

LIBERATION AND FEMINIST THEMES IN EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX'S *Church: The Human Story of God*

A discussion of liberation and feminist themes in Edward Schillebeeckx's *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) moderated by Mary E. Hines (Washington Theological Union) was initiated by brief presentations by Mary Catherine Hilkert (Aquinas Institute of Theology) and Roger Haight (Weston School of Theology). Hilkert provided an overview of the book that highlighted new aspects in Schillebeeckx's thought. This was followed by Haight's analysis of the text in terms of its liberation and feminist themes. Haight's suggestion that Schillebeeckx's theology provides categories that would be constructively supportive of feminist thought was developed by Hilkert who also offered a critique of the volume from a feminist perspective.

While Schillebeeckx's original intention was to focus on ecclesiology and pneumatology in the third volume of his christological trilogy, *Church* is more of a synthesis of Schillebeeckx's theology than a theology of the church or the Spirit. The shift in the project was occasioned by the crisis of hope Schillebeeckx detects among believers in the Netherlands and beyond, prompted largely by the ideological operation of the institutional church in recent decades. Specifically Schillebeeckx laments the lack of consistent institutional church structures to support and protect the vitality and freedom of the gospel proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council. Schillebeeckx wrote *Church* (in Dutch, *Human Beings as the Story of God*) as a re-presentation of the heart of the gospel and of Christianity both to offer encouragement to believers who are working in grassroots critical communities and to address a critical challenge to those in authority in the church.

The first chapter dealing with salvation, revelation, and human experience, while similar to the opening section of the *Christ* book, underlines more clearly the concealed ideological elements in human experience. The crucial notion of "negative contrast experience" is focused here and throughout the volume on situations of injustice and suffering in the church as well as in society. The second chapter deals with contemporary problems of belief in the context of secularization, social oppression and global human suffering. Schillebeeckx contends that the institutional church can and does serve as a real stumbling block for belief in God, particularly in terms of the official morality of the church hierarchy and the theological symbolism of patriarchy (61-62). Important new sections deal with the "vulnerability" of God in the face of human freedom and Schillebeeckx's understanding of mysticism and its relationship to ethics, although the concept of "political holiness" is not developed as fully as in the *Christ* book or in *On Christian Faith*.

The third chapter summarizes Schillebeeckx's earlier christological writings with the addition of an explicit discussion of the uniqueness (but not the absoluteness) of Jesus Christ in the context of dialogue with the world's religions. In Chapter Four Schillebeeckx insists that since church structures are necessarily historically and culturally conditioned, it is mere ideology to argue that one form of hierarchical structure or government is divinely sanctioned or to preclude honest discussion by appealing to the religious language of "the church as mystery." While Vatican II corrected a post-Tridentine overly hierarchical image of church, Schillebeeckx maintains that the more fundamental understanding of the church as "people of God" was not given adequate institutional or canonical protection. A democratic form of church government would be more faithful to the church's basic identity as "community of God" and the co-responsibility of all the baptized. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the inevitable tensions that will exist between those in office, the community of believers, and theologians if the wisdom of the Holy Spirit is to be mediated authentically by the entire community of the church. In the final chapter Schillebeeckx asserts that the church has a future "only to the degree to which it is a saving presence in the future of human beings and their worlds" (234), and explores briefly, in the light of contemporary ecological awareness and critique, the symbol of human beings as created in the image of God.

Describing Schillebeeckx as a liberationist political theologian, Haight identified the fundamental standpoint of the book as one that looks outward toward the whole of humankind, our common history, including our various religious histories, but with a special concern for human suffering (189). For Schillebeeckx as for third world liberation theologians, Christian theology to be universally relevant and "catholic" today must address the universal problem of human suffering in the forms of grinding poverty that is mediated in social and political structures.

Next Haight enumerated four fundamental dynamic principles that further define Schillebeeckx's standpoint and theology: negative experiences of contrast, the social character of human existence, the dimensions of salvation, and the unity of the theological and the ethical. Underlining the centrality of the concept of "negative contrast experience," Haight described it as a common and spontaneous human reaction to a situation (a) as negative or that should not be, (b) against the background of at least an implicit awareness of the way things should be, (c) coupled with an urge to resist or change the situation. This category recurs throughout the book in relation to the foundation of ethics and religion (28-29, 99), the situation of theology (53-55), Jesus and his meaning for us (114, 184), and the church (234). The central concept of "negative contrast experience" functions as an epistemological category that helps to define the anthropological constant out of which religion, and thus the meaning of salvation, emerge; as an hermeneutical principle that underlies in a formal way his justification of his standpoint; and as a theological principle that binds theology and praxis together in an indissoluble unity.

Haight remarked that the social character of existence, introduced by Schillebeeckx as background for the problem of failing religious belief today, has more far-reaching implications because it entails the kind of human solidarity that is a necessary presupposition for a liberationist and political theology.

Commenting on key aspects of Schillebeeckx's understanding of salvation, he pointed out that the term refers to the wholeness of human existence (the *humanum*) and arises out of various negative contrast experiences of limits to the human or ways in which the *humanum* is destroyed (77-80). Often conceived in terms of root freedom or human liberty and creativity, this experience of salvation can be described as "liberation" when human freedom is oppressed (132, and *passim*). While salvation comes from God, it occurs in history; hence Schillebeeckx's slogan, *nulla salus extra mundum* (5-13). Throughout the book in the context of discussions of God, creation, Jesus Christ and salvation, the Spirit, and the church, Schillebeeckx construes actual concrete experiences of liberation in this world as part and parcel of religious salvation from God (229-34).

Although salvation is from God, human beings are its agents; one cannot think of the experience of salvation in this world in an unmediated way. On a formal or structural level, theology cannot be separated from ethics and praxis in Schillebeeckx's thought. Both ethics and religion and consequently theology arise out of the negative experiences of contrast involved in the universal concrete experiences of contingency, finitude, human suffering, and diminishment. Because of the practical urge to resist and overcome the negativity intrinsic to such experiences, the religious imagination is wedded practically to praxis (30-33, 83-85, 91-99, 171-78).

Haight concluded that given the centrality of negative experiences of contrast in Schillebeeckx's theology, and in the context of contemporary, concrete, and specific experiences of global human suffering due to social and political causes, especially the problems of human oppression, dehumanization, and poverty, Schillebeeckx can be viewed as a liberation theologian with an option for the poor. Further, although Schillebeeckx fails to provide any lengthy description of the situation of women (or of any other oppressed group), Haight argued that his theology is a virtual feminist theology because the discrimination against women is universal and dehumanizing, because poor women are often doubly exploited, and because Schillebeeckx explicitly recognizes this.

Hilkert agreed that insofar as the feminist problematic is brought to the fore, Schillebeeckx's theology provides categories that would be constructively supportive of feminist principles, especially the notion of "negative contrast experience," the positive role of alternative communities in Schillebeeckx's ecclesiology, the Thomistic view that God's creative presence empowers and sustains human autonomy, Schillebeeckx's theology of salvation as encompassing the fullness of human and created well-being, and his understanding of "new moments" in the living Christian tradition. She questioned, however, whether a "virtual feminist theology" is possible since the liberationist stance requires explicit advocacy and critique. Citing the use of exclusively masculine language for God throughout even the original Dutch text (aside from a single reference to God as "him, it, or her," 56), the limited references to feminist literature in his vast bibliography, and the lack of a critical analysis of the hierarchical structure and operation of the Roman church as essentially patriarchal, Hilkert concluded that crucial feminist critiques and constructive work to date have not yet been incorporated into or fundamentally affected Schillebeeckx's theology. As examples of aspects of his theology that need to be rethought from a feminist/womanist per-

spective, she pointed to Schillebeeckx's treatment of the role of the women disciples at the death and resurrection of Jesus in the *Jesus* book as well as his discussion in *Church* of God as vulnerable/defenseless and the related claim that God's exercise of power as "nonauthoritarian, vulnerable, even helpless" should serve as a model for how ministerial authority is intended to be exercised in the church (221).

One question that Hilkert raised resulted in extensive discussion by the participants at the workshop: How does the category of "negative contrast experience" function for those who are socialized into traditions and social systems that fundamentally discount and misinterpret their experience from the beginning (e.g. poor women from nondominant cultures and races)? How does one recognize a negative social construction of reality as negative and begin to resist and protest? Further questions raised by the participants included: Is negative contrast experience the only, or even the most appropriate, starting point for theology? Given the shift of tone in this book, is Schillebeeckx fundamentally optimistic or pessimistic about salvation, the human condition, the future of the church? What is Schillebeeckx's understanding of freedom and of the *humanum*? Does Schillebeeckx presume a fundamental order and meaning in the universe and/or human history? Why does *Church* not provide a more developed theology of sin?

MARY CATHERINE HILKERT

Aquinas Institute of Theology

ROGER HAIGHT

Weston School of Theology