“Vocation in Work”

DOROTHY L. SAYERS

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Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) studied medieval literature at Oxford, where she was one of the first women to receive a degree. Her writing ranged from detective novels about Lord Peter Wimsey to a translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy to religious essays and plays. She wrote popular journalism both defending and constructively criticizing the Church of England.

In December 1940, the leaders of the churches in Britain put forward as one of the points necessary for the reconstruction of society: “That the sense of Divine vocation must be restored to a man’s daily work.” By thus lifting the subject of labor out of the sphere of economics, and calling for a sacramental relation between man and his work, they were courageously grappling with a problem which too many “social planners” have scandalously neglected.

Since the break with the Catholic tradition in the fifteenth century, religious opinion in the Reformed Churches has relied for guidance chiefly upon the text of the Canonical Scriptures. Oddly enough, apart from one very noble passage in the Apocrypha, the Scriptures are not very explicit on the subject of work; and I think that our feeling about it may have been too strongly influenced by an unimaginative interpretation of the famous passage in Genesis about the curse of Adam. “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (Gen. 3:17).

Work, it seemed, was a curse and a punishment; perhaps this encouraged men to feel that no blessing and no sacrament could be associated with

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it. Yet the whole of Christian doctrine centers round the great paradox of redemption, which asserts that the very pains and sorrows by which fallen man is encompassed can become the instruments of his salvation, if they are accepted and transmuted by love. "O blessed sin," says the Ambrosian liturgy boldly, "that didst merit such and so great a Redeemer." The first Adam was cursed with labor and suffering; the redemption of labor and suffering is the triumph of the second Adam — the Carpenter nailed to the cross.

We ought, perhaps, to look a little more closely at that profound and poetic myth of the creation and fall of man. "God," says the writer, "made man in his own image — in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen. 1:27). And the first thing he tells us about God, in whose image both man and woman were created, is that He was Himself a Creator. He made things. Not presumably, because He had to, but because He wanted to. He made light and water, and earth and birds, and fish and animals, and enjoyed what He had done. And then He made man "in his own image" — a creature in the image of a Creator. And there is indeed one thing which is quite distinctive about man: he makes things — not just one uniform set of necessary things, as a bee makes honeycomb, but an interminable variety of different and not strictly necessary things, because he wants to. Even in this fallen and unsatisfactory life, man is still so near His divine pattern that he continually makes things, as God makes things, for the fun of it. He is homo faber — man the craftsman — and this is the point from which I want to set out. Man is a maker, who makes things because he wants to, because he cannot fulfill his true nature if he is prevented from making things for the love of the job. He is made in the image of the Maker, and he must himself create or become something less than a man.

Can we really believe that the writer of Genesis supposed the unfallen happiness of Adam and Eve to consist in an interminable idleness? If so, a study of the tale itself will correct that idea — the poet imagined for man no such hell of unmitigated boredom. Adam was put in the garden of Eden "to dress and till it," and for intellectual occupation he had the surely very enjoyable task of naming all the animals. What, then, in the writer’s mind, was the really operative part of the curse? The work was to be more difficult, certainly — there were to be thorns and thistles — but there was to be something else as well. Work was to be conditioned by economic necessity — that was the new and ominous thing. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." And here we may look at what the materialist dogma of Communism has said about man’s nature: "Man is first man when he produces the means of livelihood." The means of livelihood. To the assertion, "Man is only
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man when he produces (or makes)," the Christian may readily assent: for
that is the Adam made in the image of God. But when the words "the means
of livelihood" are added, they rivet upon the essential nature of man the
judgment of man's corruption: "economic man" is Adam under the curse.
The economic factor in human society is, of course, a reality, as sin and pain
and sorrow and every other human evil are realities; and it is the duty of
Christians to accept and redeem those real evils. But to assume, as we have
increasingly allowed ourselves to assume of late years — to assume, as so
many well-intentioned architects of an improved society assume today —
that economics is the sole basis of man's dealings with nature and with his
fellow-men, is the very negation of all Christian principle. This assumption
is rooted in a lie; it is a falsehood that runs counter to the law of human na-
ture; and like everything that runs counter to the nature of things, it can
only lead to the judgment of catastrophe. For this reason it is impossible
that the economic situation should ever be rightly adjusted so long as it is
looked upon as being merely an economic question. To get the economic
situation dealt with we must lift it out of the economic sphere altogether
and consider first what is the right relation between the work itself and the
worker who is made in the image of the eternal Craftsman.

Now this point of view, which a few centuries ago would have been a
commonplace, is today almost inconceivably remote from the ideas of the
ordinary man. It appears to him to be a kind of theoretical luxury, out of all
relation to the facts of life. He will ask, How can we indulge in any such
high-falutin romance about work until we have gained a measure of eco-

momic security? And again, How can men hope to enjoy their work crea-
tively when most of it is so distasteful that they can only be induced to do it
by the necessity for earning a livelihood? The answer to this is one which it
is almost impossible to get people to understand: namely, that it is precisely
the concentration upon economic security which makes both security and
enjoyment in work unattainable, because it is a setting up of the means to an
end as an end-in-itself, so that the true end and object of work is lost and
forgotten.

Let us for a moment consider a group of workers who have never — in
spite of much incidental corruption — altogether abandoned the divine con-
ception of what work ought to be. They are people whose way of life is, in
essentials, so sharply distinguished from that of the ordinary worker that the
designers of economic Utopias can find no place for them, and will scarcely
allow them to be workers at all. Economic society has grown so far away
from them that it views them with suspicion as mysterious aliens, does its
best to push them out of the control of practical affairs, and is usually con-

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temptuous and hostile at the very sound of their name. That these men and
cut off from
women have become, as it were, an enclosed community, is bad for the world and bad for them. It is not that the working world
does not see and hear plenty of them — as indeed it sees and hears and gossips about the animals in the Zoo; but always with the iron bars of misunderstanding set up between. This odd, alien community is that of the men and
cut off from
women who live by and for the works of the creative imagination — the people whom we lump together under the general name of "artists."
The great primary contrast between the artist and the ordinary worker
is this: the worker works to make money, so that he may enjoy those things
in life which are not his work and which his work can purchase for him; but
the artist makes money by his work in order that he may go on working. The artist does not say: "I must work in order to live"; but "I must contrive to
make money so that I may live to work." For the artist there is no distinction
between work and living. His work is his life, and the whole of his life — not
merely the material world about him, or the colors and sounds and events
that he perceives, but also all his own personality and emotions, the whole
of his Life — is the actual material of his work.
Consider the great barrier that this forges between himself and the economic worker, in quite practical and mundane ways. For example, it would be
preposterous for a genuine artist to submit himself to strict trade-union rules. How could he agitate for an eight-hour day or keep to it if he got it? There is no
moment in the twenty-four hours when he can truthfully say he is not working. The emotions, the memories, the sufferings, the dreams even of the periods when he is not actually at his desk or his easel — these are his stuff and his
tools; and his periods of leisure are the periods when his creative imagination
may be most actively at work. He cannot say, "Here work stops and leisure begins"; he cannot stop work unless he stops living. Or how could he, in his own
financial interests or those of his fellows, adopt the policy of keeping his work, in speed or quality, down to the level of the slowest or stupidest of his colleagues. . . . Any limitation upon his right to work himself to death if he chooses, or to choose the kind of work he will do, that he will resist to his last
breath, for to set fetters upon his work is to set fetters upon his life.
There is a price paid for the artist's freedom, as for all freedom. He, of all
workers in the world, has the least economic security. The money value of
his work is at the mercy of every wind of public opinion; and if he falls by
the wayside he cannot claim unemployment benefit, or look to the State to
pay doctor's bills, educate his children, and compensate him for injuries incurred in the exercise of his profession. If he falls off a cliff while painting a
picture, if he loses his wits or suffers a failure of invention, society will not

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hold itself responsible; nor, if his publisher suddenly decides to be rid of him, can he sue the man for wrongful dismissal. Moreover, he is taxed with a singular injustice; while the world pays tribute to his unworldliness by expecting him to place a great deal of his time, energy, and stock-in-trade at the disposal of the community without payment. The artist puts up with these disabilities because his way of life is not primarily rooted in economics. True, he often demands high prices for his work — but he wants the money not in order that he may stop working and go away and do something different, but in order that he may indulge in the luxury of doing some part of his work for nothing. “Thank heaven,” the artist will say, “I’ve made enough with that book, or play, or picture of mine, to take a couple of years off to do my own work”—by which he probably means some book or play or picture which will cost him an immense amount of labor and pains and which he has very little chance of selling. In fact, when the artist rejoices because he has been relieved from the pressure of economic necessity, he means that he has been relieved—not from the work, but from the money.

Now, this is not merely because the artist is his own master, working for himself and not for an employer. The same thing holds good of the actor, for example, who is quite literally an employed person— who can actually draw unemployment benefit. The actor, like other artists, passionately enjoys doing work for nothing or next to nothing if only he can afford to do it. And he never talks of himself as “employed”; if he is employed, he tells you that he is “working.”

I think we can measure the distance we have fallen from the idea that work is a vocation to which we are called, by the extent to which we have come to substitute the word “employment” for “work.” We say we must solve the “problem of unemployment”—we reckon up how many “hands” are “employed”; our social statistics are seldom based upon the work itself—whether the right people are doing it, or whether the work is worth doing. We have come to set a strange value on leisure for its own sake—not the leisure which enables a man to get on properly with his job, but the leisure which is a polite word for idleness. The commodities which it is easiest to advertise and sell are those which purport to “take the work out” of everything—the tinned foods that need no cooking—the clothes that wash themselves—the switches and gadgets that save time and make leisure. Which would be grand if we eagerly needed that extra time and leisure in order to make and do things. Alas, the commodities easiest to sell after the labor-saving gadgets are the inventions for saving us from the intolerable leisure we have produced, and for painlessly killing the time we have saved. The entertainment to which we can passively listen, the game we can watch
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without taking part in it, the occupation, however meaningless, which can relieve us from the trouble of thinking. As a result, far too many people in this country seem to go about only half alive. All their existence is an effort to escape from what they are doing. And the inevitable result of this is a boredom, a lack of purpose, a passivity which eats life away at the heart and a disillusionment which prompts men to ask what life is all about, and complain, with only too much truth, that they can "make nothing of it."

Now that the Churches are setting themselves to tackle this dislocation that has weakened our grip upon work, I think they will find in it the root cause of a great many other evils — evils that they have failed to cure directly because they were treating the symptoms rather than the disease. It is, for instance, passivity, lack of purpose, and a failure to discharge pent-up creative energy into daily work that drives a civilization into that bored and promiscuous sexuality which derives not from excess of vitality, but from lack of something better to do, and which is always the mark of a civilization which has lost sight of true purpose in its work.

Or again: the appearance of a parasitic and exploiting class is closely connected with a way of life deficient in opportunities for creative activity. In this connection, both churches and secular "planners" should give some attention to what is known as the "woman's question" — an important subject usually ignored in the schemes for a "new order."

In this war, as in the last, the women are being called upon to come out of their homes and do, as we say, "the men's work." They come, and they do it, and everybody says how splendidly they do. But the offers of work to them are usually accompanied with the warning that after the war the men will have to come back to their jobs — and, indeed, I notice a very strong tendency, both on the Left and on the Right, to suggest that when the crisis is past the women are to be pushed out of the trades and professions and restored, as far as possible, to their homes, in the interests of "employment."

I see the men's point of view about this. I understand the resentment against the women who "take the men's jobs." But it should be realized that, under modern conditions, the opportunities for intelligent work afforded by the home are very greatly restricted compared with what they were, and that many of the women's traditional jobs have, since the age of mechanical industry began, been filched from them by the men. The baking industry, the whole of the nation's spinning, weaving, and dyeing, the breweries, the distilleries, the confectionery, the preserving, curing and pickling of food, the perfumery, the lace-making, the dairying, the cheese-making have been transferred from the home to the factory, and the control and management — the intelligent part of them — handed over to men. It was the commer-
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least; and not merely to an idle and soul-deadening killing of time. But these things are at best palliatives. They do not get to the root of the matter, which is the nation-wide and world-wide acceptance of a false scale of values about work, money, and leisure.

First of all, is there anything whatever that will not only reconcile the worker to even the most monotonous and soul-killing kind of toil, but also make him ready to undertake it with eagerness and a kind of passionate satisfaction?

The enthusiasm with which labor went to work after the Dunkirk disaster and during the “Tanks-for-Russia” week suggests that the power that enables men to work with enthusiasm is a real conviction of the worth of their work. They will endure much if, like the artist, they passionately desire to see the job completed and to know that it is very good. But what are we to say about a civilization which employs so many of its workers in doing work which has no worth at all, work which no living man with a soul in him could desire to see, work which has nothing whatever to justify it, except the manufacture of employment and the creation of profits? That is the real vicious circle in which we are all enclosed. That is the real indictment we have to bring against a commercial age. And it is one which we cannot meet by the adjustment of wages, or by the restriction of private enterprise, or by the transference of capital from the individual to the State, . . .

I do not think that when this war ends we shall enter upon a period of security and stability and prosperity. I do not see how we could — and I do not think it really desirable that we should. But I do think it essential that we should somehow contrive to enter upon a period of eager, and honest, and dedicated work. A period when we shall be prepared to live hard and rough so long as the work is done; when we shall forget to think about money and think first and foremost about the true needs of man and the right handling of material things. If, when the strains and stresses of war are over, we try to let up and sink back and rest, we shall destroy ourselves. In war, work has found its soul — this time we must not lose it again in peace. Instead of crying out for an “enduring peace,” we might do well to hope, not exactly for an enduring war, but for the carrying over into the strenuous times that lie ahead of that meaning which war has taught us to give to work.

I will not, as some of our prophets do, offer the slightest hope of a secure and easy time “after the war.” I think it will be a time when we must continue to adventure forth, “a fire on the one hand and a deep water on the other,” working as we have never worked in our lives and looking to the end of the work.