

Prophetic mysticism

by [Dennis Tamburello](#) in the [December 5, 2001](#) issue

The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance. By Dorothee Soelle. Fortress, 325 pp., \$20

At 19, when I was struggling to discern whether I had a vocation to the Franciscans (Order of Friars Minors), the following words flowed spontaneously out of my mouth as I prayed one night: "Lord, if it is your will for me to become a friar, I will do it." It was not an intentional utterance but seemed to come from the depths of my soul. I was amazed and not a little afraid. Moved by this experience and others, I soon found myself knocking at the door of the friary. Now, almost 30 years later, I hear that same inner voice constantly challenging me to live an authentic Franciscan life that promotes peace, justice and the integrity of creation.

Such experiences are neither illusions nor projections, Dorothee Soelle insists. They are authentic and put us in touch with the heart of reality. Unfortunately, many people have lost touch with their mystical sensitivity or dismiss it as fantasy or superstition. This loss of a sense of the mystical, Soelle claims, is at the root of our modern problems of egotism, materialism and violence.

Soelle, a professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary from 1975 to 1987, now lives in Hamburg, Germany, and is active in the peace and ecological movements there. In this book, which is being billed as her "major work," she makes the bold claim that mysticism is the key to the continuing vitality of religion in the new millennium. She uses the paradoxical expression "silent cry," taken from an anonymous 15th-century letter, as a mystical name for God, who cries out to us from the depths of our being, calling us to become one not only with God but with all of creation.

This sense of the unity or connectedness of all reality gives her argument its cohesiveness. Soelle claims that it is impossible to be truly in love with God without being moved to work for justice and peace. In one of many remarkable sentences, she states, "Without economic and ecological justice . . . and without God's preferential love for the poor and for this planet, the love for God and the longing for oneness seem to me to be an atomistic illusion." Thus, when properly understood,

mysticism leads to resistance, to a resounding "No!" to the world as it now is.

Soelle makes no apologies to those (often in Protestant circles) who would deny the significance of mysticism in religious life. She reproaches them for being afraid of or embarrassed by the experiential, and sees this rejection of the experiential as rooted in the trivialization of children's and women's experiences. Neither does she apologize to those (often in Roman Catholic circles) who accept mysticism only when it supports a hierarchical, institutional party line. Rather, she insists that true mysticism has a strong prophetic edge, and upsets "the powers and orders that be."

As Soelle makes her compelling argument for mysticism's relevance to our common life she refers to a wide variety of mystical authors from diverse traditions, including Christian, Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist. Particularly impressive is her grasp of Meister Eckhart, whose radical ideas she explains with exceptional clarity. Unfortunately, Soelle often quotes the words of the mystics through secondary sources, which makes it harder for readers to locate specific citations in the original texts.

There are points that can be criticized: for example, Soelle's assertion, following Eric Fromm, that acquisitiveness, as opposed to the possession of things for "functional purposes," was brought about by capitalism. Both the Bible and many mystical texts throughout the centuries have condemned selfish acquisition. However, though Soelle may be wrong in some of her particulars, her overall perspective on mysticism deserves to be taken seriously.

Soelle exposes much of what passes for religion today as just another form of consumerism. She advocates a relationship with God based on awe and love, not "bargaining" or self-interest. True mystical love gives us a sense of unity with all creation that has the potential to melt our egotism, possessiveness and propensity for violence. This will inevitably bring us joy but also some suffering and sorrow. Soelle criticizes some New Age and fundamentalist religious perspectives for their denial of darkness and suffering and their embrace of a superficial kind of "positive thinking." The dark night of the soul, which sometimes is manifest in our concrete failures in the struggle for peace and justice, cannot, she insists, "be voted out of existence."

Soelle rightly claims that the denial of mysticism poses a much greater danger to our world today than does the misuse of religion. Despite a few shortcomings (including an occasional poorly translated sentence or paragraph), *The Silent Cry*,

more than anything I have read in many years, has made me rethink my assumptions about mysticism. It offers a gold mine of valuable reflections on the spiritual life.