

Schillebeeckx: Retracing the Story of Jesus

BY JOHN P. GALVIN

In the years surrounding the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) questions concerning the Church dominated theological literature. Then came Wolfhart Pannenberg's seminal *Jesus—God and Man*, which served as a timely reminder that more fundamental christological issues could not be even temporarily forgotten. More recently, theologians, recognizing the need for serious reexamination of the very foundations of Christianity, have increasingly directed their attention to the center of Christian faith: Jesus Christ himself. Such prominent figures as Walter Kasper, Hans Küng, Jürgen Moltmann, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx have published major works devoted largely if not entirely to christology; and numerous less renowned authors have also made significant contributions to an intense discussion that shows no signs of abating.

Despite important differences among themselves, these recent christologies generally exhibit certain basic traits that distinguish them from most christologies of the immediate past. First, contemporary authors usually envision their christology as part of an overall effort to provide an integrated account of the whole of Christianity; christology is one element of an attempt to express anew the meaning of the gospel in the modern world. While allowing for the possibility that the Christian message itself will bring human needs into sharper focus, they raise the question of Christ within the general context of the problem of human salvation—an issue universal in human history but one that acquires specific contours in each new age. The resulting interest in the relationship of Christian faith to contemporary human life can readily deteriorate into preoccupation with the peripheral. Recognizing this, competent theologians understand that human concerns must be analyzed carefully and pursued to a depth often hidden from the superficial observer. At that depth human concerns do not impose false limits on the scope of divine revelation and Christian faith.

Aware too of contemporary challenges to Christian faith, modern theologians tend to concentrate on central, foundational questions about Jesus, rather than

assume that these issues have long since been settled and hasten on to subordinate topics. Taking to heart the injunction of 1 Pet 3:15—"Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you"—they are more inclined to scrutinize the grounds for faith in Jesus than to elaborate the implications of basic creedal statements.

Finally, contemporary christologies normally seek to address issues that have arisen from the work of modern biblical scholars and to incorporate as far as possible the results of contemporary biblical research into the work of systematic theology. Heightened awareness of the diversity of New Testament christologies stimulates the development of diverse perspectives in contemporary thought. But a further aspect of biblical scholarship is of even greater importance. At least since the publication in 1835-36 of David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, biblical experts have recognized the need for caution in drawing on the gospels as sources for reconstructing Jesus' life. At times—as in the writings of Strauss himself and in the work of the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)—this restraint has led to underestimating the theological importance of historical information about Jesus and to positing a dichotomy between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith." Contemporary authors frequently seek to distinguish their positions from those of Bultmann and to examine—in appropriately critical fashion—the historical foundations of their Christian faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself.

ENCOUNTER AND EXPERIENCE

Unquestionably the most comprehensive and possibly the most significant of these contemporary reappraisals of Jesus is the christological project of the Flemish Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx. Inaugurated in 1974 with the Dutch publication of the 767-page *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, continued in the even more voluminous *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, and defended against critics in the recent *Interim Report on the Books Jesus & Christ*, Schillebeeckx's effort to retell the story of Jesus as the story of God's gift of salvation to a suffering world is rivaled in range of vision and depth of insight only by the less fully elaborated christological investigations of the German Jesuit Karl Rahner. Though still unfinished, Schillebeeckx's studies invite the attention of all concerned with the

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meaning of the Christian gospel in the late twentieth century.

The author comes well equipped to his latest theological venture. Formerly a teacher at Louvain (1943-58), since 1958 professor of dogmatic theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, Holland, respected theological advisor at the Second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx acquired an international reputation through numerous publications, especially in the field of sacramental theology. His best-known work, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter With God*, was a pioneer effort to anchor the theology of the seven sacraments in a broader conception of the "sacramentality" of Christ and of the Church as mediation of God's salvific approach to man. Thoroughly familiar with the Scholastic tradition, especially the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Schillebeeckx drew as well on modern phenomenology to argue that man's personal encounter with God, in which human salvation consists, finds its necessary mediation in his encounter with Christ, itself perpetuated throughout history in the Church. Though modified considerably in the course of his more recent work, many of the basic principles of *Christ the Sacrament* continue to exercise a decisive influence on Schillebeeckx's christology. The stress on the themes of encounter and experience and the willingness to learn from attentive and critical dialogue with important streams of modern intellectual life still mark his thought.

Despite such continuity, Schillebeeckx's recent writing is distinguished from his earlier work in two major ways. Most evident is his increased concern with biblical issues. Not known previously for competence in scriptural studies, Schillebeeckx has immersed himself so thoroughly in modern New Testament research that he is able to do more than merely summarize and report the work of others. Though unqualified as an exegete in his own right, he is now able to pass informed and often acute judgment on the writings of experts in this complex and specialized field. His extended and thorough treatment of the New Testament, far surpassing the work of other contemporary systematic theologians, is a distinctive characteristic of his current writing.

Less tangible, but quite possibly more significant, is the influence of Schillebeeckx's wider engagement with modern thought. The personalism of his earlier work has been modified toward greater social concern through his interest in the Neo-Marxist Frankfurt School, as represented in the philosophy-sociology of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas. Due in part to the impact of the Holocaust, their "critical theory" is profoundly pessimistic in its assessment of modernity, hostile to unthinking fascination with the idea of progress, and anxious to retrieve the importance of the memory of suffering. The preoccupations of the school are strikingly illustrated in Horkheimer's remarkable interview, three years before his death in 1973, with Helmut Gumbor: "The longing for perfect justice...can never be realized in secular history; for even if a better society should replace the present social disorder, past misery would not be righted...[and] even if all material needs are satisfied, the fact remains that a man must die...."

Schillebeeckx derives important systematic orientation from the work of this school, which he has studied at some length in *The Interpretation of Faith*. He sees human history primarily as a history of suffering, interspersed with "contrast experiences" of meaning and salvation that, though fleeting, are sufficient to provide suffering humanity with grounds for hope. Any definitive theory of salvation presupposes that a final victory over evil has been won. To impose a comprehensive theoretical system of salvation inhibits awareness of the need for corrective human action. One must therefore accent the primacy of Christian praxis, and theology must assume the form of narrative. It must retell the story of Jesus and the story of Christian believers as an unfinished story by and about God.

While Schillebeeckx's overriding purpose is a constructive statement of the Christian understanding of salvation (in technical terms, a soteriology), *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* are largely devoted to the examination of biblical material. Stressing against Bultmann the theological importance of historical knowledge about Jesus, Schillebeeckx provides an extraordinarily rich picture of Jesus' public life—his preaching of the coming kingdom of God, his conduct anticipating its presence, his rejection and death at the hands of his opponents—in an effort to retrace the process through which Christian faith originated. In his judgment the unifying core of Jesus' activity is his "abba experience," his consciousness of unique proximity to God his Father ("abba"), the source of his confident and consistent offer of salvation.

At this point another theme, long characteristic of Schillebeeckx's thought, comes to the fore: "It began with an encounter...." Full perception of Jesus includes perception of the diverse responses he evoked. In these,

The Schillebeeckx works translated into English are available from Crossroad Publishing, New York.

Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord (1980; \$29.50)

Jesus: An Experiment in Christology (1979; \$24.50)
Interim Report on the Books Jesus & Christ (1981; \$9.95)

Minister? Pastor? Prophet?: Grassroots Leadership in the Churches (1981; \$8.95)

Ministry (1981; \$29.50)

Mission of the Church (1974; \$9.95)

Editor:

Dogma & Pluralism: Concilium Vol. 51 (1970; \$4.95/paper, as all those below)

Heaven: Concilium Vol. 123 (1979)

Jesus Christ & Human Freedom: Concilium Vol. 93 (1974)

Personal God?: Concilium Vol. 103 (1977)

Revelation & Experience: Concilium Vol. 113 (1979)

The Right of the Community to a Priest: Concilium Vol. 133 (1980)

Truth & Certainty: Concilium Vol. 83 (1973)

Unifying Role of the Bishop: Concilium Vol. 71 (1972)

as in a mirror, various facets of his personal identity are most clearly reflected.

According to Schillebeeckx's reconstruction, the main category operative in the initial identification of Jesus by his believing followers was not "messiah" or "son of man" but "eschatological prophet," a figure like Moses (cf. Deut 18:15-20), whose appearance was awaited by some strands of Jewish piety at the time of Jesus. The disciples' incipient faith, though threatened by their experience of Jesus' condemnation as pseudo-prophet and his crucifixion, was renewed and intensified by new experiences of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus even after his death. Over the course of the next several decades, different Christian communities, drawing primarily on their Jewish heritage, developed varying though fundamentally compatible interpretations of Jesus. Following, in modified form, some suggestions of Helmut Koester, Schillebeeckx distinguishes four major types of interpretation that accented, respectively, Jesus' awaited return as judge, his performance of miracles, his authority as teacher of wisdom, and his death and resurrection. While each of these "trajectories" rightly captured a genuine element of Jesus' life, it was the fourth type, "Easter christology," that proved most successful as an integrating force and which ultimately predominated when the four tendencies merged in the canonical scriptures.¹

Schillebeeckx assesses the New Testament itself as a collection of variations on a single theme. Its individual books are diverse articulations of the experience of salvation from God in Jesus; they correspond to the diverse situations of the early Christian communities. He judges the New Testament normative for subsequent Christianity primarily as a model of this process of articulation, rather than as a repository of particular doctrines. In doing so, Schillebeeckx accords contemporary Christians considerable latitude in the development of their own theologies. He does, however, distill from the biblical texts four structural principles to be maintained in any Christian conception: It is God's will to realize human salvation as integral human self-fulfillment; the definitive christological mediation of salvation occurs in Jesus of Nazareth; the role of the Church is an essential ingredient of the living story of Jesus; this story cannot come to fulfillment within the scope of earthly history and therefore requires eschatological completion. God-Christ-Church-future are thus essential dimensions of the Christian understanding of human salvation.

EARTH AND ESCHATON

Full development of Schillebeeckx's interpretation of Jesus still awaits future work. Despite their length (1,692 pages in English translation), he regards his first two volumes as no more than preparatory. Nonetheless, the basic outlines of his conception are clearly evident in what has already been published. The universal human search for a way of life that will overcome suffering must, in keeping with human nature, include various irreducible dimensions: relationship to human corporeality and to man's natural environment; relationship with other men; connection with social, institutional structure; historical-cultural conditioning in

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space and time; interweaving of theory and practice; and a religious consciousness that transcends the confines of the created world. Concerned as it must be with human wholeness, Christian salvation addresses all these facets of human existence. It must therefore comprehend both earthly and eschatological aspects. While complete salvation cannot be defined positively under the conditions of human history, it can be envisioned as victory over death and liberation from guilty failure, definitively promised by God in Jesus Christ and present fragmentarily in our practice of reconciliation.

As might be expected, the scholarly reception of Schillebeeckx's work combines appreciation of his achievement with criticism of his judgment on numerous issues, some relatively minor, others more significant. Some have found the details of his reconstruction of the life of Jesus and of the history of early Christian theology excessively dependent on the ideosyncratic views of certain exegetes. The understanding of the post-resurrection appearances as spiritual experiences in which the visual element is of subordinate significance has also been questioned. Finally, there are some who wonder whether the overall understanding of salvation represented in these volumes does full justice to the emphasis, traditional at least since Paul, on the theme of redemption from sin and death through Christ's crucifixion.

Awareness of such questions ought not detract from recognition of what Schillebeeckx has accomplished. He has already begun to respond to them in his *Interim Report*. Meanwhile, his masterly portrayal of Jesus' public life and exhaustive survey of New Testament theologies of grace and salvation are unmatched in recent literature. His stress on Christian praxis, his awareness of the importance of the Jewish background of Jesus and his earliest followers, his recognition of the central role of suffering humanity in the construction of a theology, and his effort to engage in serious dialogue with representative currents of modern thought also deserve special commendation. While—not surprisingly—many questions remain, Schillebeeckx's work may well presage the advent of a promising new stage in the unending history of Christian attempts to express in human words the inexhaustible depths of the mystery of Jesus. **WV**