

Book Reviews

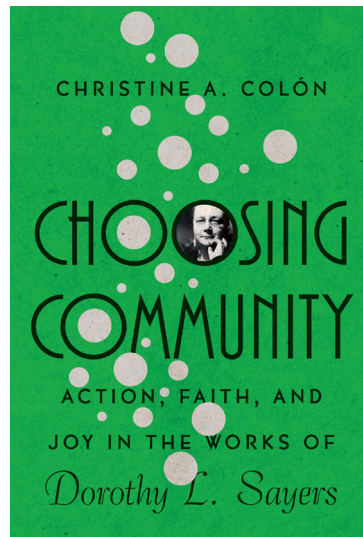
VII: *Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center*, Vol. 37 (2020)

Christine A Colón. *Choosing Community: Action, Faith, and Joy in the Work of Dorothy L Sayers.* Hansen Lectureship series, Marion E. Wade Center. (Downers Grover: InterVarsity Press, 2019), \$14.40.

In *Choosing Community: Action, Faith, and Joy in the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers*, Dr. Christine A. Colón, professor of English at Wheaton College, explores, within Sayers's extensive literary corpus, the underlying and multifaceted links among social actuality, daily life within community context, a spirit of shared purpose, and joyful faith-based commitment. This book is the published result of a three-part lecture series given by Colón at the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, as part of the Ken and Jean Hansen Lectureship

In her first essay, "Dorothy L. Sayers's Vision for Communities of Action," Colón discusses Sayers's detection novels in order to examine her viewpoint regarding the socially impactful interaction between individuals and community with regard to vocation, social order, the effects of crime as social disorder, and ways to influence communities to action. Furthermore, Colón examines Sayers's commitment to the ideal of good work well done, which may be observed within the plot and character development of her novels.

Colón focuses the reader's attention upon the conventions of detective fiction (7), with a helpful analysis of the literary devices Sayers used to intertwine individual and community values through the medium of detection. Sayers did not attempt to write fiction with a theological perspective in mind (31). Her detection principles were grounded in the psychology of human problem-solving skills and material discovery—primarily through the efforts of her main characters Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane—and supported by community involvement. Murder presents a serious social disruption to the orderly workings of community, and solving a murder mystery calls for shared action of the disrupted community. The efforts of Wimsey are dependent upon such cooperation, as Colón illustrates with a detailed discussion



of the communal intricacies of church bell ringing from *The Nine Tailors* (1934). In this sense, shared community action becomes the material key to a resolution of social imbalance. Whether there can be a complete and final restoration of communal balance after injustice or serious disorder is a question Sayers tackles in her detective novels and refines in later writings of sacred drama. Community action, to Sayers, is only human action, after all, and subject to imperfect results.

Dr. Tiffany Eberle Kriner, associate professor of English at Wheaton College, responds to this first essay (32-40). Kriner extends Colón's argument by reference to Sayers's novel, *Have His Carcase* (1932), adding the important element of setting to the communal nature of detection: "To solve the wicked problems of the world is to *pay attention to place*" (34). Consideration of the setting forces Harriet to look outside of herself, into the environment and within community, for resolution. Kriner's pragmatic approach to Sayers's detection series allows for contemporary readers to apply Sayers's principles within their own personal and communal spheres. In tandem with Colón's argument, Kriner also observes that Sayers's novels move from being solely novels of detection to being novels of humanity (39).

The discussion transitions, in essay two, from a focus on material community action regarding social justice to the more abstract realm of spiritual community and justice on a higher level. In "Dorothy L. Sayers's Vision for Communities of Faith," the author takes us into the communal world of the Canterbury Cathedral festival play, *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937), the lesson-filled tragedy of medieval architect William of Sens. In this play, the physical arch becomes symbolic of community support and strength; as William muses, "That's the way to build—each stone carrying his neighbor's burden" (41-42). By focusing on medieval architectural principles, with an emphasis on the symbolism of Christ not only as Architect but as keystone, Sayers reveals that a Christ-centered theology must remain the critical pillar and support of church community.

In this reader's opinion, "Communities of Faith" is the most informative and thought-provoking essay of the book. Sayers emphasizes the importance of building strong communal ties through a mutual Christian support structure composed of individual bricks (members of community), all of whom are together ultimately reliant on Christ as keystone. In her assessment of Sayers's emphasis on this structure, Colón repeatedly returns to the primary and fundamental point that these two components of the strong Christian arch may not be separated without disastrous results.

Reinforcing and expanding Colón's argument with concrete, present-day examples from academia is the response to essay two by Andy Mangin, assistant professor of theater and communications at Wheaton College (73-81). Mangin presents a moving response to Colón's overall thesis of faith in action. The profound teacher/student episodes he narrates exemplify the

very essence of Christ-centered community experience. Read particularly the Shakespeare narrative (76-77). It is a testament to the value of respect toward beautiful work and respect toward inspiration within humanity.

The reader now turns to Colón's third and final lecture-cum-essay: "Dorothy L. Sayers's Vision for Communities of Joy." This third discussion develops the emotionally satisfying, albeit difficult, topic of inspired happiness. Colón prepares her readers to consider the heightened emotional aspect (i.e., joy), of acting through one's committed vocation within communities of faith (82).

Sayers believed firmly that good work, well done and completed, was essential to satisfaction and joy in life. As Colón notes: "She would regularly juggle multiple projects, and she always fully committed herself to doing whatever was necessary to complete those projects successfully" (83). Sayers extended this philosophy to her definition of strong communities of faith. One must admit that such a rigorous philosophy sounds a bit joyless. In fact, it sounds exhausting. So how do individuals integrate joy with resolution as each negotiates a place within active communities of faith?

According to Colón, Sayers had an answer to this conundrum. It involved good work well done, combined with the fun of doing that work within a strong, nurturing, community. It also involved viewing the world through mirthful eyes (117). The ingredient of fun was essential and must be shared. Sayers possessed a strong and engaging sense of wit that demanded to be shared with community. It was an integral aspect of her writing, bringing joy in the process.

In order to understand Sayers's philosophy of joy manifested through "hard work and true faith" (83), Colón first reveals how Sayers discovered the process of joy in her own life through engaging friendships within various communities: literary, academic, faith-based, or personal—these often overlapping, as in the case of Sayers's correspondence friendship with Lewis (85). Secondly, Colón returns to the detective novel in order to explore the ways in which joy and community were woven into Sayers's cathartic development of the character Harriet Vane (83). In the novel *Gaudy Night* (1935), Harriet's sense of fun and romance are restored, not only through her agreement to marry Peter but through her own reestablishment of community connections, particularly with those of Shrewsbury College. By action and choice, Harriet reenters those communities from which she had been estranged through the notoriety of her trial (*Strong Poison*) and by self alienation. Only through her cathartic actions to reconnect with strong, nurturing, communities can Harriet again experience joy (101-102).

Reading Colón's accounts of joyful episodes in Sayers's life carries a joy of its own. We are happy in Sayers's joy. We are happy in Peter and Harriet's joy. To some extent, we share it, because joy is a contagious process. This overflow makes for an emotionally satisfying conclusion to the triad of essays.

In response to Colón's observations, Dr. Bryan T. McGraw, associate professor of politics and dean of social sciences at Wheaton College, considers questions regarding the place of joy within political community (119-127): "Does the business of legislation, judging, elections, back-room deals, and violence have a place for joy?" (120) His initial reaction is, "Hardly." There is a limit to mirth and joy in the context of certain communities. "Viewing the world mirthfully" seems somehow incongruous (apart from satire) within the political sphere. Yet Harriet Vane operates in this realm, as does Sayers by recording the machinations of crime within her detective novels, and each is able to discover and return to joy through the action of reentering community. Furthermore, Peter Wimsey revels in the communities of the political world, and his is the most mirthful personality of all (124).

McGraw observes that Peter's vocation "is a kind of vocation that indeed is *political*" (124), but rather than taking on Weber's or Nietzsche's tragic political ideology, Wimsey's is far more akin to Augustine's view, in *The City of God*, that a judge of crime (Wimsey's role by virtue of his vocation) is compelled to do his job and do it well because order "cannot endure absent the restraint of wrongdoing" (125). Yet, in a certain sense, it is a terrible vocation. Peter is well aware of its dark side. McGraw concludes that an essential ingredient to recovery from that dark side lies in friendship that "serves as a kind of linchpin for connecting joy and community" (126). In that spirit, Harriet and Peter—and Sayers as their creator—are each able to integrate joy into their vocations, purpose, and relationships, individually and within community. That internal and shared joy, as well as underlying commitment, made the whole adventure worthwhile.

In this reviewer's opinion, *Choosing Community: Action, Faith, and Joy in the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers* is a book designed to be read in these uncertain times. The brief set of essays and responses deserves attention for the thoughtful content delivered as well as for its potential to change the way we think about, and act upon, our value to modern communities of faith. May the vision of Dorothy L. Sayers, examined in Christine Colón's work, call us to good action, well done, and bring a measure of joy along with it.

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