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Laura K. Simmons, *Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers*

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Laura K. Simmons, *Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005). 224 pp. ISBN 978-0801027376.

Allow me to express my gratitude to Laura Simmons for bringing so much of Dorothy Sayers' writing to light in a way that is clear, systematic and coherent. As a response to Sayers' theology, Simmons' book is remarkably apt because it not only seeks an intellectually rigorous engagement with Sayers' thought, but it also aims to make Sayers' thought accessible to contemporary readers. As such, Simmons' aim is thoroughly in line with Sayers' own desire to make Christian theology seem both reasonable and relevant to her own contemporaries. By publishing and organizing so much of Sayers' unpublished writing from the Marion E. Wade Center in Wheaton, IL, Simmons has performed a great service to academics and non-academics alike.

The most valuable aspect of Simmons' book is two-fold: first, she allows Sayers' voice to be heard clearly through the pages of her book, and second, she makes that voice accessible to a very wide audience.¹ Although Simmons is clearly a gifted researcher, the most exciting bits of *Creed without Chaos* are surely the many quotes from Sayers herself. Simmons also provides a helpful biography and context for Sayers' writing, which augments the sense that one is reading the 'real' Sayers. Simmons' choice to use so many of Sayers' own words, often quoting her at length, is surely a wise one because it allows Sayers' witty and insightful style to shine through. Furthermore, Simmons helpfully organises Sayers' thought according to general topics (incarnation, trinity, sin and redemption, work, women's issues, etc.). She makes Sayers more accessible to a wider audience by avoiding unnecessary theological jargon, as Sayers herself would have done, and by offering numerous practical ways that Christians can benefit from Sayers' writing. In her final chapter, 'Reclaiming Sayers for the People of God', Simmons clearly has the lay Christian in mind, and she points to some interesting ways that Christians have used Sayers' writings.

As this book was published in 2005, numerous reviews have already been written in other journals. For the most part, these reviews are very positive, and if there is any

reason to fault Simmons, it is usually in regards to the book's failure to fully satisfy the academic theologian. What is generally agreed upon is that Simmons' book does an excellent job of bringing Sayers to the lay Christian. While I also agree that Simmons' book does bring Sayers to the lay Christian, I would like to suggest that Simmons could have approached her subject in a more critical fashion.

One might object that Simmons is aiming to commend Sayers' work to a wide audience, and so a critical discussion of Sayers' thought is out of place. But, on the contrary, a critical appraisal of Sayers' work would simply attest to the obvious fact that Sayers did not have it all figured out, and would reveal the complexity within the writing of such a great thinker. Simmons' systematic approach to Sayers' work certainly has a tendency to smooth over certain inconsistencies. For example, while Sayers clearly places a great deal of importance upon the humanity of Jesus in her writing on the incarnation, and especially in her BBC radio play *The Man Born to be King*, why is this aspect of Christ so often diminished in her writing on the Trinity?

A second reason that someone with Simmons' aim might choose to be critical of their subject would be to show which aspects of Sayers' thought both are, and are not, applicable in relation to similar contemporary debates. Now, as I mentioned earlier, Simmons does argue that Sayers' writings are relevant and applicable for contemporary Christians. Indeed, she not only offers advice about how specific books and essays can be used by Christians today, but she also brings Sayers into conversation with Jacques Ellul (p. 117) and some recent thought on business ethics (pp. 118-22). But when Simmons points out the value of Sayers' writing for today, she rarely does so in a critical way. To illustrate what I mean, allow me to take one example of a topic, Sayers' writing on creativity and art, that Simmons recommends to Christians and show how a critical assessment of Sayers' work would actually lead to a more fruitful engagement.

In Simmons' exploration of Sayers' writing on creativity and art she focuses upon Sayers' book *The Mind of the Maker* and her essay 'Toward a Christian Aesthetic'. In regards to the first, she points out the great value of her chapter on 'scalene trinities', and she even shows how that particular chapter proved to be very valuable for a group that studies Sayers' work while also making art. In regards to the second, she suggests that it 'would also provide a helpful undergirding for their [artists'] work' (p. 171). I agree wholeheartedly with Simmons' recommendations, but I am a little worried by Simmons' implicit suggestion that Sayers' writing on creativity and art will speak with equal validity and power today as it did in her own day. Sayers' writing on creativity and art is hugely shaped by the theory that art is the expression of emotion, and especially by the work of R. G. Collingwood. That

Simmons neglects to connect Sayers' writing on creativity and art to its wider philosophical tradition is a remarkable omission, especially given that Sayers was an avid reader of philosophy, and that she explicitly mentions her debt to Collingwood at the beginning of 'Toward a Christian Aesthetic'.

As a result of her reliance upon Collingwood's philosophy of art, many of her assumptions about the nature of creativity and art have been severely criticized within recent philosophy and psychology of art. In particular, her tendency to write about creativity almost entirely in terms of the mind of the artist is far too narrow, and it neglects significant ways that creative practices are shaped by the artist's physical materials, collaborators and socio-cultural context. As a result, I would expect that many contemporary artists, and not simply those working in an academic environment, would find Sayers' writing on creativity to be rather dated. With these criticisms clearly in mind, however, one can see – perhaps it is even easier to see – how a book like *The Mind of the Maker* is still relevant to the contemporary reader. Much contemporary thinking on the arts has reacted strongly against the philosophical assumptions implicit in Sayers' writing on creativity and art in favour of a view of the artist as a mere puppet of cultural ideologies or as wholly at the service of the viewer. Sayers' writing on creativity and art, even though flawed, can still be used to portray a view of the artist, in contrast to postmodern criticism, as an originator of meaning. In other words, Sayers' claim that creativity is essential to being a human being still needs to be heard today, not because she offers such a compelling account of the creative process, but because postmodern thought tends toward a dehumanisation of the artist, by removing the human subject from artistic creativity, which Sayers also witnessed in the form of industrialisation and the assembly line.

Simmons' book could be improved if Sayers' writings were approached with a more critical eye, but this apparent weakness does not diminish the great value of the book as a whole. Indeed, it is my hope that *Creed without Chaos* will re-acquaint the Christian church with one of its greatest writers and thinkers. I concur with one reviewer who writes that 'the temptation to jump on the nearest airplane to Wheaton College, where Simmons did most of her research, armed with her list of relatively unknown essays, articles, broadcast talks and letters, is almost overwhelming'.

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1. Although, as Suzanne Bray points out in her review in *Journal of Anglican Studies* 4 (2006), pp. 117-18, Simmons may be speaking most powerfully to an American audience.

2. For example, William Harrison's review in *Anglican Theological Review* 88 (2006): 657-8
3. Bray, review in *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 118