

“Hope Requires Participants”: Dorothee Sölle’s Warning and Task for Political Theology in the Trump Era

by Dannis M. Matteson

The aim of political theology, as Theodore Jennings succinctly defines it, is “to use theological resources to subvert existing political structures.”¹ Many Christians today who are concerned with the current US political structures are likely to agree that the 2016 election of billionaire and television celebrity Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States necessitates a robust political theology. Given the staggering number of white Christians who voted for Trump, Christianity cannot afford a political theology that proposes subversive ideas but remains confined by book covers and limits itself to intellectual discourse. The free-market logic and racist nationalism infiltrating America’s political atmosphere demand a dual approach for political theology: one that both fashions a critical analysis *and* delivers a constructive task.

Dorothee Sölle, a German political theologian of the twentieth century, offers a political theology that meets this demand. Her crystal-clear scrutiny of Christian blind obedience warns against its connection to “Christofascism,” the fusing of Christianity with extreme forms of capitalism and nationalism. Sölle’s constructive task for political theology dissembles “Christofascism” through imagination, which she defines as “liberated spontaneity.” We can glimpse the way in which Sölle uses her theology of imagination for praxic theology through her poetic process, which attends to political reality and inspires action, and through the public liturgies she organized that worked to build political consciousness among people of faith. I argue that Sölle’s dual approach of analysis followed by praxis outlines *the* decisive task for political theology today in light of an America under the Trump administration and a global community trending toward populist movements.

Dannis M. Matteson is a PhD student in the Integrated Studies in Ethics and Theology program at Loyola University Chicago.

Situating Sölle within Political Theology

Political Theology is a conceptual field comprising various strains. “Classical” political theology, as coined by Johann Baptist Metz,² was formulated by Carl Schmitt in 1922. Schmitt’s *Political Theology* is a reactionary work against parliamentary democracy, illustrated by his opposition to the Weimar Republic. Favoring decisionistic leadership over democratic process, Schmitt argues for a necessarily sovereign ruler who, out of national crisis, makes the exceptional decision while sustaining strict borders between friend and foe. Though many philosophers and theologians find Schmitt’s critique of liberalism accurate, his involvement in

1 Theodore Jennings, “Political Theology” (presentation, Political Theology Today, at Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, April 20, 2017).

2 Johann Baptist Metz, “Two-Fold Political Theology,” in *Political Theology: Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions*, ed. Michael Welker et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 13.

National Socialism is indicative of a dangerous politic. Some “negative political theologians”³ read Schmitt against Schmitt, utilizing his critique of liberalism to then critique neoliberalism in order to imagine alternatives such as radical democracy.

“New Political Theology”⁴ arose in the late 1960s and 1970s alongside liberation theology, with a focus on justice in light of global suffering and the state’s role in that suffering. Reflecting on the Shoah, and with an eye to the liberationist movements in Latin America, political theologians within this strand shaped Christian theology as a critique of political systems that exploit, especially within the European context. New Political Theology further exposes moments when Christianity as an institution has perpetuated political injustice. New Political Theology is temporally and contextually sensitive, always asking questions such as: how do we speak about God today in light of a given political situation?⁵ How does speech about God connect to the “polis” as a political construct for the ultimate good of the people?⁶

These questions were especially relevant to German political theologians Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothee Sölle. Each focused their life’s work on contending with the question of doing theology post-Auschwitz and criticizing an apathetic trait they noticed among Christians faced with mass suffering. Sölle’s political theology was heavily influenced by her contact with Moltmann and Metz, as she, in turn, influenced them.⁷

Moltmann’s theology meditates upon the suffering of Jesus on the cross, where the very center of God is located. For Moltmann, God is a crucified God who suffers *with* humanity. The lynchpin of Moltmann’s theology is God’s self-giving love in that the cross locates God among the suffering while the Spirit flows out into the world as an active healing force. Moltmann’s developments make evident the influence Dietrich Bonhoeffer had on him, particularly in the concept that “only a suffering God can help.”⁸

While Metz criticizes the idea of a suffering God, he fosters a theology of narrative memory. The thrust of this notion rests in the remembrance of Jesus’s death and resurrection and in its power to resurrect the memories of all those who have suffered. The memory becomes “dangerous” because it protests the unjust killing of suffering peoples. It empowers Christians to question the political forces that caused mass suffering rather than fall into acquiescence.⁹

Sölle grew up in Germany under the regime of National Socialism, and her family hid the mother of her classmate, who was Jewish, in their attic. As a young theologian she traveled to Auschwitz, and the result of this experience shifted her theology exponentially. Like the other German political theologians discussed above, the task for her political theology at that point became addressing the question of how to speak about God as “first-world” citizens in light of the realities of fascism and genocide.¹⁰

Political Theology, published in 1971, rails against Christian theology that accommodates unjust socio-political norms. Sölle condemns Christianity for sanctioning the status quo, and she exposes Christian interpretations of

3 Negative political theologians tend to work from a stance of criticizing liberalism and democracy as it appears today in its limited manifestation, opening a space for a more radical, inclusionary democracy.

4 Again as categorized by Metz, see “Two-Fold Political Theology,” 13.

5 Metz, “Two-Fold Political Theology,” 16.

6 Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 55.

7 Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 55.

8 See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

9 See Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1998).

10 For a short synopsis of Sölle’s life and theology, see Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 53. For a comprehensive biography, see Renata Wind, *Dorothee Soelle—Mystic and Rebel: The Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

scripture that reinforce violence and war at the expense of the masses. Her strongest critique questions exploitative and unjust political actions on the part of the state, which are then left unquestioned by Christian institutions.

Sölle expressly states that political theology in this sense is not merely a political theory; rather, it is concerned with influencing and forming the “political conscience.” Sölle wants to engage Christians in the public sphere as much as possible in questioning unjust political structures. As she defines it, “Political theology is rather a theological hermeneutic...in which Christian truth should become praxis.”¹¹

Praxis, and exposing Christian theology’s lack thereof, becomes Sölle’s main thrust in her conception of political theology. Establishing conversation between faith and politics, thereby dismissing “apolitical escapism,” presents political theology’s main criteria for Sölle.¹² But this can only happen after conversion of the individual *and* community. The process of conversion involves the realization that society can indeed be transformed and that sin is inherently social, not solely personal. She highlights the example of Jesus, who concerned himself with the struggles of those in his midst, and challenged sociopolitical structures that limited his marginalized contemporaries.¹³

Taking into account the political context of the United States today, as well as populist trends occurring internationally, I posit that Sölle provides a crucial framework for political theology. She criticizes Christian obedience and the role it has historically played in political movements—a critique that offers an analysis and warning for our current political situation. Sölle then provides a constructive task that she sets forth for political theology to continue to be relevant—a task that she actively performed herself by way of public poetry and prayer to inspire political action.

Christianity and Blind Obedience

Obedience is a primary tenet for many Christians in various traditions. However, after the Shoah, Sölle worries that when Christian obedience becomes *blind* obedience it then can function as a force for evil. Sölle prefaces her discussion about Christian obedience with a powerful autobiographical moment. She illustrates the linkage between her experiences of Christian obedience and the role it played in her own social, religious, and political worlds. With candidness, Sölle ventures into her critique of Christian obedience rooted in her context as a German Christian woman who grew up after Auschwitz plagued by the question, “How could it have happened?”¹⁴ As a theologian, she aims to do theology not with her back to Auschwitz,¹⁵ but by examining it head on.

Sölle’s main claim in her exposition of Christian obedience is that when obedience is upheld as Christianity’s primary virtue, it has historically held deadly implications. She maintains that obedience, when left unchecked by other religious practices and virtues, eclipses the conscience, whether operating among humans or between humans and God. For Sölle, the consequences resulting from Christian obedience expand beyond religion into the social and political spheres. She highlights the role obedience played in National Socialist Germany, providing a biographical account as an example. The author of the account narrates a portrayal of his childhood, which was embedded in relationships governed by obedience. Revealing the author to be Rudolf Höss, director of the Auschwitz concentration camp, Sölle sharpens her argument that the role obedience played in Christianity laid the foundation for fascism to germinate in twentieth-century Germany.¹⁶

11 Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 36.

12 Sölle, *Political Theology*, 55, 60.

13 Sölle, *Political Theology*, 102.

14 Dorothee Sölle, *Creative Disobedience* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), ix.

15 See Metz’s approach in *A Passion for God*, 41.

16 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 9.

Sölle utilizes a definition of obedience synthesized by Alexander Mitscherlich, who has studied the relationship between childhood and learned obedience.¹⁷ Here, imbalance of power defines the relationship between two parties, which is perpetuated by fear of punishment. Because the inferior party is constantly anticipating intimidation, and, because the relationship is never reversible, obedience becomes habitual. In light of this definition of obedience as constructing a power-over dynamic, the problematic nature of Christian obedience becomes clear when it is taken as having intrinsic value in itself—and when it is applied to humanity’s relationship with God.

Valuing obedience without critiquing its goal typifies Sölle’s notion of blind obedience. Within this understanding, obedience becomes an end in itself, and the focus settles upon *how* obedient one is rather than on the aim of the obedient act. Submission to and fulfillment of an order is glorified in itself, while the actual end is rendered irrelevant. Unfortunately, according to Sölle, lack of criticism surrounding the purpose of obedience has become the standard for the Christian life in many cases. Christians are obedient to what they perceive as obligation and become blind to the world around them. The consequences of narrowly obeying commands can be severe. In the process of obeying, one’s self-gratification numbs one’s ability to feel guilt. In this way, one completes a task or fulfills an order out of obligation, without the need to be aware of the surrounding context or implication of one’s actions. Nothing matters but that one has been obedient. Critical methods for seeing reality, such as the liberationist “see, judge, act” process, for example, are evaded in this context.

In addition, Sölle proposes that Christian obedience has direct implications for our theologies of God. Authoritarian religiosity positions God as an all-powerful monarch.¹⁸ Relationship with God then reflects the same power imbalance in which Christians become minions of God’s demands, and calamities that befall humans are interpreted as God’s punishment. God’s characteristics of justice and love are subordinated by God’s omnipotence, and, because the symbol of God functions, as Elizabeth Johnson would say,¹⁹ human relational systems come to mirror this power-over formulation.

Sölle’s Warning: “Christofascism”

In light of her conceptualization of Christian obedience, Sölle asks the questions, “What does it mean when obedience is given the central position? What are the social implications of such a theology?”²⁰ The grave answer to these questions lies in her concept of “Christofascism.” Upon first glance, the language Sölle uses appears to be harsh and perhaps even overstated. However, when Sölle uses the term “Christofascism,” she was not necessarily intending to label a leader or state as fascist; rather, she uses the term as a warning against the destructive potential portrayed when religion, politics, and economics work together to support nationalism and extreme capitalism. Rather than thinking of her term as a descriptive label, think of it as a warning. The term “Christofascism” is a pointer. It gestures toward a grave reality that *could be*, if Christianity, capitalism, and nationalism continue to cohere more and more strongly.

A closer look at Sölle’s essay entitled “Christofascism” provides clarity about the way she uses the term in her critique. The essay was penned after some time she spent teaching in the United States and noticing the links between capitalism, nationalism, and Christian obedience. Within it, she laments that a large sector of Christianity has been molded into a “vehicle” driving extreme capitalist ideology, citing Jerry Falwell and the “Moral Majority” movement of the 1980s. Sölle criticizes Falwell and others for reaching out to economically disadvantaged Americans by promising to “make America number one again” and by glorifying the free market while simultaneously soliciting

17 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 11

18 Dorothee Sölle, “Fatherhood, Power, and Barbarism” in *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 86.

19 See Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

20 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 6.

donations. Sölle captures Falwell's words that characterize the use of Christianity to bolster capitalistic ideology and ventures:

The system of free enterprise is clearly prescribed in the Bible, in the Proverbs of Solomon. Jesus Christ makes clear that the work ethic is part of his plan for mankind. Private property is biblical. Business competition is biblical. Ambitious and successful business practice is clearly prescribed as part of God's plan for his people.²¹

Sölle identifies three key elements underpinning her concept of "Christofascism": the cementing of Christian theology with capitalist ideology and nationalism (including moral superiority), a specific work ethic, and familial roles that police women in particular. Inherent to these elements are outpourings of nationalism, militarism, and racism on the part of both the governmental leadership and among Christian Americans. In this Christofascist system, the free press becomes eclipsed by censorship, and national security is upheld as sacred doctrine.²² Christian themes of justice and solidarity are neglected, and Sölle further laments that, "Jesus, who suffered hunger and poverty, who practiced solidarity with the oppressed, has nothing to do with this religion."²³

Sölle warns that Christians can become complacent in the midst of Christofascist culture especially when faced by the counterargument that a political leader cannot have fascist tendencies when he or she is elected by a voting public. However, Sölle maintains that Christofascism is dangerous precisely because it is not compulsory. Christian-capitalist ideology blankets the truth, seducing Christian voters by promising economic resurgence.²⁴

As we have seen, when Christians operate under the "virtue" of blind obedience, political leaders and also religious leaders rise up, like Jerry Falwell, who manipulate the masses to become supporters of this Christofascist enterprise. Extreme versions of capitalism and militarism reign while Christians blindly follow. Sölle is by no means the only theologian to expose the way extreme capitalism has often been supported by various Christian theologies. Pope Francis himself warns against this very notion in *The Joy of the Gospel* when he states bluntly that "we can no longer trust the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market."²⁵ Sölle counts the cost of Christofascism in her essay "Security is Death." She critiques the complete system, exclaiming that as a result of capitalism reinforced by Christianity, "wealth functions like a wall...our wall is sound proof so we cannot hear the sounds of the poor and the oppressed."²⁶ Not only are the poor and oppressed walled off to the margins, the bomb replaces God, while national security and rampant free market practice become the primary forms of societal worship.²⁷

21 Dorothee Sölle, "Christofascism," in *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 138.

22 For a similar discussion on the sacralization of American government, see Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 9.

23 Sölle, "Christofascism," 140.

24 Sölle, "Christofascism," 138.

25 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), no. 204, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

26 Dorothee Sölle, "Security is Death," in *The Window of Vulnerability*, 17.

27 Sölle, "Security is Death," 9. Jeffrey Robbins, who wants to read a "radical democratic theory into political theology" to "provide an alternative political theology," captures a similar picture of the intersection among US politics, capitalism, and the role Christianity has played to prop up both sectors. To his critique, the globalization of the free market system has been propelled by liberal democracy in such a way that it has damaged democracy itself. In the face of political theologies that support this wheelhouse of global capital, his book affirms a political theology that undergirds radical democracy. Jeffrey Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 9. Also see Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 4-10, and Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017) for further discussion surrounding the use of Christian theology to bolster political ideology historically in the United States.

Reading Sölle in light of the contemporary US context, her foreshadowed warnings of walls, censorship of the press, and promises to make the nation “number one” ring in one’s ears. The wall is underway, the press has already been excluded, and Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign itself was based on the promise to “make America great again,” which some analysts interpret as a euphemism for “make America white again.”²⁸ The eerie resemblance begs the question: is Sölle’s warning against Christofascism an accurate paradigm for analyzing the political challenges faced by Christians today? The question at hand is not attempting to determine whether Trump is a fascist leader. Rather, it is asking if the extreme capitalist and nationalistic political swing in America, largely supported by Christians in the United States, meets the conditions of the warning Sölle flagged in her critique written decades ago. Are we really seeing the ramifications of Christofascism being played out on the political and economic stage? I would venture to argue that Sölle’s critique of Christofascism does stand as an apt warning when considering how the vast majority of Trump voters were white Christians and especially when placing it within the context of the rise of populism around the world.²⁹

Sölle’s Task: Imagination

If we are to take Sölle’s warning seriously in the face of the US political climate today, which is reminiscent of many populist movements occurring worldwide, we must not stop with critique. Considering her severe critical warning against Christofascism, Sölle provides a task for political theology that she calls “Phantasie,” or imagination. In her analysis, Sölle follows Rudolf Bultmann’s approach which involves the “interrelationship” of three factors: “will of God,” “decision,” and “situation,” each element correcting one another. Unlike the Schmittian model of sovereignty, the subject is allowed her autonomy, while being confronted with a situation that demands a decision—to choose the will of God or not, in the face of that situation. In this way, “blindness before a situation is corrected by the concreteness of the demand. The authoritarian blindness for the world is corrected by the necessity of making a decision (a reaction). Neither the traditional reflection on the how of obedience nor the direct relationship between the one who demands obedience and the one who obeys plays an immediate role.”³⁰

Here, Sölle is referring to Bultmann’s theology of the Kingdom of God and radical obedience. Bultmann develops an idea of obedience which, he argues, operates outside of an authoritarian relationship to God as described earlier. The Kingdom of God is a future reality that operates in the present, “compelling man to decision.”³¹ When faced with a concrete situation, the Kingdom of God compels one to decide one’s actions informed by, but not necessarily bound by, God’s will. The freedom to decide remains with the person, and she is not forced to act in any one particular way. God places trust in humanity to respond to the situation, giving them the opportunity to make a “positive” decision.³²

This alternative concept of obedience reverses the idea of blind Christian obedience that Sölle criticizes, because here the Christian is not bound by a law that she follows blindly and uncritically. Rather, when presented with a

28 Steve Phillips, “Trump Wants to Make America White Again” *New York Times*, February 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/opinion/trump-wants-to-make-america-white-again.html>.

29 Eighty-one percent of white evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump, as did 60 percent of white Catholics and 58 percent of white Protestant Christians. Trump’s victory margin among white Christians matched and in many cases exceeded that of the last five elections. The statistics further reveal that 56 percent of weekly church-goers voted for Trump. Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martínez, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” *Pew Research Center*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

30 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 23.

31 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 52.

32 Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 55.

situation, the Christian is given the opportunity to act in alignment with the will of God (or not), and, when she does decide, she is deciding based on her autonomous subjectivity and intention.³³

However, Sölle takes Bultmann's conception of "radical obedience" a step further to develop her schema of "creative disobedience" which acts out of "liberated spontaneity." Sölle affirms that

it is not God in a general, timeless sense who demands obedience, but the situation which demands a response, and only therein does God require a person's response. Since the will of God cannot be determined in advance, nor the situation anticipated, the response the person makes can only be a decision in the now...What God wishes—and perhaps who God is—can only be determined in the situation.³⁴

This is a discerning obedience, an obedience that reacts with "eyes wide open" to the situation.³⁵ Obedience in an authoritarian vision of God advances the world's "created order" of society, sustaining the regime of socio-political norms. A "liberated understanding of obedience," on the other hand, is defined by the freedom surrounding the person when she encounters a situation. She is free to respond in the way that she chooses. Further, this freedom makes apparent that she is no longer bound to the limiting social norms that order her world. She realizes she is faced with the ultimate decision of whether or not she is going to take part in transforming the world around her or remain a slave to the order of the world.³⁶

As we have considered earlier in this discussion, Sölle laments that Christianity often reinforces the wider social "created order" by stressing blind obedience:

Obedience then was always the carrying out of commands intended to maintain this order. Since the order itself was never questioned as to whether it was good and for whom, it was easy for other masters to promote obedience for different, yet comparable natural orders: that of the state, that of a master race, or that of neocolonialism, and with equal validity. The one thing these various orders have in common is their presumed reality. The obedient person remains a *re-actor*; he or she only fulfills that which is assigned; he is required to sacrifice his spontaneity on the altar of obedience.³⁷

Blind obedience on the part of Christians translates into a pattern for acting blindly and obediently in society at large. In contrast, Sölle maintains that Jesus's message was one of transforming societal norms and that the locus for this transformation rests in the moment of decision on the part of the individual faced with a concrete situation of injustice. The decision becomes whether or not to act according to conformity or to "burst the boundary" of the created order and act in a way that transforms it: "[I]t is precisely this spontaneity for which Jesus sets us free. That which he requires does not presuppose the order of the world; that order has yet to be established in the future. Insofar as the human must first discover what God's will is, the future of the world remains open."³⁸

33 This combination of the demand of the situation and the choice of decision might be paralleled with Kahn's call for a "phenomenology of the political" which he describes as acknowledging both sides of the sovereignty-liberalism dichotomy. This is not trying to escape the reality that sovereignty exists; rather, it counterbalances one side with the other. Bultmann's approach to obedience is an example of locating oneself on the spectrum between God's "will" and human reason; both decisiveness and contingency are incorporated. "There is no single answer to the question of how political groups conceive of themselves and their members. The right question is not theoretical at all. Rather it is a question of how we place ourselves in relationship to these competing principles." Kahn, *Political Theology*, 3.

34 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 25.

35 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 25.

36 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 26.

37 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 27.

38 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 27.

Openness becomes the main characteristic of this liberated spontaneity Sölle envisions for the Christian life. In the political sphere, something similar is imagined by Jeffrey Robbins's conceptualization of radical democracy. Like Sölle, Robbins is fiercely critical of what he calls "corporatist governance"³⁹ which has been made possible by liberalism's cozy position beside free-market practice.⁴⁰ With "eyes wide open"⁴¹ to this reality, Robbins leans on the words of Antonio Negri to suggest that the decision does not lead to a closure, like it does in the sovereign's moment of exception. Rather, similar to Bultmann's "positive" decision, Negri calls the decision "the opening of a new horizon of common power."⁴² The decision becomes *decisions* (plural) produced by the multitude from below. Robbins leans into the idea of potentiality with this construction of the "generative power" and "productive capacity" that renders the created social order "immeasurable." Though today "the people have been rendered the object of market forces,"⁴³ there still exists a pre-history of democracy, which lies beneath the surface and within the potential power of the social body, waiting to be birthed into fullness.⁴⁴ "The decision is an opening, not a closure."⁴⁵

Transformation becomes the potential result of an openness created by the decision when it lies within the hands of an individual person "from below" rather than demanded from on high. This is where imagination comes into play for Sölle. Jesus's "Phantasie" provides the keenest example of imagining life in society unlimited by oppressive bounds. When met with a situation of injustice and faced with decision, Jesus not only reacted to the singular situation, but imagined a vastly different way of living, a complete transformation of the whole oppressive system. "He did not fulfill duties; instead he changed the situations of those whom he met. His *Phantasie* [imagination] began with the situations but always went far beyond them."⁴⁶

The Challenge of Practical Political Theology

But Sölle's task of *Phantasie*, which she suggests for Political Theology, does not stop here. In her strain of New Political Theology, Sölle wishes to launch into the void held open by negative political theology. In her work as a New Political Theologian, Sölle wants to do theology that is grounded in praxis. The concrete ways in which Sölle worked to make theology practical are manifested in the role poetry played in doing her theology as well as in events she organized for public prayer and action for political change.

Poetic Political Theology

Sölle's political theology of imagination is no doubt bolstered, or even possibly rooted in, her artistic life as a poet. In fact, in a 1982 television interview, Sölle describes her method of doing theology as one that consistently begins with poetry, because poetry enables her to discern the inner movements of the heart and mind. Sölle's poetry allows her to articulate with precision that which her own heart voices in reaction to encounters with injustice.⁴⁷ In this case, the poetic method provides a pattern for unveiling inner truth that otherwise lies dormant. Not only does the poetic process provide clarification for theology, it can also foster a poetic *way of being* in the world which responds to injustice. In this way, the poetic process can provide a formula for dislodging oneself from the grips of Christofascism's blind obedience.

39 Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 73.

40 Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 3.

41 Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 72.

42 Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 73.

43 Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 73.

44 Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 74.

45 Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 74.

46 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 53.

47 Dorothee Sölle, "Das Christentum setzt voraus, dass all Menschen Dichter sind, nämlich beten können," in *Dorothee Sölle im Gespräch*, ed. Theo Christiansen and Johannes Thiele (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1988), 92. ("Christianity presupposes that all people are poets, namely, they can pray.")

In a poem titled “Meine Wünsche” (My Desires), Sölle demonstrates that paying attention to one’s desires can reveal one’s own daily acquiescence to the status quo.⁴⁸ As the poem suggests, once the poet taps into the desire to break free from the limits of the Christofascist anthropology, she is rarely left alone by it and begins to feel as though she is being constantly attacked by a pesky swarm of birds. Though sometimes she is tempted to shoot down her desires with rationalizations, the narrator is constantly revisited by relentless “pests.” Efforts to return to a trivial life are interrupted by constant nagging to break the mold of Christofascism.

Not only does a poetic way of being include paying attention to inner desire, it also extends an outward gaze toward political reality. The process of opening one’s eyes to reality requires an interpretation of sin not only as a private phenomenon, but also in the form of harmful social structures. As Sölle’s political theology forwards, the primary demand made by the gospel today is to *see* social sin as collaboration with the “Death Machine” and as apathy toward the suffering it causes.⁴⁹ A vantage point is cleared by situating oneself in the context of “collaboration with systems that operate our industrialized world” and by forging self- and social-criticism.⁵⁰ Interpreting sin in light of unjust and harmful social structures stands in direct opposition to Christofascism’s privatization of sin and the escape from reality it offers.

But how exactly does one sharpen the skill of attending to reality? Sölle’s poetic thrust suggests a process that allows for the development of sight. For Sölle, the poem serves as a space from which to reflect upon encounters with people and places that have made an impression upon her as a result of her extensive activism. Sölle’s first-hand encounters with families of the disappeared in Latin America, for example, made lasting impressions on her work as a theologian. To concretize these encounters, she wrote poetry about them, as exemplified by the poetry compiled in *Of War and Love*.⁵¹

The poetic process, in this sense, provides an opportunity to relive moments of witness to the unjust impacts of Christofascism. It functions as a repetitive memory that is not allowed to recede from one’s consciousness. Seen through this lens, the *poetic human being* witnesses social sin, takes stock of the ways in which she collaborates with it, and allows what she has witnessed to take up space in her consciousness and inform her actions in the world. The poetic process provides a formula to engage imagination as it leads one out from blind obedience, helps one to see reality for what it is, and propels one to act.

Public Political Theology

A prime example of Sölle’s venture to make political theology a public event that fosters practical implementation in society is the “Politisches Nachtgebet” (Political Night Prayer) which she founded in the 1960s alongside her husband, Fulbert Steffensky. Under the belief that Christian life and political engagement are inseparable, Sölle, along with Steffensky, Marie Viet, Heinrich Böll, Klaus Schmidt, and Egbert Höfflich gathered together an ecumenical group of lay people and clergy, including theologians and activists, for a meeting that incorporated information, meditation, discussion, and action.⁵² The first meeting took place in 1968 at St. Anthony Church in Cologne at 11 p.m.⁵³ Inspired by the Worker Priest Movement in France, which was comprised of a process of *lutte et contemplation* [struggle and contemplation], the Politische Nachtgebet provided a space for a teaching

48 Dorothee Sölle, *Of War and Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 28.

49 Sölle, *Political Theology*, 92.

50 Sölle, *Political Theology*, 92.

51 Sölle, “Das Christentum setzt voraus,” 92.

52 Wind, *Dorothee Soelle*, 59.

53 “Dorothee Sölle und das Politische Nachtgebet in der Antoniterkirche,” AntoniterCityKirche, Evangelische Gemeinde Köln, <http://www.antoniter-citykirche.de/dorothee-soelle.aspx>.

centered on a specific justice issue, meditation of some kind, discussion, and plans for action in response to the injustice.⁵⁴ Eventually, the group's members were no longer allowed to meet at St. Anthony because they were too radical for conventional Christianity. The institution labeled the group "blasphemers" and "degrading to the house of God."⁵⁵ So, despite thousands of people regularly filling the church, the group was forced to continue finding various spaces in which to meet. From 1968 to 1972, the group met monthly under the dictum that "Theologisches Nachdenken ohne politische Konsequenzen kommt einer Heuchelei gleich. Jeder theologische Satz muss auch ein politischer sein (Theological reflection without political consequences is hypocrisy. Every theological statement must also be a political statement)."⁵⁶ As a result of the Politisches Nachtgebet, action groups sprang up all around the Cologne area.

Sölle wrote a creed that became formative for the group and also characteristic of the public theology she aimed to do alongside her community. The first stanza provides insight into the theology underpinning the Politisches Nachtgebet as indicative of the task Sölle had in mind for Political Theology: "Ich glaube an Gott/der die welt nicht fertig geschaffen hat/wie ein ding das immer so bleiben muss/der nicht nach ewigen gesetzen regiert/die unabänderlich gelten/nicht nach natürlichen ordnungen/von armen und reichen/sachverständigen und uninformierten/herrschenden und ausgelieferten (I believe in God/who did not create the world into fullness/like something that must always remain as-is/not something that is ruled by everlasting laws/held as unchanging/not of the natural law/of poor and rich/lawful and uninformed/governing and extradited.)"⁵⁷

Indeed, the "Politisches Nachtgebet" exemplifies Sölle's theology of imagination. Take the first meeting as an example: the group was faced with the situation of the Vietnam War and, after teachings, meditation, prayer, and discussion, they located the "Crucified One" not within the church building, but suffering in war-torn Vietnam alongside the oppressed. Rather than remaining obediently blind to the situation, the group refused to acquiesce, igniting their imagination for a different way forward for international affairs. The situation led them to *decide* to act in the face of the given world order, which condones war, bringing their protest to the streets, waving banners proclaiming "Vietnam is Golgatha,"⁵⁸ and refusing to be a church that blindly followed destructive policy.⁵⁹

This theology of imagination, for Sölle, was meant to be a public theology that inspired Christians to participate in the re-envisioning of the Kingdom of God, not a theology that merely proposed radical ideas but remained bound by book covers. But taking her theology into the public sphere was costly for Sölle. Not only did she face condemnation by the church, the university system rejected her radical stances as well. In Germany, Sölle was never granted full professorship at any university. Theology departments perceived her as too radical. In one moment in time, she was able to work at a German university in the literature department, but she was not granted a position the following year. Finally, she found a home at Union Theological Seminary in New York where she taught from 1975 to 1987.⁶⁰ Though the risk was great and consequences were many, Sölle continued applying her public political theology in various other ways throughout her life.

Conclusion

A political theology for today, as constructed by Sölle, judges Christians' complicit, blind obedience to extreme capitalist and nationalistic ideology. It provides a fervent warning that is meant to shake Christians out of com-

54 Wind, *Dorothee Soelle*, 59.

55 Friedrich K. Kurylo, "Kirchliche Bedenken," *Zeit Online*, February 16, 1973, <http://www.zeit.de/1973/08/kirchliche-bedenken>.

56 Kurylo, "Kirchliche Bedenken."

57 Wind, *Dorothee Soelle*, 45.

58 Wind, *Dorothee Soelle*, 72.

59 Wind, *Dorothee Soelle*, 72.

60 Wind, *Dorothee Soelle*, 98.

plicity, setting forth a specific task. Instead of obedience, theology must incite Christians to act by engaging the imagination and proposing alternatives to harmful socio-political norms—and it must be concretely praxic. In an interview with Günther Gaus, which aired on German television in 1969, Sölle speaks to the aim of the *Politisches Nachtgebet* as an attempt to break out of theory bound by intellectual discussion by entering the realm of practical implementation. “To me,” she tells Gaus, “what lies deep within my heart, is that theology should reflect these kinds of Theory-Praxis models, which lead us down a new way, a way that is traveled by more and more people, eventually transforming society at large.”⁶¹

⁶¹ “Was mir am meisten am Herzen liegt und auch für die Theologie am wichtigsten zu sein scheint, sind solche Theorie-Praxis-Modelle, in denen Menschen wirklich auf einen neuen Weg gebracht werden, und zwar in einer grösseren Gruppierung.” Sölle, “Das Christentum muss kritischen Fragen standhalten, wenn es Zukunft haben will,” in *Dorothee Sölle im Gespräch*, 20.