IN MEMORIAM

DOROTHEE SOELLE 1929 TO 2003

Dorothee Soelle was scheduled to speak at four events at the 2003 Ecumenical *Kirchentag* in Berlin. Sadly, she died shortly beforehand, in the midst of a lecture. It was hard to come to terms with a conference that did not include this Socratic gadfly who challenged all her contemporaries. In my London study, I collected books written by her from the various subject shelves – sixteen books, moving across theology, philosophy, social ethics, poetry and other categories. On occasions, she permitted me to publish (and translate) some of her writings in *European Judaism*. At the Leo Baeck College – Centre for Jewish Education, I find some of her books indispensable for the instruction of rabbis: *Suffering*, *The Onward Journey*, *Dialogues of the Night in the Church*, *In the House of the Man-eater*, *Sympathy* and others. But at least the books are here, in my library. Dorothee is not here, and that is a great loss in our lives.

Sometimes, I visited her when she taught at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In the early days, I would stay in her house in Cologne, where she annoyed the establishment as the German ‘God is Dead’ theologian. And then we would meet at so many conferences. Often, it was difficult to get into the hall where she was lecturing. Once, when she shared a podium with Erich Fried for a shared poetry reading, the queue stretched around the block. I marched to the front and declared: ‘I am the translator of Dorothee and of Erich’. Oddly enough, it worked.

An appreciation of all her teachings would and should take a book in itself: she left her mark in so many fields. I remember a New York conference on Elie Wiesel, where her interpretation of his book *Night* became a text used by many of the lecturers; it had appeared in her book on suffering. What she taught then and to the end was not the facile interpretation that the scene of the three gallows in the Appelplatz meant that God/Jesus had died there. God was with the suffering, not with the murderers. Dorothee was and remained a radical theologian supported by her husband, the former priest Fulbert Steffensky. And she was in the van of all progressive causes that cried out against injustice, whether in South America, Vietnam, or in all parts of Europe. *The Right to be Someone Else* remains an important encouragement for all those engaged in the civil rights struggle.

Here, I can only reiterate how much she is still needed. Two of her poems occur to me (they have more impact in her German text):

My young daughter asks me
– learn Greek? What for?
sympathein I tell her
a human ability
not present in animals and machines
learn to conjugate
while Greek has not yet been forbidden

how much do children praise him
who fly into the sky
the hundred arms of buddha spread out wide
zippers still open
as they decipher
the angels' telegram
the first snow.

Dorothee: we miss you.

Albert H. Friedlander z'l