DEATH BY BREAD ALONE: TEXTS AND REFLECTIONS ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

DOROTHEE SOELLE, Trans. by David L. Scheidt, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.

Dorothee Soelle has become widely known as a proponent of political theology done out of a radically secular, nontheistic perspective. She was trained in the university in critical philological and critical social theory. Some readers may thus be surprised that she has written a book on mysticism and spirituality. In the Postscript prepared for the reader in the United States she says that she wants this book to be understood "as a contribution to liberation theology, which someday may come to be known as socialist theology" (p. 194). In dealing with mysticism she has "the goal of helping us to reestablish human dignity as it is seen in the Christian tradition, and of bringing mysticism and revolution closer together again" (p. 147). Her heart is with the radical reformation of Thomas Muntzer and she evidently appreciates Karl Marx's observation that in the modern world the inner flame of medieval mysticism turns outward in revolution.

This is an important book. One senses that it is an adumbration of many more like it to come in the next decade. But it evidences the inconsistencies and tentativeness of a programmatic, ground-breaking work. (a) At points Soelle seems to be criticising herself and her fellow political theologians for taking a critical stance toward church and society without listening for and grappling with the religious questions of meaning and wholeness. We shouldn't try to answer questions which people are not asking religiously. (b) At other points she addresses nonbelievers with the argument that religious experience is the only means of combating the growing forms of personal and corporate death in our society. In this line of thought "mysticism" is evidently the real character of all true religion. People are not ordinarily mystical and the question is how to make them mystical. (c) But at still other points Soelle wants to argue that there is something distinctive about *Christian* mysticism. There is something about Christian faith that prompts the right (humanizing) religious questions and makes non-world-escaping and non-fatalistic mysticism possible. These three dimensions of Soelle's argument are not necessarily exclusive, but she has not carefully enough shown how they fit together.

In describing religious experience in very general ways and in trying to make it as accessible as possible, she may not have been as critical as she wanted to be. The book "speaks about the general level of religious needs and for this reason deals with the 'inward journey' " (p. 134). Reflecting on the relative success of the book in Germany, however, Soelle includes these lines in her postscript musings: "The 'inward journey' has been and may be used as a model for escapism into a better 'second world'. This book, too, is in danger of being read as a part of the nostalgia mood in which old reactionaries join with former revolutionary students who have made their peace with the system" (p. 146). Its search for transcendence may be misunderstood as a return to individualism and privatism. The burden of Soelle's argument is the demonstration that in the Judeo-Christian framework the questions of human identity and wholeness are answered in terms of the "return journey" and not just of the "inward journey." She is successful in showing that this is the case in some texts of the Judeo-Christian traditions but she is not very successful in giving the theological reasons for this. She makes a start at this: "The Christian answer to the question of meaning is that 'God is love,' and this general statement finds concrete expression in historical experiences of liberation. . . . Solidarity is the most human expression of God's love" (p. 134). But how we know that "God is love" does not become so clear.

Part One sets the stage for a renewed appreciation of mysticism. Soelle begins with a description of our normal existence in an affluent society. In this way she makes her point

that mysticism is not about a Neoplatonic other-worldly or extra-bodily existence but rather about transcendence in history, in the midst of everyday life.

We are living a "death by bread alone." We prove our love of death or necrophilia, by "being alone and then wanting to be left alone; being friendless, yet distrusting and despising others; forgetting others and being forgotten; living only for ourselves and then feeling unneeded; being unconcerned about others and wanting no one to be concerned about us; neither laughing or being laughed at; neither crying for another or being cried for by another" (pp. 3-4). At the heart of our "pursuit of loneliness" (Philip Slater) is boredom, emptiness, despair and inability to grieve. This is what the mystical traditions have called melancholy, or a mournfulness which is not able to suffer with other or with self, a mournfulness which kills the motivation to be and the quickening of the spirit. Our necrophilia becomes violent institutional death when it is expressed in political and bureaucratic systems. The many ways to "kill" people in our society arise out of our innocent-looking systems of work and knowledge. The notion that we can create ourselves and our future through work turns the world into a factory or supermarket in which all human relations are determined by production and consumption, buying and selling. In this state of self-absorption, of death in the midst of life, we become preoccupied with staving off our natural death. But the less we have lived up to life's possibilities and given ourselves away in suffering, the more difficult it is for us to face our own death. Those who have not risked boldly and suffered in life cannot accept their death and must be "forced" to die by conditions over which they have no control. And thus we live less in history and more in the face of an ugly fate. Whether we live or whether we die is a matter of the circumstances to which fate has delivered us.

In Part Two, entitled "Stations on An Inward Journey," Soelle examines several texts including the fairy tale "The Golden Bird" by the Grimm brothers, the account of Elijah on Mount Horeb in I Kings 19:1-21, and the writings of such German medieval mystics as Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, and Henry of Nordlingen. In both fairy tale and biblical text one can discern the steps of the inward journey: 1) the discovery that one cannot be "at home" in this world because of a threat or a lack, 2) the exodus out of this world, 3) the apparent finding and losing, 4) the absolute self-denial and rejection of this world in the inward immersion in "sleep," "womb," "cave," or "water," 5) the journey back into the world (pp. 41-79).

At least as regards distinctively Christian mysticism there would need to be much more careful distinctions made between *meditation, contemplation,* and *mystical union* than Soelle has done. It is clear that Soelle is not in favor of transcendental meditation. Christian meditation does have an object. The traditional object of Christian meditation has been the death of Christ. Soelle seems to agree with this to a certain extent, especially when she is exegeting the medieval mystics. But she tends to emphasize more the recollection of Jesus's life as the way in which we learn that the only weapon against death is love (p. 12). Jesus took sides with life and destroyed the concept of the fate-god whose purpose is to preserve, govern and protect. In Jesus we see that we are not our own possessions and thus become free to give ourselves to others. In thus learning how to suffer and die in love we pass beyond death to life already here in the midst of life. Religion, for Soelle, is the process by which we protest against our own assumptions about work and knowledge. It is the way we are comforted by giving up our death-dealing self-made securities in nature and history. Religion is thus about freedom through death of the old person and about new power for life through love. Can all of this be learned, however, simply be recollecting or meditating on Jesus's life? Doesn't the story of Jesus include God's own action of suffering?

Meditation, for Soelle, also means concentrating on our own experience of dying. She describes the experience of dying in highly personal terms by relating the pain and guilt

of her own divorce. Her sudden experience of "my grace is sufficient for you" (II Cor. 12:9) was a mystical experience of the "suffering of grace for life and the experience that nothing—not even our own death—can separate us from the love of God." It would have been helpful if Soelle had described this as contemplation, which can be understood as one's perception of one's meditation and as the union of the story of the suffering of the Father and Son with one's own story of suffering.

Part Three, entitled "The Problem of Identity," expands the themes of Part Two but concentrates especially on the denial of world, self, and even "God" through which the person comes to a new identity and a new sense of wholeness. Here Soelle works with an anonymous letter of an alienated student, a quotation from Suso's *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, a poem ("Who am I?") by Dietrich Bonhoeffer written shortly before his execution, and Psalm 139. She also calls heavily on the insights of Ronald D. Laing, Erik Erikson, Carl Jung, and Erich Fromm. What she is trying to get at in all of this is what the tradition has called the "mystical union." The tradition has always been better at describing what this is not than in describing what it is. So is Soelle. Identity does not come merely from an engagement in social action. Trying to work out one's identity problems by "helping" others often results only in sharing one's ego weakness with others. Identity cannot be attained by a biological interpretation of the Id's vital energies or by a psychological interpretation of the superego's will to self-control. Ultimately it cannot be attained even by the best theological understanding of God's saving acts. We cannot work, feel, will, or think our way through to an identity beyond the mournfulness which again and again spawns the depression that we hang onto as our last contact with reality and the only way to prevent our giving ourselves up. Mysticism's peculiar way of knowing does not allow us to hang on to our depression. Instead it invites us to become fully "submerged," to die to ourselves and to God so that we may, through the "God for us" and the "God with us," move to "God in and for himself."

This third movement in which we can speak of "God in us" and of us "in God" is the history of the Holy Spirit. The basis and power of our identity is the presence of God the Holy Spirit. I believe that Soelle senses a massive new area of exploration for contemporary theology. The problem is that she tries to draw out many good anthropological insights without working thoroughly with the contributions which the mystical traditions make to our understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit. It is not her "nontheistic" theology per se that is the problem. What is needed is a nontheistic biblical trinitarian theology. The Christian mystics talked about going beyond the Trinity in the last stage of union, but they never dreamed of reaching that stage without the graceful, suffering love of the triune God.

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