

Sinners in the Hands of a Suffering God

A review of Suffering by Dorothee Sölle

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Contents

Sinners in the Hands of a Suffering God: A Review of <i>Suffering</i> by Dorothee Sölle.....	3
Bibliography	5

Sinners in the Hands of a Suffering God: A Review of *Suffering* by Dorothee Sölle

Dorothee Sölle has written a splendid little book which cries out in a prophetic voice from the end of the Vietnam War, years after Mĩ Lai, when the appetite for war had been well and truly sated in many parts of the Western world. As it would seem, her words remain relevant, as indeed one rather wishes they did not. After Iraq and Afghanistan, here in Australia we have recently become profoundly aware of the dozens of little Mĩ Lais that our soldiers in the 2nd Squadron of the Special Air Service Regiment had committed against Afghani citizens towards the end of Operation Slipper. In that kind of environment, a book like *Suffering* (Fortress Press, 1975) remains incredibly important in the context of theologies of suffering, and the more entrancing theologies of hope. Everett R. Kalin's translation of Sölle's prose is quite readable, and would appeal to both theological technician and lay sufferer.

Sölle offers a powerful and enduring critique of traditional theodicies, or what she terms 'Christian Masochism'.¹ The idea is introduced by placing one of the Reformation's darling sons in the crosshairs. Calvin comes across as a misanthrope through many quotations of his liturgical prayers in which human being are consistently denigrated and demeaned. Indeed one is reminded of the introduction to the 1559 edition of the Institutes of the Christian Religion in which Calvin sets out his prolegomena with the words: 'Man being at first created upright, but afterwards being not partially but totally ruined...'²

Calvin in fact is a perfect example of this 'Christian Masochism', which is Sölle's assessment of traditional theodicy. Human suffering is normalised, but the reasoning behind this is human sin. It is to be endured, as a normative human experience. Sölle would rather see suffering in

¹ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 9-32.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 38.

a more expansive way. In fact she cites Simone Weil, outlining that suffering has ‘physical, psychological, and social’³ dimensions. When the three are engaged, Sölle sees this as something greater, as *affliction*. This has been historically understood in what Sölle calls ‘sadistic’ terms, whereby God administers suffering to God’s loyal subjects in order to teach them something.

To be sure there is a rich vein of literature to be tapped here, biblical and otherwise. What Sölle offers here is a rich exploration of the nature of suffering and affliction, and not simply jumping into the work of resolving suffering (if such a task is even possible). Throughout the chapters of this admittedly brief work, Sölle explores the nature of suffering, and traditional theodical constructions. In stark terms she shows how these responses are inadequate. Sölle’s context, as we addressed earlier, was born out of a sense of the evils of the Vietnam War. Like all theologians exploring theodicy after 1945, the holocaust looms large in Sölle’s vision.

Sölle’s ‘answer’ is to examine the rich tradition of lament, and to reconsider it. She sees a glimpse of hope in what Moltmann calls the ‘crucified God’, the very real Jesus of history, a fellow sufferer. The incarnation means that we have a framework for imagining Jesus in many ways like us, as a human being, one who was tempted, suffered betrayals, was beaten, killed, and felt separation from God the father. At the same time, remembering that this same Jesus was also God, it is fair to say that Jesus represents a suffering God.

This is no impassable deity somehow inaccessible to us, but rather a God who truly lived, suffered, and died alongside us. Such a God is not a God made in our image, but the very opposite. This is a God who suffered in the marred creation just as the creation itself continues to groan and suffer in its affliction. And this is what is set up nicely here: a ‘realised

³ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 13.

eschatology'. In some sense the onus is on humans to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven. Talk of being whisked off to heaven after we die is to be rejected. Jesus' teachings are an injunction to work for the establishment of his Kingdom – the creation restored to its Edenic perfection, with some key differences.

We are reminded of the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21. The implication of a city in the Apocalypse is immense. Cities are built by humans, and had no place in the original Eden. There is a sense here that our human contributions, feeble though they may seem, are necessary for the continued realisation of this eschatological vision. This is what suffering allows us to hope for. Suffering is inescapable, even for God, and the idea that it is somehow 'good' or 'fortifying' for our character is utterly repudiated.

One is reminded of the words of Rabbi Greenberg: 'No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children'.⁴ How could one even begin to speak of suffering as good for the soul, knowing what atrocities happened in the extermination camps of the Third Reich, the labour camps of the Khmer Rouge, the jungles of Vietnam, or the deserts of Afghanistan? Of course suffering can at times build character, fortitude, strength, but this justification does not stand up to scrutiny in a twenty-first century church, and Dorothee Sölle provides an elegant explanation of the how and the why of suffering.

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⁴ Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, ed. Eva Fleischer. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977)

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