

Tom F. Driver
IN MEMORIAM.
A WORD FROM UNION THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY IN NEW YORK

aus:

Zum Gedenken an Dorothee Sölle

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The death of Dorothee Sölle, arriving before its time, removes from the world a great reservoir and stream of love. Through her, the *caritas* of God coursed in profusion, finding its way throughout the world to persons and groups who suffer. This compassion, combined with her love of ideas, of language, and of music, made her a vivid theologian whose voice resounded through the latter part of the twentieth century and will doubtless inspire generations to come.

She was by nature an interdisciplinary thinker – that is, one who is called to think outside of boxes. Her formal studies included philosophy, ancient languages, and literary criticism, as well as Protestant theology. Her dissertation analyzed literary structures in Bonaventura's *Vigils*. She thus entered theology, so to speak, through a window rather than by the front door. It was perhaps one reason she was not offered a professorship in theology in German universities, although she her-

self attributed it to her radical politics combined with her being a woman and a scholar who did not do her research and writing in the conventional way. In any case, her not having a professorship in Germany worked to the benefit of Union Theological Seminary in New York, which decided in 1974 to offer her a professorship. While investigating her achievements and reputation, the Seminary's scouts in Germany were told by more than one informant: "She is not credentialed to receive appointment in our theological faculties, but she is the theologian whom most of our theologians read."

Professor Sölle credited her American women friends with making her a feminist, and Professor Beverly Harrison with her call to Union Seminary. Although Union did offer her a tenured professorship, she decided not to accept it. Torn by conflict between personal and professional responsibilities, and unwilling to abandon residence in Germany, she instead proposed coming to New York off and on as a Visiting Professor, a plan the Seminary eagerly accommodated since it was obvious that half a Sölle was better than none. This began in 1975. At a time when, as she later wrote, America "had just ended the Vietnam War and had finished with President Nixon,"¹ she arrived in the city she would one day call "Babylon on the Hudson."² The arrangement was for her to teach one semester

of each year. From 1982 to 1987 she carried the title of Harry Emerson Fosdick Visiting Professor of Systematic Theology. Occasionally thereafter, until 1991, she came for shorter periods, offering brief but intensive courses, usually in January and February.

Thus it happened that for sixteen years Dorothee Sölle made more or less annual entrances upon the scene at Morningside Heights in Manhattan, where her arrivals always caused excitement and her departures regret. It is possible to suspect that this rhythm of entrances and exits, somewhat theatrical in effect, was not unpleasing to her. It is certain that it spiced the life of the Seminary and added to its luster.

Her classes drew large registrations. She taught courses on religion and its critics, the problem of anxiety, alienation and sin, spirituality and politics, Christian liberation movements, mysticism and revolutionary change, sexuality and work, contemporary theology, and literary images of the Divine. In tandem with Professor Morse, a friend with whom she seldom agreed theologically, she taught "The Doctrine of God." With Professor Driver, who, like her, combined theology with literature, she taught a course on the plays and poems of Bertolt Brecht. With Professor Robert McAfee Brown she taught "Liberation Theology for North Americans." She teamed with Mary

Pellauer and Carter Heyward for a course on “The Fear of Equality.” She met a student, Shirley Cloyes, with whom she wrote one of her many books, *To Work and to Love* (1984). She also lectured widely throughout the United States.

In the early 1980s, Sölle wrote: “I think we can understand Christ’s death only if we see the torture and execution that he suffered in the light of what is happening today.”³ She was thinking primarily of suffering inflicted by the strong upon the weak and poor, a concern that was never far from her mind. Turning thought into action (word into flesh, as she was apt to say), she went to lower Manhattan to serve food to the hungry with volunteers from The Catholic Worker. She visited resisters to oppression in many lands, including Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and El Salvador. In Nicaragua she became friends with fellow poet and revolutionary Ernesto Cardenal. She wrote and lectured persuasively of the Christian vision that beckoned her into such acts of solidarity.

It may be safe to say that Sölle’s major impact at Union Seminary came through the talks that she gave in James Chapel. These were memorable. Crafted with poetic sensitivity and theological passion, they were delivered with a soft-spoken concentration that called every ear into hearing. More than words, more than rhetoric, her speaking was a demonstration

of authenticity. It challenged assumptions. One of these talks was called “The Window of Vulnerability,” which became the title of one of her books. From a poem of the same name in both the chapel talk and the book come words appropriate to recall at the end of her life:

The window of vulnerability
must be closed –
so the military say
to justify the arms race

My skin is a window of vulnerability
without moisture, without touching
I must die.

For mortal creatures, the ultimate vulnerability is death. However suddenly that came to Dorothee, our friend and colleague, there is little doubt that existentially – or shall we say faithfully? – she was prepared for it. To be vulnerable was for her a high calling.

We mourn her loss, even while we thank God for the countless ways in which she enriched the curriculum, the faculty, the students, the staff, the worship, and our whole community during all the times that she spent with us at Union Theological Seminary.

New York, 1 May 2003

Notes

- 1 Dorothee Sölle: *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, Minneapolis 1999, p. 58.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 3 Dorothee Sölle: *Of War and Love*, Maryknoll/NY 1983, p. 92.