

## SCHILLEBEECKX ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

DANIEL P. THOMPSON

*[Because of the shifts in his fundamental understanding of epistemology, salvation, and revelation, Edward Schillebeeckx argues that an appropriate understanding of the development of doctrine no longer locates doctrinal continuity in the preservation or logical development of earlier doctrinal language. Rather, he argues that doctrinal development authentically arises from a critical translation of Christian experience from one historical era to the next.]*

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY in 1994, the Belgian-born Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx published a book of interviews and personal reflections aimed primarily at his fellow Dutch-language speakers. With the humorous yet challenging title *Theologisch Testament: Notarieel nog niet verleden* (loosely translated as *Theological Last Will and Testament: Official Notice from Somebody Not Yet Gone*) (Baarn, Netherlands: H. Nelissen, 1994), Schillebeeckx indeed served notice that despite his advanced years, he would continue to engage in new theological investigations, even as he also reflected on his over 50 years of scholarly work. Retired since 1983 from the chair of historical and dogmatic theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, Schillebeeckx has continued to reside there and to produce new works, including the conclusion to the so-called christological trilogy, *Church: The Human Story of God* (1990), and a work with Catharina Halkes, *Mary: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (1993). Since then, although the pace of his research has slowed, he has honored the promise of his last will and testament, so to speak, and pursued work on a book about hermeneutics, and also a new work on the sacraments, soon to appear, with the tentative title *Interrupted Story—Resistance, Engagement, Celebration: Sacraments as Metaphorical Celebrations*. This work brings him back full circle to the theological topic with which he began his career and perhaps will offer a concrete example in his own thought of the theme of my essay, the development of doctrine.

DANIEL P. THOMPSON received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1998. He is now assistant professor in the department of theology at Fordham University, New York City. Besides translations of several of Schillebeeckx's articles, he has also published a study on "The Church as Sacrament: Schillebeeckx's Contribution to the Construction of a Critical Ecclesiology" in *Religious Studies and Theology* (1998). He is now completing a manuscript tentatively entitled: *The Language of Dissent: Edward Schillebeeckx on the Crisis of Authority in the Catholic Church*.

Strictly speaking, Edward Schillebeeckx's treatment of the problem of the development of doctrine<sup>1</sup> is an outgrowth of a more fundamental concern of his thought: explaining the significance and abiding validity of belief in Jesus the Christ in the complex, pluralistic, and secularized modern world. In the face of critics' claims that he sells short or even jettisons the classic christological tradition, Schillebeeckx claims that making this tradition a living reality for the faithful today is the main purpose of his work. He writes:

Well, as far as I am concerned, Chalcedon is the norm that governs all of my theological studies; it is to this dogma that I wish to 'lead by the hand' (*manuducere*) the Christians of our day who have their fill of books about the 'death of God' and about Jesus being only a man, though a great prophet. If I regard Chalcedon as a dead letter, I would not have the courage or desire to write two books on Jesus which together come to over fourteen hundred pages.<sup>2</sup>

In order for Schillebeeckx to keep the letter of Chalcedon alive, so to speak, he not only delves into the historical events that led to the Church's confession of Jesus as Christ and Son of God but also explains how any such confession and resultant creed can still bear meaning for the believer now. This article will explore this branching theme from Schillebeeckx's Christology: his general theology of the development of doctrine. In order to do this, I will focus on three points: first, the epistemological and theological framework that shapes Schillebeeckx's thought, with particular reference to the underlying philosophy of historical change that he presents;

<sup>1</sup> In this article "development of doctrine" will serve as a shorthand term referring to the whole complex of theological questions concerning the origin, formulation, proclamation, and abiding validity of the teachings and confessions of the Church. As I will note below, Schillebeeckx in his later work eschews the fine distinctions of the preconciliar "theological notes" in favor of simpler classifications of the weight and authority of the Church's teaching and confession. See, for example, his article "Church Teaching on Marriage and Sexuality," in *Catholic Divorce: The Deception of Annulments*, ed. Pierre Hegy and Joseph Martos, trans. Daniel P. Thompson (New York: Continuum, 2000) 180–200, at 186, where he distinguishes "Church confession" (the most grave and authoritative level) from "a conviction of the Church" and from "an opinion of the Church." Hence, although he is aware of the distinctions made in the past between "dogma" and other "doctrines" (with the former referring to revealed and infallibly defined teachings and the latter to a variety of other teachings of different levels of authority) he will use both terms in his later work to describe teachings that are usually of the "church confession" type. In this looser sense, "dogma" and "doctrine" are often interchangeable terms in his later work and so will appear in the article to follow.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, "Schillebeeckx to Congregation of Faith," in Ted M. Schoof, ed., *The Schillebeeckx Case: Official Exchange of Letters and Documents in the Investigation of Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1976–1980*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Paulist, 1980) 65.

second, his specific criteria for orthodoxy and apostolicity; third, his consequent understanding of the status of doctrinal language, made especially clear through his description of the factors that necessitate “breaks” in that language. The article will conclude with some comments about the radicalization of the question of “breaks” in doctrinal language raised, but not pursued by Schillebeeckx, in his discussion of the advent of postmodernity.

### EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

As most of his readers are well aware, Schillebeeckx’s thought defies easy summarization and systematization. I have argued elsewhere that the complex, eclectic, and occasionally bewildering nature of his theology is due to what I have termed the “non-antithetical, yet dialectical” nature of all his thinking.<sup>3</sup> This phrase is a short designation for the idea that all objects, subjects, events, ideas, and experiences exist only within a network of irreducible, continually dynamic, and mutually informing relationships. These relationships in Schillebeeckx’s thought have a certain ontological priority. Analysis and separation of the elements of these relationships are possible, but only with a realization of their greater dialectical unity. Hence, although I present these presuppositions of his thought sequentially in outline form, one should recall that the epistemological ideas inform the theological and vice-versa, the specifically christological informs the ecclesiological and vice-versa, etc. As Ted Schoof has said, Schillebeeckx has an “almost physical aversion to any trace of dualism.”<sup>4</sup>

First and at the most general level, Schillebeeckx argues that human experience and knowledge take place within three “epistemological circles”: the ontological circle of subject and object, where knowledge is mediated in a limited fashion by concepts (this is his early “perspectivalist” approach); the hermeneutical circle of context, new experiences and reformed context, where knowledge is mediated by historical tradition, present encounter, and future anticipation; and the critical circle of theory and praxis, where knowledge is mediated by negative contrast experiences, ideology critique, and action on the behalf of suffering humanity. In Schillebeeckx’s later work, the third circle is the dominant epistemological model, which serves to explain the previous two developed in earlier phases of his career.

Second, Schillebeeckx asserts that only within these epistemological conditions does authentic religious language arise. In turn Schillebeeckx names

<sup>3</sup> Daniel P. Thompson, “Theological Dissent and Critical Communities in the Catholic Church: A Constructive Interpretation of the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1998) 18–19.

<sup>4</sup> Ted M. Schoof, “E. Schillebeeckx: 25 years at Nijmegen,” *Theology Digest* 38 (1991) 40.

salvation, the actual and proleptic human experience of wholeness and healing, as the sole sufficient ground for this language. He terms “revelation” the explicit naming of this salvation as coming from God. Hence he argues that any authentic language of revelation must both follow from a real experience of human flourishing and also meet the epistemological criteria that shape all knowledge. Nevertheless, revelation and the theological language dependent upon it do not have their origin from human experience (and are therefore not mere human projections) but they must make sense within the conditions of that experience.

Third, in the Christian context, encounter with Jesus is the definitive source of salvation, because Jesus is, in Schillebeeckx’s phrase, “concentrated creation,” the person in whom God’s salvific will for humanity (the *humanum*) is expressed and offered in a fully human life. The salvific encounter with Jesus is the basis for the explicit language of revelation, Scripture, and confession in the Church. From this revelatory source in Jesus, the Church, in Schillebeeckx’s later theology particularly, functions as the anticipatory sign of both God’s reign and the *humanum*. Within the boundaries of human historicity, the Church preserves and stands under the subversive memory and presence of Jesus, which both drives it to make actual the salvific experience of the *humanum* now and warns it to hope ultimately only in God’s eschatological reign, when the now fragmentary *humanum* will come to full expression.

### Historical Change and Continuity in Schillebeeckx’s Theology

Of particular importance for Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the development of doctrine is the philosophy of history, so to speak, which operates in his work. Starting again with the christological task, Schillebeeckx draws on the French *Annales*<sup>5</sup> school to construct a method for thinking about both continuities and breaks in human history and applies this to the question of the meaning of the New Testament witness and the doctrines of Chalcedon for modern people.

One of the most important characteristics of Schillebeeckx’s later work

<sup>5</sup> A French school of historiography, founded in 1929 and associated with the journal *Annales*. Led in the first generation by the journal’s founders, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, and later by Fernand Braudel, the *Annales* school sought to overcome a historiography based solely on a narrative history of political events. In order to do so, they substituted a “problem-oriented analytical history” which intended to expand the range of historiography to cover all kinds of human activity and also to think about the long term impact of factors other than the political on the development of history. To this end, they also practiced an interdisciplinary approach to history which drew on the insights of geography, sociology, psychology, etc. This information is taken from Peter Burke’s *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–89* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1991).

is his thoroughgoing embrace of the radical historicity of the human subject. In what I have called his second and third epistemological circles, concrete experience, he argues, is always interpreted experience, and interpretation relies on elements both internal and external to a specific experience. Furthermore, these external elements are often drawn from the historical traditions within which all understanding must take place; these traditions in turn form pre-understandings and theoretical interpretative models that integrate the diversity of human experience into overarching views of self, world, and God.

However, theoretical models and traditions of understanding themselves are thoroughly enmeshed in the fabric of history. Beyond even models and pre-understandings handed down by tradition, the hermeneutical circle, according to Schillebeeckx, also includes what I call the “epochal” level. In order to grapple with the question of understanding the significance of Jesus in a modern world centuries removed from the forms of thought and life in the ancient world, Schillebeeckx introduces a three-fold distinction to explain the rhythms of cultural change in history.<sup>6</sup> First, there is “‘fact-constituted history’ or ‘ephemeral history,’ with its brief and rapidly expiring rhythm; the events of everyday come and go.” Second, there is “‘conjunctural history,’ which is more expansive, has a more profound reach and is more comprehensive, but then moves at a much slower tempo or rate of change; in other words a cultural conjuncture lasts a long time.” Schillebeeckx also calls this plane the “epochal” further below. Finally, there is “‘structural history,’ with a time-span of centuries, almost bordering on the central point between what moves and what does not, although not standing outside of history.”<sup>7</sup> Schillebeeckx likens the relationship between these three planes to that of “a turning but stationary top, around which everything revolves fast or not so fast.”<sup>8</sup>

Since human thinking is as much bound to these planes as any other element of human life, Schillebeeckx uses this schema to explain how thinking from the past can both be alien to contemporary forms of thought and yet in some way understandable to them. Beyond the ephemeral level of the mundane and the “modish,” the conjunctural level preserves over a longer period of time the intellectual spirit of the age.<sup>9</sup> Beneath these slow

<sup>6</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. by Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979) 576–79.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 577.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> “Now what has been called the ‘epochal horizon of the intellect,’ of thinking done within the bounds of ‘interpretative models’ (with the mark of a particular period upon them) or a horizon of ‘current’ experience—all this I would put in the second plane of ‘history’; in other words, the particular horizon of experience and intellection, conditioned by the spirit of the age, belongs to ‘conjunctural history’: this is more firmly and deeply based than is day-to-day thinking and experience

changes in conjunctural history is the even more slowly moving structural history of humanity. Schillebeeckx argues that this structural history manifests itself in the different periods of conjunctural history and allows for human understanding across these periods. This does not mean, however, that structural history contains a timeless “essence” of human nature. On the contrary, Schillebeeckx consistently states that, just as a concrete experience is always a dialectic of encountered reality and interpretative elements, structural history is only manifested in the particular thought forms of a period of conjunctural history.<sup>10</sup>

Schillebeeckx places “interpretative models” within the conjunctural level of human history. Hence interpretative models reflect a wider “spirit of the age” and also manifest the deeper structural elements of human history. However, as history proceeds and a new phase of conjunctural history arises, these interpretative models will themselves need interpretation. Because of the deep structures of human history this re-interpretation is possible; because of the shifts over time, this re-interpretation is necessary.<sup>11</sup> Human understanding, therefore, takes place in a hermeneutical

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with their fleeting character; a given intellectual horizon, therefore, persists through a whole period” (ibid. 577–78).

<sup>10</sup> “We must remember that even in that sector these three planes of non-simultaneity are not parallel nor separately procurable but criss-crossing one another; together they form just a single history of thinking. We do not mean to say that in addition to changing concepts in man’s thinking there are also lastingly valid concepts which can be supposed to survive intact every more or less fundamental shift in the experiential or world horizon. We do mean that the basic structure of human thinking asserts itself in the conjuncturally conditioned ideas and in the changing horizon of man’s understanding and experience” (ibid. 578).

<sup>11</sup> Schillebeeckx uses this view of history in the context of a discussion of christological doctrine, particularly that of Chalcedon. The distinctions described above allow him to argue for both the permanent significance of Chalcedon and also the need to reinterpret the doctrine in a new phase of history. As I will suggest below, this analysis also serves as the underpinning for what Schillebeeckx calls the “criterion of the proportional norm” or the “analogy of faith” when he talks about the perduring element in Christian faith and a standard for the measurement of orthodoxy. For a complete discussion of these criteria, see *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Seabury, 1974) 58–63; *Theologisch Geloofsverstaan anno 1983* (Baarn, Netherlands: H. Nelissen, 1983) 12–16; *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 40–45. Schillebeeckx briefly discusses the relationship between conjunctural history and paradigms in “The Role of History in What is Called the New Paradigm,” in *Paradigm Change in Theology*, ed. Hans Küng and David Tracy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), reprinted in *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology and the Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 239–42. For a comparison of Schillebeeckx’s discussion of history with that of Lonergan’s, see Bernard J. McGinn, “Critical History and Contemporary Catholic Theology,” *Criterion* 20 (Winter 1981) 18–25.

circle that spans historical epochs even as tradition itself is subject to the slow changes of the thought forms of a particular age.

### CRITERIA OF APOSTOLICITY AND ORTHODOXY

With this framework in mind, I will now turn to the more specific question about how Schillebeeckx describes the authentic historical transmission of the experience of salvation and revelation in the Christian community, which he addresses under the rubrics of criteria of apostolicity and orthodoxy.

The later Schillebeeckx (post-1966)<sup>12</sup> distances himself from his preconciliar theology that locates orthodoxy in the authentic development of dogma itself. Because of the epistemological turns of his later theology, he will instead opt for, as I would summarize it: a hermeneutical, critical, and practical translation of Christian experience from one historical era to the next. Because this translation of experience in the Church is itself the line of apostolic continuity, it is also the bearer of “orthodoxy.” Therefore, any discussion of Schillebeeckx’s later understanding of dogmas and doctrines must necessarily address first his criteria for this translation of experience.

In *The Understanding of Faith*, Schillebeeckx names three criteria of “orthodoxy”: the criterion of the proportional norm, the criterion of orthopraxis, and the criterion of the reception by the whole people of God.<sup>13</sup> Of these three, I think that the first is his most encompassing explanation for how this process of the critical translation of experience should take place, while the latter two are specifications and corollaries thereof.

The criterion of the proportional norm begins with the recognition that any purely theoretical understanding of the faith is an impossibility within the epistemological conditions of human historicity.<sup>14</sup> Because the criterion

<sup>12</sup> See Thompson, “Theological Dissent and Critical Communities,” chap. 4, for a more complete summary of the early Schillebeeckx’s understanding of this matter. In brief, he locates this continuity in the development of dogmas that truly express, however inadequately, the mystery of salvation and revelation contained in the deposit of faith. This continuity in development is guaranteed by the Church’s magisterium, whose task it is to preserve, define and teach these doctrines, and ultimately by the Holy Spirit, whose guidance preserves the magisterium from error and overcomes the fallibility of the Church’s human members. This doctrinal development does not equate continuity with the simple repetition of dogmatic definitions from the past, but allows for the possibility of new conceptual expressions that clarify and refine the Church’s earlier understanding in new contexts. Theologians in particular have the role of advancing this scientific understanding of the faith, even if their conclusions always stand under the judgment of the magisterium.

<sup>13</sup> Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith* 55–72.

<sup>14</sup> “From the purely theoretical point of view, orthodoxy cannot be verified. A purely theoretical hermeneutics, even of the existentially theoretical kind, based on a study of the humanities, such as that of Gadamer, cannot solve the problem adequately” (ibid. 58).

for orthodoxy cannot be derived in such a theoretical construction, or even from a so-called essence of faith that is simply clothed in different conceptual forms, Schillebeeckx argues that continuity in the understanding of faith comes from the act or intentionality of faith itself in relationship to the various referential contexts in which that act occurs. According to Schillebeeckx, there is only one saving mystery of Christ that elicits the inward act of faith, but that saving mystery both expresses itself (through the biblical *kerygma*) and is received and understood in the course of the Church's history in a variety of different contexts and through a diversity of "structuring elements."<sup>15</sup> The constant factor, therefore, is not the act or intentionality of faith, nor is it the "structuring elements" that express that act. Rather, the norm is proportional relationship between the two, as they both shape the understanding of the one saving mystery of Christ.

Schillebeeckx consistently maintains this proportional understanding of the translation of orthodoxy throughout his later work. For example, in his 1983 retirement lecture, Schillebeeckx employs the same idea to describe how theology, hermeneutically and critically aware of the poles of tradition and situation, maintains an identity of meaning.

That identity-of-meaning is only to be found *on the level of the corresponding relationship between the original message* (tradition) and the *situation*, different each time, then and now. That is what is meant by what used to be called the 'analogia fidei.' The fundamental identity-of-meaning between the successive periods of Christian understanding of the tradition of faith does not refer to corresponding *terms*, for example, between the situation of the Bible and our situation . . . , but rather to corresponding *relationships* between the terms (message and situation, then and now). There is thus a fundamental unity and equality, but this has no relationship to the *terms* of the hermeneutical equation, but to the *relationship* between those terms.<sup>16</sup>

He then goes on to illustrate this complex set of relationships by arguing that the "*given* articulation or relationship" between Jesus' message and his sociohistorical context is equal to the proportional relationship between the New Testament message and its sociohistorical context.<sup>17</sup> This proportional relationship is then reproduced in the proportional relationship between the patristic understanding of faith and its sociohistorical context, between the medieval understanding of faith and its sociohistorical context, and so on. Finally this proportional relationship must be reproduced in the current situation lest the understanding of faith become frozen in an earlier

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 60–61.

<sup>16</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch Geloofsverstaan anno 1983* 14–15. (Emphasis Schillebeeckx's)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 15. (Emphasis Schillebeeckx's)

relationship and no longer address the contemporary situation.<sup>18</sup> Only in this relationship and its continual translation can one find Christian identity. As Schillebeeckx puts it, “Christian identity, the one and the same, is thus never *the equal*, but *the proportionally equal*.”<sup>19</sup>

This understanding of Christian identity as the translation of experience is not simply the hermeneutical reinterpretation of a past tradition so that it bears meaning in a new situation. Rather, as Schillebeeckx’s second criterion of orthodoxy points out, orthopraxis itself is part of the translation of the understanding of faith. This criterion is the logical outgrowth of the shift in Schillebeeckx’s epistemological framework from the second to the third circles which I described above. In this third circle, Schillebeeckx adapts ideas from the Frankfurt School and Ernst Bloch to argue that the universal resistance to that which diminishes or destroys human life provides a negative, but real source of hope for human fulfillment. This negative and diffuse hope is made positive and concrete, Schillebeeckx says, in the life of Jesus himself. “The *humanum* which is sought, but always threatened, is proclaimed and promised in Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is the *humanum* which is sought, but now promised in Christ, made conceivable and really assured for us in grace.”<sup>20</sup> However, because of the dialectic in the Church described above, between past event, present actualization, and future promise, this fulfillment of the *humanum* in Christ is also a continuing task for the Christian in the current situation.

The object of Christian faith is, of course, already realised in Christ, but it is only realised in him as our promise and our future. But the future cannot be theoretically interpreted, it must be done. The *humanum* which is sought and which is proclaimed and promised to us in Christ is not an object of purely contemplative expectation, but also a historical form which is already growing in the world: at least this is what we have to do, in the perspective of eschatological hope. Christianity is not simply a hermeneutic undertaking, not simply an illumination of existence, but also a renewal of existence, in which ‘existence’ concerns man as an individual person and in his social being.<sup>21</sup>

This interrelationship of theory and praxis leads then to Schillebeeckx’s third criterion for orthodoxy, the acceptance by the people of God. Relying on the ecclesiological motifs of the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx argues that the Church, as the people of God, is a community of shared discourse and communication that comes prior to any distinctions between clergy and laity, and supersedes the claims of any individual theologian or

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Schillebeeckx uses nearly the same wording and the same schematic representation to describe this criterion in *Church: The Human Story of God* 41–44.

<sup>19</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch Geloofsverstaan anno 1983* 15. (Emphasis Schillebeeckx’s)

<sup>20</sup> Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* 65.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 66.

local community. “The subject sustaining the hermeneutics is not the individual theologian,” Schillebeeckx writes, “but the community of the church as a whole.”<sup>22</sup> Within this community there are various roles that interact with each other through a “tested dialectical process”<sup>23</sup> to ensure the orthodoxy of the transmission of the faith. In this Schillebeeckx is in agreement with his earlier writings; however, here, he also argues that this communal process consists of a series of mutually critical relationships, including those between theologians and the magisterium, between the local church and the other local churches of the wider community and also between local churches and their leaders, including the pope. Even if the local community must see itself always in relationship with the wider Church and ultimately under the judgment of the bishop of Rome in his capacity as successor of Peter, this does not mean that the local church may not be a source for a new interpretation of faith for the entire Church.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Schillebeeckx holds that when the specific praxis and understanding of faith of a local community gains acceptance in the Church as a whole, this is itself a sign of orthodox continuity.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, this criterion of acceptance, like the criterion of orthopraxis, is not absolute nor is it to be identified with the concept of “reception”; simple “reception” by the community is in itself not a sufficient guarantee of apostolic continuity.<sup>26</sup> The understanding of “acceptance”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>24</sup> “The local communities of God are therefore essentially subject to the criticism of the other local churches and, ultimately, to that of all the leaders of the local churches with the ‘president of the bond of love’ among them—the bishop to whom the office of the primacy of Peter is entrusted within the college of bishops. Assuming this, then, the consciousness of faith of one local church which accepts a given interpretation of faith may well be a *locus theologicus*, a source for theology within the universal church, an indication of the Holy Spirit, on the basis of which the given interpretation may be regarded as a safe guiding principle” (ibid.).

<sup>25</sup> “Acceptance by the community of faith or, seen from a different point of view, the *sensus fidelium* or consciousness of faith of the community, thus forms an essential part of the principle of the verification of orthodoxy. Because this orthodoxy is, as I have said, the theoretical aspect of Christian praxis, the ‘acclamation’ or ‘amen’ forms an essential part of the structure of the Christian liturgy in which orthodoxy is above all to be found: *lex orandi, lex credendi*” (ibid. 71–72).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Edward Schillebeeckx, “Magisterium and Ideology,” in *Authority in the Church and the Schillebeeckx Case*, ed. Leonard Swidler and Piet Fransen (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 11–12. “Second, there are others who seem to hold the opinion that the only authority which exists is that accepted by the community. They are right in emphasizing that, without what patristic and medieval theologians called ‘*receptio*’ by the community of faith, authority in the Church is meaningless. Proponents of this position forget, however, that authority does not become illegitimate without reception. In other words, no matter how important reception is for ‘empowering of an authority,’ it is not the foundation of authority, but only a response to a claim of authority. The foundation of authority must come from elsewhere.” See also, *Church: The Human Story of God* 215.

presented here includes mutual criticism and a recognition of the role of the Church's teaching authority. Moreover, this complex process of acceptance by the community, both leaders and non-leaders, stands under both the continually normative memory of Jesus and the eschatological proviso. Therefore, in order to preserve apostolic orthodoxy, the community must continually translate and re-enact the previously accepted understanding of faith within its own era.

### THE STATUS OF DOCTRINES

What then is the status of doctrines in Schillebeeckx's later work and how are they related to this critical translation of experience?

In the most general sense, Schillebeeckx maintains a continuity with his earlier understanding of dogma; they are expressions of the essential truths of the Christian faith. "Generally and ecumenically speaking (so that this also holds for non-Catholic, Christian churches), dogma means the Christian teaching of the faith in so far as that cannot be given up, because it goes back to the word of God."<sup>27</sup>

However, this "teaching of the faith" is not a timeless set of propositional statements that captures the whole reality of salvation in conceptual form. Rather, in the light of the framework and criteria just described, Schillebeeckx will argue that dogmas are ecclesial formulations of the experience of faith that fall within the hermeneutical, critical and practical limits (and possibilities) of all human language. Given this definition, Schillebeeckx argues that "development" is a less accurate term for the process of dogmatic transmission than "translation" or even "reenactment." This definition does not evacuate dogmas of their truth, but it does make dogmas dependent in a dialectical sense on the experiences of faith that give rise to them. As I will illustrate below, Schillebeeckx thinks that a dogma can serve as a bridge to an authentic experience of faith from the past (and in the present); conversely, a dogma misunderstood can serve as a barrier to an authentic contemporary experience of faith. Simple continuity in dogmatic expression does not necessarily guarantee continuity in the experience of faith. As Schillebeeckx writes, "Continuity can therefore also be

<sup>27</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch Testament: Notarieel nog niet verleden* (Baarn, Netherlands: H. Nelissen, 1994) 73. See also Edward Schillebeeckx, "Breuken in christelijke dogma's," in *Breuklijnen: Grenservaringen en zoektochten*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx, Bas van Iersel, Ad Willems, and Hermann Wegman (Baarn, Netherlands: H. Nelissen, 1994) 15–49, at 16–19, for a nearly identical discussion of the meaning of dogma. In this article, Schillebeeckx uses the same definition of dogma cited above and adds: "Non-Catholic, Christian churches will rather speak of 'formulas of unity' " (19).

only apparent-continuity. A certain *break*, such as that of Vatican II, can really mean a rediscovery of the deepest tendencies of the Gospel.”<sup>28</sup>

In a recent publication, Schillebeeckx explores at greater length the factors that may necessitate these breaks in dogmatic formulations. By examining these factors, one can see more clearly Schillebeeckx’s redefined understanding of the role and limitations of dogmatic language that I have just suggested.

First, one needs to recognize “the expressive power of the language which is used for a definition of dogma.”<sup>29</sup> The meaning of a language is not always the same in all situations and all cultures; thus the terminology of “person” and “nature” from the dogmatic definitions of Chalcedon or the language about “human nature” in the papal condemnations about Jansenism (to cite Schillebeeckx’s two examples) might not bear the same power to express meaning now.

Second, one must recognize “the inevitable tension between reality and our merely conceptual, expressive, even metaphorical and symbolic verbalization of the-reality-of-revelation-as-known-by-us.”<sup>30</sup> His example here is the apparent contradiction between the exclusivist theology of salvation enunciated by the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1439 and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Using the “perspectivalist” epistemology from his earlier thought, he argues that the confession of the Council Fathers at Ferrara-Florence reflected a truth understood from their perspective: that for them there was no other experience of salvation outside of Jesus Christ. The declaration only becomes false when it is abstracted from its perspective and experiential ground and made into a universal statement (as unfortunately did happen in this case). Both statements can be expressions of the truth, although “filtered” through the different perspective of their speakers.<sup>31</sup>

Third, one must recognize “the tension between the faith and the socio-cultural, as well as ideological and situational contexts.”<sup>32</sup> The example he offers here comes from the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, whose dogmatic definition about demons and angels had little to do with proclaiming their existence (because all people believed this in that period), but with asserting God’s creation of all beings, good and evil, against a certain

<sup>28</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch Geloofsverstaan anno 1983* 20. (Emphasis Schillebeeckx’s)

<sup>29</sup> Schillebeeckx, “Breuken in christelijke dogma’s” 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 31–32.

<sup>31</sup> “Our knowledge of the truth is always perspectival, that is to say, we catch sight of the truth from a defined point of entry. The truth recognized by us is, as it were, always filtered or broken, as through a prism” (ibid. 33).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 34.

Manichean style dualism of creations.<sup>33</sup> Knowing the cultural and ideological assumptions of a particular period can therefore clarify the intention of any dogmatic statement. This in turn can allow for a change in understanding if one recognizes what the dogma intended to define and what it actually left open for further discussion.

Fourth, Schillebeeckx continues with this discussion of breaks in dogmatic language by noting a theological concept given full expression at the Second Vatican Council: the hierarchy of truths. Some Christian beliefs, whatever the differences in their form of expression, must be seen as basic truths, while others are less central. Schillebeeckx makes the comparison between basic beliefs, such as those in Jesus as the Messiah and in the Trinity, and other, secondary beliefs about church structures and practices that have grown up over time. Into this latter category he places even the Tridentine re-affirmation of the number of sacraments, as well as the necessity of a particular form of church governance, i.e. episcopal or presbyteral, etc.<sup>34</sup> Hence Schillebeeckx argues that theologians who may be labeled as heretics because of their apparent denial of a secondary doctrine are actually seeking to preserve the heart and soul of the faith at a fundamental level.<sup>35</sup>

A fifth factor involved in creating the need for breaks in dogma is “the structure of communication of church proclamation.”<sup>36</sup> Harkening back to a theme present in his work from the very earliest days, Schillebeeckx argues that mere repetition of verbal formulas is not the same as the

<sup>33</sup> “This council did not have the least intention to define dogmatically, of all things, the existence of angels and devils. At that time no one disputed their existence! On the contrary. For some people there was, next to God as first principle of all goodness, also a spiritual, first principle of all evil. This council reacted against that. The actual intention of the council was to make a statement about the fundamental idea that everything that exists outside of God *is a creation of God*” (ibid. 34–35; emphasis Schillebeeckx’s).

<sup>34</sup> “If we place the term ‘dogma’ within the whole of the entire Christian tradition of the ‘Catholica,’ it becomes clear that we as believers cannot act as if belief in Jesus the Messiah and the belief in the Trinity implied therein (however that also will be further filled in) lie on the same level as agreement with structures of the Church which have grown up historically: for example, ‘seven sacraments, no more, no less,’ as the Council of Trent says; or also an episcopal rather than a presbyterian church structure, and the place of the Petrine function therein; or everything which was said, following a church order which was indeed valid at the time (and which nevertheless grew up out of historically contingent situations), about the relationship of the laity to the clergy in the church, above all in connection with the administration of the sacraments.” See also n. 1, where I point out Schillebeeckx’s terms for the different levels of doctrinal language (ibid. 35).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 35–36. Schillebeeckx mentions the theologian Jacques Pohier in this connection.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 36.

transmission of dogma to a new generation. If dogma is to remain living in the Church, that is, if it is to be the real vehicle of an act of communication between the past tradition and present situation, it may need to be reformulated so that it truly addresses the questions of the current situation. Indeed, since every dogma is part of a dialectic of question and answer that is located in a specific historical and linguistic context, the possibility remains real that a dogmatic formulation can become irrelevant; it becomes the fixed answer for a question that no one is asking anymore.<sup>37</sup>

“Finally,” Schillebeeckx argues, “a purely theoretical question about meaning often can be a reason to relativize the immobility of a dogma and to stimulate a reformulation.”<sup>38</sup> What Schillebeeckx means by this is that “human growth in consciousness and knowledge” provokes new opportunities and crises that necessitate “a more clearly refined, more nuanced and more contemporarily satisfactory expression of the dogmas that have been handed down.”<sup>39</sup> He cites the example of the doctrine of original sin and argues that the growth in the understanding of human nature beyond the medieval and patristic worldview makes such a term now seem “absurd” if there is no attempt to understand the meaning of such a concept in the contemporary situation.<sup>40</sup>

I would argue that Schillebeeckx’s presentation of these factors here is somewhat unsystematic, but it does reflect the application of his framework for epistemology and fundamental theology to the question of dogmas. Although his six factors do not dovetail perfectly with the framework that I laid out in the first part of my article, it is clear that Schillebeeckx thinks that dogmatic affirmations are subject to all the limitations of language and therefore must be both historically located and constantly subject to hermeneutical reinterpretation lest they take on the appearance of timeless truth. Furthermore, to include the circle of theory and praxis, Schillebeeckx

<sup>37</sup> “Personally I would thus dare say, that however true dogmas also may be within the historical context in which they were formulated, they can become fully irrelevant in another historical context. A dogmatic pronouncement only has truth-value within the asked question to which it intends to be the answer and within the language game in which those questions and answers come to speech. An answer given to an unasked question is always a stab in the air; it is neither *false nor true*: the old truth is now simply irrelevant. There is no communication!” (ibid. 37; emphasis Schillebeeckx’s).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>39</sup> “Human growth in consciousness and knowledge, along with deeper human wisdom, after the course of time which creates new opportunities and also brings us into new crises, stands in need of getting a more clearly refined, more nuanced and more contemporarily satisfactory expression of the dogmas that have been handed down” (ibid.).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 38.

also concludes this discussion by saying that “each doctrine *must go through human experience* again and again and can never go past the experience of faith of the believing community.”<sup>41</sup> This brings us back to the point at which I started this discussion of dogma; in Schillebeeckx’s later thought dogmas are expressions of this critical translation of Christian experience and not the bearer of that translation itself. They are “legitimate, but contingent and often not necessary developments from the New Testament, although they are not in conflict with it.”<sup>42</sup>

Given this recognition of the limitations and possible irrelevancy of dogmatic affirmations, does Schillebeeckx’s thought imply that the Church can actually leave aside such possibly irrelevant expressions? I have asserted that Schillebeeckx sets dogma within the epistemological circles and the fundamental theology outlined above. Furthermore, since the process of critical translation of Christian experience is an ecclesial task, dogmatic language in Schillebeeckx’s view needs to be understood within a properly conceived ecclesiology. As I briefly sketched above, Schillebeeckx in his later theology describes the Church as an anticipatory sign of God’s reign and the fulfillment of the *humanum*. If this is an accurate description of the Church, then dogmas as ecclesial expressions should also serve in their own limited way as anticipatory signs. They therefore fall within the three-fold dynamic of past remembrance, present actualization, and future hope. This idea is, I think, what Schillebeeckx means when he describes dogmas as primarily “doxological.”<sup>43</sup> Because dogmatic statements (and, in general, theological affirmations of the understanding of faith) “express the content of a definite act of trust in God,” they more specifically express a faith in the God of the promise whose action in and through Jesus is an anticipatory sign of the eschatological fulfillment of the human race. Schillebeeckx can conclude: “Every dogma must have an orientation towards the future and be open to the sphere of the future. This has consequences for our conception of dogma itself, since truth then becomes, for us now, some-

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. (Emphasis Schillebeeckx’s).    <sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Schillebeeckx wrote: “A confession of faith, expressing, at least in outline, at a certain period of history, the good news of the gospel, has primarily a doxological value; in other words, it is a confession praising God for everything he does for us in human history. If we take as our point of departure the idea of the first Vatican Council that the ‘mutual connection between the mysteries’ is a theological criterion on the basis of which it is necessary to judge truths which, compared with the essential message, have to be regarded as peripheral, then these truths which result from or are presupposed in the Christian message, must have the same doxological meaning, at least so long as they aim to be not merely logically consistent, but theologically relevant. A theological statement attempts to express the content of a definite act of trust in God” (*The Understanding of Faith* 17–19).

thing whose fullness belongs to the future; to the extent that its content is already realized, it discloses itself essentially as a *promise*.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite this doxological and future-oriented quality of dogma and despite the need for their critical reinterpretation in successive eras, Schillebeeckx does not assert that the Church can (or should) simply dispense with past dogmatic formulations. Because they express doxologically the Christian experience of faith within the parameters of a particular time, they are abiding elements of the Church’s continuous tradition. As Schillebeeckx notes, new experiences (including new experiences of faith) always occur within the tradition of past experiences, including the general frameworks or models that unify experiences into an entire world view. Hence even if the language of these past dogmas cannot be affirmed in the current situation, nevertheless this language, as the true expression of an earlier experience of faith, must be valued within the context of its particular time and recognized also as a bearer of that experience of faith to the next era.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, “Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics,” in *God the Future of Man*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 36. (Emphasis Schillebeeckx’s). He adds: “The present, itself a sphere of interpretation of the past, must be caught up in a sphere of promise, or the past will not be seen clearly for what it is. What is ultimately and primarily in question here is conceiving both the present and past as open-ended, orientated towards a new reality—what is still to come. Dogma thus becomes the proclamation of the historical realization of God’s promise, which of its very nature implies an openness to the future and to new historical realizations.”

<sup>45</sup> The clearest example of this principle at work in Schillebeeckx’s thought is his treatment of the Chalcedonian dogma in his Christology. As he expresses several times in his work, his purpose with the christological trilogy was not simply to assume Chalcedon, but to “lead people by the hand” (*manu ductio*) through the process by which the Christian community came to develop its confession about Jesus. This exercise, however, does not simply stop at Chalcedon but is intended to be a prolegomenon for a Christology to be developed in reference to the contemporary situation. See Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* 636–69, for his more complete discussion about the reinterpretation of that dogma. In a similar way, he addresses the question about the liturgical use of the classic creeds, even if contemporary congregations largely find their language irrelevant. “I think it is quite right to formulate modern creeds—if we Christians have any real self-respect, we are bound in the long run to do that. At the same time, however, I think the old creed ought to be retained for all Christians, as a standard liturgical hymn, a kind of shared sign of recognition. It shouldn’t be touched. It has, I know, become unintelligible, at least parts of it have, but it has a function in the liturgy as a sign of recognition. But it certainly requires explanation. The Our Father also gives rise to a great number of questions, but that doesn’t mean the text ought to be changed” (Edward Schillebeeckx, *God Is New Each Moment: Edward Schillebeeckx in Conversation with Huub Oosterhuis and Piet Hoogeven*, trans. David Smith [New York: Seabury, 1983] 43).

### EPILOGUE: THE QUESTION OF POSTMODERNITY

In his article on “Breaks in Christian Dogma” already cited, Schillebeeckx makes use of the philosophy of historical change that I described in the first part of this article to understand how the truth of the Christian message can perdure even across “breaks” in historical periods and the consequent “breaks” in dogmatic language. In a related way, this schema also serves as the source of the historical periodization he uses when discussing the criterion of the proportional norm. Thus he argues that most of Christian history has taken place within one phase of structural history constituted by three “conjunctural” periods: the patristic, medieval, and modern. In this later article, he also suggests that the radical problem facing the Church today is that a more fundamental shift in “structural” history is occurring, from the previous period to the postmodern.<sup>46</sup> Schillebeeckx does not expand on this suggestion, but I would like to do so here briefly because I think that the question of postmodernity raises some questions about Schillebeeckx’s understanding of dogma and will leave us with some further avenues for criticism and exploration.

The difficulty in discussing this alleged “structural” shift to postmodernity is, of course, how to describe the “postmodern.” Here I rely on David Tracy, who argues that the defining characteristic of our age, caught between the modern and postmodern, is its inability to name itself.<sup>47</sup> In his assessment of the postmodern challenge to modernity, Tracy states that the contribution and ambiguity of postmodern thought is its exposure of “the unreality of the notion of presence in modernity’s concept of present time” and “the unreality of the modern subject’s self-understanding as grounded in itself.”<sup>48</sup> What this indicates is a radical questioning of the notion that there is a single center discernible, either within the subject, within a particular cultural tradition, or within any “grand narrative” that purports to encompass and express the total meaning of human history. If this is an adequate, albeit extremely sketchy, rendering of the postmodern question, how might Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the development of doctrine and history fare in light of it?

Most critically, the postmodern challenge raises a question for Schillebeeckx’s understanding of history, and thus for the possibility of dogmatic translation. Schillebeeckx suggests that humanity is now embarking on a “structural” shift in historical consciousness. One could argue, however, that postmodernity raises the question whether there is only one “wheel of

<sup>46</sup> Schillebeeckx, “Breuken in christelijke dogma’s” 27–30.

<sup>47</sup> David Tracy, “On Naming the Present,” in *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics and Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) 3–24.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

history.” That is to say, postmodernity raises the question whether one set of the “basic patterns of human thought,” which Schillebeeckx claims are located in the structural level of history and manifested in the different conjunctural phases of history, actually exists. Furthermore, postmodern thought ruptures even a pluralist and harmonious picture of multiple wheels of structural history, that is, the idea of separate and incommensurate, but independent fundamental structures of human thought. Since postmodern thought argues that these multiple and incommensurate structures of human understanding are suddenly intersecting, interpenetrating, and clashing on their conjunctural and ephemeral edges, so to speak, there seems to be no clear vantage point *sub specie aeternitatis* to view the whole affair.<sup>49</sup> In such a picture, how can an ecclesial expression of the critical translation of Christian experience take place? Is there nothing but discontinuity and ambiguity?

This question is more radical than whether or not there can be multiple linguistic and verbal expressions of belief. Schillebeeckx readily concedes this possibility. What is really at stake here is whether, if true and taken seriously, this multiple-centered situation (or, as Tracy calls it, a polycentric world) allows for *any* proportional relationships at all. Even within the more confined space of patristic, medieval, and modern Christian belief, one could raise the critical questions about whether this proportional experience and expression actually occurs and, epistemologically speaking, how one knows that one has entered onto a new phase of conjunctural history that necessitates a new expression of belief. But the radical non-simultaneity and non-similarity of locations and experiences asserted by postmodern thinkers would make Schillebeeckx’s schema of deep continuity even across cultural breaks impossible.

Schillebeeckx’s response can only be extrapolated from his given work, so I will make a few conjectures here. First, Schillebeeckx argues that the negative contrast experience is a human constant, which is not to say that there is a fixed human nature, but that there is a real history of human suffering, human hope, and human attempts to overcome this suffering. This, I imagine, Schillebeeckx would argue is at the center of every wheel of history, even if the basic elements of thought and the conjunctural expressions of history differ tremendously from culture to culture, time to time, etc. Second, Schillebeeckx affirms both that there are fragments of overcoming, tastes of the *humanum* which occur to human beings, and also that positive experiences can be faithfully and reasonably named as God’s objective working in and with us to overcome suffering and evil. Hence even within a multi-centered world there is the possibility that hope will be

<sup>49</sup> I owe these descriptive metaphors to my colleague Dr. Susan Simonaitis, Department of Theology, Fordham University.

fulfilled and salvation experienced. Since this is for Schillebeeckx the basis of all revelation language and hence the basis for all dogmatic language, I think that Schillebeeckx would argue that the radical de-centering of the postmodern critique would not disable the critical translation and re-enactment of Christian experience and doctrine. This critique would radically de-center any single expression of that real experience, according to Schillebeeckx, but would leave open what he sees as the “real” center: the collective and conflicting narratives of human suffering and the praxis of Christians (and all human beings) in memory and hope to overcome suffering.