

EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON SCHILLEBEECKX' *JESUS* AND *CHRIST*

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A WORK of the scope, quality, and originality of Schillebeeckx' *Jesus* and *Christ* seldom appears in any discipline.¹ In theology we have not seen a study of Jesus Christ comparable to this one in the last half century. Schillebeeckx' monument, yet to be completed by a third volume, constitutes at once a critical synthesis of recent New Testament scholarship and a new approach to theological reflection on the Christian experience. He modestly denies being an exegete, yet since the years of Bultmann, Lebreton, and de Grandmaison no exegete has ever attempted a biographical synthesis of this magnitude. Its author has assimilated virtually every major study produced since the war in the very fertile fields of Germany, North America, England, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Though making no claims in the area of philosophy, he displays a methodological competence in dealing with what we commonly call the religious experience that many philosophers no longer possess. Resuming a reflection that was prematurely interrupted by nineteenth-century positivism, his work once again confronts the crucial issues that the unduly restrictive and mostly uninteresting contemporary philosophy of religion ignores. Yet philosophers, possibly deterred by the arduous task of struggling through some thousand pages of exegesis, have not yet given it the attention it so amply deserves. I have written the following reflections mainly to initiate an overdue dialogue. The critical questions they raise have been inspired by the work itself and thus, in the end, pay it its greatest compliment.

THE JESUS EXPERIENCE THEN AND NOW

Schillebeeckx assigns the Christ revelation unambiguously to experience, an area which philosophy has traditionally claimed as its own. In the clarifying *Interim Report*,² published after the second volume, he summarizes his position in one sentence—which will not fail to provoke more controversy than it was intended to settle: “Christianity is not a message which has to be believed, but an experience of faith which becomes a message, and as an explicit message seeks to offer a new

¹ E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1979); *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

² E. Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

possibility of life experience to others who hear it from within their own experience."³ This emphasis on experience challenges a century of secular and biblical positivism. Some critics have even wondered whether it leaves a sufficient objective authority to the scriptural and magisterial word for establishing any kind of Christian orthodoxy. I think their concern is unjustified, but we do well to remember Schillebeeckx' initial emphasis when, working our way through the forest of biblical interpretation, we feel tempted to accuse the author of "literalism."

In an age that has lost the cultural support of faith, all talk about a divine realm becomes meaningless unless it can be shown, as Schillebeeckx has argued in an earlier essay, that "within our secularized experience of existence there are inner references toward an absolute mystery without which even secularity is threatened with collapse."⁴ At a time when hardly any direct experience still corresponds to the traditional idea of God, the believer has no choice but to turn to those ambiguous intimations of transcendence inherent in the very heart of his worldly experience. Inevitably the idea he conceives of God will, more than ever, reflect the image he forms of himself.

A religious utterance, in other words, always entails both anthropological and theological discourse: it is a way of speaking about man and God all at once. This automatically implies that a religious utterance can only have a universal significance with a bearing on all human beings, if it can be at any rate to a degree sensibly verified, that is, if it can be made clear that the believer's affirmation of God's universal love for men—a directly non-empirical reality—opens up at the same time the true humanity of man, which can be both pointed to and experienced.⁵

With respect to our subject, this requires that the Jesus event, so deeply embedded in the Jewish-Hellenistic culture, must nevertheless retain for modern man a unique significance in determining the total meaning of his existence.

Yet, in placing the emphasis on experience, we increase the impact of the hermeneutical problems. How can a historical person, living in a culturally different age, initiate a truly universal experience, especially at a time when most people have become fully estranged from the religious culture in which his message was delivered? Schillebeeckx, much to his credit, remains fully aware of this critical problem and squarely confronts it throughout his two books. It forces him to take Christology outside the restrictive limits of the established churches and theological dogma, and to confront it as an existential challenge to social-political structures as

³ Ibid. 50.

⁴ E. Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 71.

⁵ *Jesus* 603.

well as to private and interindividual concerns. Nor does he present Christ's message as a clearly formulated assertion, but rather as "a catalyzing question, an invitation."⁶ Jesus himself never directly answered the question who he was. The defining significance of his presence must lie in the individual and social response to that question. Before we respond, the Jesus event remains a hypothesis, though one that we must confront to sound the full depth of our humanity. Blondel called it a "necessary hypothesis." Those who allow themselves to confront the Jesus event will view their existence in a wholly new way.

What speaks to us in Jesus is his being human, and thereby opening up to us the deepest possibilities from our own life, and *in this* God is expressed. The divine revelation as accomplished in Jesus directs us to the mystery of man. Therefore to ask people to accept the Christian revelation *before* they have learnt to experience it as a definition of their own life is an impossible and useless demand.⁷

Schillebeeckx meticulously investigates how eyewitnesses and early Christians originally experienced Jesus' deeds and words in order to find out which, if any, experience they could possibly elicit in a culture that in an unprecedented way came to assert the autonomy of the human as well as the relativity of any historical message. If there is an experience of grace in Christ, then all aspects of human experience will be affected by it, since all are continuous. To what extent can such a claim still be made in our contemporary world? Schillebeeckx is unambiguous on this point: only a Christology that extends to all aspects of the secular experience can develop the full cosmic implications of such New Testament writings as Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews, in which the Christ appears as the center of history and, ultimately, of creation. In a bold move, then, Schillebeeckx' theology of the secular attempts to turn around a secularizing trend that started with the emergence of a *natura pura* (prepared since the thirteenth-century Aristotelian movement in theology) and ended with the subtraction of the entire range of worldly experience from the realm of grace. Instead of the traditional distinction between nature and grace, Schillebeeckx defends the one, more congruent with the New Testament, between grace on the one hand and sinfulness, unholiness, self-righteousness, on the other.⁸

Schillebeeckx' emphasis on experience never occurs at the expense of historical objectivity, as was often the case for Bultmann's followers. He states at the outset: "As a believer, I want to look critically into the intelligibility for man of Christological belief in Jesus, especially in its origin. Face to face with the many real problems, my concern is indeed

⁶ *Jesus* 636.

⁸ Cf. *Christ* 530.

⁷ *Christ* 76.

to hold a *fides quaerens intellectum* and an *intellectus quaerens fidem* together."⁹ In contrast to the Bultmannian trend to abandon a useless search for unfindable facts in favor of a study of their subjective and culturally conditioned reverberation in the primitive community, he rejects the alternative—existential impact or historical objectivity. For him, Jesus' own preaching belongs to the essence, not only to the premises, of the theology of the New Testament.¹⁰ A full continuity links his words and deeds with the early proclamation. Meanwhile, Schillebeeckx does not attempt to prove that the historically reconstrued Jesus was the Christ, as was formerly done in the apologetic exegesis of fundamental theology. The New Testament synthesizes a number of compatible but different experiences. Nevertheless, since these experiences were by their very nature intentional, that is, noematically refer to the extraordinary historical events which set them off, the New Testament accounts report an objective as well as a subjective reality.

Jesus was not proclaimed to be the Christ despite or apart from what he really was in history. A historical reconstruction is precisely a help to get more clearly into focus both the "objective", evocative side and the subjective, "projective" side in the names which the New Testament gives to Jesus, though it is never possible to make a neat distinction between the two aspects.¹¹

To uncover the noematic (the historical events as they are reflected in the experience) as well as the noetic (the subjective aspect) of the primitive experience that stands at the origin of all later experience, Schillebeeckx had to follow a historical-critical method in the major part of his work. The Jesus of history appears to us in the traditional and Hellenistic Jewish models through which his early followers perceived him. But by acquiring as complete an awareness as possible of those models, we do not lose but rather gain insight into the historical basis of the aboriginal experience. However one may judge the individual successes of Schillebeeckx' efforts in this recovery of the objective side of the various Gospel experiences, there can be no question that the total achievement is most impressive. His task, difficult by any account, was also unprecedented in the Catholic biographical tradition. His reconstruction of the events and words of Jesus of Nazareth and of the "Christological" formulations which they inspired in his early followers brackets the entire dogmatic tradition since Nicaea. Still, it must be repeated, the author's purpose does not lie in historical reconstruction as such: his search for objectivity is part of an overall attempt to recover the entire original experience, in both its subjective and its objective aspect.

⁹ *Jesus* 33.

¹⁰ Cf. *Jesus* 72.

¹¹ *Interim Report* 29.

RETURN TO THE HISTORICAL JESUS

The adopted method, quite naturally, distinguishes the two volumes. *Jesus* deals primarily with the soteriological aspects of the early experience, while leaving the further and deeper reflection—"Who is he who is able to accomplish such things?"¹²—to the second volume, appropriately entitled *Christ*. Foreseeing the disturbing impact which a purely soteriological report of Jesus' words and deeds might have, the author added the outline of a primitive Christology in the final part of his first volume. Though this has perforce remained a somewhat lopsided fragment whose success Schillebeeckx himself has subsequently questioned, it nevertheless contains some of the most significant passages of the entire opus. The structure of the second book is more complex to follow. The first half (1-462) deals with the non-Synoptic writings of the New Testament—not, of course, because they were written later, but because, in the author's opinion, they articulate a later stage of reflection than what transpires through the oldest layers of the Synoptics. This assumption may be controverted, especially in the case of the fourth Gospel, as Schillebeeckx' critics have not been slow in pointing out.¹³ Yet, now that the two volumes exist side by side, the merit of his judgment hardly affects the presently available corpus. If there be a problem with the exegetical part of this second volume, it rather consists in the somewhat narrower focus, conveniently camouflaged in the English title (*Christ*) but apparent in the Dutch one (*Justice and Love: Grace and Liberation*). The systematic part of the second volume first sketches a synthesis of the New Testament theology of Christ. It then in bold strokes compares the Christian experience of grace with doctrines of salvation offered by other religious (and one secular: Marxism) world views. It also sketches the potential impact of Christ's message of salvation upon a secular society. Much in this latter part is superfluous, unproven, and needlessly controversial. Yet, morally compelled by his own theory, the author resolutely ventured out into relatively unknown and often uncharted areas of the religious experience of other faiths and of other times. Here the emphasis on orthopraxis rather than on the passive-mystical elements of the Christian experience clearly emerges. For Schillebeeckx, as for the Dutch Reformed theologian H. M. Kuitert, religious symbols make us not merely think but also act. Does he regard this emphasis as basic to the modern Christ experience or as characteristic of the entire experience?

Underneath the enormous scriptural erudition here displayed and the admirable logic in drawing theological conclusions from it, one occasionally detects the author's preference for a German exegetical tradition that is not afraid of building daring hypotheses. There is no need to reopen

¹² Ibid. 95.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.* 41-47.

here the controversy touched off by Schillebeeckx' assumption, in *Jesus*, of the existence of a "Q community." The existence of a Q source has been generally accepted among New Testament scholars, but not the existence of a Q community that would have lived exclusively or predominantly by this source.¹⁴ Even less certain is the basis for distinguishing various phases in the history of that community. On p. 261 appears the following statement: "Both the pre-Markan tradition (Mk 14, 36) and the oldest, Aramaic phrase of the Q tradition regarding the 'Our Father' (Lk 11, 1-4; Mt 6, 9-13, where the 'Father' in Luke turns out to be a Q text and 'our Father in heaven' more Matthean) speak in totally different complexes of 'Abba'." In this and similar cases one wonders whether the hypothesis has not developed so far from its reliable basis in the text that the chances of clarifying a passage yield to those of forcing it onto a Procrustean bed. At least Anglo-Saxon exegetes appear to be abandoning such constructions for less venturesome readings. Schillebeeckx is still willing to go quite a way with the German kind of radical exegesis. In comparing the Resurrection stories in the Synoptics, he writes about Matthew's account: "The purpose of the Matthean story is not to give us historical information [about the guard]; it echoes the controversy that arose between Jews and Christians responding to 'empty tomb', a dimension in which both sides apparently start from the fact that the tomb is empty."¹⁵ Luke transposes Mark's report into the context of the Judeo-Greek rapture model: "This [verification of the emptiness of the tomb by the women and its confirmation by Peter] follows essentially from the 'rapture' model employed by Luke. For the failure to find a person or, after his death, his corpse, is typical of the model in question. If absolutely nothing of an individual . . . remains to be found, then he has been 'taken up to God'—snatched away."¹⁶ Finally, about Mark's own story we read: "The initial story of the women's going to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning is an aetiological cult-legend, which is to say that this story is intended to shed light on the (at least) annual visit of the Jerusalem church to the tomb in order to honor the Risen One there."¹⁷

On what basis Jesus is called the Risen One in the last statement no longer appears, since all the stories of his manifestation have been reduced to other than historical sources. Now I do not feel in the least qualified to defend the historical character of the Resurrection narratives. Nevertheless, I have some problems with the method employed for

¹⁴ Cf P Schoonenberg, "Schillebeeckx en de exegese," *Tydschrift voor Theologie* 15 (1975) 255-68, and Schillebeeckx' reply, "Schoonenberg en de exegese," *ibid* 16 (1976) 44-55. The expression no longer appears in *Christ*, nevertheless, Schillebeeckx defends it in *Interim Report* 42-43.

¹⁵ *Jesus* 338

¹⁶ *Jesus* 340

¹⁷ *Jesus* 336

showing their dubious basis in fact; for in those three instances, especially in the third, a wholly unproven hypothesis is allowed to run away with a plain statement of fact. If this statement cannot be historically supported, it should be dismissed on stronger grounds than that of an unverifiable theory which, if proven, would only raise further questions about its own origin. Such controversial interpretations show, beyond Schillebeeckx' occasionally uncritical preferences in his Bible criticism, his justified conviction that without a subjective disposition (here, the Easter experience) no amount of objective facts would have been adequate to ground their and our belief in the risen Christ. One regrets that this solid thesis, admirably sustained throughout Schillebeeckx' work, has occasionally been supported by exegetical erudition gathered from the wilder corners of the field.

Several of these controversial exegeses have been dropped in the Interim Report.¹⁸ But some later clarifications are likely to stir up new controversy. That the general idea of eternal life from the Crucified One historically preceded the more precise idea of corporeal resurrection (Descamps's position) does not exactly describe his stated position.¹⁹ In *Jesus* he had questioned whether exegetes were justified in "postulating" or "presupposing" a resurrection in the early creeds. The Resurrection appears there as "a second thought," "the best way to make explicit an earlier, spontaneous experience, without their initially having done so."²⁰ I doubt whether the subtle distinction between "implied" (yes) and "presupposed" (no) suffices to harmonize the two positions. Nor will Schillebeeckx completely satisfy his critics by replying that "in particular early Christian tradition's belief in the resurrection was the starting point of the whole development,"²¹ when they insist that that belief was at least presupposed by the *earliest* kerygmatic tradition. Even his reference to the "noncanonical" status of the early tradition will not placate those critics; for the issue was not whether the canonical but whether the *oldest* traditions (obviously precanonical) did or did not presuppose the Resurrection.

My intention in reporting these polemics is clearly not to add fuel to the flames, but merely to show how difficult it is, even for so subtle a writer as Schillebeeckx, to translate a wholly new insight into adequate wording, and when it comes under fire, to defend it consistently on its own terms.

As the preceding pages have shown, the methodology applied in a hermeneutic of the New Testament raises already a host of critical,

¹⁸ One example: the pilgrim hypothesis (*Interim Report* 86-88).

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.* 83-84.

²⁰ *Jesus* 396; cf. also 409 and 416.

²¹ *Interim Report* 85.

ultimately philosophical questions. Moreover, the philosopher's primary interest in this work goes to the experience itself which Schillebeeckx places at the origin of the Christian traditions. His approach might steer theology into hitherto unexplored roads. Unfortunately, the introductory chapter of *Christ*, which analyzes the concept of experience, does not adequately convey the full import and originality of his theory. Much here is derived from less than sterling sources. The familiar, flat-footed analyses of recent British philosophers do not provide the solid philosophical support that Schillebeeckx' thesis requires. Why should at least the reader of the English translation be taken, once again, through Wisdom's "garden," Wittgenstein's "rabbits," Hare's "blik," Flew's "thousand qualifications," Hick's "seeing as," and Barbour's "interpreting as,"²² when too many necessary things remain unsaid. But I suppose these customary bows to the Dutch *Zeitgeist* could not be helped. Meanwhile, one regrets that no more effective use was made of Husserl and the phenomenological school for illuminating Schillebeeckx' own original theory.

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE ORIGINAL EXPERIENCE

We may summarize that theory as it is applied in his work and articulated in the *Report* in the following two theses:

1) Revelation can be received only in and through human experience. "There is no revelation without experience."²³ "The experience is an essential part of the concept of revelation."²⁴ A harder formulation of this first thesis states: "Christianity is not a message which has to be believed, but an experience of faith that becomes a message."²⁵ Clearly, the two claims are not identical. According to one, the Christ revelation is conveyed *within* an experience; according to the other, Christianity is primarily experience. In both readings the term "experience" stresses the central place of a subjective element in revelation—either in its reception or in its constitution. Yet, Schillebeeckx keeps a safe distance from a romantic concept of religion such as is found in Schleiermacher's *Discourses*. "The self-revelation of God does not manifest itself *from* [better translation, "on the basis of"] our experiences but *in* them."²⁶

2) The second thesis differentiates Schillebeeckx' "experience" even further from romantic feeling. All experience contains elements of interpretation, not only in the subsequent reflection but already in the experiencing act itself.²⁷ With this second thesis the hermeneutical problem confronts us with full force, for at least part of this interpretation goes back to whatever cultural attitudes and religious expectations existed

²² *Christ* 49–53.

²³ *Interim Report* 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 12.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.* 13.

at the time of the experience. These extrinsic factors structured the experience in a particular conceptual apparatus and provided its models of interpretation. Nor do they enter experience at a later stage of reflection; they fuse with it from the start.

It is an obvious fact that they [the first Christians] made use of existing concepts like Messiah, son of man, and so forth, which have their own distinctive meaning—a historical accretion that was not in all respects applicable to Jesus; obvious too that understanding Jesus as they did to be the very essence of final salvation, they deliberately modified these concepts in the very act of applying them to Jesus. . . .²⁸

Now an experience couched in this kind of interpretation is no longer directly accessible to our contemporaries, who live by altogether different presuppositions, ideologies, and world views. Hence a first condition for the New Testament message of salvation to provide “inspiration and orientation” today is that we become aware of its cultural assumptions. Schillebeeckx has devoted the greater part of his work to this seemingly simple but in fact never-ending task. But above all he has reformulated the old problem: How can the original, interpreted experience elicit a new experience of salvation in the present? Clearly there must be a causal connection between the first, privileged experience and all later ones. At the same time, the present experience must be genuinely new, since the elements of interpretation, integral parts of the experience itself, have changed.

The question how an authoritative text can be transferred to a new realm of experience has emerged before in biblical criticism—with rather disastrous results. Lessing denied any definitive authority to a historical text. The principle which led him to this denial may appear naively rationalistic: contingent historical truths, that is, accounts of past events or experiences, can never form an adequate basis for the unchanging, necessary truths of reason. It may seem a confused one as well; for, as he develops his Enlightenment thesis, Lessing blends it with the altogether different one of the inadequacy of historical evidence, which in his view never suffices to support the kind of absolute commitment which faith requires. As Lessing formulates it, the first thesis is not likely to disturb the modern believer, who tends to hold a more restricted view of necessary truths than the rationalist Enlightenment and who feels less inclined to separate historical from other truths. But underneath Lessing’s first thesis lurks the deeper problem: How can the historically conditioned truth of one generation be the basis for that of another generation? And underneath the second: How can the immediate evidence of the eye-

²⁸ *Jesus* 50.

witness ever be transmitted to a later generation? Schillebeeckx fuses the two theses into one when he writes:

Lessing stresses "rational experiential evidence" or "immediate experiential evidence". In that sense he interprets the Enlightenment's distinction between "contingent truths" and "necessary truths of reason". What were necessary truths "in the past", become now, for the developed intellect which apprehends for itself, the intrinsic evidence of what "religion" is, "contingent truth."²⁹

Schillebeeckx takes up Lessing's problem again. First, however, he liberates it from its underlying antihistorical universalism. To reduce the essential content of Christianity to that of an "eternal truth" is to betray it altogether. There is an essential link between the historical person of Jesus and the religious message of absolute values he conveyed: Christian "truth" is intrinsically connected with Jesus' person. Without Jesus' Abba experience the Christian could nurture no hope in immortality or even in a better future or a meaningful development of history.³⁰ The Christian fruit cannot be picked from its historical tree. In a very real sense the fruit *is* the tree itself. Hence Schillebeeckx rejects not only Lessing's historical occasionalism (Christianity merely educated the human race to the discovery of what are essentially self-evident truths of reason) but any theory according to which the role of the historical Jesus is reduced to that of a catalyst for the discovery of wholly new and independent religious experiences.³¹ For Schillebeeckx, the historical core at the heart of the original experience must be preserved in all later experiences. But how much of that core was saved in the edited reports of the New Testament? After all, the original core lies buried in ideologies, presuppositions, and world views from which no amount of scriptural detective work can fully liberate it. To what extent, then, must the transmitted text form the basis of our experience?

Schillebeeckx does not explicitly answer this question, but both his treatment of the text and his manner of defining guidelines for the new experience imply a response. Since the question is directly related to Lessing's problem, it may be instructive to return to the original discussion before evaluating the new answer. In his famous polemic with the Hamburg pastor Goeze, Lessing defended the "internal truth" of Christian revelation against the external authority of the text. "The scriptural traditions must be explained from the internal truth of religion, and no

²⁹ *Jesus* 584. This is clearly not what Lessing wrote, since a historical event never has the necessity of a *vérité de raison*, even for the eyewitness, the only epistemological necessity Lessing recognizes, although it may be indispensable for the discovery of a necessary truth. Schillebeeckx' interpretation, however, points to at least one thing Lessing *meant*: the absence of immediate compelling evidence in later generations.

³⁰ *Jesus* 270.

³¹ *Jesus* 586.

scriptural traditions can give it any internal truth if it have none."³² Goeze pointedly replied that the term "internal truth" provides no criterion for distinguishing one text from another, nor, we might add, one experience from another.³³ The nature of revealed truth postulates, he felt, some authority to establish it as revealed. When we deal with a codified revelation, as in Christianity, only some kind of recognition of the ultimate authority of Scripture can secure its revealed nature. In Goeze's words, "Whoever would explain to me the scriptural traditions from the internal truth of religion must first convince me that he himself has a well-grounded conception of the internal truth of the same, and that he does not form for himself an image of it which suits his views."³⁴ Before being in a position to argue the significance of the text, one must accept the text as an authoritative source of truth. This excludes the attitude of reading the Bible "as you read Livy," as Lessing suggested in the *Vindication of the Ineptus Religiosus*.

Unlike Lessing, Schillebeeckx does accept the a priori authority of the text and clearly rejects the ahistorical rationalistic universalism of the Enlightenment, which still lingers on in our own day.³⁵ And yet he would not be entirely on Goeze's side. After having traced each pericope and verse to its proper layer of tradition (Q, pre-Marc, Marc, etc.) the question returns: Now that we have exposed the historical models, presuppositions, and ideologies that enter into the composition of a New Testament passage, how does the text remain decisively significant for the Christian today? If experience continues to belong to the essence of revelation, the revealed message can have practical authority only in so far as it still "inspires" today. The reader then is to decide what in Scripture (whose authority he has accepted *in abstracto*) still elicits a Christ experience and what not. Now this may well describe the practice which Christians have followed for some time, though usually with an uneasy conscience. The apocalyptic passage in Jude 9 of the archangel Michael fighting with the devil over Moses' body has long ceased to inspire the faithful. It puzzles them and, to the extent that they attribute an absolute authority to each single passage of Scripture, it disturbs them. Schillebeeckx effectively shows how this piece of Hellenistic-Jewish lore was part of the common religious culture in and through which Hellenistic-Jewish Christians interpreted their experience of salvation. Our own Christ experience passes through altogether different channels

³² *Axiomata* 10.

³³ We remember how Kierkegaard struggled with this problem in *The Book on Adler: On Authority and Revelation*, and also, with respect to the subjective nature of existential truth, in *The Unscientific Postscript*.

³⁴ *Axiomata* 10.

³⁵ *Jesus* 591-92.

of interpretation. Since in the end the experience is decisive, the inaccessibility of an obsolete cultural interpretation should create no major difficulties.

But does this dispose of the whole problem? Must, at least to later generations, the original expression not remain as authoritative as the original experience? More precisely, can that experience itself ever be authoritative except through the expression? We cannot compare our experience with the original experience as if the two were on an even footing. The experience of those who lived at a time when the original impact of Jesus' appearance was still alive was in a unique way privileged. Yet that original experience reaches us exclusively through Scripture. Scriptural expression, then, must remain the final authoritative basis of our own experience. In this respect our experience essentially differs from the original one, since it occurs on the basis of an earlier, expressed experience. Here, then, lies at least a normative restriction to the answer to the question explicitly raised in the *Interim Report*: "How far can this account [of the New Testament writers] of their experience of salvation in Jesus with its personal and collective coloring, still inspire us now and be our guide? And as Christians are we bound by all the interpretative elements?"³⁶ Since it is the expressed experience of the early communities that lies at the origin of our own, and since this expression indissolubly combines experience and interpretation, the entire New Testament text retains a unique authority. In order to continue in time, the revelation required some sort of definitive expression of the original, interpreted experience. Any attempt to separate the experience from the interpretation in this expression must run aground on Schillebeeckx' own solid principle of their indissoluble unity.

Nevertheless, it is equally certain that some elements of this expressed interpretation have become virtually unintelligible and have thereby lost at least the practical authority to determine our own Christ experience. Some distinction between experience and interpretation, then, must be made. But what are the criteria for such a distinction? Most educated Christians today do not blink an eye when hearing a good deal of the infancy pericopes in Luke and Matthew as well as a number of sayings and events of Jesus' public life attributed to Judaic or Hellenistic narrative models rather than to historical facts. Yet theologians remain (rightly) reluctant to give a similar interpretation to the Resurrection stories, even though they subject them to the same historical criticism. What in the New Testament reports should continue to determine authoritatively the modern experience to secure an essential continuity with the original experience, and what may safely be considered to belong

³⁶ *Interim Report* 15.

exclusively to contemporary interpretation? Let us return to the section in *Jesus* on the Resurrection.

EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSED INTERPRETATION

Schillebeeckx distinguishes the Easter experience from the "articulation factor" which interprets this experience against a given horizon of understanding. "After his death Jesus himself stands at the source of what we are calling the 'Easter experience' of the disciples; at all events, what we meet with here is an experience of grace. But *qua* human experience it is self-cognizant and spontaneously allied with a particular expression of itself."³⁷ The author rightly dismisses the charge of pure subjectivism. He specifically repudiates the thesis that "resurrection and belief in the resurrection are one and the same thing."³⁸ The Easter experience, as he conceives it, is obviously more than a subjective state of consciousness, though we may not be able to point out today in what precisely its objective element consisted. As for the traditional expression of the experience in the stories of the empty tomb and the appearances, he hastens to add that that expression became in some way an intrinsic part of the total experience. Yet he distinguishes the original experience, which was directly caused by Christ, from its interpreted expression in the stories of the empty tomb and the appearances.³⁹ The Easter experience itself, as distinct from its linguistic interpretation, rests partly on the disciples' earlier acquaintance with the earthly Jesus and partly on a wholly new conversion process. This new experience does not "consist in experiences of an empty tomb or of 'appearances' (themselves already an interpretation of the resurrection faith)," but in "an encounter with grace" after Jesus' death.⁴⁰ The *Interim Report* restates the distinction in even clearer terms: "The visual element in what the Easter experience was gains an evocative significance as a redundancy element when one stresses the cognitive aspect in the process of conversion which is implied in the names given by Christians to Jesus."⁴¹

³⁷ *Jesus* 392.

³⁸ *Jesus* 644.

³⁹ Cf. *Jesus* 393.

⁴⁰ *Jesus* 394.

⁴¹ *Interim Report* 81. Schillebeeckx admits that the exegete Descamps, in his favorable review of *Jesus*, gives the visual aspect "a more precise place . . . within the whole of what I call the process of conversion" (*Interim Report* 82). I wonder whether the term "central" would not have been more appropriate than "precise" for characterizing a position according to which the Easter experience cannot exist without those precise objective elements which we know through the Resurrection narratives. He concedes fairly that "the visionary element is the one which the written texts present to us directly, whereas the hypothesis of the process of conversion—which is also cognitive—is simply a deduction, and cannot be directly recognized in the original scriptural texts" (*ibid.*). Descamps's tighter connection between the experience and the events reported in the Gospel is based on a somewhat different evaluation of the significance of the narratives.

On the basis of this clear distinction (though not separation) between the Easter experience and its interpreted expression, we should reconsider the question why Christians could not draw the same conclusion in this as in all other cases. Why should they in this one instance not be allowed to relativize the interpreted expression as culturally determined by models which are no longer available to them? To be sure, the expression "is an intrinsic aspect of the experience itself."⁴² But in other cases this actual unity never constituted a sufficient basis for compelling the modern Christian to take experience and interpreted expression *per modum unius*. It invited him to seek *through* the interpreted expression the original experience and to expose himself to it in his own cultural context. As far as I can see, Schillebeeckx provides no clear criterion that would establish a unique connection of the Easter experience with its culture-bound expression. *Either* the salvation experience can be relived in forms that are not essentially bound to all the cultural models of the New Testament world (even though we become acquainted only through these models of interpretation), and then modern Christians could undergo the Easter experience while reserving judgment on the stories of the empty tomb and the appearances. *Or* the salvation experience and its New Testament expression are so indissolubly united that any attempt to regain that experience independently of its original models of expression becomes impossible or hazardous, and then each single element of the New Testament expression, however time-conditioned, retains its full, effective authority in structuring the modern Christ experience. Both alternatives entail difficulties: relativizing the canonical text may jeopardize the continuity of experience, while giving it priority over the living experience may return us to biblical literalism.

The problem may perhaps be advanced by incorporating Schillebeeckx' valuable distinction between experience and interpretation into a more comprehensive, evolutionary understanding of revelation. He appears to grant the original experience a priority over the culturally conditioned elements of interpretation. Thus he ascribes only the Easter experience itself to Jesus as to its direct cause. There is, indeed, no doubt that experience precedes the subsequent reflective interpretation, and even that it enjoys an ontological (though not a temporal) priority with respect to that indispensable interpretation which gives structure, emphasis, and meaning to the primary experience. But there is still a third form of interpretation, which consists in the very possibility of experience and which, in the case of a transcendent revelation, must be given with the experience itself. Cultural elements may prepare man for expressing a new experience of the transcendent in pre-existing models and concepts,

⁴² *Jesus* 392.

but nothing prepares or disposes him for the experience itself. This possibility contains the most basic interpretation, the fundamental orientation which urges it to choose some cultural models and excludes others and which guides the whole process of expression. This *primary interpretation*, consisting in the very possibility of a revelation, enjoys equal status with the original experience itself. To reduce it to a level below the experience is to perform an impossible abstraction on the experience itself. As a primary interpretation, it must be distinguished from the cultural interpretation through models and concepts. Since it conditions the very possibility of a revelatory experience, the primary interpretation cannot be detached from that experience. It forms no part of the process of expression as such, but directs it, determining which cultural models will be adopted and which ones will be rejected.

Schillebeeckx' strong assertion that the revelation is not a message but "an experience that became a message"⁴³ takes, in my opinion, insufficient account of this given, fundamental interpretation. Since it has also found its way into the New Testament expression, revelation is intrinsically, not secondarily, a universe of discourse, divine expression, and hence message. The position here proposed retains Schillebeeckx' basic insight that revelation *is* experience, but it qualifies his occasional emphasis of experience over expression. Those forms of interpretative expression which he discusses—the models, concepts, ideologies, expectations—belong, indeed, to the structuring rather than to the receiving of the actual experience. But the original core of revelation consists of both the experience and its given possibility, that is, its interpretative orientation. This given, primary interpretation enjoys the same privileged status as the experience itself, since it forms an essential part of it.

The original unity between experience and primary, expressed interpretation entails no need for a literalist reading of Scripture, for the original revelation event (I prefer this term, which denotes the objective as well as the subjective element) is from the beginning both totally culturally conditioned and God-given. Experience itself is by its very nature immanently human, and hence as much historically conditioned as its structuring and reflective interpretations. The aesthetic experience of nature did not emerge until the Hellenistic period, and the feeling of its sublime awesomeness not until the modern age. In both these cases, as in all others, the experience was as conditioned as its interpretation. On a fundamental level, interpretation and experience are one. Somewhat analogously, in a revelation experience both primary experience and primary interpretation exist as a single, original unity. Hence the link with both must be preserved in later confrontations with the original

⁴³ *Interim Report* 51.

Christ event. But at the same time both experience and interpretation develop—and this is what makes the hermeneutic enterprise so complex. Schillebeeckx' masterly analysis of the various levels of revelation has given it a new direction. Yet, instead of a single, privileged Jesus experience at the beginning, I would rather posit a continuing process of interpreted experience, of which with respect to later generations the first stage was not completed until it was codified, long after most eyewitnesses had died, in what later became the canonical text. The process would constantly pass through new experiences and interpretations, all of which, however, remain both subjectively and objectively dependent upon the original, interpreted experience.

To a great extent, Schillebeeckx already follows the direction here described. Along with his emphasis on experience, he constantly insists on the necessity to hold the subjective and objective elements of revelation together. Occasionally he even stresses the primary significance of the canonical expression as such. Thus, he replies to his critics in the *Interim Report*, the absence or presence of the Resurrection kerygma in the Q source is not the crucial issue, but rather its presence in the canonical synthesis of the various sources. In the total, interpreted revelation event, not what is oldest but what is fully, definitively expressed is what counts.

The unity of the original experience and interpretation, if consistently maintained, demands a more evenhanded treatment of the non-Jewish and Jewish sources than New Testament scholars often give them. Earlier in this century a healthy reaction challenged the questionable tendency of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Bousset, Reitzenstein, etc.) to reduce all New Testament stories to Hellenistic pagan sources. Unfortunately, with the reaction against this trend Christian scholars gradually came to assume that "Jewish" sources somehow deserve altogether a preferential treatment, as if they were religiously more acceptable than pagan ones. Schillebeeckx generally avoids this sort of religious legitimation by genealogy. Yet some traces of the tacit but common assumption remain. Among the credal tenets that eventually entered into the authoritative Christological tradition, the *theios anēr* doctrine receives an exceptionally critical treatment.⁴⁴ Younger exegetes, at least the ones with whom I converse, have generally become skeptical of clear-cut distinctions between "Jewish" and "Hellenistic" sources in the extremely syncretistic age of the New Testament, and are far more ready to resume the work left unfinished after the excesses of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. The origin of the sources, indifferent in itself, appears to take on an excessive importance if the interpretation as a whole is lowered to a

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx refers to it as an extrinsic, "inaccurate" element (*Jesus* 538).

secondary level (while remaining intrinsic and essential) with respect to experience; for then it becomes particularly important that the original, divinely caused "experience" not be betrayed by "human" models of interpretation. In that perspective Jewish sources, appearing in a religiously acceptable tradition, seem somehow "safer" than pagan ones. Yet, aside from historical grounds, the derivation of the models of secondary interpretation becomes far less important if the original interpretation is (divinely) given with the experience.

Now the author may occasionally favor Jewish sources, for strictly historical reasons or because of his greater familiarity with them. Yet at least in one instance the heavy impact of a typically Jewish model of interpretation appears to me unjustified. In comparing the ethical with the mystical element in religion in general, he concludes: "Both seem to me to be indispensable, but in view of the experiential structure of revelation, the symbolic religious talk of God owes the density of reality to the *mediation of ethical existence*."⁴⁵ This questionable statement is significantly confirmed by a reference to Lévinas, hardly an expert on any religion other than his own. Generally speaking, I do not regard Schillebeeckx' excursions into the comparative study of religion his strongest contribution. I fail to see how the reader can learn much that is useful for the understanding of Christology or, for that matter, of the nature of non-Christian religions from the long chapter in *Christ* (670–723) in which he compares various religious attitudes toward suffering. Is it possible to write anything meaningful on such a complex issue in terms of "the Hindus," "the Greeks," "the Romans" (in two pages consisting mostly of references to the late and uncharacteristically syncretistic *Aeneid*)? Combining Greeks and Romans in a comparison with Israel, Schillebeeckx concludes: "Israel shows great sensitivity to the suffering of others, of the people, but apart from the Epicureans and above all Virgil, the Greeks and Romans have little or no compassion. . . ."⁴⁶ Surely an amazing statement to come from someone who knows the Psalms as well as Schillebeeckx does.

This, as most other problematic positions, appears in the rather loosely connected speculations of the final part of *Christ* that unduly lengthen an already very long book. Not that the general thesis developed in these two hundred pages is superfluous: the actualization of the Christian message into social and political justice belongs indeed to the very essence of the experience of Christ today, and much of what Schillebeeckx has to say about it strikes me as admirably balanced and to the point; especially the reflection on Christian salvation and politics is worth pondering.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Christ* 61.

⁴⁶ *Christ* 719.

⁴⁷ *Christ* 773–89.

But in this conclusion, where the writing should have been most taut and precise, it suddenly relaxes to a less systematic discourse. Various reflections on all that needs reform in the First, Second, and Third World lack the sharp focus of the earlier part. Chapters and sections follow one another without inner necessity. A similar weakening of intent and structure is noticeable in the final part of *Jesus*, even though that part contains some of the most innovative insights of the entire work.

THE UNFINISHED REINTERPRETATION

It is also mainly in these final parts that the author, confronted with such fundamental metaphysical problems as the nature of God and of His relation to the world, relents the critical attitude with which he had hitherto approached his subject. Without any of his former reservations about ancient models, he now appears ready to accept the philosophical concepts of the New Testament. This weakening of critical acumen is understandable enough, considering the enormous size of his task, yet introduces an inconsistency in his approach. Having first subjected the ideological world of the primitive Christian community to a critical examination, he owes it to his own method in presenting the message of salvation in modern terms to take account of the changes in our metaphysical awareness as well as of the evolution in our social-political consciousness. The philosophical presuppositions of a text deserve as thorough a hermeneutic scrutiny as its social background and its religious models and concepts. Schillebeeckx has confined his critical investigation to the latter task. In the final part of *Christ* a chapter significantly entitled "God Does Not Want Mankind to Suffer" describes God as a personal agent who has clear designs with man and the world. This, to be sure, is the concept that rules New Testament theology, but since the models, ideologies, and presuppositions of that theology have been subjected to such a thorough critique, one would have expected an equally critical attitude toward the even more momentous assumptions about the nature of God. Whenever an opportunity presents itself to question the beliefs of his sources in this area of "higher ideologies," the author declines to use it. While discussing the relation between God and the creature, he briefly confronts the issue of pantheism and panentheism, but peremptorily dismisses it.

We are bound to say that God's immanence only permits a non-divine, creaturely view, in profile, of his transcendence, which after all is not constituted by his immanence in the creature. To affirm that it is would in my view be the definition of pantheism or panentheism. . . . Pantheism is not defined by its powerful emphasis on the unity between God and his creatures; expressions such as *sumus aliquid Dei* or *sumus Dei*—we are "of God"—can have a Christian as well as a pantheistic implication; and what is more, many forms of authentic pantheism

accept both God's activity in creation and a term distinct from it: the creature. What is specifically peculiar to pantheism is its denial of the gratuity or radical quality of "grace" in being creaturely, so that (tacitly or explicitly) it asserts that God intrinsically needs created things in order to complete the very definition of the "being-God" of God.⁴⁸

A discussion of God's creative activity in the world directed to modern readers merits a more nuanced presentation of the "pantheist" position. But even more amazing is the absence of any distinction between pantheism and panentheism, which many Christian theologians today consider to be the only consistent philosophy of God.

In the sixth chapter of the *Interim Report*, devoted to creation as seen in the light of salvation, we read that "in the Jewish-Christian belief in creation" man is simply man and the world simply the world, that is, not-God—"they could just as well not have been."⁴⁹ Finitude here consists in the absence of any prior necessity—it is there "inexplicably, as a pure gift." The next page emphasizes "the absolute presence of God in and with the finite." Two such disparate views call for some sort of synthesis. The same absence of a conceptual synthesis strikes us in the discussion of natural catastrophes (e.g., deformed children). They are attributed to the unpredictable possibilities for contingency "for which God is responsible," yet which "do not leave . . . God indifferent."⁵⁰ How does the absolute distinction between God and the world, so strongly asserted against any kind of pantheism,⁵¹ leave God a chance of not being indifferent? In speculative matters Schillebeeckx shows a clear preference for the paratactic over the syntactic expression. He tends to oppose contrasting divine attributes rather than relate them.

Schillebeeckx superbly handles ideas when confronting methodological problems. Yet he seems reluctant to impose any synthesis of his own upon the visions and ideas gathered from his study of the New Testament. As daring as we find him in other domains of hermeneutics, as cautious does he appear with respect to that final reflection which synthesizes ideas into structured thought. He most frequently refers to such fragmentary philosophers as Buber and Lévinas, who, uncomfortable with vast speculative syntheses, favor developing biblical ideas, or to analysts and structuralists who, skeptical of speculative constructions, remain wary of venturing beyond the formal structure of language. Almost thirty years ago, in a masterly study of the sacramental theory of symbols, the (untranslated) *Sacramentele Heilseconomie*, he showed his exceptional command over the metaphysical tradition of scholasticism. In a study that deals primarily with the Jesus and the Christ experience of the

⁴⁸ *Jesus* 631–82.

⁴⁹ *Interim Report* 113.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 118.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.* 114.

primitive Christian communities, he is understandably reluctant to tackle the philosophical problems of the modern age. Yet the fourth part of each work invites us to rethink that experience in modern terms, and that rethinking requires, above all, a re-examination of our basic religious concepts. Schillebeeckx has been described as more than any other living theologian predisposed to assume the entire problem of secularization and to give it a Christian interpretation.⁵² He has dared to raise the question of Jesus and of the Christ in the radically secular content of "an age which in most, if not all sectors of its life appears to do without God."⁵³ Such an age, Schillebeeckx wrote, "requires us to speak about God in a way that is different from our past speaking about Him."⁵⁴ Not only the appearance of the Christ differs in a secular situation, but also the conceptual experience of his message. Schillebeeckx fears no radical formulas in the social interpretation of this message; but he leaves us largely unenlightened about the encounter of that message with modern thought.

In the end, the nature of this encounter may well depend on the larger question, what precisely the secularization process has meant to our culture and how much of it Christianity is able to assume. Having no ready answer to offer to this momentous question, I have no right to criticize one who has struggled as valiantly as has Schillebeeckx to provide one, at least on the level of praxis. Yet I cannot but notice his ambiguity in discussing the ethics of redemption in a secular age (in the final part of *Christ*). To what extent can and must Christian ethics itself be secularized? Schillebeeckx characteristically states his position in a parenthetical phrase:

Grace has political and social consequences (even if often this Christian stimulus is seen as sociologized in culture, i.e. as *secularization* in culture, and is often brought to its social conclusions by non-Christians; that simply means that in the long run Christian redemption is also "secularized", i.e. becomes an inner main-spring of the *saeculum* or is sociologized).⁵⁵

This position logically follows from the present need to extend the Christian experience beyond the boundaries of the churches. But it may easily lead to a variation of the kind of cultural or ethical Christianity of nineteenth-century Liberal Protestantism, which no one wishes to revive, least of all Schillebeeckx. A few passages in the final pages of *Christ*

⁵² Cf. A. Van de Walle, "Theologie over de Werkelijkheid," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 14 (1974) 469. This particular number (4) of *TvT* is a Schillebeeckx issue.

⁵³ *Jesus* 636.

⁵⁴ "Secularity," in *God the Future of Man* 156.

⁵⁵ *Christ* 565.

appear to lean toward some sort of social acculturation of Christianity. Not, of course, with the established political order, but with today's radical movements. Thoroughly secular, these movements articulate a common social concern while leaving the motivation to the individuals. But their basic position remains that of a closed humanism. Now obviously, Christians may have to co-operate with them as the most effective or even the only existing instruments for the kind of structural changes demanded by social justice. In any event, an evangelical attitude remains attentively open to such "signs of the times." But the message of salvation should not be equated with participation in this kind of social action. Schillebeeckx never does this and explicitly warns against all horizontal reductionism of the gospel. Yet the entire ethical drift of his interpretation of the message of salvation to the modern world strikes me as an undue concession to a mentality in which man views himself as the sole shaper of his own destiny. His stress of the active over the passive elements in the religious attitude of the contemporary Christian suggests the strong impact of a secular concept of self-transcendence. Charges that Schillebeeckx reduces the message of salvation to social action are blatantly unfair; but his emphasis on orthopraxis nevertheless appears to derive more from modern secular than from New Testament sources.

Again and again Schillebeeckx justifies his position by clear references to the New Testament. But in doing so, does he not project typically modern concerns upon an ancient text? Were New Testament Christians as intent on building up "a new world in the small society of their own Christian communities"⁵⁶ beyond the interindividual level? I doubt whether their attempt to reform social structures was as pronounced as Schillebeeckx presents it. Did they, so profoundly given to the idea of the transitoriness of this world, not share the widespread attitude of resignation to the fate of living in empires over the structures of which they, as everyone else, had lost all control? How solid are the arguments to support the thesis that the critical variant of New Testament Christianity became ineffective in erecting new structures only because of external circumstances? Schillebeeckx writes:

This appeal to enter into the kingdom of God was also concerned with the creation of a better society *on earth*, a society in which righteousness prevails. In this respect, they had a good understanding of Jesus' proclamation of the approaching rule of God. But the situation did not permit this Christian minority group to make any alterations to the social structure of the time in any way.⁵⁷

That Christians were quite critical of ancient society (as other philo-

⁵⁶ *Christ* 559.

⁵⁷ *Christ* 559.

sophical and religious groups were) and that they, generally speaking, saw their primitive community as a paradigmatic instrument in the world, a *sacramentum mundi*, I do not doubt. But that they ever considered implementing even the basic structural changes that such an ideal requires from our point of view, remains unproven. Certainly, Christians were powerless to abolish the institution of slavery at large; but, as far as we know, they did little to suppress it even within their own communities. It required no revolutionary attitude on the part of an individual to free his slaves. Many Romans did so, and among them undoubtedly some Christians. But nowhere in the New Testament do we read that, if at all possible, they were expected to do so. I seriously doubt whether the early Christians understood the *metanoia* as a summons to structural changes in society.⁵⁸ Such an alteration was certainly implied in Jesus' message but it was only gradually realized.

Even those who believe that Schillebeeckx has gone rather far in "secularizing" the ethics of redemption will have to admit that the reputed one-sidedness of his presentation has not resulted in a weakening of the properly religious quality of the Christ experience. On the contrary, the principal merit of this great work may well consist in its attempt to translate the religious impact of the Jesus appearance for a generation which was no longer able to experience that impact through the text alone. By forcefully confronting the Christian with his (culturally obscured) origins, it has awakened him once again to a Christian self-consciousness. The ultimate explication of what this implies must rest with the readers. Schillebeeckx has set the stage for their personal reflection.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Christ* 563.