

DOROTHEE SÖLLE

Radical Christian, Mystic in Our Midst

Nancy Hawkins

THE SAD NEWS OF THE DEATH of Dorothee Sölle, German theologian and radical Christian, spread throughout the world in April 2004, when the message of Easter was still fresh. It seemed impossible to believe that this vibrant voice was gone. Right up to the moment of her death, Sölle was giving workshops, leading discussions, and sharing her poetic message of hope. Her final, unfinished writing project, a book on death and mysticism, affirms her love of mystical theology and the fact that she was facing her own mortality. Even though Sölle is no longer with us physically, her words and her vast collection of writings will live on.

This essay celebrates Sölle as a radical Christian and as a mystic, and explores how her work fosters a spirituality for our time. Sölle's spirituality is fuelled by the desire for prayerful and political resistance. She rejects any simple idea that God is omnipotent, and she mounts a critique of the role that such beliefs have played in society. It finds its depth in Meister Eckhart's mystical concept of 'living without a why', and in the belief that all people are called to be mystics. It is a spirituality inspired by the themes of liberation theology and feminist critique, and honed by the memory of Auschwitz. Sölle's theology and spirituality are multifaceted. Her work appeals to people of many faith traditions as well as to those who search for a more humanistic, secular approach to life. Her experiences drive her reflections, keeping her writings concrete and honest, and offering her readers an accessible, challenging spirituality.

A Life in the Shadows of the Holocaust

Dorothee Sölle grew up in Cologne in Germany, and was fifteen years old when the Second World War ended. This reality colours all of her theology and her life's work. She lived in a liberal Protestant household and was exposed to a highly refined culture, with literature, philosophy and music playing a large role in her upbringing.¹ But Sölle's childhood was filled with the harsh realities of the war, especially since her family hid the mother of one of her half-Jewish classmates in their attic. One of her brothers died of wounds suffered on the Eastern Front, and as a child Dorothee experienced a world 'defined by hunger, bombings, coldness and need. Spiritually, it was a ruined landscape as well.'²

After the war, Sölle found herself suffering from what has been termed 'collective guilt'. Many Germans asked themselves to what extent they, and with them the German Christian Churches, had contributed to the mass murder of the Jewish people. This sense of collective guilt, when coupled with the national alienation present in Germany after the war, resulted in Sölle experiencing a deep sense of



¹ Sölle's family were Protestant church members, and outspokenly anti-Nazi.

² Dorothee Sölle, *Beyond Mere Dialogue: On Being a Christian and Socialist* (Detroit: Christians for Socialism, 1978), 1.

personal estrangement. This estrangement would give birth to Sölle's political questioning and to her search for a 'new' form of religion that had not been handed down to her 'from the fathers'.

It was during these years of personal upheaval that Sölle discovered the writings of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855). She devoured his thought, and his work provided a path toward interior freedom for the young Sölle. He taught her that anxiety is a moment that changes one, that drives one to conversion. Kierkegaard's insistence that anxiety can be an uplifting, redeeming power that draws one to God helped Sölle rediscover her faith.

Dorothee Sölle held two doctorates, and she began a career as a school teacher of religion before moving into full-time theological writing. She always found academic work 'oppressive' and this realisation propelled her into political activism, through which her theological views could be embodied in praxis. Along with Johannes Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann she was to 'found' a theology that consciously defined itself 'after Auschwitz': political theology.

Political theology is a distinct theology, a new and original theology which starts from the insight that all our experience of reality is inevitably mediated through society and through the world. Sölle would declare, 'Theology has to become political theology'.³ Sölle came to understand that her theology could not be done in the abstract, focused on the afterlife or on somewhere other than where human beings live. Instead, political theology seeks to work out the meaning of gospel truth within the social and political arena.

Sölle was a significant participant in the Christian-Marxist dialogue of the 1960s, which turned many committed Christians into revolutionaries. It was Sölle's desire that such dialogue should help to overcome the alienation, exploitation and destruction prevalent in the twentieth century. She believed that the modern social situation is intelligible and transformable. There are specific social conditions and patterns of behaviour which must be changed if genuine life is to be available to all human beings. Even though the Christian-Marxist dialogue collapsed, the wisdom that Sölle gained from it found its way into all her writings.

³ Dorothee Sölle, 'The Role of Political Theology in Relation to the Liberation of Men', in *Religion and the Humanizing of Man*, edited by James M. Robinson (Waterloo, Ontario: Council on the Study of Religion, 1972), 132.

In 1975 Sölle accepted an invitation to teach systematic theology at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. For the next ten years she would move between her home in Hamburg and the seminary, making wonderful friends and mentoring countless students. It was at Union that Sölle was exposed to feminist theology with its powerful critique of sexism, androcentrism and patriarchy. Eventually she was drawn to the work of the liberation theologians. Sölle credits this theology of praxis with moving her beyond political theology and into a much richer understanding of the needs of the poor and of the message of Jesus. Latin America became very close to her heart. Sölle went there to publicise human-rights violations, and one of her daughters lived and worked as a medical doctor in Bolivia. Sölle was profoundly moved by her encounters with those who provided sanctuary to people fleeing repression and terror in Central America. Their work, along with all the peace movements around the globe, had a profound impact on Sölle's theological writing and speaking.

When Dorothee Sölle died, at the age of 73, she was known throughout the world as a radical Christian of deep personal conviction. She gave countless talks and never missed an opportunity for lively theological discussion. Her final book, *The Silent Cry*, expressed her love of mysticism and its impact on her life. It is no surprise that her final written thoughts, found after her death, lie in the mystical realm. Her funeral, which was attended by so many of her colleagues and friends, was a tribute to the gift of her life and the power of her thought.

Standing before God: Resistance

The stance that Dorothee Sölle chose, in the face of God and of society, was a stance of resistance: hers is a spirituality of resistance. For Sölle, resistance has many aspects. First, it is the way that members of First World nations can truly participate in the quest for personal and societal liberation. It is also the way that human beings can confront evil and suffering head on. Sölle ties resistance to the act of praying when she declares,

To pray is to revolt. The one who prays is not saying, that's the way it is and that's that! The one who prays is saying, that's the way it is, but it should not be that way!⁴

To share in a spirituality of resistance means to enter willingly into a relationship with God through prayer that will challenge, change and disturb us. It also means willingly to hear the liberating message of the gospel, as it applies not only to our own lives but also to the lives of our brothers and sisters throughout the world.

Spiritual resistance is about saying 'No' to those elements in the Churches, in the political arena, and in society as a whole that demean human beings, deny justice and use power exploitatively. Sölle was always fearful of the privatisation of religion. Spiritual resistance counters this tendency in Christians and makes people personally accountable for the choices they make.

Prayer, for Sölle, was not something that necessarily brings peace to our hearts. It is a moment of confrontation and a moment of conversion. Sölle wanted the Christian Churches to become communities of resistance. This can only occur when our theology is in continual conversation with our politics, and when true liberation is the goal of our journey with God.

One important example of Sölle's theological resistance is her critique of the image of the omnipotent, male Father-God that has dominated centuries of Christianity. Sölle connects the symbol of a powerful Father-God with unjust and oppressive social structures. Her experiences as a woman in a male-dominated society, growing up under Nazi rule, made it difficult for her to accept the symbol of God as father, begetter, ruler and the manager of history. She reminds us that theology has linked power, maleness and fatherhood for centuries. And she actively resists any kind of God-language that diminishes the mystery of God or creates a situation of dependence and helplessness among believers.

The God-language that Sölle advocates emphasizes spirituality and avoids both idolatry and excessive rationalisation. It is rooted in the narrative and the poetic, and it has the capacity to confront

***True liberation is
the goal of our
journey with God***

⁴Dorothee Sölle, *Not Just Yes and Amen* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 40.

modernity's faith in power and success as well as the limitations of patriarchy. To ignore narrative, myth and poetry is to ignore the Bible, the place of God's definitive self-revelation. It is also to ignore those texts that create a new symbolic language with which to address and praise the Divine. Sölle fears that Christian theology and spirituality will remain patriarchal unless they integrate myth and narrative. Sölle's spirituality invokes symbols and images from feminist theology, mystical theology, and the natural world. She writes in *The Strength of the Weak* that nature symbols are useful because 'they do not imply power or authority and do not smack of chauvinism'.⁵ Sölle draws on the variety of God-images offered by the mystical tradition to develop an innovative, inclusive spiritual language, meeting the concerns of feminist critique.

Responding to God: To Live without a Why

A central idea in Sölle's work is the notion of *sunder warumbe*, meaning 'without a why'. This phrase is Meister Eckhart's description of essential being, the innermost ground of life itself. For Sölle, it is an indispensable guide for anyone who wishes to understand both Eckhart's theology and the mystical way of life. Living 'without a why' represents for Sölle how believers must respond to the promptings of God's spirit. It is the principle that guides resistance, and all ministry. This spiritual practice focuses on living life in the present moment, letting go of the compulsive need to see results from our prayer or to see just acts. The Christian who lives without a why lives without intentions, goals, purposes or power. Such a person is truly free to respond to God's grace as it influences their life.

Sölle is adamant that whenever human beings are torn between being and doing, or feeling and acting, they are no longer living in the spirit of *sunder warumbe*. Instead, they find themselves caught up in a frantic response to the world around them, seeking to measure their success, calculate benefit, and receive praise. The idea of living without a why is especially significant for those trying to minister in our fast-paced, fearful and violent times. The soul that is able to live in this spirit has no need to justify its existence; it simply appreciates the beauty of being alive in the now. To live without a why is to live and

⁵ Dorothee Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 114.

love as God lives and loves. It is about accomplishing one's actions without the need for recognition and success.

This aspect of Sölle's spirituality is profoundly liberating, and for her it is the only way to combat the violence of our world. Sölle, the political theologian and activist, declares:

There is an inner strength of being-at-peace that cannot make the goal orientation of action the measure of all things. All non-violent action in a violent world participates, in this sense, in the 'without a why' of the rose.⁶

She refers to the beauty of the 'mystical rose' spoken of in the poetry of Angelus Silesius (Johannes Scheffler, 1624-1677). Silesius wrote: 'The rose is without any why, it blooms because it blooms. It does not look at itself, and does not ask if it is seen.'⁷ The mystical rose, which is a metaphor for the mystical lifestyle, declares its worth simply by being itself and doing what it is destined to do. Sölle recognises that this rose, which is content simply to bloom for the sake of blooming, is also a symbol of non-violence, because it does not need to see the fruits of its existence: it is content to be powerless and even vulnerable, trusting that some day its way of being in the world will nevertheless bear fruit. As Sölle explains in *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*:

Once, when I was particularly depressed, a friend and pacifist from Holland told me something very beautiful: 'The people who worked to build the cathedrals in the Middle Ages never saw them completed. It took two hundred years and more to build them. Some stone-cutter somewhere sculpted a beautiful rose; it was his life's work, and it was all he ever saw. But he never entered into the cathedral. But one day, the cathedral was really there. You must imagine peace in the same way.'⁸

As one reads over Sölle's vast body of work, one is continually struck by the importance of *sunder warumbe*. It became for Sölle the

⁶ Dorothee Sölle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 40.

⁷ Maria M. Bohm, *Angelus Silesius' 'Cherubinischer Wandersman': A Modern Reading with Selected Translations* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 104.

⁸ Dorothee Sölle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 121.

mainstay of her life with God and with others. It gave her life direction and balance. Sölle believed that the only way truly to find joy in this life is to live without a why. She wrote that this attitude was the one 'little thing' she most desired to pass on to her children and her grandchildren.

Loving God: Embracing Mysticism

Sölle's spiritual stance is one of resistance, and her response to God is rooted in Meister Eckhart's idea of living without a why. These two elements together lead naturally to the third aspect of her spirituality: the mystical journey. Sölle's final book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, focuses on her understanding of the mystical life. Its title reflects Sölle's conviction that we must explore the relationship between mystical experience and social consciousness as we try to lead a spiritual life.

Dorothee Sölle's admiration and love for mystical theology began early in her life, when she attended a lecture on the life and work of Meister Eckhart, and recognised the importance of mystical prayer for her own spirituality. For Sölle, the mystical life originates from the experience of the human soul, not from within the defined limits of



organized religion, nor from books, nor from the authority of religious teaching. The mystical tradition presents a 'new' form of religion born out of relationship rather than out of submission and obedience. This relationship provides the opportunity for a profound unity with God. It is open to everyone, no matter what their personal background or lifestyle.

For Sölle, the only possible way to relate to God is through the mystical journey. Central to her spirituality is the conviction that all people

are called to be mystics. She declares, '*Wir alle sind Mystiker und Mystikerinnen*'—'All of us—women and men—are mystics!' Sölle's theological and personal goal is to democratize the idea of mysticism and cleanse it from what she views as a 'false elitism'. The mystical lifestyle is not meant only for a select few; it is offered to everyone by God.

Mystical sensibility is an act of resistance for Dorothee Sölle. She cannot separate her understanding of mysticism from her social and political commitment. This may startle many who believe that in order to be a mystic one must withdraw from the distractions and concerns of the created order. In the past, mystical experience has often been viewed as a private matter between the soul and God, with no ramifications for life in society. But Sölle believed that there is an essential connection between mysticism and social responsibility. She convincingly points out that many mystics have been reformers. We have only to read the lives of Teresa of Avila, Thomas Müntzer and Daniel Berrigan to understand what Sölle is saying. Such individuals challenged and continue to challenge the accepted social practices of their time. Only through mystical prayer can one embrace a life of resistance that declares a radical 'no' to individuals, governments and social systems that oppress and demean others.

There is an essential connection between mysticism and social responsibility

How are we to live a spirituality of mystical union and resistance? According to Sölle, it is done by embarking on a mystical journey into God and back again into society. There are many ways to speak of this inward path. For Sölle, the mystical journey begins with the *via positiva* of amazement, moves through the *via negativa* of letting go, and concludes with the *via transformativa* of resistance.

The first stage of this mystical journey is all about celebrating God's revelation in creation. Sölle calls us spiritually to experience the profound beauty and intimacy of the physical world. This experience brings us to radical amazement and ecstasy, and fuels our desire to praise God. Surrounded by amazement, we begin the second stage of the journey: that of letting go. Sölle writes that this stage is the familiar 'dark night of the soul'. It is the process of facing fears, addictions and the compulsive aspects of the modern lifestyle. This part of the journey prepares us to 'resist' anything that counteracts our amazement at the goodness of God's creation. Only by letting go can the soul live a God-oriented life.

Traditionally the final stage of the mystical journey is called the *via unitiva*, in which the soul is united to God. For Sölle, the third stage is more appropriately called the *via transformativa*. This description best mirrors Sölle's belief that the mystical lifestyle is an act of resistance. The soul, which has praised the wonders of creation and entered into the 'dark night' of transformation, is now ready to live in God. It is at this point that we face the essence of God and discover that the mystics address God as '*du stilles Geschrei*' ('you silent cry'). God is the silence and the scream. This paradoxical name illustrates Sölle's belief that the cries and cares of all humanity are contained in the very being of God. In the stillness of the mystical union the wounds of the entire world appear. The challenge now is to return to the world and become a source of healing for those whose screams have entered into the very being of God.

Sölle's Significance for Today

In the twenty-first century, we are living in highly unstable times. There is a loss of confidence in our religious institutions, people are fearful of each other, and peace seems very distant. We miss the prophetic and challenging voices that propelled Roman Catholics towards and beyond Vatican II, and that awakened us to the need for social justice. It is easy at this moment to be discouraged, withdrawn and cynical. The theology and spirituality of Dorothee Sölle, with their emphasis on resistance, on the spirit of '*sunder warumbe*', and on mystical prayer, can provide a needful beacon for our journey.

Sölle's understanding of spiritual resistance inspires those of us who view the gospel seriously as a force for personal and communal liberation. We might be fearful of the word 'resistance', but when it is understood spiritually it is the inner fire that enflames Christians to meaningful activism. Toward the end of her life, Dorothee Sölle was especially distressed by the willingness of the USA to go to war in the Middle East. She was dismayed by the anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe, and by the rise of what she viewed as a 'new fascism'. She was appalled at the way in which many Christian Churches treat their members—especially their women members. Her concerns and fears need to be our concerns and fears.

Sölle's words urge all of us to stand up and be counted when we feel overlooked and dismissed. They challenge us not to be satisfied

with meagre steps forward but to aim higher, for real change. Our prayer will never again be complacent if we embrace Sölle's precept that to pray is to revolt. Instead, prayer will propel us forwards to do as she suggested: to look at the world and to notice where it cries out for the gospel. A spirituality of resistance creates an energy within ourselves and ultimately within the world. It is this energy that can become a force for true change.



Not only do we of the twenty-first century need to live a spirituality of resistance, we need to live it in the spirit of *sunder warumbe*: living without a why. This is the mainstay of Sölle's theology and spirituality. She personally strove to live her life in its wisdom, and she offers it to us as a tool for discernment, as a guide, and as a means to embrace mysticism. Sölle was a Christian activist and she was proud of that fact. Yet she came to understand that 'doing just for the sake of doing' could lead to egoism and lack of focus. We are all faced with the temptation to act too quickly without reflection and prayer. It is very easy to allow our distorted desires to direct our lives. Living 'without a why' keeps us grounded and focused on God. After all, it is God who must be at the centre of all we do and all we hope for.

Another aspect of living without a why that is sorely needed, not only by Christians but also by the entire world community, is hope. This is the kind of hope spoken of by Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright, poet and politician. He writes that hope is not the same as joy, but is rather an ability to work for something because it is the right thing to do. This is what *sunder warumbe* is all about. It offers us a sense of hope in ourselves and in our abilities, but most especially hope in what God can do with our efforts. It frees us all to believe in the potential of our actions. While we may never see the fruits of our efforts, we can still be like the mystical rose. The rose is brave, and confident that its beauty can heal the world.

Finally, the spirituality of Dorothee Sölle reminds us that we are all called to be mystics, and that the mystical journey itself is an act of resistance. We need this reminder because so many people wrongly view mystical prayer as a passive and even selfish act. Another truth to remember is that the invitation to mystical union is not dependent upon organized religion. Rather, it originates deep within the soul. Mystical spirituality affirms that God desires union with every human being regardless of gender, ethnic background, sexual preference or race. It is an inclusive spirituality, and consequently it can offer solace to those who are disenfranchised from organized religion.

It takes courage to embrace the mystical journey into God, but it takes even more courage to return to the world after hearing the silent scream within God's heart. Sölle's words give all of us the courage to make this mystical journey; Sölle herself made the journey throughout her life, and she and her words can be our guide. Sölle's spirituality of resistance, of living without a why, and of mystical union is exactly what we need to live meaningfully in our pluralistic and challenging times. It is a mature spirituality, and it challenges us to become mature Christians in an unstable age.

At the end of her final book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Sölle describes those who have embraced the mystical quest. Her words not only demonstrate her respect for them, they also describe her own life:

There are human beings who not only hear the 'silent cry', which is God, but also make it heard as the music of the world that even to this day fulfills the cosmos and the soul.⁹

Nancy Hawkins IHM has been a religious sister for 27 years and is an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at St Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry in Rochester, New York. She is also a spiritual director, and gives retreats and days of prayer for many groups in her diocese. She contributed a chapter, 'Dorothee Sölle in Conversation with Meister Eckhart', to *The Theology of Dorothee Sölle*, edited by Sarah Pinnock (Continuum, 2004).

⁹Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).