

*Schillebeeckx:
Revelation and experience*

by

Nicholas A. Jesson

University of St. Michael's College, Toronto

Toronto School of Theology

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“This is the age of reason. We don’t believe in God anymore. That’s primitive. We are modern.” These words, or others like them, are repeated daily on the streets of our cities, if the subject of religion ever arises. Since the 1960’s, sociologists have described the decline of religion in North America in ever-increasing despair or delight, depending on their inclinations. Theologians, clergy and others concerned with the religious practices of our society have struggled with new means of expressing the Gospel and holding on to the dwindling population in our pews. News of a minimal resurgence of religion in Canada reported by Reginald Bibby, a respected Canadian observer of religious trends, has been greeted with delight and relief in church circles. However, the problems that led to the decline remain with us. These are not new problems. They have been with us since the enlightenment. Although couched as a conflict between faith and reason, the ultimate problem is one of epistemology. How do we know? If we only know by the data of our senses, then how can we speak of God? In theological terms, the problem is one of revelation. How can we know that God speaks to us? And, what is God saying?

In the mid-1960’s, Edward Schillebeeckx (b. 1914), a Flemish Catholic theologian, confronted the problem of “secularisation” in a series of articles and reported that the experience changed him.¹ Even in the Netherlands where he lives, he had not encountered the problem in quite the way that it confronted him on a tour of North America in 1967. Without putting too fine a point on it, it could be said that this experience was a turning point in Schillebeeckx’ own theological reflection on the relation of humanity and the world. Where others have faced this challenge and offered a conservative response, Schillebeeckx produced a creative new christological trilogy.² In these three books, he offers an extended theological exploration guided by a new epistemology of experience.

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, “Epilogue: The new image of God, secularization and man’s future on earth”, in *God the future of man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 169-207. Inclusive language conventions common in our day are not observed in Schillebeeckx’ earlier works. Attempts in this essay to adjust quotations have been abandoned due to awkward results.

² *Jesus: An experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, [1979], 1981); *Christ: The experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1980); *Church: The human story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990). In this essay, the first two of these books are referred to as *Jesus* and *Christ* respectively.

Schillebeeckx published the collected papers from his 1967 tour in a book entitled *God the future of man*. In that collection, he appended an epilogue that describes his need to respond in a new and creative way to the problem of secularisation that he had faced both in North America and later in an afternoon with French university chaplains. In many details, the epilogue is dependent upon other theologians and philosophers of the 1960's. His response to secularisation is therefore not unique. One can see him at a fork in the road. One path would lead to political and existential theology as Moltmann and Metz before him. The other path would lead to a more focussed hermeneutical and phenomenological theology. The route taken by the "Death of God" theologians was not an option for Schillebeeckx. In fact, Schillebeeckx blazed his own path. He combines elements of the political and existential theologies only just perceptible in the 1960's with a hermeneutical theology sharpened by Critical Theory. The epilogue to *God the future of man* provides an early summary of these features of his thought. In this essay, I will explore these features and then show how he applies them in his *Jesus* and *Christ* books.

I. Response to secularisation

The extent of secularisation that Schillebeeckx observes in the 1960's is not completely clear in his writing. He reports that "Death of God" theology confronted him in ways that he had not expected. What is clear, however, is the danger of secularisation, not as declining church attendance and the concurrent decline in influence, but rather, the development of an ideology that sees religion as private, pre-scientific, and merely another aspect of culture. Schillebeeckx offers an alternative. He speaks of a "new concept of God" emerging from the ashes of Christendom. This new concept is eschatological, practical and critical.

a) Eschatological hope with a practical focus

Schillebeeckx suggests that the notion of transcendence in the old concept of God involves looking to the past. Transcendence meant that God transcends history. The God of creation is the same God present in the worship and preaching in the church today. The scientific culture of the present is future oriented. We are conscious of progress. "Transcendence thus tends to acquire a

special affinity with what is called, in our temporality, future.”³ The new concept of God introduces an awareness of the historical character of the present, and sees God as transcending the present. The God of the present is the God of the future.

The God whom we formerly ... called the “wholly Other” now manifests himself as the “wholly New,” the One who is our future, who creates the future of mankind anew. He shows himself as the God who gives us in Jesus Christ the possibility of making the future — that is of making everything new and transcending our sinful past and that of all men.⁴

God as the creator can no longer be understood as having completed the task aeons ago. Creation is a continuing involvement of God in humanity. Far from the old notion that God sustains creation, God is seen as continually re-creating the present and creating the future. God transcends history, and beckons us from the future to become the humanity that we are meant to be.

The God of the promise again gives us the task of setting out towards the promised land, a land that we ourselves, trusting in the promise, must reclaim and cultivate, as Israel did in the past.⁵

Schillebeeckx insists that “the believer not only interprets history — he above all changes it”⁶ By this, he means that humanity is responsible for the history that we create. However, we should not think that the promised future can be realised by human achievement.⁷ In Schillebeeckx’ understanding, the future is the kingdom of God, an eschatological hope. Humans cannot create the future any more than we can redeem ourselves. At the same time, we cannot be quiescent.

Because God has promised us a future of salvation in grace despite our sinful history, it is easy for us to believe that this future in grace falls vertically into the terrestrial event, which would otherwise simply continue to take place as history without salvation.⁸

There is a practical element to eschatological hope. The believing Christian acts in the world to bring about the future that Jesus proclaims. The future is created by God working in and through us. “Human freedom is the pivot of the historical event — via human freedom, grace is thus able to change history itself.”⁹ The future that Jesus proclaims is salvation. Human striving alone is

³ “Epilogue”, 181

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 182

⁶ Ibid., 186

⁷ Ibid., 192

⁸ Ibid., 185

⁹ Ibid., 186

insufficient, and leads to perdition. By God's justification, the Christian "is responsible for the terrestrial event itself becoming a history of salvation."¹⁰

That is the paradox of Christianity — we tread in the footsteps of the God who is to come to us from the future and, in so doing, it is still we who make history.¹¹

As the church acts in the world to promote justice and peace, the Christian will continue to interpret and re-articulate the new concept of God. God will be seen to be "the wholly New One" in each time and place through the Christian community's commitment to reconcile the world to God.¹² The extent to which the "new concept of God" in each time and place is a true articulation of the person and message of Jesus "will have to come indirectly to light in the activity of Christians themselves."¹³ Schillebeeckx suggests that Christian life is itself a hermeneutic and exegetical enterprise. The practice of Christian life will itself be an interpretation and re-articulation of Scripture and tradition. In the context of an eschatological concern, orthodox hermeneutics leads to orthopraxis. "It is only in the sphere of action — of doing in the faith — that orthodox interpretation can be inwardly fulfilled... Interpretation becomes 'hermeneutics of praxis.'¹⁴

Speaking of the role of tradition and human concerns for the future in the interpretation of Scripture, Schillebeeckx states:

It is only within our own sphere of questioning, derived from our living relationship with the same reality which is directly or indirectly expressed in the Bible (that is, human existence, together with man's understanding of himself that is given in this existence...) that Scripture can provide an answer that is intelligible to us, because it is only in this way that Scripture does answer our real problems.¹⁵

This sentence is typical of Schillebeeckx, long with parenthetical comments that are loaded with meaning. We have a living relationship with the reality expressed in the Bible.¹⁶ Our sphere of questioning is human existence and reflection upon human existence. The Bible is part of the human struggle to find meaning in the world, a world of sin and suffering, a world of disorder. Schillebeeckx

¹⁰ Ibid., 185

¹¹ Ibid., 190

¹² Ibid., 183

¹³ Ibid., 184

¹⁴ "Towards a Catholic use of hermeneutics", Ch. 1 in *God the future of Man*, 36-37

¹⁵ Ibid., 9

¹⁶ "Epilogue", 188

wrote these words in response to the “Death of God” theology that he encountered during his 1967 North American tour. Against the backdrop of these existentialist concerns, Schillebeeckx offers an alternative. Scripture is not merely the voice of God in human words, but rather, it is the human voice pondering the human condition. God is found in these words because God is present in our reflections. The scriptural text speaks authoritatively because it speaks to a universal condition. Schillebeeckx’ existential concern does not sink into nihilism. Instead, it turns to eschatological hope. The scriptural message is not one of despair, but of communion with God. In Jesus, God takes up the human struggle, experiencing human suffering and death. In Jesus, humanity is promised communion with God here and now.¹⁷

As pilgrims on the way, we live historically in the absolute, orientated towards the absolute, because this absolute embraces us in grace, without our being able to embrace it.¹⁸

In response to the critique of religion by modern culture, “all that we Christians can say, in the light of our faith in God as our future, is that faith is not based on what is empirically and objectively verifiable, but comes under the category of human existential possibility.”¹⁹

b) Critical stance

What we speak of as “history” is in fact much more complex than a collection of stories of past events. The data of history derives from the experience of a particular person or community. This experience consists of either our own collected observations, actions and emotions, or the collected data of another person or group of people. The history studied in school is — for the most part — the latter, while autobiography and personal reminiscences are what we call the former. In either case, they are overlaid with a heavy layer of interpretation and evaluation. History, then, consists both of pre-reflective experience and of the hermeneutic apparatus that each narrator attaches to it.

Schillebeeckx cautions however that we can have no direct access to this pre-reflective experience.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Towards a Catholic use of hermeneutics”, 40

¹⁹ “Epilogue”, 182

The modern mind tends to think of history in objective and positivist senses. By positivist, we mean that what history describes actually occurred in the manner described. By objective, we mean that the historical assertions — and the meaning attached to them — are free of bias and have the character of “truth.” The modern mind is also aware of challenges to this understanding of history, particularly that there can be no truly objective stance from which interpretation might be offered. Challenges brought by feminist interpreters, in particular, have critiqued all past attempts at objectivity as being influenced by a failure to consider the perspective of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. Arguing that no interpreter can truly dismiss his or her experience, these critics propose that a hermeneutic of suspicion be adopted that pays attention to the context of the observer.

A similar suspicion should be applied to dogma, according to Schillebeeckx. Although in his early work, he began from dogma and moved to its historical articulation, he was careful to distinguish dogma from revelation itself. Adopting a critical stance towards the articulation of dogma ensures that the Christian mystery shines through the accretions of tradition. His *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God* is a wonderful example of this method. Even though Schillebeeckx has developed a new methodology, this book remains an important contribution. Many of the critics of his later work praise this early work as one of the most important theological works of the twentieth century.²⁰

In his essay entitled “Towards a Catholic use of hermeneutics,” Schillebeeckx was concerned with how a twentieth century Christian is to understand the development of doctrine. He challenges the notion of a static deposit of faith, and insists that the articulation of doctrine is always historically conditioned. Rejecting the distinction between “the essence of faith” and the “way it is expressed,” he insists that the historical articulation of doctrine provided insight into the mystery of God.²¹ Stripping away the historical expressions of doctrine, as proposed by Bultmann’s demythologising project, is a step too far. Schillebeeckx agrees that careful investigation into the historical character of any

²⁰ Cf. Leo Scheffczyk, “Christology in the context of experience: On the interpretation of Christ by E. Schillebeeckx”, *The Thomist* 48 (July 1984); Jean Galot, “Schillebeeckx: What’s he really saying about Jesus’ ministry?”, *The Catholic Register* (October 1983).

²¹ “Towards a Catholic use of hermeneutics”, 10 ff.

particular theological articulation is a primary concern. This provides a greater insight into the meaning of the doctrine for each community of each time and place. Only when this historical expression of doctrine is retrieved are the dogmatic affirmations of the creeds, liturgy and magisterium given meaning. This investigation assists in the task of expressing the truths of faith in this time and place.

Ultimately it is only in and through this historical realization that dogma is interpreted authentically and that the identity of the faith is, thanks to God's promise, guaranteed in continuing history. The object of faith is God, who in Christ is man's future.²²

Dogma only becomes meaningful in the present when it is historically relevant and when it is open to the future. "Dogma thus becomes the proclamation of the historical realization of God's promise, which of its very nature implies an openness to the future and to new historical realizations."²³

It is a question of being orientated towards the grace of the future, remembering God's promise and being active in faith and, in so doing, making dogma true.²⁴

It is evident that Schillebeeckx makes a strong presumption in favour of a notion of "progress" in history. Eschatological hope focuses on the future, but a complementary critique of progress is essential. To be oriented to the future means to be critical of the present.²⁵

The believer, who knows of the eschatological fulfillment promised to mankind and to man's history, will be unable to recognize in anything that has already been accomplished "a new heaven and a new earth."²⁶

Schillebeeckx adopts a concept of "critical negativity" from T. W. Adorno and Paul Ricoeur. As we have seen, for Schillebeeckx, situations of human misery and suffering do not lead to despair but to hope. From out of the experience of suffering, the Christian knows in faith that God has promised as gratuitous grace a future that is worthy of humanity. Schillebeeckx suggests that these negative contrast-experiences lead to human protest against injustice.

²² Ibid., 38

²³ Ibid., 35-36. Schillebeeckx here cites Walter Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes* (Mainz, 1965).

²⁴ Ibid., 38

²⁵ "Epilogue", 194

²⁶ Ibid., 186. Cf. 194

In the long run, situations which are unworthy of man give rise to explicit protest... in the name of human values still being sought, and revealed in a negative manner in the contrast-experience of situations unworthy of man.²⁷

Schillebeeckx is careful not to fall into the ideological trap of blessing any particular political response to injustice. He criticises both left- and right-wing political responses as ideology. He nevertheless seems to have a harsher critique of conservative tendencies that “give an absolute value to the ‘established order’ and rationalize it as a pattern of temporal society that has been sanctioned by the ‘eternal’ God.”²⁸ The critique of left-wing responses is more lenient. He rejects as ideology any attempt to define that which is worthy of humanity. We can only identify through a “critical negativity” that which is unworthy.²⁹ We cannot describe justice, but our eschatological faith provides the critical function that allows humanity to recognise injustice.

II. Christological trilogy

As we have seen, Schillebeeckx’ concern for secularisation led him to focus his theological method in an eschatological, practical and critical manner. In his later work through the 1970’s, these foci were accentuated in the *Jesus* and *Christ* books. In these two books, he received such strong criticism that he interjected an additional book entitled *Interim report on the books Jesus and Christ* before returning to his project with the final work *Church: the human story of God*. The *Interim report* provides a helpful assessment of the development of his method since *God the future of man*.

As before, Schillebeeckx remains concerned with the secular modern world. He is particularly concerned with the challenge of handing on the Gospel to succeeding generations.

“In a modern world people will no longer accept Christian belief simply on the authority of others; it will have to happen in and through an experience-with-experiences, which is interpreted in the light of what the church proclaims on the basis of a long history of Christian experience.”³⁰

It is here that we see the most dramatic development in his theological method. In these later works, Schillebeeckx gives a primacy to human experience. It is, he says, only through reflection upon

²⁷ Ibid., 191

²⁸ Ibid., 192

²⁹ Ibid., 199

³⁰ *Interim report on the books Jesus and Christ*. (New York: Seabury Press; London: SCM Press, 1980), 6

experience that the believing Christian can speak coherently about the content of faith.³¹ When Schillebeeckx speaks of experience, he has in mind both the past experiences of the Christian community, and the particular experiences of each believing Christian that provide the contemporary context in which faith in Jesus is lived. Experience encompasses both the present and the past. Both of these meanings are intended by Schillebeeckx when he refers to three hinges on which the two Jesus books turn. The third hinge is “connected with the critical correlation between the two sources of theology ... on the one hand, the tradition of Christian experience and on the other present day experiences.”³²

In his earlier work, Schillebeeckx insists that Christ is the primordial sacrament of the encounter with God.³³ He understands religious experience to be one of encounter with the divine. Christ is at the centre of all religious experience, as witnessed to in the christological dogmas. In his later works, Schillebeeckx chooses not to start with the Christ of dogma, contending that this is not the way to reach the contemporary world. Instead, he begins with experience of the historical Jesus. However, he cautions that experience of Jesus is not directly accessible to the contemporary inquirer. At a distance of two millennia, we can only experience Jesus through the experience of the disciples, as mediated through the scriptural authors and the first century Christian community.

Jesus of Nazareth was an historical person. Convincing evidence of his existence is found in non-Christian writings contemporaneous with the New Testament, and challenges to this conclusion remain suspect even in archaeological circles. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the risen Christ and the historical Jesus. The scriptural story of the historical Jesus ends with the empty tomb. His historical presence in human experience ended with his death and burial. The resurrection experiences witnessed to in the New Testament, and the interpretations that are given to them by the Christian community, are experiences of the risen Lord, the Christ. They are in a certain sense experiences of the one and same Jesus Christ. The person and work of the historical Jesus cannot be

³¹ *Ibid.*, vii

³² *Ibid.*, 50

³³ *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God*. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

wholly separated from the person and work of the risen Christ. However, in human experience they are of radically different natures. Thus, Schillebeeckx considers them separately in his two books: *Jesus* and *Christ*.

a) *The Jesus event*

In the opening chapter of *Jesus*, Schillebeeckx raises the problem of the diverse scriptural images of Jesus that we have inherited. In addition to the very different Jesus of each of the gospels and Paul, scholars also point to Christologies from Jerusalem and the Q community, as well as pre-Pauline, pre-Markan and pre-Johannine Christologies. In each of these the kerygmatic purpose indicates a distinctive hermeneutic of Jesus. "Jesus is to be found there only as the subject of confession on the part of Christians."³⁴ Thus, for Schillebeeckx, the question arises as to whether there is a constant unitive factor within this variegated whole. He identifies a number of attempted solutions, none of which is satisfactory for him. These include attempts to identify a "gospel within the gospel" as well as the related tendency to consider the diversity of Christologies as collectively normative. As well, Schillebeeckx rejects attempts to identify a primitive kerygma as normative or the similar proposal to treat the sayings of Jesus as a sufficient norm. Jesus' self-awareness does not provide a satisfactory criterion due to the obvious difficulty in accessing his inner life and character, except through the intermediary of the disciples and their experiences that are themselves filtered through the lens of the gospel writers. Finally, the last solution that Schillebeeckx rejects is that of using credal statements from the scriptural text itself. Any such attempt merely privileges one scriptural Christology over another.

Schillebeeckx' solution is to identify the only constant unitive factor as the Christian movement itself. "In other words a Christian oneness of experience which does indeed take its unity from its pointing to the one figure of Jesus, while none the less being pluriform in its verbal expression or articulation."³⁵ The person of Jesus remains an historical enigma. We know very little about him, except that which we can retrieve from the New Testament and the few other first century texts that

³⁴ *Jesus*, 53

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 56

mention him. The various quests for the historical Jesus are fraught with problems, both methodological and ideological. Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx insists that historical-critical attempts to retrieve the person of Jesus are essential for every generation. In the local community of faith, the experience of salvation leads people “to interpret Jesus’ life as the definitive or eschatological activity of God in history for the salvation or deliverance of men and women.”³⁶ The constant factor, or hermeneutic principle, is the changing life of each community of faith. It is in their experience of Jesus that the Spirit fashions them as a community of salvation.³⁷

The diversity of New Testament Christologies can be understood as a number of historical examples of communal articulation of their experience of salvation in and through faith in Jesus. In a sense, the New Testament is thus no different from the attempts of any local community of faith to articulate their experience. At the same time, as Schillebeeckx has constantly asserted:

for Christianity the foundation, norm and criterion of every future expectation is its relationship with the past, i.e. with Jesus of Nazareth and what has taken place in him.³⁸

The person and life of Jesus are not historically retrievable. He is shrouded in the depths of history, and discernible only behind the kerygma of the risen Christ. In addition to deriving from the earliest Christian communities, the New Testament remains the only historical artifact of Jesus’ life and ministry. It is thus normative for all other communities of faith as they attempt to articulate the meaning of salvation in Christ.

b) The experience of Jesus as Lord

In the second book in the trilogy, Schillebeeckx moves to a consideration of the experience of Christian faith in the life of the believer. Here, his understanding of experience takes on greater importance. Experience is more than a hermeneutic category; it also has epistemological significance. It is a necessary component of interpretation and knowledge: “the experience influences the interpretation and calls it forth, but at the same time the interpretation influences the experience.”³⁹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 57

³⁸ “Epilogue”, 189

³⁹ *Christ*, 32

As such, Schillebeeckx rejects the Cartesian dualism of subjectivity and objectivity.⁴⁰ There are no pure experiences. Every experience is mediated by interpretive elements derived from past experiences. Every proposition is the product of interpretation that follows from experience. Here Schillebeeckx is hardly original. His earlier discussion of the “hermeneutic circle” in *God the future of man* carefully rehearsed these same themes. His own contribution is the application of this epistemological insight to the problem of tradition.

As we have seen, in his earlier work Schillebeeckx had recognised the contextual character of the doctrines and dogmas known to us through tradition. Each had arisen in a particular context, and in response to particular challenges. In later centuries, the challenges may not necessarily persist, and yet the doctrinal formulations remain. Are these earlier formulations binding upon successive generations? The necessary relation of experience and interpretation in the formulation of doctrine both challenges us and provides an answer. Historical-critical research of the formulation of doctrine provides a great deal of insight into the meaning and intention of the doctrinal formulations that we have inherited from the past. However, we should remember that for Schillebeeckx there is a “constant unitive factor” in the various hermeneutics of the Christian community. This factor is the experience of the community itself. Schillebeeckx applies this insight to the relation between experience and tradition. The essential tradition is reflected in light of the experience of the community of salvation. His earlier critique of hermeneutic solutions that distinguish between the essence and the articulation of faith⁴¹ is worth note here. His critique was that the selection criteria that distinguish the essential from the non-essential are subject to human arbitrariness and sin. In his own proposal, he is using the “experience of the community of faith” as a constant unitive factor that distinguishes the essential tradition from its articulation.

In order for experience to be a sufficient criterion to avoid the critique that Schillebeeckx levelled at other theologians, he proposes that the common element of all human experience is language.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Cf. “Towards a Catholic use of hermeneutics”, 10 ff.

“Language is the deposit of a common experience.”⁴² Language only has meaning because of a common experience. More than mere vocabulary, which is different in varying cultures, the very content of language expresses a common experience. This is the language of human struggle, suffering, quest for meaning and search for God. Language thus contains within it a transcendent quality. “Revelation is experience expressed in the word; it is God’s saving action as experienced and communicated by men.”⁴³ The transcendent quality of revelation derives from the common experience of salvation that is communicated in the word. “The transcendent lies in human experience and its expression in the language of faith, but as an inner reference to what this experience and this language of faith have called to life.”⁴⁴ To move from experience to revelation seems a big leap, but it is important to keep in mind how Schillebeeckx understands revelation. Revelation is not propositional. It is, as might be expected, the contemporary and contextual expression of the collective experience of salvation in Christ.

On the one hand the religious message is an expression of this collective experience, and on the other its proclamation is the presupposition for the possibility of its being experienced by others.⁴⁵

Revelation is therefore not a series of propositions that must be believed “but an experience of faith, which is presented as a message.”⁴⁶

c) The primacy of experience

In the *Interim report*, Schillebeeckx vigorously defends the epistemological primacy of experience. As mentioned above, he understands there to be a critical correlation between the “tradition of Christian experience” and “present-day experiences.” Related to one another in a mutually critical fashion, these two are what Schillebeeckx understands as encompassed by the term “experience.” In this correlation, “we attune our belief and action within the world in which we live, here and now, to

⁴² *Christ*, 46

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 62

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

what is expressed in the biblical tradition.”⁴⁷ The Bible remains the norm by which all experience is assessed.

There are, Schillebeeckx proposes, constant structures to the experience of salvation in Christ. “This basic experience, interpreted in a variety of ways but nevertheless the same, then shows up the points of juncture, elements which have structured the one New Testament experience.”⁴⁸ These elements are expressed through four structural principles. The first, which Schillebeeckx labels “theological and anthropological,” is that God wills salvation for human beings, and has willed it through our history. As humanity searches for meaning in the midst of meaninglessness, salvation coincides with human self-realisation. As we come to understand ourselves and our nature better, we will discover God who acts in our history. “To find salvation in God is at the same time to come to terms with oneself.”⁴⁹ The second structural principle, labelled “Christological mediation,” provides dogmatic Christian particularity. Jesus of Nazareth discloses perfectly and definitively the starting point of God, and thus must be the starting point for humanity’s search for meaning. The third structural principle relates to the message and lifestyle of the church. The story has been handed down so that we ourselves can follow Jesus and “thus write our own chapter in the ongoing history of Jesus.” Schillebeeckx’ fourth and final structural principle is labelled “eschatological fulfilment.” By this, he means, that the “ongoing history of Jesus” cannot come to an end in our history, and thus looks for an eschatological dénouement. Belief involves an implicit “already now” and “not yet.”⁵⁰

It is important to draw a connection here between what Schillebeeckx is calling “constant structures” of the experience of salvation and the “constant unitive factor” that he spoke of in the *Jesus* book. The constant unitive factor discussed earlier is the experience of the Christian community itself. These four principles are the content of the experience of the Christian movement. They describe the constant experience of the Christian community.

⁴⁷ *Interim report*, 50-51

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 51

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 52

III. Conclusion

Schillebeeckx' concern for secular society and the transmission of the Christian message to future generations led him to modify his theological method. Rather than approaching the Christian mysteries from a dogmatic perspective, he chose to begin from the perspective of a faithful, but perhaps still questioning, believer. From this perspective, the dogmatic assertions of tradition are not immediately persuasive. The experiences of individual believers, and of the faith communities to which they adhere, provide authority to their reflections upon — and articulations of — the Christian message. The Scriptures remain the norm for the interpretation and articulation of the Christian message in each new place and time. This articulation differs as it is expressed in a new context. It ensures its continuity with the faith of the apostles through its attention to the constant experiences of the Christian community. These are expressed in Scriptures and in the tradition of the Christian community. It is in the critical correlation of these two factors that authentic interpretations are to be found.

In response to secularisation, Schillebeeckx proposed that there is a new concept of God that must be articulated. This new concept has eschatological, practical and critical foci. His epistemology of experience remains consistent with the new concept of God that he described. For Schillebeeckx, experience provides the unitive factor that allows tradition to speak to the present. In this dialogue, the Christian community formulates a response to the questions of meaning posed by life itself. However, the response of the community, expressed in faith in Jesus Christ, the One who saves, looks to the future in hope. It proclaims the coming of the kingdom in terms that speak to the people in that time and place.

Schillebeeckx' discussion of experience offers new opportunities for preaching in the Christian community and addressing the wider world. Preaching as an active reflection upon the experience of the community placed in critical relation to Scripture can become the voice of revelation. Reflection upon the experience of the modern — or even post-modern — secular world can be the occasion for proclaiming the Christian message to the world. This is, as Schillebeeckx insists, the task of every generation.

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