

**ARCHBISHOP TEMPLE'S OFFER OF A
LAMBETH DEGREE TO DOROTHY L. SAYERS**

Edited by
Peter Webster

24, NEWLAND STREET,
WITHAM,
ESSEX.
7.9.43

Sayers, Dorothy

TELEPHONE: WITHAM 157
TELEGRAMS: SUNNYSIDE, WITHAM.

Your Grace,

Thank you very much indeed for the great honour you do me. I find it very difficult to reply as I ought, because I am extremely conscious that I don't deserve it. A Doctorate of Letters - yes; I have served Letters as faithfully as I knew how. But I have only served Divinity, as it were, accidentally, coming to it as a writer rather than as a Christian person. A Degree in Divinity is not, I suppose, intended as a certificate of sanctity, exactly; but I should feel better about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian. I am never quite sure whether I really am one, or whether I have only fallen in love with an intellectual pattern. And when one is able to handle language it is sometimes hard to know how far one is under the spell of one's own words.

Also, you know, I am just a common novelist & playwright. I may not - in fact I almost certainly shall - remain on the austere level of the Man Born to be King & the Mind of the Maker. I can't promise not to break out into something thoroughly secular, frivolous or unbecoming - adorned, if the story requires it, with the language of the rude soldier, or purple passages descriptive of the less restrained & respectable passions. I shouldn't like you

39 Dorothy L. Sayers to Archbishop William Temple, 7 September 1943, reacting to Temple's offer of a Lambeth degree (reproduced by permission of David Higham Associates and the Estate of Dorothy L. Sayers) (LPL, W. Temple, fo. 273)

Introduction*

Among the papers of William Temple at Lambeth is a short correspondence from the summer of 1943 between the Archbishop and the novelist and writer Dorothy L. Sayers, in which Temple intimates his wish to award Sayers the Lambeth Doctorate of Divinity. The ensuing exchange, at the end of which Sayers was to turn down the offer, is illustrative of the views of both Temple and Sayers on the relationship between the Church of England and the arts, and stands as an epitome of many of the unresolved tensions in that relationship.¹

In order to place the offer in its fullest context, a brief account of the previous six years' development in Sayers's work is necessary. For the editor of Sayers's letters, 1937 was a turning-point in her career, at which the transition from detective novelist to playwright began.² The year saw the production of her first attempt at religious drama, *The zeal of Thy house*, for the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, which was staged in June. The play was successful enough to transfer to the Westminster Theatre in London, and marked a new phase; as one of her biographers has noted, views that might previously have been attributed to characters in her novels were now voiced by angels and archangels in a story of the building of a cathedral, and as such were bound to be attributed to her personally.³ It was from this point on that Sayers's correspondence gradually became swollen with invitations from clergy and lay Christians to write or speak on religious matters; despite her later protestation that she had never intended to become embroiled in apologetics, or to 'bear witness for Christ', this was to be the effect.⁴ Prominent articles began to appear, such as 'The greatest drama ever staged is the official creed of Christendom' in the *Sunday Times* in April 1938.⁵ Sayers's profile as Christian apologist grew, and by 1939 she was receiving letters 'by every post imploring one to open bazaars at Penzance or South Shields'.⁶

At some point in the immediate pre-war period Sayers caught the attention of William Temple, at that point still archbishop of York.⁷ Late in 1939 Temple, according to his biographer a devotee of detective fiction, wrote to J.H. Oldham

* I am indebted to Melanie Barber, Mark Greengrass, Margaret Hunt and to the staff of Lambeth Palace Library for their assistance at several stages of the preparation of this edition.

¹ Lambeth Palace Library (hereafter LPL), William Temple papers, vol. 39, fos. 267–80. The Sayers letters were included in the second volume of the edition of her correspondence edited by Barbara Reynolds (5 vols., Cambridge, 1995–2002), at pp. 429–32. It is briefly summarized in Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: her life and soul* (London, 1993), pp. 372–4, and by James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers* (London, 1981), at pp. 214–15. It is not mentioned in Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers. A Literary Biography* (Kent, OH, 1979).

² *Letters*, II, xiv.

³ Brabazon, *Sayers*, pp.161–2.

⁴ Sayers to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday 1954; *Letters*, IV, 139.

⁵ *Sunday Times*, 3 Apr. 1938.

⁶ Sayers to her son, 22 Mar. 1939; *Letters*, II, 123.

⁷ Sayers was guest of honour at a luncheon of the Old Queens Society, chaired by Temple in Feb. 1938. *Times*, 7 Feb. 1938.

exclaiming ‘how magnificent Dorothy Sayers is!’⁸ Sayers turned down a request from the archbishop in the summer of 1940 to write a play for use in the diocese of York, and in November 1941 declined an invitation to be involved in a prospective religious ‘Brains trust’ broadcast by the BBC.⁹ Temple was, however, successful in persuading Sayers to contribute to his Malvern Conference of January 1941.¹⁰

Temple’s offer of the Lambeth DD was in recognition of the impact of two works in particular: the series of radio plays *The man born to be king*, and the earlier book *The mind of the maker*. Published in 1941, *The mind of the maker* may fairly be regarded as Sayers’s most enduring work of theology proper.¹¹ Temple clearly thought highly of it, describing it as ‘a really original approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, of great theological and apologetic value’ (Letter 4). V. A. Demant thought the work to be of ‘inestimable value’, having ‘as to method, in my opinion, revived theology as it should be written in any constructive and seminal sense’.¹² Developing ideas already present in *The zeal of Thy house*, it contains an extended analogy between the creative work of the Trinity and human creativity.¹³ In so doing, it lays out a doctrine of the status of work of the highest possible dignity, and makes some very trenchant claims for the independence of the artist and the importance of works of art in and of themselves; views which, it will be argued, were in part behind her decision to refuse the Lambeth degree.

If *The mind of the maker* was quietly successful, *The man born to be king* was a sensation. Before the plays were even broadcast, agitation had begun in the press against Sayers’s use of modern speech, and against the direct portrayal of Christ by an actor, since any such portrayal was still disallowed on the stage under the censorship powers of the lord chamberlain. The greater impact, however, unfolded as the plays were broadcast at monthly intervals between December 1941 and the following October.¹⁴ In his foreword to the printed edition of the plays, James Welch, director of religious broadcasting of the BBC, reproduced a sample of the hundreds of letters of thanks he had received, showing, in his view, that the plays had been massively successful in reaching the majority of the listening public who were not regular churchgoers, and who had not been reached hitherto by the more standard BBC provision of broadcast services and religious talks.¹⁵ As Welch put it whilst

⁸ F. A. Iremonger, *William Temple, archbishop of Canterbury. His life and letters* (London, 1948), p. 477; quoted in a letter from Oldham to Sayers, dated 28 Dec. 1939, in Brabazon, *Sayers* p. 188.

⁹ Sayers to Temple, 30 Aug. 1940, *Letters*, II, 177; Sayers to Temple 24 Nov. 1941, *Letters*, II, 321. On her view of the existing BBC programme of that name, see Sayers to James Welch, 2 Jan. 1941; *Letters*, II, 217–21.

¹⁰ Sayers’s paper on ‘The church’s responsibility’ was included in *Malvern 1941. The life of the church and the order of society* (London, 1941), pp. 57–78. The conference itself is described in Iremonger, *Temple*, pp. 428–33.

¹¹ On the work’s originality, see John Thurmer, ‘The theology of Dorothy L. Sayers’, *Church Quarterly Review*, 168 (Oct.–Dec. 1967), 452–62. See also several of the pieces in Thurmer, *Reluctant evangelist. Papers on the Christian thought of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Hurstpierpoint, 1996).

¹² Demant, ‘Analogy of creation’ (a review), in *Christendom. A Journal of Christian Sociology*, XII, 45 (Mar. 1942), 49–53, at 49.

¹³ *The zeal of thy house* (London, 1937), pp. 110–11.

¹⁴ The making, broadcasting and reception of the play are described in depth in Kenneth M. Wolfe, *The churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922–1956. The politics of broadcast religion* (London, 1984), pp. 218–38.

¹⁵ Foreword to Dorothy L. Sayers, *The man born to be king* (London, 1943), pp. 12–15. The printed version had itself gone through some twenty-four impressions by 1969.

suggesting the idea of the Lambeth degree to Temple in June 1943, 'these plays have done more for the preaching of the Gospel to the unconverted than any other single effort of the churches or religious broadcasting since the last war' (Letter 1). Cyril Forster Garbett, archbishop of York and chairman of the BBC's Central Religious Advisory Council at the time, later described the plays as 'one of the greatest evangelistic appeals made in this century'.¹⁶

Welch's confidence that Sayers would be delighted with such an offer was not borne out by her first response (Letter 6). Whilst professing herself honoured, and recognizing that the degree was not intended as a 'certificate of sanctity', she nonetheless expressed doubt as to whether she was enough of a 'convincing Christian', and not simply 'in love with an intellectual pattern'. Her letters contain ample evidence of this diffidence, which clearly ran much deeper than a conventionally humble declaration of *nolo episcopari*. The opening words of her address to the Malvern Conference gave some warning of her view: her feelings on treating any question relating to the church were of embarrassment, since 'I am never quite sure how to identify it or whether, in anything but a technical sense, I feel myself to belong to it.'¹⁷ Sayers later professed herself personally unsusceptible to religious experience or emotion, but instead sustained by a purely intellectual conviction; a theme that recurred elsewhere in her correspondence.¹⁸ As she put it to Temple, part of her was perhaps trying to preserve a 'bolt-hole'; an insurance against an irrevocable public step of personal commitment.

There is in addition some evidence of a degree of personal lassitude in her own attendance at public worship. Brabazon has noted an infrequency at public worship when visiting Sayers's parental home in Cambridgeshire.¹⁹ There also survives amongst the Lang papers evidence that this had come to the attention of the archbishop himself. In 1941 George Bell, bishop of Chichester, had been warned by a clergyman in his diocese, on the basis of confidential information from clergy in Essex where Sayers lived, that she was apparently not a communicant member of her own parish church. It would be kindest therefore, suggested Bell, not to press Sayers too far forward as a spokesperson for the church, but to allow her the space to make up her own mind. Lang professed his surprise, but had noted rumours of an apparent movement towards Rome in any case, and continued '[b]ut apart from this I have lately been thinking that the Church of England tended to make too much of her and put her too much on its front-window'.²⁰ It is not clear whether or not Temple was aware of this correspondence when making the offer of the degree.

Sayers's first response also made the point that as a mere 'common novelist and playwright', she could not guarantee in the future to abstain from writing 'secular, frivolous or unbecoming' work, full of the language of the 'rude soldiery' or descriptive of the less respectable passions; 'I shouldn't like your first woman D.D. to create

¹⁶ Charles Smyth, *Cyril Forster Garbett. Archbishop of York* (London, 1959), p. 211.

¹⁷ *Malvern*, p. 57.

¹⁸ Sayers to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday 1954: *Letters*, IV, 136–7; Sayers to L. T. Duff, 10 May 1943, *Letters*, II, 401. See Marjorie Lamp Mead, 'Rejoicing in truth: Dorothy L. Sayers and the "good of the intellect"', in *Further studies on Sayers. Essays presented to Dr Barbara Reynolds on her 90th birthday*, ed. Christopher Dean (Hurstpierpoint, 2004), pp. 23–30.

¹⁹ Brabazon, *Sayers*, p. 118.

²⁰ Correspondence between J. A. Bouquet, Bell and Lang, at LPL, Bell papers, vol. 208, fos. 245–8: Lang to Bell 16 May 1941, fo. 248. Such a move to Rome was apparently mooted from time to time in the Roman Catholic press; Sayers to V. A. Demant, 2 Oct. 1941, *Letters*, II, 306.

scandal, or give reviewers cause to blaspheme' (Letter 6). Temple evidently took the lightness of tone at face value, responding with a quip about the detective novels of Cyril Alington, dean of Durham (Letter 7). It seems probable, however, that behind the apparent levity was a fear, of which Temple could have had no notion, of the possible disclosure of details of Sayers's private life. Brabazon has suggested that the one doctrine of the church with which Sayers was in emotional engagement was that of sin, and in her case, the consciousness of the church's certain view, were it to know of it, of her marriage to a divorced man.²¹ Even more pressing was the matter, known only to her and a handful of others, of her illegitimate son, John Anthony, born in 1924 and being raised by Sayers's cousin, Ivy Shrimpton.²² Barbara Reynolds has suggested that these private considerations played no part in her decision to refuse, and that the reasoning expressed in the letter was sufficient.²³ The point clearly cannot firmly be established one way or the other. However, being the first female recipient of the Lambeth DD whilst continuing to work in the still morally ambiguous environments of secular literature and the theatre would have brought pressures of which she was surely likely to have been sensible, and which cannot but have been a factor to have been considered.

There may well have been therefore very pertinent personal issues behind Sayers's initial reluctance. Temple was however not deterred, and took further advice from Oliver Quick, regius professor of divinity at Oxford, as to whether his intention could be as well fulfilled by the award of a D.Litt., which Sayers had suggested instead (Letters 6 and 7). Quick's advice, in a letter that has not survived, appears to have been that a D.Litt. would not quite have the same import, and so Temple returned to the subject once again, hoping that Sayers might accept (Letter 8). In fact, the D.Litt. had been awarded only once before in the twentieth century, and not on that occasion for the sort of 'Letters' that Sayers had in mind.²⁴ After a request for more time, Sayers responded on 24 September with her longest statement, which Temple accepted, professing that he should do the same in her position (Letters 9 and 10). Her letter made two main points, which shed much light on the position of both the Christian apologist and the Christian artist in relation to the institutional church in this period.

The first concerns the effect, deleterious in Sayers's view, of too close an association between the apologist and the church. Almost from the beginnings of Sayers's growing involvement as an apologist, her letters show a persistent sense that both the amount and the profile of such involvement ought carefully to be controlled, lest its effectiveness be blunted. As early as January 1939, she wrote to the Roman Catholic bishop of Nottingham that she was already trying to avert the risk of her 'perpetual appearance in the pulpit' detracting from the force of what she might

²¹ Brabazon, *Sayers*, pp. 214–15. See also Sayers to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday 1954; *Letters*, IV, 137.

²² *Letters*, II, 437–41.

²³ Reynolds, *Sayers*, footnote to p. 374. The judgment is offered without any (to this author) compelling evidence to discount the suggestion, which has been made by Brabazon, *Sayers*, pp. 214–15.

²⁴ Francis Carolus Eeles, secretary of the Central Council for the Care of Churches, was thus honoured in Mar. 1938. The D.Litt. was not awarded again until May 1962, to the first female recipient of any Lambeth degree, the ecclesiastical historian Margaret Deanesly. The register books of degrees are to be found at LPL, Faculty Office, FVI/1/3 and F VI/1/4 (1931–53 and 1953–74 respectively.) Separate summary lists exist at Faculty Office, F VI/2/7A (1947–70), and MS 1715, pp. 89–113 (1848–1948).

have to say.²⁵ Archbishop Lang's caution in this regard has been noted above, and at least one observer of the national scene agreed, arguing in 1941 that the church had mishandled its reception of T. S. Eliot, having 'worked his name to death in our propaganda as we are now doing also with Miss Dorothy Sayers'.²⁶ By December 1942 it had become clear to her that, despite her best efforts, she had already come to be viewed as 'one of the old gang, whose voice can be heard from every missionary platform'; it was therefore time to withdraw somewhat.²⁷ So it was that she explained to Temple that the status of outsider was necessary in the 'present peculiar state of public opinion', in order to avoid becoming, in the phrase of the *Daily Herald*, "'the pet of the bishops"'.²⁸

Sayers's second point in this final letter would appear to be simply a restatement of her earlier fear about future writing on secular subjects proving an embarrassment to Temple in the future. However, an examination of her other writings reveals that her fear of 'a sort of interior inhibition in the handling of secular work', here phrased very gently, was part of a much more robust view of the independence of the artist, and of the record of the church's patronage of the arts up to that point.

The mind of the maker, to which Temple was concerned to give recognition, contained in the chapter on 'The love of the creature' a gentle insistence on the artist's duty to protect, as it were, the interests of their creature.²⁸ This conviction was more strongly expressed when challenged, as in the case of a protracted and bitter disagreement with the BBC over editorial intervention in the scripts for *The man born to be king*.²⁹ One particular letter to Welch justifies an extensive quotation:

I am bound to tell you this: that the writer's duty to God is his duty to the work, and that he may not submit to any dictate of authority which he does not sincerely believe to be for the good of the work. He may not do it for money, or for reputation, or for edification...or for any consideration whatever. ... The writer is about his Father's business, and it does not matter who is inconvenienced or how much he has to hate his father and mother. To be false to his work is to be false to the truth: 'All the truth of the craftsman is in his craft.'³⁰

Such a high view of the duty of the artist to God and to his work had added force when considered alongside Sayers's jaundiced view of the relationship between the church and the arts; a view shared by many other artists, as the present author has shown elsewhere.³¹ As early as 1938, Sayers had been sufficiently aggrieved by the lack of financial support from the church for the provincial tour of *The zeal of Thy house*, 'a play written and performed for her honour', that she was prompted

²⁵ Sayers to Neville S. Talbot, 25 Jan. 1939; *Letters* II, 116–17.

²⁶ 'Clericus', *The crisis in the church. An open letter to the archbishop of York* (London, 1941), p. 23. 'Clericus' was apparently an anglican clergyman based in London.

²⁷ Sayers to Eric Fenn (BBC), 14 Dec. 1942; *Letters* II, 382.

²⁸ *The mind of the maker* (London, 1941), pp. 102–7.

²⁹ The dispute is described in Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, pp. 220–3. Sayers's side of the correspondence is at *Letters*, II, 196–236.

³⁰ Sayers to Welch, 2 Jan 1941; *Letters*, II, 217–21. The final quotation is from *The zeal of Thy house*, voiced by the Prior in scene III, 59.

³¹ Peter Webster, 'The "revival" in the visual arts in the Church of England, c.1935–c.1956', in *Revival and resurgence in Christian history*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, *Studies in Church History*, 44 (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 297–306.

to write to the *Times* about the matter.³² However, the problem ran much deeper than mere parsimony, and was a constant theme in Sayers's correspondence. The church was widely associated, in her view, with 'artistic frivolity and intellectual dishonesty'.³³ It had seemed unable to grasp that 'the divine Beauty is sovereign within His own dominion; and that if a statue is ill-carved or a play ill-written, the artist's corruption is deeper than if the statue were obscene and the play blasphemous'.³⁴ What was necessary was 'a decent humility before the artist', and an absolute insistence that a work of art must be good in itself, before it could possibly be good religious art.³⁵ Sayers, in common with several of her contemporaries in the arts, suspected the church of holding to an inadequate understanding of the absolute necessity of beauty.

This point is more precisely focused if one considers for what exactly it was that Sayers was to be honoured. Amongst the muniments at Lambeth survives some guidance, from the time of Archbishop Davidson, on the award of Lambeth degrees. It stipulated, in line with the practice of Davidson's predecessors, that degrees be awarded only to 'persons eminent' in the various fields, and in practice, in the case of the DD, to those 'in the Foreign and Missionary Work of the Church by some special service, generally of a literary character; e.g. translating the Scriptures into a new language'.³⁶ Despite the fact that, in practice, the DD had been awarded almost exclusively to clergy, *The man born to be king* would seem to be just such a 'special service' of a literary character for the mission of the church. Welch's initial suggestion was clearly that it was as the author of *The man born to be king*, a 'work of Christian evangelism', that Sayers might be offered the degree (Letter 1). Temple agreed that the plays were 'one of the most powerful instruments in evangelism which the Church has had put into its hands for a long time past'; the 'most effective piece of evangelistic work, in my judgment, done in our generation' (Letters 2 and 4). Oliver Quick agreed, and suggested that C. S. Lewis might also be offered a degree: 'They are the two people who seem really able to put across to ordinary people a reasonably orthodox form of Xty' (Letter 3).

Despite Welch's description of the work as Sayers's 'magnum opus', conspicuously absent from this exchange was any broader sense of the plays being honoured *as plays*; any sense that there was some worth in a play that was well crafted, regardless of its 'effectiveness' as an evangelistic tool. It was, however, precisely this (apparently) instrumental view of the arts that so exercised Sayers. The commissioning practice of 'asking writers to produce stories and plays to illustrate certain doctrine or church activities' showed how little such 'pious officials' understood of the mind of the artist. In these productions doctrine was not allowed to emerge spontaneously from the inherent dynamic of a narrative imagined by the artist; instead, action and characters were inevitably distorted for the sake of the doctrine that had been preordained for exposition, with disastrous consequences.³⁷ As Sayers told the Malvern Conference, the church was thus guilty of fostering corruption 'by condoning and approving a thing artistically vicious provided that it conforms

³² *Times*, 24 Nov. 1938.

³³ Sayers to the Rev. G. E. Wigram, 14 Jan. 1943; *Letters*, II, 383.

³⁴ *Malvern*, p. 75.

³⁵ Sayers to Brother George Every, 21 May 1941; *Letters*, II, 261.

³⁶ Printed leaflet on 'Lambeth degrees', LPL, MS 1715, pp. vii–ix, at p. vii.

³⁷ Sayers to Brother George Every, 21 May 1941; *Letters*, II, 261.

to moral sentiment'.³⁸ However, no sooner than Sayers had sat down after having 'harangued' the conference thus, George Bell (as she later recalled) 'toddled amiably onto the platform and said: "And I do agree with Miss Sayers that the Church must manage to get hold of the Arts again". – Oh, dear! The C. of E. does suffer a great deal from her bishops.'³⁹ The notion of the church 'getting hold of' the arts clearly rankled, as it appeared in later letters, and Sayers was to restate her point, in gentler terms, at the conference on 'The Church and the Artist' that Bell himself convened in Chichester in 1944.⁴⁰ In accepting Bell's invitation to that conference, she named as the 'text' for her oration a phrase of Charles Williams: 'Religion itself cannot order poetry about; the grand act is wholly autonomous.'⁴¹

It may well be argued that Sayers's view of the church was too negative, and did not take into account the work of a number of key figures. Bell himself was capable of defending the freedom of the artist against opposition, as in the case of John Masefield's play *The coming of Christ*, for Canterbury Cathedral in 1928. His agency in the setting-up of the subsequent Canterbury Festival plays was by this point well known, and Sayers could hardly have been unaware of it.⁴² It was also the case that both Temple and Quick held much more developed views on the relationship between theology, the church and the arts than the tone of their letters here reproduced would suggest.⁴³ However, even if Sayers were aware of this work, the accumulated record of the wider church in its actual patronage (as opposed to theological writing) meant that the balance was overwhelmingly negative. Sayers was in fact to return to the theme some ten years later, in an article entitled 'Playwrights are not evangelists', and a sense that little progress had been made can be detected amongst other commentators in the 1950s and beyond.⁴⁴

In passing Sayers suggested an alternative way in which the Church of England might usefully honour artistic work (Letter 11). Rather than attaching the accolade to the individual, she suggested a scheme more analogous to the *nihil obstat* commonly attached to Roman Catholic publications, but more honorific in intention. Attaching the approbation to the individual work would both free the artist later to range across genres and subjects which may be 'descriptive of the less restrained and respectable passions', and at the same time protect the church from association with such work. The present author has described elsewhere a tension between different approaches in anglican patronage of the arts in this period, between the individualistic approach of a patron such as Walter Hussey, later dean of Chichester,

³⁸ *Malvern*, p. 75

³⁹ Sayers to Count Michael de la Bedoyere (editor of the *Catholic Herald*), 7 Oct 1941; *Letters*, II, 309.

⁴⁰ See Sayers to an unidentified correspondent, 28 Nov. 1941; *Letters*, II, 334. Bell's notes on the proceedings of the conference are at LPL, Bell papers, vol. 151, fos. 190–6.

⁴¹ Sayers to Bell, 4 Sept. 1944; LPL, Bell papers, vol. 151, fo. 169. The text is from Charles Williams, *The figure of Beatrice. A study in Dante* (London, 1943).

⁴² See Peter Webster, 'George Bell, John Masefield and "The coming of Christ": context and significance', *Humanitas. The Journal of the George Bell Institute*, X, 2 (2009), 111–25; on a later instance of Bell's defence of the artist, see Paul Foster, 'The Goring judgement: is it still valid?', *Theology*, CII (1999), 253–61. On the probability of Sayers's awareness of Bell, see Hone, *Sayers*, p. 84. On Bell's work in general, see Webster, 'The "revival" in the visual arts'.

⁴³ See, by Temple: *Mens creatrix* (London, 1923), ch. 10 ('The nature and significance of art', pp. 93–128), and *Nature, man and God* (London, 1934), pp. 135–65. See also Quick, *The Christian sacraments* (London, 1927), ch. 2 ('Aesthetic sacramentalism'), pp. 19–42.

⁴⁴ 'Playwrights are not evangelists', *World Theatre*, V (1955–6), 61–6. Webster, 'The "revival" in the visual arts', pp. 297–8, 306.

and the more institutional approach characteristic of George Bell.⁴⁵ It may have been that Temple's approach was the only way in which, under the pressures of war-time, he could conceive to use the limited institutional tools at his disposal. It would seem that he had not the time to pursue Sayers's idea, or to explore it any further privately, and the suggestion does not appear to have gained any traction with his successors or indeed anywhere else in the Church of England. Temple's offer, had it been accepted, would however have been greatly innovative amongst Lambeth degrees. It would have been the first award to a woman, the innovative nature of which becomes apparent in light of the fact that the first subsequent award to a female candidate (of the lesser degree of MA) was not made until 1958, and the first doctorate (a D.Litt.) not until 1962.⁴⁶ The lack of a ready means by which to honour 'freelance' writers and apologists was further demonstrated by the hesitation by Archbishop Fisher over awarding a doctorate to the writer Leslie Paul; he was, after much internal consultation, awarded the MA in 1959.⁴⁷

It also remained the case that no easy means was found to honour artists. The Lambeth degree of Mus.Doc. had long been awarded to senior cathedral organists and also to composers such as Martin Shaw (1932), and had achieved a status as a professional qualification, being awarded on the testimony of others in the field.⁴⁸ It is a measure of the difference between the church's relationship with church musicians and that with practitioners in the visual and dramatic arts that the first award for work in the arts (other than music) was not made until 1971, to the theatre director Martin Browne, whose first dramatic collaborations with George Bell in the diocese of Chichester had begun in the early 1930s.⁴⁹ The whole exchange remains a highly revealing episode in the relationship between the church and the arts.

Editorial conventions

Manuscript amendments to typescript or manuscript letters that are clearly authorial have been adopted without comment. Obvious spacing errors in type have been corrected without comment. Misspellings have been retained, as have errors of grammar and syntax. Words which are underlined in the original manuscripts have been printed in italic type.

⁴⁵ Webster, 'The "revival" in the visual arts', p. 302.

⁴⁶ LPL, Faculty Office FVI/1/4. Register Book 1953–74. The MA was awarded to Diana Mary Snow (Mother Clare of the Deaconess Community of St Andrew) and Mrs Mildred Betty Ridley, in both cases 'in recognition of conspicuous services in the Church of England'.

⁴⁷ LPL, Fisher papers, vol. 223, fos. 154–64.

⁴⁸ On the existence of a church-musical 'establishment', see Ian Jones and Peter Webster, 'Anglican "establishment" reactions to "pop" church music in England, 1956–c.1900', in *Elite and popular religion*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, *Studies in Church History*, 42 (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 429–41, at p. 430.

⁴⁹ LPL, Ramsey papers, vol. 207, fos. 12–14. R. C. D. Jasper, *George Bell, bishop of Chichester* (London, 1967), pp. 121–2.

The letters

The correspondents

William Temple, archbishop of Canterbury

Dorothy L. Sayers, writer and dramatist

Oliver Chase Quick, regius professor of divinity in the University of Oxford, and canon of Christ Church

Dr James W. Welch, director of religious broadcasting for the BBC

Sir Henry T. A. Dashwood, legal secretary to the archbishop

1. Welch to Temple 18 June 1943

TS, LPL, William Temple papers, 39, fo. 267

My dear Archbishop,

I hope you have now received a specially bound copy of THE MAN BORN TO BE KING. We had three copies specially bound for you, the Archbishop of York¹ and the King.

Two letters happen to have come in the post this morning about these plays and I really think it worth while asking you to read copies of them, because they bear on the main subject of this letter.² They are typical of the letters that continually keep on coming in.

If you are able to read my introduction, you will know something of how the plays got on the air and what we think of their religious value. But much the most important part of the book is the brilliant introduction by Dorothy Sayers herself. These plays seem to me to be her *magnum opus*; she spent more than two years studying her sources and books and writing these plays, and I know something of the terrific labour that went into their making. I have done a good deal of travelling up and down the country recently, talking mostly to parsons and lay-people, and I have been astonished at the religious effect of these plays on regular churchgoers; but very much more striking than that is the way in which the Gospel has been made to mean something to people totally divorced from the churches to whom the Christian Gospel has little relevance or meaning. My serious judgment is that these plays have done more for the preaching of the Gospel to the unconverted than any other single effort of the churches or religious broadcasting since the last war – that is a big statement, but my experience forces me to make it.

And so I wonder, not knowing the rules of this particular game, whether it would

¹ Cyril Forster Garbett, archbishop from 1942 to 1955, who was also chairman of the BBC's Central Religious Advisory Council from 1923 until 1945; *ODNB*. Biographical information has been derived from the *Oxford dictionary of national biography (ODNB)* unless stated otherwise.

² These letters have not been retained.

be possible and right to offer Dorothy Sayers a Lambeth D.D. for this fine piece of Christian evangelism. This may be quite impossible, but I thought I would suggest it. I have not asked Dorothy Sayers, but I think I know her well enough to say that nothing would give her such deep pleasure as the conferring of that degree. And I think such an honour would have the support of church people throughout the country.

Your devoted servant,

2. Temple to Welch 21 June 1943

TS copy, fo. 268

My dear Welch,

Your letter raises a most interesting suggestion; I will take a few soundings about it at once and should be very happy if it seemed possible to do what you have proposed.

I did received [*sic*] the specially bound copy and wrote to thank the Director-General for it; I am delighted to have it.³ I have also got the ordinary edition.

I have read nearly the whole of the plays now. I think they are extraordinarily effective, and while they are full of interest to somebody who knows the story, I am sure you are right in thinking that they are one of the most powerful instruments in evangelism which the Church has had put into its hands for a long time past. Also I entirely agree with you about the introduction, which is a brilliant piece of work.

Yours very sincerely,

3. Quick to Temple 24 July 1943

MS, fos. 269–70

My dear William,

I'm sorry for the delay in answering your letter. It only reached me last night. I'm on a holiday & staying for the moment at Hugh's prep. school which has been evacuated here. It is Hugh's last term, after which he follows Anthony to Shrewsbury.

I'm all for Dorothy Sayers being given a D.D., & shd like C.S. Lewis to have one too. They are the two people who seem really able to put across to ordinary people a reasonably orthodox form of Xty. But I don't think it wd be the least use *my* trying to suggest D.S. or C.S.L. either for an Oxford D.D. Hon. D.D.s are entirely in the hands of the Hebdomadal Council⁴ – I am not a member of it & I am never consulted by it. I did on one occasion try to suggest a name to the Council; but I only got 'rapped over the knuckles' for my [fo. 269v] pains. It was F.R. Barry, just after he had been made a Bishop.⁵ He clearly ought to have been given a D.D. by Oxford, & at the Vice Chancellor's suggestion I wrote a long letter to Council, stating his case & dwelling on his services to the University & to theological teaching. All the answer I got was a curt note to the effect that as the Council had not granted a D.D. to one

³ This presentation copy would appear not to have been deposited in the archbishop's library at Lambeth Palace.

⁴ The chief administrative body of the University of Oxford.

⁵ Frank Russell Barry, bishop of Southwell, 1941–63; obituary in *Times*, 25 October 1976. He in fact received a Lambeth DD in 1947: LPL, MS 1715, p. 113.

or two other recent bishops, they could not without unfairness grant one to Barry. Their attitude seemed to me to be quite typically unimaginative & unintelligent. I was obliged to tell F.R.B. that, if he were to send in his published work for D.D. & B.D. 'by accumulation' in the ordinary (& expensive) way, the result would be doubtful. (N.P. Williams⁶ whom I consulted privately thought Barry's work clearly not good enough & even Hodgson⁷ considered it 'a border-line case'. Of course in this case, which wd be decided by the Board of the Faculty, *nothing* but the quality of the actual work submitted could be considered). The result [fo. 270] was that Barry, naturally enough, decided not to apply for a D.D., & there is no means of giving him one. I was fed up by the whole business, over which I took much trouble to no purpose. And I am sure that to start again over Dorothy Sayers would only lead to the same result, in spite of the fact that N.P.W. is no longer there to oppose, as he certainly would.

But, as I say, I'm all for D.L.S. having her D.D. & shd be delighted if she were to receive one from Lambeth.

Yours affectionately,

4. Temple to Dashwood 31 July 1943

TS, fo. 271

My dear Dashwood,

After consulting several people, including the Archbishop of York and the Bishop of London, who cordially approve, I should like to offer the Lambeth D.D. to Miss Dorothy Sayers, whose book 'The Man Born to be King' represents a great amount of study and is the most effective piece of evangelistic work, in my judgment, done in our generation, and her former book, 'The Mind of the Maker', was a really original approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, of great theological and apologetic value.

But I suppose it has never been given to a woman before. I consulted the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, who entirely approves my going forward. All Degrees there are now open to women as to men and the Doctorate has been given to several women, though not, I think, in Divinity.

[fo. 271v] Before I write to Miss Sayers, I just want to be sure that you can see no objection from the point of view of regulations.

Yours sincerely,

5. Temple to Sayers 4 September 1943

TS, fo. 272

Dear Miss Sayers,

I am writing to ask if you would allow me to confer upon you the Degree of D.D. in recognition of what I regard as the great value of your work especially *The Man Born to be King* and *The Mind of the Maker*. I have consulted the Regius Professor

⁶ The late Norman Powell Williams, Lady Margaret professor of divinity and canon of Christ Church, who had died in May of that year. *ODNB*.

⁷ Leonard Hodgson, regius professor of moral and pastoral theology from 1938. He succeeded Quick as regius professor of divinity after Quick's death in 1944. *ODNB*.

of Divinity at Oxford who cordially approves my going forward. There are I am afraid certain fees to be met amounting to about £70. This sounds exorbitant but any proposal to reduce the fees for the Lambeth Degrees would, at least a little while ago, have met serious resistance from the Universities. There is a little ceremony of admission to the Degree which we can fix at any time convenient to both of ourselves. You would be the first woman actually to receive the Degree though there has in the past been a [fo. 272v] proposal to confer it upon one other but that never actually took place.

Yours sincerely,

6. Sayers to Temple 7 September 1943

MS, fo. 273

Your Grace,

Thank you very much indeed for the great honour you do me. I find it very difficult to reply as I ought, because I am extremely conscious that I don't deserve it. A Doctorate of Letters – yes; I have served Letters as faithfully as I knew how. But I have only served Divinity, as it were, accidentally, coming to it as a writer rather than as a Christian person. A Degree in Divinity is not, I suppose, intended as a certificate of sanctity, exactly; but I should feel better about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian. I am never quite sure whether I really am one, or whether I have only fallen in love with an intellectual pattern. And when one is able to handle language it is sometimes hard to know how far one is under the spell of one's own words.

Also, you know, I am just a common novelist & playwright. I may not – in fact I almost certainly shan't – remain on the austere level of *The Man Born to be King* & *The Mind of the Maker*. I can't promise not to break out into something thoroughly secular, frivolous or unbecoming – adorned, if the story requires it, with the language of the rude soldiery, or purple passages descriptive of the less restrained & respectable passions. I shouldn't like your [fo. 273v] first woman D.D. to create scandal, or give reviewers cause to blaspheme.

My husband says, helpfully, that after all I could scarcely be more scandalous than Dean Swift!⁸ He also says (being military-minded) that I should probably do as the Archbishop says & not argue. Perhaps he is right. Probably I am only trying to keep a bolt-hole open into which I can retreat, crying: 'I never really committed myself to anything – I only wrote books!' I don't know. I find it very difficult to tell where conscience ends & pride, or cowardice, begins.

I expect I had better leave it to your judgement. If you tell me that I ought to accept, I will. It is a very great honour, and I am deeply sensible of it. I feel as though I had not expressed myself very graciously or gratefully, but I do appreciate it very deeply & I thank you...

I shall be in town from to-morrow till Saturday morning if you would like me to come & see you or anything. My address is 24, Great James St., W.C.1. Or I could come up at any time.

Yours very sincerely, and indeed gratefully,

⁸ Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), satirist and dean of St Patrick's Cathedral Dublin. *ODNB*.

7. Temple to Sayers 10 September 1943*TS, fo. 274*

Dear Miss Sayers,

I am rather moved by your letter and the anxiety you shew. Let me say at once that if you would feel easier in letting the Degree be a Doctorate of Letters, I would readily agree to that; but I should like first to consult Canon Quick. I do not think there is the least harm in a Doctor of Divinity writing detective stories or any similar literature: Cyril Alington is not only a Doctor of Divinity but also a Dean and has several such stories to his credit – or discredit; frankly I am not quite sure which, because though they amused me, knowing him as I do, I don't think they are very good!⁹

I am very sorry I can[']t arrange for you to come and see me just now, but I am in Canterbury all this month. I am going to send your letter on to Canon Quick and ask for his reactions, making no comment of my own to give him any lead, and I will write again when I have heard from him.

Yours sincerely,

8. Temple to Sayers 15 September 1943*TS, fo. 275*

Dear Miss Sayers,

I have now had a letter from Oliver Quick¹⁰ which I cannot send because it contains some other matter, but entirely agreeing with me that it would be a great mistake to suppose that a D.D. is to be regarded as anything like a certificate of sanctity or incompatible with the production of thoroughly secular work in literature. I think that the object I have in view would not be quite fully met by a D. Litt., and I am therefore hoping more than ever that you will be ready to accept the D.D. If so, we will lay plans for the moment of conferring it.

Yours sincerely,

9. Sayers to Temple 18 September 1943*MS, fo. 276*

Your Grace,

Thank you very much for your letters. I quite see that a D.Litt. wouldn't be the same thing from your point of view. I only mentioned it as the kind of thing I should have no qualms about accepting.

I do still feel a little uneasy about it. Will your Grace forgive me & not think I am making a silly and ostentatious fuss if I ask for two or three days more in which to consider? I seem to be behaving very ungraciously, but I can't help feeling horribly like the jay in peacock's feathers,¹¹ with a touch of Judas Iscariot.

Yours very sincerely,

⁹ Cyril A. Alington, dean of Durham since 1933. The *ODNB* describes his detective fiction as 'clever, witty, but quickly perishable'.

¹⁰ This letter has not survived.

¹¹ A reference to one of the fables of Aesop.

10. Temple to Sayers 22 September 1943*TS, fo. 277*

Dear Miss Sayers,

I am so sorry to have put you all in a flutter! I am most anxious that you should not feel pressed in this matter. It would be to me a satisfaction if you allow me to confer the degree; it is a considerable satisfaction to have offered it; but if on reflection you are disposed to think it better that it should not be conferred, do not a moment hesitate to say so. Perhaps however, in that case, I might have your permission to mention privately to friends that I had made the proposition but that you preferred not to become *doctrix*?

Yours very sincerely,

11. Sayers to Temple 24 September 1943*MS, fos. 278–9*

Your Grace,

Thank-you very much for your letter. I have been thinking the matter over very carefully, & have consulted, confidentially, one or two people whose advice I thought would be valuable, & have come to the conclusion that it would be better for me not to accept the D.D. My consultants all felt on the whole the same way about it, though not all for the same reasons. (If you cared to have their names, I am sure they would readily explain to you why their judgement supported my instinctive feeling about it).

Quite apart from my reluctance to sail under anything that might appear to be false colours, there are certain practical considerations. The first, & perhaps the most cogent from the Church's point of view is this: that any good I can do in the way of presenting the Christian Faith to the common people is bound to be hampered & impeded the moment I carry any sort of ecclesiastical label. In the present peculiar state of public opinion, it is the 'outsider' with neither dog-collar nor professional standing in the Church who can sometimes carry the exterior defensive positions by the mere shock of a surprise assault; but the power to do this depends largely on remaining a free-lance. The moment one becomes one of the regular 'religious gang', or (in the elegant phrase used by the *Daily Herald*) 'the pet of the bishops', everything one says is heavily discounted. That is why I have lately been refusing to appear on the platform at religious meetings, or to sign protests & manifestoes – the oftener one's name appears in such contexts, the less weight it carries.

Also, knowing the world of journalism as I have only too much reason to do, I think we might find ourselves up against some very disagreeable [fo. 278v] publicity. It is, I think, your generous intention that the recognition given to my work should be publicly known. But women are 'news' in a way that men are not, & peculiarly subject to the attentions of the sensational press – some of which does not love me very much. There might well be some rather disagreeable comments, impossible to refute or argue about, whose barb would stick, ranging from, 'Thriller-writer Dorothy Sayers, having made Christ a best-seller to the tune of 30,000 copies, has been rewarded with a D.D.' to 'This not very seemly farce, dealing cynically & light-heartedly with divorce (or what not) is by Miss Dorothy Sayers, D.D., & will probably make the Archbishop rather sorry that he ever ...' and so forth. And to the

extent that this might happen, & that one would not wish it to happen, there would always be a sort of interior inhibition in the handling of secular work. I know, of course, that there is nothing to prevent the writing of detective stories – mostly a very innocuous form of entertainment; but there would always be the strain of an obligation to *be* innocuous & refrain from giving offence, & that is a strain under which no writer can work properly.

By all means say to those people who have been demanding that ‘something should be done about’ the author of the books that you have offered her a Degree, & that she has, with a deep sense of appreciation, thought it nevertheless better to decline the honour. I understand very well, I think, the purpose you had in mind – & indeed I have often felt, and said, that it would be a good thing & helpful to the work of what it is fashionable to call the Lay Apostolate, if their books could receive some form of official recognition – not in order to reward the writer so [fo. 279r] much as to establish the orthodoxy of his doctrine. As it is, the reader is only too apt to suppose that Christianity interestingly presented is not historical Christianity at all, but a new ‘interpretation’ deriving from the author’s individual taste & fancy. (As, only too often, it is.) But I would suggest, with submission, that the best way would be to accord recognition, not so much to the workman as to the work. If, for example, the Church had something analogous to the power of the French Academy to ‘couronner’ the actual book, when it appeared to be both orthodox & valuable to God’s work.¹² I am not thinking of anything quite like a medal or a ‘prize’, but something which would act both as a ‘nihil obstat’ & as a mark of honour – which would say, in effect, ‘This book, though readable & even exciting, stands within the Catholic tradition, & the Church commends it.’ This should satisfy any writer who was not making Divinity his life-work, & would also be of some guidance to the reader (who at present is in some uncertainty about what is & is not ‘in the tradition’); while the Church would not have committed herself to approving any subsequent errors and extravagancies [sic] into which the amateur theologian might (through sin or ignorance) so easily fall. (I often wonder what the Popes think of the FID. DEF. on English coins, & if they ponder on the rashness which conferred that title on Henry VIII!)¹³

But all this is by the way. I hope very much that Your Grace will [fo. 279v] understand why, after very careful deliberation, I have come to the conclusion that I must refuse the very great honour offered to me, & will believe that I have done so in no ungrateful spirit.

Yours very sincerely,

12. Temple to Sayers 30 September 1943

TS, fo. 280

Dear Miss Sayers,

I am extremely grateful for your most kind letter. I think I do fully understand the situation: indeed you have persuaded me that if I were in your position I should have

¹² Probably a reference to the *Grand prix du roman*, awarded by the Académie Française. I am indebted to Mark Greengrass for his advice on this matter.

¹³ *Fidei defensor*, the title conferred on Henry VIII in 1521 by Pope Leo X, in recognition of his *Assertio septem sacramentorum*, of the same year.

reached your conclusion. Meanwhile I am still glad that I made the proposal and that you are willing for me to mention it to some of those who have been eager that the Church should show some real recognition of the great value of your Plays and also the book 'The Mind of the Maker'.

Yours very sincerely,