
# ESSAYS OF DOROTHY L. SAYERS

## Part II

## STRONG MEAT

## &

## THE DOGMA IS THE DRAMA

"For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness; for he is a babe.

"But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

*—Epistle to the Hebrews*

# STRONG MEAT

It is over twenty years since I first read the words, in some forgotten book. I remember neither the name of the author, nor that of the Saint from whose meditations he was quoting. [1] Only the statement itself has survived the accidents of transmission: *"Cibus sum grandium; cresce, et manducabis Me"*—"I am the food of the full-grown; become a man, and thou shalt feed on Me."

Here is a robust assertion of the claim of Christianity to be a religion for adult minds. I am glad to think, now, that it impressed me so forcibly then, when I was still comparatively young. To protest, when one has left one's youth behind, against the prevalent assumption that there is no salvation for the middle-aged is all very well; but it is apt to provoke a mocking reference to the fox who lost his tail. One is in a stronger position if one can show that one had already registered the protest before circumstances rendered it expedient.

There is a popular school of thought (or, more strictly, of feeling) which violently resents the operation of Time upon the human spirit. It looks upon age as something between a crime and an insult. Its prophets have banished from their savage vocabulary all such words as "adult," "mature," "experienced," "venerable"; they know only snarling and sneering epithets, like "middle-aged," "elderly," "stuffy," "senile" and "decrepit." With these they flagellate that which they themselves are, or must shortly become, as though abuse were an incantation to exorcise the inexorable.

Theirs is neither the thoughtless courage that "makes mouths at the invisible event," nor the reasoned courage that foresees the event and endures it; still less is it the ecstatic courage that embraces and subdues the event. It is the vicious and desperate fury of a trapped beast; and it is not a pretty sight.

Such men, finding no value for the world as it is, proclaim very loudly their faith in the future, "which is in the hands of the young." With this flattery, they bind their own burden on the shoulders of the next generation. For their own failures, Time alone is to blame—not Sin, which is expiable, but Time, which is irreparable.

From the relentless reality of age they seek escape into a fantasy of youth—their own or other people's. First love, boyhood ideals, childish dreams, the song at the mother's breast, the blind security of the womb—from these they construct a monstrous fabric of pretence, to be their hiding-place from the tempest. Their faith is not really in the future, but in the past.

Paradoxical as it may seem, to believe in youth is to look backward; to look forward, we must believe in age. "Except," said Christ, "ye become as little children"—and the words are sometimes quoted to justify the flight into infantilism. Now, children differ in many ways, but they have one thing in common. Peter Pan—if indeed he exists otherwise than in the nostalgic imagination of an adult—is a case for the pathologist. All normal children (however much we discourage them) look forward to growing up. "Except ye become as little children," except you can wake on your fiftieth birthday with the same forward-looking excitement and interest in life that you enjoyed when you were five, "ye cannot see the Kingdom of God." One must not only die daily, but every day one must be born again.

"How can a man be born when he is old?" asked Nicodemus. His question has been ridiculed; but it is very reasonable and even profound. "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Can he escape from Time, creep back into the comfortable pre-natal darkness, renounce the values of experience?

The answer makes short work of all such fantasies. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The spirit alone is eternal youth; the mind and the body must learn to make terms with Time.

Time is a difficult subject for thought, because in a sense we know too much about it. It is perhaps the only phenomenon of which we have direct apprehension; if all our senses were destroyed, we should still remain aware of duration. Moreover, all conscious thought is a process in time; so that to think consciously about Time is like trying to use a foot-rule to measure its own length. The awareness of timelessness, which some people have, does not belong to the order of conscious thought and cannot be directly expressed in the language of conscious thought, which is

temporal. For every conscious human purpose (including thought) we are compelled to reckon (in every sense of the word) with Time.

Now, the Christian Church has always taken a thoroughly realistic view of Time, and has been very particular to distinguish between Time and Eternity. In her view of the matter, Time is not an aspect or a fragment of Eternity, nor is Eternity an endless extension of Time; the two concepts belong to different categories.

Both have a divine reality: God is the Ancient of Days and also the I AM: the Everlasting, and also the Eternal Present; the Logos and also the Father; the Creeds, with their usual practicality, issue a sharp warning that we shall get into a nasty mess if we confuse the two or deny the reality of either.

Moreover, the mystics—those rare spirits who are simultaneously aware of Time and Eternity—support the doctrine by their knowledge and example. They are never vague, woolly-minded people to whom Time means nothing; on the contrary, they insist more than anybody upon the validity of Time and the actuality of human experience.

The reality of Time is not affected by considering it as a dimension in a space-time continuum or as a solid having dimensions of its own. "There's a great devil in the universe," says Kay in *Time and the Conways*, "and we call it Time.... If things were merely mixed—good and bad—that would be all right, but they get worse.... Time's beating us." Her brother replies that Time is "only a kind of dream," and that the "happy young Conways of the past" are still real and existing. "We're seeing another bit of the view—a bad bit if you like—but the whole landscape's still there.... At this moment, or any moment, we're only a cross-section of our real selves. What we really are is the whole stretch of ourselves, all our time, and when we come to the end of this life, all our time will be us—the real you, the real me."

Granted all this—that the happy young Conways still co-exist, now, with the unhappy, middle-aged Conways; granted also the converse—that the unhappy, middle-aged Conways already co-existed, then, with the happy young Conways. What of it? All we have done is to substitute a spatial image for a temporal one.

Instead of a progress from good to evil we have a prospect (or "landscape") of mixed good and evil, which, viewed in its entirety ("when we come to the end of this life") must necessarily contain more evil than good, since things "get worse and worse." Kay may find this "all right"; the fact remains that there is here no conquest over Time, but an unconditional surrender.

That surrender is made in the moment when we assume that Time is evil in itself and brings nothing but deterioration. It is a pity that the Conway family contained no saint, no artist, no one who had achieved any measure of triumphant fulfilment. His opinion would have been of great interest, since he might have spoken with authority of the soul's development in Time, of the vigorous grappling with evil that transforms it into good, of the dark night of the soul that precedes crucifixion and issues in resurrection.

In contending with the problem of evil it is useless to try to escape either from the bad past or into the good past. The only way to deal with the past is to accept the whole past, and by accepting it, to change its meaning. The hero of T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, haunted by the guilt of a hereditary evil, seeks at first "To creep back through the little door" into the shelter of the unaltered past, and finds no refuge there from the pursuing hounds of heaven. "Now I know That the last apparent refuge, the safe shelter, That is where one meets them; that is the way of spectres...." So long as he flees from Time and Evil he is thrall to them, not till he welcomes them does he find strength to transmute them. "And now I know That my business is not to run away, but to pursue, Not to avoid being found, but to seek.... It is at once the hardest thing, and the only thing possible. Now they will lead me; I shall be safe with them. I am not safe here.... I must follow the bright angels." Then, and only then, is he enabled to apprehend the good in the evil and to see the terrible hunters of the soul in their true angelic shape. "I feel quite happy, as if happiness Did not consist in getting what one wanted, Or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of, But in a different vision." It is the release, not from, but into, Reality.

This is the great way of Christian acceptance—a very different

thing from so-called "Christian" resignation, which merely submits without ecstasy. "Repentance," says a Christian writer [2], "is no more than a passionate intention to know all things after the mode of Heaven, and it is impossible to know evil as good if you insist on knowing it as evil." For man's evil knowledge, "there could be but one perfect remedy—to know the evil of the past itself as good, and to be free from the necessity of evil in the future—to find right knowledge and perfect freedom together; to know all things as occasions of love."

The story of Passion-Tide and Easter is the story of the winning of that freedom and of that victory over the evils of Time. The burden of the guilt is accepted ("He was made Sin") the last agony of alienation from God is passed through (*Eloi, lama sabachthani*); the temporal Body is broken and remade; and Time and Eternity are reconciled in a Single Person. There is no retreat here to the Paradise of primal ignorance; the new Kingdom of God is built upon the foundations of spiritual experience. Time is not denied; it is fulfilled. "I am the food of the full-grown."

[Footnote 1] But I would have laid any odds, from the style, that it was Augustine of Hippo; and so, indeed, it proves to be (Confessions: vii.10).
[Footnote 2] Charles Williams: He Came Down from Heaven.

## THE DOGMA IS THE DRAMA

"Any stigma," said a witty tongue, "will do to beat a dogma"; and the flails of ridicule have been brandished with such energy of late on the threshing-floor of controversy that the true seed of the Word has become well-nigh lost amid the whirling of chaff.

Christ, in His Divine innocence, said to the Woman of Samaria, "Ye worship 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 sadly out of touch with the twentieth-century mind, for the cry to-day 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 generalised and undirected worship is the practical difficulty of arousing any sort of enthusiasm for the worship of nothing in particular.

It would not perhaps be altogether surprising if, in this nominally Christian country, where the Creeds are daily recited, there were a number of people who knew all about Christian doctrine and disliked it. 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 that they simply cannot believe that anything so interesting, so exciting and so dramatic can be the orthodox Creed of the Church.

That this is really the case was made plain to me by the questions asked me, mostly by young men, about my Canterbury play, THE ZEAL OF THY HOUSE. The action of the play involves a dramatic presentation of a few fundamental Christian dogmas—in particular, the application to human affairs of the doctrine of the Incarnation. That the Church believed Christ to be in any real sense God, or that the Eternal Word was supposed to be associated in any way with the work of Creation; that Christ was held to be at the same time Man in any real sense of the word; that the doctrine of the Trinity could be considered to have any relation to fact or any bearing on psychological truth; that the Church considered Pride to be sinful, or indeed took notice of any sin beyond the more disreputable sins of the flesh:—all these things were looked upon as astonishing and revolutionary novelties, imported into the Faith by the feverish imagination of a playwright.

I protested in vain against this flattering tribute to my powers of invention, referring my inquirers to the Creeds, to the Gospels and to the offices of the Church; I insisted that if my play was dramatic it was so, not in spite of the dogma but because of it—that, in short, the dogma was the drama.

The explanation was, however, not well received; it was felt that if there was anything attractive in Christian philosophy I must have put it there myself.

Judging by what my young friends tell me and also by what is said on the subject in anti-Christian literature written by people who ought to have taken a little trouble to find out what they are attacking before attacking it, I have come to the conclusion that a short examination paper on the Christian religion might be very generally answered as follows:

Q.: What does the Church think of God the Father?

A.: He is omnipotent and holy. He created the world and imposed on man conditions impossible of fulfilment; He is very angry if these are not carried out. He sometimes interferes by means of arbitrary judgments and miracles, distributed with a good deal of favouritism. He likes to be truckled to and is always ready to pounce on anybody who trips up over a difficulty in the Law, or is having a bit of fun. He is rather like a Dictator, only larger and more arbitrary.

Q.: What does the Church think of God the Son?

A.: He is in some way to be identified with Jesus of Nazareth. It was not His fault that the world was made like this, and, unlike God the Father, He is friendly to man and did His best to reconcile man to God (see Atonement). He has a good deal of influence with God, and if you want anything done, it is best to apply to Him.

Q.: What does the Church think of God the Holy Ghost?

A.: I don't know exactly. He was never seen or heard of till Whit-Sunday. There is a sin against Him which damns you for ever, but nobody knows what it is.

Q.: What is the doctrine of the Trinity?

A.: "The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole thing incomprehensible." Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult—nothing to do with daily life or ethics.

Q.: What was Jesus Christ like in real life?

A.: He was a good man—so good as to be called the Son of God. He is to be identified in some way with God the Son (q.v.). He was meek and mild and preached a simple religion of love and pacifism. 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. If we try to live like Him,

God the Father will let us off being damned hereafter and only have us tortured in this life instead.

Q.: What is meant by the Atonement?

A.: God wanted to damn everybody, but His vindictive sadism was sated by the crucifixion of His own Son, who was quite innocent, and therefore a particularly attractive victim. He now only damns people who don't follow Christ or who never heard of Him.

Q.: What does the Church think of sex?

A.: God made it necessary to the machinery of the world, and tolerates it, provided the parties (a) are married, and (b) get no pleasure out of it.

Q.: What does the Church call Sin?

A.: Sex (otherwise than as excepted above); getting drunk; saying "damn"; murder, and cruelty to dumb animals; not going to church; most kinds of amusement. "Original sin" means that anything we enjoy doing is wrong.

Q.: What is faith?

A.: Resolutely shutting your eyes to scientific fact.

Q.: What is the human intellect?

A.: A barrier to faith.

Q.: What are the seven Christian virtues?

A.: Respectability; childishness; mental timidity; dulness; sentimentality; censoriousness; and depression of spirits.

Q.: Wilt thou be baptised in this faith?

A.: No fear!

I cannot help feeling that as a statement of Christian orthodoxy, these replies are inadequate, if not misleading. But I also cannot help feeling that they do fairly accurately represent what many people take Christian orthodoxy to be, and for this state of affairs I am inclined to blame the orthodox. Whenever an average Christian is represented in a novel or a play, he is pretty sure to be shown practising one or all of the Seven Deadly Virtues enumerated above, and I am afraid that this is the impression made by the average Christian upon the world at large.

Perhaps we are not following Christ all the way or in quite the right spirit. We are apt, for example, to be a little sparing of the palms and the hosannas. We are chary of wielding the scourge of small cords, lest we should offend somebody or interfere with trade. We do not furbish up our wits to disentangle knotty questions about Sunday observance and tribute-money, nor hasten to sit at the feet of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions. We pass hastily over disquieting jests about making friends with the mammon of unrighteousness and alarming observations about bringing not peace but a sword; nor do we distinguish ourselves by the graciousness with which we sit at meat with publicans and sinners.

Somehow or other, and with the best intentions, we have shown the world the typical Christian in the likeness of a crashing and rather ill-natured bore—and this in the Name of One Who assuredly never bored a soul in those thirty-three years during which He passed through the world like a flame.

Let us, in Heaven's name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slip-shod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. If the pious are the first to be shocked, so much the worse for the pious—others will pass into the Kingdom of Heaven before them. If all men are offended because of Christ, let them be offended; but where is the sense of their being offended at something that is not Christ and is nothing like Him? We do Him singularly little honour by watering down His personality till it could not offend a fly. Surely it is not the business of the Church to adapt Christ to men, but to adapt men to Christ.

It is the dogma that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God Who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death.

Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realise that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.

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