

Dorothee Soelle: Justice Theologian Par Excellence

Introductory Remarks

Today is the last Sunday of the Easter Season, and I'll be concluding my series "Extraordinary Persons of Faith". A few Sundays ago we began by visiting Germany during the 1930s and 1940s and reflected on the life and work of the Lutheran pastor and theological ethicist, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**. We discovered his fierce opposition to Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party, for which he was eventually executed and martyred.

The 2nd person we considered was **Katharine Hayhoe**, the young Canadian atmospheric scientist whose scientific knowledge and evangelical Christian faith have had the consequences of her becoming one of the world's leading voices in advocating wholesale societal change because of the current climate crisis.

Third, we discussed **Elaine Pagels**, a brilliant American theologian whose scholarly work on the Gospel of John and the recently discovered non-canonical gospels known as the Nag Hammadi Gnostic documents was revolutionary, especially because this brilliant and courageous scholar dared to go public telling the world that these sacred texts portrayed women in the early church as having been held in high esteem, that they were equal to men, and held high positions and responsible church offices.

Equally important, as the consequence of her six-year old son dying from a rare lung disease, and her husband falling to his death while mountain climbing in Colorado about a year later, Elaine Pagels wrote the book "Why Religion?". This amazing volume explains how, in spite of these terrible personal tragedies, she found solace and comfort in Christianity's ancient and sacred texts. Her book "Why Religion?" remains a Christian classic to this very day.

Last Sunday, San Salvador's **Archbishop Oscar Romero** was fourth "Extraordinary Person of Faith" we considered. If you have had an opportunity to check out my message for last Sunday's worship time, you'll recall that Oscar Romero used his high church position and his radio

broadcast sermons to call for economic, political and social justice reforms for the impoverished people of El Salvador. Not only that, Romero used the radio broadcasts of his sermons and his international contacts in the Vatican and outside the church to challenge 1. U.S. imperialism in Latin America, 2. El Salvador's corrupt government, and 3. The military death squads who were killing and disappearing 3000 El Salvadoran citizens per day.

Because Archbishop Oscar Romero spoke truth to power he was assassinated on August 24, 1980 while serving communion during Mass.

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Today on the final Sunday of the Easter Season we come full circle as we visit Germany once again and remember the life and work of a person deeply influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Her name is **Dorothee Soelle**.

She is remembered for many things: as a radical eco-feminist, and liberation theologian – as the author of countless cutting edge scholarly books and articles about human suffering, the church and contemporary Christianity - as a mystic, a political activist, a pragmatist, and a poet.

Most important of all, it seems to me, back in the late 1960s and early 1970s Dorothee Soelle coined and used the term “Christofascism” to describe Christian fundamentalism, of all types but especially the American variety. Or, in today's lingo, she used the term “Christofascism” to describe the kind of religion that today we might label as right wing, white, evangelical, fundamentalist Christianity.

I ask you to keep that term “Christofascism” in the back of your mind as I tell Dorothee Soelle's story.

But first, let me tell you a little about her life and work.

A Brief Biography

Dorothee Soelle was born in Germany in 1929. Her father, Hans Carl Nipperdey, was a professor of labour law who eventually rose high in Germany's halls of jurisprudence.

Although the entire Nipperdey family, at her father's urging, had distanced themselves from religion, Dorothee studied theology, philosophy and literature at Germany's University of Cologne, eventually earning a doctoral degree. Later, as a young scholarly woman, she became a university lecturer in her German homeland, and from 1975 to 1987 she served as a professor at Union Seminary in New York City.

As a university student and throughout her academic career, Dorothy Soelle had a well earned reputation for her dogged pursuit of social justice and radical political activism. For example, she spoke out against the arms race of the Cold War. She vocally opposed the Vietnam War, and challenged the all too common injustices found throughout the developing world. Soelle also campaigned her entire life for the integration of religion and politics.

She was married twice: in 1954 she married the artist, Dietrich Soelle, with whom she had 4 children. They divorced in 1964. In 1969, she remarried: this time to the former Roman Catholic priest and German theologian, Fulbert Steffensky, with whom she had another child.

On April 27, 2003, Dorothee Soelle died at age 73 while attending a conference in Germany.

Early Influences

Now, I want to return to the word "Christofascism", the term coined by Dorothee Soelle. It came about, no doubt, because as a child and young teen she lived through World War 2. Her parents were not only neutral about religion but at home, fiercely anti-Hitler and anti-Nazi. Throughout her childhood and into her early teens, Dorothee was warned to keep quiet about their politics because her family feared being sent to a concentration

camp. Shortly after the end of the war, Dorothee learned that her father was ¼ Jewish.

So, it was in the shadow of Nazi death camps like Auschwitz that she raised questions about God and human suffering, and for her (and some other German theologians of this time and place) those questions – questions about the struggle for peace and justice rooted in human suffering - remained a central and recurring theme.

Soelle came to understand human sin as more than an individual and personal matter. For her, sin was also social and political. Consequently, she argued, Christian faith and theology must be critical of the ideologies of the era in which a person lives – ideologies like Nazism, Fascism, Racism, Sexism, Imperialism and Consumerism, Capitalism, Militarism and so forth.

It must be noted too that although Dorothee Soelle was only 15 when Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged on the personal orders of Adolph Hitler, she was deeply influenced by his example and writings. Later in life she paid tribute to Bonhoeffer by describing him as “the one German theologian who will lead us into the third millennium”. Some of the other influences on her life and work were India’s Mahatma Gandhi and America’s Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dorothy Soelle and Christofascism

It’s probably safe to say that the idea of “Christofascism” had its origins in Soelle’s experience and knowledge of the horrors of Nazi Germany’s fascist ideology, jails, executions, concentration and death camps, anti-Semitism, racism, war and bloodshed. The word “Christofascism” itself appeared much later in her theological-ethics book with the title “Beyond Mere Obedience: Reflections on a Christian Ethic for the Future”.

And, as I mentioned earlier, Soelle used that word “Christofascism” to describe Christian fundamentalists, or those who might be described today as right wing, white, evangelical, fundamentalist Christians. She saw these people and their religious ideology as dangerous because they have

perverted and twisted the teachings of Jesus Christ and about Jesus Christ, turning them into something that is dictatorial at its heart – something insidious that is preparing American society for a new American-style fascism.

These same people – these Christofascists - she warned, seek to impose their own wrongheaded views of Christianity not only on other religions but also on political parties and American culture and society as a whole. Christofascists, Soelle went on to explain with considerable accuracy are anti-Semitic, anti-Afro-American, militant and are willing to use violence to achieve their goals.

Soelle's warning might be said to be a confirmation of the words of the author Sinclair Lewis (or possibly Lewis quoting James Wise) who wrote, "When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross."

More recently, Christopher Hedges, an ordained Presbyterian minister, writer and commentator on U.S. national political, economic and social affairs, has confirmed the existence of Christofascism throughout American history up to the present time.

Because Christofascism is a real and present danger – indeed, threat - to democracy, human rights, freedom, justice and equality, Dorothee Soelle, again quite rightly, suggests that the best way to guard against **Christofascist tyranny** is for Christians to stop neglecting the human Jesus, and remind themselves that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish human being.

And, even though this incredible woman has made so many enormous contributions to understanding and living the Christian faith, that particular insight, especially with the contemporary marriage of Christofascism with right wing political populism, may well be her greatest gift to our time and place. Amen.

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