

Faith Story: Dorothy L. Sayers

If Christian faith is for you more a matter of thought than of emotion, you might turn to Dorothy Sayers as your patron saint.

Involved with the Anglican church all her life, respected as an eloquent proponent of Christian apologetics, acclaimed for her lucid and lovely theological writing, Sayers nonetheless said of herself: "I am quite without the thing known as 'inner light' or 'spiritual experience'". Instead it was her 'passionate intellect' which drew her to faith and enabled her to write so effectively about Christianity that the Archbishop of Canterbury described radio broadcast *The Man Born to Be King* as "one of the greatest contributions to the religious life of our times."



her

Sayers, the daughter of an Anglican minister, was born in 1893 in the headmaster's house of Christ Church Cathedral School in Oxford, England, during her father's tenure there. She won a scholarship to Somerville College of Oxford University and in 1915 graduated with first class honors in modern languages.

The routine and isolation of academia did not appeal to Sayers, so after university, she worked first at a publishing house and then at a London advertising firm where she soon crafted a successful national campaign for Colman's Mustard which engaged the public by telling stories about such members of the imaginary Mustard Club as Lord Bacon and Lady Hearty.

While still working at the advertising firm, Sayers began writing detective fiction and in 1923 published the first novel featuring her character "Lord Peter Wimsey", which was well-received. Sayers published twelve detective novels between 1923 and 1937. One of the noteworthy characteristics of her writing was that she used the techniques of fine literature in the popular genre of detective stories. Another distinction is that she published these novels in an era before the writing of mysteries was considered a woman's domain. She wrote these works, not to prove a point about a woman doing a man's job, but because she needed the money which she earned from the books and she found the genre fascinating.

However, she eventually shifted away from secular writing toward religious subjects, abandoning crime fiction to write dramas and interpretive essays on Christianity. In 1937, Sayers was asked to write a play for the Canterbury Festival. That first religious work, *The Zeal of Thy House*, was followed by the series of BBC radio plays titled *The Man Born to Be King*, which was very popular but caused a stir because Sayers had Christ speak in modern English.

Sayers continued to focus on Christian themes, producing essays and books that articulated her traditional Anglican theology in terms that were at once uncompromising, learned, and humorous. Her book *The Mind of the Maker*, takes as its thesis that an analogy can be drawn between the Persons of the Trinity and phases of the creative process. She suggests that the Father corresponds to the idea, the Son to the implementation, and the Spirit to the communication between the idea and its realization.

One of the concerns that Sayers addressed frequently in her religious writing and lectures was the extent to which Christ has been domesticated by Christianity. She found fault with preachers who,

emphasizing Jesus' humanity, turned "the Lion of Judah" into a household pet with a sweet disposition when in reality he was the most radical, shocking individual ever to live. She wrote: "Somehow or other, and with the best intentions, we have shown the world the typical Christian in the likeness of a crashing and rather ill-natured bore -- and this in the Name of the One who assuredly never bored a soul in those thirty-three years during which He passed through this world like a flame. Let us, in Heaven's name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction."

Sayers also said, "...faith is not primarily a 'comfort', but a truth about ourselves ... Only when we know what we truly believe can we decide whether it is 'comforting'".

The last major writing project which Sayers undertook was a translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The first two books of her translation, *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* were published in 1949 and 1955. When she died suddenly in 1957 at the age of 64, she was still working on the third book, *Paradiso*.

The New York Times obituary for Dorothy Sayers outlines both her crime fiction and her religious writing, but it ends with this personal note:

The author was described as a cheerful, friendly person who was at ease with all sorts of people. In her middle years, she liked to drive a motorcycle.

That seems to me the perfect conclusion to our summer of Faith Stories.

Works Consulted:

- *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*; published by the Editors of *Christian History Magazine*
- Dorothy Sayers; *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine*
- *The Gospel in Dorothy L. Sayers: Selections from her Novels, Plays, Letters, and Essays*
- Britannica website; <https://www.britannica.com>; "Dorothy L. Sayers"
- National Catholic Reporter website; "Biography Explores 'Subversive' Christianity of Novelist Dorothy Sayers"; 2-6-21
- New York Times archives website; "Dorothy Sayers, Author, Dies at 64"
- The Dorothy L. Sayers Society; www.sayers.org.uk
- VoegelinView; "The Inkling Who Wasn't There: Dorothy L. Sayers"; April 2, 2013
- Writers Write; <https://www.writerswrite.co.za>; "Literary Birthday -- 13 June -- Dorothy L. Sayers"
- Wheaton College Marion E. Wade Center; www.wheaton.edu