

## 2. What do Christians believe about God?

Crucifix, p. 31

In about 1562 the Flemish artist Frans Floris painted the *Allegory of the Trinity*, combining a common Western depiction of the Trinity as an old man, the crucifix, and a dove—sometimes termed “A Throne of Grace”—with the metaphor in the Gospels in which Jesus likens himself to a mother hen protecting her chicks. The Trinity is welcoming all the needy humans. On the right side of the painting John the Baptist is pointing to Christ, and on the left side of the painting, Jesus is walking into the city of Jerusalem. The painting was originally hung in a Paris church, but was brought to the Louvre in 1977.

### Quotes and Images

p. 32: The quotation from Rudolf Otto contrasts rationality to religion by using the term nonrational, rather than irrational.

p. 33: Lyle Hatch, photographer and digital artist, created this nontraditional digital art depiction of the Trinity.

p. 33: Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), one of the West’s most abstruse mystics, was a Dominican preacher who sought to understand God-talk and its meaning. Some of his writings were declared heretical in 1329, but in the twentieth century he regained considerable popularity.

p. 34: Augustine (354–430) knew that he could not wholly comprehend or accurately describe God, but this did not stop him from trying.

p. 35: Edward Rothstein is an art critic for the *New York Times*. This comment comes from his column of October 23, 2010.

p. 36: The Westminster Catechism was the popular version of the 1647 Westminster Confession, the creedal statement of the Church of Scotland. The Catechism became important for Presbyterians and some other Protestants worldwide.

p. 37: The sixth-century mystic sometimes called Pseudo-Dionysius utilized the imagery of the neo-Platonic hierarchical worldview to describe the Christian life as an ascent to God. His poetic writings were extremely influential in Eastern Orthodox churches.

p. 38: This church signboard describes one Christian attitude toward judgment. Other churches would speak of judgment in different ways.

p. 39: Bill Watterson's (b. 1958) Calvin and Hobbes cartoons often touch on religion, with the Calvin character meant to recall the theologian John Calvin. John Calvin dedicated endless energies into trying to answer the great questions of religion and the being of God.

p. 40: The quotation is from Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm*, a memoir that considers the theodicy question. Dillard (b. 1945) is a Christian naturalist, essayist, and novelist.

p. 41: This text of the Apostles' Creed was crafted in 1988 by the ecumenical committee titled the English Language Liturgical Consultation, which sought to provide common texts for English-speaking Christians of widely used worship material. Note for example in the first line of the Jesus paragraph that "his" is replaced by "God's."

p. 42: St. Patrick is one of the world's most popular saints and his analogy of the shamrock to the Trinity is well known.

p. 43: Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) was a lay visionary who gained a great following in her own time. She is distinguished among medieval mystics because of her outspoken attention to church politics, with her public speeches and open letters chastising the conduct of the pope and clergy. In 1970 the Roman Catholic Church named her Doctor of the Church.

p. 44: In this representation of the Trinity crafted by the David Wixon Art Glass company in Bethlehem Lutheran church, St. Charles, Illinois, the Father is shown as a descending hand, the Son as a cross, the Spirit as a dove, and the Trinity as interlocking circles. All are traditional symbols.

p. 45: Carmen Renee Berry (b. 1953) was raised in the Nazarene church and has written a cleverly engaging, while still accurate, guide to Christian churches titled *The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church*. One category she uses in comparing churches is their "Trinity Affinity," that is, which person of the Trinity receives the most attention in their theology and worship.

p. 45: John Calvin (1509–1564) brought his legally trained mind to the massive task of describing God and the church. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (final version 1559) has had immense influence in many Christian churches.

p. 47: The cartoon contrasts the inarticulate slang of some Americans with the attempt of Christian theologians to solve the problems of evil and the suffering of the innocent.

p. 48: Brian Wren (b. 1936), raised in England, is now an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and a prolific author of hymn texts crafted in inclusive language. Many of his hymns present contemporary imagery for God and deal with current issues in spirituality.

## Suggestions, p. 49

6. Notice that among the many metaphors for God in Psalm 18 are some opposites: God is a stronghold, thus protective walls (v. 2), and God helps me leap over a wall (v. 29).

7. The much-anthologized short story "A Father's Story" (1983), by the American author of short stories and essays Andre Dubus (1936–1999), records the thoughts of Luke Ripley, a devout Roman Catholic, who did not contact the police or confess to his priest that his daughter Jennifer killed a nineteen-

year-old man in a hit-and-run car accident. Ripley, who remembers Fr. Paul saying that “belief is believing in God; faith is believing that God believes in you,” imagines a conversation with God: had the driver been one of his sons, he, like God the Father, could have watched the pain of a Son, but of his daughter he could not. Keeping this secret has distanced Ripley from everyone except God. Discussion of the story can focus on Christianity’s understanding of God’s justice and mercy and on the doctrine of the atonement.

8. The 2007 novel *The Shack*, having been rejected by twenty-six publishers, was self-published and sold ten million copies in the first two years. The author William P. Young (b. 1955) narrates the experiences of Mackenzie Phillips, a man suffering the Great Sadness after the abduction and murder of his daughter, who spends a weekend with God. God appears to him as Elousia, an African American woman usually called Papa; a Middle Eastern laborer named Jesus; and a small Asian woman who dances about and fades in and out, named Sarayu, which means Wind. These three teach Mack that God is about love and relationship, even within God’s being. Some theologians praised the novel; others condemned it.

9. The 2011 film *The Tree of Life*, directed by Terrence Malick, was inadequately reviewed, perhaps because many people missed most of the Christian references. The “you” in most voice-overs is God. Exploring the origins and the meaning of life, the film follows a practicing Christian family in Waco, Texas, in the 1950s, who at the death of one of the sons in the military, must ask the theodicy question. As the film begins, the mother recalls that the nuns taught that there are two ways, the way of nature and the way of grace: this is straight Thomas Aquinas. She represents grace in her forgiving attitude, and her husband, striving to get ahead, represents nature. A fifteen-minute sequence depicting evolution and illustrating the Job 38 quote is spectacular. Discussion of the film can focus on whether God is more nature, more grace, or a combination.