

THE THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS OF EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX

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[The theological hermeneutics of Edward Schillebeeckx facilitated a reflection on Christology tied to the notion of "experience." This allowed Schillebeeckx to interpret the experience of salvation in Christ from one cultural milieu to the next. However, the overall experiment in Christology failed to acknowledge the limitations, especially for today, imposed by his reliance on frameworks of interpretation that too narrowly limit experiences of salvation within the legitimization structures of biblical and ecclesiastical theological structures.]

THE QUESTION OF how Christology can be hermeneutically retrieved against different historical-cultural backgrounds is the focus of my article. The theological hermeneutics of Edward Schillebeeckx facilitates a reflection on Christology which is tied to the central notion of experience. This allows Schillebeeckx to update the Christian experience of salvation in Christ from one cultural period to the next. But the overall experiment in Christology, especially in his "Jesus books," fails to acknowledge the methodological limitations imposed for today by his reliance on frameworks of interpretation that too narrowly freeze experiences of salvation within the biblical and traditional horizons of experience. A theology for today in which culture and biblical narrative no longer overlap requires an adjusted theory of religious experiences that both stands within the tradition and remains open to the currents of experience not yet discernible within that same tradition.

Schillebeeckx embarked on just such a theological project to engage the cultural climate of his time. This included extensive studies in Christology. Although these studies have been variously assessed, they utilized the experience tradition to renew Christology without compromising the incarnational, historical, and logocentric frameworks that ensure faithfulness

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to the particularity of the historical figure of Jesus and its later ecclesiastical tradition. The success or failure of this project contains insights for the present-day challenge posed to Christology by a contemporary pluralistic and postmodern cultural climate where the overlap between faith and experience has been considerably diminished. My examination reviews the work of Schillebeeckx from the point of view of its indebtedness to certain presuppositions and suggests methodological issues important to the question of postmodern pluralism. Contemporary pluralism of experience, while it defines the present cultural environment, demands a thorough re-evaluation of methodological considerations for theology, if one is to evaluate the possibility of a dialogue within and between Christian faith and contemporary culture.

SCHILLEBEECKX'S CHRISTOLOGY

In recent published interviews Schillebeeckx has located his theological point of departure in creation. He has stated: "I regard the creation as the foundation of all theology."¹ Indeed, this has been the central motif characteristic of his theological career.² According to Schillebeeckx it is creation that "I have been studying day and night" because it "interests me a great deal."³ Creation is the pivotal stance for Schillebeeckx's theological work. However, the theology of redemption is intimately related to the theology of creation. He has observed:

Man is not just confronted with a God who is creator—he is also confronted with a God of salvation. . . . That is why I say that the God of Israel, the liberator God (the God of salvation) is creator. This does away with the entire conceptual difficulty between salvation and creation. Creation is the point of departure for the whole of the covenant and the whole of the movement of liberation in which universal salvation is to be achieved for all mankind.⁴

For Schillebeeckx the *Deus Creator* is clearly the *Deus Salvator*. In this way the history of salvation coincides with the history of creation in that the whole of created experience is permeated with God's saving intention. "Creation and salvation thus shed mutual light on one another."⁵ Accord-

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *I Am a Happy Theologian: Conversations with Francesco Strazzari*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 47.

² Philip Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993) 9–10.

³ Schillebeeckx, *I Am a Happy Theologian* 47.

⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, *God is New Each Moment*, trans. David Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983) 102.

⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

ingly, any understanding of Christ is grounded in a theology of creation. The Christ phenomenon is concentrated, condensed creation.⁶

Category of Experience

The ideas presented by Schillebeeckx in his 1983 *Farewell Speech* from the University of Nijmegen eschew this more panoramic view of theology in favor of specifically prioritizing a theological hermeneutics of experience. This was not a sudden change. Since 1966 he had been teaching a course in hermeneutics at his University which, though in the form of lecture notes, may well have been intended for publication. Also, in the so-called “Jesus books,” one finds further reflections on theological hermeneutics and the central role of experience in his theological methodology.

Three reasons for this concern with experience can be identified. First, he seeks to understand the self-development of the Christian message—then and now—which is the hermeneutical problem. Second, he promotes a concern for the dialogue between the different forms of Christian self-development, which is the ecumenical problem. Third, he favors the further exchange between Christians and non-Christians which constitutes the inter-religious dialogue. Leo Apostel summarizes this focus as follows: “If the Christian message develops itself, without therefore denying itself, then this cannot be simply done by inductively or deductively continuing a line of reasoning from an original information-injecting event, but it has to be the outcome of an organic comparison of the original experience (of Jesus first and of the disciples through and with him) with the experiences of later generations.”⁷ What is at stake here is the organic relationship between two types of experience—experience then and experience now. Because these experiences belong to different historical cultural horizons, one may ask how these two horizons of experience can be melted, since different cultures, philosophical systems, and frames of interpretation are involved.

Schillebeeckx has a number of concerns in mind with respect to Christian faith. Firstly, he wants to avoid an interpretation that is either simply handed down or that opens the original message about Christian experience to an unlimited number of interpretations. Schillebeeckx’s lengthy trilogy intends an updating interpretation of the Christ-event for and by the present-day faith community. Here Schillebeeckx wants to escape from the danger of two extremes: relativizing the revelation of God in Christ and its

⁶ Schillebeeckx, *I Am a Happy Theologian* 50; Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx* 87.

⁷ Leo Apostel, “Religieuze ervaring bij Edward Schillebeeckx,” in *Volgens Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Etienne Kuypers (Leuven: Garant, 1991) 92.

dogmatic petrification. He steers a middle course between the Scylla of Lessing and the Charybdis of the Roman magisterium.⁸ In other words, to steer a course between rigid orthodoxy and a pure relativism that would compromise the revelatory power of the Christ-event. Secondly, he wants to understand the Christian message as universal (with a potential claim on all people) and unique (with no equivalence between all forms of religiosity). Thirdly, he wants to relate the religious and non-religious language games through the design of universal human experience

Thus, Schillebeeckx focuses on the universality of human experience as the central interpretative element for theology and especially Christology. Furthermore, since this flows from an experience of reality, the interpretation has to bridge horizons, past and present, here and then, ours and theirs. The question is whether this can be achieved by anchoring a theological interpretation in contemporary experiences that manifest radically different parameters of feeling and thinking from those that prevailed at the time of first-century Palestine. Schillebeeckx commences his Christology in the experiential situation of the New Testament world.

New Testament Experiences

Initially, the Christian gospel, as outlined in the New Testament, is understood in the thinking of Schillebeeckx as having a permanent value which struggles for its identity in every culture and historical situation. On this problem Ted Schoof remarks:

[T]he deepest reason of history's changing role the Christian theologian will localize in a kind of original tension that is particular to Christianity as a religion and that is even somewhat paradoxical: the Christian churches refer to a very precise historical fact—something which was done and suffered about 2000 years ago in Palestine by Jesus of Nazareth and a group of followers—as their origin and core but, at the same time, they see this event as having an absolute and universal character. From the very beginning, Christian thought struggles with this clash between historical contingency and permanent (and in that sense unchangeable) meaning, for example, when the concrete and dynamic Judeo-Christian forms of thought in which the core event was formulated, had to be transformed into the more static and abstract ideas of western Greek and Roman thought. . . . Can the plasticity of Jesus' parable language be translated into the distancing, theoretical speech about nature, essence and person, stemming from Hellenistic thought and aiming at universal validity? Can the historical contingency of the events concerning Jesus stand the shock of such a transformation?⁹

⁸ Georges De Schrijver, "Hertaling van het Christus gebeuren: een onmogelijke opgave?" in *Volgens Edward Schillebeeckx* 53.

⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, "Breuklijnen in Christelijke Dogmas," *Breuklijnen: Grenservaringen en zoektochten* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1994) 2, following T. Schoof, "Geschiedenis en theologie: een haat-liefde-verhouding?" *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 101 (1988) 510–24, at 510.

These expressions or schemes of interpretation in which the Christian experience is phrased, although contingent themselves, are considered by Schillebeeckx to preserve the meaning of the unique religious experience and revelation of God that was given in Jesus of Nazareth. This religious possibility then becomes fixed as part of a dogmatic process in which it receives a formal juridical and even fixed meaning. This, he argues, was particularly strong in Roman Catholicism since the 16th century and especially in the 19th century. However, this was not always the case and even the four Gospels reflect a plurality of understanding and a particularized reception of Jesus. Historically and in terms of the personal and social needs of people, certain groups of people tell the Jesus-story because in their lives they have found salvation through that event.¹⁰ However, according to Schillebeeckx, in spite of these particular receptions, what draws people to Jesus is his special experience of faith and praxis that makes him unique and universally valid in his relationship to God. This is demonstrated in the religious experiences of Jesus and his disciples, especially in the Abba and Easter experiences that become core experiences for the New Testament faith.

Abba Experience

Schillebeeckx speaks of Jesus' special experience as the Abba experience which becomes the foundation for his life praxis.¹¹ Jesus' experience that theory and practice are scandalously separated and hypocritical in Judaism shapes his own interpretation. And the experience of a new and unique praxis of love, shared by his disciples, forms an alternative religious and theological interpretation. Of course, it is no easy task to identify the religious experience of another, either directly or through their conduct of life. In the case of Jesus this can be deduced by the prayerful but extraordinary reference to God as Abba.¹² Furthermore, his manner of living, under the rubric of the coming reign of God, constituted the experience from which the disciples interpreted the meaning of religion. Schillebeeckx gives the following description: "... this message was given substantive content by Jesus' actions and way of life; his miracles; his dealings with tax-gatherers and sinners, his offer of salvation from God in fellowship at table with his friends and in his attitude to the Law, sabbath and Temple, and finally in his consorting in fellowship with a more intimate group of

¹⁰ De Schrijver, "Hertaling van het Christus gebeuren: een onmogelijke opgave?" 65; Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 82–83.

¹¹ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 256–67.

¹² *Ibid.* 259.

disciples. The heart and centre of it all appeared to be the God bent upon humanity.”¹³

For Schillebeeckx, Jesus is the subject of a unique religious experience of God beyond the Torah and Synagogue. It is the experience of an intimacy with God that is direct, one that emphasizes the conviction of Jesus, the certainty, even the inevitability that salvation is imminent and universally given. Also, that human community with sinners and disciples alike is but a foretaste of salvation, accompanied as it is by changed attitudes toward the Law, sabbath and synagogue. Schillebeeckx constructs the whole Christian message around the Abba experience. Georges De Schrijver adds the praxis of Jesus, then and now, as the central experience of the disciples and for Christians now. He refers to Schillebeeckx on this point: “Its effect [the praxis of Jesus] is to reveal that the factor mediating between the historical person Jesus and his significance for us now is in concrete terms the practice of Christian living within our continuing human history.”¹⁴ Antoine Vergote also emphasizes this relationship between Jesus’ very personal experience of God and his integrally ethical way of life: “Jesus is eminently a religious-ethical person, but not the man of ritualistic religions. Rituals do not constitute the essence of Jesus’ religion. He does not function as a priest, does not encourage the practice of religious rituals, and does not seem to give importance to sacrifice, generally the most important ritual. The essence of Jesus’ religion is his private, very personal relationship with God his Father. The ethical disposition and behavior he conveys lies in the religious observance he stresses.”¹⁵

The Abba experience is the irreplaceable foundation for the initial and subsequent construction of the Christian message.¹⁶ At the same time, Schillebeeckx allows for the possibility that this unique experience of God, including the hope and promise that come from faith in Jesus, his trustworthiness, may be an illusion. The authenticity of this experience of Jesus, resonant in the unique categories of interpretation given to this experience by the New Testament, is subsequently always a matter of faith. For, in fact, the “direct” quality of the experience is lost. One more fruitfully looks to the traditions in which others have worded and framed their witness to Jesus in the whole post-paschal period. This shows a plurality in the Jesus-story which De Schrijver describes as follows:

¹³ Ibid. 266–67.

¹⁴ De Schrijver, “Hertaling van het Christus gebeuren: een onmogelijke opgave?” 65.

¹⁵ Antoine Vergote, “Jesus in Confrontation with Modernity and Postmodernity,” unpublished paper, Leuven, February 2000, 1–15, at 13.

¹⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 269–70.

After Jesus' death different communities were formed at the edge of official Judaism. Each of them developed their interpretation of Jesus based upon their local needs and historical expectations, that means, with the help of interpretation schemes borrowed from the Jewish tradition they tried to understand what Jesus concretely meant for them. This variety can be immediately noticed in the different Jesus-names which all have their own tradition: Messiah, Eschatological Prophet, Son of God, Suffering and Elevated Servant, Returning Son of Man, First Resurrected. The 'story of the living' differs in the letters of Paul, in the four Gospels and in the older source on which Matthew and Luke sometimes draw (Q or Quelle).¹⁷

These titles of Jesus and the traditions or frameworks of interpretation that locally interpret the meaning of Jesus' uniqueness provide the access that one has to the Jesus event. To a large extent, especially in the forms of an elevated Christology, these testimonies are influenced by the Easter event which is still intimately related to the historical Jesus because it is the experiences in Jesus' life and praxis which make possible all authentic theological thematization about Jesus and his message. In fact, any theological interpretation will depend on an underlying reminiscence grounded in Jesus' earthly life. Without this point of reference to historical phenomena related to Jesus' life, the potential for a purely ideological superstructure becomes a real danger.¹⁸ Such references include the fact that Jesus "has done so much good" and his wonderful freedom "to do good"; characterizing the coming reign of God as a deep concern for humanity; his eating and drinking in fellowship with outcasts, tax-gatherers, and sinners that brings freedom, salvation, and liberation from a closed notion of God.¹⁹ These experiences, more especially when viewed from the post-paschal perspective, show Jesus to be salvation from God. Easter becomes an experience with experiences (of Jesus). It is an interpretation based on the experience of salvation in the life and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth.²⁰

Easter Event

It follows that Schillebeeckx defines Easter as "being converted, on Jesus' initiative, to Jesus as the Christ—salvation found conclusively in Jesus."²¹ In this way he follows the line of relating the historical Jesus, his life and praxis, with the Christ, who brings salvation from God. But it is the disciples who have an experience of dislocation after the execution of Jesus, followed by their re-grouping, fellowship, and proclamation of the "still Living One." This situation demands an explanation. For Schillebeeckx this becomes the Easter and Resurrection event that is both historical experience and interpretation that followed the shocking, lonely,

¹⁷ De Schrijver, "Hertaling van het Christus gebeuren: een onmogelijke opgave?" 65.

¹⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 188.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 183, 177, 206, and 248–49.

²⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report* 95.

²¹ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 379.

and unwarranted death of Jesus. He takes as his frame of interpretation the “Jewish Conversion” model. After the death of Jesus this is described as the experience of unfaithfulness and fear being forgiven by the One who was always unconditional love. He who was an offer of salvation-from-God remains and the life of Jesus has not been closed. Grace and mercy continue to be experienced as an open project.²²

This experience of the renewal of their lives and the grace of Jesus’ forgiveness brings the disciples to the conclusion that the dead do not proffer forgiveness.²³ In other words, their experience of forgiveness for their cowardice and lack of faith, reflected upon in light of Jesus’ historical living praxis, formed a matrix in which the faith proclamation in Jesus as the “Risen One” emerged. While this is not absolutely conclusive, it became for the disciples the “venture of faith” through which they were involved in an ongoing drama of mercy and grace. “Opening up the subject of a meta-historical resurrection, as in fact is done in the New Testament, presupposes of course experiential events that are interpreted as saving acts of God in Christ. It presupposes a particular experience and an interpretation of it. The question then becomes: What, after Jesus’ death, were the concrete, experienced events which induced the disciples to proclaim with such a degree of challenge and cogent witness that Jesus of Nazareth was actually alive: the coming or risen One?”²⁴ This is a question of experience and how to interpret that experience in terms that surface the activity and revelation of God in a specific historical and cultural situation.

JESUS EVENT AS EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION

Schillebeeckx’s emphasis focuses on experience and interpretation. He insists on the experience of Jesus and the experiences of the disciples with Jesus as constitutive for the interpretation of the Abba and Easter experience. “Our experiencing does not exist (in bare form); to however minimal extent it is (already) articulated and in that respect interpreted. Thus the experience can never be detached from its linguistic context, any more than from its conjunctural intellectual horizon.”²⁵ His approach aims to anchor these first theological reflections in experience and, therefore, interpretation. The potential limitation for the theologian is that these frames and schemes of interpretation, at other moments in human culture, will cease to be adequate to the Christian theological task of surfacing the divine presence in the contemporary situation.

However, Schillebeeckx’s project undertakes a further step where he takes critical theory seriously and speaks in terms of a theory and praxis,

²² Ibid. 380–81.

²⁴ Ibid. 380.

²³ Ibid. 391.

²⁵ Ibid. 392 and Part 4.

especially the epistemological value of negative contrast experiences.²⁶ At this juncture he wants to give a stronger anchor to the gospel-event in view of the liberating praxis of Jesus. He understands the various strands of Easter faith as the articulated experience of the first believing communities, a theological reflection that can also be applied to present-day experiences of suffering and liberation. Negative experiences of contrast continue to invite faith in the Resurrection. However, Schillebeeckx remains insistent on the reality of this event:

But besides this subjective aspect it is equally apparent that (according to Christian conviction) no Easter experience of renewed life was possible without the personal resurrection of Jesus—in the sense that Jesus' personal-cum-bodily resurrection (in keeping with a logical and ontological priority; a chronological priority is not the point here) 'precedes' any faith-motivated experience. That Jesus is risen, in his own person, therefore entails not only that he has been raised from the dead by the Father (what after all would this 'in itself' signify for us?), but also—and just as essentially—that in the dimension of our history God gives him a community (Church, as was to be said later on); at the same time it means that the Jesus exalted to be with the Father is with us, in an altogether new way.²⁷

This implies a primary Christian interpretative element but not a uniformity of interpretative traditions that can still be developed. In other words, there is a primary element of reference to the life and praxis of Jesus prior to the plurality of interpretations, among which can be included the early creeds that incorporate Maranatha, *theios-aner*, Wisdom and Paschal interpretations as receptions of the life and praxis of Jesus.²⁸

Categories of Experience and Interpretation

Schillebeeckx's hermeneutical recovery of the Jesus event points to the centrality of the categories of experience and interpretation within his project. Especially the notion of experience, which is always interpreted experience, is the centerpiece of his work in the "Jesus books." Experience within the linguistic context of the New Testament is decisive for his understanding the gospel event.

However, on closer inspection, the notion of experience that Schillebeeckx uses is incomplete. Both the Abba and Easter experience, which include the mandatory context of understanding and linguistic frameworks

²⁶ See summary of Daniel Thompson, "Schillebeeckx and the Development of Doctrine: Historical Periods, Postmodernity, and the Translation of Experience," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 54 (1999) 114–15 for an account of the methodological/epistemological "layers" or circles involved in Schillebeeckx's work.

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 645–46.

²⁸ De Schrijver, "Hertaling van het Christus gebeuren: een onmogelijke opgave?" 69.

for interpretation, omit any mention of the function of emotions in attaining cognitive insights. The emotions may be presupposed but they are not given any cognitive function. This is especially unusual given that the idea of “contrast experiences” implies a radical protest against that which is abhorrent to the true human condition that struggles against the forces of hypocrisy and destructiveness. Presumably contrast experiences include emotions of intense and empowering intimacy (Abba) and an overwhelming sense of forgiveness (Easter) which inspire us to engage deliberately in concrete committed actions.

Surely these emotions featured in the experience of Jesus and the disciples. Their importance is not just to add color but to elucidate further the meaning of events in the life of Jesus. Emotions have real cognitive value. And no treatment of religious experience seems adequate if one leaves the emotive component, and its potential cognitive power, undiscussed.²⁹ This interrelationship between the emotive and cognitive follows the line of Brentano’s thought which shows how emotive acts help to surface and explain the cognitive understanding of concrete programs of action.³⁰

Furthermore, in addition to the function of emotions in experience there is the aspect of self-consciousness. Experiences are not always self-conscious. For example, the Easter experience may well have been possible without the disciples “knowing” the motivation for mission that possessed their small group. They could have known it without necessarily being able to express it; the interpretation that it was Jesus’ influence could even have been added by way of explanation. But, whatever the case, there need not necessarily have been “new” experiences, as described by Easter, to explain their behavior. In other words, their experiences may well belong to a number of different and alternative cultural frameworks of interpretation. For example, of the four creedal strands mentioned, it is only the Easter Christologies that make Jesus’ Resurrection an explicit object of Christian proclamation and part of the kerygma of early Christian faith.³¹ One can conclude that experience, which is not always necessarily self-conscious, and interpretation, which is not unidimensional, are not always constitutively related as understood by Schillebeeckx.

These considerations are important because they challenge and contest the structural account of experience fundamental to Schillebeeckx’s understanding that theological reflection rests on a theological hermeneutics in which experience and interpretation are intimately aligned. At least initially, it seems that experience happens more or less directly without the

²⁹ Apostel, “Religieuze ervaring bij Edward Schillebeeckx” 96.

³⁰ A. Rorty, *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980) 127–52.

³¹ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 396.

necessity for a specifically “Christian” frame of interpretation. That is, there is always the possibility of an experience *qua* experience. But Schillebeeckx does not agree with this point:

Our experiences are always within a pre-existing framework of interpretation. And in the end this is none other than the cumulative personal and collective experience of the past, in other words, a tradition of experience. As the totality into which the particular present experience is taken up, this interpretative framework gives meaning to that experience: and as a result it becomes an experience of meaning.³²

But is experience meaningful only when it is connected to a pre-given framework of interpretation? It has been argued that Schillebeeckx is incorrect in his emphasis on the tight affinity of experience and interpretation.³³ In fact, it makes the tradition of interpretation too independent, potentially adrift or even out of touch, from the experience-receiving human person and community. Arguably, this has created a growing tension in contemporary culture between experience and the traditional Christian frameworks of interpretation. Of course, one can always approach reality from a certain tradition, even a religious tradition, such as Christianity, Islam, or even atheism. However, at a certain moment one can feel or perceive that one is alienated from reality inside that tradition. This does not necessarily mean that one has come under the influence of another tradition of interpretation. It is simply the feeling that one lives in a tension between one’s experiences and the tradition in which one finds oneself.³⁴ Such can be said to be the case in a pluralistic cultural climate such as today’s climate.

For example, in the gospel interpretation of the Abba experience, Jesus’ experience is not discovered in the existing Jewish idea of God at all—there were many aspects of that framework of interpretation that were absent in Jesus’ experience—but in a struggle with an experienced reality that found separate expression from the prevailing religio-cultural views. Although the early disciples and Christians of following generations have little difficulty in relating to that experience of forgiveness and its interpretative frame, it does not mean that their in-depth experience of reality is necessarily subsumed under or even adequately comprehended by that tradition. In fact it is important to value the sublime depth of reality experienced by a human being even though, for many Christians, it remains impossible to improve on the gospel interpretation of that magnitude of life

³² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 16–17.

³³ See J. Vandenbulcke, “Geloof tussen ervaren en traditie,” *Kultuurleven*, 59 (1992) 34–41, 35.

³⁴ Vandenbulcke, “Geloof tussen ervaren en traditie” 35.

and love that constitute meaning or, in some cases, lack of meaning. Jaak Vandebulke expresses it as follows:

We always experience within a tradition but we are never completely absorbed by it, not even when we are dealing with religion. We are not totally imprisoned in a web of texts. Whenever one wants to speak about a belief 'close to reality' one has to keep in mind the fact that humankind is directly touched in their experiencing by a 'surplus' in reality. To experience this one does not need to belong to a certain tradition: one only has to be human.³⁵

This expanded understanding of the relationship between experience and interpretation potentially allows theology to work with experience for a more comprehensive thematization of Christology in a changed cultural situation where the overlap between Christian faith and contemporary experiences is much reduced by the processes of secularization and detraditionalization. It seems that Schillebeeckx needs to be more cognizant of this "space" between experience and interpretation if his Christology is to continue to resonate with the changing cultural situation to which he aims to be sensitive.

Enlarged Model of Experience

The model of Leo Apostel, who is indebted to Jaak Vandebulcke, helps to clarify this analysis regarding the structure of human experience.³⁶ It addresses human experience as a synthesis of four moments: (1) experience of the object (perception, emotion and will); (2) awakening of these experiences in a system of notions; (3) expression of (1) and (2) in language; (4) an intellectually and verbally qualified experience of the object (synthesis of 1, 2, and 3). Using this schema provides a structure for understanding both the Abba and Easter experiences of Jesus and the disciples but assigning different levels to experience and interpretation.

This differentiation of experience and interpretation means that more serious weight can be given to experience-seeking-for-understanding, as it were, at the margins of pre-given interpretation schemes. Indeed, new experiences are more readily taken into account within a soteriology and Christology that remains open to fresh mediations concerning the *agapē* between God and human beings. Schillebeeckx remains ambiguous about the role of these new experiences within his theological project. He states: "So for the believer, who affirms the creative and living God, every created thing, according to its own measure and definition, is a constitutive reference to God."³⁷ But is this reference to God a function of the experience

³⁵ Ibid. 36–37.

³⁶ Apostel, "Religieuze ervaring bij Edward Schillebeeckx," 36–37.

³⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 630.

or the interpretation? If it is a part of the experience then it is theoretically available to all. If it is dependent on the standard interpretation then, to some extent, it imposes itself on the experience and even shields that experience from changes that take place at the cultural level of understanding and expressing experience.

Partly because the interpretation is so important for his theology, Schillebeeckx emphasizes linguistic expression as a faith-language with the quality of "disclosure." "To speak about history *qua* history is therefore something different from speaking in faith-language about what is nevertheless the same history."³⁸ Furthermore, ". . . it is equally the case that this same world and history are intrinsically such as to be the basis for, and give substance to, faith-language and the theological account of things."³⁹ Schillebeeckx thus seems to wager on faith-language which interprets experience in terms of the divine-human relationship as the hermeneutical foundation for a theology that can remain relevant in different times and places. He does, however, make two significant adjustments to the ideas that he developed in *Jesus*. These need some clarification.

Schillebeeckx's Hermeneutical Adjustments

In his book *Church: The Human Story of God*, Schillebeeckx revised ideas about the interpretation of human experiences that he had developed in *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. This is explicitly stated as a correction of his earlier view that two interpretations of experience can be simultaneously reducible to one another. He now argues that: "It must be possible to assign a human experience, or experiences, which 1. all men and women unavoidably share with one another and 2. at the same time is an experience (*a*) which does necessarily call for a religious interpretation while (*b*) it is nevertheless experienced by all men and women as a fundamental experience, namely one which so deeply affects human existence most deeply, and 3. which is helped in the understanding of this fundamental character, which so deeply affects human existence, by the word of God."⁴⁰ This experience is one of radical finitude, limit, and contingency. "At least in our modern times, believers and non-believers have the basic experience of an absolute limit, of radical finitude and contingency."⁴¹ Schillebeeckx is thus convinced that it is one and the same experience that allows for either a theistic or atheistic frame of interpretation or, presumably, any other scheme of interpretation, although he remains convinced that only the religious interpretation is totally meaningful.

However, the frames of interpretation in both the Abba and Easter

³⁸ Ibid. 626–27.

⁴⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Church* 84.

³⁹ Ibid. 628.

⁴¹ Ibid. 77.

experiences are clearly unidimensional in line with his non-negotiable priority to the religious, linguistic and faith oriented interpretation. In *Jesus* this is clearly stated: “Human history—with its successes, failures, illusions and disillusion— is surmounted by the living God.”⁴² But in *Church: The Human Story of God* he takes the opposite view, seemingly by way of a correction, when he writes that: “The life of men and women seems to make sense without belief in God.”⁴³ If the account of experience and interpretation given in *Jesus* is taken as representative of Schillebeeckx’s position, then one can ask where the particular experience of Jesus as the “trinitarian fullness of God’s unity of being” comes from?⁴⁴ Is it his own faith-interpretation? That of a particular church community? Or is it faith without experience?

The translation of experience into faith interpretation is not restricted to the hermeneutical reinterpretation of a past tradition of meaning into a new horizon of experienced meaning. Remembering that orthopraxis is also part of our translation of the understanding of faith. Daniel Thompson summarizes:

Schillebeeckx adapts ideas from the Frankfurt School and Ernst Bloch to argue that the universal resistance to that which diminishes or destroys human life provides a negative, but real source of hope for human fulfilment. This negative and diffuse hope is made positive and concrete, Schillebeeckx says, in the life of Jesus himself . . . this fulfilment of the *humanum* in Christ is also a continuing task for the Christian in the current situation.⁴⁵

Thus Schillebeeckx completes a second hermeneutical adjustment to his Christological exposition from the interpretation of experience. But here again the interpretation of the *humanum* remains unidirectional in terms of frameworks of Christian soteriology that point to the ‘real’ center of human emancipation, namely the praxis of Christians in memory and hope of their Lord.

ASSESSMENT OF SCHILLEBEECKX’S PROJECT

Faced with the on-going predilection for frameworks of interpretation in Schillebeeckx’s theological discourse, especially his analysis of the Jesus event, one is led to offer several remarks that partly explain this direction in his understanding of experience. Schillebeeckx certainly remains committed to a theological reconstruction of the Jesus event in terms of the historical category of experience but he is against the suppression of what is strange or different in the biblical language and narrative and what

⁴² Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 639.

⁴³ Schillebeeckx, *Church* 99.

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 670.

⁴⁵ Thompson, “Schillebeeckx and the Development of Dogma” 114–15.

functions to subject new cultural experiences to the existing Christian frameworks of interpretation. Here is a dilemma. On the one hand, Schillebeeckx wants to develop hermeneutically and critically the Christian tradition in terms of new experiences. On the other hand, he realizes that the experiences of modernity need a correction, namely, to know its finitude and dependence. The biblical language then acts as a “lens” through which to view experiences in a process of translation that relies on those existing frames of interpretation.

Schillebeeckx is aware of the danger that the Christian tradition of faith could become subject to a form of reductionism where the divine-human relationship of salvation is collapsed into merely psychological experiences. But how can a reduction to experience be a problem within the context of his hermeneutical project when its very rationale draws precisely on the value of experiences? Schillebeeckx seems to overstress the structural frameworks of interpretation, especially the biblical language, thus losing the new manifestations of experience that show themselves at different levels as part of a new cultural feeling and sensing. By missing the experience at all its levels, especially before its incorporation into language, Schillebeeckx loses the new experiences that allow for the surfacing of the transcendent in and through experiences of human wholeness. Surely the surfacing of meaning is not only through the Christian interpretative frames of reference. Apostel’s model of the structure of experience has the advantage of locating those levels of experience prior to the emergence of frames of interpretation. Hans Georg Gadamer was also conscious of levels of experience prior to interpretation. He rejected the idea that reality is simply *bildbedürdig* (in need of an image) and *bildwürdig* (worthy of an image). Instead, Gadamer focused on the fact that certain striking events in reality emulate for becoming. According to Vandenbulcke:

In order to understand Gadamer well, one has to stress the fact that certain realities are worthy to be put into an image. When one stresses too much the need for realities to be put into an image, then there is the danger that the image, the expression, is given too much weight over against experience. Gadamer intends to say that certain realities appear in our experience with their own ‘face’, their own image. This ‘image’ appears mainly in the words of poets and it is not the poets that give their image to reality. This is the reason why a good poem is a struggle with language.⁴⁶

Even when already codified experiences cannot find a form they leave what can be called traces within the life experiences of people—that is their content—and they merely wait their time or else they are never expressed or even badly expressed. Vandenbulcke gives the example of Hölderlin’s poem *Friedensfeier* (Celebration of Peace) where, drawing on elements (he

⁴⁶ Vandenbulcke, “Geloof tussen ervaring en traditie” 37.

calls them reminiscences) from the Christian tradition, a whole new image of God can be presented. In understanding the structure of experiences it seems that some allowance must be made for the priority of experience (in-depth experience) that theologians such as Schillebeeckx are reluctant to make.

Experiences of wholeness or salvation are obviously the starting point for interpretation within any religious tradition. Schillebeeckx examines these experiences of salvation in all three of his "Jesus books." Not all experience, however, has the same depth impact. He speaks of changing densities of disclosure in human experiences. Nevertheless, he continues to maintain the priority of interpretation within the religious tradition. "One has religious experiences in and with particular human experiences, though with the illumination and help of a particular religious tradition in which people stand and which is thus influential as an interpretative framework which provides meaning. . . . Religious experiences or experiences of faith take place in a dialectical process, like all experiences."⁴⁷ But does this mean that religious and secular experiences are distinguished only by the interpretation that is given? And are experiences of Christian faith now, which presumably have their own framework of interpretation from the present day, identical with the experiences of the New Testament? If not, then frameworks of interpretation then and now are neither identical nor are they the only frameworks available for capturing the dimensions of transcendence and salvation present in human existence. In other words, it is not necessary to filter experience through the "religious" models, in the light of the religious language, in order to find salvation in and through human experience.

Admittedly, Schillebeeckx does name specific experiences such as those of human dependency (our createdness), symbolic experience (the rubric of Father and Child of God) and human engagement (of the disciples with Jesus and of Jesus himself). But he seems unable to analyze a wider range of human experiences outside Christian interpretative schemes. This is perhaps linked to an unconscious intellectualism in his work and a strong bias toward connecting experiences with the existing tradition. In addition if, as Schillebeeckx states, "faith cannot live only by way of experience," what is the surplus that is faith and how is it different from experience?

CONCLUSION

Schillebeeckx's Christology has made a significant contribution to the task of theology which attempts to bridge the tradition of faith with the changing socio-cultural context. With other theologians of the post-Vatican

⁴⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Church* 23–24.

II period, including Karl Rahner and Hans Küng, his method of correlation has advanced the dialogue between Christian faith and contemporary post-modern culture. However, this post-Enlightenment preoccupation with experience presumes a more adequate grasp of its in-depth character. This exposes a methodological problem with Schillebeeckx's notion of experience that can no longer, in the postmodern context, automatically find a transcendent meaning within the Christian frames of reference. Rather, Schillebeeckx remains part of the "grand" Catholic hegemony that struggles to retain its identity through an interpretation of human experiences.

While Schillebeeckx addresses the concreteness of human experiences, he retains his confidence in a transcultural and transhistorical meaning that necessarily constitutes a metaphysical reference. While he intends to maintain the primacy of experience, he remains accountable to the role of tradition and its frames of reference, especially the New Testament language and conceptuality that, after secularization and de-traditionalization, shows increasingly less overlap with present-day cultural experiences.

Of course, the experience of meaning is the absolute starting point for Christology. Such experiences have traditionally been captured by the prevailing frames of interpretation associated with Christendom in the West and beyond where missionaries stamped their religion and culture. However, the disintegration of the Christian influence in many cultures has been associated with both a functional differentiation (secularization) and a plurality of identity previously absent from traditional Western societies (de-traditionalization). The pluriform contemporary experiences of life resist easy or automatic interpretations. There is always a "delay" between experience and its grounding in interpretations of meaning or futility. This "delay" belongs to the time of "assimilation." Its duration is apparently not predictable just as historical time dawdles at its own pace. But despite the implosion of meaning which carries with it both contrast experiences and pure meaning experiences, history remains a history of suffering, nonsense, and misery. A mixture of salvation and disintegration, an open occurrence which cannot be completely closed with a depository belief system of whatever persuasion or orthodoxy.⁴⁸ Schillebeeckx has struggled, at times uncomfortably, with experiences that he has seen fit to bring to closure under the benign interpretations of the Christian faith in Jesus the Christ.

⁴⁸ J. Van Wyngaerden, *D. M. De Petter O.P. (1905–1971): Een inleiding tot zijn leven en denken* (Licentiate in Godsdienstwetenschappen), Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1989, 186.