

Suffering and Liberation in Dorothee Sölle's Political Theology



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In an insightful and moving reflection on Mary Magdalene in *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature*, Dorothee Sölle notes that, while Mary “embodies the fear and mourning of the whole community,”¹ she is courageous and undaunted in the face of this fear, as Jesus’ close friend, the first to whom the risen Lord appears. Quoting Augustine, Sölle calls Mary Magdalene the “apostle of apostles,” who brings news of the risen Lord to the men who had fled Calvary in the grip of a paralyzing fear. “[More] courageous than the men,” she pays the grave of Jesus a visit, unfazed by the presence there of Roman guards who were likely to interpret her action as the criminal attempt to publicly mourn a crucified person, punishable by execution. Mary serves, in that way, as witness to and apostle of an event that irrupted in our midst “for the sake of liberation of all people from fear and submission to the powers of death.”²

The significance of *Great Women of the Bible In Art and Literature* lies in its continuity with the hermeneutics of “political theology” introduced by Sölle in *Political Theology* over two decades earlier.³ In some of her earlier works, and in a number of later ones, we can find this hermeneutics evolving in the genesis of the fear-mourning idea, which brings focus to bear upon the human struggle to realize life amid suffering in the world. In a departure from Rudolf Bultmann’s essentially

¹Dorothee Sölle and Joe H. Kirchberger, *Great Women of the Bible In Art and Literature* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1994 [1993]), p. 278. Please note that in this footnote and in what follows, if the original date of publication of the German text differs from the English translation, that date is given in brackets.

²*Ibid.*

³Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974 [1971]).

subjective approach,⁴ Sölle stresses in her work the communitarian context of theology above the existential and personal.⁵ In a sense, Sölle interprets the salvation by Jesus — first of Mary Magdalene, then, by extension, of the other disciples — as a saving of “us” rather than of “me.” It is *society* that is saved.

Mary Magdalene is personally “saved” by Jesus, yes, but she also represents, or embodies, her community. In Sölle’s view, “being a person first becomes a concrete, tangible reality precisely when one becomes aware of his dependence on society and, conjointly, of the latitude permitted by that society at specific points.”⁶ Resurrection as “liberation of all people,” then, refers not just to numbers but to the *social* conception of human existence.

These societal emphases may suggest aspects of “liberation theology” to some and, indeed, there are intersections. For example, Jon Sobrino’s notion of the “crucified people” has overtones of Sölle’s communality of suffering. The “crucified people” represent “the presence of Christ crucified in history.”⁷ This, not only because they are identified with Jesus as Suffering Servant, but also because “the crucified people also make Christ present in history through the fact that they are *a people and not just an individual*” (emphasis added). The people are “massively on the cross,” in a way that, for Sölle, by remaining intimately united with Christ throughout the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene is said to represent the community, the masses, embodying their “fear and mourning.” The theology of suffering by representation is here, with apostolic witnessing as its purpose. The crucified people throughout history “carry the sin of the world and by carrying it they offer light and salvation to all.”⁸ Similarly, Mary Magdalene is “apostle of apostles,” making Christ present and effecting the “liberation of all.”

⁴Sölle criticizes Bultmann for what in her view is his overstatement of the “personal savior” theology, where the group saved is conceived of as a collection of persons individually saved.

⁵ My reflections here and following are based on a reading of Bultmann’s *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (Scribner’s, 1958) and on notes from a seminar in hermeneutics at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, Massachusetts (autumn term, 1997).

⁶*Political Theology*, p. 46.

⁷Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 264.

⁸*Ibid.*

The individual, according to this model, “represents,” both the saved individual, and by carrying that salvation to the community and becoming its salvation precisely in the context of society, the *polis*, accounting for the “political” nuance introduced by Sölle into her hermeneutics. In an early work, *Christ the Representative* (1967), Sölle describes this aspect which later writers such as Sobrino developed into a determinative feature of their work. Just as Jesus represents God to people, Jesus is their representative before God. One central passage in *Christ the Representative* provides a clue to the evolving theology of the *polis* in Sölle’s hermeneutics:

“We still hope in Christ’s resurrection as the achieved identity of all men, but we do so not because the final Christ has withdrawn us from the complexities of the world and the risks of history, but because the provisional Christ hangs on the cross of reality even to the end of man’s days. Only here, on the cross, does Christ identify himself with the fears and sufferings of those whom God has forsaken.”⁹

The “fears and sufferings” of a crucified people are not manifested in the existential, personalized consciousness of Bultmann’s “individual.” For Sölle, rather, “Man does not ‘possess’ himself as a self-evident being in contrast to everything else that exists. On the contrary he is continually projecting himself afresh” — into history, into the societal reality as “representatives” of each other, Christ and people.¹⁰

Sölle did not arrive at this communal hermeneutics at the expense of totally sacrificing individuality. That would be a misreading of her critique of the perceived excesses of Bultmannian existentialism. Rather, she asserts the power of the individual as intimately cooperating in the liberating self-discovery which Jesus himself experienced and which allows one in the *polis* to exercise the outgoing, transformative corporate function which Sölle sees as “representative,” Jesus and disciples effecting the Kingdom together.

⁹ Dorothee Sölle, *Christ the Representative* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967 [1965]), p. 126. The use of exclusivist terms (e.g. “men”) reflects both the era in which these early books appeared as well as the penchant of the translators. As with many contemporary writers, Sölle later came to avoid the use of this language in the course of articulating her theology. The terms are reproduced here as cultural artifacts.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

We remain “continually projecting” ourselves “afresh” by our participation in what Sölle calls the “phantasy of Jesus.” In a short meditative work, *Beyond Mere Obedience*, she reflects on the self in relation to the Kingdom, the tangible society of God at work in the world, in both suffering and joy, for Jesus embodies both.¹¹ Humans experience the “joy of fulfillment: imagination,” which is a synonym for “phantasy”; and Jesus of Nazareth, an “expression of true fulfillment,” worked for “humanity’s total reclamation, not merely for a single aspect of it.”¹² In expecting humans to “engage in changing the world — and it was to this end that he set free our phantasy,”¹³ Jesus wants us to participate radically, personally, in discovery of the valid “self,” capable of asserting “I” in the same manner he did. We are empowered to claim the self, saying “I” with the courage of Jesus, because he was “the person most conscious of his own identity,” with a strength “rising out of this joyous self-realization.”¹⁴ In Sölle’s view, shortly after Jesus left the earth, Christians lost this form of personalized “transcendence,” with the other-worldly variety becoming dominant in theology. What society needs, as a collection of individuals, is to rediscover that “for Jesus ‘God’ meant liberation, the unchaining of all powers which lie imprisoned in each of us.”¹⁵ Rather than projecting some form of transcendent “superior-self” of virtue expressed by “mere obedience,” the person truly able “to say ‘I,’ can have an entirely different and liberating effect” on society.¹⁶ This is the power of authentic individuality, selfless rather than self-centered, seeking salvation through liberation of “I” as part of the collective rather than “I, myself.”

To put Sölle’s meditation into concrete form, the fulfillment of the communal imagination — daring to see the world transformed into God’s Kingdom as Jesus imagined it to be possible — depends foremost on courageous individual initiative. It is appropriate to question just what Sölle understands by “Kingdom of God,” for in her system this traditional wording appears to be contradictory: indeed, the Kingdom is

¹¹Dorothee Sölle, *Beyond Mere Obedience* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982 [1968]).

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 56.

given more human emphasis than divine. She faults Bultmann, for instance, for attempting to portray "Christian proclamation" apart from any "mutual relation between man and his society."¹⁷ Sölle argues this based on her preceding analysis of what constitutes human personhood:

[B]eing a person first becomes a concrete, tangible reality precisely when one becomes aware of his dependence on society and, conjointly, of the latitude permitted by that society at specific points.¹⁸

Society develops a mutually agreed "latitude" in which the members relate to each other, so that human and societal norms become the tangible fulfillment of the divine injunctions. Sölle cites similar critiques of Bultmann's radical existentialism, in such seminal writers as Johannes Metz and Ernst Käsemann, to help establish her more human-centered hermeneutics.¹⁹ Metz, in *Theology of the World*, declares that in order to "deal with existence we cannot today speak purely existentially"²⁰; Käsemann argues for the situation of the person of faith as "utter entanglement with the world." Sölle might agree with the old maxim that "God's work on earth must truly be our own."

Comprising "our own" work, the Kingdom as "imagined" by Jesus and established by humans comes about only *with God, through* identity in Jesus. All the suffering, mourning, fearing — all that begins with the cross and climaxes in resurrection — has meaning only if we claim to be Christians and live that reality. This is the identity with Jesus that transformed Mary Magdalene, a total conversion brought about by selfless encounter, daring to accept the terror along with the glory, unlike the cowardly apostles fleeing the cross. For Sölle, embracing the cross alone establishes Christian identity. Union with the passion of Jesus transforms the human into a "*cooperator Dei*," a person who is no longer merely a "passive agent receiving orders and grace," but one imbued with a "new understanding of repentance as real transformation and conversion."²¹ The Kingdom as "positively" fulfilled in human terms, Sölle then concludes, means that "faith is possible, love comes to pass, hope

¹⁷ *Political Theology*, p. 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Political Theology*, p. 45-46.

²⁰ Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (Herder, 1969).

²¹ *Political Theology*, p. 53.

transforms men and their world."

In *Choosing Life* which appeared subsequently too political *Theology*, Sölle examines more fully the parameters of being a Christian by living out the theological virtues in the Kingdom.²² The theme of liberation through suffering (again reminiscent of liberation theology) is presented in terms of human dignity and self-worth as affirmed by the suffering of Christ. And it is an intimate association with Christ, an "in Christ" identity as living reality more than static paradigm: "I find the dignity of my humanity articulated in Christ."²³ Sölle then asks, "What does this 'in Christ' mean? Why am I a Christian?" Her answer is "not simply a description of a reality," in the sense that a label will suffice. Rather, the ultimate desire is "to be a Christian in my heart," and "to say 'I am' is as much as to say 'I am trying, I am living in that direction, I am becoming.'" Life in Christ is process, beyond cross and tomb, for "I am calling myself after a person who was tortured to death 2,000 years ago, a person whom it proved impossible to kill . . . I 'identify' myself, which means I cannot describe my identity without talking about him."

The implication of this radical identification with Christ, in the paradoxical reality of his suffering and dying yet remaining "impossible to kill," is the basis for a theology of hope, of life as crowned struggle. Being one with Christ means finally transcending, as he did, the "material and spiritual conditions in which their living character is taken away from people, the conditions in which they are cut off from transcendence: through hunger and misery, which directs all a person's energies towards survival."²⁴ If we resist giving up in the struggle, we triumph, like Christ, from cross to resurrection, for the "dignity of human beings is the capacity for going beyond what exists," and Christ continually "invites us to participate in this mystery." Like Mary Magdalene at the tomb, fear and mourning give way to dawn, as we find the ground of "relationship" in Christ. For Sölle, the authentic interpretation of "reality" is crucial to finding life: "To be real means to be related, to live in relationship, to live by and in the direction of relationships. The more relationship the more reality, the less relationship the more death."²⁵

²²Dorothee Sölle, *Choosing Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967 [1965]).

²³*Ibid*, p. 67.

²⁴*Ibid*, p. 68.

²⁵*Ibid*, p. 69.

Death is conquered by living one's identity with Jesus, just as he conquered death in realizing his own relationship to God, the source of life itself. How is this life lived to its fullest? While conventional wisdom would say the rich have the most abundant life, Sölle, now directly embracing the tenets of liberation theology, writes in another recent work, *On Earth as in Heaven*, that the poor are most alive in God.²⁶ Its opening chapter, "The Future of the Poor," concludes with the assertion that the "future of God is the future of the poor," and without them "there will be no future for the Christian God."²⁷ This assertion is startling at first, but her more fundamental message is the traditional notion that "God will make the poor 'rich' in being, not in having; rich in relationship, not in possessions; rich in God." Life is the reward, and the possession of life in God is solidarity with the poor. Those drawn to the poor "come into contact with the foundation of all life," for a guiding "principle of the theology of liberation . . . is that the poor are teachers who draw our attention to life."²⁸ In the next chapter, "Jesus and Women's Self-acceptance," Sölle argues similarly about Jesus' marginalized friends. Declaring in a subheading, "Jesus Was a Feminist," Sölle reasserts the primacy of Mary Magdalene in the initial witnessing to the resurrection, arguing that the early "apostolic authority" shared by women was lost due to a "progressive patriarchalization of ecclesiastical office."²⁹ What was lost again was what the "Jesus movement," in Sölle's view, had restored, "the image of God in women."³⁰ The emphasis is on life, specifically on the divine prerogative of giving life: "The woman has an unrestricted share in the mystery of life and in God."

In her "political theology," Sölle's constant concern is that God's life might dispel fear and suffering, in each person and the whole community. God is love for the poor, life for all, hope for the future — all of the things which Mary Magdalene represents as the community's embodiment of "fear and mourning." It is for the poor especially and "for the sake of liberation of all people from fear and submission to the

²⁶Dorothee Sölle, *On Earth as in Heaven: A Liberation Spirituality of Sharing* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 22.

powers of death," that Jesus is risen Lord.³¹ Jesus loved the marginalized, so manifest in his acceptance of poor, discarded women like Mary Magdalene, who was the first to receive the revelation of life triumphant over death at the resurrection. And as apostle of hope she carried the promise of this new life to the others: "I have seen the Lord" (*John 20:18*). ☞

³¹ *Great Women*, p. 278.