

SCHILLEBEECKX FOR A NEW GENERATION
AND NEW CONTEXTS—INTEREST GROUP

Topic:	Grace and Politics
Convener:	Daniel Minch, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Moderator:	Daniel Minch, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Presenters:	Christiane Alpers, Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt Steven Rodenborn, St. Edward's University
Respondent:	Roger Haight, S.J., Union Theological Seminary

This session marked the first installment of a three-year interest group focused on the work and continuing legacy of Edward Schillebeeckx for theology and especially for a new generation of scholars who are now discovering and applying S.'s work. The specific topic was 'grace and politics', which tied together the broader theme of the convention with two important themes from S.'s writings. This session featured two scholars of the new generation of Schillebeeckx experts in conversation with the expertise and guidance of the senior generation. The session also sought to bring together American and European perspectives in order to highlight his original European context, the substantial reception of S. in the United States, and the significance of S.'s work for the global church.

Christiane Alpers' paper, entitled "The Church as Sewage of the World: Schillebeeckx's Theology of Grace in the Context of the Catholic Renewal of the 20th Century," attempted to discern the mission of the church within the world. Alpers locates this problem between the poles of "adaptation" to the values and categories of modernity, and a more "triumphalist" approach that emphasizes the exclusivity and holiness of the church over-against "the world." According to Alpers, adaptationists identify nature and grace too closely, thereby forgetting the ways in which the reception of grace entails radical conversion. On the other hand, "sectarian triumphalists" want the church to be a morally pure community that already embodies eschatological salvation in the present. She argues that S.'s account of the mission of the church, in dialogue with the work of William T. Cavanaugh and Erich Przywara, can help us to think of the church's distinct mission in ontological terms, rather than on a purely ethical level.

Steven Rodenborn clearly addresses the convention theme of "grace at work in the world" by focusing on S.'s concept of "negative contrast experience" as a kind of basic and universal human experience. His paper, "Encountering the Threatened *Humanum* in a Culture of Indifference," first provides an account of contrast experience as a positive impulse that emerges from experiences of suffering. These instances should provide a glimpse of the expectation of goodness that grounds human hope for the future, even to the point of allowing for a new kind of natural theology. Rodenborn then problematizes S.'s concept by pointing to how "cultural elements" can obscure the articulation of this experience and therefore also its apologetic value. In particular, he addresses the contemporary "culture of indifference" as referred to by Pope Francis. Such a culture too frequently drains people of their resistance to the suffering of others. Rodenborn utilizes Elizabeth Vasko's work on indifference and white privilege to deconstruct unethical passivity. Ultimately, Rodenborn argues that this cultural reality actually makes S.'s work more relevant, urging us to use negative contrast to "break through" the learned habits of privilege and indifference.

Interest Group: Schillebeeckx for a New Generation and New Contexts

In his response, Roger Haight, S.J., cut to the heart of both papers by concisely highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each. To open the discussion, Haight adopted the voice of each respective author to pose a question to the other. For Alpers, the question was whether her model of a church of “sinners and saints,” with such a strong ontological foundation simply appeases a culture of indifference. More pointedly, can such a church still publicly excommunicate members who openly promote or perpetrate violence, as with militaristic and totalitarian regimes? For Rodenborn, the question was whether or not he is promoting a church of the morally elite rather than a church that is open to all. These questions opened a highly fruitful discussion about the political nature of the church in contemporary society. This discussion, at times quite intense, focused on the necessity of the church, in its many forms, to either publicly condemn political actions that oppose the gospel, or to work to reopen public spaces for empathy and grace in the midst of conflict.

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