

Continuity underlying Discontinuity : Schillebeeckx's Philosophical Background

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By way of introduction

It is occasionally said of Edward Schillebeeckx that he is a difficult theologian to understand because in the last analysis he does not have a theology! Instead, he is thought to have produced two, three, or more, quite distinct theologies, whose characteristics depend on the kinds of philosophical equipment he has marshalled in order to give conceptual embodiment to his theological convictions.

Over the past five decades, Schillebeeckx has published about four hundred and seventy theological studies. A perusal of these divulges that at different stages his writings have freely borrowed philosophical ideas from such diverse contexts as phenomenology, existentialism, Anglo-American-Scandinavian analytical philosophy, structural linguistics, semiotics, neo-Marxist critical theories of society, and twentieth-century revivals of Thomism—a list by no means exhaustive.

A survey of his publications further uncovers that for a period of about nine years, from 1963 to 1974, he did not write a single book.¹ These years, particularly from 1966 onwards, were devoted to a determined study of hermeneutics and biblical exegesis as a preparation for interpreting Christian faith *in a new way*. In 1974, at the end of this incubatory period, he published *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*², the monograph in which he effectively gave notice that he had radically changed his theological method. From the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, he had employed a method which took classical theological theories and texts as its point of departure. With the book *Jesus*, however, references to patristic, medieval, and papal documents have to a large extent been put aside in favour of an avowedly hermeneutical method, which is dependent on a bountiful array of exegetical data and which seeks to set past and contemporary human experiences in a *mutually* critical and interpretative relationship with each other.

Towards the end of the *Jesus* book, Schillebeeckx refers to having made a *break* with his earlier philosophical heritage. Within the context of asserting that concepts of faith must in some way be grounded in human experience, he speaks of a *clear break* ('een duidelijke breuk') with the 'implicit intuition' of the totality of meaning maintained by classical

philosophy like that of De Petter, Lavelle, and certain French philosophers.³

What precisely does Schillebeeckx mean here by claiming to have made a *clear break* with classical philosophy like that of De Petter? Well might one ask: Who, on earth, is De Petter? In speaking of a rupture with De Petter, does Schillebeeckx mean that he has completely jettisoned his once-cherished philosophical convictions in favour of newborn suppositions? Or has he merely sundered his work from a particular form of philosophical terminology while retaining foundational postulates couched in the language? Is the philosophical scaffolding of his theology actually an amalgam of quite diverse schools of thought?

While my broad concern is the philosophical arguments which Schillebeeckx harnesses to buttress his theological assertion that God can be known, I am focussing specifically on an epistemological turning point in Schillebeeckx's thought. During the 1960s he exchanged a highly speculative theory of knowledge as a basis of his theology, for a more experiential approach, nourished by the notion of praxis.⁴ I am seeking to determine when such a turning point transpired; what it involved in terms of philosophical argumentation; why it occurred; and the consequences it might suggest for contemporary systematic theology.

It is my impression that the key for deciphering Schillebeeckx's intellectual background and development resides in his ongoing attempt to link two movements in human history: proto-Christianity and the European Enlightenment. He seeks to fuse what he perceives to be an emphasis on freedom in early Christianity with a stress on the powers of human reason found in a good deal of the philosophy of the Enlightenment.⁵ And yet, in aiming to link these two movements in his many writings, he has not in any way or at any time abandoned the most basic metaphysical and epistemological fundamentals which have informed his theology since the beginning of his career. His philosophical groundwork has changed its outer vocabulary while retaining its inner syntax. What is more, I would even be prepared to argue that the whole of his theology is one vast commentary on an epistemological premise which is found in a single text of Thomas Aquinas. More of this presently.

Part I: Schillebeeckx's philosophical heritage

The early Schillebeeckx: Theology under the philosophical presupposition of the primacy of theory

In a sense, any adequate explanation of Schillebeeckx's philosophical background would need to follow a number of separate tracks winding back to an assortment of diverse wellsprings in antiquity, the Middle Ages, the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, as well as more recent

developments. Like many other theologians today, he has inherited a common patrimony of modern and contemporary Westernized philosophical discourse, a patrimony which appeals to an intermixture of theories from the period between René Descartes and Emmanuel Lévinas. Somewhat surprisingly, all the same, the main path towards an understanding of Schillebeeckx's philosophical inheritance leads to a far more obscure and comparatively unshared Roman Catholic source, that is, the philosophy of Dominic De Petter.

Faith's experiential and conceptual dimensions

In the second edition of his book, *Faith and Knowledge*, John Hick described the Thomistic-Catholic view of faith as intellectualist, fideistic, and voluntaristic.⁶ Quite so. Around the turn of this century, however, there were attempts among certain Catholic thinkers to accentuate experiential as well as discursive, propositional dimensions in the concepts of Christian faith, and they sought to do so through a combination of phenomenology and a Thomistic theory of knowledge. These attempts constitute the Roman Catholic philosophical hinterland to Schillebeeckx.

When, in 1907, Pope Pius X condemned Modernism and thereby effectively gave free reign to an unashamedly conceptualistic neo-scholasticism in the Roman Catholic Church, it was only possible for Catholic theology to be revitalized from within neo-scholasticism itself.⁷ Two such attempts at renewal were to determine decisively the shape of Schillebeeckx's thought. One endeavour was set in motion by the French Jesuit, Pierre Rousselot, who, from 1910 onwards, published articles which sought to highlight an experiential aspect in the act of faith by re-emphasizing Aquinas' largely forgotten doctrine of 'the light of faith'. A second effort to advance Catholic theology beyond its nineteenth-century attachment to scholastic theology manuals was represented by the establishment in Belgium, in 1904, of a theology school for French Dominicans, the school called Le Saulchoir. From its beginnings Le Saulchoir attempted to undertake its researches by a twofold attention to historical research and contemporary experiences. The school was moved to France in 1939.

Schillebeeckx's initial formation: Louvain and De Petter

How is Schillebeeckx to be situated in all this? To begin with, it is important to note that his initial intellectual and philosophical formation was Flemish, not Dutch. He was born in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1914. After a secondary education in the Jesuit school of Turnhout, he entered the Belgian province of the Dominican Order in 1934. Following a year spent as a novice he moved to Louvain, where he began studying philosophy.

It was in Louvain that he met the single most important and enduring philosophical influence in his life—the Flemish Dominican, Dominic De Petter. When Schillebeeckx first arrived in Louvain, De Petter was Professor of Philosophy in the Dominican House of Studies. He and the

Jesuit philosopher Joseph Maréchal, who also taught in Louvain, attempted to develop the ideas of Rousselot by devising an epistemology which would account for non-conceptual factors in human cognition.

At odds with the post-Scotist scholastic view which maintained that conceptual propositions refer absolutely and without mediation to an Absolute Godhead, De Petter and Maréchal contested that concepts are not directly applicable to transcendent reality. While De Petter guided Schillebeeckx, Maréchal proved to be the stimulus behind such figures as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan.

De Petter is largely unknown outside the Dutch-speaking world because his major works have never been translated from Dutch. His thought was at base a philosophical anthropology which forged a synthesis between Thomism and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Contrary to the normal practice of the time, he encouraged the young Schillebeeckx to disregard ecclesiastical strictures which prevented Catholic theology students from studying Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Freud and Merleau-Ponty.

Implicit intuition

In 1939, De Petter began to publish an epistemological theory centred on what he called 'implicit intuition'.⁸ His theory asserted that human knowledge involves more than concepts. He explained a non-conceptual element in knowledge by claiming that intuition forms an intrinsic part of the human intellect. Intuition is here conceived as a contemplative or spiritual link between an individual subject and the reality which is external to the subject. Intuition is thought to be a direct experience of objective reality as well as a participation in the absolute meaning of reality. De Petter insisted, though, that intuition is always an *implicit* factor in knowledge: the direct link with the totality of reality's meaning given in intuition constantly stands in need of explanation in the form of concepts. For De Petter, therefore, knowledge of God is thought to be possible because of a contemplative, intuitive, non-conceptual element of knowledge which connects an individual with absolute reality.⁹

What needs to be stressed here is that De Petter's theory postulates an interplay between positive and negative poles. On the one hand, he supposes that God can be known positively because an unthematized element of knowledge—implicit intuition—points towards God. On the other hand, it is admitted that the concepts which point to God are powerless to grasp God's being directly.

In effect, De Petter used the phrase 'implicit intuition' to outline a post-Kantian theory of knowledge where knowledge is seen as a synthesis involving contributions from a knowing subject and an object known. As opposed to more classical theories of knowledge which held that the mind is merely passive ('tabula rasa') in the process of cognition, De Petter sought to account for an active role of the subject in cognition. Hence, his theory of implicit intuition is his own formulation of the central insight of

the phenomenological analysis of consciousness, namely, the principle of the intentionality of consciousness.

Nevertheless, De Petter's theory spoke of human cognition in a purely speculative way and without linking concepts to the question of human action. His theory accorded a priority to theory over action as a source for truth. In his early theology, Schillebeeckx appropriated De Petter's epistemological hypothesis and applied it directly to the question of God's accessibility to human knowledge. De Petter's stress on an inner, contemplative dimension of knowledge is immediately recognisable in the following text of Schillebeeckx:

We come into contact with the formal object of faith in a purely supernatural way, 'through the inner impulse of the grace of faith' or the light of faith. The effective contact in which we know God is in us the result of the *locutio interna* ('inner address') or of the light of faith.¹⁰

Chenu and Le Saulchoir

Having completed his studies in philosophy and theology in Louvain, Schillebeeckx moved to France in 1945 to undertake doctoral studies in theology under the supervision of Marie-Dominique Chenu, who was living in the community of Le Saulchoir and giving 'unofficial' courses to selected students. Chenu encouraged his students to regard theology as an enterprise coloured by historical circumstances, and theological concepts as the corrigible and incomplete products of regionalized histories. He also infused his students with an enthusiasm for the secular. For Chenu, there is no opposition between God and the world: the world is *meant* to be secular; the world is *meant* to enjoy its independence and freedom because the world is not God! Le Saulchoir, then, together with the Jesuit faculty at Lyon (Fouvière) actively encouraged the use of historical-critical methods in theology. The Dominicans championed a return to medieval sources, while the Jesuits focused on patristics. Apart from studying medieval sources, Schillebeeckx attended lectures on existential phenomenology in various institutions in Paris.

Just as De Petter was Schillebeeckx's principal *philosophical* mentor in that it was De Petter who encouraged his pupil to relativize theology viewed as a system of concepts, Chenu was the most important *theological* director. Their combined influence needs to be stressed for an event in their lives was to mark permanently the young Schillebeeckx. In the same year—1941, the year of Schillebeeckx's ordination to the presbyterate—both De Petter and Chenu were dismissed from their teaching positions at the request of the Vatican. The reason? The two sought to lead Catholic theology away from any kind of excessive attachment to a naively mimetic view of theological language. They also emphasized contemporary experiences as a source for theology. Much of Schillebeeckx's work has been devoted to continuing their project. From De Petter, above all, he learned that every concept of God is in fact

godless, that is, every concept falls short of adequately explaining who or what God is. From Chenu he learned that doctrines and dogmas are the fruits of *human* creativity and reflection.

Teaching in Louvain: 1947—1957

From 1947 to 1957 Schillebeeckx taught dogmatic theology in Louvain. During these years he published his doctorate—a treatise on sacramental theory—as well as books and articles on mariology, the eucharist, marriage, ecclesiology, and fundamental theology. He also taught a cycle of dogmatic theology based on the subjects of creation, introduction to theology, christology, and eschatology.

Nijmegen

In 1957, he was appointed Professor of Dogmatic Theology and the History of Theology in the Catholic University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, a post he held until his retirement from university teaching in 1983. He continues to live and work in Nijmegen.

His philosophical development at Nijmegen led him to recast his theology under the rubric of a quite different philosophical presupposition which accorded priority to action over speculative thought, and attention to human language over analysis of consciousness and perception. Although God was still said to be accessible in human experience, the experience intended was no longer one of introspective, contemplative faith, explained in a speculative way, but an experience of suffering.

In 1968, Schillebeeckx publicly declared that he had come to the conclusion that De Petter's ideas tended too much in the direction of idealism: like the whole of Greek and Thomistic metaphysics, De Petter's philosophy was now thought to rest on an ideological option which accorded an arbitrary primacy to the speculative and in so doing was devoid of any roots in practical life.¹¹ Schillebeeckx even spoke at this time of having the impression that past theology was mummified in ideology!¹²

He set out to give his theology and its epistemological undergirdings a more existential basis while at the same time retaining elements of what De Petter called a 'non-essentialist metaphysics'¹³, that is, a metaphysics which is not centred on concepts. From around 1966 until the present day, Schillebeeckx's work has been built on an acceptance of a *primacy of praxis* in relation to theory.¹⁴ He now contends that the question of God is not solely or even primarily a speculative issue, but one which needs to be approached in the first place from within a context of human action. For Schillebeeckx, orthodox faith in God is now seen as having its source in *orthopraxis*. By *orthopraxis* he means 'right action': an action which conforms to the standard of the biblical image of 'the kingdom of God'.¹⁵ Hence, an action is right ('orthopractical') if it seeks to advance 'the kingdom of God' by promoting justice. The epistemic priority which Schillebeeckx invests in *praxis* is clearly stated in the following words from one of his recent publications:

The most obvious, modern way to God is that of welcoming fellow human beings, both interpersonally and by changing structures which enslave them. Moreover, that is not a purely theoretical or speculative approach to God (ontological foundations or decisionistic proclamations of free subjectivity), but a meta-ethical, viz. religious or theologal, interpretation of a micro- and macro-ethical human possibility. It is no metaphysics or free subjectivity, but believing reflection on the praxis of justice and love. ...God is accessible above all in the praxis of justice.¹⁶

The key phrase, 'primacy of praxis', requires explanation, since it can be highly ambiguous. For Schillebeeckx, it does not mean that practical activity finds its own self-justification without reference to theory and speculation. What he does intend is that action and theory form an indissociable unity: praxis needs to be guided by theory, which, in turn, is fed by a particular praxis. Therefore, to speak of a primacy of praxis means that thoughts do not exist independently of an experiential context which moulds the form thinking takes; thinking can only *follow* experiences and can never proceed independently of them. Schillebeeckx's thought in this matter is highly paradoxical: on the one hand, theological reflection can only follow action as a 'second step', thus providing a criterion and control of actions which pass as Christian; on the other hand, theory is not merely limited to a post-practical function but also (consciously or implicitly) precedes praxis! Action as such can never provide the basis for a theory's value as truth.¹⁷

The problem with De Petter's epistemology is that it was too closely attached to the classical Thomistic theory of knowledge, which lacked any real acknowledgment of thought's involvement in space and time. The classical position was largely unable to account for development in knowledge except within the fixed categories of the logical interrelationships between formalized scholastic concepts.¹⁸

In accepting the primacy of praxis, Schillebeeckx is, of course, indebted to Kant's turn to the priority of an individualistic ethical praxis. However, Schillebeeckx owes even more to the social critical theory of the so-called Frankfurt School and especially to Jürgen Habermas¹⁹, whose work, in part, represents an attempt to re-address the timeworn problem of the theory-praxis relationship by paying attention not only to private ethical praxis (as did Kant) but to social praxis as well.

Part II: Reasons for Schillebeeckx's epistemological change

What ultimately caused Schillebeeckx to adopt a praxis terminology in his theology? In brief, he underwent a philosophical transformation in the
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mid-1960s because of personal, sociological, ecclesiastical, political, and spiritual factors. A few examples will illustrate the point.

1. Courses in hermeneutics: From implicit intuition to negative contrast experiences.

From 1966 to his retirement, Schillebeeckx taught hermeneutics at Nijmegen. His first lectures focused on the 'hermeneutics of the humanities', attending to such philosophers as Ricoeur and Gadamer. He eventually came to the conclusion that the hermeneutics of the humanities were too subjectivistic and idealist. In search of a more objective basis for hermeneutics, he made a study of structuralism, semiotics, Wittgenstein, historico-critical methodologies, and the universal pragmatics of Karl-Otto Apel and Habermas.

Schillebeeckx's reading of hermeneutics is the key to his philosophical evolution. He regarded hermeneutics as a tool for clarifying the meaning of Christian faith. His main hermeneutical problem was to find criteria for justifying contemporary interpretations of faith.

As a result of his hermeneutical studies he came to regard Thomistic philosophy as an ideological superstructure amongst many others. However, he concluded that structuralism and semiotics, as well as phenomenology, could not serve alone as criteria for interpreting faith because they were too reductionistic, that is, they did not refer directly to reality as such. Schillebeeckx then turned to the phenomenological ontology of Heidegger and his followers, but concluded that Heideggerian philosophy was but one view of human nature amongst several others.²⁰

Schillebeeckx found the criterion he was looking for in the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno. Having formerly named the experience of faith as the experience in which God is known, Schillebeeckx altered his position and designated instead what he calls *negative contrast experiences* or *negative dialectics*.²¹ In such experiences he sees much more widely acceptable criteria for interpreting reality than the criteria of Thomism or the 'hermeneutics of the humanities'. Not all human beings are Thomists! Neither are they all semioticians! And yet, every human being *does suffer* in some way or another. Experiences of negativity or suffering, precisely because they are said to be universally shared, are taken by Schillebeeckx to serve as a universal basis for speaking about reality and God. Schillebeeckx's epistemological turning point, therefore, is a shift from the language of implicit intuition to negative contrast experiences, as a *foundation for theology*.

Within his thought, a negative contrast experience is used to explain the difference between *what is* and *what ought to be*.²² In experiences of suffering, Schillebeeckx maintains that human beings are still capable of seeing and hoping for situations and realities beyond their sufferings. He concludes that such a trust has its basis in God. Schillebeeckx recognizes a special epistemological significance for negative contrast experiences because he believes that they form a bond between a purely contemplative

knowledge and an instrumental knowledge of science or technology. In his own words:

... experiences of suffering come upon a man in the form of a negative experience, quite different from the positive enjoyment of contemplative, playful, and aesthetic experiences. On the other hand, under the aspect of the experience of *contrast* or critical negativity, the experience of suffering forms a bridge towards possible action which might remove both suffering and its causes.²³

2. North American lectures

At the same time as he began to teach hermeneutics, Schillebeeckx also made his first lecture tour in North America, where he directly encountered American philosophical pragmatism and theologians of the so-called 'death of God' movement. Because of these meetings he became more convinced than ever that traditional dogmatic formulations of faith were appearing to many people as unintelligible gibberish. A sense of urgency overtook his work after 1966 as he searched for verification-criteria to put in the service of a reformulation of faith in terms of contemporary experiences.

His writings at this time stressed again and again that a new view of human nature, and hence of God, prevailed in the modern world. The new view of human nature revolved around secularization, which for Schillebeeckx is the emergence of a rational sphere of understanding: because of a new-found confidence in rationality, he maintains that for the first time in history people have the possibility of using reason, science, and technology to determine the future of the world. Moreover, people today are said to be directed towards the future and not the past in their thoughts and hopes; their thought stands under the *primacy of the future*. For Schillebeeckx, then, this new view of human beings has evoked a new view of God. Whereas previously God's transcendence was tied to the past, now God can be described as the God of the future—the One who is to come—who can never be fully grasped until a summation of history set in the future.²⁴

3. A new Dutch christology

A third significant impetus towards change occurred in Nijmegen, in 1966, when the Augustinian exegete and dogmatician, A. Hulsbosch, published a daring project for christology.²⁵ Hulsbosch argued that the classical Chalcedonian two-natures model was an outworn framework for the interpretation of Christ; that the whole of the salvific significance of Jesus, his unique universality, is to be located in his humanity, his being-as-man.²⁶ Catholic theology has, of course, always associated salvation with Jesus' humanity, of course, but a humanity viewed as one which saved because it was ontologically linked to the Father independently of the mediation of history.²⁷ Hulsbosch had a considerable

impression on Schillebeeckx, who, since then, has attempted to interpret Jesus with the same kind of attention to his humanity.²⁸

4. *The Lessing problem*

Several other causes could be offered to explain Schillebeeckx's philosophical transitions in the 1960s, such as his engagement in the affairs of Christian churches in the Netherlands and his study of liberation theology. Central to my thesis, however, is the claim that the principal cause and explanation of his epistemological turn from purely speculative to a practical *and* theoretical stance, stems from his personal theological and philosophical quest to find a solution to a fundamental problem posed by the Enlightenment: the problem of how a particular historical event can be said to mediate a universal significance and truth. Hence, his turn is not simply a matter of assuming a pragmatic view of faith, nor is it predominantly an appropriation of a left-Hegelian or any other specific modern philosophical system. It is much more an attempt to explain the mediation of universality by a historical particular.

At one point in his book *Jesus* he quotes Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's aphorism: 'Accidental, historical truths can never become evidence for necessary truths of reason.'²⁹ Such a position would imply for Christian faith that the historically particular figure of Jesus could not possibly be a mediation of universally valid truth. Jesus would no more be the locus of God's absolute salvation than any other human being.

As is well known, the philosophical climate of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a climate which celebrated the untrammelled power of human rationality and which was increasingly aware of the historicity of human existence, set reason above blind faith and revelation. The philosophical salvos which were aimed at established Christianity by such figures as Lessing, Diderot and Voltaire propelled theologians to search for a historically knowable and philosophically justifiable Jesus. Directly coupled with the theological quest for a historical Jesus was the more philosophical quest to explain Jesus' singularity and universal significance. Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Schelling all attempted to rehabilitate Jesus and Christianity after many others had declared Christianity an outworn movement in human history.³⁰

Schillebeeckx's most recent theology is a qualified reception of the liberating dimensions of two post-Enlightenment movements: the Quest of the Historical Jesus, and the search for the formulation of religion within the framework of modern society. Schillebeeckx, too, is in quest of a philosophically justifiable Jesus. In this sense, a christological problem has actually forced a change in Schillebeeckx's theory of knowledge, for the problem of how God can be said to be implicated in the life of Jesus, a man in history, actually distils the epistemological dilemma of Lessing and the Enlightenment with its focus on infinity manifested in historical relativities.

The complication of universalism in particularism is not only present

in the deliberations of the Enlightenment and in the christological conundrum of how to assert the uncircumscribed uniqueness of Jesus; it also presents itself at the core of fundamental theology, which must account, in a theology of revelation, for the manner in which God is revealed in human history.

In his earlier theology, Schillebeeckx would have maintained that objective truth can be channelled through human contingency by virtue of reason, since human reason was thought to participate in God's eternal reason. It is crucial to recognize that Schillebeeckx eventually shied away from such a position because he saw that his early theology merely provided an idealist response to Lessing's assertion that historical facts cannot stand as a valid foundation for the justification of truth.

In the long run, the novel aspect which Schillebeeckx introduced into his thought in the mid-1960s is a sweeping awareness that all human thought is bound by its situation in history. He abandoned a non-historical in favour of a historical theology. In seeking to avoid the idealisms of neo-scholasticism and philosophical hermeneutics, as well as the aprioristic rationalisms of Lessing,³¹ Schillebeeckx's epistemological turning point has led him in a direction away from self-hypostasizing theories and pre-established dogmas back to a study of the very cornerstone of Christian faith—the Jesus who is recoverable *in some measure* by historical critical methods.

To appreciate the significance of Schillebeeckx's recognition of the historically determined nature of all thought, it needs to be recalled that certain influential schools of Roman Catholic theology from the seventeenth century until the present day have been characterized by retrograde-movements: counter-reformation, counter-enlightenment, counter-liberation and counter-modernity³²—in other words, consistent refusal of the 'dialectic of modernity', with its emphasis on the autonomy of reason, the historical characteristic of all human thought, and the value of democracy. To speak in very general terms, one can see (especially in the field of christology) Catholic theology's reluctance to accept the Enlightenment's relativization of authority and dogma and this theology's tendency to refuse to apply modern historical and literary critical methods to the doctrine of Christ. Catholic theology in the century preceding Vatican II applied historical-critical methods to the study of tradition and church, but never to christology. Even Le Saulchoir's battle-cry of 'back to the sources' meant back to the Middle Ages, not back to the Bible.

Schillebeeckx's work is arguably the most historically and exegetically informed Roman Catholic treatment of christology to have appeared in the twentieth century. Just as his work is, belatedly, a (critical) appropriation of Kant and post-Enlightenment philosophy in general, it is also an attempt to deal with the problems which Schleiermacher dealt with in Protestant theology a hundred and fifty years ago.

The continuity underlying discontinuity

I have been emphasizing philosophical evolution and change in Schillebeeckx's work and indicating how his philosophical development has shaped the contours of his theology. In other words, I have been stressing *discontinuity* in his thought and his move to a more experientially grounded discussion of God's accessibility in knowledge. But the most surprising thing that my investigation has revealed to me is that Schillebeeckx's perceived philosophical and theological discontinuity is in fact rooted in his earliest theological formation. There is a continuity underlying discontinuity. What do I mean by this?

In the first place it needs to be noted that Schillebeeckx's theology is a soteriology. Moreover, he has always cocooned his explanation of salvation in a theology of creation. He frequently refers to a text of Aquinas³³ which states that all our ideas about God and all our explicit affirmations about God are derived from our experiences within the world and within the history of salvation. For Schillebeeckx, like Saint Thomas, there are neither ghosts nor gods wandering around in the world. We have no mysterious source of knowledge of any reality whatsoever apart from human experiences, which is to say, apart from creation. This assertion represents the continuous element in Schillebeeckx's thought.

For a time, however, I worked under the impression that, like the multiformed mythological sea god Proteus, Schillebeeckx has frequently altered the forms of his theology's philosophical foundations. At one stage he explains God's accessibility in terms of implicit intuition; and at another, in terms of negative contrast experiences which instigate ethical praxis. Gradually, however, I came to realize that these two different expressions—one Thomist, the other, neo-Marxist—are actually the same thing! They are the same thing in the sense that they both refer to a salvific reality independent of human beings: for the former it is God, for the latter it is the *humanum*. What Ernst Bloch referred to as the '*humanum*' could quite conceivably be understood by a Christian as a reality approximating to what would otherwise be termed 'the kingdom of God'.³⁴

Furthermore, the expressions 'implicit intuition' and 'negative contrast experiences' both involve a dialectic interrelationship between positive and negative poles. For the former, the positive pole holds that God can be known; the negative is that God cannot be grasped by concepts. For the latter position, the positive pole resides in hope offered by the *humanum*; the negative resides in the limiting and debilitating experience of suffering. In both views 'a beyond' is hoped for and trusted in from the standpoint of human limitation. From this perspective, one could well argue that a negative dialectics is a modern philosophical foil to the ancient theological tradition of apophatism: the hope found in experiences of suffering is somewhat akin to the 'dark night' theme of so many mystical treatises.

The philosophical bedrock of Edward Schillebeeckx's theology is the

epistemological premise that God can only be approached by way of human experiences. Schillebeeckx invariably asserts that God can be known *immediately* through the *mediation* of human contingency. The so-called epistemological break from De Petter is a break from De Petter's highly speculative language, but not from the conviction that faith-propositions are unable to exist without reference to experience. As in the time of the Modernist crisis, no less than in the work of De Petter, so too in the whole matter of Schillebeeckx's theology and its philosophical background, the burning issue remains the epistemological status of concepts. Ironically, De Petter even stands as a cause of Schillebeeckx's move to praxis because it was De Petter who led his pupil to read contemporary philosophies and to regard concepts as relative.

In asserting now that knowledge of God can only be found in human experiences of action, is Schillebeeckx leaving himself open to the charge of having produced a merely 'horizontal' theology without a 'vertical' attention to God? I would say no; for the simple reason that the dichotomy between 'the horizontal' and 'the vertical' is a false problem—false because the two dimensions are one and the same reality! Schillebeeckx's main theological preoccupation concerns human action and divine grace. He maintains that theology today is poisoned by a dualistic supernaturalism which would view grace as blessings descending from a detached heavenly realm, quite distinct from the sphere of human activity. According to Schillebeeckx, grace and action are one and the same reality: grace is emmeshed in the structure of historical human existence.³⁵ He explains transcendence in terms of a radical immanence: the more humanity is struggled for, the more God is known; God is not against people, but more human than any human being.³⁶ In this light, Schillebeeckx's thought is, one could say, a contemporary formulation of Saint Irenaeus' theology of the living person who is viewed as the manifestation of God's glory ('Gloria Dei, vivens homo'). Propositional knowledge of God springs from actions which confirm God's nature as a God who is concerned for humanity.

This is Schillebeeckx's theological vision—his conviction of faith. Although he strives to explain philosophically his faith that God can be known in this world, in the end his whole theological corpus is based on a trust that what he describes is so.³⁷ It is evident that as philosophically-minded as Schillebeeckx may be and as disposed to a pragmatic turn in theology as he no doubt is, in the last analysis his theology cannot help but accord a primacy to faith.

This is a slightly revised version of a paper given at Cambridge on the 22 February 1989, to a systematic theology seminar in the Divinity Faculty.

1 Studies which were issued as books were in fact collections of previously published articles. See Ted Schoof, '... een bijna koortsachtige aandrang ...,' in *Meedenken met Edward Schillebeeckx*. (Baarn: H. Nelissen, 1983), 11—39, especially 24.

2 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury Press and London: Collins, 1979). Originally published as *Jezus, het verhaal van een levende* (Bloemendaal: H. Nelissen, 1974).

3 *Ibid.*, 618.

- 4 The literal meaning of 'praxis' in Schillebeeckx's later theology is 'actual conduct'. See, for example, *Jesus, An Experiment in Christology*, 60.
- 5 See Edward Schillebeeckx in 'Edward Schillebeeckx en Leo Apostel in gesprek: (A) Theïstische Spiritualiteit', *Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven*, Extra Number (April, 1988), 9.
- 6 John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (2nd Edition; London: Macmillan, 1988), 23.
- 7 See T.M. Schoof, *A Survey of Catholic Theology: 1800—1970* (New York: Paulist Newman Press, 1970), 68.
- 8 For the first in a series of articles, see D.M. De Petter, 'Impliciete Intuïtie', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 1:1 (February, 1939), 84—105.
- 9 See Edward Schillebeeckx in *God is New Each Moment: Edward Schillebeeckx in conversation with Huub Oosterhuis and Piet Hooogveen* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), 13—14.
- 10 *Revelation and Theology* (Vol 1, 1967; this edition, London: Sheed & Ward, 1987), 83.
- 11 *Colloquium voor O.P. Studium Albertinum* (Unpublished manuscript; Albertinum, Nijmegen, November, 1968), 1—7, especially p. 1.
- 12 In *Les Catholiques Hollandais* (Edited by H. Hillenaar and H. Peters; Brouwer: Desclee, 1969), 15.
- 13 Outlined in D.M. De Petter, *Naar het Metafysische* (Antwerp/Utrecht: Uitgeverij, 1972).
- 14 Schillebeeckx refers explicitly to 'the primacy of praxis' in his book, *God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 99.
- 15 *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 747.
- 16 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus in Our Western Culture* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 63—64.
- 17 See Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Questions on Christian Salvation of and for Man', in *Toward Vatican III: The Work that Needs to be Done* (Edited by David Tracy with Hans Küng and Johann B. Metz; New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 27—34, especially 37; *Ministry: The Case for Change* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 101.
- 18 Schoof, *A Survey of Catholic Theology*, 149.
- 19 See Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith* (first published, 1974; this edition, London: Sheed & Ward, 1981), 102—155.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 14—44.
- 21 Adorno's influence is acknowledged in Edward Schillebeeckx, *God, the Future of Man* (1969; this edition, London: Sheed & Ward, 1977), 205, n.8.
- 22 See John Bowden, *Jesus, The Unanswered Questions* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 189—190.
- 23 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 818.
- 24 See Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, passim.
- 25 A. Hulsbosch, 'Jezus Christus, Gekend als Mens, Beleden als Zoon Gods', *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 6:3 (1966), 250—273.
- 26 On Hulsbosch's impetus for a new approach to christology see Mark Schoof, 'Dutch Catholic Theology: A New Approach to Christology', *Cross Currents*, 22:4 (1973), 415 — 427.
- 27 See Christian Duquoc, *Libération et Progressisme* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1987), 37, n.6.
- 28 For a recent attempt see Edward Schillebeeckx, 'De levensweg van Jezus, beleden als de Christus', in *Religie als Levende Ervaring* (edited by Marcel Messing; Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1988), 136—149.
- 29 *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 583.
- 30 See Vincent A. McCarthy, *Quest for a Philosophical Jesus: Christianity and Philosophy in Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Schelling* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), ix—xv.
- 31 See Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 585—594.
- 32 See Rudolf J. Siebert, *The Critical Theory of Religion: The Frankfurt School* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1985), 476—477).
- 33 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, I, 7, ad primum. Quoted by Schillebeeckx, for example, in his works: *God and Man*, 1965 (this edition, London: Sheed & Ward, 1979), 39; 'Active Silence about God', *Theology*, 71:577 (July, 1968), 302; *The Mission of the Church*, 1973 (this edition, London: Sheed & Ward, 1981), 144. For a later allusion to Aquinas' text see, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 630.
- 34 See, especially, Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 65.
- 35 Edward Schillebeeckx. 'The Magisterium and Ideology', in *Authority in the Church and the Schillebeeckx Case* (edited by Leonard Swidler and Piet F. Fransen; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 5—17, especially p. 7.
- 36 *God Among Us*, 61. See as well, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 669.
- 37 *God and Man*, 175—177; *The Understanding of Faith*, 19, 41—42, 59, 82—83, 95, 97, 150, 168, n. 12.