
The Mystery of Vocation

BY MARTHA GREENE EADS

In popular mysteries featuring detective Lord Peter Wimsey and trenchant essays during the Second World War, Dorothy L. Sayers explored the deep theological mystery of Christian vocation. Our creative work can be a source of fulfillment and blessing, and a celebration of God's creativity through the material world. Indeed, we are most like our Creator when we create.

In her mystery novels and stories featuring detective Lord Peter Wimsey, Dorothy L. Sayers dramatically depicts sin's effects on individuals and society. Sayers's aristocratic sleuth regularly encounters shady characters who, as the Gospel of John describes, "loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (3:19). Her detective fiction is not, however, overtly religious; Lord Peter states publicly that he doesn't "claim to be a Christian or anything of that kind."¹ Sayers's Anglican Christianity, however, informs all her writing, from her detective fiction of the 1920s and '30s to her secular and sacred plays in the '30s and '40s; her essays, letters, and speeches during the Second World War; and her translation work on Dante's *Divine Comedy* from the War until her death in 1957. In all these works, including the Lord Peter Wimsey novels, Sayers investigates a deep theological mystery: the nature of Christian vocation.

Sayers came to believe that a right understanding of vocation was vital to individual as well as cultural well-being. Lamenting the modern West's insistence on equating work with mere employment, she urges Christians to look beyond economics in thinking about vocation. "Economic man," she writes in a 1942 essay entitled "Vocation in Work," "is Adam under the

curse.... To assume, as so many well-intentioned architects of an improved society assume today—that economics is the basis of man’s dealings with nature and with his fellow-men, is the very negation of Christian principle.”² Borrowing language from the third chapter of John, she sets forth her challenge to think differently:

I am convinced that *no* satisfactory adjustment of these things can ever be made without a radical alteration in the attitude of everybody—not merely “the worker,” but *everybody*—to this matter of the worth of the work. Unless we are regenerate and born again, we cannot enter the kingdom of a divine understanding of work (99).

Christians, she declares, must revive a centuries-old view of humankind as made in the image of God, the eternal Craftsman, and of work as a source of fulfillment and blessing.

Our work, Sayers concludes, should be more than simply a means of producing and acquiring goods and services. She endorses what she regards as a medieval, sacramental understanding of vocation, in which work becomes a celebration of the material world as the expression of God’s creativity. We are most like our Creator when we create, she argues. Certainly, every human deserves to work *in* humane conditions, but we ought also to work *on* creative projects worthy of our efforts. After struggling in ill-fitting teaching assignments and designing effective but empty campaigns for Guinness stout and Colman’s mustard at a London advertising agency, Sayers knew the frustration of unfulfilling employment. Her subsequent success as a mystery writer enabled her to move on to the work she found most satisfying: writing religious plays and essays and translating medieval poetry.

Sayers’s Christian faith and admiration for medieval thought not only shaped her conception of vocation but also served as a foundation for her friendships with Inklings Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis. Although Sayers had studied French literature as an Oxford undergraduate, Williams introduced her years later to the Italian poet Dante and his three-part Christian epic, *The Divine Comedy*. At Williams’s urging, she picked up a copy of the first part, *Inferno*, and carried it with her into a London shelter during a wartime air raid. She found *Inferno* so compelling that she mastered medieval Italian in order to translate the entire epic. Two years later, her commitment to Dante scholarship having grown even stronger, Sayers marveled that *The Divine Comedy*’s treatment of land, labor, and wealth made her want to ask the poet “to come and address a meeting about world economics.”³ Her fascination with *The Divine Comedy* never flagged; when she died at age 64, she was still working on her translation of part three, *Paradise*.

Sayers's fascination with the Middle Ages gave her more in common with the Inklings than most detective novelists would have. Although she was never an "official" Inkling (no woman was), Sayers corresponded regularly with Williams and Lewis and, as they did, looked to the medieval period for clues about timeless theological mysteries. Corbin Scott Carnell groups Sayers with Lewis, Williams, and J. R. R. Tolkien because they all "were more at home in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance [than in the present], but the very depth of their immersion in the past gave them a useful perspective on the present which presentists ironically lack."⁴ As the Second World War loomed and then broke loose, Sayers believed that the West's need for a renewed understanding of work was increasingly urgent.

GLIMPSES IN MYSTERIES AND DRAMA

Sayers first acknowledged the theological implications of work in Lord Peter Wimsey's debut novel, *Whose Body?* In the 1923 mystery, Lord Peter agonizes over a difficult case but also frets over his sense of professional calling. He turns for counsel to his friend Detective Inspector Charles Parker, whose pedigree is less impressive than Peter's but whose character and insight are not. Calling on Parker in his flat, Peter asks, "D'you like your job?" Parker puts aside the Galatians commentary he has been reading, mulls over Peter's question, and replies, "Yes—yes, I do. I know it to be useful, and I am fitted to it. I do it quite well—not with inspiration, perhaps, but sufficiently well to take pride in it. It is full of variety and it forces one to keep up to the mark and not get slack. And there's a future to it."⁵ Sayers sets forth here her earliest criteria for meaningful work: it must be useful, appropriate to the worker's abilities, varied, and endlessly challenging.

In this passage, Sayers also suggests that Christian faith enables vocational discernment. Inspector Parker's Galatians commentary, minor detail though it may appear to be, gives him a context of faithful freedom and responsibility for reflecting on work; he understands that the worker must labor without worrying about others' perceptions. He rebukes Peter for focusing on his own reputation in carrying out his calling, to which Peter responds sulkily, "I don't think you ought to read so much theology. It has a brutal-

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izing influence" (121). Coming to the conversation from his Galatians commentary, Parker is likely to have in mind the following passage: "Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). While Lord Peter would never describe himself as Christ's servant, Sayers nevertheless uses his exchange with Parker to begin devel-

oping her own theology of work.

Of the lack of varied work in an industrial society, Sayers lamented: "the Divine joy in creation, which Man should inherit in virtue of his participation in the image of Godhead, has largely been destroyed, persisting today almost alone among artists, skilled craftsmen, and members of the learned professions; and it is this loss . . . which lies at the root of our social and economic corruptions."

In the Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries that followed *Whose Body?*, especially those featuring Peter's detective-novelist wife Harriet Vane, Sayers further shows characters struggling to understand their relation to work. Attending her Oxford college reunion in *Gaudy Night* (1936), Harriet sizes up her own and her former-classmates' professional choices. To a brilliant scholar who abandoned academics for farming, Harriet observes,

"A ploughshare is a nobler object than a razor. But if your natural talent is for barbering, wouldn't it be better to *be* a barber, and a good barber—and use the profits (if you like) to speed the plough? However grand the job may be, is it *your* job?" (48). Harriet wonders at times whether her job of mystery-writing is sufficiently serious, but Peter encourages her to persist and challenges her to make Wilfred, her protagonist, more complex. Peter feels that Harriet has paid him the ultimate compliment when she tells him that his urging has inspired her really to *work* on characterization, telling her that he "shall be honored to go down to posterity in the turn-up of Wilfred's trouser" (498). In the 1936 play *Busman's Honeymoon* (and the novel by the same title that soon followed), Harriet insists that Peter pursue his investigations, no matter how inconvenient or even painful they may be for her. "What kind of life could we have if I knew that you had become less than yourself by marrying me?" she asks.⁶ Together, Lord and Lady Peter Wimsey demonstrate work's centrality, even to family life.⁷

In *The Zeal of Thy House*, written for the 1937 Canterbury Cathedral Festival, Sayers's treatment of vocation is more overtly Christian. The play's main character, William of Sens, is a twelfth-century architect whose dedi-

cation to his work on the Cathedral's construction project is as remarkable as his egotism. Although he initially sees himself as indispensable to the Cathedral, William recognizes his dependence on the Church when he suffers grave injuries in a fall. In making his sacramental confession, first to the Cathedral prior and then to the angel Michael, William realizes that confessing his individual sins does him little good if he lacks a proper understanding of his relationship to God. Directed by Michael to consider Christ's self-denial on the Cross, William comes to see that the work itself is more important than the worker's role in it and subsequently repents of his pride. Sayers's account thus illustrates how work can reveal the Christian's role in the Church and, through it, in the Kingdom.

Many of Sayers's contemporaries found her shift from detective fiction to religious drama confusing, failing to understand that she was narrowing her focus rather than changing it. In response to a reviewer's skepticism about her having written both *Busman's Honeymoon* and *Zeal*, Sayers replied, "This is like saying that a person who says his prayers is betraying a split personality when he uses the same organs of speech to say, 'Pass the potatoes'.... Both of these [works]...deal with precisely the same theme: namely, that a man may not exalt his private passions above his proper vocation." Sayers argued further that writers need not limit themselves to one type of writing:

[The reviewer assumes that] mankind's normal way of working approximates to that of the conveyor-belt, to which each operative contributes his small, standardized operation with as little variation as may be. Now this may be usual, but it is not the normal, in the sense of the natural function of an artist, or of a craftsman—or indeed of a human being at all; it is the function of a machine; and we cannot subdue either art or man to the rhythm of the machine without destroying their proper nature as man and art.⁸

Her indignation in this letter rises from the conviction Detective Inspector Charles Parker expressed twenty years earlier in *Whose Body?»: meaningful work must be "full of variety."*

SOCIAL REFORM AND BEYOND

Sayers came to recognize the difficulty of insisting on varied work in an industrial society, lamenting in a 1941 letter that "the Divine joy in creation, which Man should inherit in virtue of his participation in the image of Godhead, has largely been destroyed, persisting today almost alone among artists, skilled craftsmen, and members of the learned professions; and it is this loss...which lies at the root of our social and economic corruptions."⁹ She saw that assembly-line work provided vast numbers of jobs offering limited opportunities for tasting "Divine joy in creation." Not a Luddite, however, she asserts in the 1946 essay "Living to Work" that the

Christian's "task is not to run away from the machines but to learn to use them so that they work in harmony with human nature instead of injuring or oppressing it."¹⁰ A Christian re-envisioning of vocation would, she hoped, lead to reform not only of work practices but also of theories about work itself.

She blamed the modern Church, however, for having contented itself with merely striving to improve working conditions instead of calling for an entirely new way of looking at work. Sayers describes one Roman Catholic plan for social reform, praising its emphasis on just employment practices but asking why it failed to go further. The plan, she explains in a May 1940 speech entitled "Creed or Chaos?", "in its lack of a sacramental attitude toward work, was as empty as a set of trade-union regulations. We may remember that a medieval guild did insist, not only on the employer's duty to his workmen, but also on the laborer's duty to his work."¹¹ In the modern economics-based culture, she believed, both the worker and the work suffer. The worker becomes bored with work he finds meaningless, and the work is trivial and often shoddy.

Our theologically-impoverished view of work has wider cultural consequences. She warns in the essay "Why Work?" that equating work with mere employment leads first to thoughtless consumption and ultimately to war:

No nation has yet found a way to keep the machines running and whole nations employed under modern industrial conditions without wasteful consumption. For a time, a few nations could contrive to keep going by securing a monopoly of production and forcing their waste products on to new and untapped markets. When there are no new markets and all nations are industrial producers, the only choice we have been able to envisage so far has been that between armaments and unemployment.¹²

A deep love for her country did not prevent her from holding Great Britain partly responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War. In this essay, first delivered as a speech in Eastbourne, England, in 1942, she admonishes:

Never think that wars are irrational catastrophes: they happen when wrong ways of thinking and living bring about intolerable situations; and whichever side may be the more outrageous in its aims and the more brutal in its methods, the root causes of conflict are usually to be found in some wrong way of life in which all parties have acquiesced, and for which everybody must, to some extent, bear the blame. (91)

She also faults the Church in "Creed or Chaos?" for having adopted "'the industrious apprentice' view of [vocation]: 'Work hard and be thrifty,

and God will bless you with a contented mind and a competence.’ This is nothing but enlightened self interest in its vulgarest form, and plays directly into the hands of the monopolist and the financier.” She continues in the sharpest of terms:

Nothing has so deeply discredited the Christian Church as Her squalid submission to the economic theory of society. The burning question of the Christian attitude toward money is being so eagerly debated nowadays that it is scarcely necessary to do more than remind ourselves that the present unrest, both in Russia and Central Europe, is an immediate judgment upon a financial system that has subordinated man to economics, and that no *mere* readjustment of economic machinery will have any lasting effect if it keeps man a prisoner inside the machine (68-69).

The Church must teach society to view work theologically in order to avert cultural and political disaster, she believes.

While many Westerners, today as in her own day, would scoff at her analysis, Sayers insists rightly in “Why Work?” that a “society founded on trash and waste” is a

“house built upon sand” (90). To maintain a high standard of living, a society at peace finds itself encouraging wasteful consumption. Sayers invites us to “ask ourselves whether we do not all contribute to it by demanding the newest thing, by our snobbery of the modern and up-to-date, by our ignorance and carelessness about how things work, and our inability to distinguish good craftsmanship from bad” (“VW” 100). She dares us instead “to take the same attitude

to the arts of peace as the arts of war,...sacrific[ing] our convenience and our individual standard of living” (“WW” 95). Christians must, she asserts, eschew economic values rooted in envy and avarice, reclaiming instead the “absolute values” of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom values, Sayers teaches in “Why Work?”, yield a Christian understanding of labor that first celebrates work “not, primarily, as the

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thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do." Work, she asserts, should be the embodiment of the worker's talents and efforts and thus the means by which he "offers himself to God" (101). Such an understanding also acknowledges that God calls many to do secular work and that any work, done well by Christians, is Christian work, "whether it is church embroidery, or sewage farming" (108). Furthermore, an understanding of vocation rooted in kingdom values will direct the worker's attention to the work itself rather than to the community. Although the temptation to serve others seems noble, Sayers warns that it will degenerate into catering to the public. "We are coming to the end of an era of civilization which began by pandering to public demand," she asserts, "and ended by frantically trying to create public demand for an output so false and meaningless that even a doped public revolted from the trash offered to it and plunged into war rather than swallow any more of it" (114). Here Sayers poses the Galatians 1 question Charles Parker has in mind in *Whose Body?:* Do we want "to win the approval of men, or of God"?

CONCLUSION

Although her rebuke still carries a sting over a half-century later, Sayers's is not a counsel of despair. Her writings remind us that the Church can and should think differently from the wider culture about every aspect of life—even work. In celebrating human creativity as evidence of our being made in the Creator's likeness, Christians must encourage one another to do work worthy of our best efforts, whether it be "church embroidery, or sewage farming." We must examine our purchases and practices, asking whether they show respect for other workers created in God's image. Sayers challenges us to seek what she calls "the kingdom of a divine understanding of work"—a mysterious and glorious view of vocation, focused not on economic means but on eternal ends.

NOTES

1 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935; reprint, New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1995), 490 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

2 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Vocation in Work," in *A Christian Basis for the Post-War World*, edited by A. E. Baker (London: Christian Student Movement Press, 1942), 90. Further citations are marked "VW."

3 Dorothy L. Sayers, "To Wilfred Scott-Giles," 25 February 1946, in *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, volume 3, edited by Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: Carole Green, 1998), 202.

4 Corbin Scott Carnell, "The Inklings and the Twentieth Century: Did They Back Away?" *Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society*, 5:12 (1974), 4.

5 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923; reprint, New York: Avon, 1961), 119 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

6 Dorothy L. Sayers and Muriel St. Clare Byrne, *Busman's Honeymoon: A Detective Comedy*, in *Love All: A Comedy of Manners. Together with Busman's Honeymoon: A Detective*

Comedy, edited by Alzina Stone Dale (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1984), 101.

7 In *Love All* (1940), her more obviously autobiographical play, Sayers suggests that satisfying work may be far more meaningful than marriage. After her self-absorbed husband leaves her for a young actress, *Love All's* protagonist finds fulfillment, financial security, and friendship as a playwright. Sayers's own marriage to the shell-shocked WWI veteran Oswald Atherton ("Mac") Fleming foundered while her literary star rose.

8 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Letter to the Editor of the *Stoke Newington Observer*," 12 June 1944, in *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, volume 3, 20-21.

9 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Letter to the Editor of the *Sower*," 21 April 1941, in *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, volume 2, edited by Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: Carole Green, 1997; reprint, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 251.

10 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Living to Work," in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 126.

11 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Creed or Chaos?" in *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949; reprint, Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1999), 71 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

12 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Why Work" in *Creed or Chaos?*, 94-95.



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