

SEMINAR PAPER

THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS AND HIS "ABBA EXPERIENCE" IN THE THEOLOGY OF EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX

At the 1976 CTSA convention in Washington, Peter Schineller presented a survey of contemporary views on the respective roles of Christ and the Church in the mediation of salvation; at the same meeting, Charles Davis defended the thesis that, while an absolute claim to exclusivity and uniqueness is intrinsic to the Christian story as an expression of the unconditionality inherent in religion, Christ's "uniqueness belongs to the context of the story; it cannot be isolated from that figurative, mythical context and made into a literal factual proposition."¹ Since then, the theme of the uniqueness of Jesus has never been absent from our agenda. One of the major contributors to the ensuing discussions has been Paul Knitter, whose examination of Hans Küng's *On Being a Christian*² detected inconsistency between Küng's assertion of the normativity of Jesus and the evidence adduced in its behalf. Against Küng, Knitter argued that claims for the uniqueness of Jesus are not necessary for commitment to Christ or fidelity to Christian tradition, not conducive to dialogue with other religions, and not possible according to appropriate norms of (revisionist) theological and historical-critical method.³

For this year's seminar, we have chosen a portion of Edward Schillebeeckx' *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*⁴ as the focal point for further study of Jesus' uniqueness. Schillebeeckx' interpretation of the historical Jesus differs from Küng's in some important respects, one of which, in particular, may make his affirmation of Jesus' uniqueness

¹Cf. J. Peter Schineller, "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views," *TS* 37 (1976), 545-66, and Charles Davis, "Religion and the Sense of the Sacred," *CTSA Proceedings* 31 (1976) 87-105; the citation is from p. 103.

²(Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

³Cf. "World Religions and the Finality of Christ: A Critique of Hans Küng's *On Being a Christian*," *Horizons* 5 (1978), 151-64. It may be pertinent to note that Knitter attributes salvific value to religious symbols, not to historical events as such; thus he maintains: "Myth-symbols save. Historical facts do not" ("Jesus-Buddha-Krishna: Still Present?," *JES* 16 [1979], 657).

⁴(New York: Seabury, 1979), pp. 579-674 (hereafter *Jesus*). It must be stressed that *Jesus* is not the whole of Schillebeeckx' Christology. The section chosen for primary reference in this seminar is in large part a preliminary and fragmentary sketch of the themes to be pursued more comprehensively in the third volume of his projected trilogy; for Schillebeeckx' account of its origin and purpose cf. *Die Auferstehung Jesu als Grund der Erlösung: Zwischenbericht über die Prolegomena zu einer Christologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979), pp. 117-22.

less vulnerable to criticism.⁵ In an essay on Küng's Christology, Robert Butterworth has observed:

Whilst it is obviously improper practice to stick old labels on new wineskins (so to speak), is there not a sense in which Küng's Jesus displays an almost Apollinarian lack of human mind? Thus at the start of a key section Küng can declare: 'we are not asking here about Jesus' consciousness or his psyche' (p. 214). But why not? This sort of disclaimer has become, more or less expressly, a marked oddity, indeed a thoroughly bad theological habit, in some recent Christological writing. The instinct seems to be to shy away from enquiry into Jesus' human consciousness. Perhaps it is felt that the New Testament exegetes have once and for all like the cherubim and flaming sword barred access to it. It may well be the case that direct access is more difficult or at any rate more limited than it was once thought to be. But access can hardly be ruled out completely. After all, it must strike the reader as odd that it is considered possible to find so much to say about Jesus and his mission without at least implying that he somehow knew what he was about, and also that he willed to bring it about. To assert that 'the sources give us no insight into his mind and soul. Neither psychology nor mental philosophy are of any use here' (p. 318) simply cannot be justified.⁶

In sharp contrast to the tendency criticized by Butterworth, Schillebeeckx studies in detail Jesus' personal experience of God, his "abba experience." Far from being peripheral to Schillebeeckx' Christology, this theme is of decisive significance in his fundamental portrayal of Jesus as the eschatological prophet,⁷ since this "prophet like Moses" is by definition one whom God knows face to face (cf. Deut 18:15-18; 34:10). This insistence that claim to such special relationship with God is one of the most salient characteristics to be recovered precisely through critical historical reconstruction of Jesus' public life distinguishes Schillebeeckx' Christology from that of Walter Kasper, according to whom the fact that Jesus understood himself from above, i.e., in his relationship to God, dooms Christologies from below to failure.⁸

In an effort to provide background for our discussion, this paper will present Schillebeeckx' conception of Jesus' "abba experience." While general acquaintance with the Christological project inaugurated in *Jesus* must be presupposed here,⁹ appropriate reference will be made to the immediate context of our topic and to its function in Schillebeeckx' Christology as a whole.

In keeping with his far-reaching principle that the norm and criterion of any interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth is Jesus of Nazareth himself,¹⁰ Schillebeeckx combines recognition that "the question about the unique and universal significance of Jesus is one that can only be answered in terms of belief"¹¹ with insistence that such faith must have a

⁵For Küng's own comparison of his theology with that of Schillebeeckx, cf. "Toward a New Consensus in Catholic (and Ecumenical) Theology," in Leonard Swidler, ed., *Consensus in Theology?: A Dialogue with Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), pp. 1-17.

⁶"Questions to Hans Küng," *HeyJ* 18 (1977), 437.

⁷Cf. *Jesus*, pp. 441-49, 472-99; and *Die Auferstehung Jesu*, pp. 87, 118-19.

⁸*Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist, 1976), p. 247.

⁹For my own summary and assessment, cf. my review in *HeyJ* 21 (1980), 185-90.

¹⁰*Jesus*, pp. 43-76.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 604.

solid basis in Jesus' life-history: "If the Christian affirmation of Jesus' universal significance is not ideological but is an assent to reality, something in the record of Jesus must point in that direction. . . . In the historical man Jesus there must be present some ground or reason for our being able to acknowledge him in that way."¹² Historical foundation of this sort is indispensable in Christology, Schillebeeckx maintains, unless one holds that Jesus, whatever the facts of his life may have been, is simply made into a representative symbol of human aspirations by the subsequent activity of others who profess faith in him.¹³

Due in part to these considerations, but more specifically to his conviction of the need for a narrative soteriology which retells "the life-story of the man Jesus as a story of God,"¹⁴ Schillebeeckx devotes a substantial portion of *Jesus* to a coherent, post-critical account of Jesus' public life.¹⁵ Although a very thorough presentation of Jesus' message and conduct comprises the major part of this section, Schillebeeckx is convinced, even on purely historical grounds, that it is impossible to rest content with a description of what Jesus said and did: it is necessary to seek to penetrate into the unifying source of Jesus' message and conduct. Pursuit of this further dimension is not intrusion of extraneous concerns into the question of the historical Jesus: it is an intrinsic aspect of appreciating the historical Jesus himself, "for although Jesus never posited himself (beside the rule of God) as the second subject of his proclamation . . . his person is never entirely separable from his message and ministry."¹⁶

Schillebeeckx entertains no illusions about the complexity of obtaining access to interior experience on Jesus' part. Distinguishing terminologically between self-awareness and self-understanding, he concedes the hopelessness of reaching the former in Jesus' case, or of venturing to dissect the psychology of Jesus, since "the data needed for that are not available to us."¹⁷ But Jesus' self-understanding, including the center of his religious experience, is another matter. Direct verbal expression of such private religious experience is lacking in our knowledge about Jesus; but such direct articulation of interior experience is in any case difficult to assess and of limited value, since it always includes an intermingling of experience and interpretation.¹⁸ Its absence poses no insuperable obstacle, for even without it we can proceed further when someone in his words or deeds "intimates or discloses his personal religious relationship to God . . . : The mystery of each person is only accessible to us in his behavior. . . . It is more than his several actions and yet is disclosed only *in* this activity. This does not stop us from acquiring through these acts a slant on the mystery of the person of another individual human being within the insuperable ambivalence of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 611.

¹³ Cf. *Die Auferstehung Jesu*, p. 37.

¹⁴ *Jesus*, p. 80.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-319.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 257; cf. also p. 54.

¹⁸ Cf. *Gerechtigheid en liefde, genade en bevrijding* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1977), pp. 25-56; and *Die Auferstehung Jesu*, pp. 19-28.

our history."¹⁹ As far as Jesus is concerned, these conditions are fulfilled, for "what he said (his message) and what he did (his mode of conduct) are enough to shed light on his self-understanding:"²⁰ "We can get to know quite a lot about Jesus' understanding of himself, albeit indirectly, through his proclamation of the kingdom of God, his insistence on 'discipleship,' his intercourse with social and religious 'outcasts,' his parables confronting the Jews with a decisive choice, and so forth."²¹

Within this framework, Schillebeeckx maintains that the source and secret of Jesus' being, message and manner of life is his distinctive 'abba experience,' a religious consciousness of "deep intimacy with God,"²² "the benevolent, solicitous 'one who is against evil,' who will not admit the supremacy of evil and refuses to allow it the last word."²³ In Schillebeeckx' understanding, "the *Abba* experience of Jesus, although meaningful in itself, is not a self-subsistent religious experience, but . . . an immediate awareness of God as a power cherishing people and making them free;"²⁴ as such, it grounded Jesus' certainty of the coming of salvation and his prophetic mission.²⁵

Schillebeeckx' argument for this position is analogous to some considerations of Karl Rahner,²⁶ but displays a characteristic stress on the negativity of human experience, reminiscent of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and of the narrative theology of J. B. Metz.²⁷ The history within which Jesus stood (and that within which we stand²⁸) is seen as a "history of man's suffering, a history of calamity, violence and injustice,"²⁹ in no way capable of providing a valid justification of Jesus' promise of salvation. "The hard facts of history do not in themselves offer any guarantee or hope that ultimate *shalom* and reconciliation are possible."³⁰ Since Jesus' preaching and conduct represent "a message of a hope not inferable from the history of our world,"³¹ their only possible source is Jesus' religious awareness of contrast between the history in which he lived and his personal experience of God.³² Because

¹⁹ *Jesus*, p. 259.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 263.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 267-68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 256-71, 625.

²⁶ *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 251-54. The varying approaches of Schillebeeckx and Rahner are not unrelated to the traditional Thomist and Scotist positions on the motive of the Incarnation; on these cf. Felix Malmberg, *Über den Gottmenschen* (Basel: Herder, 1960), pp. 9-26.

²⁷ Cf. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973); Hans Czuma, "Technokratie—Fortschritt—Emanzipation: Die Kritische Theorie der 'Frankfurter Schule,'" *ZKT* 95 (1973), 132-73; and J. B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

²⁸ Cf. *Jesus*, pp. 612-25; and *Gerechtigheid en liefde*, pp. 614-64.

²⁹ *Jesus*, p. 267.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 620.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 267.

Jesus' life is inexplicable without such contrast (a theme which also plays a significant role in other aspects of Schillebeeckx' soteriology³³), "to delete the special 'relation to God' from the life of Jesus at once destroys his message and the whole point of his way of living."³⁴

To clarify Schillebeeckx' position, two further observations are necessary. First, though convinced on exegetical grounds that Jesus "referred in a special way to God as *Abba*,"³⁵ Schillebeeckx refuses to concentrate exclusively or even primarily on gospel texts containing that word,³⁶ and rejects efforts to deduce Jesus' distinctive religious experience or ontological status solely from that custom. Although "Jesus' familial expression for God, *Abba*, without any further qualifications suggestive of 'transcendence' . . . quite certainly points to a religious experience of deep intimacy with God, in terms of which Jesus would seem to be conscious of a distinction between his experience of God and that of, for instance, his disciples,"³⁷ conclusions are nonetheless to be drawn, not from this "abba experience" in isolation, but rather "only from that experience as the soul, source and ground of Jesus' message, praxis and ministry as a whole, which alone serve to illuminate the exceptional and peculiar character of the *Abba* experience."³⁸ While influenced by the position that Jesus did not take the step from calling God "abba" to designating himself as Son or Son of God,³⁹ these remarks also reflect Schillebeeckx' insistence on the priority of indirect access to Jesus' religious experience (through his message and conduct) over direct access through self-expression thematically addressing this material.

Secondly, it must be stressed that the above considerations are not intended in themselves to establish the validity of Jesus' "extraordinarily pronounced consciousness of a prophetic role, on which is grounded his message of the approaching rule of God."⁴⁰ Whether or not Jesus' "abba experience" is an illusion is a question which cannot be resolved solely by historical investigation; finding a basis for one's life in the trustworthiness of Jesus is an act of faith.⁴¹ The point is rather that Jesus' message and conduct are inseparable from a claim to such relationship with God, so that the content which he preached is inseparable from his person: Jesus pertains to his "cause," not as part of the direct and explicit content of his own preaching, but as its essential presupposition. As a result, the validity of his message of salvation stands or falls with the validity of his own personal experience of proximity to God. Any

³³Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 619-22.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 268.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 258.

³⁶Cf. *ibid.*, p. 100; for a listing of the pertinent NT texts cf. Gerhard Kittel, "abba," TDNT I:5-6.

³⁷*Jesus*, p. 263.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 266.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 258; but cf. also *Die Auferstehung Jesu*, p. 87, where Schillebeeckx speaks of Jesus' consciousness of being son of this "Father" in a special way, even though he did not proclaim himself as son.

⁴⁰*Jesus*, p. 257.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 269-71.

assessment of the truth of what Jesus represented will ultimately find it necessary to consider not only Jesus' preaching and conduct but also his person—including, perhaps above all, his personal fate.

Schillebeeckx' reflections on Jesus' "abba experience" hardly resolve all questions. There remain in particular problems concerning the precise meaning in this context of the word "experience"—a term which inevitably evokes the memory of Schleiermacher and which Hans-Georg Gadamer has numbered among the most obscure concepts we possess.⁴² But Schillebeeckx does offer impressive support for his contention that "there is at any rate a significant, intrinsic and real link between the person of Jesus and the salvation brought by him on God's behalf"⁴³—a connection which would seem essential to any possible defense of Jesus uniqueness. In this regard, Schillebeeckx' warning that our appropriation of the Enlightenment must not preclude challenge to its prejudice against the possible permanent and universal significance of particular historical events ought not pass unheeded.⁴⁴

Further pursuit of these themes would lead to inquiry into the ontological basis of Jesus' "abba experience," the ontological source of his conviction that God's Kingdom is drawing near "in and through his own strangely marvellous ministry."⁴⁵ With all due caution, Schillebeeckx addresses these issues as a second-order (not secondary) dimension of Christology.⁴⁶ But, in accordance with our distinction, for purposes of orderly discussion, between functional and ontological uniqueness, such matters as Schillebeeckx' analysis of the Christological teaching of the early ecumenical councils will be left, as beyond the limited scope of this presentation, for possible consideration at a subsequent stage of our deliberations.

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⁴² *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 310.

⁴³ *Jesus*, p. 657.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 583-94.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 652-69.