

THEOLOGY OF EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX

- Topic: *Missio Ad Gentes*: The Contribution of Edward Schillebeeckx
Convenor: Brian D. Berry, College of Notre Dame of Maryland
Presenters: Heather A. Chappell, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto
Kathleen McManus, University of Portland
Diane Steele, St. Mary College, Leavenworth, Kansas

The point of this session was to present recent scholarship on the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx and to explore the relevance of this theology for contemporary missiology. Brian Berry introduced the session by recalling that, for Schillebeeckx, the mission of the church is to be a sacrament of God's salvation for the world. This mission is grounded in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, the primordial sacrament, who in his preaching and practice of the kingdom of God revealed God's will to save all of creation. This salvation by God in Jesus, which the church among others continues to mediate, is not only *for* the world, but it is realized first of all *in* the world, or it is rejected there.

Heather Chappell focused her presentation on Schillebeeckx's theology of God, particularly his understanding of God as fundamentally merciful. She explained that, for Schillebeeckx, mercy is understood as constitutive of the very nature of God as revealed in Jesus. Mercy describes a quality of God's grace that effects the conversion of human beings in a deeply transforming way, one that corresponds to the needs of the world caught in both suffering and sin. We are converted *by* the mercy of God which opens up for us a future, and we are converted *for* a practice of mercy which in turn opens up a future for the world. Chappell concluded that because mercy affects our attitude and approach to the world, it should be primary in the church's missionary praxis, opening the way to conversion, reconciliation, communion, and healing, and becoming in turn an authenticating criterion of a converted way of life. She also suggested that, although Schillebeeckx writes that the church ought to support secular work for justice, he seems to view this as subordinate to the church's witness to mercy, which not only "seasons" justice but ultimately "supplants" it in the eschatological kingdom of God.

Kathleen McManus directed her attention to Schillebeeckx's theological anthropology, especially his notion of negative contrast experience. Observing that care of the dying in the West is often marked by aggressive overtreatment and a creeping acceptance of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, McManus raised the question of how Schillebeeckx's notion of negative contrast experience might be illuminating for end-of-life situations where doctors have been unable to conquer human suffering and patients are left in a state of extreme vulnerability. She explained that, for Schillebeeckx, negative contrast experiences are experiences of suffering that not only give rise to protest and the ethical imperative towards active transformation, but that also involve a charismatic

element. Contrast experiences dialectically link the practical, "purposive" knowledge of science and technology with the "purposeless" knowledge of contemplation. McManus thus concluded that the contrast experience of persons being left alone to die requires that the church invite people to a praxis of solidarity that refuses to abandon the sufferer—just as God continued to "hold" Jesus' hand on the cross—and that protests against and actively resists prevailing cultural norms of what is deemed to be "meaningful" human life.

Diane Steele organized her reflections around Schillebeeckx's Christology, particularly his soteriology. She began by noting that, over the past decade, Schillebeeckx's theology has focused more on questions concerning the universality of Jesus' role in salvation. Because of his ever increasing consciousness of the reality and value of religious pluralism and of the violence committed in the name of religions that claim to be absolute, he has shifted from an inclusivist soteriology, which views all salvation as mediated by Christ, to a revelatory theocentric normative soteriology, which recognizes salvation outside the mediation of Christ and yet views Jesus as the "norm" of salvation. Steele highlighted some ambiguities that remain in Schillebeeckx's position regarding the normativity of Jesus for salvation. On the one hand, he insists that Jesus' role in salvation is essential for the final coming of God's kingdom, which would seem to place him close to Peter Schineller's position that Jesus is a "positive norm" of salvation or the revelation and mediation from God that corrects and fulfills all other mediations. On the other hand, Schillebeeckx presents other religions as true, valid ways of salvation and not as religions that need to be completed or fulfilled by Jesus Christ, thus coming closer to Roger Haight's position that Jesus is a "negative norm" of salvation insofar as he rules out contradictory alternatives. Steele concluded by underscoring the significance of Schillebeeckx's emerging normative soteriology for the church's understanding of its mission today.

In the discussion that followed, a number of issues were raised. One participant asked whether mercy in Schillebeeckx's thought, although different than human justice, is not the same as God's justice. Anselm's soteriology was cited both positively for attending to the justice of God while at the same time insisting on God's ultimate mercy, and negatively for its view of the role of the cross in salvation. Several participants posed the question of the meaning of human suffering in cases that are particularly hopeless or extreme (e.g., compromised newborns, global injustice and oppression), which prompted reflection on virtues such as compassion, solidarity, and wisdom that are evoked in other persons. A final participant asked whether Schillebeeckx's emerging normative soteriology, although engaged with the challenge of religious pluralism, is still not essentially an inclusivist one.

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