

ST. THOMAS AND THE APPEAL TO EXPERIENCE

A Response to Kenneth L. Schmitz

I'd like to thank Professor Schmitz for providing the opportunity for the kind of interdisciplinary dialogue Walter Principe called for in his presidential address last year. Summoning us to greater intellectual honesty and modesty, he reminded us that "there is just too much information and there are too many disciplines involved for any one person to pretend to claim sufficient knowledge to explore a topic thoroughly."¹ In order to foster discussion among those gathered here who come from increasingly diverse philosophical and theological backgrounds, my response will first point to potential dialogue partners in the Thomistic tradition whose philosophical foundations differ from that proposed by Prof. Schmitz, highlighting the contribution of Edward Schillebeeckx. Then I'll focus briefly on an aspect of experiential knowledge in Aquinas' thought to which Prof. Schmitz alluded, but which he did not develop. I'll conclude with an observation on the connection between Aquinas' confidence in the dialectic of opinions and recent disputes in this society and the larger academy over the emphasis placed on the experience of marginalized persons, groups and cultures.

Professor Schmitz's central claim is that Thomas Aquinas' understanding of experience—more precisely the relationship between experience and conceptualization in Aquinas—warrants a further hearing in the contemporary context. Fundamentally Schmitz is arguing for a classic Thomistic metaphysics of being that "has not suffered the divorce of subjectivity and objectivity in their modern and mutually exclusive senses" (30).² He sees this as the most adequate philosophical foundation for theological appeals to experience since a Thomistic metaphysics situates the appeal to experience "within the context of a conceptualization that returns us to the community of being" (30). By way of contrast Professor Schmitz assesses the "turn to the subject" that characterizes modernity to result in human consciousness or the self as the "center of all meaning, value and reality" (21). Human experience becomes the "ultimate, decisive horizon of what can be taken as true and real" (22). "Human consciousness 'imposes' its own order and values upon everything external to consciousness" (23). "Human

¹Walter H. Principe, "Catholic Theology and the Retrieval of its Intellectual Tradition: Problems and Possibilities," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 46 (1991) 86.

²The final version of Professor Schmitz's paper was not available prior to the presentation at the convention. All specific references to Schmitz's paper were taken from an earlier draft of the paper. Parenthetical page references refer to that earlier draft.

subjectivity acknowledges itself, rather than being, cosmic fate, or God as *setting* what counts [for humanity]" (24).

The crucial epistemological question Schmitz poses of the relationship between consciousness and being is at the center of the foundational theologies of two of the major mentors of this society—Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan. In their distinct projects both have attempted to "reconcile" the divorce between subjectivity and objectivity; Rahner, through a metaphysical anthropology, and Lonergan, through a cognitional analysis that establishes that the mind intends reality and thus that authentic subjectivity intends objectivity. While both Rahner and Lonergan have accepted the "turn to the subject" as a given component of modernity, clearly neither would agree that the human subject, rather than being or God, imposes order and values. Others in the audience may wish to pursue that discussion further with Professor Schmitz, explaining why you find the critical realism of Rahner's transcendental Thomism or Lonergan's general empirical method to be a necessary critical retrieval of Thomistic realism in our historical and cultural context. In particular, you may wish to return to Professor Schmitz's own remark that what is at issue here is philosophical and theological anthropology and specifically his concern to show that human persons are not closed off from transcendent depth.

I wish to highlight yet another approach to experience within the Thomistic tradition. The shift to concrete human history as the locus of God's revelation led Edward Schillebeeckx to reject both a classic Thomistic metaphysics of being and the transcendental turn of modern theology. Schillebeeckx's approach to human experience, heavily influenced by the phenomenological tradition of his Louvain mentor Dominic De Petter,³ insists that experience is neither totally subjective, nor totally objective, but rather occurs in the encounter of a subject with the "givenness" of reality. While the subject necessarily brings an interpretive framework or a horizon of understanding formed by the multiple traditions in which he or she stands, nonetheless reality can and does resist one's expectations and thus effects change in the subject's horizon. Experience occurs in a dialectical and self-correcting fashion precisely because it is not totally a subjective phenomenon.

It is not the modern "turn to the subject," but rather the political turn to the concreteness of human history that most distinguishes Schillebeeckx's project (as

³See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980) 29-79; *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 15-45; and "Erfahrung und Glaube," in *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*, Teilband 25 (Freiburg: Herder, 1980) 73-116. For Schillebeeckx's rejection of transcendental Thomism and De Petter's influence on Schillebeeckx's early writings, see "The Concept of 'Truth,'" and "The Non-Conceptual Intellectual Dimension in our Knowledge of God According to Aquinas," in *Revelation and Theology*, vol. 2, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 5-29, 155-206.

well as that of Johann Baptist Metz) from that of Thomas Aquinas. Professor Schmitz suggests that "the challenge that Thomas presents to the modern understanding of the primacy of experience is that, according to him, conceptualization somehow discloses a transhistorical dimension in relation to experience⁽¹⁰⁾. He argues that "to form a universal understanding of a particular temporal-historical situation, and on the basis of discursive experience to recognize the facets of meaning contained within it . . . is in some sense a liberation from the particularities of the situation, since conceptualization followed by judgment permits us to re-situate those concrete particularities and that historical situation within a larger horizon of understanding and of discourse" (10).

But this is exactly what is at issue in the shift beyond the classic focus on natures and universals, and even beyond modernity's "universal" human experience, to the particularities of concrete human history—especially the particularities of situations of suffering and injustice. The question is not the meaning of the particular in relation to the whole, but whether there is any meaning to be found within some parts of history at all. Can we speak with intelligibility about meaning in all of human history? In theological terms can we speak about God's action in, or presence to, human history in the face of Auschwitz, the starvation and oppression in Haiti, the abuse of children in our homes, the increase of rape, murder and violence in our cities, racial hatred, international devastation of the environment? Can we, and should we, form a transhistorical concept that can understand and recognize facets of meaning within those experiences of radical negativity? In the concreteness of human history we are confronted with the classic problem of evil which is characterized by an absence of being and therefore utter nonintelligibility.

It was precisely because history involves contingency and finitude wherein meaning and lack of meaning coexist, that Edward Schillebeeckx broke ranks with his philosophical mentors rejecting both Aquinas' metaphysical worldview and De Petter's "implicit intuition of meaning-totality."⁴ As Schillebeeckx states in his *Jesus* book: "History itself is not capable of complete rationalization; the 'reason for' history is not accessible to theory . . . the meaning of history is beyond rational solution."⁵ The faith that history does indeed have meaning and rests ultimately in the hands of God is an eschatological hope that can be verified

⁴See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979) 618-19. In spite of Schillebeeckx's assertion that it is no longer possible to hold to his traditional philosophical foundations, William L. Portier argues that Schillebeeckx's affirmation that human life, even apart from revelation, is more than simply meaningless, requires that Schillebeeckx retain "at least a minimal, fundamentally negative, realist metaphysics from his Thomist past." See Portier, "Edward Schillebeeckx as Critical Theorist: The Impact of Neo-Marxist Social Thought on His Recent Theology," *The Thomist* 48 (1984) 362.

⁵Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 617.

in fragmentary ways in human action, but that lies beyond rational verification. Thus the "experience" or the "evidence" for the hope that lies within us is to be found in the realms of praxis and mysticism (a mysticism that Schillebeeckx notes is most often mediated by the experience of dark night).⁶

Aquinas' conviction that theory necessarily is rooted in the evidence of experience is still operative here, but the evidence of experience is always interpreted in a concrete social and political context. Therefore social location and practical commitments make a foundational difference in the theoretical realm influencing what counts as evidence, modes of argumentation, principles for judgment, and conclusions that are drawn. Thus in response to Professor Schmitz's remark that "one hears of local theologies deriving from various worlds of experience" (1), Schillebeeckx among others would note that all theologies are local. Having been educated by the "masters of suspicion," political and liberation theologians argue that the search for the truth includes locating the theologian and theological claims in terms of conscious or unconscious determining factors of class, race, and gender, among others, and recognizing that all claims remain, in the end, perspectival.

Professor Schmitz stated clearly that he intended to limit himself to the philosophical dimensions of Aquinas' thought—his own area of expertise and an extremely valuable contribution to our convention. A more fully developed treatment of Aquinas' explicitly *theological* contribution to the convention theme would involve greater attention to, and exploration of, Aquinas' understanding of connatural knowledge of God—the *notitia experimentalis* or experiential knowledge of God that flows from the divine missions and the indwelling of the Trinity, to which Professor Schmitz alluded at the end of his presentation. The knowledge of God that theology is concerned with is most fundamentally the wisdom available only through union with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, the "Word breathing love" (*Verbum spirans amorem*). This kind of knowing goes beyond the conceptual to what Aquinas calls "a kind of experiential awareness, a knowing that is, as it were, tasted."⁷ Aquinas' doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Spirit suggests that this "experiential knowledge of God" is available to all believers through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in grace. As theologians exploring the role of experience in the thought of Aquinas we cannot afford to bypass the richness of Aquinas' insight into the kind of knowledge that only friendship with God can yield in our contemporary discussions of "the experience of grace," "religious experience," "faith experience," "experience of God," "the knowledge born of religious love," or the role of affectivity in spirituality and ethics.⁸ Further since this "knowledge by compassion" (as Aquinas sometimes

⁶Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, 70. See also *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, 804-17.

⁷*Summa theologiae* I,43,5 ad. 2.

⁸See, e.g., *ST* I, 1, 6 ad 3; I, 34, 1, obj. 2 and ad 2; I, 43, 5 ad 2; II-II, 45, 2; II-II,

refers to it) flows from charity, what are the implications in our day for the relationship between praxis and mystical experience of God or between ethics and theological reflection on the mystery of God?

Finally, Aquinas' contribution to discussion of the convention theme of the role of experience in theology is not limited to his understanding or use of the term "experience," but extends rather to Aquinas' method of doing theology and relates to the politically charged question of "whose experience counts?"⁹ The concern has arisen more than once in recent years, in this Society as well as in the academy, as to whether we are collapsing into a kind of "political correctness" at the expense of seeking the truth in frank, open, and critical dialogue. In a recent article in *Theological Studies* George Schner offers a rhetorical analysis of how the claim to speak "from experience" functions in public speech. Basically, he notes, "the appeal to experience alerts us to the speaker's absence in the other conversation partner's self-articulation. . . . It provides an indirect clue to the state of affairs in the community of believers, the realm of public discourse, or the academy."¹⁰ In that sense the appeal to experience is an appeal to a broader tradition than the version being offered by the speaker. In our focus on the role of experience in theology, retrieval of Aquinas' confidence that truth emerges in the dialectic of opinions would urge us to actively seek out, attend to, and critically evaluate the diverse viewpoints in this Society (as well as the views not welcomed or represented here) so that in an honest dialogue about our "conflict of interpretations" we might together come to fuller wisdom.

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97, 2 ad 2; *In Ps.* 33 (34):9, 14, 266; *I Sent.* 16, 1, 2c; 1, 373. See also Walter Principe, c.s.b., "Affectivity and the Heart in Thomas Aquinas' Spirituality," in Annice Callahan, R.S.C.J., ed., *Spiritualities of the Heart* (New York: Paulist, 1990) 45-63; Thomas Gilby, "Sacra Doctrina" and "The Dialectic of Love in the Summa," Appendices 5 and 10 in *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1, Blackfriars ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964) 58-66, 124-32; and T.C. O'Brien, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 7, Blackfriars ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976) appendix 3, 261-63. For a survey of recent retrievals of Aquinas' focus on friendship with God as central to Christian ethics, see William C. Spohn, S.J., "The Return of Virtue Ethics," *Notes on Moral Theology 1991, Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 72-75.

⁹See Monika Hellwig, *Whose Experience Counts in Theological Reflection?* The Père Marquette Lecture, 1982 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982).

¹⁰George P. Schner, S.J., "The Appeal to Experience," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 45-46.