

A Book I Can Recommend

Fiona Gardner

The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance. Dorothee Soelle 2001
Fortress Press: Minneapolis

*Why, when God's world is so big,
Did you fall asleep in a prison
of all places?*

THIS SIMPLE QUESTION by Rumi runs as the subtext throughout this extraordinary book. In it Soelle, a feminist theologian and professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1975-1987, explores the relationship between mystical experience and social and political behaviour, and in so doing seeks to erase the distinction between a mystical internal and a political external. An activist in peace and ecological movements, Soelle at the time of writing this book lived in Hamburg, Germany. Her understanding of mysticism relies both on the discovery of different strands of mysticism and their appropriation. 'I learn from these "brothers and sisters of the free spirit" a language that brings my own experiences closer to me and lets them shine. Of course, my own deprivation also becomes more clear, for the prison can be named only by someone who calls me to come out of it' (p.5).

Release from prison is then internal - the renewed cognition of one's self and one's own forgotten experience, and external - the shocking awareness of the extent of the prison house of materialism, globalization and violence.

For Soelle - and her life and work is powerful evidence of this - resistance is deeply rooted in mysticism and faith must be linked to political reality.

Mystical experience is something that happens to all of us - Soelle writes of 'the buried mysticism of childhood...in which we are grasped by a remarkable, seemingly unshakable certainty' (p.11), and quotes Thomas Muntzer who speaks of high "amazement". The trivialization of life is perhaps the strongest antimystical force amongst us and Soelle includes in this the ongoing and malevolent trivialization of women and what women experience, feel and come to know. In this discussion on trivialization Soelle turns to Merton who said that, 'if you want to know me, don't ask where I live, what I like to eat, how I part my hair; rather, ask me what I live for, in every detail, and ask me what in my view prevents me from living fully for the thing I really want to live for' (from *Raids on the Unspeakable*). The lives of C. S. Lewis, Martin Buber, Thomas Muntzer, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day are used to illustrate her ideas, and she also draws extensively on traditions of medieval mysticism, the spirituality of Quakerism and several Sufi mystics. The prison where we sleep away our lives becomes visible only in and through the experience of stepping out and Soelle gives the example of Rabi'a, a Sufi saint from Basra, and her idea of 'disinterested love' - love for the sake of love.

I found particularly helpful her analysis of mystical sensibility and Meister Eckhart's concept of *sunder warumbe* - 'you should perform all of your deeds without whys and wherefores' - a mystical sensibility that lies at the root of all mystical love of God - we are in God's presence without a why or a wherefore' (p.61). She links this to the C. S. Lewis statement, 'I am what I do'.

For Soelle mysticism and transformation are indissolubly interconnected. 'Without economic and ecological justice ... and without God's preferential love for the poor and for this planet, the love for God and the longing of oneness seems to me to be an atomistic illusion' (p.89). The stages of transformation are then: to be amazed; to let go; and to resist.

The second section of the book explores places of mystical experience: community, joy, eroticism, suffering and nature. In the third section Soelle draws together her thinking into the idea that mysticism is resistance. She picks up Rumi's idea of the prison in which we humans 'who have no thought of God have fallen asleep' (p.191). Her analysis of the prison is of the, 'standardized, globalized economic order of technocracy that demands and achieves total disposition over space, time and creation'. The effect of this relentless machine is to leave us addicted and dependent as never before. Her political and theological analysis is I believe one that Thomas Merton would have relished as he too knew the mystical unity that undergirds resistance. The way to free ourselves is

through ego-lessness, property-lessness and non-violence. Our mentors for this journey include Leo Tolstoy and Dag Hammarskjold who freed themselves of these chains of modern life. Voluntary simplicity was lived by St Francis of Assisi, John Woolman and Dorothy Day; and Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. challenge us to practise non-violence.

For Soelle mysticism is about loving life even where it has long been condemned to death - we are required to go beyond what is - we are asked to listen to the silent cry of transcendence and faith. Her theology of liberation is about kneeling down and learning to walk upright - the two movements belong together and only work in tandem. In this section she turns to poets and priests who have lived alongside the dispossessed. She quotes the Brazilian poet Pedro Casaldaliga and his 'mysticism of dying' developed from the experience of the threatened and murdered in South America,

'I shall die erect, like the trees.
(They will kill me standing upright.)

....

In the twinkling of an eye in death
My life will become truth.
Finally, I shall have loved!'

This poem carries a special poignancy as Soelle died in April 2003 of a heart attack at a protest event against US Middle Eastern policy where she was to read her poetry. She died as she lived - resisting the collective insanity that surrounds and contaminates us.

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