

Inklings Forever

Volume 1 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the First
Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis &
Friends*

Article 25

1997

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately

Marjorie Lamp Mead
Wheaton College

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mead, Marjorie Lamp (1997) "Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 1 , Article 25.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol1/iss1/25

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume I

A Collection of Essays Presented at

The First

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1997

Upland, Indiana

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately

Marjorie Lamp Mead

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately
by Marjorie Lamp Mead

I imagine that many of you here this morning have only a vague sense of who Dorothy L. Sayers was. You most probably know her name as one of the authors in the Ed Brown Collection. Some of you, no doubt, are fans of her detective novels featuring her aristocratic sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey. Others may know that she wrote apologetic works and was a friend of C.S. Lewis. A few may even be aware of her religious drama and of her translation of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. But I would assume that most of you are largely unacquainted with her personal life and story.

Dorothy Sayers was a bright and engaging woman. Of all of her close friends that I have been privileged to meet over the years, I have yet to find one who did not speak of her lively sense of humor, or indeed of her great capacity for meaningful friendship. Sayers was clearly a woman who embraced life and enjoyed it deeply, and as a result was a delight to be with.

However—perhaps just like some of you here this morning—Dorothy L. Sayers did not find faith an easy path. The only

child of an English rector and his wife, Sayers was raised in a loving home filled with books, music, and creativity. And though Christian teachings were clearly a part of her home environment, she seemed not to find it easy to discuss either her beginning faith or her very real doubts and questions with her parents.

As a young person, she attended worship services regularly; she even taught Sunday School to the younger children of the parish. The first indication we have of her early faith struggles is found around the time of her confirmation, a sacrament which takes place in the Church of England in the early teenage years. She later wrote of this to her cousin Ivy:

Being baptised without one's will is certainly not so harmful as being confirmed against one's will, which is what happened to me, and gave me a resentment against religion in general which lasted a long time. My people (weakly) thought it would 'be better' to have it 'done' at school—and it was the worst possible school for the purpose,

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

being Low Church and sentimental—and I (still more weakly) gave in because I didn't want to be conspicuous and fight it out. Afterwards [when I began to have my own faith] I wish I hadn't done it, because then I could have undertaken it properly, without fury and resentment, and without having the dreariest associations connected with the Communion Service."¹

Further indications of her thoughts at this time can be found in *Cat O' Mary*, a partially autobiographical, unpublished novel which we have in manuscript form in the Wade Center. In it, her main character, Katherine Lammas, is also forced to undergo the confirmation process against her will. Dismayed by what she perceived as a cloying and sentimental religious atmosphere, Katherine found that all of this "produced [in her] . . . a powerful agnostic reaction."² Gloomy and rebellious, but unwilling to be totally frank with her parents as to the reasons why she did not want to be confirmed, the fictional Katherine found herself at the moment of confirmation saying "I do," while secretly meaning "I've got to, but I'd much rather not."³

¹DLS to Ivy Shrimpton, April 15, 1930, *The Letters of DLS, Volume 1, 1899-1936*, edited by Barbara Reynolds (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) p. 306.

²DLS, *Cat O' Mary*, Ms-40, 156.

³DLS, *Cat O' Mary*, Ms-40, 169.

While it is unwise to apply fiction exactly to real life, it still seems reasonable to take general indicators from this passage. Indeed, here and elsewhere in her writings, it is clear that Dorothy Sayers found the Christianity which she was offered as a teenager to be singularly distasteful. She recoiled from the "hushed tones and pietism" which surrounded her, longing even then for a faith with a strong intellectual underpinning. Instinctively, she felt that if God mattered at all, He was robust not sentimental. This heart-felt conviction about the nature of God carried over to Sayers's mature faith, for years later when discussing our modern tendency to diminish the dynamic character of Christ, she described her concerns this way:

If this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting? The people who [crucified] Christ *never*, to do them justice, accused Him of being a *bore*—on the contrary; they thought Him *too dynamic to be safe*. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround Him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him 'meek and mild,' and recommended Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. To those who knew Him, however, He in no way suggested a milk-

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

and-water person; *they* objected to Him as a dangerous firebrand.”⁴

Perhaps if the teenage Sayers had been able to see the dynamic character of Christ in this way, she would have found herself naturally attracted to the Christian message. As it was, the overly maudlin surroundings of her religious environment only served to alienate her from the Church. For Sayers, the primary difficulty lay in the fact that she found herself incapable of responding as the other girls in her confirmation class did. Religious emotion was a dry well for her. In fact, rather than pulling her along in its wake, the trappings of religious feeling erected insurmountable barriers in her path. As she later acknowledged to the Christian scientist, John Wren-Lewis:

I am quite incapable of ‘religious emotion’. This has its good as well as its bad side. I am not seriously liable to mistake an aesthetic pleasure in ritual or architecture for moral virtue, or to suppose that shedding a few tears over the pathos of the Crucifixion is the same thing as crucifying the old man in myself. . . . But the lack of religious emotion in me makes me impatient of it in other people.⁵

⁴ DLS, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged,” from *Creed or Chaos?* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1947), pp. 15.

⁵ DLS to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday March 1954, Letter #387/22.

This lack of religious emotion also left Sayers with a fundamental dilemma which she described in this way: “since I cannot come at God through intuition, or through my emotions . . . there is only the intellect left.”⁶ In many ways, seeking God, through whatever means, is of necessity a solitary journey, but Sayers did find a worthy guide in the writings of G.K. Chesterton. Years later she acknowledged this debt when writing a letter of condolence to Chesterton’s widow. Here are her words: “I think in some ways, G.K.’s books have become more a part of my mental make-up than those of any writer you could name. I remember vividly the extraordinary excitement of reading *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* at a very impressionable age; and I owe him a debt of gratitude of a kind which it is foolish to try and express in words.”⁷

The extent of this debt she made clear elsewhere, declaring that it was reading Chesterton’s vigorous words which first gave her a sense of the true excitement and substance of Christianity. As she explained: “Chesterton performed [this service] for me when I was a sullenly unreceptive adolescent. If I am not now a logical Positivist, [that is to say, someone who focuses on the meaning of words rather than the underlying realities] I

⁶ DLS to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday March 1954, Letter #387/23.

⁷ DLS to Mrs. G.K. Chesterton, 15 June 1936.

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

probably have to thank GKC. Because ... I am not religious by nature."⁸

Having glimpsed the fact that Christianity need not be dull and flavorless, Sayers continued on this spiritual journey during her years as an undergraduate at Oxford. It is rather ironic, however, that Sayers, who by personality embraced that which was lively and passionate in all other aspects of her life, still found no place in her religious pilgrimage for religious ecstasy.

In her letters home to her parents, we get some idea of what she was reading and thinking in this regard. For example, in March 1913, when she was age 20, she writes that she has been reading Chesterton's *What's Wrong with the World*, as well as several books from the New Testament including *The Acts of the Apostles*. She also readily offers her parents her own critical assessment of those who lived during the time of Christ and listened to His teachings. She declares: "Having read two Gospels with more attention than I had ever before given to the subject, I came to the conclusion that such a set of stupid, literal, pig-headed people never existed as Christ had to do with, including the disciples."⁹

A month later, she is writing to a friend who is innocently attempting to interest her in an organization known as the

Christian Union. She responds emphatically: "Certainly not! . . . The [Christian Union] is no more a *necessary* corollary of Christianity than the Inquisition." Following this tactful opening, she then goes on to explain: "The only *necessary* products of Christianity are those which Christ appointed. He did not encourage misty theological discussion, but taught by authority and by example. The Early Christians did the same. . . . Discussion of beliefs and dogmas came in, I suppose, with the Renascence, but rested on the authority of the Bible which had become overlaid with the authority of the Church. . . . I know little about the [Christian Union] but it seems to me from all I hear of it, to begin from the wrong end. Christianity rests on Faith, not Faith on Christianity. If you have read [Chesterton's] *Orthodoxy* you will see what I mean. . . ."¹⁰ Already in this letter, Sayers is beginning to carve out a position which maintained the clear and pre-eminent authority of the Church and scripture on all matters of theology. Even as a young person, she wanted nothing to do with what she termed "misty" and vague doctrinal discussions.¹¹

¹⁰ DLS, *The Letters of DLS, Volume 1*, letter to Catherine Godfrey of April 1913, p. 72.

⁸ DLS to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday March 1954, Letter #387/27; logical positivism was anti-supernatural, materialistic, concerned only with the world of our five senses.

⁹ DLS, *The Letters of DLS, Volume 1*, letter to her parents of 2 March 1913, p. 71.

¹¹ See also, E.L. Mascall, "What Happened to DLS that Good Friday?" *SEVEN* (volume 3 -- 1982), p. 11 & 14: "... the use of the intellect in the Christian religion can mean two quite distinct, though compatible, activities. It can mean the understanding and explanation of the *nature* of Christianity or the investigation of the question of its *truth*. And Dorothy was rightly convinced that a great deal of argumentation about the second of

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

But no matter how confident she was in the authority of the Christian Church, her own faith questions were still far from settled, as this letter to her parents nearly a year later indicates. She writes: “. . . [as regards the spiritual realm] what you have been taught counts for nothing, and . . . the only things worth having are the things you find out for yourself. . . . I’m worrying it out quietly, and whatever I get hold of will be valuable, because I’ve got it for myself; but really, you know, the whole question is not as simple as it looks.”¹²

Years later, Sayers was to say that she never had an explicit conversion experience, having been raised in and having always remained within the Christian faith. Nonetheless, whether we term the culmination of Sayers’s faith journey a conversion experience or not, it is evident that as a young woman, she did carefully examine the tenets of her Christian faith and come to a point where she made an intentional decision to accept *for herself* these same Christian beliefs. Nor was this a simple academic exercise of mere head-knowledge; many years later, when writing about the substance and

these aspects was quite futile because of confusion about the first. . . . Dorothy was thus convinced that her particular task, as a Christian intellectual, was to make it plain to modern people, in language that they could understand, just what the historic Christian faith is, and to discredit the bogus substitutes which, frequently bearing its name, are offered in its place. The task of arguing for its truth she was content to leave to others—or at least she thought she was.”

¹² DLS, *Letters volume 1*, letter to her parents of March 1914, p. 85.

reality of the Christian creeds, she declared “But unless it is a *living* [emphasis mine] truth to me, I cannot make it truth to you.”¹³

The first evidence of this “living” truth in her spiritual life comes four years later. Having graduated with a First Class degree in French from Oxford, Sayers was working for the publisher, Basil Blackwell, and awaiting her second book of poetry to be published. She decided it was wise to alert her parents to the nature of this forthcoming volume: “I hope [my new book] won’t horrify you, but I’d better warn you about it! . . . It is called *Catholic Tales [and Christian Songs]*, and all the poems are about Christ. Some people think it ‘wonderful’ and some think it ‘blasphemous’. . . . I can assure you that it is intended at any rate to be the expression of reverent belief -- but some people find it hard to allow that faith, if lively, can be reverent.”¹⁴

Sayers’s concern that her poems be received as a reverent expression of faith was genuine, and extended to more than her parents, as evidenced by her dedicatory poem in this collection. She begins this dedication by quoting from scripture, the passage where Judas betrays Christ in the Garden: “And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, Master; and kissed Him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend. . . .”

¹³ DLS to John Wren-Lewis, #387/29.

¹⁴ DLS, *Letters volume 1*, letter to her parents of 14 June 1918, p. 138; book was published in Oct. 1918.

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

Her verse then reads as follows:

Jesus, if, against my will,
I have wrought Thee any ill,
And, seeking but to do Thee grace,
Have smitten Thee upon the face,
If my kiss for Thee be not
Of John, but of Iscariot,
Prithee then, good Jesus, pardon
As Thou once didst in the garden,
Call me 'Friend,' and with my crime
Build thy passion more sublime.¹⁵

Faith was now a reality in Sayers's life, and she was concerned that her vigorous expressions of it did not reflect poorly on her Lord. For, no longer mired in uncertainty about what she believed, Sayers had begun to speak with conviction—and yes, even passion—about the Christian truths she had embraced as her own. Like her spiritual mentor, Chesterton, she unabashedly declares her faith to be both reverent and lively. Make no mistake, however; this passion, this intensity, which Sayers brought to her faith is not something she would equate with religious emotion.

Let me clarify: by religious emotion, Sayers meant something that evoked in the believer a sense of comfort, well-being, even happiness, and thereby became the motivation for belief. Sayers did not dismiss the value of certain religious emotion or even that it could be the means for bringing others to the Christian faith; she simply understood that this avenue was

¹⁵DLS, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, (Oxford: Blackwells, 1918), [1].

not hers. Rather, when she declares the intellect, albeit what she terms the *passionate intellect*, as being the path which brought her to God, she means that a conviction of the truth of the Christian message is what compelled her to believe—nothing more, but, just as importantly, nothing less. In other words, Dorothy Sayers did not come to faith because she sought solace there from her problems and difficulties, but rather she examined the orthodox teachings of the Christian Church, believed them to be true, and responded to Christ's claim on her life.

Her later apologetic essays underscore this conviction. Hear her words: "faith is not primarily a 'comfort,' but a truth about ourselves. . . . Only when we know what we truly believe can we decide whether it is 'comforting.'"¹⁶ And this: "The proper question to be asked about any creed is not, 'Is it pleasant?' but 'is it true?'"¹⁷ In other words, for Dorothy Sayers the only relevant reason for accepting Christianity was that it was true—not that it was pleasant, or comforting, or even valuable to our lives, but simply that it was true.¹⁸

¹⁶DLS, "What do We Believe?," *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946), p. 18.

¹⁷DLS, *Mind of the Maker* (1941), p. 12.

¹⁸Mascall, "What Happened to Dorothy L. Sayers that Good Friday?," *SEVEN* (volume 3, 1982), p. 14 -- "when all is said and done, the only really relevant reason for accepting Christianity is that you are convinced that it is *true*; not that it is comfortable or uncomfortable, interesting or uninteresting, profitable or unprofitable, or what-have-you, but simply that it is *true*."

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

(Her stance on this, incidentally, is very reminiscent of C.S. Lewis.)¹⁹

In this unswerving emphasis on truth, Sayers is at definite odds with the pluralistic relativism which was then prevalent in the intellectual community of her time and certainly defines so much of our culture today. Just a few weeks ago, the *Chicago Tribune* printed a letter from a junior at Harvard University in which he touted the benefits of religious toleration having been raised in a home where one parent was Christian and the other Jewish.

¹⁹ There are numerous parallel Lewis quotes, see for example: "One of the great difficulties is to keep before the audience's mind the question of Truth. They always think you are recommending Christianity not because it is *true* but because it is *good*. . . . One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important." from "Christian Apologetics" *God in the Dock* (1945), p. 101. ; Or this CSL quote: "The Christian religion . . . does not begin in comfort; it begins in . . . dismay. . . . In religion, as in war and everything else, comfort is the one thing you can not get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: If you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth -- only softsoap and wishful thinking to begin with, and, in the end, despair." from *Mere Christianity*, bk. 1, chap. 5, p. 39; or this: "Christianity is not a patent medicine. Christianity claims to give an account of facts -- to tell you what the real universe is like. Its account of the universe may be true, or it may not, and once the question is before you, then your natural inquisitiveness must make you want to know the answer. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be: if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all." from "Man or Rabbit?" in *God in the Dock* (1946), pp. 108-109.

I quote in part from this letter: "I admit that I have not chosen one [faith] or the other because I have seen no need to make a choice. . . . Good people can emerge from multi-religious upbringings, with a firm belief in tolerance and a strong sense of morality. Saying that children must be raised in one faith or the other seems to suggest that you can be truly religious only if you have been brainwashed into accepting a specific denomination. This premise I reject absolutely. . . . Religion should be a search for spiritual answers, not a commitment to dogma."²⁰

A noble statement, perhaps, if the goal is simply a moral life, but it is not the same end goal which motivated Dorothy Sayers. The truth she served went much deeper. She expresses this view of truth most eloquently in an essay on Dante's *Inferno*, the first book of his epic work, *The Divine Comedy*. In this passage, Sayers is describing what she calls "the journey of self-knowledge." As you may recall, in *The Divine Comedy*, Dante is being led by his guide, the poet Virgil, on a journey beginning in Hell. But before entering Hell, itself, the two travelers must pass through the Vestibule. This is a place that "is not yet Hell, though it is the way to Hell. . . . [In other words, it is the entryway, but it has a significance greater than simply this. For] it is populated by those whom both Heaven and Hell reject: those who [in their lifetime] were 'neither for God nor for His enemies.'"

²⁰ Ann Landers column, "Grateful to my parents, The Pros and cons of a multi-religious upbringing," *Chicago Tribune*, October 26, 1997, section 7, p. 2.

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

Sayers goes on: "Dante looks, and recognises. We too may recognise—perhaps with some astonishment. The vestibule is very crowded. . . . Here are the people who never come to any decision. Do we despise them? Or do we admire their wide-minded tolerance and their freedom from bigotry and dogmatism? They discuss everything, but come to no conclusion. They will commit themselves to no opinion, since there is so much to be said on the other side. . . . They never abandon themselves wholeheartedly to any pursuit lest they should be missing something: neither to God, lest they should lose the world, nor to the world, because there might, after all, be 'something in' religion. They shrink from responsibility, lest it should bind them; they condemn nothing, for fear of being thought narrow. They chose indecision, and here in Hell they have it; they run forever after a perpetually-shifting banner; the worry and fret that torments them as of old stings them like a swarm of hornets. They sweat blood and tears, but in no purposeful martyrdom: the painful drops fall to the ground and are licked up by worms. . . . 'But surely,' they cry, 'all experience is valuable! All good and evil are relative! All religions are the same in essentials! One mustn't draw hard-and-fast distinctions! One must be free to try everything!'"²¹

²¹ DLS, "The City of Dis," from *Introductory Papers on Dante* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 132; originally written for the *Confraternitas Historica*, Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, and presented 25 February 1947.

Now remember, Sayers wrote this view of the dangers of relativism in 1947; Dante published his earlier description in 1314. But both are strikingly prophetic of the tragic flaw plaguing our society today. For fear of being thought intolerant, we disdain choosing, but we read in these words of both Sayers and Dante that such toleration is, itself, ultimately worthy of disdain—not admiration.

Fence-sitting was not a pastime accepted by Dorothy Sayers. For her thinking passionately meant thinking decisively; thinking always with energy and integrity; putting rigor back into an understanding of the Christian faith. In short, it is the call to a committed life—and a committed life which includes the life of the mind. This is not a call she makes on her own authority. The Christ she served is not shy in making His claims: "Take up your cross and follow me."

But no matter how important it is to live a committed life, to think passionately, it does little good if we don't understand what we are committed to. And indeed, addressing this lack of understanding as regards the Christian faith became one of the great passions of Dorothy Sayers's life. For she was convinced that not only unbelievers, but also too many Christians, were largely ignorant of the foundational teachings of the Christian faith. She identified a related tendency by Christians to dismiss doctrine as "boring" in preference to the experience of worship. Sayers, however, believed that unless you truly knew what you were worshipping, your worship experience would be shallow

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

at best.²² Does this reality sound familiar to you? Unfortunately, it seems that all too often today, even as we have succeeded in carefully crafting worship environments which reflect the tastes of our modern congregations, we have often failed to insure that the substance and understanding of our Christian doctrines remain. Sayers would tell you that ultimately such experiences will be less than satisfying as the hunger for spiritual knowledge will remain largely unfilled.

Sayers also saw this lack of knowledge as being a critical handicap in the Church's efforts at evangelism. In this regard, she said: "It is more startling to discover how many people there are who heartily dislike and despise Christianity without having the faintest notion what it is. If you tell them, they cannot believe you. I do not mean that they cannot believe the doctrine: that would be understandable enough, since it takes some believing. I mean they simply cannot believe that anything so interesting, so

exciting, and so dramatic can be the orthodox Creed of the Church."²³

This observation was not just idle speculation on her part, she knew firsthand from her own experience (such as her play-cycle on the life of Christ) that all too many people were shocked when confronted with the simple claims of the gospel story. Sayers believed that the response of an individual could be belief or not, but that there was no room to call the story of God's sacrifice on our behalf dull. Or as she put it in her typical no-nonsense way:

Now we may call that doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull, then words have no meaning at all. [Here Sayers was speaking as writer.] . . . Any journalist, hearing [this story] for the first time [that is, the story of man putting God to death . . . and of God's triumph over death on mankind's behalf] would recognize it as news, and good news at that; though we are apt to forget that the word Gospel ever meant anything so sensational.²⁴

²² DLS, "The Dogma is the Drama," *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, p. 23. DLS quotes Jesus talking to the Woman of Samaria, "'Ye worship what ye know not what'— being apparently under the impression that it might be desirable, on the whole, to know what one was worshipping. He thus, showed himself to be sadly out of touch with the twentieth-century mind, for the cry today is: 'Away with the tedious complexities of dogma— let us have the simple spirit of worship; just worship, no matter of what!' The only drawback to this demand for a generalized and undirected worship is the practical difficulty of arousing any sort of enthusiasm for the worship of nothing in particular."

²³ DLS, "The Dogma is the Drama," *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, p.23.

²⁴ DLS, "Greatest Drama Ever Staged," *Creed or Chaos?* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1947), pp. 5-6.

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

She continues:

Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as 'a bad press.' We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—'dull dogma,' as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama. That drama is summarized quite clearly in the creeds of the early Church, and if we think it dull it is because we either have never read those amazing documents, or have recited them so often and mechanically as to have lost all sense of their meaning.²⁵

A recent article by Richard Osmer, a professor of Christian Education at Princeton Seminary, on the need for re-introducing catechism in today's churches would support Sayers's view of the Church's general lack of theological knowledge as well as the importance of this knowledge in the life of each believer. Osmer says: "it is safe to say that the members of mainline Protestant churches [today] know less about the faith, are more tenuously committed to the church, and are less equipped to make an impact on the

surrounding world than they were at the turn of the century."²⁶

Osmer then goes on to discuss the fact that modern educational theory has been shown to be lacking in its emphasis on process over content. He says: "To put it simply, you cannot think, speak or act unless you have something to think, speak or act with. Unless explicit attention is given to the acquisition of biblical and theological knowledge, the members of the church will not be capable of using the faith to interpret their lives or their world. They will employ concepts from other areas of life in which they do have competence."²⁷

In other words, individuals inevitably must make decisions based on some frame of reference; if their lack of theological knowledge prevents them from using Christian precepts as their reference points, then even those who declare themselves to be Christians will be forced to make the most important decisions of their daily lives using standards they have acquired from the world around them—rather than from the teachings of the Church. It is this sort of tragic circumstance that appalled Dorothy Sayers, and why she thought the mind was such a vital part of our Christian faith.

In a little known, but brilliant essay entitled, "The Meaning of the Universe," Sayers clearly marks out where she stands on the intellectual responsibility of each

²⁵ DLS, "Greatest Drama Ever Staged," p. 1.

²⁶ Osmer, Richard R., "The Case for Catechism," *The Christian Century*, April 23-30, 1997, p. 412.

²⁷ Osmer, Richard R., "The Case for Catechism," *The Christian Century*, April 23-30, 1997, p. 412.

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

Christian. Presented originally as a talk to the Christian Mission on Ash Wednesday, 1946, Sayers was speaking to an audience of both Christians and non-Christians. She begins this way:

"I have come here this evening to say a few words about a part of the human make-up which is often forgotten or neglected in discussions about Christianity—the part which we call intellect, or mind, or understanding. . . . The first thing I want to say, as plainly and forcibly as possible, is this: I do not think we can afford to live any longer in a universe which makes no sense. It is hardly an over-statement to say that to ninety-nine people out of a hundred today, the world, and man's life, and man's place in the world have come to appear completely irrational. . . . they do not understand what it is all for, or where it is going, or what they are doing in it."²⁸

Speaking as she was in post-World War II England, Sayers goes on to describe man's futile attempts to control his environment, to achieve progress, to advance his society—all of which efforts had been met in recent years by terrifying and dismal failure. This had resulted in what she believed to be a world of increasing confusion, where man had lost confidence in his own abilities to build a better society, and now all that faced him was his own fear of the future.

She goes on:

We are all afraid. We are afraid of each other and of ourselves. And the greater the power and ingenuity exercised by Man in his inventions, the weaker and more insignificant does each individual man or woman seem to be—the less important, the less able to cope with the situation or understand what is going on or do anything at all about it. We cannot go on like this. . . . Somehow we have got to rescue the human mind from this chaos of stark bewilderment. Now the Christian revelation does do that. It does make sense of the universe. It does more than that, of course – it not only explains things, but also gives the power to put wrong things right. But for the moment, let us concentrate on the one point. It sets the intellect free. It makes sense of what before seemed irrational.²⁹

In other words, Sayers is saying that the Christian faith gives us a frame of reference whereby we can understand the confusion of the world around us. And in offering a rational view of the universe and of God's over-arching plan, Christianity enables us to be freed from the turmoil that plagues those who put their faith solely in man and his abilities. To repeat her words: "The Christian revelation makes sense of the universe. It makes sense of what

²⁸ DLS, "The Meaning of the Universe," (1946), p.3.

²⁹ DLS, "The Meaning of the Universe," (1946), p.4-5.

Dorothy L. Sayers: Thinking Passionately • Marjorie Lamp Mead

before seemed irrational. And as a result, it sets the intellect free.”

The voice of Dorothy Sayers will never be a popular one in today’s world, for in her passionate pursuit of dogma, she will be seen by many to be dogmatic. However, this is not a charge which would have worried her. Indeed, she looked to Another for her model. This same woman who struggled so mightily with her own faith questions as a young person, having once made her decision—based not upon what was comfortable but rather upon what she saw to be true—this same woman had no difficulty in standing tall upon her convictions. For her, there was no choice. To think passionately about her faith meant to unwaveringly embrace the core tenets of Christian doctrine. She did this, first of all, because she believed Christianity to be true, and she did it with passion because she saw the Christian faith as infinitely vital and exhilarating.

Dorothy Sayers may not have come easily to faith, but when she did come it was with a sense of integrity and absolute trust in the truthfulness of what she wholeheartedly and passionately believed. In Colossians 2, the Apostle Paul writes of his hope that the Christians there will attain: “all the riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden *all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*.”³⁰ Note well, Paul declares wisdom and knowledge to be treasures— something to be sought after, something to be greatly

³⁰ Colossians 2:2-3 NKJV.

valued. Sayers would have understood this emphasis.

Like Paul, Dorothy Sayers did not see the mind as incidental to faith; she, too, saw wisdom as something to be treasured. Unafraid of intellectual inquiry, she believed that Christianity not only supported, but also stood up to the most rigorous examination. Faith and reason, all too often, have had an uneasy marriage within the Church; but Sayers did not see it that way. I close with these words of hers on the essential relationship between the mind and faith: “faith does not destroy reason—faith supports it. You must not let anybody suppose that Christianity means doing away with your intelligence and believing a lot of nonsense. If you are doing your duty by your neighbour, and by Christ—whom Christians call ‘the Divine Reason’—your message to the world has got to be, not: ‘I have given up trying to understand and have fallen back on blind belief,’ but ‘I believe in Christ, and therefore I understand.’”³¹

©1997 Marjorie Lamp Mead
Associate Director
The Marion E. Wade Center
Wheaton College

³¹ DLS, “The Meaning of the Universe,” (1946), p. 15; see also this quote by CSL, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.” from “Is Theology Poetry?” in *The Weight of Glory* (1944), p. 92.