

# Human Beings as the Story of God : Schillebeeckx's Third Christology

Philip Kennedy OP

During the month of his seventy-fifth birthday, November, 1989, Edward Schillebeeckx published the final part of what now stands as a three-volumed Christology. His new book, *Mensen als verhaal van God* ('Human Beings as the Story of God'), has taken twelve years to appear. It completes a trilogy begun in 1974 with *Jezus, het verhaal van een levende* ('Jesus: The Story of a Living One'), and continued in 1977 with *Gerechtigheid en liefde: Genade en bevrijding* ('Justice and Love: Grace and Liberation').<sup>1</sup> These three 'opera magna' combine approximately eighteen hundred pages of reflection on the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and the specificity of Christian faith. What follows is a description of the third part of Schillebeeckx's Jesus-Quest with an overview of its structure and contents in the light of its two companion volumes, and comments on its governing preoccupation. The description is intended more as an interpretative commentary than a critique.

Professor Schillebeeckx began the exegetical research for the first instalment only a few years after the closure of the Second Vatican Council. His intention in the initial volume was not to provide an apologetical support for official church teaching, but rather to discover what was distinctive about Jesus, not as his individuality is codified dogmatically but as it is found in his practice and preaching, as these are reflected in the early credal formulas of the New Testament. Schillebeeckx sought to examine critically the intelligibility of Christological belief in Jesus of Nazareth for people today (I, 33—34). Whereas the first volume addressed the issue of the ultimate identity of Jesus, the second gave more attention to various theologies of grace, especially the New Testament. The most fundamental presuppositions on which the first two books were constructed related to conditions for professing a Christian faith in the modern world. Schillebeeckx maintains that people today will no longer embrace Christianity simply on the basis of authority: conditions for believing must in some way be anchored in contemporary experiences.<sup>2</sup>

In an epilogue to the second volume Schillebeeckx spoke of his original intention to finish that book with a section on ecclesiology and pneumatology (II, 840). Lack of space, however, would not permit; any further discussion would have to be left for a third study. In 1982, a name was even given to the planned conclusion: *Christus en zijn Kerk* ('Christ and his Church').<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the final result bears a different title, is not

primarily an ecclesiology, and was a long time in gestation. All this is chiefly to be explained by developments in the Roman Catholic Church over the past decade.

During that time, Schillebeeckx was active in the Dutch province of the Catholic Church. As a result of his engagement, he published articles and books devoted to the theology and practice of ministry.<sup>4</sup> Comparing his experiences in Rome during sessions of the Second Vatican Council with his subsequent ecclesiastical involvements, he has come to the stark conclusion that the joy of belonging to the church during the time of the Council has been severely put to the test over the past decade. He argues that during the 1970s, and especially during the 1980s, precisely that which was 'new' in Vatican II has not been consistently received in official institutional structures of the church. On the contrary, certain structures, as dictated by the new code of canon law, are simply foreign to the deepest intentions of Vatican II (III, 5–6). An important achievement of the Council in Schillebeeckx's eyes was that it promoted the notion of a 'people of God' rather than retaining a post-Tridentine triumphal, juridical and clerical church (III, 6 and 212). Faced, then, with a malaise and polarisation in church life that is related to an official maintenance of a Tridentine 'hierarchy', Schillebeeckx altered his original plan of completing his trilogy with an expressly ecclesiological tract, because he deemed it more important to search (once again) for the kernel of the gospel and the Christian religion.

Consequently, with *Mensen als verhaal van God*, he has fashioned much more than either a third Christology or an ecclesiological excursus. In effect, he has written a systematically unfolding fundamental theology in which he seeks to expound a new foundational fulcrum for conveying what he believes is the universal and salvific relevance of the Christian gospel. Viewed as a fundamental theology, his new book methodically adheres to a classical schema: it begins with epistemological prolegomena, which are followed by discourses on God, revelation, salvation, and faith; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; the church and its mission; as well as pneumatology, protology and eschatology.

Schillebeeckx's earliest writings assert a confidence that the great tradition of Christian theology, including the Church Fathers, conciliar dogmas and medieval compendia, is, in itself, an adequate guardian and expounder of the gospel's meaning for the twentieth century. His early work tended to regard theology as a matter of extracting the riches of past *texts*: authoritative documents, handed on in a tradition. Since Vatican II, however, he has come to the conclusion that theology needs to rely on a balance, a mutual-critical correlation, between past *experiences* (encapsulated in dogmas and treatises) and contemporary, *practical* experiences (see III, 58–62).

The point to be underlined here is that Schillebeeckx's new publication has a positive aim. It could even be looked upon as his 'apologia'. In the prefatory remarks he describes the work as a testimony of faith from a

theologian who has been gropingly and stammeringly searching all his life for what God can mean for human beings (III, 7). The book is anything but an acidulous attack on opposing theological positions in an intramural ecclesiastical squabble. It is an attempt to present a constructive vehicle for keeping alive the meaning of the original Christian gospel within contemporary experiences. Schillebeeckx is not trying to ignore the Christian tradition. He is striving to weld ancient wisdoms with a new structure for theology so as to render more intelligible what Christian language about God may mean in a cultural context of widespread disavowal of God.

*A survey of structure and contents*

*Mensen als verhaal van God* is a considerably shorter work than either of its predecessors. With a length of barely three hundred pages, it is half the size of the first tome and a third of the second. The body of footnotes and literature arranged in the first two books has been reduced, although the items listed are still drawn from an extensive multilingual pool of classical and contemporary sources. The text is written in a simpler literary style with a less technical theological nomenclature. It reiterates several arguments that have been published over the past decade in articles and short books.<sup>5</sup>

The volume is divided into five chapters. The first (pp. 21—63) lays a philosophical ground-plan for the rest of the enterprise by situating churches, religions, theology and divine revelation in the context of human history. The second chapter (pp. 65—119) is more directly concerned with God. While Saint Thomas Aquinas explains his faith in God by speaking of 'Five Ways', Schillebeeckx elaborates his own faith within a quite different framework: human suffering and struggles for justice (III, 73). Chapter Two, therefore, is Schillebeeckx's 'proof' for God; but only in the sense that it presents a context for talking intelligibly about a God whose existence is accepted in a prediscursive moment of faith. Schillebeeckx does not try to argue for God's existence on theoretical grounds, but presupposes and believes that God exists. Chapter Three (pp. 121—202) is Christological and forms the longest subdivision of the book. It deals with the issues of the identity and uniqueness of Jesus, and of the relation between Christianity and other religions. The fourth chapter (pp. 205—245) has the church as its subject and is followed by a short concluding section (pp. 247—263) that speaks about the place of ecology and the Jewish-Christian faith in a divine creation. In the overview to follow, attention will be devoted to the first three chapters.

Like its two precursors, the third volume is concerned with the lives of human beings and their association with God, especially as such a bond is made visible in Jesus (III, 5). The fundamental significance of the book's title is that humanity itself is numinous: human existence is the primary cipher or symbol of the divine. The original Dutch title invites attention because it shares an important nuance with the first book on Jesus, a nuance which can be altogether obscured in translation. Both titles speak of a story: 'Jesus: The Story of a Living One', and 'Human Beings as the Story of

God'. In the original Dutch, there is a subtlety involved in the double genitive 'van' ('of'). The story, therefore, can be simultaneously a story told about God ('genitivus obiectivus') or a story which God tells about humankind ('genitivus subiectivus'). And again, one can speak either of an account about Jesus, or a story that he narrates himself. The title of Schillebeeckx's latest book, therefore, conveys two theses simultaneously: God's story, or concern, *is* the welfare of human existence; wherever justice and goodness are realised, the very nature of God, who in the Jewish-Christian tradition is experienced as a God concerned with human beings, is perceived and practically confessed. On the last page of the fifth chapter of the book, Schillebeeckx asserts that for the Bible 'the person' is the substitute ('locum tenens') of God on earth (III, 263); and in the middle of the volume he muses on why God keeps silent in our earthly lives and concludes, in figurative terms, that God listens to what we have to say and is unable to answer until our fleeting lives on earth have ended. God is waiting for us, as it were, to be *his story* (III, 150).

This conclusion explains the strategy of the entire work. If humankind itself is the primary paragon for speaking of God, then churches, sacraments and religions are epiphenomenal. The book's introduction begins by quoting the Christian general council of Florence-Ferrara (1442), according to which no one can be saved outside the Catholic Church (III, 17, 61, 164). The quotation accentuates a question of truth: is all knowledge of truth, of God, and of salvation, exclusively to be found in one specific religion? The introduction proceeds to set two adages in antithesis: 'outside the church there is no salvation', and 'outside the world there is no salvation'. The first is relinquished while the second becomes a leitmotiv for the remainder of the enquiry. Schillebeeckx asserts that the empirical, institutional church never exists for *its own sake*, and for that very reason less should be said about it and more about God and people. Precisely *for the sake* of God, of Jesus and of humankind, Schillebeeckx argues against any kind of ecclesiocentrism. He prefers a 'negative ecclesiology', or a 'church theology in a minor key'. Thus, the focus of his book, is not so much the church, but God, Jesus Christ, and humankind. All three are said to be one, in the sense that they can never be pitted against one another (III, 19).

A novel aspect that Schillebeeckx has introduced into his theology with this new study is an avoidance of Christian imperiousness and absolutism. He retains a belief in the uniqueness and universality of Christianity, but without asserting that all truth is to be discovered absolutely and exclusively in Christianity: the plenitude of God is so profuse and inexhaustible that no one religion, no single church, no particular figure in human history—not even Jesus—could possibly contain and adequately manifest the unutterable mystery of God.

#### *A saving God working in human history*

The first chapter begins by asking: Who or what brings salvation and liberation to human beings? Schillebeeckx speaks of a historical irony in that

the cultural forces of science and technology, which have for a long time been proclaimed as the liberators of humanity, are now portentous of calamity. He is not opposed to science and technology as such, but only to a scientific positivism and technologism that claims to provide salvation by precluding the possibility of a human relationship with the transcendent God (see III, 23—24). In his third Christology, the marks of Schillebeeckx's faith in God are not difficult to locate: God is a transcendent pure positivity, an absolute freedom and gratuity, who *works* in human history as a saving God of and for humankind.

During his inaugural lecture on taking to the chair in dogmatic theology within the Catholic University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, Schillebeeckx asserted that in a cultural context of widespread disbelief in God, theology is compelled to circumscribe more precisely the area in which it makes contact with the reality of God.<sup>6</sup> His most recent publication is fired by exactly the same imperative to search for a humanly meaningful and philosophically intelligible context in which it becomes clear for believers and non-believers alike, what can be meant by talking about God and God's salvational association with humankind.

#### *Negative contrast experiences*

Having stressed that 'the world' rather than the church is the primary locus for salvation, Schillebeeckx sharpens his case by specifying a very particular aspect of worldly experience as an undergirding for theology in which it becomes possible for believers and non-believers alike to understand what is meant by God. The heuristic tool he selects for a universally accessible hermeneutical basis for theology is that of what he calls negative contrast experiences, which is to say, human experiences of suffering, of finiteness and contingency, and of an 'absolute limit'. As a taproot for theology, therefore, Schillebeeckx postulates that all human beings share a common (though variously interpreted) pre-religious experience of being constrained by the intractability of reality. A negative contrast experience, however, is not simply an endurance of suffering; it contains a positive propellant in that it produces an indignation at injustice and suffering. By indignantly refusing to succumb to injustice, victims are capable of perceiving situations of liberation, of transcendence. Confronted by a perplexing mixture of meaning and meaninglessness in the world, both believers and non-believers, in the midst of their negative experiences that run counter to more humane situations, can share a solidarity which pursues justice. In broader terms, the ground that Schillebeeckx pinpoints for theology is the constantly changing history of human contingency. To say this, moreover, is to assert that religious language is not an autonomous datum, but a response to a prior action of a creating God. God's creative action in history is the ultimate ground of all human speech about God (III, 24—28, 34, and 96—99). This way of speaking recalls Schillebeeckx's sacramental studies of the 1950s that spoke of a divine invitation and a human response, realised in sacramental rites.

Having underlined the crucial role of negative contrast experiences, Schillebeeckx moves on to describe the structure of revelation. The first chapter has a long title which speaks of four different histories: 'World history and salvation history, revelation history and the history of suffering'. Revelation is said to have a sacramental structure in that the religious meaning of a secular event presupposes a human meaning or significance. Hence, it is only in profane, secular history that God is revealed: "'the human" is the medium of divine revelation' (III, 30). By pointing out that human history is the locus of God's saving history'. Schillebeeckx stresses that salvation history is not the same thing as the history of revelation. The latter is an explication (in faith) of what is perceived in an anterior history of salvation. Schillebeeckx is arguing against an older view where salvation was regarded as a question of better knowledge: as if a hidden 'ontological consciousness' could be brought to 'consciousness' by revelation. The consequence of distinguishing between salvation history and the history of revelation is that salvation is not to be coupled with religion and churches. Religions are not salvation but the sacrament of salvation which God realises through humankind in a very specific context (III, 29—32).

After indicating what he understands to be negative contrast experiences of contingency which can lead to liberation, Schillebeeckx then turns his attention to analysing in greater detail precisely what he means by experience. He notes that many Christians still see an unbridgeable crevice and contrast between Christian faith, as the obedience and submission of believers to God's revelation, and human experiences. He sets out to analyse experiences and to show their profane and religious significance (III, 34).

Roman Catholic theology in its more recent history has been chary of an appeal to experience as a ground for theology. Pope Pius X impugned the term in his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907). An appeal to experience as a methodological infrastructure for theology can appear as an arbitrary reliance on unquantifiable and illusory inner subjective states of feeling. In the first chapter of his new book, therefore, Schillebeeckx ventures to show that experiences, and especially negative contrast experiences, can reveal something absolute, that is, something of God. He notes a new and contemporary insight into the complex character of experience and lists various factors such as the political, social and economic mediation of experiences in society. His basic conception of experience is that it is an interpretative perception engaging an irreducible unity between objective and subjective poles: 'Experience is brought to completion in a dialectical process: in an interplay of perceiving (within an interpretative framework) with thinking, and of thinking with perceiving' (III, 40).

The main point of the chapter and, indeed, of the whole volume is to talk about *God* in a universally accessible way. Schillebeeckx pursues his goal, and concludes the first chapter, with reference to the history of human suffering: the deepest experiences which guide human life are experiences of suffering which evoke a change of mind, action and being (III, 48).

The second chapter is entitled: 'Humanity in search of God, and God in search of humanity'. In this section of the work Schillebeeckx explains in further detail his framework for speaking about God. He maintains that religions rather than a philosophical context constitute the primary sphere wherein the word 'God' is used: 'In a philosophical-rational analysis one in fact does no more than lay bare the cognitive intentionality of a certain religious belief, or, on the other hand, of an actual non-belief' (III, 83). This is taken to be the significance of Thomas's so-called 'Five Ways'.

An important feature of Schillebeeckx's new book is its analysis of Christian faith. Faith is regarded as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising ethical, inter-personal, ecological, socio-political, and mystical elements. Ethics acts as a bridge between mystical and political dimensions. It is crucial to note here that Schillebeeckx affirms that God is cognisable. He makes this affirmation by saying that the mystical dimension of faith contains an aspect of cognitive union with God. This cognitive dimension is divided into two parts: on the one hand there is an aspect of conceptual representation of faith, while on the other there is a factor of cognitive contact with the very reality of God (III, 88).

#### *On Jesus, confessed as Christ*

The third chapter, 'Christians find God above all in Jesus Christ', comprises a third of the book's length. It focuses the volume's primary theme, that humanity is numinous, with reference to Jesus, the Christ: God's being is revealed in Jesus's humanity. The chapter addresses *the* Christological problem: the issue of the definitive quality in Jesus—his uniqueness and universality, as these are linked to historical contingency.

This chapter is of considerable moment in terms of the history of twentieth Roman Catholic Christology. When Catholic theological education was officially revamped at the end of the nineteenth century, it was done so on the footing of a neo-scholastic return to medieval syntheses. The reversion was rejuvenating for historical, medieval studies, but deleterious for Christology, which was constrained to speak of a metaphysical unity between Jesus and God, so much so that the New Testament images of Jesus were pushed into the background in favour of pre-established metaphysical categories.

One of the more remarkable consequences of Vatican II is that, contrary to what one might have expected, the Council did not spawn a large number of significant ecclesiological studies in its wake. Instead, it was a catalyst for a multitude of Christological probings in search of a culturally more pertinent central reference-point for a church uncertain of its social image and traumatised by its cultural isolation.<sup>7</sup> Many of these recent treatises have expressed dissatisfaction with traditional dogmatic Christological formulas. This has not prevented them, however, from falling back into Chalcedonian modes of thought when it comes to explaining how Jesus can be called the plenary incarnation of God. Schillebeeckx's new book offers a completely novel framework for Christology. In its third

chapter he argues for a universal uniqueness on the part of Jesus without relying on dogmatic language. He preserves the deepest meaning of Chalcedon (by ascribing a pre-eminence to Jesus), but within a divergent conceptual framework.

Schillebeeckx called the first work in the trilogy a *prolegomenon* to a Christology. It was conceived as a prelude to a more explicit Christology. Yet this description describes his original intention when he set out to write the book, and not his final publication. The final stages of the first book on Jesus contain detailed discussion of such theories as *enhypostasis*, *anhypostasis*, and the ‘*unio hypostatica*’ (I, 652—669). Be that as it may, Schillebeeckx has kept to his plan of providing an explicit Christology in his third volume, but has done so by using a less classical and technical language than is found in the first two volumes, originally described as preambles to a Christology. The third book, with over a hundred pages set aside to discussing the significance of Jesus, has no mention whatsoever of the notion of hypostatic union. And yet Schillebeeckx explains that for Christian faith Jesus is the redeemer of all people and the absolute revelation of God. Schillebeeckx’s central difficulty is, in a pluralistic gathering of diverse cultures and religions, to reconcile belief in the differentiating specificity of Jesus with a positive appreciation of other world religions (III, 121). How, then, does he go about this?

The crucial problem in Christology revolves around the matter of Jesus’s contingency: how is his humanity to be considered? A major emphasis in Schillebeeckx’s recent work is that Jesus is a historical and therefore contingent being. This implies that he not only reveals God, but also conceals the full reality of the Godhead (III, 28).

Accentuating that Jesus is a contingent being, Schillebeeckx explains his relation to God (his ‘divinity’) with reference to a biblical category: the kingdom of God. Schillebeeckx asserts that the ‘kingdom of God’—the key word in Jesus’s message—is a biblical expression for the very nature of God. In other terms, what strikes Schillebeeckx about Jesus’s career is that the advent of the kingdom of God is essentially related to the person and message of Jesus (III, 137). Jesus’s concentration on God, his ‘*Abba*’ experience, is at the same time a clue for trying to describe who he is, and a pointer to the reality of God. It can be learned from Jesus’s life and message concerning the kingdom that God’s nature is to be glimpsed in a quest for liberating human beings from suffering and injustice. God’s being, the kingdom, is itself salvation for humankind.

If Jesus’s identity engages the kingdom of God, then Schillebeeckx needs to illustrate what he means by this notoriously multivocal expression. His strategy towards this end is to speak of biblical metaphors. To tease out a meaning of the kingdom of God he discusses New Testament parables describing the action of Jesus—his *praxis*, so to speak, in accordance with the kingdom. In his actions Jesus makes directly visible what he speaks about, and consequently anticipates eschatological salvation (the kingdom) (III, 138). Where human action removes suffering and injustice, God’s very



being is confessed in practice. A praxis of the kingdom is a manner of behaviour that is an alternative to the way people are normally inclined to behave in our society. For Schillebeeckx, Jesus subordinates the human logic of justice to a divine largess and sharply reacts against the upholders of social rules, rules that in terms of strict human justice can even involve the excommunication of already downtrodden people who are frequently regarded as socially putrid and dispensable. For Jesus, God is not the guarantor of social prosperity, but is to be met in those who hunger and thirst, in the stranger, the sick and the outcast. In a human love for the poor, that is, in a praxis of the kingdom, there is an implicit confirmation of God's own being perceived as an unconditional, non-exclusive love that embraces oppressed pariahs (see III, 27 and 136).

In the second part of his trilogy, Schillebeeckx spoke of humanity in terms of anthropological constants (II, 734—743). In his new book he tries to explain the meaning of Jesus's link with God, and the universality of Christianity, in terms of four biblical metaphors associated with God's kingdom. His interpretation of Jesus is now based on Christological constants and not overtly on the 'two-nature' scheme of Pope Leo the Great. Schillebeeckx avoids speaking of a neat bifurcation between divine and human natures in Jesus, and tries to indicate how 'divine nature' is translated *in* Jesus's humanity. But the significance and newness of his latest Christology goes much further than emphasising that something of God can be discovered through Jesus's humanity. His new work is not a neo-Schleiermacherian post-Enlightenment bourgeois Christology fixed on the humanity of Jesus. After all, the notion of knowing universality through Jesus's humanity is precisely the problematic of Chalcedon.

Where Schillebeeckx is contributing to the leading of contemporary Christology into new terrain is in linking the question of universality *to our own humanity*. In effect, he is positing a praxical moment of knowledge in Christology: we do not know Jesus simply on the basis of an acquaintance with theories and doctrines about him; we know Jesus, and hence God, if we undertake a praxis of the kingdom of God, that is, if we make manifest in our own actions God's non-discriminatory love for the poor. Granted that the specific identity of Christianity resides in the fact that the Christian religion ties its relationship to God to a situated particularity—Jesus of Nazareth—then to talk in modern times about the uniqueness of Christianity requires that the history and memory of Jesus's way of life be made manifest in the particular lives of his disciples (see III, 187).

The four metaphors at the centre of Schillebeeckx's latest Christology try to evoke in symbolic language what the kingdom of God, the eventual destiny of humanity, will resemble. They revolve around the notions of Kingdom, Resurrection, Restoration, and *Parousia*: the 'kingdom of God' will be a definitive salvation of humanity as a community in which master-servant relationships are non-existent; the complete salvation of the individual will involve 'the resurrection of the body'; definitive redemption will include a restoration of a damaged ecology ('the new heaven and the

new earth'); and, finally, the constitutive role and meaning that Jesus plays in bringing about fragments of the kingdom of God will only be clear in the *Parousia* (III, 152—153). The uniqueness of Christianity, in other words, can only be fully understood in an eschatological consummation. But for Schillebeeckx, catholicity, or Christian uniqueness, can be rendered concrete in a present-day context by an 'option for the poor', an option that is said to be an inner consequence of a specifically Christian non-discriminatory universal love for human beings (III, 188).

To describe Jesus's definitive character in terms of four biblical metaphorical visions may appear as an overly vague undertaking. But this is precisely Schillebeeckx's point: he wants to retain something of the mystery of Christ by implying that the ultimate identity of Jesus cannot be neatly anatomised and pigeon-holed into conceptualisations. Jesus himself is redemptive. Thus, "'Jesus' redeems us, not 'Christ'" (III, 186). 'Christ' is a title coming from a specific culture. In effect, at this point Schillebeeckx is highlighting that all theological theories and definitions are perspectival and hence secondary. One's faith is in the indefinable mystery of Jesus himself, who is confessed as Christ, and not in a theory about him. To an apophatic theology, therefore, Schillebeeckx has added an ecclesiology in a minor key, and now, a 'negative' Christology.

A stress on Jesus's human contingency serves Schillebeeckx in his discussion of Christianity as it is related to a plurality of other religions. He asserts that the unique character of Christianity is that it finds the essence of God in the concrete, particular humanity of Jesus. In an anti-docetic vein he says that 'Christians have in the course of time absolutised without further ado precisely this historical and limited particularity of Christianity' (III, 184). But since no single historical particular can be called absolute, by virtue of the historical circumscription found in Jesus, every person can encounter God apart from Jesus. Consequently, the plurality of religions is not an evil to be overcome, but a richness to be welcomed (III, 185—186). In his discussion of religious pluralism Schillebeeckx avoids two extremes: absolutism and relativism. His personal position is that Christianity in the past has confused a justifiable claim to be universal with absolutism. In other words, it has claimed a monopoly of absolute truth and regarded other religions as inferior. The question of the uniqueness of Christianity, then, is not the central problem. Every religion, like every person, is unique. The problem is how to express the uniqueness of Christianity without discriminating against other manifestations of God. Schillebeeckx avoids relativism by refusing to say that all religions are equal. He frankly states that a religion which sends the eldest son of a family to death is certainly not of the same value as a religion that does not. Criteria of humanity apply here as well (III, 181)!

The rest of Schillebeeckx's most recent book contains carefully wrought discussions on such themes as the church, hell, and creation, themes that deserve more attention than can presently be offered here. To conclude, it may be helpful to gather some of the book's many subjects into an overarching perspective.

### *The governing preoccupation*

As a young Dominican Schillebeeckx had hoped to write a doctoral dissertation on the relation between faith and culture. Instead he was directed to write on sacraments. Nevertheless, his long-standing interest in the age-old problem of nature and supernature has never been far from the centre of his theological reflection and turns out to be the predominant concern guiding the argument of his third volume. Whichever catchwords are used to designate this preoccupation, whether they be nature and grace, transcendence and immanence, divinity and humanity, the central issue remains one of a putative interpenetration between that which is absolute and that which is contingent and particular. Such an ostensible fusion lies at the hub of all religions.

To read Edward Schillebeeckx's theology is to read a compendium of centuries of theological and philosophical reflection on the conundrum of what God can mean for human beings. All three books in his Christological trilogy respond to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Leibnizian epistemology, according to which a historical concrete truth is unable to provide knowledge of the absolute (I, 583; II, 809; III, 184). Schillebeeckx is unwilling to relinquish the conviction that human beings may know God. His central dilemma is to argue how God can be revealed in the relative. He knows that this cannot be demonstrated on *a priori* grounds, nor can it be corroborated experimentally. He turns, then, to the concept of negativity: something absolute resides in negativity (III, 200)—in contingent human experiences of suffering that perceive a truer existence which nonetheless remains indefinable. The upshot of his position is that the religious question of truth becomes attached to the question of justice. God is known, not so much as the result of a discursive calculus, but in a practice of justice that works against any negative suffering which contrasts with what humanity could and should be.

Schillebeeckx accepts Lessing's point that no single particularity can be called absolute (III, 184), but turns it on its head to argue that one need not conclude that *nothing* of the absolute can be found in the particular. Edward Schillebeeckx's most recent theology, then, is a corrective to a wholesale acceptance of 'modernity'. The term 'modernity' in this instance is taken to mean the world-view that has developed out of the seventeenth-century Cartesian-Baconian-Newtonian understanding of science, one in which scientific method is heralded as the pre-eminent channel through which truth is apprehended.

Schillebeeckx's work is not anti-modern in the sense of romantically hankering to reprimatinate pre-modern times and refusing to acknowledge accomplishments in human knowledge that have resulted from more recent scientific inquiry. Rather, his work challenges an uncritical adulation of modern positivism as he asserts that science is no more purely objective than other forms of knowledge and does not have an exclusive claim on truth (III, 22).<sup>8</sup> He criticises the socio-economic culture, determined by a bourgeois ideology, which has formed Western society since the

Enlightenment, and has sustained a utilitarian individualism (III, 38). Any suggestion that science and technology are 'innocent' went up in a cloud of gas at Hiroshima.<sup>9</sup> The modern technological world-view has spawned an overweening militarism, nuclearism and ecological despoliation. If the premises of modernity continue to be accepted without correction, then the attendant individualism, nationalism, and consumerism will obviously continue to be calamitous.

And so, in the last chapter of *Mensen als verhaal an God*, Schillebeeckx asks: 'Does the church have a future?' It will, he answers, have a future if it works in the world, for the world.

- 1 *Jezus het verhaal van een levende* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1974) was issued in English as *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, translated by Hubert Hoskins, (London: Collins, 1979, and New York: Crossroad, 1981). The second volume appeared as *Christ: the Christian Experience in the Modern World*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1980). Subsequent references to these books will be made in the body of the article between parentheses. 'I' and 'II' refer to the English translations of the first and second volumes respectively. 'III' will designate the Dutch original, *Mensen als verhaal van God* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1989).
- 2 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books 'Jesus' and 'Christ'* (London: SCM, 1980), pp. 6–7.
- 3 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Evangelie Verhalen* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1982), p. 5.
- 4 In English, for example, Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: A Case for Change* (London: SCM, 1981); and *The Church with a Human Face* (London: SCM, 1985). Also published in the interim period between the larger Christology books were two collections of homilies and conferences: *God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed* (London: SCM, 1983); and *For the Sake of the Gospel* (London: SCM, 1989).
- 5 As in, for instance, Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus in our Western Culture: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics* (London: SCM, 1987).
- 6 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Op zoek naar de levende God* (Utrecht/Nijmegen: Dekker & Van De Vegt N.V., 1958), p. 3.
- 7 See Christian Duquoc, *Messianisme de Jésus et Discretion de Dieu: Essai sur la limite de la christologie* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1984), pp. 12–13, and 50.
- 8 See David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), pp. ix–xii).
- 9 See Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).