

SCHILLEBEECKX FOR A NEW GENERATION AND NEW CONTEXTS –  
INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Schillebeeckx for a New Generation and New Contexts  
 Administrative  
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 Convener: Stephan van Erp, KU Leuven  
 Moderator: Kathleen Mroz, Emmanuel College  
 Presenters: Christopher Cimorelli, National Institute for Newman Studies  
 Robert (Bobby) Rivera, St. John’s University (New York)  
 In Memoriam: Robert Schreiter, CPPS, Catholic Theological Union

Christopher Cimorelli’s paper, “From Cynicism to Vigilance: The Negative Contrast Experience and Ecotheology,” explored Edward Schillebeeckx’s notion of the “negative contrast experience” (NCE) as helpful for both conceiving and applying ecotheology in ways that directly respond to the ecological crises facing the created order. He views Schillebeeckx’s “negative contrast experience” as having taken shape amid various theological shifts: beginning with his Thomistic framework regarding the goodness and sacramental character of creation as mediating the divine, his historical studies via *la nouvelle théologie*, his engagement with critical theory and with liberation theology in the post-Vatican II global church. The NCE both supports resistance to suffering and injustice “from below” and promotes vigilance regarding the intransigence of structures “from above” which often are the beneficiaries of paralyzing cynicism. Understood as a threefold process, NCE begins with 1) a negative experience of suffering or injustice in the life of an individual or community. This experience 2) elicits a response of protest, or resistance of contrast (“this should not be!”) and 3) moves a person or group toward praxis to lessen or remove the suffering and its causes.

Cimorelli presents a case for incorporating the NCE into the methodology of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), which he sees as having a natural, three-fold correspondence to the See-Judge-Act (SJA) method, but offers a potentially more robust approach to judgment and action. In particular, the NCE can bolster the religious imagination of Christians seeking to respond to ecological injustice by revealing the horizon of hope that characterizes the open “yes” of the covenant between God and humanity exemplified in the cross of Christ. The NCE navigates between efforts that might sacrifice God’s kingdom for the extremes of a human-controlled utopia, or a fallen world that is not the milieu for God’s reign. Such a truly eschatological conception simultaneously upholds the relative autonomy of creation that is not God, but *participates* in the transcendent God. An ecotheology that employs SJA becomes a force of moral reasoning that sheds light on how experience is processed and how conscience is examined, not merely individually, but in a way that includes the sinful social structures that shed light on what “complicity” means from a Christian perspective. The framework of NCE likewise renders experience as mystical-ethical in nature, due to the augmented sight, resistance and praxis that function in harmony with the pursuit of liberation from within and not outside of the world: as Schillebeeckx would say, *extra mundum nulla salus*.

Robert (“Bobby”) Rivera’s paper, “Catholicity in An Age of Globalization: The Contribution of Edward Schillebeeckx,” draws attention to Antonio’s Sison’s 2003 interview with Schillebeeckx in *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue* (2006). There Schillebeeckx shared his concern that “the globalization of the whole Western economic system...is one of the greatest threats to the Third World” (p. 142). Yet, analyzing the causes and consequences of globalization remains most difficult because it entails analyzing the capitalist economic system and its consequences. The difficulty is exacerbated by the neoliberal economic adherents of globalization who have advanced a narrative that celebrates as much as it conceals. Furthermore, neoliberal economic globalization not only affects the Third World, but is also a First World reality that affects vulnerable communities in countries like the US, especially communities of color.

For Rivera, neoliberalism is an ideology that believes that economic globalization is manifestly good and that the free market is capable of producing prosperity for everyone. This idea is sold with “gospel” overtones that purport the flourishing of human life and the just and equitable participation in economic processes. However, this story masks *the victims* produced as a result of market forces and the widening gap of inequality between the rich and the poor. It creates a “cruel abyss between peoples,” promising “salvation” along with the convenient alibi that globalization’s devastating effects and exacting costs are both inevitable and, in the end, worth the sacrifice.

In contrast, Schillebeeckx’s notion of “catholicity,” inspired by the option for the poor found in liberation theologies, resists the dehumanizing forces of economic globalization precisely by grounding itself in a concrete praxis of the Reign of God, advocating for, and being in solidarity with, the most vulnerable and oppressed. Some of the most significant features of his understanding of catholicity are: 1) it must be rooted in an option for the poor, since poverty is the condition of most of the world’s population; 2) globalization cannot consider itself as “universal” (the actual meaning of “catholicity”) because it does not include the poor; and 3) theologizing in an age of globalization and exclusion necessitates a focus on the particularities of places and persons identified with the poor. Thus, a true catholicity for Schillebeeckx requires engaging our blind spots regarding the social exclusion of the poor.

Given the untimely death of our colleague Robert Schreiter, CPPS, who was to be the respondent in this final year of the Schillebeeckx Interest Group, the conveners, with the approval of the presenters, decided to forego a discussion of the paper presentations in order to devote the last thirty minutes of the session to words of remembrance and gratitude for the life of a great scholar, generous mentor and friend. Stephan van Erp began by calling Bob “a leading Schillebeeckx scholar who introduced many others from all over the world to the theological hermeneutics and political theology of the Flemish Dominican.” Of the thirty-two persons attending, more than a dozen colleagues and students of Bob presented reminiscences and tributes.

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