

# Preface to the English Edition



**W**e are honored to have the opportunity to make accessible to the English-speaking world Renate Wind's biography of our late colleague and beloved friend Dorothee Soelle. In working with this text we have discovered how urgent the questions engaged and lived by Soelle still are, and with what skill and insight her biographer conveys that evolving journey of seeking God through prayer, poetry and action, resisting violence and injustice out of compassion for God's people in a suffering world.

Dorothee Soelle, arguably one of the most important twentieth century German women theologians, is known to many in the United States, Canada, and Latin America who encountered her during her twelve-year professorship (1975–1997) at New York's Union Theological Seminary, her appearances during international lecture tours, or in the context of her decades of peacemaking efforts. Some readers will be familiar with the twenty-five books by Soelle in English translation (see Works Cited on page 193), including *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian* (1999) and her major work, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (2001). Despite numerous academic studies of her work, Renate Wind has written the first biography of Soelle in German or English. It is a task whose time had come, for the generation of her contemporaries is no longer young.

Moreover, we are persuaded that Generations X, Y, and those to follow, as well as any elders who have not had the good fortune to know of Soelle until now, will be well served by Wind's succinct and powerful account and may be encouraged to discover Soelle for themselves. No English equivalent exists of her twelve-volume collected works (*Gesammelte Werke*) published from 2006 to 2010 by Kreuz Verlag nor of many works we quote in translation. We hope that will change.

One previously unpublished Soelle poem, "Heart Attack" (April 1981), is included here, having been generously provided to the author by Professor Tom Driver of Union Seminary, New York, after the German publication of the biography in 2008. This book also includes many previously unpublished photos and texts discovered by Renate Wind in collaboration with Fulbert Steffensky in the family's archive.

Dorothee Soelle was not only a theologian and teacher, a contemplative and a peace activist—"mystic and rebel"—but also a reader of literature, a lover of hymns, songs, and poems, and herself a poet. Soelle's poetry and the songs and poems she translates or cites are scattered in many different publications, whether within her own work, sometimes untitled, or cited in essays about her, sermons, workshop or worship handouts, church newsletters or websites. No single collection of Soelle's poetry exists in English. We are pleased that Renate Wind addresses the integral role that Soelle's "theopoetics" plays in her intellectual, theological, and spiritual development as she reaches beyond the sphere of insight and spiritual experience she feels can be articulated in linear, rational terms.

Regarding our translation and editing process, we have made every effort to locate existing translations of the poems and parts of poems cited in this volume. All translations of Soelle's published poetry not credited exclusively to another English publication, or not indicated to be altered versions of these, are our own. Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted. Our brief

parenthetical notes and insertions in the text and our translators' footnotes within the chapters provide information to readers who may be less familiar with movements, institutions, or events of the time period in question than the author's German-speaking audience. For source citations, we have indicated existing translations of quoted material whenever possible. Where none exists, none was located, or where existing translations required alteration or replacement for reasons of accuracy or completeness, we have indicated that in the notes.

This book is a collaborative effort. One of us is a native speaker of German and one of English, one a theologian and one a language, literature, and translation professional. We each translated half the chapters, checking each other's first drafts, revising and rereading several revised drafts, conferring frequently about troublesome phrases and contexts, consulting our various resources, and taking joy in finding answers. Martin Rumscheidt searched existing works by Soelle in German and English for cited material; Nancy Lukens searched other cited works, prepared the front and back matter and many footnotes, and edited the text.

Finally, we commend to the reader Renate Wind's characterization of Soelle, whom she criticizes where appropriate yet whose dream—of justice and peace as a force united to preserve the integrity of creation—she is inspired to share with a new generation:

One cannot speak of Dorothee Soelle without dreaming the dream that the world might yet be able to find its true order after all; that all God's creatures might live together free of violence, without human beings or nature being destroyed; that life and work might return to a human scale and that life in abundance would not be the luxury for the few that it now is, but possible for all, so that the biblical Shalom might become reality, where justice and peace are united forever.<sup>1</sup>

*Nancy Lukens and Martin Rumscheidt*



# Preface



She wanted to know the truth, so she studied theology. At first it was an intellectual adventure, but it became the beginning of a lifelong journey, an adventure consisting of the search for a home and an identity, for God and God's realm of "Shalom." Somewhere along this path it became clear to Dorothee Soelle that truth cannot be defined abstractly, but must be lived and experienced in the flesh. "Make me to know your ways, O God; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me," says Psalm 24. She opened herself to this way, which led her into the world and into a radical praxis in life. From there she gained new perspectives about God and God's truth.

This biography traces the stations of this life's journey. It attempts to describe the particular historical moments during which Dorothee Soelle's life undergoes further development or reverses direction, or when a new theme or a new challenge enters into her life. For events and developments at such focal points in her life are always connected with what is happening concurrently on the stage of history. At these important junctures, what she considers important is never merely her own personal situation, but rather, as the saying goes in German, when friends get together and talk about everything under the sun—what counts are "God and the world." When

Dorothee Soelle began to write books and poetry and to enter the public sphere with actions like the Political Evensong,<sup>1</sup> she became a historical figure who not only reflected theologically, politically, and poetically about the revolutionary changes and movements of her time but one who initiated, inspired, and embodied these changes.

A person who lives this way has kindred spirits all over the world. There is hardly a familiar name among prominent critical voices in the ecumenical world or in the realm of political and cultural work that does not show up in the same context when Dorothee Soelle is mentioned. They cannot all be listed here. Some will be named because they are part of a particular moment in Soelle's development or because they tell a particular story. The two most important witnesses to her life are an exception: Fulbert Steffensky,<sup>2</sup> her "laughing and crying partner," and Luise Schottroff,<sup>3</sup> her best friend.

I am indebted to these two for the abundance of previously unpublished photographs, documents, and stories. I would also like to thank them for entrusting this project to me, for I hardly belong to her "inner circle," was not a friend, student, nor companion, but at most a younger contemporary, engaged since 1965 in the peace and solidarity movement. There I met Dorothee Soelle again and again, whether as a "grassroots" activist at events protesting the war in Vietnam, or in support of Nicaragua, or at actions of the working group for Peace and Disarmament and at gatherings of the Christian Peace Conference.<sup>4</sup> It was not until the 1995 Hamburg *Kirchentag*<sup>5</sup> that I met her in person, when I was invited to her home in Hamburg to join in an intensive and interesting evening with none-but-prominent "names." But once there, the people I met were simply happy and unconventional people. This made me conscious of other aspects of Dorothee Soelle, whom I had until then known only as the quintessence of a charismatic and sometimes very disciplined fighting spirit.

Since then I have continued in the role of one of her younger contemporaries, by giving the address at her seventieth birthday

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celebration and in the many memorial events after her death. It is from this perspective that this book, too, is written. It makes no claim to completeness; there are many other important theological and spiritual appraisals of her that would fill volumes by themselves. My view of Dorothee Soelle is characterized by our shared dream of a world in which life, love, and work are given their due place, a world that should be a place of “abundant life,” of justice and peace for human beings and for nature. What I share with her are the experiences of political movements that intend to translate this dream into social structures—experiences of liberation as well as limitation—in which Christians, too, have found their place. The future will show how much has survived of these efforts and continues underground. The same is true of Dorothee Soelle’s texts and poetry. As a poetic rebel and a prophetic mystic, however, she has already earned a special place in the history of the church and in our memory.

In the end, she herself wanted to be nothing more than “a drop in the ocean” of God’s love. It is for this that I especially admire and love her.