

Edward Schillebeeckx: God is "always absolutely new."

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Edward Schillebeeckx was born in Antwerp in 1914 and studied in Louvain and Paris. A Dominican priest, he taught dogmatic theology at Louvain and then at Nijmegen until his retirement in 1982, and was a notable figure at Vatican II. His earlier work was mostly concerned with ecclesiology and sacramental theology, but more recently he has devoted increasing energy to exegesis and philosophy as well as to more central dogmatic concerns. He is a prolific writer, and is currently completing the third volume of his Christology, after which he hopes to turn his attention to hermeneutics and to eschatology. Of late, Schillebeeckx has lived under a cloud of official disapproval after his investigation by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1979. This article attempts to identify some of his major preoccupations from the vantage-point of his understanding of the relationship between the Christian gospel and the contemporary world in which salvation is experienced.

One of the results of the profound mutations in Christian religion and theology since the eighteenth century has been the rise of historical consciousness. No serious contemporary Christian theologian can fail to grapple with the fact that Christianity is a phenomenon which, far from remaining historically stable, undergoes change. Because of this, we might say that mainstream Christian theology today understands Christianity as within history rather than history as within Christianity. The Christian faith is subject to the same sorts of historical developments as any other human phenomenon, and so its beliefs, its patterns of behaviour and its institutional expressions are not static but moments within an historical process. This problem of historical change is perhaps the most fundamental theme of Christian theology since the Enlightenment.

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Whilst some theologians welcome the awareness of historical development as unproblematic, most understand that it faces the Christian theologian with the question of the identity of Christianity. If Christianity is historically mobile, then can it be said to have a stable core — a "centre" or "essence" (the terms are familiar throughout the theological literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)? How can the Christian faith be said to have a continuous identity, an identity with duration through historical change? Within the evangelical tradition it is the primacy of Scripture which furnishes the element of stability; within other traditions it may be, for example, the persistence of certain patterns of ministry (such as episcopacy). For the Catholic tradition, the issues are clearly of very great significance indeed, since until relatively recently the Catholic understanding of tradition emphasised the unbroken continuity of the teaching office

Dr John Webster, whose stimulating series surveying contemporary continental theologians has been appreciated by many, continues with a look at the controversial Catholic thinker, Edward Schillebeeckx.



of the church and the a-historical nature of Catholic teaching. The decrees and decisions of the church, deriving ultimately from the commission of Christ to the apostles, are eternally valid and thus outside the historical process.

A great deal of Schillebeeckx's work is taken up either explicitly or implicitly with this set of issues. This is as much the case in his earlier treatises on marriage or the eucharist as it is in his most recent writings on the political dimensions of the Christian experience of salvation. For he has always sought to refuse any suggestions that the theologian is forced to choose between fidelity to the Christian inheritance and commitment to the contemporary world. The "identity" of Christianity, its "essence," is not discovered by abstraction from the processes of historical development but within those processes. And so commitment to the reinterpretation of the Christian tradition need not be either diminution of its substance or courting the favour of the contemporary world. It may be the way to discover both the content and the meaning of the gospel.

Schillebeeckx's positive attitude to historical change derives partly from his understanding of revelation as that which is experienced within history rather than as that which lies outside history, and partly from the pervasive "incarnational" tone of much of his writing. But it is also the fruit of the spirituality which has nourished him throughout his theological work: that of the Dominicans or Order of Preachers. Schillebeeckx's Dominicanism is not simply accidental, but of great significance for understanding his style of theology; and so it is to a few remarks on the Dominicans that we turn.

Dominican spirituality

Two features of the Dominican tradition are of especial significance here. The first is its commitment to the intellectual service of the Word of God. From its inception the Dominican order has been less concerned with personal formation and ascetical theology than with study, and study as a means to an end: the proclamation of the Word of God, in the sense of the articulation of the Christian gospel in an intelligible and contemporary way. An English

Dominican theologian once described "the essential Dominican vocation" as "a vocation in the service of the Word, involving a reverence for the life of intelligence in the economy of our redemption in Christ" (c. Ernst, *Multiple Echo* (London 1979) 150). The Dominican apostolate is preaching, although preaching not simply in the restricted sense of pulpit oratory but in the more extended sense of the whole work of interpreting and making meaningful the truth of God. Schillebeeckx stands in a long line of Dominican theologians (stretching back to St Thomas Aquinas and St Albert the Great), whose involvement with the intellectual currents of their own day was the embodiment of the particular charisma of their Order.

The second feature of Dominican spirituality is its peculiar flexibility and adaptability, expressed in its singular lack of concern with either ascetic detail or tightly controlled observance. This emphasis on liberty and openness to new possibilities makes the Dominican Order less static and more exploratory than other Orders, and so more alert to the fresh avenues which might be opened up by historical change. In his splendid introduction to his edition of early Dominican texts, Simon Tugwell writes that "A Dominican preacher is . . . not typically a man seeking an ordered way of life, which will protect him from his own unreliable instincts, nor is he a man desiring to have his every move governed by the will of another; he is a man eager to throw himself into the task given him by God, in the context of world-wide mission held together by the generous loyalty that has inspired its members to put themselves at the disposal of its leader and Master. And so he cannot afford to allow his initial generosity to be swamped by too much prudence or fussiness" (S. Tugwell, ed., *Early Dominicans* (London 1982) 24).

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How do these considerations colour Schillebeeckx's style of theology? In an essay on "Dominican Spirituality" in *God Among Us* (ET London 1983) he writes that "Dominican spirituality is . . . to be defined as a spirituality which, on the basis of admonitory and critical reflection on the heritage left behind by the past religious tradition, takes up critically and positively the cross-thread provided by whatever religious possibilities for the future keep emerging among us" (238). Dominic himself, he writes, "had a fine sensitivity both to religious values from the past and to the religious promise for the future emanating from the modern experiments of his time" (ibid). For Schillebeeckx, in other words, the Dominican tradition does not find its identity in repeating the past, but in discovering in the present a possibility of growth and of continuing rather than simply re-telling the story of the Order. Identity is achieved in embracing rather than resisting change.

For the theologian, this means that mere repetition of the solutions of earlier generations is insufficient. The continuity of Christian theology is achieved not so much by formal repetition as by entering into the task of articulating and commending the Christian gospel with whatever resources the contemporary world has available.

And so a fresh interpretation of the gospel is necessary precisely in order to remain in continuity with the past in its essential task. "Today faith insists that the believer pass through the ordeal of a new interpretation of his faith if he wishes to be faithful to the message of the gospel" (*The Understanding of Faith* (ET London 1974) 3). Change is not necessarily capitulation; it can be born of the attempt to follow God's Word as it encounters us in the history of mankind. Accordingly, the modern historical consciousness, far from obscuring the proper task of Christian theology, may lay bare that task more clearly as one of mediating between the world of historical experience and the gospel of Christ. "Theology lives by man's experience of his own existence and by patiently listening to the Word of God. God's Word was addressed to the world and his deeds were performed for the world. In revealing himself to man, the Word of God at the same time revealed man to himself" (*Marriage* (ET London 1965) vif).

We now turn to look in a little more detail at some particular elements of Schillebeeckx's theology.

Christian Humanism and Secularity

Like many theologians in the 1950's and 1960's, Schillebeeckx was very deeply impressed with the posthumous writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the relation of the Christian faith to a post-religious world. Bonhoeffer's appraisal of secularity has been variously (and often mistakenly) interpreted and appropriated. Schillebeeckx's engagement with the theme derived from his growing sense that the horizon of human experience is the only possible location of any knowledge of God: "I cannot . . . discover God . . . unless he makes himself known to me in grace and in the history of salvation *in the world* as the world of men. How could a divine revelation which was outside man's experience be heard — how, in other words, could it be a *revelation* to man?" (*World and Church* (ET London 1971) 82).

To this necessity that revelation be located in human experience there corresponds, however, the actual form of revelation as "incarnate", that is, within the creaturely economy. "True Christian faith is faith in the absolute and gratuitous nearness of God, in Christ, in all the circumstances of life in this world" (ibid 100). Because all history is thus the location of the presence of God in Christ, because the secular is, in its secularity, the bearer of God's revelation, then human experience is grace.

Schillebeeckx's volume's of essays *World and Church* and *God and Man* are chiefly concerned to explore the implications of this positive evaluation of secular history for ecclesiology, and especially for the way in which the church relates to human society as a sign of God's presence in the world rather than as a contradiction of the world. But for our present concerns, it is important to note that Schillebeeckx's interpretation of secularity rests upon a particular conception of the relationship of grace to nature. Grace presupposes nature; nature bears grace within itself, or, as Schillebeeckx puts it, "Reality reveals itself to man as pointing towards God" (*God and Man* (ET London 1969) 66). Like his Dominican forbear St Albert, Schillebeeckx is little concerned with precisely "identifying the boundaries between nature and grace" (*God Among Us*, 226). Because nature and grace interpenetrate in this way, the human and the divine come together so that, in a familiar Schillebeeckx phrase, "man's concern is God's concern." "Outside the mystery of Christ, humanism has no lasting meaning. Within the mystery of Christ, however, it becomes an aspect of our redemption in action. 'Thou renewest the face of the earth'" (*World and Church*, 11).

Sacraments and Encounter

Alongside this interest in the church's relation to the secular world, Schillebeeckx's earlier writings also betray a preoccupation with sacramental theology. His concern for both these areas is, of course, rooted in his affirmation of the earthly, personal manner of God's presence in the world. His two most widely-read books in the area of sacramental theology are *Christ the Sacrament* (ET London 1963) and *The Eucharist* (ET London 1968). Both are concerned to offer a fresh interpretation of the nature of the sacraments through the use of analytical categories derived from contemporary philosophy, though without losing sight of the proper continuity with the tradition of theological reflection. And both are particularly impressive for their acute historical scholarship and their ability to pierce through textbook caricatures to the real intentions of earlier theologians and church councils. The interpretations of Aquinas on "ex opere operato" in *Christ the Sacrament* and of transubstantiation in *The Eucharist* furnish particularly good instances of this.

The category of *encounter* is central to Schillebeeckx's writing here: the sacraments are to be understood as making possible an encounter with God in Christ. It is here that he seeks to move away from aspects of scholastic sacramental theology, for the kind of terminology and interpretative categories employed by the schoolmen and particularly by the Council of Trent tend to be mechanical, impersonal and so excessively physical in, for example, their understanding of the nature of Christ's presence in the eucharist. Over against this, Schillebeeckx seeks to give theological expression to the Christian conviction that "the sacraments are the properly human mode of encounter with God" (*Christ the Sacrament*, 6). In the sacraments we encounter not an abstraction (such as "sacramental grace") but Christ himself; and so a theology of the sacraments will draw more readily on the personalist categories of modern anthropology than on the quasi-physical ontology of earlier generations. Encounters between persons are embodied: persons present themselves in a bodily way. But because Christ is now risen, ascended and glorified, he cannot relate to us immediately in this bodily manner. And so the sacraments are the means by which and in which Christ's glorified presence is mediated to us: the sacraments are "the earthly prolongation of Christ's glorified bodiliness" (*Christ the Sacrament* 44). That is to say, in the same way as Christ's earthly self was embodied, so now his glorified self is embodied in the sacraments. Through the sacraments, we experience Christ himself; the sacraments externalise Christ's self in the same way that bodily gestures (such as a handshake) externalise the self of a human person and so establish relationships. "As the personal redemptive act of Christ in his church, a sacrament is therefore the personal approach of Christ to a particular man" (*Christ the Sacrament*, 80).

This understanding of a sacrament as the embodiment of the personal presence of Christ leads Schillebeeckx to offer a fresh interpretation of the relationship between the eucharistic elements of bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ. From the Mediaeval period, Catholic dogma developed the doctrine of transubstantiation, a doctrine given its most sophisticated expression by Aquinas and then codified in a less subtle form by the Council of Trent. The intention of the doctrine, far from asserting a crude identity between the eucharistic elements and Christ's body and blood, was in reality to prevent a physicalist account of Christ's presence in the eucharist. For Aquinas proposes that, whilst the inner essence (substance) of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of Christ's body and blood, their outward form ("accidents" — that is, all their physical characteris-

tics) remain the same, so that Christ's presence is sacramental rather than physical.

But however refined an interpretation we put on the doctrine, for Schillebeeckx the language of "substance" and "accidents" is insufficiently personal, and too much the language of things, especially in versions of the doctrine found after the Council of Trent. "In such a time it was almost impossible to experience the pre-eminently *human* character proper to a religious meal. In a context of natural philosophy the *reality* of the eucharist... was bound to acquire a specially physical colouration" (*The Eucharist*, 91f). To try and shift out of this problem, Schillebeeckx uses concepts drawn from philosophical anthropology, in order to express the primarily human character of the eucharist and so locate in the world of contemporary experience.

Behind this lies a strong Christological emphasis on the presence of Christ: Jesus Christ is not dead but alive, and salvation in him is not a message from the past but a contemporary experience.

A key concept here is that of transsignification. The term is used to propose that what is changed in the eucharist is not the *substance* of the bread and the wine but their *meaning*: bread and wine receive a new significance. Behind this lies a conviction that the meaning of a particular piece of reality is its meaning for particular human beings in a particular context. A piece of coloured cloth in one context is simply decorative; in another it becomes a national flag which focusses corporate emotion. The cloth does not change physically from one context to another; what does change is its significance. So with the bread and wine: in the new context (the celebration of the eucharist) they take on a new meaning as the embodied self-offering of the glorified Christ.

Contemporary sacramental theology has discussed the usefulness of the concept of "transsignification" at great length. For our present purposes it is important simply to note how Schillebeeckx uses the resources of contemporary philosophy of signs in order to reinterpret the affirmations made by previous theological generations through very different philosophical categories. But again, that reinterpretation is not a deviation from the tradition but rather an attempt to be faithful to the core meaning of the tradition without repeating its external expression. "The contemporary context of our life leads us to reinterpret the world of ideas with which the dogma of transubstantiation has come down to us, precisely in order to be able to preserve in a pure form the basic meaning of the dogma and make it capable of being freshly experienced by modern man" (*The Eucharist*, 90).

Salvation in Jesus

Schillebeeckx's sacramental theology is imbued with the conviction that the sacraments extend the life of the glorified Christ into the life of the church: "a sacrament is primarily and fundamentally a personal act of Christ himself" (*Christ the Sacrament*, 54). Behind this lies a strong Christological emphasis on the *presence* of Christ: Jesus Christ is not dead but alive, and salvation in him is not a message from the past but a contemporary experience. And it is this contemporary experience of salvation in Jesus which forms an underlying theme of the first two

volumes of his Christology, *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology* (ET London 1979) and *Christ. The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (ET London 1980). Both books are highly diffuse, and out of the great range of issues which they treat we focus on that of present-day experience of salvation.

For Schillebeeckx an answer to the question "Who is Jesus?" cannot be simply an historical answer. Rather, it has to be an answer which takes account of the *effects* of Jesus, that is to say, of the way in which individuals and communities have experienced salvation in him. Jesus cannot be understood apart from the benefits which he has bestowed and which he continues to bestow. Thus "we cannot in isolation ask 'Who was Jesus of Nazareth?'" (*Jesus*, 45); to understand who Jesus is we need also to inquire into our own experience, precisely because that experience is our means of access to the reality of Christ.

To claim this is not to reduce Christology to mere subjectivity, to underplay the objective, historical component. There always exists the need to stress "the continuing 'Opposite Presence' of Jesus of Nazareth as norm and criterion, *vis-à-vis* the churches and all who consider that salvation is to be found in Jesus" (*Jesus*, 77). But the field of reference of Christology is wider than that of Jesus' past: it also includes our present interaction with him. And so "the life of Christians in the world in which they live is a fifth gospel; it also belongs at the heart of Christology" (*Christ*, 18). Above all this is because Jesus Christ is present, his story as it were unfinished as his salvation extends into the world. Thus we do not need to choose between faithfulness to the past and openness to the present, or between an objective Christology and a subjective account of human experience, precisely because of who Jesus Christ is: the living one in whom salvation is to be found.

Much of the stability of evangelicalism, both theologically and institutionally, rests in its resistance to faddishness. But the price of that stability may sometimes be a disturbed relation to the present, expressed by censure, hostility or withdrawal.

In recent years Schillebeeckx has come increasingly to emphasise the political dimensions of that experience of salvation. This is partly because he has grown increasingly uneasy about certain styles of institutional life in Christianity, but above all because "revelation takes place in human experiences in this world" (*Christ*, 62). And as that is true, a doctrine of salvation which did not address itself to contemporary political experience would remain simply abstract, and because of that, fail to be a doctrine of *salvation*: "revelation is an *action of God* as experienced by believers and *interpreted* in religious language and therefore expressed in human terms, in the dimension of our utterly human history" (*Christ*, 78).

God is "always absolutely new"

In an interview Schillebeeckx once said that God is "always absolutely new. He is never exhausted, certainly never in the kingdom which he establishes among us. There is always openness. We have to leave God his freedom in

being new with regard to us. . . I prefer to see God not as an unchangeable and unchanging God, but rather as eternal youth. . . God is new each day. He is a constant source of new possibilities. . . He is always surprising us" (*God is New Each Moment* (ET Edinburgh 1983) 29).

Perhaps the most interesting question which Schillebeeckx's theology poses to its readers is that of the relationship of the Christian faith to the present, and especially of the tradition of doctrinal reflection to the contemporary intellectual world. Is Christian belief, in its doctrinal and institutional expressions, able to envisage the present as a possibility or as a threat? For evangelical Christians, that question is a particularly acute one, since like most strands of Protestantism, evangelicalism is often weighted towards the past. Partly this comes from its understanding of revelation as a finished process; partly from its doctrine of the finished work of Christ; partly from its high evaluation of the apostolic era (and sometimes of other eras in the history of the church) as an era of normative discipleship by which to correct the present.

Much of the stability of evangelicalism, both theologically and institutionally, rests in its resistance to faddishness but the price of that stability may sometimes be a disturbed relation to the present, expressed by censure, hostility or withdrawal. And behind those phenomena may lie not simply a defective trust in God but also a defective Christology: a failure to grasp the implications of the fact that Jesus' career is not over and his dealings with the world not at an end. To be eager and expectant for the new may not simply be to crave for novelty. It may be to be alert both to the presence of Christ and to his transcendence as the free one to whom no limits are set.

To say that is not, of course, to absolve the theologian from his role as a guardian of the apostolic tradition, nor to allow any new interpretation which happens to chime in with aspects of contemporary experience. Evangelicals in particular will want to interrogate Schillebeeckx's work to discover how he guards himself from the danger of allowing too active and creative a role to the present and insufficient attention to the claims of the given deposit of truth. But in so doing, they should not allow themselves to forget that creativity no less than faithfulness are enjoined upon us, as part of our response to the (literally) infinite mystery of Christ.

For further reading:

Earlier works on "church" themes include *Christ the Sacrament* and *The Eucharist*, as well as *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (ET London 1964) and *Marriage, Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (ET London 1965). His theological essays from the 1950's and 1960-s are collected in *Revelation and Theology* (ET London 1967); *The Concept of Truth and Theological Renewal* (ET London 1968); *God and Man; God the Future of Man* (ET London 1989); *World and Church*, and *The Mission of the Church* (ET London 1973). He has a collection on hermeneutics entitled *The Understanding of Faith*.

On the two volumes *Jesus* and *Christ* there is an *Interim Report* (ET London 1980). Recent work includes *Ministry* (ET London 1981), a series of interviews *God is New Each Moment*, and a collection of sermons and addresses *God Among Us*.

From the secondary literature, J. Bowden's *Edward Schillebeeckx* (London 1983) is brief and laudatory. P. Hebblethwaite, *The New Inquisition?* (London 1980) examines his disputes with the Catholic hierarchy; and M. Schoof, *Breakthrough* (ET Dublin 1970) relates some of the background in Dutch Catholicism.