

Book Review Supplement

VII: *Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center*, Vol. 38.2

Crystal Downing, *Subversive: Christ, Culture, and the Shocking Dorothy L. Sayers*. (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2020).

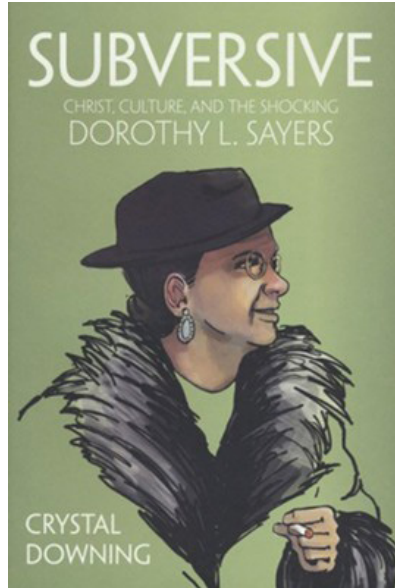
In Gilbert and Sullivan's 1879 operetta sensation, *The Pirates of Penzance*, the characters make silly fun in a song about "a most ingenious paradox" (Gilbert 142). While having little to do with theology, the phrase has always stuck with me and is an appropriate frame for the reading of Dr. Crystal Downing's *Subversive: Christ, Culture, and the Shocking Dorothy L. Sayers*.

Sayers was a paradox: a woman with fame and influence in the mid-twentieth century; an Oxford graduate whose degree was delayed until the University awarded degrees to women in 1920; an author who had her work criticized by those on the right and the left; a Christian apologist who had a child out of wedlock; and a writer who worked to bring people to Christ by using "vulgar" language.

Downing's exploration of Sayers's intriguing life and theological insight offers a refreshing perspective on how Christians today might navigate critical questions about religion and culture that often feel murky and even paradoxical.

Friend (and influence) to fellow Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, Sayers distinguished her writing by cleverly critiquing the distorted understanding of the Gospel she saw in her day (and throughout history), which she said "muffled" the true voice and character of Jesus. Downing's detailed exploration of critical themes in Sayers's life and work shows how difficult it was for readers, both then and now, to brand Sayers as liberal or conservative, progressive or traditionalist—a paradox that reveals why she remains relevant to theological and political discussions today.

Downing's most pivotal argument is laid out in the first chapter, where she explains the "both/and" paradigm that characterizes Sayers's life and work instead of an "either/or" perspective. These juxtapositions are Downing's analysis and not necessarily phrases used by Sayers herself. But Downing introduces the concept through a reference to Sayers's response



to a book written by an atheist that specifically called out the “stupidity” and “perversion” of Sayers and Lewis for elevating Christianity as supreme knowledge over science. Downing points out the either/or mentality of these accusations: “[E]ither you stupidly promote Christianity or you intelligently acknowledge that only science leads to truth; either you superstitiously believe that God created humanity or you astutely recognize that life results from evolution; either you naively assert the Bible is inerrant or you acknowledge it is a human construction” (43).

She notes, though, that Christians often err here, as well. As Sayers experienced when she wrote her groundbreaking series of radio plays, *The Man Born to be King*, which used vernacular language to tell the story of the life of Christ, she was met with “either you use King James English or you speak blasphemy.” Today it’s “either you emphatically support my political party or you have a flaccid faith” (43).

Downing shows how Sayers rebutted these charges and instead lived out the radical paradox that two seemingly opposing truths may exist together: in Sayers’s case, one can believe in both Christianity and science. In Downing’s application of the concept today, two people of different political parties can both be earnest followers of Christ. If Jesus could be fully human and fully God, then the paradoxical framework is cast. If reduced to either/or, the true message is missed.

In his book *Honest Advent*, present-day artist-storyteller Scott Erickson uses his original artwork to show the startling, gritty, and paradoxical beauty of the nature of Christ and the Gospel message. In a way, it makes an excellent visual pairing to the images Sayers paints with language. Erickson describes the paradox of Jesus as fully God and fully human as “where the finite and infinite wove together salvation in the belly of a young woman . . . a mystery [that] may never be fully explained. And that’s okay . . . because the function of a paradox is not to find the solution to seemingly opposing truths, but to be transformed by living in the middle mystery of them” (84).

Downing’s middle chapters display the clever yet constructive way Sayers transformed the expression of the Christian faith in her time. Sayers’s use of “vulgar” language to describe Christian theology (e.g., humans murdered God) shocked a nation that felt she had defiled the beauty and tradition of the Scriptures. In *The Man Born to be King*, Sayers used “new” language (aka not King James English) to portray biblical characters, including Christ—an act that angered many Christians in her day but, paradoxically, also won others to Christ. Sayers didn’t present new truth, only the biblical account of the life of Jesus. She simply expressed the story in an entirely new way that shattered the stained-glass image of Christ on the cross and made the Gospel message real and relatable to a twentieth-century audience. In exploring what, exactly, Sayers’s portrayal of the Gospel in this way accomplished, Downing suggests that “the foundational doctrine of Christianity does not

change; only the signs used to explain it change—in fact, *should* change—in order to avoid the idolatry of language” (43).

Two other topics that aren’t necessarily the meat and potatoes of the discussion still offer valuable elements to the discourse. Downing shows how Sayers lamented that Christians had turned the “business of Christ into just another economy of exchange” where churches are “shopped for” and the prosperity gospel (health and wealth) is peddled as truth, all contributing to a transactional message that is contrary to the free gift of salvation (72). From here, Downing refers to thinking that greatly influenced Sayers’s work as a writer: in her essay “Why Work?” Sayers proposes that the only Christian work is good work well done. Good art/work, whether done by Christians or non-believers, glorifies God because God is the source of all goodness. Relating this to the biblical example of creation, Sayers observes that a thing was created and pronounced “good” because of how it was made rather than what the creator could get from it in return.

In chapter 5, “The Politics of Religion, the Religion of Politics,” Downing shows how the concepts explored in earlier chapters are realized most clearly in the realm of cultural politics, making her case that Sayers deserves a role in the larger discourse of political theology. Though the relevance of Sayers’s thinking to contemporary society is seen in each chapter, it applies particularly well to today’s ultra-politically charged climate, where the debate over the relationship between religion and public life is extremely contentious.

Sayers’s published works and letters underscore the fact that the convergence of politics and religion is almost always muddy territory. At the extreme end, it becomes too easy to adopt an either/or mentality, “lacing rhetoric with religious language” and erasing the line separating the two (184). Instead of saying “to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21), we often hear the implication that “to live is my party’s political agenda,” where arguments tend to get reduced to black or white, good guys vs. bad guys, my way or the highway, based upon the conflation of religious morality and political stance (184). This un-biblical either/or philosophy, as Downing explains, is contrary to the both/and character of Christ. Instead, Sayers and Downing suggest that we do the hard work to engage in more meaningful dialogue with people from the opposing party (as Sayers did), use less divisive rhetoric, not blindly follow party lines, and admit that there is no political party that will ultimately lead to the promised land.

Downing and Sayers draw us, as C.S. Lewis wrote, “further up and further in” (171) to embrace the paradox of both/and instead of sliding into the either/or camp. Sayers was, in fact, strengthening the argument for Christianity by showing that the core message and truth of salvation never changes, even if the expression of it does, and that its stability allows culture to adapt and change around it, whether in terms of language, style of worship, or politics. In Sayers’s view, an appropriately sound faith follows Christian-

ity's beautiful both/and message. This task that Sayers put to her generation remains a relevant challenge today: either/or is easy in most cases; both/and is a more difficult balance to maintain, but it is one that truly mirrors the nature of Christ. Christians can and should have a properly confident faith, but not at the expense of acting un-Christlike.

In this thoughtful and well-researched book, Downing shines a light on how Dorothy L. Sayers's ability to turn well-worn Christian thinking on its head enables Christians to embrace this "most ingenious paradox" of the beautiful both/and nature of Christ.

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