

EXCERPT

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Choosing Community

Action, Faith, and Joy in the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers

October 15, 2019 | \$16, 150 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5374-8

Few writers in the twentieth century were as creative and productive as Dorothy L. Sayers, the English playwright, novelist, and poet. In this volume in the Hansen Lectureship Series, Christine Colón explores the role of community in Sayers's works. In particular, she considers how Sayers offers a vision of communities called to action, faith, and joy, and she reflects on how we also are called to live in community together.

Dorothy L. Sayers's Vision for Communities of Action

By all accounts, Dorothy L. Sayers, the English novelist, playwright, and poet, was a gifted writer and a somewhat eccentric figure, not unlike some of her own characters. Barbara Reynolds, her primary biographer, records one such evaluation of Sayers:

What a woman! Brilliant, erratic, rude and impatient as only dedicated writers and artists can be, earnest, hard-working, loving, yet never achieving settled love, deeply religious, with a flair for expressing old truths in new words, funny as well as witty, eccentric, curious in appearance, scholarly, a woman who knew her own mind and knew, too, that it was as good as any man's; a fighter who could be a worthy opponent in any kind of controversy.

In light of her own articulations of Christianity, perhaps "defender of the faith" is another title that could be applied to Sayers. Of course, a central element of the Christian faith is the importance of community, as diverse people are brought together through the Holy Spirit to be the one body of Christ.

In the first of her three lectures on the communal vision of Dorothy Sayers, Dr. Christine Colón points to Sayers's growth as a writer as demonstrated in her Lord Peter Wimsey novels through her portrayal of the roles of individuals who threaten or restore the health of the community. I have enjoyed reading these detective novels, but I had never considered that it is possible to trace Sayers's growth in her work as a writer by investigating the trajectory of her novels.

The importance of community was also a theme in Sayers's own life. She benefited from the communities of fellow writers, such as those in the Detection Club, a group of detective fiction authors that included G. K. Chesterton among others. In Chesterton's estimation, Sayers "sustains about the best level, in my opinion, of lively and intelligent writing in this style." Notably, Sayers was not an official member of "the Inklings," the famous writing group that included C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and others, but she was friends with several of its members. Moreover, she carried on extensive correspondence with many people, and she lauded the community of the theater that she discovered at the Canterbury Festival.

However, one community in which Sayers evidently did not find much support for her work was the church. Listen to her describe the church's approach to artists:

The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.

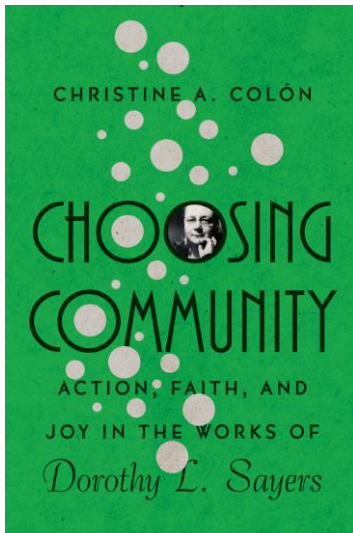


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Christine A. Colón (PhD, University of California at Davis) is professor of English at Wheaton College. She is the author of *Joanna Baillie and the Art of Moral Influence* and *Writing for the Masses: Dorothy L. Sayers and the Victorian Literary Tradition*. She is also the coauthor of *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church*.

Before we dismiss these claims, we should recall that Sayers's father, the Rev. Henry Sayers, was the chaplain at Christ Church, Oxford, so she speaks as a "daughter of the manse," who knew the realities of church life, perhaps all too well. Sayers considered her work as a writer to be a sacred task, but she did not hear the church value the work of artists. She bitterly laments that "the Church will tolerate, or permit, a pious intention to excuse work so ugly, so pretentious, so tawdry and twaddling, so insincere and insipid, so *bad* as to shock and horrify any decent craftsman." The reason the church does not encourage artists to pursue excellence in their work is that "she has forgotten that the secular vocation is sacred. Forgotten that a building must be good architecture before it can be a good church; that a painting must be well painted before it can be a sacred picture; that a work must be a good work before it can call itself God's work."

Sayers's devastating critique of the church's negative attitude toward works of art and the work of artists is a theme in her essays. Fortunately, that is not the theme of Professor Colón's lectures. Instead, she emphasizes the positive directions found in Sayers's work for building true communities where individuals joyfully support each other in their God-given work, a vision that applies to the church as well as other communities. All who seek the welfare of their communities will find reliable guidance by following Dr. Colón's exploration of the dramatic, eccentric, and whimsical vision of Dorothy Sayers for Christians living and working together in a healthy community.

—Taken from the introduction by Walter Hansen

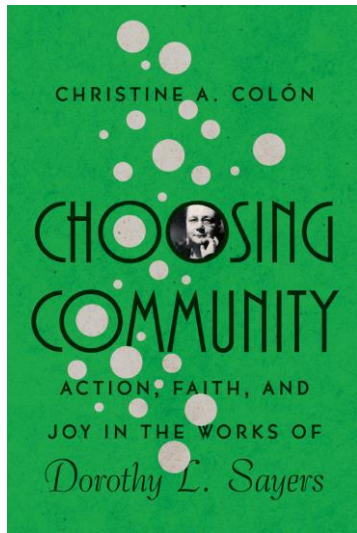


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DETAILS

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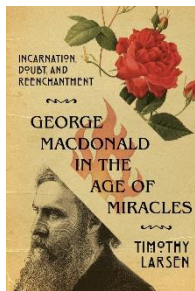
Few writers in the twentieth century were as creative and productive as Dorothy L. Sayers, the English playwright, novelist, and poet. In this volume in the Hansen Lectureship Series, Christine Colón explores the role of community in Sayers's works. In particular, she considers how Sayers offers a vision of communities called to action, faith, and joy, and she reflects on how we also are called to live in community together.

The Hansen Lectureship Series from InterVarsity Press

The Hansen Lectureship Series features reflections related to the imaginative work and lasting influence of seven British authors, including C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, and Dorothy L. Sayers. The books in the series are based on the Ken and Jean Hansen Lectureship, an annual lecture series hosted at the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, named in honor of former Wheaton College trustee Ken Hansen and his wife, Jean, and endowed in their memory by Walter and Darlene Hansen. Each book includes three lectures by a Wheaton College faculty member on one or more of the Wade Center authors with responses by fellow faculty members.

Founded in 1965, the Marion E. Wade Center houses a major research collection of writings and related materials by and about seven British authors: Owen Barfield, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, Dorothy L. Sayers, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. The Wade Center collects, preserves, and makes these resources available to researchers and visitors through its reading room, museum displays, educational programming, and publications. All of these endeavors are a tribute to the importance of the literary, historical, and Christian heritage of these writers.

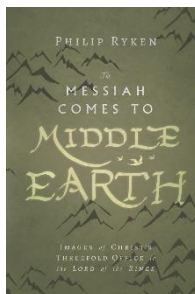
Titles in the Hansen Lectureship Series include:



Choosing Community: Action, Faith, and Joy in the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers by Christine A. Colón (October 2019)

George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment by Timothy Larsen (November 2018)

Timothy Larsen considers the legacy of George MacDonald, the Victorian Scottish author and minister who is best known for his pioneering fantasy literature. Larsen explores how MacDonald sought to counteract skepticism, unbelief, naturalism, and materialism and to herald instead the reality of the miraculous, the supernatural, the wondrous, and the realm of the spirit.



The Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth: Images of Christ's Threefold Office in The Lord of the Rings by Philip Ryken (November 2017)

Can The Lord of the Rings help us understand the Christian faith more deeply? Wheaton College president Philip Ryken mines the riches of Tolkien's theological imagination. In the characters of Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn, Ryken hears echoes of the one who is the true prophet, priest, and king, considering what that threefold office means for the calling of all Christians.



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