

EXPERIENCE ACCORDING TO EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX: THE DRIVING FORCE OF FAITH AND THEOLOGY

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1. Introduction

Edward Schillebeeckx¹ may well be considered an exemplar of a Catholic theologian living and working in the second half of the twentieth century, from his formation in Neo-Thomist philosophy and theology and evolving *via* the Second Vatican Council to become one of the exponents of late-modern theology.² In the late sixties, after having attempted to elaborate a theology of culture,³ Schillebeeckx makes a hermeneutical turn,

¹ For an intellectual biography, see Erik Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: Een theologoog in zijn geschiedenis. Deel 1: Een katholieke cultuurtheologie* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1999); ET: *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian in His History. 1: A Catholic Theology of Culture 1914-1965* (Dulles, VA: Continuum, 2002). For Schillebeeckx's primary bibliography: Ted Schoof and Jan van de Westelaken, *Bibliography 1936-1996 of Edward Schillebeeckx o.p.* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1997).

² Born in 1914, in Antwerp in a Flemish Catholic family, Schillebeeckx entered the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) in 1934. In Ghent he was taught at the Dominican philosophical institute by Domien De Petter who attempted to bring into dialogue philosophical Thomism and Husserlian phenomenology. Schillebeeckx studied classic Neo-Thomist theology at the Dominican theological institute in Leuven and later studied in Paris at Le Saulchoir and the Sorbonne. In Paris he enjoyed contacts with the French Dominicans of the *nouvelle théologie* Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu. In 1951 Schillebeeckx concluded a doctorate in theology with a dissertation on the sacramentology of Thomas Aquinas. After some years as a professor in the Dominican Theologicum in Leuven, he left for the chair of dogmatic theology and the history of theology at the theological Faculty of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He served as an expert for the Dutch episcopacy at Vatican II, was one of the founders of the progressive international theological review *Concilium*, and had a major influence on the Pastoral Council in the Netherlands, including the publication of the *New Catechism*, which was one of its primary results. In the seventies he accomplished one of the major theological efforts in his career with the publication of the first two books of his Jesus-trilogy (the third part only appearing in 1989). In 1982 he became an emeritus professor. At present, he still writes and publishes, and we are awaiting his often-announced new *Sacramentology*. Three times the Congregation for the Defence of the Faith investigated the orthodoxy of Schillebeeckx, but his theology was never condemned: in 1968 there was a general investigation; in 1979 his Christology became the subject of scrutiny; and in 1984 he was targeted for his views on ministry.

³ Until the late Sixties Schillebeeckx was in search of a new theology of culture in a context of secularisation. Important results of this endeavour were published in the first four volumes of his *Theologische peilingen* (Theological Soundings). One may consider

and exchanges a more neo-Thomist metaphysically-grounded theology for a theology rooted in history and language. It is at this point that the category of experience assumes a very important place in his theology, at the level of both theological method and content.

In the introduction of *Geloofsverstaan (The Understanding of Faith)*,⁴ Schillebeeckx defines *theological hermeneutics* by describing its two major tasks: (a) ‘how to interpret the biblical message of God’s Reign, and how to affirm such interpretation as a Christian interpretation?’, and (b) ‘how to account for such a Christian interpretation of reality to modern thinking, at least to the legitimate demands this thinking brings to the fore?’. It is from this hermeneutical perspective that his Christological trilogy, *Jesus het verhaal van een levende* (1974) (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 1979), *Gerechtigheid en liefde: Genade en bevrijding* (1977) (*Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World*, 1980) en *Mensen als verhaal van God* (1989) (*Church: The Human Story of God*, 1990) were conceived.⁵

Schillebeeckx’s goal has been the construction of a plausible and relevant theology within a modern context proceeding from a critical dialogue with this context. The result has been a critical-hermeneutical, praxis-oriented theology that places Christians in the midst of an emancipatory and liberating struggle of humanity for a more just and humane society. In this respect, Schillebeeckx’s theological position is very near the political theology of Johann Baptist Metz.⁶ Both reject a theology that

Gaudium et spes as exemplary for this attempt on the ecclesial level. In relation to today’s world Schillebeeckx intended to elaborate “a theological perspective on the historical form of human existence in its concrete involvement with the world and its religious meaning” (Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx*, 454). In line with *Gaudium et spes* – including the optimism of the Sixties – he envisaged a new partnership between Church and world. The Church is not an escape hatch of security and unchangeability, to flee from the insecurities and ambiguities of history and society, but has to link itself with the questions implicit in the contemporary sensibilities. Salvation is encountered in the daily living and working of human beings in the world in their relation with what is of the earth.

⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Geloofsverstaan: Interpretatie en kritiek*, Theologische peilingen, V (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1972); ET: *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (London and New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1974).

⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus het verhaal van een levende* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1974); ET: *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York, NY: Seabury Press and London: Collins, 1979). *Gerechtigheid en liefde: Genade en bevrijding* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1977); ET: *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1980). *Mensen als verhaal van God* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1989); ET: *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York, NY: Crossroad and London: SCM Press, 1990).

⁶ Which he at the same time appreciates very much and criticises, because for Schillebeeckx Metz is wrong in positing God as the subject of history, and not humanity (see his “Erfahrung und Glaube,” *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*, ed. Franz Böckle,

allows for an anti-modern, culture-inimical dogmatism or fundamentalism, and thus opt for a theology that appreciates the gains of modernity and its dream of a more humane world. Both, therefore, enter into a critical dialogue with modernity. Schillebeeckx, as much as Metz, protests against a theology that is oriented to a doctrinally pure set of eternal and deductive truths. They both search for a theology that is posited in the midst of a concrete praxis of faith, itself an expression of the ongoing Christian search for the meaning of the gospel for one's own time. And finally, against a theology that only focuses on the spiritual well-being of individual souls, they construct a theology which is (also) involved in the political and socio-economic realm and in the concrete histories of suffering and the resistance of humanity in need of and striving toward a just and liberated world. As already mentioned, it is in such a theological project that Schillebeeckx accentuates the crucial role of experience in faith and theology – to such a degree that some call Schillebeeckx's theology resolutely a theology of experience.⁷

In this contribution, I first want to consider how the turn to hermeneutics challenged Schillebeeckx to highlight the notion of experience (as well as correlation). Second, I will investigate his methodological views on experience, revelation, tradition development, and correlation as he developed them in his Jesus-trilogy. I will then conclude with a schematic presentation of Schillebeeckx's theological hermeneutics and some remarks and questions.

2. Hermeneutics Calls for Experience

In order to construct a theological hermeneutics of his own, in *Geloofs-verstaan (The Understanding of Faith)* Schillebeeckx enters into a dialogue with philosophical hermeneutics (Heidegger, De Saussure, Ricoeur, Gadamer), with theological hermeneutics (Bultmann, Fuchs, Ebeling,

vol. 25 (Freiburg, Basel, and Wien: Herder, 1980) 73-116. For Johann Baptist Metz, see his most important monograph: *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1977); and the collection: *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1997).

⁷ Cf. the presentation of Schillebeeckx in Rosino Gibellini, *Panorama de la théologie du XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1994) 371-398: 'Théologie et expérience' (theology as the understanding of the Christian experience). See also Marc Dumas' qualification of Schillebeeckx's project as 'une corrélation d'expériences', later on corrected in 'une interrelation critique d'expériences' (cf. Marc Dumas, "Corrélation d'expériences?," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 60 (2004) (still to be published)).

Tillich, Pannenberg) and linguistic philosophy (Ramsey), and critical theory (Habermas). In this endeavour the category of experience arises, especially in the search for criteria of an authentic dogmatic and theological language, and thus for legitimate changes or shifts in theological doctrine and dogma. Next to the doxological criterion (the primary aim of theological language is to praise God for God's salvific involvement in human history and world), Schillebeeckx stresses the importance of the experiential context of our faith concepts. But, for the first time, other, basic concepts and theological strategies are presented in this volume: the importance of orthopraxis, negative dialectics (contrast-experience), and the criterion of correlation.

a. Theological Language and Experience

In one of the contributions of *Geloofsverstaan*, namely *Ervaringscontext en doxologische waarde van het gelovige spreken*, Schillebeeckx defines the “relationship with lived experience as criterion for the meaning of theological interpretations”.⁸ He further elaborates this criterion under two aspects.

First, theology is in need of “a hermeneutics of experience before embarking on a system of hermeneutics of christian tradition, because it is not by any means certain that every real aspect of human experience will be expressed in the self-understanding of christian experience, which of course, forms an integral part of that experience”.⁹ That is the reason, according to Schillebeeckx, why one has to distinguish between, first, a dogmatic or theological faith understanding (which is always a linguistically expressed interpretation), and, second, the experience that is interpreted. One should thus hold the distinction between an experience-bound or experienced *interpretandum* and the linguistic interpretation models, *interpretaments*, in which this *interpretandum* is expressed.

Second, what “is said about Jesus in the church's interpretation of faith has therefore, if it is to be meaningful and intelligible to us – and this is the most important condition to be fulfilled if we are to give ourselves completely in faith – to have a real relationship with our ordinary everyday experience with our fellow-men in the world”.¹⁰ Indeed, the link with

⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Geloofsverstaan*, 57-62; ET: “The Context and Value of Faith-Talk,” *The Understanding of Faith*, 14-19, 14.

⁹ Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 16.

¹⁰ Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 16.

contemporary human experience is the only way to make the theological, interpretative language of the church meaningful and understandable.¹¹ Schillebeeckx even radicalises this point: “All theological interpretation must, as a reflection about religious talk, have a meaning that can be understood in and by the world. In other words, it must have ... a secular meaning.”¹²

b. Orthopraxis, Critical Negativity, and Correlation

In order to develop these insights, Schillebeeckx not only investigates the structure and nature of language, but also some (other) theological criteria. It is in this context that he, next to the criterion of the proportional relation between ‘interpretament’ and ‘interpretandum’ and the role of the reception by the faith community in validating new interpretations, profiles the criterion of *orthopraxis*. Whoever has come to understand his own existence will be led to a renewal of this existence: there is a mutual, intrinsic relation between theory and praxis, between Christian orthodoxy and Christian orthopraxis. Orthodoxy is only ‘orthos’ in as much it is realised in concrete praxis.¹³

Another crucial element which will fundamentally determine Schillebeeckx’s endeavour is the criterion of *correlation*,¹⁴ which he conceives of as a correction of Paul Tillich’s question-answer-correlation. For Schillebeeckx it is far from evident that out of the human quest for meaning arises the quest for the God of Christian faith. Schillebeeckx, likewise, wonders if this link could only be evident from the point of view of revelation. It seems that Tillich makes a category mistake and too hastily combines two different language games in linking a religious answer to a non-religious question. According to Schillebeeckx, theology is not concerned with a correlation of human questions and religious answers, but a correlation of answers. For a human question, only a human answer

¹¹ In summary: “The basic condition, then, for every interpretation of faith which is faithful to the gospel is the meaningfulness of that interpretation. In other words, it must reflect real experience. On the other hand, the experience of our everyday existence in the world must also give meaning and reality to our theological talk” (Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 16-17).

¹² Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 17; with a reference to Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

¹³ Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 67-69.

¹⁴ Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 78-101: “Correlation between Human Question and Christian Answer.”

can be meaningful. It is the task of the theologian to bring about a correlation between what is humanly meaningful and what is meaningful in light of the Gospel. Only then, when God is not in principle needed for a meaningful life, does God cease to function as “a ‘stop-gap’, something to which you resort if you can find no other way out of your deepest problems”.¹⁵

In discussing these human answers, Schillebeeckx points to negative and positive human experiences. Negative ‘contrast-experiences’ have to do with the experience of a threat to the *humanum*, and impulses to resist suffering. In this context Schillebeeckx mentions the ‘*critical negativity*’ or ‘*negative dialectic*’ as the universally acknowledgeable pre-understanding of all (pluralistic) positive human projects of meaning. These negative experiences bear in themselves a positive potential that inspires the manifold struggles for a more humane world, for human integrity. This is “the context of human experience in which christian talk about God can be heard in a way which is both secularly meaningful and universally intelligible. There is indeed a convergence or correlation between what is affirmed in the gospel message as a promise, a demand and a criticism and what man experiences as emancipation in his resistance to the threat to the *humanum* that he is seeking”.¹⁶

There are, however, also *positive partial experiences of meaning*, which, according to Schillebeeckx, implicitly call for ultimate meaning, that is, for fulfilment. Here a link with the Christian message may become apparent: “From the point of view of man’s question about the authentic fulfilment of his life, about salvation, I see the only explicitly non-religious context within which it is meaningful to speak correlatively about God ... The ultimate fulfilment of man at the end of time, which all men are seeking but cannot formulate and can only partly realise, is the universal pre-understanding of the *humanum* that is promised to us in Christ.”¹⁷ Only when human beings already experience in their daily life ‘signs and glimpses of transcendence’ is it meaningful to talk about the Christian God.

¹⁵ Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 90.

¹⁶ Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 94.

¹⁷ Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 98. The text goes further: “Human reality, which can, despite everything, be meaningfully interpreted in secular terms and especially by realising meaning in praxis within a history of meaninglessness, receives from christianity meaning in abundance: the living God himself, who is ultimately the abundance to which all secular meaning is indebted for its own secular significance” (Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 98-99).

Finally, in the last part of *Geloofsverstaan*, Schillebeeckx develops the importance and impact of Habermas's new critical theory on a modern hermeneutical theology, and accentuates the *practical-critical intention*, and thus the striving for orthopraxis of such theological hermeneutics, which therefore qualifies itself by its Christian-emancipative intention.

c. Provisional Conclusion

It is fair to say that in *Geloofsverstaan* all the preparatory work was completed for Schillebeeckx's theological project from the seventies until the present day. To conclude this section, I sum up some of the crucial elements:

- the introduction of the category of experience, the importance of the context of experience for a theological hermeneutics of dogmatic language, and the distinction between an experiential *interpretandum* and linguistical interpretation models (interpretaments);
- the need for a correlation of the Christian message to contemporary non-religious experiences to highlight the plausibility and relevance of theological language in the current modern context (1972), giving rise to new interpretations;
- the analysis of such non-religious experiences in terms of contrast-experiences of critical negativity, and of experiences of partial meaningfulness;
- and, finally, the crucial role of orthopraxis as the hallmark of an authentic practical-critical, emancipative Christian faith in search of the *humanum*: orthodoxy is a matter of orthopraxis; Christian salvation has to do with the realisation of human integrity.

It is from here that Schillebeeckx undertakes his Christological trilogy. Often he explicitly refers to the part experience plays in faith and faith reflection. Likewise, from time to time, in his methodological texts and paragraphs, he elaborates anew the role of experience in theological epistemology.

3. Experience as the Driving Force of Faith and Theology

I already mentioned that during his Jesus-research Schillebeeckx further elaborates his theological method, and a number of the crucial elements stemming from his earlier writings are taken up again and further

developed in view of new elements and questions. A noteworthy, clear synthesis is offered in 1978, after having completed his second Jesus-book: *Tussentijds verhaal over twee Jezusboeken (Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ)*.¹⁸ In this rather short monograph Schillebeeckx presents – in dialogue with or reacting to some of his reviewers and critics – some clarifications on his method, very closely linked to the way in which he proceeded in his Jesus-research (especially to the first methodological part of *Christ*).

I take this booklet as the starting point for a more systematic analysis of the theological-epistemological role of experience in Schillebeeckx's theology. I also examine *Erfahrung und Glaube* and *Mensen als verhaal van God (Church)*,¹⁹ and when appropriate also his valedictory lecture as a professor in Nijmegen, titled *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983* (The Understanding of Faith in the year 1983), the title of which evidently refers to his first hermeneutical monograph.²⁰ To a large extent, the lecture itself has been integrated in the first part of *Mensen als verhaal van God*.

The word 'experience' is to be found throughout *Tussentijds verhaal (Interim Report)*. It is the key term (a) not only to understand what inspired the *first Christians* to testify that Jesus was the risen Christ, but also to gain insight into the 'what' and 'how' of revelation and what is at stake in the two thousand year tradition of Christianity; (b) furthermore, for Schillebeeckx, the category of 'experience' is crucial in order to analyse the *current situation*; and (c) lastly, by 'correlating' both 'experiences' Schillebeeckx is able to develop how *Christians today* can live out their faith in a contextually credible and relevant manner. The ubiquitous presence of 'experience' in Schillebeeckx's theology thus has a double consequence: it teaches us something about his vision of what belief is, and the method in which this belief can still function.

For a clear understanding of this, it is important to make a preliminary note before starting our close reading of the *Interim Report*. Schillebeeckx distinguishes three elements in his analysis of what experience is: an *experiential* dimension (or let us better term this a 'lived' dimension), an *interpretative* dimension that acquires concrete form by the expression of

¹⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Tussentijds verhaal over twee Jezusboeken* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1978); ET: *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (London: SCM Press and New York, NY: Crossroad, 1980).

¹⁹ For references, see resp. notes 5 and 6.

²⁰ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1993).

that experience into concrete images, concepts and narratives ('interpretations'), and a *theoretical* dimension (a model) that forms the framework in which experience and interpretation occur and are contained. In his own words: "Thus, in what is called a religious experience, there is not only interpretation (understood as certain concepts and images), but moreover a theoretical model from which one synthesises divergent experiences."²¹

a. Christianity Began with an Experience – Revelation and Experience

For Schillebeeckx, Christianity began with an *experience*, an encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, which caused people to discover new meaning and direct their lives in a new direction. Through actual, liberating events people experienced God's closeness. A quick look at the two Jesus-books already published at the time of *Tussentijds verhaal (Interim Report)* clearly illustrates this point.

In his first Jesus-book Schillebeeckx refers to two basic experiences, elementary to understand Jesus's life, message and praxis, and the origin of the Christian faith community after his death. First Schillebeeckx refers to Jesus's abba-experience,²² related to Jesus's 'unconventional' praxis of praying to his Father, to explain Jesus's self-understanding. This experience underlies and is the source of his message and praxis of the coming Reign of God, "which without this religious experience, or apart from it, lose the distinctive meaning and content actually conferred on them by Jesus".²³ Further, according to Schillebeeckx, the abba-experience points to the very characteristic specificity of Jesus with regard to his own context (which is not to say that in this basis the supra-historical significance of Jesus could be sustained). Second, Schillebeeckx refers to the Easter experience of the first disciples, as the experience of conversion, on the initiative of Jesus, to Jesus as the Christ – which is the experience of having found forgiveness, grace and salvation in Jesus, and of returning to the actual community with Jesus, now professed as the Christ, the coming Judge (Son of Man) or Risen Crucified.²⁴ It is on the basis of this experience, which is new – however not discontinuous with the experiences of the disciples with the pre-paschal Jesus – that the disciples gather

²¹ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983*, 26 (my translation).

²² Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 210-221.

²³ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 266.

²⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 379-397.

again (on the historical initiative of Peter). It is also in this experience that the reality of what in the pascha-christologies is called ‘resurrection’ and later is received as the ‘leading and canonical kerygma’, is revealed.

In his second Jesus-book, Schillebeeckx focuses on the experience of grace, that is, of having found salvation in Jesus from God (Dutch *van Godswege*), in the variety of interpretations to which the New Testament testifies. It is at this point that Schillebeeckx again makes a difference “between the interpretation brought by the *Christian experience* itself (and this includes historical and social conditioning, though the experience of Jesus as the Christ or as decisive and final salvation can also include universal human experiences), and what I might call the subsequent culturally conditioned thematization and theoretical development of these Christian interpretative experiences”.²⁵

In the *Interim Report* Schillebeeckx further reflects on these religious experiences in terms of revelation. Because revelation, for Schillebeeckx, always has to do with experience. In *Erfahrung und Glaube* and *Church*, he will become even more explicit about ‘revelational experiences’.²⁶ However, even though there can be no revelation without experience, revelation is not equivalent to human experience, and yet it can only be discerned “in and through human experiences”.²⁷ The confession of the first Christians that Jesus is the Christ is then not only *their* articulation of an experience but, first and foremost, evidence of something *that has overtaken them* and has made or taught them to look at Jesus in another light.²⁸ The faith experience that Jesus is the Christ is thus not a purely

²⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 634.

²⁶ In *Erfahrung und Glaube*, there is a long section about the false dilemma between ‘Glaube aus dem Hören’ en ‘Glaube aufgrund von Erfahrung’ – a false dilemma because faith never starts from an unmediated hearing, but can only be realised and mediated through personal experience – cf. p. 81: “Erst wenn die lebendige Geschichte einer bestimmten religiösen Tradition erzählt und lebendig in Praxis umgesetzt ist, können heutige Menschen aus und in und mit ihren heutigen menschlichen Erfahrungen christliche Erfahrungen machen, das heißt sich mit dieser Geschichte identifizieren oder sich von ihr distanzieren [reference is made here to some other works, including some of his own]. In dieser Geschichte können sie in und mit ihren menschlichen Erfahrungen in der Welt zugleich sich selbst entdecken.” The Christian tradition is therefore the history of Christian faith experiences: human experiences that, by their embodiment in the Christian histories and narratives about experiences of God, become experienced as Christian experiences. See further also *Church*, 22ff.

²⁷ Revelation occurs “through a long process of events, experiences and interpretations”. For this and following quotes see: *Interim Report*, 11.

²⁸ “But when Christians claim that Jesus is God’s decisive revelation, they understand this in a twofold way, both objectively and subjectively. On the one hand, there are people (Christians) who affirm, ‘this is the way we see him’.” It is because of their liberating encounters and experiences of salvation with Jesus before his death, and in the events

subjective human intuition, sensation or feeling and, thereby a product of human interpretation, rather, it contains a cognitive claim (an ‘objectivity’) that unravels itself together with the experience. Truly this revelatory initiative of God can only become expressed through a person’s answer in faith (for instance, in confessing Christ). Nonetheless, it cannot be reduced to this, even if paradoxically enough it is only in and through this human answer in faith that revelation becomes visible to us. Put differently: there can be no experience without interpretation.

Schillebeeckx unfolds this ‘objectivity’ of the experience by distinguishing between ‘experiential elements’ and ‘interpretative elements’ within the ‘(revelatory) experience’ itself. Already present *within the experience itself* are intrinsic interpretative aspects that can be distinguished from other interpretative elements that originate from the situation in which the experience takes place. Here Schillebeeckx mentions love as an example. Those who are caught up in the experience of love know that their experience is about love.²⁹ The experience of love thus speaks for itself: it has a transparency of its own. This does not mean that *interpretative elements* (interpretations) from elsewhere – for instance, from literature or popular culture – do not really matter. On the contrary, on the one hand, they give expression to the inexhaustible richness of this experience of love and, at the same time in doing so, demonstrate that it cannot be contained in words – both being the catalyst to the continually renewing search for forms of expression. On the other hand, they thoroughly colour the experience of love as a whole and describe how actual love is experienced. The interpretation thus does not come from above but rather, as the self-expression of the experience, is deeply interwoven in the actual experience.³⁰ Schillebeeckx designates expressions that are primarily an articulation of this ‘original’ interpreted experiential dimension of the experience as ‘first-order’ expressions. Expressions

surrounding his death, that people began to think of him in this manner. “On the other hand, in accordance with this self-same understanding on the part of the disciples, this affirmation also carries the implication, ‘We must see him like this, because this is the way he is.’” From their experience of liberation and salvation the disciples mean to answer the question: “Who is he that he can act thus?” with the following conclusion: Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. Expressed more technically: “Soteriology is the way to christology” (Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 11-12).

²⁹ “Thus this interpretative identification is an intrinsic element of the experience of love” (Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 13).

³⁰ “Real love is fed by the experience of love and its own particular ongoing self-expression ... However, this growing self-expression makes it possible to deepen the original experience; it opens up the experience and makes it more explicit” (Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 13-14).

that schematise this experience further, from out of a ‘further, advanced, reflexive, interpretative experience’, are ‘second-order’ expressions.

Applied to the experience of the first Christians, such first-order expressions as ‘Jesus is the Christ’, or ‘He lives’, refer to the common *fundamental basic experience* of ‘having experienced salvation in and through Jesus’. It is this basic experience that received an interpreted expression in the New Testament writings in various ways and in relation to the Old Testament and the contemporary context. The fundamental basic experience *is not disconnected from* the New Testament *interpretations* (second-order expressions) – it can, in fact, not be disconnected from it. However, it does not coincide with these interpretations because this basic experience is already contained within pre-existing interpretative frameworks from the outset – frameworks that are already influenced by underlying theories and models. There simply cannot be an ‘unmediated experience’.

Nonetheless, Christian belief is all about this basic experience, certainly and especially if we ask ourselves what this Christian belief can still mean for us today. Schillebeeckx’s primary concern is that the adherence to interpretations handed down to us by tradition will end up restricting precisely that open access to this basic experience. For, just as the New Testament gave testimony to that basic experience in various ways depending on the situation, so too did the ‘living tradition’ as a history of consecutive contextually-coloured interpretations of *that same shared basic experience* because, through the combined action of experience and interpretation, tradition is both the condition of possibility for, and the result of, participating in the same fundamental experience of ‘finding grace in Jesus’. When an appeal to tradition does not make this possible, then only traditionalism and dogmatism devoid of experience remain. The only legitimate development of tradition should be that which makes it possible for Christians today to also have access to that faith experience.

From this perspective Schillebeeckx further develops Gadamer’s tradition hermeneutics and arrives at his well-known scheme of the *identity between the proportions between faith expression and the historical context in the course of history*.³¹ The dialectics between (new) experiences (in new contexts) and (old) interpretations (stemming from older contexts) fosters a continuous process of tradition development, in which ruptures do not threaten the continuity of tradition, but may be urged precisely to guarantee this continuity. The relationship between Jesus’s

³¹ See Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 40-45.

message and his historical context is fundamentally similar to the relation between the New Testament message and the historical context that gave it form. Despite the difference between both expressions there is identity and continuity – ‘proportional similarity’. This identity of meaning continues to persist through the subsequent proportions between faith expression and context in the patristic, medieval and modern times. But Schillebeeckx’s real message is that this relation will also once again acquire form today. It is here again that the category of ‘experience’ occupies a prominent place in his thought.

b. Our Modern World of Experience

Schillebeeckx states: “What once was experience can only be handed down in renewed experiences, at least as living tradition.”³² To this a connection must be made with *our modern world of experience* which, according to Schillebeeckx, is fundamentally associated with, on the one hand “our ineradicable expectation of a future in which men can live, and on the other hand the utter horror” regarding the suffering and senseless injustice that threatens the future of the overwhelming majority of people.³³ Modern hope for a better society is after all thwarted by utilitarian and individualistic understandings of ‘freedom’. Increasing wealth and power runs parallel to an instrumentalisation of the human person and society at the expense of ecology and human well-being. However, the ethical resistance that places both of these under critique and, in particular, the suffering that they generate, betrays a ‘*new sense of ethical values*’ in terms of solidarity that, according to Schillebeeckx, ‘are Biblical’ at their core. Furthermore, against the background of suffering, disintegration and uprootedness, the religious question, which is a question of healing, restoration, salvation, and human integrity, becomes a question of being a human being, regardless of whether one is religious or not. “The question of salvation is not just religious or theological; in our time it has become universal and even explicitly is now the great driving force of all human history.”³⁴

At other places Schillebeeckx develops this new sense of ethical values and the experiences involved in the question of salvation as the question of the whole of humanity, often in relation to the notion of *contrast-experience*.

³² Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 50.

³³ Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 55.

³⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 58.

He does this again, for example, in his so-called ‘theological testament’, published in Dutch in 1994, on the occasion of his 80th birthday. The ‘radical contrast-experience’ is an experience that is foundational, accessible to all people, pre-religious and even pre-reflexive, “a basic experience which is common to all human beings, and which, as such, is ... pre-religious, accessible to all human beings”.³⁵ Such contrast-experience intrinsically bears within itself both a negative and a positive element. *Negatively*, it is the experience of indignity that arises in human beings when perceiving the factual world with its histories of suffering and injustice, oppression and misfortune. It calls for an irresistible veto against the inhumanity in our history; a ‘No’ to suffering. Schillebeeckx adds: “Moreover, this experience possesses a greater evidence and certainty than all what philosophy and human sciences may bring in as verifiable knowledge.”³⁶ Positively, it invokes an open ‘Yes’ that is at the very basis of all kinds of resistance and that reveals evil and injustice as evil and injustice to us. This positive side reveals an unspecified openness to a new and more humane situation, which can justifiably claim our unconditional yes. It gives raise to a positive expectation that a better world is possible. It is the ground for human *belief* in the humaneness of humanity, and for hope that suffering and injustice do not have the last word in this history, which is marked by ambiguity: “Without this hope the factual available indignity is as lived experience non-existent, intrinsically impossible, meaningless and without humane content. The human indignity itself is without at least a latent positive yearning for humaneness essentially absurd.”³⁷ Therefore this ‘open yes’ is more radical than negative contrast experiences, which in fact presuppose it. This ‘open yes’ is also nurtured, affirmed and supported by fragmentary experiences of happiness, meaning, fulfilment, etc., for both believers and unbelievers. Religions, then, are the offspring of pairing negative experiences and positive salutary conceptions and expectations. Most often they do not theorise about suffering and the way in which it can be solved, but offer ways to deal with it, in a praxis of liberation. This is also true for Christianity.³⁸ Because “asking what *Christian identity* is about is not to be separated from asking what *human integrity* is about. Moreover, this quest for identity cannot be solved in a merely theoretical way. It essentially implies a

³⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament: Notarieel nog niet verleden* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1994) 128. The translation of this citation and the following is mine.

³⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament*, 128.

³⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament*, 130.

³⁸ Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament*, 131-132.

quest for a Christian, specific praxis of a both mystical or theological and ethical-practical nature, extending itself to the domain of ecology and of the social and political life. To speak of God only receives its proper meaning and ‘productive’ weight in the framework of the *praxis of the Reign of God*.³⁹

c. Towards a Critical Correlation between the Christian Tradition and the Modern Situation

It is to this modern context of experience that the Christian faith has to relate. It thus makes necessary a ‘critical correlation’ *between tradition and the modern situation*. On one end, new contextual experiences help cast a fresh look at the tradition. On the other, this tradition, as the ever-renewing interpretation of experiences, renders perspectives that add a Christian dimension to this modern context. The result is a real and up-to-date Christian belief in which the present-day situation “is an intrinsic element of the significance of the Christian message for us”.⁴⁰ It is such a Christian faith that is both founded upon and a result of the fundamental Christian experience, which in its turn, precisely in relation to the new situation, acquires form and expression once again. Thus the correlation between tradition and context can with equal, or perhaps even greater right be called *a correlation of experiences* – i.e. between that of the fundamental experience handed down by tradition and the experiences of the modern human being.

Indeed, as already stated, Schillebeeckx understands tradition to be the history of both the experience and interpretation of the fundamental Christian experience. On the basis of his research in the New Testament, he discerns four constant structural principles that depict this fundamental experience and lend structure to all forthcoming interpretations: finding

³⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament*, 136.

⁴⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 55. He continues: “It is therefore striking that the times in which men refer to their own experiences, individual and collective, with renewed emphasis, are always times of crisis in which they experience a gap between tradition and experience instead of continuity between, e.g. the Christian tradition of experience and their contemporary experience. Of course even old experiences have power to make men question and transform; the four structural principles mentioned above remain a critical reminder of that [for these principles, see further in our text]. But even new experiences have their own productive and critical force; otherwise, a reference to ‘interpretative elements’ of old experiences would do not more than solidify and hold back our ongoing history.”

salvation in God is to become fully human; Jesus is the definitive mediation of this; by means of passing on his story in the Church through its retelling, we also are invited to enter into this story; and, this salvation embraces, but also extends beyond, history.⁴¹ Correlated to the current situation these structural principles acquire a concrete form in so far as the Christian faith, with respect to the new ethical sense of values in the modern context, is able “to understand the impulses of living, struggling and praying mankind, to find here echoes of its own Christian impulses and then to show solidarity on the basis of the belief that God does not [want] that mankind should suffer; on the contrary”.⁴² The Christian message of salvation is the full restoration of the human person and also implies an ecological, social and political praxis. It is in this praxis, in the actual engagement with the suffering, that the fundamental Christian basic experience can once again acquire form. This is the contemporary locus of *religious experience, the privileged place where God’s commitment to the human person can be experienced*, in the opposition to suffering and injustice. Christianity today is a matter of politics and mysticism bound together.⁴³

d. The Primacy of Experience over Interpretation, in Its Very Indissoluble Bond to It.

In *Church* Schillebeeckx stresses more explicitly that all experience is in fact *irreducibly interwoven or inextricably linked to interpretation*. This applies all the more to religious experiences, and definitely to Christian religious experiences. Both are intrinsically experienced in and through particular human experiences, “though with the illumination and help of a particular religious tradition in which people stand and which is thus influential as an interpretative framework which provides meaning”.^{43a}

⁴¹ Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 51-54.

⁴² Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 58.

⁴³ “This radical concern for human society indicates a special presence of God. If living man is the fundamental symbol of God, i.e. ‘the image of God’, then the place where people are dishonoured, oppressed and enslaved, both in their own hearts and in society, is at the same time *the privileged place where religious experience becomes possible* in and through a life-style which seeks to give form to that symbol, to achieve wholeness and liberation. Thus real liberation, redemption and salvation always diverge into mysticism, because for religious people, the ultimate source and foundation for the healing and salvation of mankind, living and dead, is to be found in God” (Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 59-60 – italics mine).

^{43a} Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 24-25.

For Christians this illumination is offered by “the faith content of the Christian tradition of experience”.⁴⁴ He also accentuates the *reflexive* character of experiences: experiences are not so much concerned with unmediated ‘sensations’ or ‘affections’, but rather with interpretation and reflection.

Nevertheless this does not undo the *pre-linguistic*, or *pre-reflexive*, aspect or even the ‘original’ *transparency of experience towards universal significance*, even though these are unattainable without interpretation. Inasmuch as experiences are ‘revelation of reality, of that which is not produced or thought of by human beings’, they have a cognitive, critical and liberating power. They teach us something about the human search for truth, goodness and righteousness, and happiness. The same is true for the Christian “offer of revelation with its non-objectifiable meaning and content” that is “to be found only in the believing interpretations of men and women in a particular social and cultural context.”⁴⁵ For although the pre-linguistic experiential moment cannot be distilled as such from the accompanying interpretative moments, this does not imply that at its core the Christian revelation is empty. On the contrary, it “provides its own *direction* of interpretation, as the normative basis of our non-arbitrary interpretation of faith”.⁴⁶ Further on in *Church* Schillebeeckx states more explicitly that Christians can legitimate their faith because it concerns a fundamental, thoroughly human experience. All human beings share such experience. It does not necessarily require a religious interpretation, although for every human being it is related to the deepest meaning of life. Such a fundamental experience, nevertheless, “is helped in the understanding of this fundamental character, which so deeply affects human existence, by the word of God”.^{46a} Schillebeeckx adds: “I say, ‘is helped’; not ‘gives a better understanding of’ this experience than the agnostic explanation”, and further: “So I am talking about universally shared experiences which are fundamental to any human existence, which by the introduction of belief in God’s saving presence manifest a distinctive comprehensibility which can be understood by others (even if they do not accept them), which is not present in other interpretations in which belief in God is not expressed.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 24-25.

⁴⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 42-43.

⁴⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 38.

^{46a} Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 84.

⁴⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 84.

The inextricable link between experience and interpretation also makes Schillebeeckx wonder about the concept of ‘correlation’ because of which he seems to (*slightly?*) radicalise his hermeneutical position, without relativising its universalistic dimension. As already mentioned, in *Tussentijds verhaal (Interim Report, 1978)* Schillebeeckx describes the critical correlation theory, as consisting of three steps: first, the tracing of constant structures of the Christian foundational experience within the New Testament and the tradition; second, the analysis of the present-day world of experience, in a general-cultural and a Christian-specific sense; and third, the critical correlation or confrontation of both sources of theology. Schillebeeckx will later, however, prefer to use the term ‘*interrelation*’ instead of ‘*correlation*’. In his valedictory lecture in Nijmegen in 1983, Schillebeeckx even states that ‘correlation’ is a misleading term, because it would suggest only a harmonious relationship between tradition and situation, whereas for Schillebeeckx the intrinsically necessary link between tradition and situation includes a whole range of possible relations, from identity (Dutch *het klikt*) to non-identity (Dutch *het botst*), from harmony and correlation to conflict and confrontation.⁴⁸ Authentic theologising, he writes, takes place in “two phases that nevertheless together form a dialectical whole ... We after all only understand the Christian tradition out of the questions handed to us from the present situation wherein we live; the understanding of the past already implies an interpretation of the present. And the other way round, our understanding of the present stands itself under the historical influence of the Christian tradition.”⁴⁹

It remains a question however, as to whether there is already the presumption of a more fundamental continuity and harmony, underlying the very structure of Schillebeeckx’s interrelation-concept, which would unmask this as essentially correlation. This would (at least in my opinion) become apparent in his continuous reference to a pre-linguistic and thus pre-reflexive element in experiences, secular as well as religious, and the way in which he profiles the relationship Christian faith has (or should

⁴⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983*, 9-10.

⁴⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983*, 12. But, as a matter of fact, already in *Gerechtigheid en liefde (Christ, 1977)*, he employed the category of interrelation: “Christian theology in particular is concerned with an interrelationship [Dutch original: *interrelatie*] between an ‘analysis of the present’ on the one hand and an analysis of the historical experience of Christian life and hermeneutical reflection on this life on the other. Its concern is to distil from this totality a direction which Christians can responsibly take in the process of living towards the future” (*Christ*, 72).

have) with this element.⁵⁰ In summary: because it concerns essentially the ‘same’ experience that is shared by believers as well as non (or other) believers, despite the diversity of often incompatible interpretations in which this experience is expressed, it is possible for Christians to affirm the plausibility and relevance of their faith in relation to today’s modern context and its standards of rationality and humaneness.

e. The Lessons of Edward Schillebeeckx

The lessons to be learned from Edward Schillebeeckx are thus clear:

- There can be no faith without experience. Faith is not about acceptance of doctrines stemming from the past but rather actual lived and reflected upon faith experience. Faith has to do with life. Indeed a faith that cannot be actually experienced is not worth believing.
- To this Schillebeeckx adds that just as such experiences are always contextually situated, the universal significance of the Christian message (the ‘offer of revelation’) continually manifests itself in concrete particular forms. This was the case with Jesus, and this is once again the case when the narrative of Jesus’s life and death ‘fits’ (or does not ‘fit’!) in with our own life experiences.
- Consequently, Schillebeeckx can affirm that, for a Christian, a properly understood pursuit of an ethical and just society has an affinity with following Jesus’s example in working for the kingdom of God. For the modern Christian there is an intrinsic bond between both. Precisely because of this, there is a ‘(co)relation’ possible between the experiences of the first disciples with Jesus and the deep-seated contemporary human experiences of Christians today in their modern context (with a privileged role for experiences of suffering). Interpreted against the background of the Christian tradition it is essentially the same fundamental basic experience: God is committed to human beings and their salvation. The project of the human being is the project of God: “Christianity has to do with the integration of being human in and through a source experience in which people, confronted with the man Jesus, connect the world, society and the individual with the absolute ground, the living God, our salvation”.⁵¹

⁵⁰ For a similar analysis of Schillebeeckx approach, see my: “The Sacramental Interruption of Rituals of Life,” *Heythrop Journal* 44 (2003) 401-417.

⁵¹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 62.

– Finally, *the particularity of the Christian tradition* therefore in no way threatens the plausibility and relevance of Christian faith in a modern context and its standards of rationality and humaneness, and thus *its universal significance*. On the one hand, in the words of the *Interim Report*: “Christians find the most adequate expression of the depth-dimension harboured in all our everyday human experiences – what can be rightly called a primal trust or a fundamental belief – in Jesus Christ. For precisely that reason, in Jesus individual, historically unique originality and human universality go hand in hand.”⁵² On the other hand, inversely, as stated in *Erfahrung und Glaube*, the question for meaning and truth is a question only to be solved in concrete praxis in which – for Christians – today’s actual experiences of meaning and truth are addressed in the Christian experience tradition as a practical anticipation of universal meaning (the praxis of the Reign of God) and as the historical mediation of the manifestation of universal truth, both standing under the critical-cognitive and liberating power of the histories of suffering.⁵³

f. Experience between Particularity and Universality: Two Critiques of Schillebeeckx’s Position

Schillebeeckx has been criticised for his concept of experience from two perspectives. After having analysed the way in which Schillebeeckx uses human (religious) experience, Leo Apostel, a prominent Flemish atheist philosopher, observes that Schillebeeckx from beginning to end *still presupposes a Christian horizon of understanding*, and never really succeeds in getting out of it. On the one hand, Schillebeeckx defines religious experience in as undetermined a way as possible, but on the other, he binds it very stringently (or wishes to do so) to tradition. According to Apostel, that is why Schillebeeckx is caught up in a thinking pattern in which what is, generally speaking, human ultimately only can be fulfilled by integrating it into a Christian perspective.⁵⁴ “If he would have defined religious

⁵² Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, 61. The quote goes further: “Just as a unique, utterly original loving relationship between two people is a matter of universal experience, so too the original, specific and historical career of Jesus also discloses possibilities for all men. Historical particularity does not away with universality, but manifests it. That is why the Christian encounter of a number of people with Jesus could become a world religion with a message that can be addressed to all men.”

⁵³ Cf. Schillebeeckx, “Erfahrung und Glaube,” 108.

⁵⁴ Leo Apostel, “Religieuze ervaren bij Edward Schillebeeckx,” *Volgens Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. E. Kuypers, *Rondom filosofen*, 3 (Leuven and Apeldoorn: Garant, 1991)

experience in itself (and in a quality of its own), then he would have found it again (in a diversity of modalities) in the different religions, and, at least as far as the experience of global meaning is concerned, also with non-religious people. This would have made possible a real dialogue. And this is in fact what Schillebeeckx wanted. But by binding the description of experience so closely to the framework of interpretation, he did not allow himself to reach his goal".⁵⁵ It would have been better to stress "the autonomy of the pre-linguistic moment in religious experience",⁵⁶ before linking it to interpretation. In the same way Jaak Vandebulcke accentuates the autonomous character of religious experience. Vandebulcke pleads for acknowledging a pre-linguistic, profoundly human experience of reality, in which in principle universality precedes all interpretations (religions) and likewise is constitutive of them. Even more: the relation to this experience is the criterion to evaluate the truth claims of a particular religion.⁵⁷

The psychologist, philosopher and theologian, Antoon Vergote, on the other hand, *criticises the too facile appeal to (religious) experience in faith and theology* (and Schillebeeckx is considered one of the accused).⁵⁸ Vergote sharply distinguishes between 'faith on the basis of experience' ('ervaringsgeloof') and 'having experience of faith' or 'experienced faith' ('geloofservaring'). In the first case people start from the profoundly human experiences of love, of a mysterious power, and link to it in a second move the name of God. God, then, would seem to be an adjective: something is divine for me, "*the mysterious, the profound, ... that is God for me*".⁵⁹ Such fundamental experiences do not so much concern Christian faith, but rather a general, basic, human disposition, a kind of general

91-131. Cf. p. 118: "According to Schillebeeckx the struggle against alienation and for ultimate meaning is present in as complete and as authentic with atheists (be it more heroic and without hope) as well as with Christians. Immediately, however, he adds such restrictions to this that only in the Christian struggle for ultimate meaning ... the really liberating struggle is engaged in." (The translation of this and following quotations is mine.)

⁵⁵ Apostel, "Religieuze ervaring bij Edward Schillebeeckx," 118.

⁵⁶ Apostel, "Religieuze ervaring bij Edward Schillebeeckx," 118.

⁵⁷ Cf. J. Vandebulcke, "Geloof op basis van ervaring: Naar aanleiding van A. Vergote's 'Cultuur, Religie, Geloof'," *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 29 (1989) 270-278. See also his "Geloof en ervaring," *Streven* 57 (1990) 196-198; and "God ervaren, wat betekent dat?" *Sacerdos* 58 (1991) 127-144.

⁵⁸ A. Vergote, "Ervaringsgeloof en geloofservaring," *Streven* 52 (1985) 891-903. Published again in A. Vergote, *Het meerstemmige leven: Gedachten over mens en religie* (Kapellen: DNB and Pelckmans, 1987) 16-30. We have used this last version.

⁵⁹ Vergote, *Het meerstemmige leven*, 17.

^{59a} Vergote, *Het meerstemmige leven*, 28-29.

faith or basic trust, which is part of being a human being as such. Accentuating the role of experience in faith, therefore, runs the risk of *reducing Christian faith to a kind of general human faith*. It is even a mistake to try to solve the crisis of Christianity in Western Europe by appealing to ‘faith on the basis of experience’. For faith is something in its own right, not a product of experience. There is nothing in Christianity that would compel people to believe. For non-engaged observers, Christianity is only the accidental product of a series of contingent, historical events, which in no way can place any claim on this history. ‘Having experience of faith’, on the contrary, is not primary, but can only be acquired through engaging in Christian faith, in taking the leap of faith, which one ventures in the confession that God has become present in history through Jesus Christ. Experienced faith, therefore, concerns having the experience of what it is to be in faith. Not experience produces faith, but faith, experience. According to Vergote this happens when people succeed in perceiving their own lives and understanding of reality in connection to the message of the Christian faith. This involves an integration of faith and life, through which life begins to speak about faith; and concerns “a concrete living of faith which interprets and values the world and the being a human being from the perspective of faith”.^{59a} This necessitates the construction of a specific culture of faith, learning to read with the eyes of faith. Because without this “one has no more than words, words words ... words *without* experienced reality”.⁶⁰

These reactions to Schillebeeckx’s appeal to experience bear witness to the modern epistemological problem of relating the particularity of Christianity to the universality of general human truth, in order to validate Christianity’s truth claims. All three are answers to the question as to how Christian faith fits into a context in which secular rational and epistemological criteria reign, a position all three take for granted. The answer of *Apostel*, like that of Vandembulcke, is very similar to one of the positions of the so-called pluralistic theology of religions. All religions would seem to be partial, incomplete cultural mediations or expressions of a universally shared (mystical) experience. This implies that the truth of religions can only be accounted for in relation to this experience. To the extent no religion is able to completely express this experience, no religion can claim absolute truth. In other words: the particularity of religion is relative in terms of the universality of the (mystical) experience. Schillebeeckx is not

⁶⁰ Vergote, *Het meerstemmige leven*, 28-29.

⁶¹ Schillebeeckx in fact maintains an inclusivist position: in the end the Christian truth

ready to go that far, and does not want to go that far.⁶¹ This explains the ambiguity at which Apostel and Vandebulcke hint. Even if Schillebeeckx in principle holds to a universal pre-linguistic element in experience, shared by all human beings as a fundamental basic experience, he nevertheless remains *de facto* within a Christian framework of interpretation. This relativises (at least somewhat) the factual distance between Vergote and Schillebeeckx, although it does not do away with it. In reflecting on the particularity of Christianity Vergote makes a move opposite that of Apostel and Vandebulcke, and stresses this particularity by distinguishing it from a general human basic trust or faith. The truth of Christianity cannot be founded on the latter, but must be sought in the specificity of Christian faith, in particular, the faith option itself. One might imagine that Vergote's position does not satisfy Schillebeeckx on two counts. First, he would criticise Vergote for undervaluing the need for a rational legitimating of Christian faith (even if the latter never can be stringently conclusive), and second, he would regret that with his criticism of the appeal to experience in faith and theology, Vergote also wipes out the internal theological hermeneutical dynamics of tradition criticism and tradition development, to which the continuous interplay between (Christian) experience and Christian interpretation gives rise.

g. Towards a Theology of Experience in a Postmodern Context

From a contemporary perspective, one could judge all three of these positions to be modern to the extent that they relate the question of Christian particularity and truth to a modern (secular) epistemological framework. But one could legitimately ask what the consequences are when one takes into account the postmodern criticism of such epistemology⁶² and of the secularisation thesis, which is conceived in relation to it.⁶³ It seems indeed that a contextual shift occurred, through which plurality and difference are

claim is the criterion for all other truth claims. See e.g. his "Identiteit, eigenheid en universaliteit van Gods heil in Jezus," *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 30 (1990) 259-275.

⁶² See e.g. my "Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: A New Opportunity for Theology?," *Philosophy and Theology* 10 (1997) 449-468.

⁶³ For the latter, see e.g. Harvey Cox, "The Myth of the Twentieth Century: The Rise and Fall of 'Secularisation'," *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, ed. G. Baum (New York, NY: Orbis, 1999) 135-143; Peter Berger, "The Desecularisation of the World: A Global Overview," *The Desecularisation of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999) 1-18.

⁶⁴ I developed this thesis at the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA)-con-

conceived as irreducible, and all claims to universality are regarded with suspicion. Regarding secularisation, it would seem that de-traditionalisation (rather than secularisation) does not result in a religion-free, general, human, secular discourse about the meaning of life, but on the contrary, results in a plurality of approaches, religious or not, dealing with these questions, the relativist position being only one. In such a context of de-traditionalisation and pluralisation, Schillebeeckx's project of correlation, because of its modern presuppositions (continuity), necessarily meets its own limits. It is my conviction that precisely the contact that Christian tradition and theology has with the current context forces theology to become post-correlational, not by giving up the dialogue with the context, but by reconceiving its conditions and presuppositions.⁶⁴

In a context of irreducible plurality, the particularity of Christianity becomes constitutive of Christianity's meaning and truth, which has to be conceived in relation to the meaning and truth claims of other religions and worldviews without relativising one's own claims (or the other's) and this plurality from the very outset. Christian experience then does not bear within itself a pre-linguistic element to relativise Christianity's particularity, but reveals this particularity to itself as inescapable. It is what differentiates Christians and their tradition of experience from others, and constitutes the very point of departure for a dialogue, that is, a confrontation between different religions and worldviews. More generally, it is clear that what people initially seem to have in common (i.e. questions and answers for ultimate meaning), differentiates them the most. Experience interrupts accounts of continuity that are too facile, let alone harmony. Only the one who is able to live with difference and to think from it would seem not to lapse into hegemonic and totalitarian master narratives excluding plurality and otherness.

At the same time, within Christianity itself the Christian experience interrupts accounts of continuity and harmony that are too facile. The God of Christian faith does not coincide with tradition and interpretation. As the Other of the Christian tradition, God in principle withdraws from it, even when it remains true that only through and in this tradition God reveals God's self, i.e. can be discussed. The God who has everything to do with this tradition cannot be contained in it, but questions from the inside the tradition itself, interrupts it, makes it confront its own limits,

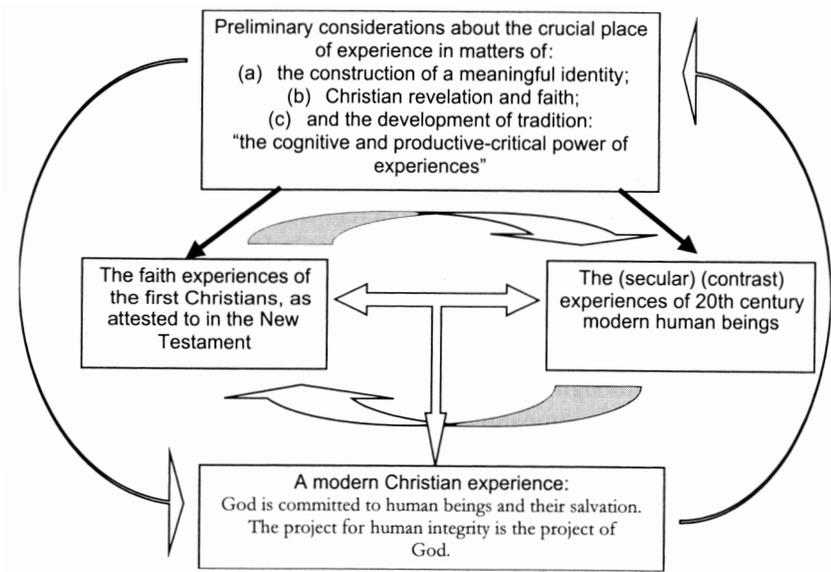
vention in New Orleans, 2002: "Postmodern Theology between Secularity and Plurality: Some Western-European Methodological Considerations."

⁶⁵ I have elaborated further on these too brief clues for a reconceptualisation of the the-

urging it to develop and renew itself. Only to the extent that this interrupting aspect of a God, who cannot be reduced to the particular Christian narrative about God (although inconceivable without it and outside of it) is part of the Christian experience can tradition development be theologically thought of and legitimised today.⁶⁵

4. Conclusion

Schillebeeckx's theology is indeed a theology of experience, a hermeneutical reflection on the experiences of Christians of the past and Christians living in a modern context, in relation to this context. To conclude this contribution I would like to offer a schematic presentation of Schillebeeckx's hermeneutical theology, highlighting the epistemological role of experience.



Hermeneutics and Experience: a Schematic Presentation

ological-epistemological role of religious experience in the Fourth International LEST-conference on Religious Experience and Theological Epistemology, Leuven, November 2003. The proceedings of this conference will appear in BETL, Peeters, 2005.

It is certainly not an exaggeration to affirm that Schillebeeckx's *theological epistemology* is as much an explanation of the correlation efforts he deems of theological necessity for a responsible and plausible contemporary theological reflection as it is its first product. Stressing the role of *experience* in theological epistemology as a key element for doing theology in the second half of the Twentieth century is already the result of the integration of modern sensibilities in theological methodology. In this way the *hermeneutical circle* is already operative on the level of the texts in which Schillebeeckx is explaining its function in the development of tradition and theology. This holds true for the concept of *correlation* itself, which presupposes a universally acknowledgeable underlying consensus or continuity between the best of humanity and the Christian message. The experience of being a Christian in a modern context, appreciative of the gains of modernity but also critical, with modernity's critics, of its failures, causing suffering and injustice, leads to a modern theology in which Christians are profiled as at least as modern as anybody else (especially modern agnostics or atheists). Christianity therefore is not a hindrance to human development, but may well offer a surplus of opportunities to sustain human striving for a just and humane society.

In this way, the category of experience serves at least two purposes. First, it makes it possible to describe in a new and dynamic way the *very particularity of Christian faith*, which is embedded in an ongoing history of interpretation and experience, of concrete liberating praxis, in which God, in the history of Israel and most particularly in Jesus Christ, has revealed God's self as a God of human beings. Remarkably, the notion of experience is at the same time responsible for the difference between Christian faith expressions as well as for the fundamental continuity between them: although the interpretative elements may vary, even to a point that they are incompatible with each other, Schillebeeckx claims that there is an experiential element qualified through a specific 'direction of interpretation', which in the end founds and guarantees the unity of the Christian tradition (albeit in a diversity of expressions).

Second, through the notion of the contrast-experience, the category of experience serves as an instrument to sustain or to found the *universal truth and meaning claims of Christianity*. Because Christian experience has an intrinsic link with what is at the core of all human experience, what is the experiential element in all human experience – the desire for human integrity – there are good rational grounds to be or to remain a Christian. Also here the structure of experience provides the instruments to account for the difference between human interpretations and theories,

e.g. between a Marxist and a Christian striving for justice, as well as for the fundamental continuity which ultimately is the driving force for all forms of resisting inhumanity and injustice, and the longing for emancipation and liberation.