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Dorothee Soelle: mystic and rebel

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Book Review

Dorothee Soelle: Mystic and Rebel

Renate Wind

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012

Biographer Renate Wind, author of *Dorothee Soelle: Mystic and Rebel*, introduces theologian and political activist Dorothee Soelle as one who “took seriously Karl Barth’s familiar demand that good Christians get up every morning and open the Bible with one hand and the newspaper with the other. The Bible taught Dorothee to speak with God. The news confronted her with the world as a place that is still filled with and determined by violence, where talking about God must prove itself worthy in the face of the history of violence” (11). It is this quote that perhaps, more than any other, captures the life of political, liberation, feminist theologian Dorothee Soelle. Renate Wind, in her biography of Soelle, provides an accessible overview of the life journey of Dorothee Soelle and her resulting theology.



Dorothee Soelle (1929-2003) was a feminist theologian who is most notably known for her work in the areas of feminism, mysticism, and liberation themes, specifically themes that address the suffering that emerges in response to the oppressive forces enacted by humanity. In *Dorothee Soelle: Mystic and Rebel*, Wind provides the reader, through an engaging narrative interspersed with Soelle’s poetry and journal entries, with a comprehensive account of the theology of Soelle and the life events that formed the cornerstone of her theological activism and thought. Wind introduces the reader to the young Dorothee Soelle, the daughter of German, bourgeois intellectuals born prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, who was both deeply influenced and indeed scarred by the events in Germany during the Nazi regime. Much of Soelle’s lifework carries the angst of a post-Auschwitz German and the guilt and shame associated with the events of the Holocaust as perpetrated by her fellow Germans. It is this personal sense of angst that provided Soelle with much of the impetus for her creative theology and fierce political theological activism.

Thus it was illuminating to be introduced by Wind to a Dorothee Soelle that one does not often encounter in Soelle’s books and poetry. Soelle is best known for her work identifying with the suffering of the oppressed and developing a liberationist theology in solidarity with the exploited. Later in her work we meet a mystic who thinks deeply about life, God, and Christ, and their role in a troubled and suffering world. It is surprising to learn that Soelle could have elitist sentiments that stood in stark contrast to her writing and poetry. Wind notes that peers challenged Soelle for her rigorous critique of those who failed to live up to her lifestyle (123) and indeed that she herself could not meet her exacting criteria short of withdrawal from mainstream life (124). Wind further notes that Soelle, in later life, seemed to take off in rather “unspiritual ways,” lacked humility, and presented a walking juxtaposition challenging oppression while wearing a fur coat; that

her rigorous outlook, at times, began to be “rather out of touch with life”. Wind further notes that eventually Soelle’s zeal for Christian converts began to border on an almost fundamentalism, and that this paradigm apparently began to undermine her dialogue with those her theology was meant to represent, that is, those who are oppressed and suffering.

As a result, Wind’s book *Dorothee Soelle: Mystic and Rebel* provides the reader with a holistic introduction to Soelle. Through Wind we meet the brilliant and passionate theologian who has provided contemporary liberation theology with deeply important work on mysticism, suffering, and feminism. We also meet Soelle, the very human woman, mother, wife, and friend. Wind’s discussion of the elitism and rigour that Soelle was known for in later life is compelling in that it introduces the reader to aspects of Soelle we rarely encounter in her work, that of a deeply human thinker who herself struggled with striking a balance between idealism and realism. However, this side of Soelle, while new to many of us, simply provides a more nuanced opportunity to view Soelle’s corpus of work and does little to detract from her important contributions to theology.

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