



A Literary and Theological Conversation with Dorothy Sayers

KENT L. JOHNSON

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

To assist readers in finding a book that fits their interests and mood, bookstores and public libraries often shelve their novels according to categories: westerns, classics, historical, gothic, action/adventure, science fiction, mysteries. In the public library where I do most of my browsing there is no shelf for religious, or Christian, novels. While I suspect that there are novels that could fit those descriptions, there are novels in every category that trace religious themes and issues. I want to suggest that discovering those themes and engaging in a conversation on them with the novelist can be a very profitable and interesting way to go about theological reflection. Before considering one novel that illustrates this perspective, allow me to make a few introductory comments.

I. ON READING NOVELS

It is the work of novelists to develop personalities, spin out plots in which the characters are involved, describe settings in which the events take place, and invent dialogue. In doing so, many writers create a mosaic of values, culture, events, characters, beliefs, and perspectives that is, in the large sense of the word, religious. The reality they create in their novels is one that readers are free to consider as more or less authentic—more or less representative of their own experience, their own beliefs and values, or of a reality they can imagine to exist. Often, these created realities raise issues that are of specific concern to the Christian community. Given the power inherent in biblical themes, it shouldn't be surprising that novelists' stories are often variations on those themes.

page 156

Some novelists seem to give the impression that what they are writing is, in fact, the reality that is. Readers do not, however, have to accept the writer's work as dogma. Precisely because it is fiction, readers can exercise their own creativity as they enter into a conversation with the novelist and other readers, not required to find one interpretation of what they read, but free to explore their own understanding of it. If novelists tell their stories well, there is a good deal of pleasure to be enjoyed along the way. The mystery *The Nine Tailors*, by Dorothy Sayers, is the novel I have chosen to illustrate the conversations I have with novelists.

Now, it needs to be said that if there is any novel that is not meant to be read "exegetically," at least in its first reading, it is the mystery. Mystery writers hook their readers early in their novels, compelling them either to read as fast as they can to discover the solution to the crime, or to jump ahead to the last pages when their curiosity cannot be contained. *The Nine Tailors* has something of that quality about it, though it doesn't start as fast as some whodunits.

Indeed, there does not seem to be much of a mystery in her opening chapters, and readers who demand a quick start may be tempted not to allow Sayers to tell them her full story. It is only at the conclusion of the novel that readers realize that her opening comments not only set the stage for the mystery, but introduce the themes that are of theological interest as well. Therefore, it is essential that *The Nine Tailors* be read at least twice. First, it can be read as a detective story. Then, this novel can be read for what it is, a magnificent commentary on creation, fall, judgment, and the cleansing of God.

All this should be seen as something of a warning. In this I will do the unforgivable, at least as far as mystery writers are concerned: I will reveal the solution to the mystery. It simply has to be done in order to introduce the religious themes I find in this novel. If you haven't read it, I strongly urge you to stop reading this article and transfer your attention to it. Having read it, come back and join me in a conversation with Dorothy Sayers on the subject of the religious themes I find in *The Nine Tailors*.¹

II. CREATION, FALL, JUDGMENT, AND CLEANSING

The Nine Tailors is a novel about church bells—the clangor of bells, the mathematical formulas by which bells are rung, the fascination of the English for bell ringing, and, not least, bells as the instruments of the judgment of God. The title of the book comes from the name Sayers gives to her bells—bells she suggests are as much alive as any of the characters she created to ring them. (And, by the way, they are marvelous characters.) Nevertheless, it could be argued that water, and not bells, is the dominant metaphor in Sayers' telling of a story of creation and redemption.

Sayers set her story in the lowlands (fens) of England's East Anglia—in the village of Fenchurch St. Paul's. In the beginning, Sayers tells us, farmers and engineers constructed canals, dikes, and gates that redeemed the land from the

¹Dorothy Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (1934; reprint, New English Library, 1982).

marshes and sloughs of the countryside. It is the story of the third day of creation (Gen 1:9-13). On the sixth day, Genesis tells us, God created man and woman, giving them dominion over the separated land and water (Gen 1:24-31). Over many generations the inhabitants of the fens had exercised that dominion well. They had worked hard to protect the land from the assaults of spring and summer floods. Nevertheless, the threat of a watery deluge was never far from the minds of the people of the fens—or from Dorothy Sayers and her readers.

If there is peace anywhere in the world, one would expect to find it in Fenchurch St. Paul's. On the surface, those expectations are realized. But in the world Sayers has created, evil and contention are present even in this most pastoral of settings. The fens are not immune to the brokenness of creation. Repeatedly, Sayers alludes to disputes among the leaders of the community about the deplorable condition of the sluice gates which were designed to control the waters. The pleas of the sluice-gate keeper, like those of an Amos, go unheeded. From the first page to the conclusion of the novel, the threat of flood hangs over this tranquil community.

Evil comes in another way to the fens. Not far into the novel, Sayers' amateur detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, discovers that the memory of a crime still casts a long shadow over the community. A valuable necklace had been stolen at the home of the village's leading citizen.

Though innocent of the crime, the members of this family took responsibility for it—a responsibility that led to financial ruin and, for several, an early death. While the perpetrators of the crime were found, sentenced, and imprisoned, the crime remained an open mystery because the stolen necklace was never found.

One of the thieves, after escaping from prison, committing murder, and hiding in France for some years, returns to Fenchurch St. Paul's to retrieve the necklace. Thought to be dead, his appearance causes further consternation, especially for his wife who, thinking him dead, has married another man with whom she has several children. Sayers tells us that wherever Deacon, her first husband, appears, suffering is sure to follow. He is the personification of evil for this community. The mystery in *The Nine Tailors* is concerned with Deacon, who dies upon his return to the fens and is buried in a shallow grave in the churchyard. He is the source of the problem that Lord Peter Wimsey must solve. But for Sayers, and for those who would consider it, there is a deeper mystery here—that of water that kills, and water as an instrument of judgment.

Sayers is no romantic. She describes the water of the canal that nearly claims Wimsey's life as "unforgiving." Water has that quality. It is no respecter of persons—of itself it responds to no appeals for mercy. Once in its grasp, water's victim will die unless saved by another. The white snows of winter, writes Sayers, create a scene of remarkable beauty over Fenchurch St. Paul's, but she also knows that snow melts, and when it does, it unmask the debris accumulated over a long winter and brings the potential for floods. No doubt about it. No matter how innocent or beautiful her landscape, Sayers knew there is evil in the world.

In *The Nine Tailors*, there is the evil inherent in the failure to care for the

page 158

earth—the carelessness demonstrated in allowing the sluice gates to deteriorate. And there is the evil of Deacon, a man who spoils lives—creating pain wherever he goes. By the close of the novel, the threatened flood arrives. The raging waters created by a spring thaw burst through the weakened sluice gates and flow over the fields of the fens. Then, like Noah, the inhabitants of the fens converge on their church, bringing with them their animals, food, and precious possessions. There, in this ark built on the highest ground for miles around, the rector of the parish maintains the roll of his people, rations food, comforts the despairing, leads in worship, and waits for the first sign of the receding waters.

At the same time Sayers uses water as a means of judgment for all those living on the fens, she portrays the same water as God's cleansing and renewing agent in a sinful world. In this latter sense, *The Nine Tailors* is a commentary on Romans where Paul wrote:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4)

The apostle was no romantic about this sacrament of baptism. The smiles of parents, the posing for photographs, all the pleasantries we have come to associate with baptism, probably would not have impressed Paul. Baptism was, first of all, a matter of dying—of putting to death

the old Adam in order that the new be born. The same view of water and baptism is portrayed by Sayers. *The Nine Tailors*, I think, is a novel about the judgment of God, about the sin and evil that brought Jesus to the cross, and a judgment that comes at the moment of baptism—a judgment by water that both kills and raises up, that ends one life and initiates another. This is the deeper mystery that I find Sayers inviting her readers to explore even as they search for clues to the identity of the one buried in a shallow grave in a churchyard.

III. BELLS: INSTRUMENTS OF GOD'S JUDGMENT

If judgment in *The Nine Tailors* comes upon a whole community by means of a flood, it comes to the novel's most heinous sinner by way of bells. The conditions which allow the bells to fulfill that role, as well as the way in which they execute judgment, reflect the creative genius of Sayers as she weaves together both superstition and theological themes into the mystery that is *The Nine Tailors*.

The novel begins with an "accident." While driving through the fens in a blinding snowstorm, Wimsey drives his car off the road and almost into a watery grave. Leaving his car, he and his valet soon find themselves guests in the home of Mr. Venables, the rector of Fenchurch St. Paul's. Wimsey soon discovers that on this night (New Year's Eve) there was to have been a great ringing of bells. All has been canceled, however, because Will Thoday, one of the ringers, has been struck down with influenza (more of Will Thoday in a moment or two).

As Mr. Venables tells his guest what might have been, it occurs to him that Lord Peter just might be a ringer of bells. When he discovers that he is, the rector

page 159

declares that it must have been Providence that brought this very person to Fenchurch St Paul's—yes, perhaps even the snowfall and the accident may have been the work of Providence in order that the marathon ringing of bells could be accomplished.

Now Will Thoday is the man who had married the wife of Deacon. It was to his wife and Thoday that Deacon had come when he returned to the fens to claim the stolen necklace. Thoday agreed to help him, even drawing money out of his bank account to give him as an incentive to hurry him along the way. At the same time, not trusting Deacon, Thoday insisted that he be tied up and hidden in the tower just below the bells. Deacon agreed. Unfortunately for him, the one who was to release him from his prison became so ill that he could not make his way to the bell tower. Except for the arrival of Wimsey, that would have been no problem. However, with Wimsey present as Thoday's substitute ringer, but not rescuer, Deacon's fate is sealed.

How Deacon died, who killed him, and who buried his body in the churchyard are the mysteries that Lord Peter is challenged to solve. For the most part, he finds his answer when he finds himself in the same place Deacon had died on the night of the great bell ringing. Wimsey makes his way into the bell tower as the bells alert the people of the fens to the coming flood. Though he is in the chamber but for a few moments, the noise is so deafening that he almost dies. Once out of the chamber, he knows how Deacon died, and who killed him. The bells had done the executing; Deacon had died a horrible death.

Throughout the novel Sayers bestows a sort of life on these bells of hers. Possessed of mouth and tongue, they call the community to worship, warn of impending danger, celebrate weddings, announce the birth of children, and, with muffled tongues, accompany mourners to the

open graves waiting for the deceased. When threatened, either by those who do not understand them, or by the soldiers of Oliver Cromwell who had no appreciation of them (or so the legend goes), the bells have been known to kill. These bells, their ringers know, have personalities—personalities that demanded respect.

Chance circumstances and the noise of the bells killed Deacon, one could say. But, one wonders, was it more the bells themselves that did the deed, bringing death to this evil man? Or, were these bells instruments of a righteous Providence—a Providence that engineered a sequence of events to bring about an act of judgment upon an evil man? There is mystery in how the mercy and judgment of God find expression in human experience. Dorothy Sayers taps into that mystery in *The Nine Tailors*. Artful as she was, the novelist refuses to let her readers position her with regard to that mystery.

On the one hand, readers are given the impression that her bells are the instruments of the judgment of God. Evil will be dealt with—all in God’s good time and way. On the other hand, Sayers invests many of her characters with a good deal of superstition intertwined in their confessions of faith. The rector’s wife, for example, knocks on wood to ward off any self-inflicted curse. Wimsey acknowledges his superstitions by altering the direction in which he circles the

page 160

church. Inhabitants of the fens are anxious about ghosts, not sure they believe in them, but not wanting to discredit them altogether, either. Is Sayers teasing her readers into discovering a mystery where there is none, or tempting them to find the hand of God in activities in which God had no part? Ah, now, those questions are part of the mystery that this mystery writer leaves unresolved.

As for myself, I’m impressed with the ingenious way in which Sayers connected the two main motifs in the novel—church bells and water, judgment and grace. Early on in the novel, before the folks of Fenchurch St. Paul’s have any notion about what has happened to Deacon, or readers have any clues about the mystery which will have to be solved, Mrs. Venables takes her guest, Lord Peter, on a tour of St. Paul’s church. She is a marvelous, sensitive, hard-working woman, the greatest helpmeet any pastor could hope for. She also has a way of talking on and on, not always making connections between one thought and another. Sayers has her doing just that during the tour she gives to Lord Peter. Having commented on half-a-dozen matters, she turns to her guest and says: “I think bells are rather frightening, somehow. Oh the font. You must look at the font.”²

²Ibid., 51.