

**Dorothy L. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*,
Review by Cole Matson
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Dorothy L. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*, 280 pp., Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, 2004.

Dorothy L. Sayers is one of the most under-rated of the Inklings-related writers. Her theological writings related to creativity are the most directly relevant and indispensable to the growing field of theology and the arts, yet they are much less widely known and cited than J.R.R. Tolkien's essay 'On Fairy-Stories' or C.S. Lewis's essays on fantasy and his own creative process (such as 'On Stories'). Her most well-known contribution to Christian thought on creativity, *The Mind of the Maker* (published 1941), is an extended argument for a particularly Trinitarian concept of creativity. It also asks what the mind of a human maker can tell us about the mind of the divine Maker. *Letters to a Diminished Church* is a collection of 16 essays that similarly calls for a particularly Christian aesthetic, one that is not only grounded on Christian dogma, but also is lived out by the Christian artist in practical service to his work. It is very clearly not the work of a pure theologian looking to an outside field for new insight, but the work of a practicing artist who is also a robust theological thinker. Like *The Mind of the Maker*, *Letters to a Diminished Church* is strong evidence of the value of the scholar-practitioner.

The first essay, 'The Greatest Drama Ever Staged', attacks the notion that Christian dogma is a series of boring statements. Instead, Sayers presents it as a drama of God killed by man, 'the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama' (p. 1). In 'What Do We Believe?', Sayers explicates the Creed (using phrases from both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds) as an expression of the creativity of the divine life, and therefore of the Christian life. In 'The Dogma is the Drama', Sayers presents a satirical 'short examination paper on the Christian religion' (p. 17) expressing what most people believe about Christianity. (Samples include 'Q: WHAT IS FAITH? A: Resolutely shutting your eyes to scientific fact' [p. 19] and 'Q: WHAT WAS JESUS CHRIST LIKE IN REAL LIFE? A: ...He had no sense of humour. Anything in the Bible that suggests another side to his character must be an interpolation, or a paradox invented by G.K. Chesterton' [p. 18].) In 'The Image of God', Sayers suggests that the image of God in which humanity is made is not his reason, but his creativity – for "“God created”" is all that the author of Genesis has told us about God so far (pp. 24-25). She also

ends the essay with an argument for dialogue between artists and theologians, 'toward a synthesis of experience' that will enable true communication (p. 33) – a synthesis in which Sayers herself excels.

'Creative Mind' seeks to explore the difference between metaphorical and scientific language, and the limits of each in seeking truth – not that one type of language is more effective than the other, but that they are tools for understanding different kinds of truth. Sayers argues that our time errs too far in the direction of using scientific language to explain poetical truths, which can only be understood through metaphor. In 'Creed or Chaos?', Sayers argues that 'if we really want a Christian society, we must teach Christianity' – and that means 'teaching Christian dogma' (p. 51). She then sets out seven concepts on which the Christian view most needs expounding – God, man, sin, judgment, matter, work, and society. 'Strong Meat' is a meditation on the Christian view of age and time, a view in which adulthood is accepted and celebrated as a time of increased strength and experience, not dismissed as simply the expiry date for the freshness and innocence of youth. In 'The Other Six Deadly Sins', Sayers divides the Seven Deadly Sins into the 'warm-hearted, or disreputable sins' of lust, wrath, and gluttony, and the 'cold-hearted or respectable sins' of covetousness, envy, sloth (spiritual sloth, or despair), and pride – noting that 'Christ rebuked the three disreputable sins only in mild or general terms, but uttered the most violent vituperations against the respectable ones' (p. 83). The political and religious authorities of Christ's day and ours make the cold-hearted sins respectable by claiming them as 'virtues' (p. 83): success, ambition, open-mindedness, independence. 'Christian Morality', a shorter essay which immediately follows, likewise points out the absurdity of a morality which makes the Church acceptable to Caesar, and therefore ends up condemning those whom polite society condemns, while leaving polite society's self-approval intact. (In an aside which uncannily echoes recent concerns, Sayers asks, 'Has any prosperously fraudulent banker, I wonder, ever been refused communion on the grounds that he was, in the words of the English Prayer book, "an open and notorious evil liver"?' [p. 113].)

'The Triumph of Easter' is a piece of joyful theology in which Sayers, beginning from a Creator 'that loved His own creation so completely that He became part of it' (pp. 120-21), shows how Easter is the triumph of that Creator artistically making a good work out of the raw materials of sin and evil. In 'Why Work?', Sayers proposes a Christian theory of work that doesn't focus on exterior working conditions, but on the interior *purpose* of work. Work should be good and worthy in itself – not manufacturing cheap and useless trinkets for the sake of an immaterial economy, but creating beautiful objects for the joy of the work. She also presents a view of the

artist not as a servant of God *per se*, or a servant of the community – she has seen too much art ruined by a forced devotional or evangelical purpose – but as a servant of the *work*. ‘The only Christian work is good work well done. Let the Church see to it that the workers are Christian people and do their work well, as to God: then all the work will be Christian work’ (p. 140).

‘Why Work?’ leads into the key essay of the collection: ‘Toward a Christian Esthetic’. In this essay, Sayers claims that a Christian aesthetic of art must be ‘based on dogma and not on ethics’ (p. 168). That is, it must be both ‘Trinitarian and Incarnational’ (p. 148). As against the classical view, a Christian view of art is not mimetic – it is creative. ‘This word—this idea of art as creation—is, I believe, the one important contribution that Christianity has made to esthetics’ (p. 159). Creation is Trinitarian, and leads to Incarnation – the enfleshment of Reality in an Image which is (Eucharistically?) Communicated in Power (p. 164). The creative process displays the Trinity, and issues in the Incarnation of an artwork.

In ‘The Faust Legend and the Idea of the Devil’, Sayers looks at the difficulties for poets and dramatists in portraying the Devil without making him too seductive, and evaluates the relative success of Marlowe, Milton, Goethe, herself, and Dante. In ‘A Vote of Thanks to Cyrus’, Sayers meditates on what it means to realize that ‘Bible characters’ are part of the same history as Cyrus and Xerxes, a history which continues today (p. 194). In ‘The Writing and Reading of Allegory’, the longest essay in the collection, Sayers provides a brief history of allegory as a literary form. She suggests that the allegorizing tendency has experienced a revival in Freudian psychoanalysis, and ends the essay with guidance on reading allegory properly. In the final essay of the collection, ‘Problem Picture’, Sayers argues that ‘creative mind is in fact the very grain of the spiritual universe’ (p. 245), and that therefore every person is a creative artist. Life is not a problem to be solved (the ‘problem picture’ of the title), but a creative act.

This collection of essays is indispensable for anyone interested in the intersection of theology and the arts, particularly artists and theologians who are seeking to learn more about each other. Sayers speaks the language of both

That said, the edition itself is less than ideal. It has an unusually large number of typographical errors, and the book’s biographical cover blurb mistakenly claims that Sayers was a member of the Inklings. There is no contextual information given about the essays, such as whether and where each was previously printed, date written, relation to other published works, etc. A basic introduction could have solved this problem and been of help to readers like myself who are not primarily Sayers

scholars. Finally, it would have been helpful to provide translations of passages that Sayers quotes in their German or Italian original.

In sum, Sayers's essays form an incisive, humorous, and sorely-needed examination of a properly Christian aesthetic, but this particular collection could have been made more helpful to the reader by a greater editorial contribution. However, even with its limitations, it is an indispensable volume.

Cole Matson
Harris Manchester College
University of Oxford