

SALVATION AND LIBERATION IN THE PRACTICAL-CRITICAL SOTERIOLOGY OF SCHILLEBEECKX

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[The practical-critical soteriology of Schillebeeckx understands and orients the experience of salvation in relation to liberating political praxis and social emancipation. Practical-critical soteriology develops the claim that liberation is intrinsic to and constitutive for the experience and interpretation of eschatological salvation. The interaction between liberation and salvation in his soteriology can be described as an interdependent yet fragmented identity amid productive difference. Schillebeeckx's soteriology constructs their identity and difference on the basis of the biblical dialectic regarding the lifep Praxis, execution, and Resurrection of Jesus, the eschatological advocate of God's preferential solidarity.]

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN the realities of salvation and sociopolitical liberation are as complex as they are pivotal for the communication of God's abiding concern for eohuman well-being amid real histories of suffering. The practical and critical soteriology of Edward Schillebeeckx delineates some of this complexity and constructs the tension between salvation and emancipation as a dialectical exchange. A relationship of fragmented identity and productive difference marks the interaction between salvation and sociopolitical liberation amid histories of suffering reoriented by the eschatological promises of justice and reconciliation.

While Schillebeeckx rejects the false dilemma that unnecessarily places interpersonal and sociopolitical forms of love in competition with each other,¹ he consistently asserts that the offer of salvation from oppression

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¹ While interpersonal love is no substitute for sociopolitical love, the urgent demands on sociopolitical love do not justify trivializing the responsibilities of interpersonal love. "The Christian may be committed," writes Schillebeeckx, "to the task of bringing salvation to the whole of society in the form of better and more

and suffering, communicated by Jesus the Christ and by his praxis of God's inbreaking reign, entails extensive public repercussions for sociopolitical living.² It is only an abstract and contested personalism that limits the redemptive initiatives of God's reign to a private interiority or segregated enclosure of intimate relations.³ Such sectarian withdrawal is vulnerable to political manipulation.⁴ The gift of salvation from oppression and suffering entails possibilities of love through justice and reconciliation that sustain a variety of liberating sociopolitical struggles and structural emancipations.⁵ For Schillebeeckx, a soteriology with practical-critical priorities maintains that actual historical movements of sociopolitical liberation provide the basis for meaningfully communicating God's saving activity amid current contexts of oppression and humiliation.⁶ God's saving activity, while active

just structures for all human beings, but, until these structures have been created, s/he cannot and should not, in the meantime, that is, during the whole of the eschatological interim period, overlook one single individual. Many contemporary expressions of Christian love have social and political dimensions, but interpersonal love practiced by politically committed critical communities of Christians is still relevant and meaningful even if it has been thrust into the background of the community's activity" ("Critical Theories and Christian Political Commitment," in *The Language of Faith: Jesus, Theology, and the Church*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995] 71–82, at 80). (Author's note: For the sake of greater accuracy and consistency, in the course of this article, I sometimes adjust the various cited English translations of Schillebeeckx's writings against the Dutch originals.)

² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1979) 619; hereafter cited as *Jesus*. See also the following works, all authored by Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980) 563, 585–86, 597; *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980) 58; *On Christian Faith: The Spiritual, Ethical and Political Dimensions*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 19–20; and *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 111–12, 116, 132.

³ *Jesus* 623–24. See *Christ* 563, 744, 809; and *On Christian Faith* 75. This is also reiterated in the following significant articles by Schillebeeckx on practical-critical soteriology in his advanced Christology: "God, Society and Human Salvation," in *Faith and Society: Acta Congressus internationalis theologici lovaniensis*, ed. M. Caudron (Gembloux: Duculot, 1978) 87–99, at 90; and "Can Christology be an Experiment?" *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings* 35 (1980) 1–14, at 13.

⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, "Forumdiscussie," in *Politiek of Mystiek? Peilingen naar de verhouding tussen religieuze ervaring en sociale inzet*, ed. E. Schillebeeckx et al. (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1972) 84; "God, Society and Human Salvation" 92.

⁵ *Jesus* 673. See *Christ* 803–4; *Interim Report* 58; *On Christian Faith* 19–20, 74; and *Church* 132, 175–77. See also the important articles "God, Society and Human Salvation" 91; and "Op weg naar een christologie," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 18 (1978) 131–56, at 148.

⁶ *Christ* 745.

in the present, offers a future open to the deepest and most ultimate well-being of humankind on earth. Despite ongoing failures and setbacks, the efforts to realize justice and reconciliation are worthwhile in ways that might not yet even be verifiable. These efforts and setbacks remain open to unexpected possibilities in the future. Action and reflection, centered on realizing justice and love, strive therefore to advance tangible movements of liberation despite the overwhelming evidence of suffering and defeat. Sociopolitical liberation resulting from justice and reconciliation is necessary in order that the public conditions for open communication and for the integrity of ecohuman life flourish in response to current crises producing histories of suffering. The interaction between God's salvific initiatives and emancipatory praxes sustaining sociopolitical liberations is intrinsic to the pattern of Schillebeeckx's practical-critical soteriology.

THREE TYPES OF SOTERIOLOGIES

Within the effort to establish a viable connection between salvation and liberation, Schillebeeckx presents a typology of various soteriologies. He defines soteriology as "the teaching of redemption: views and expectations which humans have in respect of their salvation, well-being and wholeness, redemption and liberation."⁷ He differentiates three types of soteriologies—instrumental, fideistic, and interactive—in order to clarify better the kind of interaction between salvation and sociopolitical liberation advocated by his practical-critical soteriology. "To sum up, one can speak of (i) *horizontal and futurist* soteriologies (which look for completely different social structures); (ii) *vertical* soteriologies (often apolitical in their, perhaps well-intended, religious liberation); (iii) *religious and political* soteriologies (in which the progressive and political meaning of the religious is stressed)."⁸

This typology distinguishes various kinds of soteriology not simply on the basis of religious criteria but expressly on the basis of their different relations to the political. Horizontal soteriologies are instrumental in the sense of totalizing a finite sociopolitical movement as the definitive agent or absolute disclosure of historical salvation. They tend toward absolutizing, and, if religiously legitimated, sacralizing transient forms of a political culture, whether marxist-leninist, fascist, nihilist, or neo-liberal. In the extreme, these soteriologies legitimate and normalize various kinds of systemic violence in attaining preconceived ideals that benefit the priorities of minority élites. Determined by a calculating rationality that renders most people and creaturely forms of life servile to exploitation by dominant interests, horizontal or futurist soteriologies are instrumental. Communi-

⁷ Ibid. 906.

⁸ Ibid. 907.

ties and biospheres become instruments sacrificed to the attitudes and ideals of the dominant ideological élite.

By contrast, vertical soteriologies are fideistic in the sense of isolating salvation in a disembodied and dislocated interiority withdrawn from historical responsibilities. Fideistic soteriologies tend toward sectarian and otherworldly forms of religious withdrawal from the complexities of prevalent sociocultural and political-economic realities. Seeking release from this complexity through recourse to a transcendental purity, vertical soteriologies legitimate dissociation. Vertical soteriologies flee the difficulties of life on earth by attaching to and identifying with an idealized or post-historical narrative. The group that is formed around such attachments and identifications insulates its members from struggling with real responsibilities for the current conditions of social and political living. Such postures of withdrawal and protection intend sociopolitical neutrality but in fact submit to, even passively participate in, dominant systems of oppression. Schillebeeckx connects these instrumental and fideistic types of soteriology with particular social formations in historical societies and churches.

The third type—interactive between religious and political—offers a different way amid these extremes of supposed emancipation without salvation, on the one hand, and salvation without emancipation, on the other. An interactive soteriology disclaims both the totalization and the renunciation of the political. Neither totalizing nor renouncing the political, this third way seeks to transform the political. A soteriology that is equally religious as it is political avoids the excesses of one-sided immanence or transcendence characteristic of the instrumental and fideistic types. Religious transcendence and sociopolitical immanence are in a mutually productive tension with each other, allowing their various fields of practice and interpretation to confront and develop each other. An interactive soteriology strives to articulate how religious transcendence and sociopolitical liberation are distinct yet mutually implicated aspects of both divine gift and human activity in history. Within this framework, sociopolitical liberations are interpreted as capable of signifying equally religious as well as humanizing aspects of redemption. This mutually involving pattern of interaction between salvation and liberation defines the practical and critical features of Schillebeeckx's soteriology.

SALVATION AND LIBERATION

Schillebeeckx's interactive soteriology invigorates the interdependence between salvation and liberation set forth in his Christology-trilogy consisting of *Jesus*, *Christ*, and *Church*. The purposes of *Jesus* include establishing the biblical basis of the ministry and person of Jesus in order that a comprehensive view of the connections between “‘redemption’ and ‘eman-

ipation' or human self-liberation" could eventually be established.⁹ While the biblical basis for this correlation is extended in *Christ* to include the experience of grace in the early Christian communities, "the question concerning the relation between redemption and emancipatory self-liberation" is paramount throughout the entire text.¹⁰ The original Dutch version of *Christ* bore the title *Justice and Love: Grace and Liberation*. The beginning of the fourth and final part of *Christ* marks a pivotal shift in the Christology-trilogy from a historically-minded exegetical retrieval, both of Jesus as the eschatological prophet of God's inbreaking reign and of the experience of grace in the early Christian communities, to a recontextualizing hermeneutics of the experience and interpretation of Christian salvation within the contemporary horizon of human suffering. Schillebeeckx articulates the decisive question guiding his interactive soteriology around the dialectical interaction between emancipation and salvation: is the interpretation of emancipation from sociopolitical suffering a fragmentary sign and hence condition for faith in the gift of salvation?¹¹ This line of questioning proposes a difference yet connection between sociopolitical liberation and the promises of salvation. In *Church*, the third and final volume of the trilogy, Schillebeeckx not only summarizes the shift from retrieval to recontextualization previously initiated in *Christ* but further clarifies the creative tension between salvation and liberation: "I have just said that only a history which brings about human liberation can be experienced as salvation history. . . . Human history, in so far as it liberates humans for true and good humanity with a deep respect for one another, is God's saving history for Christians, and is so independently of our being aware of this gracious structure of salvation, however not without conscious human liberation occurring."¹² For Schillebeeckx, human liberation is intrinsic to the experience and interpretation of salvation. Dignifying movements of sociopolitical liberation are affirmed as the historically immanent coordinates of God's salvific activity. The humanizing activity and effects of sociopolitical liberation form the basis for experiencing and interpreting the divinely originating gift. This third volume also intensifies the contextual aspects of the interaction between salvation and liberation, with particular reference

⁹ *Jesus* 35. Schillebeeckx reiterates this and anticipates the second volume of his trilogy, when toward the end of this book he writes: "Indeed this book (which I have always called a prolegomenon) calls for a substantial complement with what I would call: a reflection on what "grace" is, that is, a presentation whereby the problem of *redemption* and *emancipation*—the current problem of our history of liberation—could come to language within a contemporary horizon of interpretation and action. Perhaps this book will thus still receive a sequel" (*Jesus* 669).

¹⁰ *Christ* 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 745. See also "God, Society and Human Salvation" 91.

¹² *Church* 9–10.

to the issue of how emancipatory liberations secure the communicability of salvation in the contexts of sexism, racism, fascism, ethnonationalism, and colonialism.¹³ The redemptive activity of God in Jesus, an activity that liberates humans toward renewed patterns of structural, institutional, and interpersonal justice, is recontextualized by Schillebeeckx in relation to contemporary struggles for sociocultural and political-economic emancipation. The three volumes point to a thematic integrity that unites their various lines of inquiry and levels of discourse. The connection between salvation and sociocultural, political-economic liberation emerges as both a literary priority and a central theological concern. Such priority and concern endorse the liberationist project set forth in Schillebeeckx's practical-critical soteriology.

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Schillebeeckx's retrieval of biblical resources structures the interaction of salvation and liberation in his soteriology. Three sets of biblical resources are operative in orienting the way his practical-critical soteriology constructs their interaction: (1) the historical lifepaxis, political execution, and eschatological Resurrection of Jesus; (2) the structural elements of the experience and interpretation of salvation in the early Christian communities;¹⁴ and (3) three significant New Testament metaphors.¹⁵ A summary of the interdependence between the lifepaxis and Resurrection of Jesus, the most decisive set for orienting the interaction between salvation and liberation in Schillebeeckx's soteriology, is therefore warranted.

Jesus

Schillebeeckx does not think that there is sufficient historical evidence to reconstruct the politics of Jesus with any probable certainty. He thereby considers it very difficult to evaluate whether Jesus was either political or apolitical or to determine what the precise politics of Jesus involved.¹⁶ The

¹³ Ibid. 132.

¹⁴ Ibid. 563. See also "Op weg naar een christologie" 149.

¹⁵ "De levensweg van Jezus, beleden als de Christus" 147; translation mine. See also his "Spreken over God in een context van bevrijding," *Tijdschrift voor Geistelijkes Leven* 40 (1984) 2–24, at 22; *On Christian Faith* 29–30; and *Church* 133–34 (This last citation adds a fourth metaphor).

¹⁶ *Christ* 584–85. Even if the politics of Jesus could be adequately reconstructed, Schillebeeckx is quick to point out that a biblical fundamentalism that would try to apply it directly to contemporary politics either of the right or the left would be unjustified, hermeneutically naïve, and would lead only to an ideological biblicism. See Schillebeeckx, "Befreiungstheologien zwischen Medellín und Puebla," *Orientierung* 43 (1979) 17–21, at 20.

redaction and editing of early Jesus traditions by minority Christian communities, communities trying to protect themselves from persecution, and the apologetic projection of their sociocultural strategies of religious and political survival onto the Jesus figure, renders the critical retrieval of the politics of Jesus tenuous.¹⁷ The most one can infer historically is that Jesus' interest in pragmatic politics was determined by and derived from his primary service and celebration of the reign of God; and secondly, that Jesus did not separate issues of ecological, sociocultural, and political-economic justice from the praxis of God's reign. This minimal historical knowledge of the concrete politics of Jesus thus cedes in Schillebeeckx's soteriology to a full account of Jesus as the eschatological prophet of God's inbreaking reign. If the sociopolitical repercussions of Jesus' lifestyle and person are to be delineated, they must be approached, according to Schillebeeckx, through this account.

Eschatological Prophet of God's Preferential Solidarity

Schillebeeckx presents Jesus the Christ as the eschatological prophet whose life, death, and Resurrection decisively witness to God's inbreaking reign as a salvific initiative for human beings.¹⁸ Jesus, a contingent and finite human being, is utterly identified with and entirely empowered by God's inbreaking reign. Jesus is utterly identified with and empowered by God's inbreaking reign so that his praxis intrinsically describes God's reign of love as a reign of justice and reconciliation among human beings.¹⁹ Representing the eschatological community of justice and reconciliation in his ministry and person, Jesus witnesses to God's solidarity with the vulnerable who suffer.²⁰ Communicating this solidarity, he identifies with the marginalized, the poor, and the disadvantaged. The active solidarity of Jesus with the vulnerable discloses "an unmistakable partisan preference of Jesus' love with a view towards the *universal* reign of God."²¹ The universality of God's reign requires Jesus' solidarity to overcome all forms of historical exclusion through social practices of inclusion for the marginalized and disadvantaged. "On account of its universality excluding no one, christian love is, in a sociopolitical perspective, concretely partisan—otherwise socially-concretely it is not universal!"²² Jesus is the eschatological prophet of God's preferential solidarity.

In and through the lifepraxis of Jesus, God's reign is enacted and promised as a renewal of history. This renewal entails abolishing suffering, elimi-

¹⁷ *Christ* 568–72.

¹⁸ *Jesus* 142–43; *Interim Report* 131; *On Christian Faith* 19–20; and *Church* 121.

¹⁹ *Jesus* 152–54; *Christ* 639; and *Church* 118.

²⁰ *Christ* 18.

²¹ *Jesus* 593.

²² *Church* 178.

nating sickness and distress, negating relationships of domination and enslavement, sustaining the integrity of the ecological environment as well as restoring life to the dying and the dead.²³ In and through the praxis of Jesus, God's reign is enacted and promised as an available yet excessive and hence elusive renewal of relationship with the living God who is sovereign over the finite initiatives of violent evil. In and through the praxis of Jesus, God's reign is enacted and promised as a community of justice and reconciliation that is as inclusive as it is universal: the justice and reconciliation defining this community restore dignity to the socially outcast, the culturally excluded, the politically voiceless, the economically dispossessed, the religiously marginalized, as well as to those oppressed in any way in violation of their being human.²⁴ This universal community of justice and reconciliation even extends so far as to include repentant oppressors. Jesus opens up lines of communication with the marginalized, challenges internalized attachments to patterns of sociocultural and political-economic enslavement, restores a sense of effective agency to the oppressed, and uproots attachments to the oppressive use of power.²⁵ Jesus' identification with the approach of God's reign is so radically original to his way of life that his person enjoys a unique relation to God the creator and liberator.²⁶ In his human way of acting and suffering, Jesus communicates that God is a God committed to the healing and empowerment of human beings, especially the violated and enslaved. Jesus at the same time communicates through his constructive action and suffering how it is that human beings can live in solidarity with the liberation of the violated and enslaved, and thereby renew their relationship with the justice and love which God is. Jesus both communicates God's effective solidarity with human beings and reorients this preferential solidarity toward forms of justice and reconciliation. As a witness to the excessive love accessible in God's solidarity with a suffering humanity, Jesus communicates a preferential justice and unrestricted reconciliation.

Execution of Jesus

Within the context of his praxis of God's reign and all its implications, Schillebeeckx situates the interpretation of Jesus' death by political torture and execution. This is a crucial point in Schillebeeckx's exegetical retrieval of the biblical soteriology that orients his liberationist project. The inter-

²³ *Church* 111–12, 116.

²⁴ "Befreiungstheologien zwischen Medellín und Puebla" 20; and *On Christian Faith* 20.

²⁵ *Church* 113.

²⁶ *Jesus* 267–68; *Interim Report* 141; *On Christian Faith* 21–22; and *Church* 112, 118–19, 121–22.

pretation of the death of Jesus cannot be isolated from the way-of-life and message that preceded it. Isolating the death of Jesus from his lifepraxis results in misrepresenting its redemptive significance in terms of a bloody and even sadistic sacrifice; it renders the interpretation of God's redemptive activity in Jesus liable to mythopoetic distortion.²⁷ The murder of Jesus was the political result of the rejection of his message by a powerful alliance between elite religious and political interests. These interests resisted the sociopolitical and interpersonal changes stemming from the negation of master-slave systems demanded by a renewed relationship to God's in-breaking reign.²⁸ The death of Jesus expresses the unconditional, limitless identification of Jesus with this praxis of resisting evil, reversing suffering, and renewing sociopolitical as well as religious relationships.²⁹ Jesus was so totally identified with and empowered by God's reign that the imminent threat of his dying did not deter him from entrusting his life to the approaching and definitive manifestation of God's reign.³⁰ The kind of death to which Jesus was subject also signifies the extent of his identification with the outcast and the downtrodden.³¹ The death of Jesus on the cross as a criminal signals his definitive rejection of an apocalyptic vengeance on oppressors that would heal human history through a divinely inaugurated or sanctioned violence.³²

Jesus did not want to be a messianic-political leader, but this does not mean that his message and his career did not have political meaning. I would call "subversive" actions and words which in fact undermine the authority of social-political institutions. The basic choice of Jesus was to refuse power; and so his words and actions take on an unparalleled authority. Accepting even rejection and repudiation, Jesus does not want to be the leader of the outcast. He thereby wants to stress that being outcast is not a privilege, but the perverse effect of an oppressive society. . . . Jesus' death on the cross is the consequence of a life in the radical service of justice and love, a consequence of his option for poor and outcast human beings, of a choice for his people that suffered exploitation and manipulation. Within an evil world, any commitment to justice and love is perilous.³³

The commitment by Jesus to represent the eschatological community of justice and reconciliation subverts the systemic interests of a minority yet dominant elite of local religious as well as local imperial political authori-

²⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, "The Mystery of Injustice and the Mystery of Mercy," *Stavros Bulletin* 3 (1975) 3–31, at 19–20. See *Christ* 794; *On Christian Faith* 23; and *Church* 120, 125. This eventually applies to the interpretation of the Resurrection as well. As he tersely puts it: "Without Jesus' human way of life all of christology becomes an ideological superstructure" (*Church* 8).

²⁸ *Christ* 794; *Interim Report* 133; and *Church* 120.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Jesus* 317; and *Christ* 794.

³¹ *On Christian Faith* 24; and *Church* 68.

³² *Church* 125.

³³ *Ibid.*

ties. Jesus is violently humiliated, tortured, and executed in absurd disproportion to the liberating relationships and lifestyles he engenders. His dying and death are interpreted by Schillebeeckx in terms of a sociological backlash against his unswerving fidelity to the praxis of God's reign. The death of Jesus was a suffering for others rooted in his personal validation of God's reign of love as a humanizing reign of justice and reconciliation among human beings.

The dying and death of Jesus, according to Schillebeeckx, are in themselves neither salvific events nor intrinsically necessary as an act of obedience to a divine demand for sacrificial compensation.³⁴ The death of Jesus is not the result of God's wish or imperative, not the result of Jesus' obedience to a sadistic parent, nor a moral teaching on suffering as an end in itself, or even a means to glory. Schillebeeckx brings to our attention a distinct dimension of the salvific meaning of the death of Jesus. God does not reject Jesus, but identifies with the Jesus rejected by a dominant minority of sociocultural and political-economic élites. This represents the extent of God's solidarity with all the marginalized and downtrodden. Even when liberation from suffering fails to realize its desired outcome and when evil proliferates, the witness of Jesus indicates that, despite such failure, God remains intimately concerned about the violated and vanquished and does not abandon them.³⁵ Within the death of Jesus, God's solidarity with all the violated and vanquished is disclosed. Schillebeeckx therefore maintains that, in his dying and death, Jesus discloses how the practice of love and justice retain their intrinsic value, even when they end in absurd failure and do not tangibly eliminate or reverse the suffering of others.³⁶

Jesus' death on the cross, inner consequence of the radicalism of his message and reconciling praxis, indicates that every praxis of liberating reconciliation that is directed towards humanity is valid *in and of itself* and not in retrospect with respect to possible, subsequent success. It is not success that counts, not even failure or miscarriage due to the intervention of others: but the love that serves. In Jesus' "gratuitous" love, whose measure he knows does not lie with success but in itself as a radical love and identification, the true face of both God and humans is displayed. Reconciliation or liberation is only then not simply a mere change in power relationships and thus a new domination in so far as, however much connected to the limited context of a historically incomplete situation, it is valid for each and every one. . . . It is based on a love which risks the "gratuitous" and does not force human beings into what one personally sees as deliverance and liberation.³⁷

³⁴ *Church*, 120–21, 125.

³⁵ "The Mystery of Injustice and the Mystery of Mercy" 20–21; and *Christ* 823–32.

³⁶ "The Mystery of Injustice and the Mystery of Mercy" 20–21; *Christ* 795.

³⁷ "Waarom Jezus de Christus?" 351; translation mine. See *Christ* 837; and "God, Society and Human Salvation" 98.

By disclosing the intrinsic value of the practices of justice and love, Jesus affirms God's solidarity with struggling human beings in their effort to establish liberated and reconciled relationships in a liveable society, even when such a society is not fully attained. In his dying and death, Jesus refused the messianic invocation of a divinely inaugurated violence that would shatter the powerful.

In his dying and death, Jesus further endorses unconditional and sovereign love as a defining feature of the approach of God's reign, thereby indicating that praxes of liberation are never to become the basis for a new system of domination. Jesus further appeals to human freedom and social communication by refusing to enforce a single, universal manifesto of emancipation as the definitive instrument of liberation for the oppressed. His personal finitude and limitations leave others free to assume and define their future responsibilities for resisting suffering and reversing oppression in their own subsequent contexts. The gratuitous love disclosed by Jesus in his death reorients the praxis of liberation as an invitation into responsibility for others to the point not only of constructive action but also of productive suffering out of a tenacious fidelity to such liberating concerns. The gratuitous love disclosed by Jesus in his death reorients the praxis of liberation by emphasizing that the service of liberation also includes setting others free in their responsibilities by accepting the limits to one's own, thereby deconstructing any inclination to centralize an absolute control of justice in a single figure or movement. The gratuity of love disclosed in the cross of Jesus deconstructs the claim of any group or individual to appropriate God's justice into a closed system where aggressive efforts at liberation become the basis for new forms of exclusion, scapegoating, and control. Schillebeeckx concedes that trust in God's proximity even amid failure and the recalcitrance of historical evil can be politically manipulated by powerful interests that want to maintain their hegemony by propagandizing the oppressed to accept their powerless and degrading condition as a divinely blessed destiny.³⁸ This possibility remains the disastrous result of an artificial focus on the death of Jesus as a salvific event in isolation from his lifepraxis and message. Jesus' proclamation of God's reign, centered on right relationships rooted in justice and reconciliation, remains constitutive for interpreting the meaning of his death. Attempts by elite interests to reinforce their hegemony through a religious interpretation that distorts the meaning of the death of Jesus must be systematically countered by reinterpreting the death of Jesus in the context of his lifepraxis at the service of God's preferential justice and unrestricted reconciliation. Jesus' announcement of God's reign of love in solidarity with the disadvantaged and vanquished remains the defining lens for interpreting the event and

³⁸ "The Mystery of Injustice and the Mystery of Mercy" 20–21.

meaning of his execution. By strengthening the essential connection between the execution of Jesus and his lifepraxis, Schillebeeckx counters theological distortions of the death of Jesus that would attempt to sanction ongoing systems of political-economic or sociocultural oppression.

The Exaltation of Jesus

The wholly unexpected Resurrection of Jesus intensifies this solidarity of God with humans in their histories of suffering. With the Resurrection, God's eschatological action authenticates and ratifies the permanent validity of Jesus' way-of-life and radical identification with God's reign as a healing justice and transformative love for the marginalized.³⁹ As with the interpretation of his dying and death, the connection to the message and praxis of Jesus remains pivotal for Schillebeeckx to the integral interpretation of the Resurrection; otherwise the eschatological exaltation itself risks being mythologized.

Therefore the reality of the resurrection, through which alone the resurrection faith is brought to life, is the test of both the *understanding of God* proclaimed by Jesus and our *soteriological christology*. In the resurrection, God authenticates the person, message and whole way-of-life of Jesus. He puts his seal on it and speaks out against what human beings did to Jesus. Just as the death of Jesus cannot be detached from his life, so too his resurrection cannot be detached from his way-of-life and death. . . . First of all, we must say that Christian faith in the resurrection is actually a first *evaluation* by the gospel of Jesus' life and crucifixion, precisely as the recognition of the intrinsic, intact and irrevocable meaning of Jesus' proclamation and praxis of the reign of God.⁴⁰

Schillebeeckx belabors the significance of an adequate interpretation of the Resurrection for developing a soteriology. The Resurrection event has an irrevocable relationship to the lifepraxis of Jesus that is constitutive for the experience and interpretation of the eschatological reality of this event. The Resurrection, however, is not only a pneumatic and posthistorical ratification by God of the significance of Jesus' praxis and message in communicating the reign of justice and love. Through the Resurrection, the permanent validity of the message of the reign of love through the praxes of justice and reconciliation is recognized in faith by human beings. This kind of faith endorses the provisional anticipation of God's definitive power over evil through historical justice and reconciliation.⁴¹ The Resur-

³⁹ *Jesus* 642; *Christ* 796; and *Church* 129.

⁴⁰ *Church* 129. See *Jesus* 642; *Interim Report* 134–36; and *On Christian Faith* 26–27. For exegetically detailed argumentation, see Edward Schillebeeckx "Seigneur, à qui irions-nous?" in *Le service théologique dans l'Église: Mélanges offerts à Yves Congar pour ses soixante-dix ans*, ed. G. Philips et al. (Paris: Cerf, 1974) 269–84, at 280–82.

⁴¹ *Church* 127; and *Interim Report* 135.

rection is not a compensation package for work-related injuries sustained on a job that remains incomplete: the historical praxis, message, and defenselessness of Jesus in his dying are a historical anticipation of the Resurrection as God's sovereign power over evil and suffering. Jesus' lifepraxis and fidelity even into death, communicating God's solidarity with human beings as a solidarity intent upon justice and reconciliation, are a partial, advance realization of the Resurrection as God's sovereign power over evil and suffering.⁴² In other words, the Resurrection event is not only the definitive manifestation beyond history of the actual reversal of the history of suffering. The Resurrection is already historically enacted in the praxis and message of Jesus.⁴³ The Resurrection of Jesus further communicates God's reign as a universal liberation extending even to the vanquished and annihilated who have been forgotten, despised, and horrendously deprived of justice and love through humiliating or unnoticed deaths.⁴⁴ The Resurrection is provisionally and proleptically communicated, even embodied, by the historical praxis and message of Jesus as the eschatological beginning of this reversal of suffering. In his liberating interactions that heal the vanquished and empower struggling human beings, the historical Jesus communicates the inbreaking reality of resurrection as an approaching reality that disrupts the finality of evil and suffering.

The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead thus eschatologically continues the actual overcoming of the history of suffering initiated in and constitutive for his lifepraxis. The pneumatic remembrance of the Resurrection of Jesus sustains the ongoing reversal of suffering in the historical contexts of actual cultures, societies, and political economies. Schillebeeckx draws out several implications of this profound connection between the Resurrection of Jesus and his lifepraxis and death. First, the critical power of faith in the Resurrection of Jesus serves as both a criticism of any claim that absolutizes a finite sociopolitical movement as a definitive reversal of suffering and a catalyst orienting a progressive politics that concretely resists socio-cultural, political-economic, and ecological evils while rehabilitating histories of suffering.⁴⁵ Second, faith in the Resurrection of Jesus, as faith in an eschatological and pneumatic acceptance of the permanent validity of Jesus' way-of-life, entails the recognition that God opens a future to every praxis of liberation, despite failure or transience, a future that is greater than the ambiguity of finite history.⁴⁶ Third, an integral faith in the

⁴² *Church* 127–30.

⁴³ "The Mystery of Injustice and the Mystery of Mercy" 20–21.

⁴⁴ *Church* 177.

⁴⁵ "The Mystery of Injustice and the Mystery of Mercy" 21–22.

⁴⁶ "God, Society and Human Salvation" 99.

Resurrection of Jesus that remains connected to his lifepraxis and death recognizes that, however much the process of emancipatory liberation is necessary for and encouraged by God's solidarity with humankind and especially the afflicted, such solidarity entails residual sufferings of finitude and mortality which only a final eschatological intervention from God can heal, since no amount of human effort will ever remove them.⁴⁷ Finally, Schillebeeckx argues that political dictatorships, maintained in power by so-called Christians who celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ every Sunday, would be impossible to sustain if the powerful were at all aware of the fact that his Resurrection is intimately bound to the message and conduct of Jesus, to his praxis of the reign of God as the reign of a God concerned for justice and reconciliation that favors the poor and disadvantaged.⁴⁸ The conviction that the praxis, death, and Resurrection of Jesus form an integral and indivisible witness to God's salvific activity for human beings in histories of suffering remains a core conviction of Schillebeeckx's practical-critical soteriology. This biblical conviction structures his soteriological account of the connection and difference between sociopolitical liberation and salvation.

SALVATION AND SOCIOPOLITICAL LIBERATION: IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

The biblical resources orienting Schillebeeckx's practical-critical soteriology pivotally structure his interpretation of the interaction between eschatological salvation and sociopolitical liberation. Grounded in the interdependent tensions identified in the lifepraxis, death, and exaltation of Jesus the Christ, Schillebeeckx delineates the interdependent poles of both the identity and the difference between sociopolitical liberation and eschatological salvation. The necessity of a historical appropriation and development of the sociopolitical repercussions of God's eschatological activity with and for human beings, especially the violated and vanquished, remains paramount. These biblical directives recognize that the praxis of the reign of God, alongside inner renewal, includes the transformation of sociopolitical structures and systems. Schillebeeckx advocates an emancipative political praxis that both relativizes and radicalizes the political.

Politics is thus definitely subject to critique, in that the identification of Christians with politics as a total system for salvation is un-Christian. Christianity rejects any absolutization or ideologization of politics; but on the other hand, however, it also radicalizes the political engagement for the making whole of the person and society.

⁴⁷ *Jesus* 177–78 and 637; *Christ* 814.

⁴⁸ Schillebeeckx, "Christian Identity and Human Integrity," in *The Language of Faith* 185–98, at 195–96.

A particular presence of God is indicated precisely in this radical concern for human beings and their society.⁴⁹

This tension between the gift and the task of developing the sociopolitical repercussions of the witness to God's inbreaking reign is central to Schillebeeckx's soteriological account of political praxis. The tension between gift and task emerges as the pivotal element in Schillebeeckx's recontextualization of the relationship between sociopolitical liberation and eschatological salvation. At one end of the pole, a biblical radicalization of the sociopolitical repercussions of the praxis of God's approaching reign prevails; on the other end of the pole, the permanent criticism of all sociopolitical movements is renewed. The dialectical interaction between these poles prompts Schillebeeckx's elaboration of the relationship between sociopolitical liberation and salvation as a relationship of fragmented identity and productive difference.

The Identity between Sociopolitical Liberation and Salvation

In continuity with his defining biblical convictions, Schillebeeckx strengthens the claim that emancipatory liberations are constitutive for the experience, interpretation, and communication of salvation. Stated in his formal terms, processes of emancipatory liberation effecting the structural transformation of sociocultural, political, economic, and ecological contexts are the condition of possibility for a contemporary faith in salvation from God in Jesus. It is impossible, he claims, to believe in a Christian faith that is not identified with critical movements to emancipate humankind.⁵⁰ There is no greater purpose or accomplishment for human beings on earth, Schillebeeckx claims, than living in solidarity with emancipative movements and collaborating in the realization of liberation from suffering.⁵¹ Where emancipation can reconstruct social relationships and the integrity of life through communicative sociocultural and strategic political-economic action, through applied medicines and therapies or even appropriate technologies, for instance, these efforts are universally enjoined on all human beings in the name of the God of Jesus the Christ, creator and redeemer.⁵² Without being explicitly Christian in its self-reflexive or public identity, emancipative processes of liberation are essential for Christianity in so far as they constitute the specific and historically necessary forms which directly communicate an authentically human—and hence for Schil-

⁴⁹ *Interim Report* 59; see also *Christ* 585–86; “Op weg naar een christologie” 149; “Befreiungstheologien zwischen Medellin und Puebla” 19–20; and “Can Christology be an Experiment” 12–13.

⁵⁰ “Critical Theories and Christian Political Commitment” 77.

⁵¹ *Christ* 765.

⁵² *Ibid.* 764–65.

lebeeckx an ultimately Christian—love, hope, and faith.⁵³ Schillebeeckx leaves open the possibility that autonomous processes of emancipative liberation, without being explicitly Christian, might contain inspirations and orientations which, while originating from Christian sources, have been thoroughly secularized within a culture and which continue to socialize personal and collective initiatives without any reflexive association to explicit forms of Christian witness.⁵⁴ These claims indicate that within Schillebeeckx's practical-critical soteriology, sociopolitical liberation is constitutive for the experience and interpretation of salvation. Salvation is not some vanishing point on the elusive horizon, but abundantly available within the ranges of human action and endurance. At this level, there is no difference between emancipative liberation and salvation from God in Jesus. They are essentially identical with one another.

Within this recognition of the soteriological significance of liberating emancipation, Schillebeeckx advances some stronger claims regarding the theological significance of the identity between eschatological salvation and sociopolitical liberation. These claims concern the way in which liberating emancipations sustain the material, intelligible, and communicable dimensions of salvation from God in Jesus. The promises of salvation, according to Schillebeeckx, cannot be mediated theoretically; they require practical mediations amid histories of suffering. The first claim identifies the historical occurrence of emancipative liberations as the constitutive material of salvation from God. The second claim identifies the historical value of emancipative liberations as the basis for communicating the intelligibility of salvation from God in Jesus. The third claim identifies the historical efficacy of emancipative liberations as the basis for affirming the practical credibility of salvation from God in Jesus. These claims move Schillebeeckx's understanding of the identity between emancipative liberation and eschatological salvation from the level of a preliminary soteriological insight animated by biblical resources to an intricate theological position.

With respect to the first claim, Schillebeeckx asserts that God's salvific activity can be mediated only through concrete praxes that historically liberate human beings. Liberating praxis is "the material or medium of God's salvific activity, without which God is 'powerless' " such that sociopolitical liberation forms "an inner constitutive element of the redemption which is God's reign."⁵⁵ Schillebeeckx reiterates this claim that "in so far as politics is liberating for humans . . . , politics is actually the 'material' of

⁵³ Ibid. 768.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 565.

⁵⁵ Schillebeeckx, "Theologie als bevrijdingskunde," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 24 (1984) 388–402, at 401; translation mine. See *Jesus* 634–35; "Christian Identity and Human Integrity" 187–88; *On Christian Faith* 7–14; and *Church* 6–13.

God's salvific activity."⁵⁶ Sporadic indications of criteria for evaluating whether political praxes are genuinely emancipative ensue from this conviction. Sociocultural, political-economic, and ecological praxes, in order to be liberating and salvific, must at a minimum (1) establish justice for the disadvantaged and exploited; (2) entail a viable reconciliation within society after the liberation struggle is ended; and (3) avoid creating further hierarchies of oppression and exclusion. Schillebeeckx is primarily concerned in this discussion to recognize that, apart from historical movements and events of structural emancipation, there can be no holistic, historical experience of salvation. The development of these criteria is articulated primarily at the level of ethical norms rather than sociological patterns.

In regard to the second claim, Schillebeeckx asserts that the meaning of eschatological salvation in society is attained in the autonomous meaning intrinsic to emancipative struggles or developments that sustain ecohuman liberation. Schillebeeckx maintains that "the Christian concept of salvation loses its rational significance, if there is no *positive* relationship between justification or redemption *and* our liberating political praxis in the world, or if there is no positive relationship between eschatological salvation and social, political and economic peace which needs to be built up by human efforts."⁵⁷ The Christian witness to salvation from God in Jesus and their Spirit is void of meaning unless realized from within the intrinsic value of truly emancipative praxes that sustain justice and reconciliation within historical societies on earth. For Schillebeeckx there can be no recognition, let alone experience, of redemptive meaning that prescind from prior ranges of ecohuman meaning, since the covenant is meaningful only as situated within creation and the profound unity between God's activity as liberator and as creator.⁵⁸ This entails a real and procedural distinction between the human and the religious dimensions of historical interpretation. "Facts must already be interpreted as somewhat coherent, meaningful facts in order to be called 'history.' Through human interpretation 'facts' became human history. And only then, in a second interpretation of experience, can 'profane' events of human liberation be experienced and set forth as *salvation from the activity of God*. . . . At issue is the religious meaning of reflexive human action that liberates and initiates communication."⁵⁹ Note that liberating events and movements are salvific whether

⁵⁶ Schillebeeckx, "Befreiende Theologie," in *Mystik und Politik: Theologie im Ringen von Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Johann Baptist Metz zu Ehren*, ed. E. Schillebeeckx (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1988) 56–71, at 69; translation mine.

⁵⁷ Schillebeeckx, "Christian Conscience and Nuclear Deterrant," *Doctrine and Life* 32 (1982) 98–112, at 112.

⁵⁸ *Christ* 515–30, 810.

⁵⁹ "Theologie als bevrijdingskunde" 400–1; translation mine. See *On Christian Faith* 10–14; and *Church* 6–7.

they are religiously interpreted or not. Within this identity between eschatological salvation and truly humanizing emancipation, however, a religious dimension of meaning can emerge only from within the humanly constructed meaning of liberating developments. This emergent religious dimension explicitly names and narrates the gift of eschatological salvation implicit within the original liberating event. Schillebeeckx's practical-critical soteriology emphasizes the procedural value of constructing the independent historical meaning of original liberating events in society.⁶⁰

Regarding the third claim, Schillebeeckx asserts that faith in God's salvific activity is obscured when divorced from its ground in emancipative praxes and sociopolitical liberations. "Faith in humankind's liberation (or redemption) without this liberation becoming apparent and tangible here and now would be equivalent to a mere ideology, without any basic credibility."⁶¹ Rendering the witness of Jesus to God's eschatological community of justice and reconciliation fully credible and available requires Christian participation in movements of liberating emancipation. The contemporary witness to the covenant promises renewed by Jesus becomes more believable as it becomes more communicable through liberating praxes. The credibility of contemporary forms of witness to the life and praxis of Jesus can flourish when connected to efforts to liberate human beings universally from degrading affliction.⁶² Without the historical mediation of a liberatory praxis through human action amid current contexts of alienation and suffering, any faith in an eschatological future remains the empty story of a merely promised salvation.⁶³ There is a particular temporal effect stemming from the believable witness of a liberating praxis: a believable witness grounded in the practical even if partial mediation of salvation through liberation that opens up a range of trust in the future promised to justice and reconciliation.⁶⁴ The experience of emancipative events intensifies the desire for an all-encompassing salvation in the future.

By rendering salvation historically real, meaningful, and believable, the soteriological value of contextual processes of emancipation begins to emerge. Emancipation is the condition of possibility for the experience and interpretation of salvation. Liberating political praxes furthering the development of emancipation is the condition of possibility for the commu-

⁶⁰ While soteriology remains sovereign and autonomous as a theological discourse, it stands constantly invited to a critical correlation with semiotic and dialectic social theories. See "Theologie als bevrijdingskunde" 397–400; and *Christ* 773–74.

⁶¹ Schillebeeckx, "The Christian and Political Engagement," *Doctrine and Life* 22 (1972) 118.

⁶² *Church* 168–69.

⁶⁴ *Christ* 814.

⁶³ "Befreiende Theologie" 70.

nication of love in contemporary societies. This is the soteriological basis for the shift from an interpersonal to a political love that encompasses the development of Schillebeeckx's practical-critical soteriology. Just as the Resurrection of Jesus consolidates the intrinsic value of his liberating praxis of solidarity, the eschatological transcendence of the promises of salvation consolidates the salvific value intrinsic to emancipation. Just as his lifepraxis partially and provisionally communicates the promise of resurrection, emancipative movements partially and provisionally communicate the promises of salvation. From this interdependence within the eschatological identity of Jesus, Schillebeeckx draws the following implication for the relationship between salvation and emancipation: "By means of continually provisional and replaceable configurations, eschatological salvation must visibly, if fragmentarily, be realized within the basic framework of our human history, both in heart *and* structures, so that (especially in our present society) the heart of love may also be mediated by the structures."⁶⁵ Schillebeeckx emphasizes the sociopolitical communication of love through social relationships that have been emancipated in a liberating praxis. Since the communication of preferential justice and unlimited reconciliation is never absolute and final, sociopolitical emancipations represent transient fragments of salvation. Historical emancipations set forth the process and content of God's liberating solidarity with struggling human beings in contexts of political-economic oppression, sociocultural alienation and ecological instability. Sociopolitical liberations are basic to the encounter with and understanding of the gift of God's solidarity. There is a relationship of inseparable identity between salvation and emancipation, even though this remains a fragile and fragmented identity. This identity is not simple or even theoretical. It is a threatened identity that must be established through the practical mediation of human action and creative suffering. Within these transient yet liberating fragments, the experience of salvation is available and its future open.

The Difference between Sociopolitical Liberation and Salvation

The communication of salvation through sociopolitical liberations and emancipative struggles, however, remains provisional. Schillebeeckx reflects on how liberating efforts and developments remain transitory even under the most successful conditions.⁶⁶ Emancipative liberations are interrupted by interference from retrenching systems of domination. Sociopo-

⁶⁵ Schillebeeckx, "God, Society and Human Salvation" 91; See "Waarom Jezus de Christus?" 4; *Gerechtigheid en liefde* 685/*Christ* 745; and "Befreiende Theologie" 70–71.

⁶⁶ *Jesus* 24–25, 177–78, 637–38; and *Christ* 764–65, 769–70, 814.

litical liberations can be eroded when random disability, disease, and death impede the networks of human actions sustaining them. Global and even regional histories remain ambivalent in the absence of both the ultimate integrity of life and the ultimate destruction of life. Indeed, a near ultimate destruction of life on earth appears possible to the extent that the degrading initiatives of historical evil, ethical and strategic failure, limited health and inevitable death cumulatively undermine a definitive integrity of life free of suffering and violence. The collapse of life-systems and the extinction of humankind remain a possible outcome of human shortcoming. Furthermore, there are ranges of suffering that persist even when viable sociocultural identities, just political economies, and sustainable ecologies are secure. Even if a particular region can attain such positive conditions, other regions may still remain mired in systemic oppression and structural violence. Even if global levels of emancipated structures were to secure permanent levels of dignity, justice, and sustainability for all, sufferings arising from interpersonal violence, anguish, and loneliness related to finitude would persist. Finally, all emancipative liberations, no matter how successful, are always too late for the countless majority of human beings who have died deprived and humiliated, tortured and murdered. While the responsibility to realize emancipative liberations at the service of justice and reconciliation, from the religious perspective of eschatological salvation, remains universal, the outcomes of such efforts remain insecure and insufficient.

This transience and fragility of emancipative liberations raise the question of a more comprehensive rift and healing pervading social relationships. Transience and fragility signal that the most optimal outcomes of structural and systemic transformation remain incomplete and frustrate a total healing of human suffering.

In modern situations, the impossibility of a total, universal and definitive self-liberation through emancipation is the very context in which the *question* of the ultimate meaning of human life arises. The project of emancipation is itself confronted with the fundamental question mark which accompanies the process of emancipation from within. . . . The history of emancipation can therefore *not be exclusively equated* with the history of redemption from God's activity, whereas the latter cannot be divorced from human self-liberation. . . . Christian redemption is more than emancipative self-liberation, with which it nevertheless remains in critical solidarity.⁶⁷

Given the tenacity of various kinds of suffering directly related to human finitude and the associated fragility, if not instability, of emancipative liberations, a complete healing and reconciliation of human beings is not forthcoming within history through the sum total of liberatory praxis.

⁶⁷ *Christ* 768–70.

While eschatological salvation includes sociopolitical liberation, it also exceeds the structural and systemic integrity of life and cannot be reduced to emancipative praxes. Eschatological salvation extends into ranges of alienation intrinsic to basic human finitude which no abundance of structural transformation will be capable of adequately liberating. Within the most optimal and emancipated social relationships, there is the residual alienation within personal identity stemming from the inevitable loss of relationships, declining energy through ageing, and death. This clearly does not, according to Schillebeeckx, justify minimizing the eschatological necessity of emancipative praxis, but it does qualify its outcomes as necessary yet insufficient for a holistic healing of suffering.

A condition of definitive and universal salvation eludes human effort and endurance in history. Wherever sociocultural, political-economic, and ecological actions are structurally directed at healing and empowering human beings amid unjustifiable suffering, these events realize fragments of eschatological salvation on earth and the provisional emergence of God's reign within history. Precisely within this fragile and fragmentary identity, however, the difference arises between emancipative liberation and eschatological liberation.

This is the challenging message of Jesus, which on the one hand leaves room for and incites the human process of liberation and emancipation, on the other surmounts it in an unshakeable trust in a total salvation that only God can give. This total salvation is a transcendent, since divine, answer to the finitude itself of our being human, a finitude under the index and exponent of which every emancipation and critical praxis stand. Through their finitude (the metaphysical rift in their being), humans are beings who are directed to the grace and mercy of God their Creator for their salvation, wholeness and fulfilment.⁶⁸

Just as the realized salvation communicated by Jesus within his lifepaxis was interrupted by unjustifiable violence, the limits of finitude, and the inevitability of death, so the emancipative liberations that communicate tangible disclosures of eschatological salvation on earth remain tenuous. They remain unstable and liable to breakdown. Between emancipative liberation and eschatological salvation, a painful and absurd rupture intervenes. Within this rupture, the differences between emancipative liberation and definitive eschatological salvation from God in Jesus present themselves. Schillebeeckx frankly admits that whoever walks the path of Jesus in solidarity with the oppressed through the liberating praxis of preferential justice and unrestricted reconciliation, will arouse opposition and even a life-threatening counterviolence.⁶⁹ A life committed to emancipative praxis inevitably confronts its limits. The promise of a total and final salvation

⁶⁸ *Jesus* 638.

⁶⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Gerechtigheid en liefde* 732–34/*Christ* 794–95; *Mensen* 187/*Church* 168.

remains the unexpected horizon of eschatological salvation, just as the raising of the crucified to new life was the unexpected horizon of Jesus' solidarity with God.

Eschatological Proviso

The notion of the eschatological proviso emerges as an integral result of delineating the differences between sociopolitical liberation and definitive salvation in Schillebeeckx's practical-critical soteriology. Based on the transience of emancipative liberations as well as the ultimate alterity of definitive salvation, Schillebeeckx infers that any claim by an emancipative movement to represent a complete and total liberation is misleading, counter-effective, and eventually if not obviously tyrannical.⁷⁰ An eschatological restraint is placed on every emancipative liberation with the recognition that no matter how comprehensive, such liberation will always remain partial and limited. The sociopolitical repercussions of this are extensive.⁷¹ The eschatological proviso entails that there can never be any claim that absolutizes any single or sum total of emancipative liberations in history by assigning to it a universal and total importance.⁷² The eschatological proviso entails that there can never be any claim that sacralizes, by identifying it as commensurate with God's definitive eschatological initiative, any single or sum total of emancipative liberations in history.⁷³ The eschatological proviso entails that no emancipative movement can be totalized such that it claims to be the universal agent of a global or even regional history. Schillebeeckx here counters the exaggerated claims that neo-marxist, neo-liberal, or ethnonationalist movements constitute inevitable, necessary, and unalterable courses of sociopolitical development. The eschatological proviso intensifies the sociopolitical repercussions of the difference between definitive salvation and emancipative liberation. While sociopolitical praxis in the service of justice and reconciliation partially manifests God's eschatological activity, the eschatological proviso asserts that God's eschatological activity cannot be reduced to and exclusively equated with any particular sociopolitical movement. Political movements, even movements of genuine sociocultural, economic, and ecological liberation, cannot unequivocally claim to represent the full extent of God's eschatological activity for humans.

Schillebeeckx raises the question whether the eschatological proviso might not be taken to an extreme, thereby indiscriminately relativizing the

⁷⁰ *Christ* 769.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 776.

⁷² *Ibid.* 776–77.

⁷³ "God, Society and Human Salvation" 94; and "Befreiungstheologien zwischen Medellín und Puebla" 20.

value of all sociopolitical movements and serving a reactionary function by entrenching current structures of domination.⁷⁴ The capacity of the eschatological proviso to relativize might also neutralize any evaluation of sociopolitical movements, thereby leaving intact the hegemonies of actual systems of oppression. This possibility arises as a theological aftermath of unjustifiably separating the significance of God's action in the Resurrection of Jesus from its proper context in his lifepraxis, message, and death. The eschatological proviso cannot be used to argue that the ultimately transcendent or historically immanent poles of salvation have absolutely no sociocultural, political-economic, or ecological repercussions whatsoever. Nor can it be used to nullify God's preferential solidarity with the disadvantaged and the downtrodden. Far from eliminating or even minimizing this solidarity, the eschatological proviso radicalizes the responsibility for transforming sociopolitical structures through both a preferential justice and an unrestricted reconciliation.

It is not the abiding ambiguities of the ultimate sociopolitical significance of fragmentary emancipations that define the eschatological proviso. It is defined rather by the outer limit of an indefinable and definitive salvation that cannot be produced by human action alone within the conditions of finitude; sociopolitical activities, while they are first radicalized toward emancipative praxes of justice and reconciliation extending into social structures that benefit the oppressed, ultimately remain provisional, liable to revision, and inadequate to a definitive communication of salvation.⁷⁵ In other words, the eschatological proviso, far from stifling historical liberation movements, seeks to intensify their emancipative potential and redemptive power by fortifying them against destructive bias that create a legacy of victims and vitiate their humanizing potential. It maintains that history is open to liberating effort and that liberating efforts are equally liable to revision as to critique; it recognizes that, where liberatory efforts fail, the futility can be entrusted to God as the ultimate protagonist of universal providence and the Lord of history establishing definitive salvation.⁷⁶ This God of the prophetic and exalted Jesus is "indeed the infinite source and heart of all truly human movements of liberation and salvation, but cannot be reduced to any particular, historical event of liberation."⁷⁷ The eschatological proviso endorses the transcendence of God's salvific activity and thereby intensifies its sociopolitical repercussions immanent to history. This creative tension between God's transcendence and imma-

⁷⁴ *Christ* 777–79; and "De levensweg van Jezus, beleden als de Christus" 147–48.

⁷⁵ *Christ* 779; and "De levensweg van Jezus, beleden als de Christus" 148.

⁷⁶ *Christ* 779.

⁷⁷ "De levensweg van Jezus, beleden als de Christus" 147; translation mine.

nence within history is directly disclosed in the radical unity of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus.

Eschatological Surplus

If the eschatological proviso limits and revises emancipative efforts, the eschatological surplus renews them. If the horizon of definitive salvation intensifies the transience of sociopolitical liberation, it also extends the possibility of an unrealized future. The eschatological surplus of the exaltation of Jesus with God and the sending of their Spirit renews the validity and urgency of the praxes of preferential justice and universal reconciliation. This surplus inspires a resurgence of liberating activity, and refuses an absolute submission to tragic failure that would bring a premature closure to historical possibilities. A similar relationship can be affirmed between salvation and liberation. Just as God's reign and the Resurrection of Jesus are eschatologically situated within and beyond history, Schillebeeckx affirms an eschatological surplus beyond history that orients historical liberations even without being exhausted by them.

As a Christian I do not insist so much on a "proviso" (unless the outlines, limits, and possible misunderstandings thereof are clearly circumscribed beforehand in an accessible language). As I now see it, I insist much more on an "eschatological superabundance," a surplus, that for God's activity an inner, *positive* connection exists between, on the one hand, what humans here on earth realize in terms of true justice for everyone and of authentic love for other humans, and, on the other hand, the ultimate figure that God will give to what the Christian originary tradition calls the reign of God.⁷⁸

The eschatological surplus of God's transcendent love in solidarity with the disadvantaged and downtrodden is intimately connected to, even dependent on, the liberations that humans can achieve within history. At the same time and with equal intensity, the eschatological surplus of God's transcendent being in solidarity with the disadvantaged and downtrodden exceeds the liberations that humans can achieve. The surplus is thereby constantly capable of renewing and reorienting them.

Schillebeeckx insists that this transcendent surplus revitalizes sociopolitical liberations as tangible configurations of eschatological salvation in history. "By means of continually provisional and replaceable configurations, eschatological salvation must visibly, if fragmentarily, be realized within the basic framework of our human history, both in heart *and* struc-

⁷⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, "Terugblik vanuit de tijd na Vaticanum II: De gebroken ideologieën van de moderniteit," in *Tussen openheid en isolement: Het voorbeeld van de katholieke theologie in de negentiende eeuw*, ed. E. Borgman and A. van Harskamp (Kampen: Kok, 1992) 153–72, at 170–71; translation mine.

tures, so that (especially in our present society) the heart of love may also be mediated by the structures.”⁷⁹ Sociopolitical liberations are necessary but transient fragments of salvation. As the historical, intelligible, and communicable material of eschatological salvation within the finite dimensions of ecohuman living, sociopolitical liberation is indispensable to the process and content of salvation. Sociopolitical and ecological liberations are basic constituents for the participation in the gift of God’s eschatological activity for human beings. They give a fragile yet real content to the integrity of life that God’s eschatological activity promises. Sociopolitical liberations set forth the procedural and substantive dimensions of God’s liberating solidarity with human beings in histories resisting oppression and suffering; They are capable of signifying the material, intelligible, and communicable immanence of God’s eschatological salvation within history and even to some extent beyond.

Definitive eschatological salvation from God in Jesus thus remains an affirmation of faith without any basis in objectively demonstrable necessities. It remains indefinable and the language that attempts to affirm and describe it remains negative.⁸⁰ Trust in the actual reality of definitive eschatological salvation arises out of an affirmation of faith in the manifestation of the resurrected reality of Jesus. For Schillebeeckx, definitive eschatological salvation—as a salvation that completely heals the ruptures of finitude, that eliminates all suffering from history, that even reconciles the living with the dead, and that permanently secures the sociopolitical and ecological integrity of life for one and for all—remains an unpredictable and excessive gift. Schillebeeckx does not directly attempt to clarify the relation between divine gift and human action with respect to definitive eschatological salvation. On the one hand, there is a realm of human suffering that no amount of human action can eliminate, since it is grounded in the inevitability of degeneration and death attached to human finitude. Only a surprising and unpredictable renewal of life by the direct activity of God, a gift attested to through faith in the disclosure of the Resurrection, can continue life when it is damaged to the point of death and annihilated. “That does not in any way mean that final salvation will come upon us *from outside*, detached from and regardless of what humans in fact make of it in their history. Eschatological or final salvation . . . takes shape . . . from what humans on earth achieve as salvation for others.”⁸¹ While the process and content of definitive eschatological salvation transcends and exceeds hu-

⁷⁹ Schillebeeckx, “God, Society and Human Salvation” 91; See “Waarom Jezus de Christus?” 4; *Gerechtigheid en liefde* 685/*Christ* 745; and “Befreiende Theologie” 70–71.

⁸⁰ *Interim Report* 122–24.

⁸¹ *Christ* 792; see also “Befreiende Theologie” 70–71.

man finitude and praxis, it does not negate finitude and undermine praxis but somehow affirms and extends them. While human action and endurance are not sufficient to establish definitive salvation on earth, they are necessary in order that definitive salvation might ultimately manifest itself as a salvation for creation and among human beings.

While Schillebeeckx does not attempt to clarify systematically this disproportion between divine gift and human action within and beyond history, he does introduce a temporal dimension into its depth. In the affirmation of the Resurrection through faith, "the believer in God knows that redemption is not in our power and that God opens, nevertheless, the future to any praxis of liberation and reconciliation, a future that is greater than our entire finite history encompasses: *in* our history the future of God is at stake."⁸² Praxis of justice and reconciliation are assured a future both anticipated within and deferred beyond history. The difference between sociopolitical liberations, as fragments of salvation, and definitive eschatological salvation contains at least a temporal difference: while sociopolitical liberations are limited by the failures of the past and frustrations of the present, definitive salvation holds a future open to the integrity of life amid the tragic and fragile outcomes of human striving for liberation and wholeness. This difference between the "anticipated within history" and the "deferred beyond history" is not defined or systematically described by Schillebeeckx. The God of Jesus the Christ, the creator and liberator, remains the decisive and universal actor in the drama of history. The Spirit of this God in Jesus is active in history to renew the future from within the capabilities of ecohuman responsibilities for liberation in present historical conditions. The exalted life that the subversive and executed Jesus enjoys with God extends a future not only to his lifepraxis but to any practice of justice and reconciliation, however incomplete. This future is not only transhistorical and perhaps even cumulative within a historical framework, but also conclusive and ultimate. The profound connection between the lifepraxis, death, and Resurrection of Jesus remains pivotal in Schillebeeckx's understanding of the productive difference between sociopolitical liberation and definitive eschatological salvation. This connection lends a temporal perspective to the abiding difference between sociopolitical liberation and definitive eschatological salvation.

CONCLUSION

According to Schillebeeckx, liberating emancipations are constitutive for experiencing, interpreting, and communicating eschatological salvation

⁸² "God, Society and Human Salvation" 99. See *Christ* 838.

from God in Jesus.⁸³ Historical praxes of emancipation, however fragile or incomplete, are fragments of salvation, the contingent yet real immanence of eschatological salvation in history. Schillebeeckx argues that historical praxes of sociopolitical liberation render the encounter with and response to eschatological salvation from God in Jesus both historically available and intelligible, as well as communicable if not believable. Between surplus and proviso, the eschatological identity and difference that determines the interaction between liberating emancipations and definitive salvation is full of creative tensions for the soteriological interpretation of sociopolitical praxis. “God the Creator, the one in whom we can trust, *is* love that liberates men and women, in a way which fulfills and goes beyond all human, personal, social and political expectations. Christians have learned all this by experience from the life and path of Jesus: from his message and his matching corresponding lifestyle, from the specific circumstances of his death, and finally from the apostolic witness to his resurrection from the realm of the dead.”⁸⁴ The eschatological surplus and proviso endorse the transcendence of God’s salvific activity and thereby intensify its sociopolitical repercussions immanent to what Schillebeeckx refers to as the history of emancipation. This creative tension between God’s transcendence and immanence within history is directly disclosed in the radical unity of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection, all of which serve as the prophetic and mystical witness to God’s inbreaking reign of preferential solidarity. On the basis of the relationship between the human agency of Jesus and God’s preferential solidarity, Schillebeeckx’s practical-critical soteriology argues that sociopolitical liberations enact and anticipate salvation in provisional fragments. Eschatological salvation renews the effort and promises an unexpected future for liberating emancipation. Schillebeeckx’s practical-critical soteriology constructs the dialectical interaction between salvation and liberation as a relationship of fragmented identity amid productive difference.

⁸³ The author gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of the Federal Government of Canada for its doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships which have supported the research and writing of this text.

⁸⁴ *Church* 122; see also *Interim Report* 128.