

Dorothy L. Sayers

A Writer and Theologian for Today

Laura K. Simmons

In January 1941, the Archbishop of York hosted a conference on “The Life of the Church and the Order of Society,” and over 220 people attended. About three-fourths were men—mostly bishops and other clergy. Women who were identified with organizations were “head deaconesses” or in charge of women’s schools or committees in churches and government agencies. Nine men spoke—more clergy, plus some academics and writer T.S. Eliot. And then there was the tenth speaker: “Miss Dorothy Sayers.”

The inclusion of Dorothy L. Sayers, best known as the writer of the Lord Peter Wimsey detective stories, on the program of the Malvern conference was neither an accident nor an example of tokenism. By 1941, Sayers was an established lay theologian who had a thriving correspondence with a number of religious professionals, including theological tutors, bishops, local clergy, and even archbishops. This was not her first invitation to address a gathering largely made up of clergy, nor would it be her last.

Sayers delighted in hearing from clergy and in dialoguing with them about her work (although it made her nervous to address them because she was not a trained theologian or preacher). Of all the critics, readers, acquaintances, and others who responded to her writings, a large portion of the letters she received, answered, and saved were from clergy. Some of this correspondence came at her initiative; she would write to ask for clarification on a theological concept or to refer a correspondent of hers to someone who was qualified to answer that person’s question on a particular point of doctrine. At other times, clergy wrote to her about things she had written, to invite her to speak, or to ask for her collaboration in some venture.



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Dorothy L. Sayers Continued

It is clear that many people (clergy and otherwise) considered Sayers a theologian—and a good one at that. People praised her ability to communicate powerful theological concepts succinctly and accessibly. Theologian Karl Barth used Sayers' work to learn and practice English, and translated several of her essays into German. A priest from Washington, D.C., dining with President and Mrs. Roosevelt one evening, heard them speak highly of Sayers' detective fiction, and he recommended that they read her religious writings as well. He was startled to learn that Eleanor Roosevelt then read one of Sayers' essays that very night! And it has been said that the BBC production of Sayers' life-of-Christ play cycle *The Man Born to Be King* was one of the most significant events in twentieth-century Britain.

Sayers' influence did not cease upon her death in 1957. Theater companies continue to produce her plays, English professors include her Dante translation in their syllabi, mystery fans still read about Lord Peter and Harriett, and hundreds of classical schools around the world owe their existence to Sayers' small essay "The Lost Tools of Learning." A thriving Dorothy L. Sayers Society meets yearly, mining her work in ever-greater detail. Perhaps most significantly, many of Sayers' theological contributions keep returning to print: *The Man Born to Be King* (well-suited to reading in the weeks before Easter; C.S. Lewis read the plays yearly), *The Mind of the Maker* (about the Trinity and the creative process), Sayers' essays (most recently in the collection entitled *Letters to a Diminished Church*) and her very insightful commentaries on women and men, published in a small volume called *Are Women Human?*.

In this past year, as America found itself engaged regularly in discussions of race and gender because of our history-making presidential candidates, Sayers' words on women have perhaps become more needed than ever. In 1938, she was invited to address a women's group; her speech "Are Women Human?" was ahead of her time and probably more than a little shocking. This address, along with an essay called "The Human Not-Quite-Human," is published in the aforementioned slim-but-powerful volume.

Sayers asserted that there is no such thing as a man's job or a woman's job, but that people should pursue vocations for which they are passionate and gifted. She challenged a culture that tended to define men's interests and human interests synonymously, while holding women apart as some sort of special species, not-quite-human. She reminded her audience that Jesus treated women entirely differently than most of his followers have through the ages, and called the church to be more like Jesus in this regard. She also remarked that it was no wonder women did not want to stay at home, since all the interesting work had been removed from homes and relocated to factories and industries.

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Dorothy L. Sayers Continued

Sayers' comments made in 1938 have been proven yet again to be incredibly insightful and forward-thinking by some of the media coverage of Hillary Clinton's campaign for president, Sarah Palin's campaign for vice-president, and the gender issues with which Americans have subsequently grappled. One author remarked that male presidential candidates are seen as representing all people, while women candidates are seen as representing women. It's "The Human-Not-Quite-Human" all over again—almost identical language to what Sayers was saying seventy years ago. Sadly, we appear to have learned little in that time.

Sayers understood that her voice was at times too prophetic for her culture. She published a whole volume of essays called *Unpopular Opinions*—many of which were rejected by the very people who had commissioned them because they were too provocative or otherwise differed from what they thought they had requested when they asked Sayers to write or speak. Dorothy L. Sayers believed strongly that one should not write mainly to please one's audience. Certainly, audiences have needs, and many of her works were commissioned for particular populations or organizations. However, Sayers would generally write on something only if she found herself passionate about a given topic and thought she might have something to say about it—not just because someone asked her to write on that topic.

On this point, C.S. Lewis disagreed with Sayers. He often wrote for people who wanted an article on a particular subject written by a popular author because he felt a pastoral obligation to them. Sayers felt she was serving the writing itself, not the audience, when she accepted or declined writing assignments. Did something wish to be written—and if so, how did it demand to be written? This is perhaps an unusual way of talking about how she was inspired by God. She accused Lewis and others of being too impatient to wait for what God might want to say through them; they would "drag the eggs out of the goose" and write on topics they did not sufficiently understand.

Sayers also disagreed with C.S. Lewis on the matter of women's ordination. He wrote to her asking that she take a public stand against it (this defense of tradition needed to be written by a woman, he reasoned). Instead, Sayers suggested she would be an "uneasy ally" for him because she did not see any theological reason why women should not be priests. She distinguished between whether a man or a woman should be "cast for the part" of "playing" Christ in the mass (it made the most dramatic sense for it to be a man, of course) and

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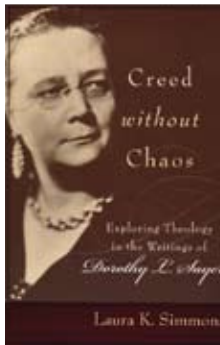
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whether a man or a woman could represent Christ to humanity. Because Christ was the representative of all humanity, not simply male humanity, she believed either a woman or a man could reflect that representation.

It is important to say at this juncture that Sayers did not consider herself a feminist, and likely would have bristled at being included in that movement. This was partly due to the fact that she found feminists too often taking the pendulum to an opposite extreme and subjugating men as a reaction to years of oppression. She also believed that no individual should be seen primarily as a representative of some class of human beings (a woman as representative of all women, a Christian as representative of all Christians, etc). She preferred to be considered as Jesus considered women—simply human, no more, no less.



Click [here](#) to purchase Laura Simmons's book on Dorothy Sayers, *Creed Without Chaos*, from Amazon.com and CBE will receive a percentage of the sale.



Click [here](#) to purchase *Are Women Human?*, a collection of essays by Dorothy Sayers. Use E-Quality book sale coupon code to save 25%.



LAURA K. SIMMONS is determined to get people to read more of Dorothy L. Sayers's nonfiction, which she finds astonishingly applicable to 21st-century life. When she is not writing (*Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers*) and speaking about her favorite author, Simmons is Associate Professor of Christian Ministries at George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland, Oregon. She teaches courses on reconciliation, communication, teaching, spiritual formation, and equipping and discipleship.



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