

## Introduction

“WHAT IS WOMAN’S WORK?” has been my core concern—as student, career woman, wife, mother, returning student and now college professor. Coming of age, as I did, in the early 1970s, in the heyday of what is now called Second Wave Feminism, I experienced the old certainties of social roles, including gender roles, being cast aside in the sweeping tide of the radical challenges of the liberation movements. A participant observer of the culture wars about motherhood and work, I want to review and clarify the gains that women have achieved, and identify what we have learned which can contribute to a better life for women and for men.

I write as someone who sees men and women struggling with balancing work and life. In a time of economic stress, this balance seems ever more elusive. Those who are employed are asked to work longer hours; those who are unemployed are facing a job market that looks for the cheapest labor, disregarding the need to pay a living wage with good benefits. We have seen manufacturing change, move off-shore, and the service economy provide more of the jobs. These jobs, though, are often low-wage, part-time employment lacking healthcare coverage or job security. The work itself is standardized in such a way that the workers need few skills; so they are interchangeable and need little training.

I decided to pursue theology as my work and studied a woman who had intrigued me through her mystery writing, especially the book *Gaudy Night*. In Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) I found a woman who spent her life engaged with her faith intellectually, who was passionately concerned about good work and women’s chance to use their talents.

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She approached this question through her Christian faith, which made her an interesting voice. In the Mommy wars of the 1980s many Christians equated being a good mother with being a stay-at-home mother, as part of God's plan. Sayers offered an alternative vision which was based on the most basic doctrines of Christianity, the Incarnation and the Trinity. Her life-long fascination with the Athanasian Creed informed all of her writing: mysteries, drama, translations and essays. She saw that the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity rightly understood and applied to life result in a respect for creation and human work, and ground human solidarity.

It may seem strange to use the writings of a woman from the early 20th century, writing about Christianity in Britain, to address the problem of good work in the global economy of the 21st century, but Sayers has something of importance to say to anyone interested in work as part of a fulfilling human life. She herself struggled to find employment, worked in an advertising agency, and finally as a free lance writer. She experienced the Great Depression, and saw the suffering of those who had no work. She was part of a great movement of Christians who wanted to create a social order that was more just, and participated in the great conversations of her day about work and society, economics and family life. She is a voice that is relevant today.

Sayers is best known for her mystery novels which feature Lord Peter Wimsey. Her novels have never been out of print and many have been turned into television plays. In 1930 she introduced a love interest for Wimsey: Harriet Vane, described as an Oxford educated writer whom Wimsey loves as much for her brain as for her appearance. Over several novels she explores Harriet and Peter's relationship; in *Gaudy Night* they finally agree to marry, and in *Busman's Honeymoon* we have a love story interrupted by a corpse, which gives Sayers a chance to show what love might mean to two intelligent people who hold an ideal of integrity and see marriage as a partnership of equals, each of whom has a role in the public and the private sphere.

Sayers focused on integrity in work throughout her life, as a young woman seeking a satisfactory career with a living wage that was not nursing or teaching, as a writer deciding which commissions to accept, and as a novelist and playwright. In her novels and plays she showed the conflict between the personal and the demands of integrity to work, whether scholarship, architecture or detecting. She was a writer who created narratives

which displayed the truths and complexities of human lives, and showed women as human beings who needed to do good work for a satisfying life.

Through the war years she lectured and wrote on vocation in work and post-war reconstruction. Much of her work during the war has not been studied in depth, and as that was the period when she was concentrating on presenting her ideas about work and human life, it is a rich field to mine which adds to Sayers' studies as well as to social ethics.

She was a Christian whose Christianity was primarily expressed through her formidable intellect. She approached theology through narrative and writing in a way which pre-figures the concerns of modern theology about the relation of revelation, text and audience. In her radio plays *The Man Born to Be King*, she was one of the first to present the Gospel in a modern, naturalistic style which we today take for granted, but which caused an uproar at the time. In *The Mind of the Maker* she proposed an understanding of the human person as essentially creative, and therefore that work fit for humans should fit the Trinitarian creativeness of our being.

I am using the term theological anthropology for the conception of the person within a theological tradition. Sayers would not have used this term but would acknowledge that she was explaining one way that humanity bears the image of God. Her work as a writer of narrative and of theology within her conscious adherence to Christianity produced insights that we can now bring together as her theological anthropology. As a writer of narrative, she created characters and so investigated the depths of the human heart. As a writer and especially as a playwright, she experienced creation as a three-fold process which she examined in light of her understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Her analogy appeared in its full form in the printed version of the play *The Zeal of Thy House* and was discussed in detail in her book *The Mind of the Maker* (see chapter 5).

From this analogy she has developed a theological understanding of human beings and their work. Sayers' perspective on work and gender emphasized equality, as the three persons in the one God are co-equal. She described men and women as humans, equal and more alike in their common humanity than they are distinctive in their genders. As male and female, they bear the image of the Trinitarian God in their ability to create. Sayers' account of good work is based on this anthropology and claims that differences between individual men or individual women are just as distinctive and important as the distinction between genders.

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Sayers offers, I think, two major contributions to the ethical reasoning about work: first her Trinitarian anthropology of the person, and second, the ethics of work which develops from that anthropology. Sayers was not a professional theologian. In her own day, her work was read as apologetics not theology, but her methods are comparable to those theologians in our day, such as George Lindbeck<sup>1</sup> or Stanley Hauerwas, who recognise the fruitfulness of a methodology based on a mutual exchange between literature and theology.

Ann Loades, an Anglican theologian who has produced many works of interest especially on or about feminist theology, has produced several works based around Sayers. She believes Sayers offers resources we need now, as Sayers was committed to a sacramental understanding of the world.<sup>2</sup> This sacramental understanding of matter as good, is needed now more than ever, as the demands of the consumer economy create more and more environmental degradation.

A further problem with good work is that we systematically undervalue the work of care: compare a day-care worker's salary to a rookie professional athlete, a public relations consultant or a neophyte banker. No Christian account of work is complete without a full valuation of the care of the young, old, sick, and disabled. Sayers gives us a solid theological starting point for this valuation in her analogy of the Trinity, which is essentially social. She does not explicitly discuss the question of the work of care, for in her society the assignment of that work to women was almost unquestioned. In our day, though, we need a better understanding of the importance of the work of care not only to those who are in need of care, but to the full human development of all humans as care-givers. The great commandment, Love your neighbor as yourself, applies to everyone. Alasdair MacIntyre's work, *Dependent Rational Animals*, with its account of the family as a practice offers a philosophical basis for an ethics of care that isn't gender based. Together, MacIntyre and Sayers give us a theologically grounded account of work in a good human life.

1. Sayers' preface to the published version of *The Man Born to Be King* discusses the doctrine as the framework of her plays, controlling the characters and locking the dramatic action together in a way which foreshadows Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984). Comparing the two in detail would be fruitful, but it is beyond the scope of this study.

2. Loades, *Feminist Theology Voices from the Past*, 170.

We possess an extended letter which gives us Sayers' perception of her task and method in theology. Sayers described what it is that "her sort" can safely do and categorised her own writings.

1. We can write a book, play or other work which genuinely and directly derives from such fragments of religious or human experience as we ourselves have (*The Zeal of Thy House* —the sin of the artist; *The Just Vengeance*—which is about the choosing of God through the only values we know). . . .
2. We can (if we feel like it) write a direct statement about our own experience. (*The Mind of the Maker*). . . .
3. We can *show you in images* [sic] experiences which we ourselves do not know, or know only imaginatively (*The Man Born to Be King*). Because in this, we do not need to pretend anything about ourselves. . . .
4. We can interpret another man, who has what we have not (we can translate and edit Dante). Our intellect can assess him and our imagination feels what he feels. . . .
5. We can, so far as our competence goes, help to disentangle the language-trouble by translating from one jargon to another. For this, we need to know both jargons thoroughly.<sup>3</sup>

In these five points she has categorized her writing over her lifetime. She does not include her detective fiction in her scheme, but I believe we can read her detective novels as narratives which show us the human values of work and of relationships grounded on equality. Her work as a playwright, a translator and a Christian apologist present a consistent theological ethic of work which is as applicable today as it was in the 1940s.

## Plan of the Book

Chapter 1 discusses Sayers' life, highlighting some of the influences on her writing and showing her constant interest in the question of work and integrity. An overview of her lifetime of writing is given.

Chapter 2 looks at Sayers' narratives, the detective fiction and her plays. In terms of attracting readers, her detective novels are the most important. She is part of the Golden Age of detective fiction, was a serious student of the genre, and a craftsman who brought the detective story from a simple whodunit to a novel of manners. Her novels show us her vision of work as a necessary part of a fulfilling life for all human beings. In her

3. Sayers, *Letters Vol. 4*, 141–42.

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detective fiction we find novels of social criticism that show us the importance of good work for men and for women, including for her hero, Lord Peter Wimsey. The plays are important because it was in her experience of the theater that her analogy for the Trinity came alive.

Chapter 3 discusses her war-time work, and will give a detailed account of Sayers' writings and speeches about work and vocation. The chapter will place Sayers in the Anglican Social Ethics of that period and highlight William Temple's influence in bringing Sayers to national prominence as a Christian thinker. The chapter aims to show what a significant national figure in the debate about social ethics and the post-war world Sayers was, and how her ideas are still relevant.

Chapter 4 explains the importance of Sayers' idea of human beings bearing the image of God in their ability to create. She created an analogy for the Trinity to the process of artistic creation. Her analogy to the Trinity brings that doctrine into the lived reality of Christian life, rescuing it from isolation in systematic theology by reconstructing social ethics on the need for men and women to live creatively in all areas of their lives. Her analogy is especially helpful to social ethics because it is not self-contained as Augustine's analogy of the human mind, but relational: the third term connects the person with other persons. From this analogy she develops her theological anthropology which understands the person as individual and essentially relational, thus accounting for particularity in Christian ethics without lapsing into an atomism of the individual of modern liberal capitalism.

Chapter 5 discusses Sayers' conception of good work which arises directly from her anthropology of person as creator. To fill out Sayers' account of good work, her writing is put into dialogue with Alasdair MacIntyre's idea of practices and their sustaining institutions and especially with MacIntyre's account of the family as a practice. This dialogue yields a human ethic of work that accounts for the interdependence of human beings, and the ethical requirements of caring for the weak, the young and the old that is gender neutral.