

Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy Sayers by Laura K. Simmons. Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Mich. 2005 Pb. 222 pp. \$ 19.99 US.

Are Women Human? By Dorothy L. Sayers. Introduction by Mary McDermott Shideler. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. Pb. 68 pp. \$ 9.00 US. Reviewed Johan D. Tangelder.

Dorothy Leigh Sayers (1893-1957)

Dorothy L. Sayers, who wrote chiefly in the first half of the twentieth century in England, was one of the most versatile and imaginative authors of her generation. Her career cut a path through the worlds of advertising, journalism, drama, broadcasting, and popular literature. She was a formidable intellect, and the sheer scope of her work is daunting for any reader. A book of poems written while she was a student at Oxford became her first publication. The research she had done in the history and literature of the Middle Ages had persuaded her that she could translate Dante's *Divine Comedy* for which she taught herself medieval Italian at the age of fifty-two. Sayers always wanted to write to a wide popular audience. But she was not prepared to court popularity at any price, and she could be uncompromising and determined when the principles behind her work were at stake.

Sayers was born in Oxford in 1893. She was an only child. Her father was an Anglican clergyman, whose household included his grandmother and a maiden aunt. Dorothy enjoyed a comfortable middle-class upbringing, though later she complained that it had been overprotective and sometimes lonely. She once remarked that "she had practically never spoken to any men of my own age till I was about twenty-five." She was educated at home until the age of fifteen, learning French and German from private tutors and Latin from her father. In March 1912, she won a scholarship to Somerville College in Oxford. Sayers proved herself a brilliant scholar, completing all the qualifications for a first-class honours degree in modern languages in 1915. But she had to wait until the rules were changed in 1920 before she could be awarded her B.A. and M.A. retroactively, which made her one of the first women officially to gain a University of Oxford degree.

Sayers's early unconventional years offer a few hints of the respectable and rather conservative figure she was later to become. After Oxford, her life was financially and personally very turbulent and uncertain for some time. Early in 1924 she gave birth to an illegitimate son, a closely guarded secret she confided only to her cousin, whom she persuaded to act as the baby's foster-mother. She never told her parents what had happened. But in 1926 her parents were surprised by her sudden announcement she was going to marry a divorced Scottish journalist named Oswald Atherton Fleming. She rode round the city of London on her motorcycle, had drinks with reporters in Fleet Street pubs, and played the saxophone at the Christmas dances of the advertisement agency where she was employed. Politically Sayers was strongly anti-socialist, yet she was highly critical of what she considered capitalism's wastefulness and "soul-destroying" mass production, a view confirmed and intensified with the onset of the

second world war. Although for a while she made a living writing advertisements, she believed that advertising is a necessary evil in an industrial society, an argument she subsequently made more explicit in a 1937 essay on "The Psychology of Advertising," satirizing its absurdities and excesses.

Sayers had a high standard for work and business ethics. Her view on work cannot be understood without first exploring her theology of vocation. This she locates in Genesis 1:27, which reveals that humanity is created in the image of the Creator. Consequently, being creative is the main characteristic common to God and humanity. Sayers defines being creative as "the desire and the ability to make things." The Christian view of work, therefore, grows from the belief that in work which is creative, human nature most nearly approaches its Creator. One of the most enduring contributions to think Christianly about creativity and art is her exhortation to do these things well. Sayers disdained poor quality art produced by Christians. She said that art done "merely by pious persons intent on edification" is nothing but a devotional exercise for uncritical congregations, and a poor witness. Sayers came down hard on the kinds of items sold in Christian bookstores. Her critique was withering about seeing low-grade kitsch being made, sold, and bought in the name of God whose image we represent.

Sayers became the dominant figure in writing detective fiction. She was a founding member of the Detective Club, a private society of mystery writers formed in 1929, to which some of the leading detective novelists of that period belonged, including her friend Agatha Christie. Her approach significantly raised the literary quality of crime fiction. She aligned it with the life of the mind, so that reading and reasoning become closely intertwined. Her stories do not dwell on the physical aspect of murder. Readers were fascinated with the method of resolving a crime, coupled with the pleasure of seeing crime put down. Her Lord Peter Wimsey books, which featured an aristocratic amateur detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, became enormously popular. Sayers's 1934 novel, *The Nine Tailors*, has become the favourite of many readers. Her detailed account in this book of the British art of bell ringing is typical of the careful research found in all her novels. It is still a marvellous book to read. When World War II arrived, she felt it inappropriate to continue writing detective fiction. Sayers stopped writing mysteries in part because of this human tendency to see all problems easily solved; in wartime, this was too simplistic a worldview to encourage.

The feminist movement claims Sayers as one of their own. But she was not a feminist. The liberation of women was not a cause she espoused. One of her concerns with feminism is the temptation to replace male domination with female domination. She argued that women be accepted as human beings, "not as an inferior class and not, I beg and pray all feminists, as a superior class." She believed aggressive feminism might do more harm than good. In 1948, when C.S. Lewis wrote to Sayers to express his concerns and solicit her opinion regarding the movement to ordain women in the Anglican Church, her response was telling: "Obviously, nothing could be more silly and inexpedient than to erect a new and totally unnecessary barrier between us and the rest of Catholic Christendom. I fear you would find me a rather uneasy ally [in opposing it]....In so far as the Priest represents Christ, it is obviously more dramatically

appropriate that a man should be, so to speak, cast for the part."

Sayers's insistence on women's equality with men in the eyes of God came through with remarkable consistency in her writings. But she didn't mince words in expressing her opinion about the differences between male and female. Are all human beings created to do the same work? She says that the obvious answer is, "No, of course not, never in the history of man, and least of all now. It is - or should be - equally obvious that biological characteristics determine in part the kinds of work that any given human being is capable of." In *Are Women Human?* she observes, "Few people would go as far as to say that all women are well fitted for all men's jobs. When people do say this, it is particularly exasperating. It is stupid to insist that there are as many female musicians and mathematicians as male." Sayers insisted on the uniqueness of the individual, regardless of gender. She states, "What is repugnant to every human being is to be reckoned always as a member of a class and not as an individual person." It is ridiculous to take on a man's job in order to be able to say that "a woman has done it - yah!" The only decent reason for tackling any job is that it is *your* job, and *you* want to do it."

Sayers ridiculed the importance of "having a woman's point of view." When she was asked about writing crime fiction "from the woman's point of view," she said "Go away and don't be silly." "You might as well ask what is the female angle on the equilateral triangle." She noted that a woman's opinion on literature or finance is valuable only as the judgment of an individual. She declared, "What 'in thunder is the 'woman's point of view' about the devaluation of the franc or the abolition of the Danzig Corridor?" She urged men and women to look to Jesus as their role model. She wrote about Jesus and women. "Perhaps it is no wonder the women were first at the Cradle and the last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man - there has never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them...who took their questions and argument seriously."

Sayers died in 1957, but her books are still worth reading today. She had a unique combination of talents. In the concluding article I will focus on Sayers' powerful theological insights. She coupled them with her tremendous writing skill. She had the gift of making theology readable for the "ordinary" Christian. In an increasingly complex and fragmented world, we need her gifts and insights more than ever.

Dorothy L. Sayers: a "Lay Theologian."

Dorothy L. Sayers's second notable literary career was as a Christian "lay" theologian and apologist. She defended the Christian faith in an age in which "the one and only unpardonable heresy was orthodoxy." She never separated her writing from her faith, even when she was not writing directly about Christianity. The context in which Sayers was attempting to defend Christianity was a climate in which faith was not socially or intellectually acceptable. Moral and religious issues preoccupied Sayers increasingly during the Second World War. The topics on which she reflected were wide-ranging.

She did not write only about theology; she also focused on issues of work, economics, leisure, and creative hobbies. She advocated using "weekday language" to explain the things of God to people in the language of every day, of "cats and cabbages," as she put it. One of her most consistent frustrations was people who rejected or critiqued Christianity without ever understanding it. But she believed that not only those outside the church misunderstand the Christian faith, but also those inside the church. According to her, most church members at best, had only an inadequate grasp of its basic doctrines. It is clear from her many cautions that she did not set out to revise doctrine. Her belief in the historic doctrines of the Christian faith and commitment to the Athanasian Creed in particular (and the creeds in general) were to inform her writings throughout her career. Her aim was to clarify orthodoxy, to identify misunderstandings people might have about basic Christian convictions. She cared passionately about helping people understand Christianity better.

Sayers was a committed Anglo-Catholic to the end. The latter is the high-church wing of Anglicanism, resembling Roman Catholicism in many ways except for (in some cases) veneration of Mary and obedience to papal authority. But when Sayers uses the word *Catholic* in her writings, she usually means what we today might call catholic in the ecumenical sense rather than Roman Catholic. Her willingness to use her writing gifts for the benefit of the church, in spite of her misgivings about her theological training, is remarkable. Sayers told a correspondent that she had theologically trained colleagues check the theology of her work to make sure that what she was writing was orthodox. She used her skills in ways that glorified God and pointed her audiences and readers heavenward. She wrote that studying Christian doctrine is not dull. The opposite is true. She wrote that the neglect of dogma makes for dullness. In her essay "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged" she stated "the Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man - and the dogma is the drama." And so it is. Sayers made theology interesting - clear, forceful and exciting. In recognition of her unique gifts to make a solid case for Christianity in a time when so many people had turned away from it, the Church of England offered her an honorary Doctorate of Divinity, but she declined it as she preferred to be known above all as a literary scholar. Sayers was Biblically realistic about human nature. She recognized that "those who take Hell and the devil seriously are always those who have felt the abyss of the consent to evil opening up within themselves." In all of her works, whether essays, plays, some poetry, or mystery novels, the problem of evil plays a central role. She argued that pride, which cast Lucifer, the archangel, out of Heaven and Adam out of Eden of primal innocence, is the head and front of all sin. She noted that the worst evil in the world is brought about, not by the open and self-confessed vices, but by the deadly corruption of the proud virtues. Her concern for the sin of pride drove her play, *The Zeal of Thy House*, the story of a craftsman who believed himself to be better than God.

One of the doctrines on which Sayers reflected perhaps more than any other was the incarnation of the Son of God. Sayers forces many of us to consider afresh its awesome implications. "The dogma of the incarnation is the dramatic thing about Christianity," wrote Sayers, "and indeed, the most dramatic thing that ever entered into the mind of man; but if you tell people so, they stare at you in bewilderment." A proper

understanding of Christ's essence, character, and mission on earth was "the difference between pseudo-Christianity and Christianity," she wrote in June 1945. The relationship between the God who created the world and God's Son, Jesus, who walked in it, was a crucial part of her theology.

Sayers insisted that Christians should understand that Christ is both fully divine and fully human. This truth is the very heart of our Christian faith. Jesus' full divinity and full humanity assures Christians that God the Son understands their lot. She wrote, "Against these heresies, and the innumerable variations of them, stands up the Catholic Church, affirming in the teeth of the world that that which died upon the cross was true God and true Man - that every agony that man can undergo - grief, pain, fear, shame, defeat and death, passed through the consciousness of God and are for ever part of God's experience." Christ's full divinity and full humanity are important to the atonement. Sayers believed in Jesus' vicarious sacrifice, the ransom paid for our sin. Humanity's sins constitute a debt that only God can repay by becoming a man. She wrote "If He is not personally God, the whole story of the crucifixion and atonement is only a cruel injustice, disgraceful to God and man, and not more saving power than the death of any other victim." She stressed the reality and the importance of Jesus' bodily resurrection. The resurrection was important for the first apostles, not because it held out a promise of "personal survival; it was important *because it established the identity of the Slain.*" Sayers recognized that her insistence on orthodoxy in portraying Christ made even Christian believers uncomfortable. But Sayers was happy to shock people because she believed the gospel should be *shocking*.

Sayers's contributions to the defence of Christianity were many. The year 1941 saw her groundbreaking book *The Mind of the Maker*. It reveals that she was a skillful apologist for orthodox Christianity. It is the source of most of Sayers's reflection on the Trinity, and a work of permanent interest. It is the thesis that the ordinary experience of making anything - creating art or applying workmanship to any object - corresponds to the meanings symbolized by the Trinity.

Her most famous work *The Man Born to be King*, a series of radio plays based on the life of Christ, was first performed on the BBC in 1941-1942. It became a best-seller when it was released as a book in 1943. Sayers took the information about the life of Christ from the four gospels and synthesized it in such a way as to make the story coherent. Each of the twelve radio segments stood on its own as an individual play and contributed to the larger story being told over the entire course of the work. To write the play as Sayers wrote, she had "worn out one Greek Testament and amassed a considerable theological library." In this play the historical events are expressed with a twentieth century realism. Its contemporary language and controversial slang is perhaps the most obvious example of her goal to reach contemporary audiences in the language they can understand. Sayers argued that we have fallen out of the habit of looking on Jesus and His disciples "as *really* real people." By stipulating that her play would portray "people painfully like us" she wanted to bring home to her radio listeners the shocking truth about Christ's death, to make them recognize that "the Elders of the Synagogue...are to be found on every Parish Council - always highly respectable, often

quarrelsome, and sometimes in a crucifying mode."

Sayers highlighted certain elements of Judas' behaviour and zeal early so that his betrayal of Jesus was more understandable when it happened. Her description of the betrayer is colourful and effective. She wrote, "One thing is certain: he cannot have been the creeping, crawling, patently worthless villain that some simple-minded people would like to make out; that would be to cast too grave a slur on the brains of the character of Jesus. To choose an obvious crook as one's follower, in ignorance of what he was like, would be the act of a fool; and Jesus of Nazareth was no fool, and indeed St. John expressly says that "he knew what was in" Judas from the beginning." Not everyone was impressed with her work. Upon hearing small snippets of one of her radio plays, the Lord's Day Observance Society and the Protestant Truth Society immediately protested them, asking the BBC not to air the controversial material. For Sayers, though, it was imperative that people were jolted out of their religious complacency. C. S. Lewis commented that *The Man Born to be King* "has edified us in this country more than anything for a long time." He later said of this play, which was published in book form, that he had "re-read it every Holy Week since it first appeared, and never re-read it without being deeply moved."

Another notable collection of essays is Sayers's *Creeds or Chaos?* (1947). It is especially valuable in teaching both church history and doctrine because it makes these subjects accessible to the common person. It reminds the readers that forms of Arianism and other early church heresies recur throughout history.

Dorothy Sayers died suddenly on December 17, 1957. C. S. Lewis was asked to give the eulogy at the memorial service at St. Margaret, Westminster. Characteristically, Lewis wrote a loving but honest portrait of a remarkable woman. In describing Sayers as a writer whose work included enormous variety, he noted that in everything she wrote, she was always the craftsman who took pride in her trade. Why read Sayers's works in the twenty-first century? One of the joys of reading Sayers is her mastery of the English language. She wrote with precision, grace, and humour. She didn't waste words. And in an age in which some branches of the church are increasingly anti-intellectual, her challenge to engage in disciplined thinking about the great doctrines of the faith is essential. In a world ever more confused about what Christianity has to offer, Sayers's clarifications of doctrine are still useful. We should also note that ideas have consequences. If doctrine is neglected, the foundation for ethical behaviour will disappear. As Sayers noted, "We on our side have been trying for several centuries to uphold a particular standard of ethical values which derives from Christian dogma, while gradually dispensing with the very dogma which is the sole rational foundation for those values."