the uttermost" (just as the "New Age" version of Jesus was the first to discover the ability that every human being potentially has to manipulate the energy that is the essence of the Universe) (100). An interesting conviction, to be sure, and one that would lead us to conclude that any human being has the potential to (among other things):

1. Walk on water – for example, manipulate the molecules of H_2O so that it becomes a solid substance, or levitate oneself in such a way that one does not sink into a liquid substance;
2. Change water into wine – again, manipulate the molecules of H_2O in such a way that the H_2O becomes a different substance (for example, the fermented juice of grapes);
3. Produce (*ex nihilo*?) a coin in a fish's mouth; a fish that will then be in precisely the right position at precisely the right time to be caught by precisely the right person;
4. Create food *ex nihilo* – create new substances (for example, bread and fish) either by speaking into existence new molecules, or replicating the existing molecules of those substances in a supernatural way;
5. Heal a genetically deficient or mangled limb (such as a "withered arm") by restoring the skeletal structure, the musculature and other anatomical aspects of such a limb to perfect wholeness.

The Shack teaches that we all have Ruby Slippers on our feet, as it were, and need only learn how to avail ourselves of their power and we could go back to Kansas whenever we wish. It is merely our ignorance of or lack of faith in that power that keeps us seeking after witches' broomsticks and dealing with flying monkeys. The history of Christianity seems remarkably deficient, though, when it comes to the possibilities listed above. If Young's theology is correct, one would think that at least one or two Christians in the last two thousand years would have made the right connections and produced some pretty spectacular media headlines...

While we are on the subject of theology, it is noteworthy that the God portrayed in Young's novel "does not need to punish people for sin" (120). Thus the traditional view of the Deity as Judge is dispensed with because "sin is its own punishment." It appears that history's wisest man, Solomon, must have been in error then, when he recorded in Ecclesiastes that he had seen "righteous men perishing in their righteousness and wicked men living long in their wickedness" (Ecclesiastes 7:15). He had also observed "righteous men getting what the wicked deserve, and wicked men getting what the righteous deserve" (Ecclesiastes 8:14). Most would agree, I think, that Solomon's observations are far more in keeping with how the world actually works than Young's attempts to "airbrush" the concepts of sin and evil.

There is an interlude in which Mack's deceased daughter appears, "living," as it were, in another dimension, while his still "living" children are said actually to be dreaming. Such a portrayal is essentially Hindu in form, recalling the Upanishads' teaching regarding the levels of human "consciousness" – which are the inverse of the West's thinking on this sub-

ject. The living children, we are told, "are dreaming and each will have a vague memory of this—some in greater detail than others, but none fully or completely...Missy [Mack's deceased daughter], though, is fully awake" (168). In classical Hinduism, to be "awake and aware" is the least form of consciousness – since in this state one is entrenched most firmly in *maya*. "Dreamless sleep," on the other hand, is the highest form, surpassed only by *moksha*. Missy has attained the "true" world while the "living" remain mired in their illusion of reality.

On a more positive note, Young's view of the Church as "a living breathing community of all those who love [Jesus]" does indeed reflect the New Testament paradigm somewhat accurately – it is correct that the early church was never about "buildings and programs" (178). But the author's spiritualization (or allegorization) of the eternal city described in the closing chapters of Revelation is less appealing and takes more liberties with the biblical text. He also has Jesus speak of "religion, politics, and economics" as institutions never created by God but rather "a man-created trinity of terrors that ravages the earth and deceives those [Jesus] cares about" (179). Such a depiction is far too simplistic in tone and fails to capture the delicate paradox the New Testament and Christian history have dealt with regarding the interrelationship between these three aspects of human life and society. Neither Jesus nor the apostolic writers ever said anything to denigrate the Caesars of this world. In point of fact, precisely the opposite is taught by Paul to the inhabitants of Rome: "there is no authority except that which God has established" (Romans 13:1). Young recovers somewhat a few pages later when he acknowledges that properly instructed Christians will have "the freedom to be inside or outside all kinds of systems and to move freely between and among them," but this recovery represents what is essentially a contradiction to his earlier statements (181). As mentioned above, at several points the narrative sounds "deep," "intellectual," even philosophically and theologically "profound." Some of the dialogue provokes and intrigues – until the sentences are dismantled and examined carefully. An example: Mackenzie comments at one point that he cannot imagine "any final outcome that would justify all this"—the "this" referring to the flaws, the evil, the suffering, and the pain in the world (127). The reply of Papa is that "We're not justifying it. We are redeeming it" (127). A response that sounds uplifting, to be sure—but it is ultimately inadequate. Biblically speaking, the flaws, evil, pain, and suffering of the world are neither to be 'justified' nor to be "redeemed." They will be ended—once and for all.

What Young has attempted to do here is 'humanize' the Deity and place him/her/it into the realm of emotion as opposed to the realm of rationalistic, theological propositionalism. Consequently to the ideas of orthodoxy ("right belief") and orthopraxy ("right practice or action") we must apparently now add the concept of orthopathy ("right feeling"). This God collects tears, has a strong bent toward "funk and blues with a beat," and is the quintessential "friend-you-can-talk-to-about-anything." He/She is "folksy" to the point of being (slightly) crude: "Well, Mackenzie, don't just stand there gawkin' with your mouth open like your pants are full" (88). This is a God who does not worry about proper grammar ("We is all that you get;" "Those things can give you the trots if you ain't careful") (85, 121). This is a God for whom emotion is never to be controlled, but rather to be indulged; to be "let out" to the fullest extent. Indeed, the only feelings that are not allowed are those of obligation ("You're not supposed to do anything. You're free to do whatever you like"), making God the ultimate libertine (89).

There are, to be sure, certain aspects scattered throughout the novel that even a hardcore biblical literalist could say "amen" to. There is an (all but forgotten in this day and age)

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"orthodox" rendering of the name by which the Biblical God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush: "I AM Who I AM." The African American female Papa sets the record straight:

> The problem is that many folks try to grasp some sense of who I am by taking the best version of themselves, projecting that to the nth degree, factoring in all the goodness they can perceive, which often isn't much, and then call that God. And while it may seem like a noble effort, the truth is that it falls pitifully short of who I really am. I'm not merely the best version of you that you can think of. I am far more than that...(98).

Additionally, there are aspects of Mack's discussion with Sarayu (The Holy Spirit) of "good" and "evil" that ring true. Biblical revelation does indeed demand that humans abandon their pitiful allegiance to humanistic autonomy and their attempts to determine good and evil on their own terms. And Young is also correct when he intimates that using the life of Jesus merely as an example to copy is hopelessly inadequate as a proper life course.

The book's analysis and evaluation of emotions is consistent with both biblical teaching and contemporary psychology: they are responses to perceptions. "As a man thinks in his heart" – the seat of emotions – "so is he," the Bible teaches (Proverbs 23:7 according to some translations). Consequently, as Papa holds, "if your perception is false, then your emotional response to it will be false too" (197). Mack is counseled to evaluate his perceptions and to test the truthfulness of the paradigms that form the worldview out of which his self-identity is formed. Good advice, to be sure – as far as it goes. The remainder of the conversation, however, deteriorates rapidly when Mack seeks to apply this new understanding of "the way things are." Worldview paradigms should never be constructed of "rules," he is taught. "The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules. It is a picture of Jesus" (197). Actually it is not, outside of the four gospels and some other isolated teachings scattered here and there. And even if it were, the implication that a mystical, ethereal, supernatural relationship of some kind with a spiritual being who according to Biblical revelation is "seated at the right hand of the throne of God" is possible without "rules" of any kind is nonsensical. "Rules" or "principles" are always involved in any kind of relationship – and dismissal of this fact is the reason for the development of the kind of Christianity that is characteristic of the American Church today, in which divorce rates are equal to or exceed those of 'secular' society, in which 90% of "abstinence pledges" regarding sex before marriage are broken, and in which 61% of young people who were seriously involved in a church during their teen years are completely disengaged by the time they reach their late twenties.

Given such a state of affairs, one would think that "rules" and "principles" should perhaps be accorded more respect than they appear to be given here. "Rules cannot bring freedom," Sarayu the Holy Spirit tells Mack (203). Apparently she has forgotten what she inspired the author of the Book of James to write, since this epistle speaks clearly of "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25). Christians who obey God's laws concerning sexual purity, for instance, are free from ever having to wake up in the morning wondering if they have contracted a deadly STD. Those who obey biblical principles regarding financial responsibility are free from the burden of indebtedness, free from the threat or reality of bankruptcy, and free from the anxiety that accompanies financial profligacy. Conformity to laws regarding the covenant of marriage will keep a couple free from the excruciating pain inherent in unfaithfulness, divorce, and remarriage. No, the "law of the Spirit of life" (Romans 8:2) is something to be celebrated, not denigrated.

Equally problematic is the dismissal of responsibility by both Sarayu and Jesus. "Responsibilities and expectations," they insist,

> are the basis of guilt and shame and judgment, and they provide the essential framework that promotes performance as the basis for identity and value...to the degree that you resort to expectations and responsibilities, to that degree you neither know me nor trust me (206).

Young even makes the astounding claim that "you won't find the word responsibility in the Scriptures" (205). Excuse me? No mention in the Bible of reliability? Of dependability? Of answerability and accountability – all of which are synonyms for the word "responsibility?"

No, the Bible speaks consistently of duty – which is simply another way of speaking of "responsibility." "Fear God," we are told, "and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty,'" Jesus taught (Luke 17:10). "It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful," Paul insists. Christians are responsible to "work out their own salvation with fear and trembling," and are supremely responsible for the use of the talents they have been given. "To whom much is given, of that person will much be required," Jesus warned. Indeed, if the parables that he relates are meant to be taken in the least bit literally, failure to exercise such responsibility will lead to the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in the fires of Hell. More tears, perhaps, for Papa's collection – but I am sure that this is not the intention of the parables' teaching...

In his modern classic *My Name is Asher Lev*, Chaim Potok includes the following exhortation by a master to his new pupil: "No one will listen to what you have to say unless they are convinced you have mastered [your religion]. Only one who has mastered a tradition has a right to attempt to add to it or to rebel against it."[15] I believe that Young and other contemporary authors such as Brian McLaren, Donald Miller, Rob Bell and Shane Claiborne all fail to meet Potok's very practical criteria. Their attempts at theological revisionism and contextualization are interesting at points, but they lack the sophistication that would be necessary for them to be accepted and approved. I do not see "mastery" in McLaren's frank admission that he is "neither a trained theologian nor even a legitimate pastor"[16] and that his book *A Generous Orthodoxy* is "laced with overstatement, hyperbole, and generalizations"[17] – when the New Testament commands that "if anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11). I do not see "mastery" in Miller's *Blue Like Jazz* narrations of his utter disdain for and scornful mockery of a disciplined and self-controlled Christian lifestyle – when the New Testament claims that God has given us a "Spirit of power, love, and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). In Claiborne's writing I see no familiarity with or understanding of the history of German rationalism and its effect on biblical interpretation, theological liberalism, the Ecumenical Movement, post-millennialism, or the Social Gospel Movement, when knowledge of any of these would have forewarned and prepared him for the inevitable failure of his utopic *Irresistible Revolution.*

Nor do I see any evidence that Young has mastered the Christian tradition when I consider his own hyperbole and overstatement as demonstrated in his lack of understanding of the theological concept of *kenosis*. His view of discipline and self-control become as problematic as Miller's views when he speaks of a quasi-mystical "relationship with Jesus" and ex-

[15]Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett-Crest, 1972), 204.
[16]Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystic/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialities, 2006), 38.
[17]Ibid., 39.

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cludes the need for "rules and responsibilities." And his convictions concerning such things as "sin being its own punishment" and the need to "re-feminize" the Christian faith are drawn straight from the realms of theological liberalism and the New Age Movement, items that are difficult to swallow for those who seek to be faithful to the revelation of God's word.

Given the opportunities for Christian education that exist in the societies of the modern world, such misunderstandings are simultaneously astounding and grievous. But I suppose we should not be all that much surprised: God told the prophet Hosea that His people were being destroyed because of their lack of knowledge. It appears that nothing much has changed in 2700 years.

Peter Iver Kaufman. *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More.* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. vii+279 pp. $35.00, ISBN 9780268033149.

Reviewed by Burnam W. Reynolds, History, Asbury College

The contributions of Augustine and Thomas More to the development of the Western Intellectual Tradition certainly have been the subject of more than their fair share of scholarly evaluation. But usually such examinations focus on one or more of the sometimes slippery positions of the two authors, hidden often in allusion or late-career retractions, and then not in tandem. Peter Iver Kaufman's *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More*, does not assay their conclusions on the various issues in their storied careers, but rather seeks to determine their attitude to political involvement generally. Kaufman, recently retired Professor of History and Religion at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and now the Modlin Professor of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, pairs these seemingly disparate personalities and careers and concludes, as the title frankly suggests, that the two entertained serious and delimiting doubts about both participation in political affairs and the amount of possible good that politics might ever accomplish.

Some may wonder at the pairing of these scholars, Augustine and More, separated as they are by significant amounts of time and circumstance. Yet this should not be a cause for puzzlement as the young More, studying law at Lincoln's Inn, established the basis for his early academic reputation by means of a series of public lectures on Augustine's *City of God*. Aficionados of the Just War also will see an obvious connection. More's *Utopia* is suffused with Augustinian principles on war, and by extension other governmental issues as well. The real question is whether or not these conjunctions represent a special connection between the thought of the two or signify simply a generalized extrusion of the overall Reformation-era renaissance of Augustinian thought.

Kaufman allays these doubts by enumerating the fascinating points of congruence between the two that inspired his study. Despite being separated by eleven centuries, both wrote enigmatic and much discussed masterpieces of the Western Canon, *The City of God* and *Utopia*. Both hovered between a life of renunciation of the world and full involvement in political affairs, Augustine with a monastic community in Thagaste, North Africa, and More with a serious flirtation with joining the Carthusians. Both learned much from a mentor in their earlier years, often as much what not to do as what to do: Augustine with Ambrose, the politically involved Bishop of Milan, and More with John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, Chancellor for Henry VII, and infamous originator of the "heads I win, tails you lose" tax gambit known as "Morton's Fork." Both argued against, and even punished, dissident