

# Dorothy L. Sayers as a Cautious Transformationalist

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## KEY WORDS

| Dorothy L. Sayers | Political Theology | Christ and Culture |  
| H. Richard Niebuhr | Vocation | Transformationalist |

## ABSTRACT

Dorothy L. Sayers is most famous for her detective fiction, particularly the mystery novels involving Lord Peter Wimsey. Her greatest gift to history, however, is the application of a faithful concept of vocation to her art. Based on a speech delivered to the Archbishop of York's conference in Malvern, 1941, it appears Sayers had something like a transformationalist view according to Niebuhr's model. She saw withdrawing from the culture and becoming one with the culture as a pair of matched dangers. The first effectively privatizes Christianity and the second denatures it. Accordingly, Sayers believed the Church must do the impossible: without becoming identified with cultural institutions, it must redeem those institutions. The church must influence morality, but not get tied to the moralistic aspects of cultural institutions. This essay presents the case that Sayers was a cautious transformationalist. She believed that Christianity could permeate and redeem every form of art and every institution to improve it and make it more consistent with God's creational design. In a period of growing cultural marginalization, Sayers' example presents a way for Christians to point people toward a robust understanding of human flourishing.

## INTRODUCTION

Depending on the circle in which she is being discussed, Dorothy L. Sayers may be known as a mystery writer, an advocate for classical education, a playwright, a lay theologian, or a translator of Dante. She is all these things and more. She is, intellectually speaking, fitting company for G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and T. S. Eliot. No less significant than these famous men of the early twentieth century, Sayers deserves a place at the table in the contemporary Christian discussion of cultural engagement.<sup>1</sup>

The multi-faceted Sayers is, to use Andy Crouch's term, a culture maker.<sup>2</sup> Her stories,

plays, essays, and translations are excellent by any standard. Through all these media, she strives to be true to the form of the art, because she believes that the act of skillful creation is a good in itself. Sayers advocates for this approach to work in her famous essay, "Why Work?"<sup>3</sup> and no less clearly in her detective novel, *Gaudy Night*.<sup>4</sup> She sees faithfulness to God as being exemplified by faithfulness to her craft. In this respect, there is resonance between her understanding of cultural engagement and Crouch's. However, Sayers encourages a deeper engagement in political and economic activities than Crouch, which leads to something like a

1 For example, Bruce Riley Ashford, *Every Square Inch: An Introduction to Cultural Engagement for Christians* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 55–58.

2 Crouch himself uses Sayers' volume, *The Mind of the Maker*, in support of his vision. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 274.

3 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Why Work?," in *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2004), 125–46.

4 See for example, the clear discussion of the importance of the quality of one's work and consistency with the artistic form. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (New York, N.Y.: HarperPaperbacks, 1995), 370–72.

transformationalist approach to the relationship between Christianity and culture.

This essay argues that Sayers is a cautious transformationalist. That is, she demonstrates many of the characteristics of H. Richard Niebuhr's typology, *Christ Transforming Culture*, but with due caution to prevent tipping from transformation to theonomy. She actively resists conflation of the church with the institutions of the world while seeking to influence culture through Christian truth. Whether in her fiction, her plays, or her essays, Sayers provides a helpful example of how to remain oriented to doctrinal orthodoxy and influence culture from a Christian worldview through excellence in a craft.

### CAUTIOUS TRANSFORMATIONALIST

Though some object to the use of H. Richard Niebuhr's categories, they remain helpful as typological categories.<sup>5</sup> Adapting the categories of *Christ and Culture*, Dorothy L. Sayers is a cautious transformationalist: she seeks to redeem the good things in culture and use them for the glory of God.<sup>6</sup> However, she is cautious about the approach the church should take to influence culture for fear Christianity will become unduly associated with the institutions of culture. Therefore, Sayers follows the path of the transformationalist but with concern for the potential to conflate the state and the church and bring about a synthesis that would misrepresent the truth of Christianity.

Living in a nation that still recognizes the

5 For example, Carson discards Niebuhr's categories as useless, though he offers scant replacement. D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–65.

6 Niebuhr outlines the transformationalist perspective in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Expanded ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 190–229.

Church of England as the official religion of state, it could have been easy for Sayers to see a purification and elevation of that ecclesial body as the solution to the decline of Christian sentiment. Sayers does not support that option. Instead, she argues the church should be a transformative force in the world, but one that is disinterested in politics. In other words, the church should seek to fulfill the gospel without risking entanglement in governance because the quest for power can undermine the mission of the church.<sup>7</sup>

Based on these observations, it seems warranted to qualify Niebuhr's categories somewhat and carve out a new variety of cultural engagement for those that see the power of the gospel to transform all things and yet feel the need to object to the burning of Servetus more strenuously than did Calvin. Sayers' preference for distance between the coercive power of the government and the transformational work of the church may have been influenced as much by the conflation of the state and church in Nazi Germany as by her understanding of the government of Geneva; there is little evidence to work from.<sup>8</sup> However, her appreciation for the applicability of Christianity to all of life is firmly driven by the unity she sees in the world, which is inspired by her classical education.

### CLASSICAL LOGIC

In homeschool circles, Sayers is known for her essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning," which has contributed to the resurgence of classical

7 Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Church's Responsibility," in *Malvern, 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society: Being the Proceedings of the Archbishop of York's Conference* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1941), 71–72.

8 Cf. *Ibid.*, 60.

education.<sup>9</sup> Her appeal reflects a call to educate children as she was educated: with great books, an emphasis on the grasp of languages, and significant effort toward clear thinking. Her father, an Anglican clergyman, taught her Latin at a young age. She learned several romantic languages from her governesses.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Sayers read promiscuously of books that matter and that shaped her thought.

The wide net of Sayers’ reading leads her to make some connections in different ways than many children that grow up in church. For example, Sayers tells of her initial encounter with Cyrus the Persian. She met the ancient monarch in the pages of a children’s magazine and categorized him with the Greeks and Romans. “So for a long time he remained,” writes Sayers. “And then, one day, I realized, with a shock as of sacrilege, that on that famous expedition he had marched clean out of our Herodotus and slap into the Bible.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the story of Esther and Ahasuerus crossed from biblical data to classical history in Sayers’ mind.<sup>12</sup>

As Sayers describes it, “I think it was chiefly Cyrus and Ahasuerus who prodded me into the belated conviction that history was all of a piece and that the Bible was part of it.”<sup>13</sup> The connection is like a light bulb turning on. The Bible is no mere fairy tale to Sayers; it is true. Christianity is a real, historical religion for her. This makes all the difference as she seeks to find her place in the world as a Christian. Everything inside and outside the Bible has the same standard of logic applied to it. No special pleading is allowed on

the basis of faith or obstinate skepticism.<sup>14</sup> The key for Sayers is to think and think clearly; her concern for education is to see that children are taught that skill.

Sayers’ essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” stands on par with Lewis’ essay, “Men Without Chests,” in its prophetic value as they both question modern subjectivist pedagogy.<sup>15</sup> In a series of interrogatives in her introduction to the essay, Sayers asks, “Has it ever struck you as odd, or unfortunate, that today when the proportion of literacy throughout Western Europe is higher than it has ever been, people should have become susceptible to the influence of advertisement and mass propaganda to an extent hitherto unheard-of and unimagined?”<sup>16</sup> This is, of course, Sayers’ own opinion. It is confirmed through her experience working for an advertising agency as a copywriter.<sup>17</sup> Thus Sayers’ call to return to a classical education is humanitarian as well as practical.

The humanitarian element of her syllabus for classical learning is drawn from the view that people are generally better off when they can think clearly. Clear thinking saves people from getting ripped off by conmen. The danger, according to Sayers, is in having “a population that is literate, in the sense that everybody is able to read and write; but, owing to the emphasis placed on scientific training at the expense of the humanities, very few of our people have been taught to understand and

9 Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” *National Review*, January 19, 1979, 90–99.

10 Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 14–26.

11 Sayers, “A Vote of Thanks to Cyrus,” in *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*, 193–94.

12 *Ibid.*, 194–95.

13 *Ibid.*, 195.

14 The rejection of special pleading to differentiate biblical and extra-biblical history is largely the point of her essay *Thanks to Cyrus. Ibid.*, 193–202.

15 C. S. Lewis, “Men without Chests,” in *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 1–26.

16 Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” 90.

17 Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 111. Her experience working in an ad agency formed the backdrop of one of her early Lord Peter novels, *Murder Must Advertise*. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body? / Clouds of Witness / Murder Must Advertise / Gaudy Night* (New York: Avenel Books, 1982), 261–458.

handle language as an instrument of power.”<sup>18</sup> She then describes the world in picturesque terms as having children bumbling about in a scientific laboratory pulling levers and pushing buttons. Yet in the same essay she recommends the delight in knowledge and the understanding of how to use words to explore the unity in the world.<sup>19</sup> The study of language as a part of a child’s education is critical to helping them piece together comprehension of the universe as it is.

For Sayers, the fragments of knowledge and culture are interesting in themselves, but the reassembled whole is enthralling. The creation is good and deserves looking into and looking after, which can be done through the study of history, science, and language. Along with these subjects theology is an essential element in her ideal education, “because theology is the mistress-science, without which the whole educational structure will necessarily lack its final synthesis.”<sup>20</sup> She encourages parents to orient children to the “story of God and Man in Outline—i.e., the Old and New Testaments presented as parts of a single narrative of Creation, Rebellion, and Redemption.”<sup>21</sup> The content of Scripture provides the ethics necessary for later evaluation of history, limitation of science, and the deep discussion of dogma, which is a good and exciting thing in itself.<sup>22</sup>

The unity of the world in Sayers’ mind is exactly what places her in the category of a

transformationalist. There are no compartments in Sayers’ world. The gospel makes sense of the whole universe and its light should be shone on every area of life. For Sayers, the doctrines of the church are enlivening and exciting. The truthfulness of Christianity illuminates all things and coordinates all things. Therefore, she sees that all things could and should be done in a way that brings glory to God. This includes the brilliant logic and grammatical prose of her detective fiction.

### EXCELLENCE IN FICTION

As one of the first female graduates from Oxford with a Master of Arts, it may seem somewhat surprising to find the first fruits of this great mind in the fiction stacks. However, her stories of Lord Peter Wimsey provide an entry point into later efforts and pay the bills for a time as she, a single mother, finances the upbringing of her son. There is some evidence to suggest that she feels some consternation at writing popular detective novels to earn money when she is capable of more academically oriented writing. This can be seen in her semi-autobiographical character, Harriet Vane.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the dangers of reading an author’s life into her work, there is little question there is a clear link between Vane and Sayers.<sup>24</sup> Harriet is a writer of detective novels. She is an MA from Oxford in one of the earliest women’s classes. In *Strong Poison*, Harriet has an illicit lover who claimed to be opposed to marriage and with whom she fell out, much like Sayers.<sup>25</sup> Harriet

18 Sayers, “Creative Mind,” in *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*, 46.

19 *Ibid.*, 45–48.

20 Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” 95.

21 *Ibid.* That Sayers is a mystery writer who appreciates biblical theology only deepens the love of many Christians for her writing.

22 *Ibid.*, 98.

23 See, for example, the discussion between Harriet and the dons about her work. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 31.

24 Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), 63.

25 There is no doubt that Harriet’s relationship with Phillip Boyes is autobiographical. Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 113–14.

and Sayers value work done well for its own sake. This is significant inasmuch as Harriet Vane is confronted by her Senior Common Room for writing detective fiction. On the one hand, the oddity is that she writes murder mysteries after having been on trial for murder. However, there is an intellectual snobbery among the dons, which causes them to sneer gently at Harriet’s novels, however excellently written.<sup>26</sup> There is tension throughout *Gaudy Night* about Harriet’s calling as novelist. But this tension helps make it the best of her novels, because in it, the characters are most real.

If there is a legitimate criticism of Sayers’ fiction, it is that the early Wimsey stories are less literary than her other works.<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that the stories are bad. Sayers presents excellent detective stories that challenge the reader with careful reveals and delightful red herrings. The syntax is superb, but the characters are not fully human. The interactions between Wimsey and his valet, Bunter, are sometimes humorous and always helpful to the story.<sup>28</sup> But Wimsey is something of a plastic character. He is an exceedingly intelligent aristocrat with near limitless financial resources. He and Bunter are conveniently experts at nearly everything they encounter. The stories are fun, but they lack some of the virtues of high literature because her main character does not appear to be real—Wimsey is too much of a superhuman.<sup>29</sup>

26 Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 39–42.

27 For example: Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Bibulous Business of a Matter of Taste,” in *Lord Peter* (New York: Avon, 1972), 154–72.

28 As when Wimsey notes that he is surprised and disappointed that Bunter knows nothing of campanology. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962), 15.

29 Hannay provides evidence of the exaggerated heroics of Wimsey from an unpublished address. Margaret P. Hannay, “Harriet’s Influence on the Characterization of Lord Peter Wimsey,” in *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), 37.

That begins to change when Harriet Vane is introduced as the defendant in *Strong Poison*. Her former lover is poisoned by arsenic shortly after a vigorous quarrel. Harriet is, rather serendipitously, writing a novel about arsenical poisoning. In doing research for the book, she uses false names to purchase arsenic at various chemists in London. The case against her seems insurmountable even after Lord Peter steps in to investigate. It is a very good detective story, but *Strong Poison* becomes a good novel because it is the first account in which the main characters are authentically human.<sup>30</sup> Peter falls for Harriet and proposes to her in a prison interview room. The love story is set in motion, but the concern for jealousy over past lovers, fear for Harriet’s life, and the social pressure of a nobleman marrying a notorious woman accused of murder stifle the relationship. Lord Peter loses none of his witty demeanor and razor sharp logic, but he gains humanity by being emotionally real for the first time.<sup>31</sup> The novels that chronicle the Vane-Wimsey romance are the most excellent because they are the most authentic and Peter is seen to mature as a person.

Lord Peter’s maturation presents a problem, however. In creating her Sherlock, Sayers imbues him with characteristics that seems to reflect her own state of rebellion against Christian morals and the church. Lord Peter knows Christian doctrine but is unrepentant of a history of immorality, including affairs with a Viennese opera singer<sup>32</sup> and a woman

See especially note 4.

30 Margaret Hannay discusses the impact of Harriet Vane on Wimsey in detail, noting that the love story was concocted, in part, by Sayers to marry Lord Peter off and be done with him. *Ibid.*, 40.

31 It may be the experience of writing *Strong Poison* that Harriet and Peter debate in Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 331–33. Cf. Hannay, “Harriet’s Influence on the Characterization of Lord Peter Wimsey,” in *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*, 40–41.

32 Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 183.

named Barbara with whom he is so enamored that he took a course in logic.<sup>33</sup> More than his sexual exploits, which are set to paper while Sayers is engaged in an affair,<sup>34</sup> the reader sees a dismissive attitude toward Christianity in Lord Peter's rejection of the Gospels. On one occasion Wimsey comments, "As the old pagan said of the Gospels, after all, it was a long time ago, and we'll hope it wasn't true."<sup>35</sup> As a result, Sayers cannot bring Wimsey into the kingdom without destroying the authenticity of his character. At the same time, she is herself returning to the faith of her youth, which seems to influence her work. Her friend and biographer, Barbara Reynolds, notes that Sayers returns to confession and communion after the birth of her illegitimate son.<sup>36</sup> There is about a six-year gap between the birth of John Anthony and the submission of *Strong Poison*, where Wimsey seems to begin his turn, so plenty of room for debate remains.

Whatever questions remain about Sayers' psychology and conversion at the time, even her early detective novels recognize the objective order of the world.<sup>37</sup> Lord Peter displays a passion for finding the truth, so that even when his brother's life is on the line, exposing the reality of the situation is more important than any value gained from ambiguity in evidence. In a somewhat heated exchange, Lord Peter defends himself against his brother's solicitor:

"Damn it all, we want to get at the truth!"

33 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (New York, N.Y.: HarperPaperbacks, 1995), 128. It is possible that the relationship with Barbara was platonic.

34 See Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 107.

35 In *Clouds of Witness*, Chapter 2: Sayers, *Whose Body? / Clouds of Witness / Murder Must Advertise / Gaudy Night*, 133.

36 Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 141.

37 E.g., Dorothy Sayers, L., *Whose Body?* (New York: HarperPaperBack, 1995), 123.

"Do you?" said Sir Impey drily, "I don't. I don't care twopence about the truth. I want a case. It doesn't matter to me who killed Cathcart, provided I can prove it wasn't Denver. It's really enough if I can throw reasonable doubt on its being Denver. . . ."

"I've always said," growled Peter, "that the professional advocate was the most immoral fellow on the face of the earth, and now I know for certain."<sup>38</sup>

A more rigorous concern for truth than is displayed by Sir Impey Biggs can be seen in the sympathetically portrayed Chief Inspector Parker. For example, the policeman is glad to see his case against Harriet Vane overturned in *Strong Poison* and cooperates with Lord Peter to do so, even though it will make him look silly for having been mistaken.<sup>39</sup> Truth and integrity are significant concepts within Sayers' worldview. This leads her to a transformationalist stance because when one recognizes that there is truth, it is merely the next logical step to believe that all things should conform to that truth.

Apart from the worldview that undergirds Sayers' detective fiction, her writing ability enables her to be effective as a cautious transformationalist because she hones the skills necessary to communicate clearly and imaginatively to a wide audience. Laura Simmons notes, "Writing detective fiction requires the ability to visualize a complete story and break it down into its constituent parts, composing it so that all relevant clues—and usually some irrelevant ones—are included and can point readers toward the solution."<sup>40</sup> She goes on, "More than simply telling a story, though, a

38 Sayers, *Whose Body? / Whose Body? / Clouds of Witness / Murder Must Advertise / Gaudy Night*, 200.

39 Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 57.

40 Laura K. Simmons, *Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 49.

detective novelist is crafting an argument of sorts. Sayers is not presenting a random jumble of information; each clue has to help readers understand the conclusion. In her theological writing, Sayers is similarly persuasive.<sup>41</sup> Sayers’ detective stories are excellent because of the same outlook that makes her a faithful Christian: a thirst for the truthfulness in everything in life. Her fiction reflects a Christian ethos because it is true to the art form and reality, not because the main characters express exemplary faith.

In fact, her most famous character, Lord Peter, never does convert. However, his attitude toward Christianity seems to soften through the series. Peter’s relationship to the church may reflect a parallel to Sayers’ own attitude.<sup>42</sup> Based on her biographies, there is an ebb in Sayers’ spiritual tide during the early Wimsey days, which causes the flow at later points toward a more pronounced Christianity to be noticeable. Sayers’ renewed interest in theology seems to push her away from the frivolity of Lord Peter’s detective stories and toward more explicitly theological works. As one scholar notes, “Even Lord Peter . . . in his later days showed increasing sensitivity to moral and religious issues, but it was not in keeping with his eighteenth-century gentility to become a Christian convert. . . . Dorothy L. Sayers needed a new means to present the case for Christianity. She found it in the drama.”<sup>43</sup> So it is that Sayers shifts from being primarily a novelist to a dramatist with an invitation to write for the Canterbury Festival in 1937.

41 *Ibid.*, 50.

42 Catherine Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 181–90.

43 Nancy Marie Patterson Tischler, *Dorothy L. Sayers, a Pilgrim Soul* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 102.

## DOCTRINAL DRAMA

Distinct from the youth skit that mars the contemporary worship service with poorly delivered lines, too frequent informal heresies, and blatant moralism, Sayers’ theatrical contributions are quality in doctrine and form. In response to an invitation, Sayers writes a play celebrating vocation and service through the arts for the Canterbury Festival. In this drama, Sayers works to transform the culture by presenting a robust doctrine of vocation from a Christological perspective.

Her first play, *The Zeal of Thy House*, is an outworking of the doctrine of vocation that she begins to display in *Gaudy Night*. The play, according to Brabazon, interests Sayers more “as a job than as a work of devotion.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, she sees it primarily as an artistic opportunity rather than as an act of religious service to the Church of England. The play represents the story of William of Sens, a French architect who is commissioned to rebuild a cathedral destroyed by fire. His work is done well, but he is prideful about it and impious. The moral of the story, as it were, is that the quality of the work defines the quality of the worker.<sup>45</sup> It is a sin for a Christian to do a thing badly and for that bad thing to be accepted as good merely because of the doctrinal leanings of the worker.

Two things are revealed as Sayers shifts from writing novels to writing plays. First, she demonstrates the depth of her appreciation of the necessity of integrity in work. This is put on display because of the basic theme of the play she writes. It matches what she has already revealed.<sup>46</sup> Second, Sayers’ actual attitude

44 Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 160.

45 *Ibid.*, 162.

46 Indeed, Sayers was surprised when critics failed to see the connection in the theme of her play to that in *Gaudy Night*. *Ibid.*, 161.

toward Christianity is finally made plain. As indicated in the discussion above, the main character of her novels is somewhat skeptical of Christianity. However, the distance between the characters and the storyteller leaves it open to doubt what Sayers' own attitude is when writing those stories. In contrast, her plays written for a religious audience to be performed in a religious venue leave little doubt as to Sayers' own Christian faith. This leads to her being drawn into open religious conversations in her day.

Sayers does what she can to distance herself from her own theology by writing about confessional doctrine and not personal experience. According to Brabazon,

Unfortunately the way in which she re-stated the Christian doctrines was so vigorous, so pugnacious, so stimulating – in short so personal and so unlike the normal clerical version – that there was no chance of her being able to get away with insisting that she was merely repeating what the Church was always saying. Orthodox theology it might be, but it bore little relationship to what the man or woman in the pew heard, week after week, from the man in the pulpit.<sup>47</sup>

At this stage in her career, however, Sayers is reluctant to openly theologize on a regular basis. As she explains in a letter of refusal to an offer of a commission to write a book on Christianity, “I feel that lay persons such as myself can interfere in these matters much more successfully if they do not do it too often. To rise up once and lay about one is startling and effective. But when one makes a practice of it, the thing becomes official, and the public only say ‘Oh poor old Dorothy Sayers has gone religious,’ and pay no further attention.”<sup>48</sup> Likely Sayers has a point,

47 *Ibid.*, 166.

48 Letter to Messrs Longmans dated May 13 1938, cited in

which more artists who are Christian could consider for today, though her point is much more difficult to heed given the prevalence of media—social and otherwise.

In any case, Sayers continues to work as a playwright. She writes a play depicting the honeymoon of Lord Peter and Harriet, *Busman's Honeymoon*, which is also presented as a novel.<sup>49</sup> She returns to making religious plays, producing a radio nativity play for the BBC, *He That Should Come*. Eventually, she writes a cycle of twelve plays on the life of Christ as radio dramas for the BBC. In the plays, which are published as *The Man Born to Be King*, she seeks to bring the greatest story ever told to life with a fitting dramatic flourish.<sup>50</sup>

With these plays, Sayers crosses from merely being an artist creating works that are popular and excellent to becoming a public theologian. She writes and speaks openly about her Christianity, bringing her sharp intellect and talent to bear on the deep religious questions of the day. This she does with excellence and integrity, viewing the work of the theologian as inherently good and necessary for the transformation of the culture.

## TRANSFORMATIVE THEOLOGY

Sayers' initial foray into public theology is the result of many questions raised when *The Zeal of Thy House* is produced. She writes the essay, “The Dogma is the Drama,” to explain that the content of *Zeal* is not novel invention, but imaginative presentation. She argues, “The action of the play involves a dramatic presentation of a few

*ibid.*, 168–69.

49 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

50 Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943).

fundamental Christian dogmas—in particular, the application to human affairs of the doctrine of the Incarnation.”<sup>51</sup> Her basic position is that the doctrines of the church are some of the most interesting truths, and that they are typically misrepresented.

To make her point, she offers a tongue-in-cheek modern theological catechism:

Q.: WHAT IS MEANT BY THE ATONEMENT?

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

...

Q.: WHAT IS FAITH?

A.: Resolutely shutting your eyes to scientific fact.

Q.: WHAT IS THE HUMAN INTELLECT?

A.: A barrier to faith.

...

Q.: WILT THOU BE BAPTIZED IN THIS FAITH?

A.: No fear!<sup>52</sup>

Sayers thus imaginatively presents various fallacious doctrinal positions that people in her day attributed to Christianity. Her approach is somewhat confrontational, since there are responses in her catechism that many readers would likely find to resonate with their own theological understanding. And that is exactly the point. Sayers uses somewhat shocking language to confront her audience with their error; making readers uncomfortable

is a necessary part of the task of apologist. According to Brabazon, “The work of Christ and His Church was, after all, to bring good out of evil. Christians were right and pagans were wrong; and what harm was there in a little short-lived suffering, a little destruction, if it gave her the chance to prove it?”<sup>53</sup> Sayers’ theological work is one of bringing the transformative power of truth, accurately and imaginatively expressed, to bear on all of life. The willingness to be confrontational and go where logic leads sometimes puts Sayers on the front lines of the doctrinal disputes of her day.

Sayers herself is no stranger to doctrinal debate. Her concern for logical precision extended to her understanding of gender roles. During an early attempt to ordain women in the Church of England, C. S. Lewis asks her to write in opposition to it. Her response is to say that she believes the priest should be male on the basis of tradition and a preference for the theatrical propriety of a male standing in the place of Christ in administering the Eucharist.<sup>54</sup> She also argues it is better to hold to traditional gender roles in the church to avoid further alienating the Church of England from the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. However, as she writes to Lewis, she does not see any strong logical or theological reason to resist the ordination of women.<sup>55</sup> Her perspective on this issue leads to some identifying her as a sort of proto-feminist.<sup>56</sup>

However, in the early days of feminism, Sayers rejects that label. Despite that open rejection, some feminists still try to reclaim

51 Sayers, “The Dogma is the Drama,” in *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*, 16.

52 *Ibid.*, 18–19.

53 Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 179.

54 Simmons, *Creed without Chaos*, 15–17.

55 Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 358–59.

56 Mary McDermott Shideler, “Introduction,” in *Are Women Human? Astute and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 3–8.

her, since she rides a motorcycle, has a career, and denies there is an ontological difference between men and women. According to Sayers, women should have access to the same sorts of jobs as men, as long as they are qualified.<sup>57</sup> Still, she vigorously resists the feminists because she sees their attempt to place the female over the male as an overcorrection.<sup>58</sup> Sayers views women as ontologically equal to men and sees only physical strength and individual gifting as differentiating qualifications for differing vocations. It is her razor-sharp mind, honed by an education in classics, that allows her to argue so tightly. While recognizing the authority of Scripture, Sayers is willing to go wherever the logic takes her because she views God and his creation as ultimately logical.

Sayers' ability to speak theologically to the masses is a strength that gives her work enduring value. According to Simmons, "One of Sayers's great contributions as a lay theologian was that she knew both jargons thoroughly. Few other professional writers had the same degree of theological acumen, the ability to interpret, clarify, and embody theology for people."<sup>59</sup> Just as Sayers later translates Dante in the vernacular, so she translates the formal theology of her day into ideas that have legs. She does for theology what many of the clergy were incapable of doing. In a personal letter, Sayers comments on the inability of theologians to write well, saying, "Some of them are so clumsy and obscure that one can hardly shake the good ideas out of the mist of enveloping verbiage."<sup>60</sup> Getting dogma

into the public sphere is essential to Sayers. In an essay, the point of which is that society may either have a Christian creed or social chaos, Sayers argues for a greater role of doctrine in the church: "It is not true at all that dogma is hopelessly irrelevant to the life and thought of the average man. What is true is that ministers of the Christian religion often assert that it is, present it for consideration as though it were, and, in fact, by their faulty exposition make it so."<sup>61</sup>

When she makes this statement, Sayers is not arguing for replacing theology with creative writing, but for doing theology creatively. In other words, doctrine is the most exciting thing about Christianity; it does not need spectacular additions. Such a stark claim might cause a fog machine to fail if made in certain contemporary circles, but there are really few more theologically rich and intriguing concepts that are intimately relevant to the Christian life than, for example, the doctrine of the incarnation. However, as Sayers goes on to argue, "The trouble is that, in nine cases out of ten, [the average Christian] has never been offered the dogma. What he has been offered is a set of technical theological terms that nobody has taken the trouble to translate into language relevant to ordinary life."<sup>62</sup> This is the breach in the wall that Sayers so admirably fills.

Sayers enacts a cautious transformationalism by engaging the culture through contemporary means without compromising content. As she argues of her plays, the dogma is the drama. As she demonstrates in her essays, doctrine is really quite interesting, not stodgy and boring. The most significant failure of the modern theologian is to make the most interesting

57 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Are Women Human?" in *Are Women Human? Astute and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 33–34.

58 *Ibid.*, 21–22.

59 Simmons, *Creed without Chaos*, 59.

60 Sayers to Mrs. Robert Darby, May 31, 1948, in Barbara Reynolds, ed. *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, UK: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1999), 376.

61 Sayers, "Creed or Chaos?" in *The Whimsical Christian: Reflections on God and Man by the Creator of Lord Peter Wimsey*, 38.

62 *Ibid.*, 39.

subject in the world boring. Much academic theology stifles the imagination, rather than enlivening the Christian mind to meet God. Sayers helps to reinvigorate the Christian imagination to begin to overcome this failure.

### CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

In an essay on a Christian aesthetic, Sayers first dismisses the idea that there has been a recognizable Christian aesthetic in history. She goes on to propose the development of a Christian aesthetic that values creation. According to Sayers,

The true work of art, then, is something new; it is not primarily the copy or representation of anything. It may involve representation, but that is not what makes it a work of art. It is not manufactured to specification, as an engineer works to a plan—though it may involve compliance with the accepted rules for dramatic presentation and may also contain verbal “effects” that can be mechanically accounted for. We all know very well, when we compare it with so-called works of art that are turned out to pattern, that in this connection neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. Something has been created.<sup>63</sup>

This is artistically significant in that such an attitude would exterminate all kitsch culture from the camp of Christianity. It is also theologically significant in that it speaks very specifically to the doctrine of humanity. In other words, part of what defines humanity is the ability to create analogously to God’s ability to create. This is a significant emphasis in one of Sayers’ most well-known theological texts, *The Mind of the Maker*.

63 Sayers, “Toward a Christian Esthetic,” in *The Whimsical Christian: Reflections on God and Man by the Creator of Lord Peter Wimsey*, 83.

Sayers begins *The Mind of the Maker* by establishing her worldview, which stands in the continuum of the great tradition of Christian theology. As such, there is a universal moral law, which is knowable through human experience.<sup>64</sup> It is essential to establish such an understanding at the outset of this treatise on work and the value of creation because it emphasizes the difference between cultural approval of something and its timeless goodness. Cultural approval results from conformity to certain moral codes derived from society, while timeless goodness results from conformity to universal moral laws written into creation by God.<sup>65</sup> This helps to inform Sayers’ ethic and enhance her portrait as a cautious transformationalist.

God is the creator—or former—and primary transformer of the world. As Sayers notes, “The mind of the maker is generally revealed, and in a manner incarnate, in all its creation.”<sup>66</sup> Thus to engage in creative work in the world is to emulate God and function as the image of God. The product of that creative work should correspond to the universal moral law, and, as much as necessary, to the customary codes of the artist’s society. That is, to be excellent, work must reflect both artistic truth and universal truth. The impetus toward both truths is the way that the Christian can transform the world with the knowledge of God.

Caution is evident in Sayers’ conception of truthful artistry. Avoidance of cheap moralism is an absolute. The loving creator wants his creation to develop in its own shape. As Sayers notes, “The more genuinely creative [the artist] is, the more he will want his work to develop in accordance with its own nature, and to stand

64 Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 9.

65 *Ibid.*, 9–13.

66 *Ibid.*, 87.

independent of himself.”<sup>67</sup> Good art resists simplistic moralism. Transformation of the culture through art must not cheapen the art by merely copying cultural forms and inserting a Christian morality. Instead, the Christian artist should demonstrate excellence in the cultural forms and consistency with the universal moral law. Thus, transformation occurs when universal truth is artfully represented, and caution is evident because the Christian artist does not co-opt the cultural form, deforming it in an attempt to redeem it. When the church becomes too closely identified with any particular cultural form, whether artistic or political, the church can start to lose its focus.

### CHRISTIANS AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Sayers comments on the engagement of the church with the state in a 1941 address to the Archbishop of York’s Conference on “The Life of the Church and the Order of Society.” In this essay, Sayers outlines two significantly different ways that the church can exist in culture. The first is to be a “self-contained community, practicing its peculiar loyalty, and offering neither particular approval of, nor opposition to, those departments of human activity which are vaguely summed up in the words ‘civilization’ and ‘the state.’ As Christians they are not concerned with them.”<sup>68</sup> Opposed to that perspective is “a body of opinion which sees civilization, as a German National-Socialist sees it, namely as a ‘world within the Church’—organized in every detail and inspired in every activity, by devotion to a single purpose which at

once indwells and transcends it.”<sup>69</sup> Nothing at all can be excluded from the purview of the church under the second description. Sayers debunks the first option because it is inconsistent with Scripture and fails to account for the doctrine of the incarnation fully. She debunks the second option because it denatures the church and causes the church to lose sight of its mission. As she argues, “In claiming to control the state, [the church] has become involved in maintaining the state machinery.”<sup>70</sup>

In Niebuhr’s terms, Sayers has thus outlined and rejected both the categories of Christ and Culture in Paradox and Christ Transforms Culture. She is neither a Lutheran nor Calvinist. Given her Anglo-Catholic leanings, one might expect her to land near to Saint Thomas with an understanding of Christ Above Culture. She does not, however. There are similarities in the view, but her assertion that the Christian should do work excellently in a way that teaches the doctrines of the church separates her from this view. Instead, she sees the Christian as called to cautiously transform the world by doing things excellently in light of the unified truth of the moral order of the universe.

According to Sayers, the church, both as an institution and its individual parts, must avoid being associated with the administration of the law. Instead, like Christ, Christians should “proclaim a kingdom in which the judgment of the Law [has] no need to operate. The Gospel escapes, as it were, between the meshes of the Law, exactly as He Himself escaped between the horns of every dilemma by which the lawyers attempted to enclose him.”<sup>71</sup> Christians, then,

67 Ibid., 130.

68 Sayers, “The Church’s Responsibility,” in *Malvern, 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society: Being the Proceedings of the Archbishop of York’s Conference*, 60.

69 Ibid., 67. It should be clearly noted that in 1941 comparisons to Nazis were strong, but since the Holocaust was unknown, they were not nearly so strong as they are today.

70 Ibid., 69.

71 Ibid.

are to transform culture—ever cautious to avoid entrapment in its failings—by pointing toward the redemptive power of the gospel in life and in art.

Sayers believes transforming society to reflect Christian values is possible. However, such a transformation is dependent upon the intellectual integrity of the church. She writes, “If we really want a Christian society, we must teach Christianity, and . . . it is absolutely impossible to teach Christianity without teaching Christian dogma.”<sup>72</sup> There is a place in Sayers’ vision of society for a significant role of Christians teaching Western thought patterns and, perhaps most importantly, teaching the great truths of the church.<sup>73</sup>

Sayers calls for a significant revision of the Constantinian project by placing limitations on the church’s political engagement, writing, “The Kingdom of Heaven is not of this world; and the attempt to yoke it to any form of secular constitution is treason.”<sup>74</sup> Such entanglement is dangerous to the very nature of the church. Sayers notes, “The Church can only order the affairs of the world when, and so long as, she is not involved in or identified with them.”<sup>75</sup> This paradox is explained more clearly by Sayers’ call for Christians to participate in the world without attempting to gain power. In the realm of politics, such an approach requires disinterested participation.

In a distinction that reflects the precision of her reasoning, the prefix attached to “interest” marks the essence of Sayers’ view on

the relationship between the church and the surrounding culture. When everyone engaged in culture has an interest, the common people will all feel there is no one they can trust. As Sayers describes her time, “All had an axe to grind, and the expressed principles of all were only a screen of expediency put up to cover a march of exploitation.”<sup>76</sup> She also notes, “In certain devastated areas of our cities, the only people who could get things done, bursting through red tape and indolence, were a number of parish priests and clergy.”<sup>77</sup> This is because these men attempt to change the culture in a disinterested fashion, with no hope of gaining political capital. Yet they seek to change the systems around them because they are Christians. This is the embodiment of disinterest, not uninterest. This is Sayers’ charge to Christians as they interact with the culture both as the church and as individuals. It is, as she describes it, impossible, but it is the task at hand.<sup>78</sup> She is a cautious transformationalist because she has real hope for improving the culture through Christian truth, but well recognizes the danger of the church becoming identified with cultural institutions.

## CONCLUSION

Dorothy L. Sayers is a uniquely gifted and creative person of the sort that normally only comes around every few generations. Her success in various vocations, including as author, playwright, and public theologian make her an inherently interesting person. More than merely an interesting figure from history, Sayers is an example of cultural engagement for modern Christians.

72 Sayers, “Creed or Chaos?,” in *The Whimsical Christian: Reflections on God and Man by the Creator of Lord Peter Wimsey*, 36.

73 E.g., Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” 90–99.

74 Sayers, “The Church’s Responsibility,” in *Malvern, 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society: Being the Proceedings of the Archbishop of York’s Conference*, 70.

75 *Ibid.*, 77.

76 *Ibid.*, 73.

77 *Ibid.*

78 *Ibid.*, 78.

She is uncompromising in her artistic standards, unwavering in her doctrinal fidelity, and unflinching in her commitment to pursue sound logic wherever it leads. Sayers recognizes the signs of the times, diagnoses the disease, and searches history for a possible solution rather than attempting to find an answer from within herself. The beauty of Sayers' work is not that she provides all the answers. She does not, because the issues of her day are different than those of the contemporary age. Instead, Sayers points toward a cautious engagement with culture that speaks the language of culture, models excellence in its artistic forms, but transforms contemporary media with the timeless truths found only in Christianity. Contemporary Christians would do well to model her conscientious engagement with the world as cautious transformationalists.

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