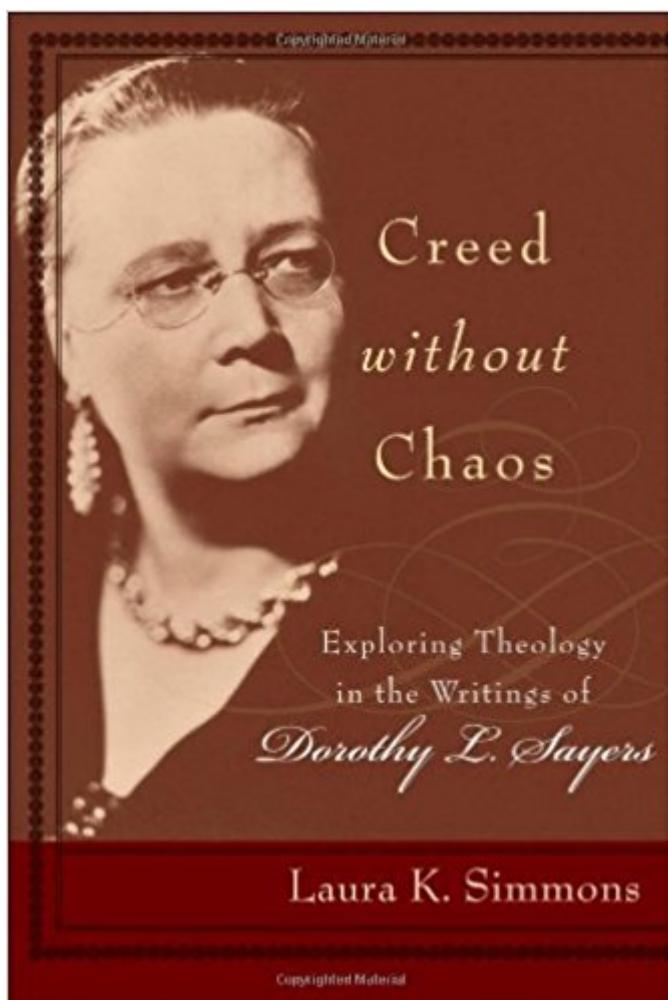


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# Creed Without Chaos: Exploring Theology In The Writings Of Dorothy L. Sayers



## Synopsis

British novelist and playwright Dorothy L. Sayers, best known for her Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels, possessed the unique combination of keen theological sense, tremendous writing skill, and a deep concern with how ordinary people understand Christian life. She stands, along with C. S. Lewis, among the most vigorous and popular twentieth-century defenders of Christianity for her work in relating theological themes to everyday concerns. *Creed without Chaos* performs a service for readers by providing a careful introduction to Sayers's writings from a theological rather than a literary perspective. Laura Simmons further provides a powerful argument for Sayers's continuing relevance to the church.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In this superb commentary on Sayers, Laura Simmons brilliantly helps church members and leaders of all sorts recover the task of speaking biblical truth clearly. Not only did this book inspire me immensely with Sayers's (and Simmons's) keen theological insights into such topics as how the writing process illustrates the Trinity, but it also offers great suggestions for future study of Sayers. A concise glossary of recurrent doctrinal deviations helps us avoid and combat them, and encouraging excerpts from Sayers's letters show us the kind of people we need to be to serve God in our present circumstances. This is an exceedingly timely book." -Marva J. Dawn, teaching fellow in spiritual theology, Regent College, Vancouver

"As the institutional church falters, lay theology becomes increasingly important, infusing dogma with new life. In twentieth-century England, the list

of such lay thinkers was impressive Chesterton, Lewis, Eliot, and the least known of this group, Dorothy Sayers. With the publication of *Creed without Chaos*, readers now have access to the breadth of Sayers's theology, particularly as expressed in her voluminous letters. In the process, Simmons has provided an important resource for America's twenty-first-century church."-Robert K. Johnston, Professor of Theology and Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary"Simmons has done us a great service in writing the first full-length, comprehensive survey of the theology of Dorothy L. Sayers. This enterprise has difficulties. Most of the devotees of Lord Peter Wimsey and many who appreciate the translations of Dante are not interested in theology, and theologians raise their eyebrows and say, 'Sayers?' For Sayers, however, the novels, the theology, and the translations were all 'variations upon a hymn to the Master Maker,' and Simmons celebrates the hymn and the value of its theological variations for the twenty-first century."-Canon John Thurmer, former chancellor of Exeter Cathedral"A thorough evaluation of Sayers's theological contribution is long overdue. In recent years, attention has been paid to important features of her life, literary work, and fictional writings. This volume, the fruit of more than a decade of investigation into Sayers's thought, draws on the full range of both her creative writings and her informative letters. In doing so, it further enhances Sayers's reputation as one of the twentieth century's most significant and vigorous apologists for the Christian faith."-Robert Banks, senior research and development fellow, Center for the Study of Christian Thought and Experience, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia --Wipf and Stock Publishers --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Endorsements: "In this superb commentary on Sayers, Laura Simmons brilliantly helps church members and leaders of all sorts recover the task of speaking biblical truth clearly. Not only did this book inspire me immensely with Sayers's (and Simmons's) keen theological insights into such topics as how the writing process illustrates the Trinity, but it also offers great suggestions for future study of Sayers. A concise glossary of recurrent doctrinal deviations helps us avoid and combat them, and encouraging excerpts from Sayers's letters show us the kind of people we need to be to serve God in our present circumstances. This is an exceedingly timely book."--Marva J. Dawn, teaching fellow in spiritual theology, Regent College, Vancouver "As the institutional church falters, lay theology becomes increasingly important, infusing dogma with new life. In twentieth-century England, the list of such lay thinkers was impressive--Chesterton, Lewis, Eliot, and the least known of this group, Dorothy Sayers. With the publication of *Creed without Chaos*, readers now have access to the breadth of Sayers's theology, particularly as expressed in her voluminous letters. In the process, Simmons has provided an important resource for America's twenty-first-century

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Most who have encountered Dorothy L Sayers at all have done so through Lord Peter Whimsey, the gentleman detective. While these are some of the better written novels on the genre, Sayers' contributions to the world of understanding God are especially insightful. Her greatest skill was to add clarity to her topics without her personal beliefs fogging them up. Simmons carefully researches volumes of personal and "professional" writings to sculpt a dimensional view of a fascinating personas well as a thoughtful writer. fully referenced and annotated.

Dorothy L. Sayers' writings about seven theological topics that were of particular concern to her, and her related thoughts as expressed in 30,000 pages of her letters which are at the Wade Center of Wheaton College, make up the subject matter of Professor Laura K. Simmons's book. Although less well-known than C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, T. S. Eliot, and G. K. Chesterton (who preceded the others in time by about a generation), Dorothy Sayers, who wrote during the first half of the 20th century, was one of their milieu. When Chesterton died, Dorothy wrote a letter to his wife in which she remarked that she thought "G. K.'s books" had influenced her more than any others. She exchanged letters with C. S. Lewis, references to which occur in the copious footnotes of this book, and she sometimes attended meetings of the Inklings society. Dorothy shared the concerns of these other Christians regarding the crumbling of traditional Christian "orthodoxy" apparent in their world

and due in part to the effects of "modernism." For about a century new ideas such as conveyed by the theory of Darwin, the science of psychology, a more industrialized society providing a greater availability of consumer goods, and other factors had weakened religious faith and church attendance had fallen off. Dorothy felt that churches and churchmen were doing a poor job of communicating with the common people and that traditional forms of church life and religious language had become too stiff, too stuffy, worn out, too removed from ordinary life, and were unexciting, virtually meaningless and irrelevant to most people. For various reasons pointed out in this book, she believed it was important that the public (and the society at large) understand and become educated about certain theological matters. As author Laura Simmons says, Dorothy thought "it was imperative that people be jolted out of their religious complacency." Overall, Dorothy wanted to "sanctify" the laity, the practice of creative art, and actually all work. She wrote newspaper articles and dramas for radio and theatre in which religious subjects were portrayed by characters who spoke ordinary English, including contemporary slang. They came across as down-to-earth, everyday people with ordinary vocations. Jesus Christ, in her "The Man Born to be King" (1943), wasn't (as a hypothetical instance) an elevated, typically ethereal being who'd stepped out of an icon and who communicated with other stylized religious characters addressing one another as "thee" and "thou." That would have been the "religious" expectation in the minds of most people for the portrayal of a religious subject. Sayers' presentation of Jesus struck some traditionalists as objectionable. On the other hand, a play that she wrote about "The Emperor Constantine" (1951), which included a scene portraying a meeting of Christians in process of composing the Nicene Creed, turned out to be very exciting to the audience, even those from the commonest, not-highly-educated classes. The audience actually became engrossed in the theological issues and animated about the theological topics (!) partly because the language of the play managed to make the ideas involved quite accessible to them. Dorothy's father was an Anglican clergyman and she grew up in a rectory, was taught Latin by her father, learned other languages and subjects from governesses and at school. As Professor Simmons states, Sayers had a "formidable intellect." She also had an uncommon ability for expressing herself in writing. She (like Tolkien) thought that creative works ought not to specifically proselytize about religion. In her creative works, she did not write to evangelize; rather, she wanted "to express an image, to create and to incarnate the creative idea God had planted in her

Most people, when they hear of Dorothy Sayers, immediately think of her delightful detective novels based around Lord Peter Wimsey. But she was much more than another Agatha Christie. She was

also a superb thinker and committed Christian. A contemporary of C.S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot, Sayers was a first-rate thinker who had a passionate belief in the importance of Christian doctrine and theology. Unfortunately she has tended to be overshadowed by the likes of other famous Christian laypeople from England: Lewis, Eliot, Tolkien, Muggeridge and Chesterton. But she was in many ways their equal, and she can rightly be described as one of our most important Christian intellects and authors of recent times. Sayers was appalled at the general lack of doctrinal knowledge amongst most believers, and she wrote extensively on the need to develop a Christian mind. And she strived to make theological truths accessible to the common man. It is her theological interests that make up the theme of this important book. Laura Simmons is well versed in the writings of Sayers. Indeed, she spent one summer reading through the 30,000 pages of letters written by and to Sayers. This book demonstrates that Simmons has a very good grasp indeed of the mind and writings of Sayers. The title of Simmons' book refers of course to the 1940 essay by Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* In that important tract Sayers demonstrates her clear grasp of the importance of right belief as the basis of right living. Orthodoxy, in other words, precedes orthopraxis. We cannot rightly live the Christian life if we do not have a right understanding of basic Christian doctrines and teaching. Simmons examines a number of theological concerns that Sayers addressed over her important career. Sayers wrote on many theological issues, on the nature of words and language, on women's issues, and creativity and art. Simmons explores all these vital topics in depth. The very extensive bibliography of both primary and secondary sources shows that Simmons' has deeply mined the works of Sayers, and those written about her. Hers is a first-rate treatment of a first-rate Christian thinker and writer. Simmons deserves praise for bringing the theological side of Sayers back into the public spotlight.

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