

Dorothy L. Sayers's Statement of Faith in History and the Future

“[T]here is no point in history to which we can go back as the ultimate and indisputable beginning of misfortune. Everybody has his own particular bogey on which he likes to put the blame for all subsequent disorders: the emancipation of women, the industrial revolution, the Reformation, the collapse of feudalism, the rise of feudalism, the fall of Rome, the crucifixion of Christ, the intrusive appearance of Christ, the influence of Greek philosophy, the fall of man, or—in the last resort—the creation of the world. Further than that we mercifully cannot go. All these events have happened and cannot now ‘unhappen.’ What we have to see is that in every evil there was and is always a good, which is the positive side of evil. We must take all the developments of history as they are, and from the existing good and evil we must hammer out the positive good.”

“I wish only to emphasize two facts: first, that the principles to which we are now clinging amid the wreck of the philosophies are the Christian principles of the Western-Mediterranean civilization; that they are rocking beneath us because we have knocked away the foundation of eternal values on which they were built, and that unless we can find some eternal basis on which to rest them, they will founder and our civilization with them. And secondly: that the Spiritual Man is so utterly a part of our nature that we cannot cast him out; if we deprive ourselves of the eternal Absolute, we shall inevitably make an absolute of some temporal thing or other—be it Liberty, Equality or Progress in any of their possible forms; be it Race or Reason, or even Unreason, or the Perpetual Flux of Relativity. Yet there is nothing temporal than can bear the strain of being thus defiled; so that every earthly absolute in the end produces a condition of life which is intolerable and provokes revolt into its opposite, with a violence that makes war inevitable.”
--*Begin Here: A Statement of Faith* (1940/41)

During the years surrounding World War II, Dorothy L. Sayers often wrote on matters of faith, culture, and social action. Her 1940 examination of the war, *Begin Here: A War-Time Essay*, was written for a general British audience, and though she often made reference to her Christian faith and indeed built her case upon it, she did not assume her audience was entirely formed by the faith. (The 1941 American edition, subtitled *A Statement of Faith*, acknowledged certain aspects of the book were very British but hoped it would speak into the American context as well.) Among other things, the book was an analysis of the political, social, and economic challenges that were facing Britain, but also Western society in general, and while she insisted that there was no way to return to the cultural past, her analysis was based upon a broad historical argument that sought to address what had gone wrong. This wasn't the only time she sought to set out a theological response to the war. In 1946, after the war, she wrote and saw performed at Lichfield Cathedral her play, *The Just Vengeance*. It proposed that the cross of Christ was the salvific answer to the burden of suffering which the war had brought to bombers and bombed alike. Her answer to the problem of history might be said to finally be one of theatricality, yet this also included a general principle of salvific responsibility. Being offered redemption, we nonetheless have a work of penitent reexamination and cultural creative renewal before us. We cannot return to the past, we can only work with and transcend it.

During the intervening years surrounding the war, she also wrote a number of important essays of Christian apologetics and cultural criticism that sought to speak into the situation that the war had forced the country to face. Sayers was most concerned with the nature of work, and the question of creativity became a central focus of hers. In *Begin Here*, she suggests that “Creative Man” might be the vision of humanity to come. To reach this conclusion, she briefly traced a history of cultural conceptions of human nature and their resulting socio-political-economic

ideals. It is important to keep in mind, that she acknowledged that these ideals were as often honored in the breach—the medieval and Reformation Church failed, for example, yet she did see such ideals as having cultural impact. She also argued that they continued in various forms up to the present. These were not meant to be airtight examples of periodization. Rather, they represent different impulses that often overlap and create more dangerous hybrids.

Vision of Humanity	Basic description	Historical Period	
Theological	“The Whole Man, the image of God”	Patristic-Medieval-Reformation; Great Man history	A powerful balance of divine sovereignty, equality under God; freedom to be true to one’s nature; high view of arts and crafts; trust in reason under God
Humanist	“The Whole Man, a value in himself, apart from God”	Renaissance-Reformation	Rise of modern science; Authority of the Bible as central to the individual
Rational	“Man the embodied Intelligence”	Enlightenment; Constitutional history	The theory of the Sovereign People; liberty of minorities; extension of franchise with education
Biological	“Homo Sapiens, the intelligent animal”	Darwin; Social Darwinism	Despite claims of progress, it cannot end in moral perfection or even human improvement
Sociological	“Man the member of the herd”	Social history; Industrial Revolution	Behaviorist assumptions—mass data is what increasingly matters to human understanding
Psychological	“Man the response to environment”	Freud/ Psychoanalysis	History as interplay of irrational forces
Economic	“Man the response to the means of livelihood”	Smith, Marx, Economic history	Laissez-faire capitalism did not bring economic freedom; led to class competition; Five-year totalitarian plans even worse

Sayers goes on to argue that these ideals tended to create attempts at ideological absolutes, but were often balanced by counter-opposing ideals: individualism by the ordered community; nationalism by desire for international peace; equality by economic freedom; the majority rule by political equality, and so on. She insisted that it was a residual Christian theological instinct that supported this: all temporal values need to act as checks against one another because none represents the true transcendent Absolute, which exists outside history. Sayers hoped that an economic system could be found that better distributed the means of wealth without denying the positives of mass production or of limited competition. She thought that some things should be produced on mass, others in more limited skilled ways, and yet other wasteful things outlawed. She also held that serious respect needed to be considered for soil conservation and agricultural production. Above all, she looked to the creative artist, as well as the scholar and doctor, as examples of work done for other reasons than simple economic gain. Thus, “Creative Man” might offer a way forward. Such a view recognizes the relative limits of our human and material existence, even as it acknowledges a deep theological structure—that of the Creative God whose image we are made in.