INTRODUCTION

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In an interview on the eve of his eightieth birthday in 1994, the Flemish theologian Edward Schillebeeckx noted that the following two biblical texts have sustained him throughout his theological career, which now spans more than sixty-five years:

“Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3.15b);

“Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast [to] what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5.19–21).

Schillebeeckx describes himself as one who has tried to remain open to the God who is “new each moment.” In living his life this way, Schillebeeckx has sought to bear testimony to others about the hope and joy within him. He attributes both the constructive-liberating character of his theology and its critical edge to the work of the Holy Spirit (*I Am a Happy Theologian*, 81; *Testament*, 173).

Pastoral and social concerns have been at the heart of Schillebeeckx’s theological project from the beginning. His theological vision and method have developed in response to the questions and experiences of contemporary believers and all those searching for meaning and purpose in human life. Of particular interest to many were his efforts in the 1970s to rethink the story of Jesus (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*) and the Christian experience of salvation (*Christ: The Experience of Jesus As Lord*), in the face of radical human suffering and the growing crisis of credibility confronting Christian faith in the modern world. Likewise, his investigations of the development of the church’s ministerial structures and theology in the early 1980s (*Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* and *The Church with a Human Face*) were prompted by concrete pastoral crises. Of particular concern were the

increasing shortage of ordained ministers, the number of local communities deprived of Eucharist, and the forms of alternative practice emerging in a variety of communities of faith.

By the end of that decade, Schillebeeckx's theological work had caught the attention of scholars, ordinary believers, and others who confessed to curiosity about theology's contribution to the dilemmas facing the world at the end of the twentieth century. However, his work was not easily accessible, due to the length of his books, the breadth and detail of the scholarly research he included, and the inevitably technical theological language that his thought required. At that time, no single volume existed in the English-speaking world that provided a general introduction to Schillebeeckx's theology. In 1989 the authors in this book sought to remedy that lack, through a collection of essays that offered clear exposition of major theological themes that recurred in Schillebeeckx's writings on christology and ministry. That volume was published under the title *The Praxis of Christian Experience: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*.

Because Schillebeeckx continued to explore new questions, to develop major theological themes that have engaged him throughout his career, and to rethink earlier positions in light of changing cultural and ecclesiastical climates, that introduction now needs to be revised and updated. In 1993 Philip Kennedy published *Schillebeeckx*, a work that provided an excellent analysis of the core of Schillebeeckx's theology, with particular attention to examination of his sources, the historical development in his thought, the core of his christological project, the centrality of creation in his theology, and the question of whether and how human beings can speak about God. But Kennedy never intended to offer an exposition of all the major themes covered in this volume, including some of long-term interest to Schillebeeckx, such as eschatology and sacraments. The addition to this book of Kennedy's chapter on Schillebeeckx's insights about God and creation has considerably expanded the scope of our introduction to Schillebeeckx's theology. Schillebeeckx's own previously untranslated prologue to this edition makes clear that the question of who God can be for human beings remains the central question at the heart of his diverse theological writings.

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1989

A broad overview of the new topics and emphases in Schillebeeckx's theology since 1989 can help to orient readers, both those who are familiar with his thought and those who have turned to his work only recently. *The Praxis of Christian Experience* appeared the same year in which Schillebeeckx published the Dutch version of what was to have been the third and final volume of his christological trilogy. As he explained in the introduction to that work, however, it became instead a summary and overview of what he still views as the heart of the gospel and the Christian religion, an effort to express what God can mean for contemporary women and men. Written in a less technical style than the previous two volumes, *Church: The Human Story of God* (more accurately translated from the Dutch as "Human Beings as the Story of God") was intended to offer hope to ordinary believers. Schillebeeckx expressed concern that grassroots communities of believers were growing discouraged by the lack of implementation of the vision of Vatican II in a period of increasing polarization within the church, and noted that he wanted to address critical challenges to those in authority (*Church*, xiii).

Although the third volume for the most part summarized insights from the previous two parts of the trilogy, there were some important changes and developments. These included an explicit distinction between salvation and revelation, further clarification of the relationship between religious experience and ethics, a new approach to the question of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus, a more developed call for democratic exercise of authority in the church, and a growing emphasis on creation and ecology. As the title of his third volume suggests, Schillebeeckx's early focus on Jesus Christ as the sacrament of encounter with God has now shifted to humankind, and specifically to action on behalf of humankind and creation, as the central locus of encounter with God. According to Schillebeeckx, the entire human race constitutes the chosen people of God. In that context, he refers to Jesus as "paradigm of humanity" and "concentrated creation."

The explicit distinction that Schillebeeckx made in *Church* between salvation and revelation (discussed in chapter 4 of this book) prompted the change in the title of this revised introduction to his thought, from *The Praxis of Christian Experience* to *The Praxis of the Reign of God*. While

Schillebeeckx has written persuasively about “the praxis of Christian experience”—the living of the Christian life—he also insists that Christianity does not exhaust the mediation of God’s reign. The “praxis of the reign of God”—fostering the well-being of creation and humanity—is not limited to Christians and cannot be identified solely with Christian experience.

Schillebeeckx’s second collection of homilies and sermons, which appeared in English translation that same year under the title *For the Sake of the Gospel*, included several pieces that reflected his growing critique of official church structures that block, rather than foster, gospel freedom. In another section of that work, Schillebeeckx turned to believers’ questions about the hiddenness of God (a topic to which he returns in the prologue to this book) and an issue of central importance in the postmodern world—the claim of God’s omnipotence in the face of radical suffering. Moving beyond his description of God’s power as “non-authoritarian, vulnerable, even helpless (*Church*, 221), he began to speak of God’s “defenseless superior power over evil,” both concealed and expressed in the life and death of Jesus (*For the Sake of the Gospel*, 97).

In other articles and chapters published since 1989, Schillebeeckx addressed the role of history in theology, the discontinuities in the living tradition of Christianity and explicitly in Christian doctrine, the mystical and political dimensions of theology, the uniqueness and universality of Jesus, a contemporary mariology, and creation theology. One valuable resource for an overview of both the continuity and the shifts in Schillebeeckx’s theological concerns is *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology, and the Church* (1995). This is a collection of thirteen essays that appeared between 1964 and 1989, most of them in *Concilium*, the journal that he cofounded in 1965, along with Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, and Hans Küng, to help promote the theological dialogue and ecclesial reform that characterized the Second Vatican Council.

Although the essays were all published initially prior to 1989, several of them highlight key concerns that Schillebeeckx continued to develop in his later writings and unpublished lectures. Of particular importance are the essays on ecclesial critical communities (“Critical Theories and Christian Political Commitment,” 1973), the teaching authority of all believers (“The Teaching Authority of All: A Reflection

about the Structure of the New Testament," 1985), theological method ("The Role of History in What Is Called the New Paradigm," 1989), and the question of the universality of Jesus and Christianity in the context of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue ("The Religious and Human Ecumene," 1989).

Schillebeeckx's long-term interest in the relationship between faith and culture took on a new focus as he turned to questions of religious pluralism, violence carried out in the name of religion, and a theology of forgiveness and reconciliation. In a recent series of essays on faith and culture, as well as in unpublished lectures, Schillebeeckx raises the question of whether religion is actually a threat to the well-being of humankind and the earth, in contemporary cultures. While insisting that violence is not inevitable in a pluralistic society, he nevertheless observes that historical evidence has made it clear that the claim of any religion to be the one true one has served as a virtual declaration of war on the others. For that reason, he argues, Christians need to rethink the claims of Christianity to universality and uniqueness.

In this same context, Schillebeeckx has proposed the necessity of a theology of forgiveness and reconciliation as a necessary step toward a new future for humankind and all of creation. In line with his most recent work on rethinking the sacraments "from below" as metaphors for human life, Schillebeeckx argues that remorse can be liberating, and that human repentance and forgiveness must be celebrated in their religious dimension as sacraments of God's forgiveness.

The purpose of this revised volume is to provide an updated overview and a reading guide to students, pastoral ministers, study groups, ecumenical audiences, and other interested adults who wish to explore Schillebeeckx's thought, but question where to begin. Since the book is intended to lead readers into Schillebeeckx's own writings, suggestions for further reading are provided at the end of each chapter. Serious students of Schillebeeckx's thought will want to consult the glossaries at the end of *Jesus and Christ* (titled "Technical Information") and the definitive *Bibliography 1936–1996 of Edward Schillebeeckx O.P.*, compiled by Ted Schoof, O.P., and Jan van de Westelaken (Baarn: Nelissen, 1997).

OVERVIEW OF THIS VOLUME

Schillebeeckx's prologue begins with a theme that echoes his recent interest in interreligious dialogue and his turn to human beings as the locus of encounter with God. Referring to human beings as "religious by nature" and to the religions of the world as "schools of wisdom," he reiterates a conviction that has been fundamental to his theology from the beginning: no human concepts can capture or exhaust the mystery of God. Nevertheless, Christians are called to respond to the God who has spoken in the economy of salvation, and preeminently in Jesus Christ. Stressing that the God of Jesus is a God of life, Schillebeeckx interprets God's name as revealed to Moses: "I will be there for you." He concludes with the central theme that recurs in each of the essays in this book, and from which it draws its title: Christianity is above all about praxis, the praxis of the reign of God.

The chapters that follow offer an overview of the development of and major themes within Schillebeeckx's vast and continuing theological project. In the opening chapter, William Hill provides an introduction to Schillebeeckx's "theology in transition," highlighting a primary theme that Schillebeeckx underscores in his prologue: God's cause is the human cause. Hill reviews Schillebeeckx's personal history and the roots of his theological development, from his Thomist origins through the influence of phenomenology and hermeneutics to his later understanding of theology as a critical and political task. In his *Theologisch testament*, Schillebeeckx describes his theological method as "critical-hermeneutical" (80). While Schillebeeckx has not directly engaged questions of postmodernity under that heading, his concern for radical suffering, along with his conviction that no grand narrative of history is possible in the face of radical evil, echo many of the claims of postmodernity. (Robert Schreiter points this out in his conclusion to this volume.) Throughout the shifts in Schillebeeckx's theological development, Hill identifies an underlying (Thomistic) conviction that pervades Schillebeeckx's varied writings: the absolute primacy of God and God's grace in history.

Developing the broad lines of Schillebeeckx's theological method outlined by Hill, William Portier in the second chapter situates Schillebeeckx's approach to the theological task in terms of both contemporary North American concern with theological method and the

Dutch Catholic context in which his theology was born. Portier underlines the necessity of theology's commitment to a historical praxis of mysticism and politics (another theme that recurs in later chapters) and concludes that for Schillebeeckx, "theology as interpretation entails concrete social dimensions with inseparable links to Christian life and worship." In addition, Portier notes a new emphasis in Schillebeeckx's writings on breaks or ruptures within the living Christian tradition. Because Schillebeeckx takes seriously the role of history in theology, he argues that Christian identity can be found only in and through cultural ruptures and shifts, including moments of discontinuity in Christian doctrine. As Portier notes, Schillebeeckx viewed the Second Vatican Council in precisely that way—as a break with the antimodern stance of the church in the first half of the twentieth century, precisely to ensure continuity with the larger Christian tradition. Because discussion of method in theology emerges only from reflection on the actual practice of the theological task, Portier's chapter, as well as Hill's, can be profitably reread after finishing the book.

In both his *Theologisch testament* and the more popular interview, *I Am a Happy Theologian*, Schillebeeckx comments that "faith in creation is the foundation of all theology" (*Testament*, 85; *I Am a Happy Theologian*, 47). But creation-faith (*scheppingsgeloof*), one of Schillebeeckx's frequently repeated terms, is possible only because of God's loving and free initiative, the absolute presence of creative love that sustains and empowers all that exists.

The one new chapter in the present volume is contributed by Philip Kennedy, an internationally recognized expert on Schillebeeckx's theology. He provides a much-needed review of Schillebeeckx's theology of creation and the Creator God. Kennedy demonstrates that the theme of creation, which is now returning to the center of theological discussion, has been a driving force in Schillebeeckx's theological project from the beginning. For Schillebeeckx, the theology of creation undergirds the very possibility of theology as human speech about God. Drawing from diverse writings throughout Schillebeeckx's career, Kennedy points to both the Thomistic grounding of Schillebeeckx's theology of creation and the startling breaks with Aquinas's insights, such as the assertion that creation is an adventure full of risks in which God remains defenseless.

As Kennedy remarks, Schillebeeckx's theology of creation can be viewed as a reformulation of Irenaeus's declaration that the glory of God

is humankind and all living creatures, fully alive. Stressing that for Schillebeeckx, creation faith has a critical and productive force, Kennedy explains how a theology of creation undergirds Schillebeeckx's understanding of ethics and the centrality of human praxis in mediating the reign of God. While many contemporary thinkers argue that christology is the necessary starting point for a Christian theology of creation, Kennedy notes that Schillebeeckx speaks of christology as "concentrated creation," a theme that recurs in chapter 6. In the final section of his chapter, Kennedy elucidates Schillebeeckx's descriptions of God as pure positivity, absolute freedom, constant source of future possibility, and more human than any human being.

The question of whether and how human beings can encounter the mystery of God is the focus of chapter 4, on "Experience and Revelation." While Schillebeeckx often used the terms *revelation* and *salvation* interchangeably in earlier writings, he made an explicit distinction between the two in the opening chapter of *Church*. The broader term, *salvation*, refers to the absolute presence of the Creator God and is mediated wherever good is done and evil resisted. As such, it cannot be identified with revelation—the experience, recognition, and celebration of the universal presence of God's saving grace. In chapter 4, I explore Schillebeeckx's claim that revelation occurs within, but cannot be identified with, human experience. I go about this by identifying crucial moves within Schillebeeckx's theology of revelation: the distinction between salvation and revelation; the relationship between experience and interpretation; the necessity of a faith horizon for the religious experience of revelation; the Christian claim that God has been revealed uniquely and definitively in Jesus; the historical transmission of the experience of revelation as a living tradition of faith through the praxis and words of the followers of Jesus today; and the need for a mutually critical correlation of contemporary experiences of faith with the original apostolic experiences of salvation.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the soteriological christology that Schillebeeckx identifies as his own personal theological project or research of choice (*I Am a Happy Theologian*, 44). His christological trilogy was occasioned by the widespread crisis in christology among both Catholics and Protestants. Locating Schillebeeckx within the broader discussion in contemporary christology, John Galvin, in chapter 5,

emphasizes the uniqueness of Schillebeeckx's option for a narrative christology forged in the face of human suffering—a retelling of the story of Jesus as the story of God. Noting the breadth of Schillebeeckx's exegetical research, Galvin traces the main outlines of the *Jesus* book, highlighting the features of the “historical Jesus” that led to the later Christian confession of christological faith. Following a careful analysis of Schillebeeckx's unique and largely negative interpretation of the death of Jesus, his controversial theology of the resurrection, and his discussion of the development of early Christian plural strands of faith, Galvin concludes with important critical questions regarding Schillebeeckx's christology.

The soteriological focus of Schillebeeckx's christology, and specifically his attempt to provide a new focus for traditional Western christology in light of the ambiguities and paradoxes facing humankind at the end of the modern era, is developed further by Janet O'Meara in chapter 6. O'Meara explains how Schillebeeckx's move toward a contemporary soteriology in part 4 of the *Christ* volume is carefully interrelated with both the christology of *Jesus* (see Galvin's chapter) and the analysis of New Testament understandings of the experience of salvation, which continued in the earliest Christian communities in and through the power of the Spirit (the major portion of the *Christ* volume). After a brief survey of Schillebeeckx's theological synthesis of New Testament theologies of grace and his outline of the four structural elements that must undergird any current soteriology, the chapter concentrates on part 4 of *Christ*, where Schillebeeckx analyzes the contemporary historical situation, characterized by massive human suffering, as the context for any contemporary soteriology. O'Meara highlights Schillebeeckx's description of six anthropological constants as constitutive aspects of “livable humanity,” and thus of human salvation. She then reviews Schillebeeckx's discussion of the problem of the relationship between human efforts towards self-liberation and the promise of final redemption by God.

O'Meara's chapter takes note of the increasing emphasis in *Church* and subsequent writings on the identification of salvation and God's absolute presence in creation. That is, God's universal salvific intention for creation is realized wherever good is done and evil resisted (see chapters 3 and 4). She also remarks on Schillebeeckx's new discussion, in *Church* and subsequent essays, of Jesus as universal, but not absolute,

savior, and the responsibility of Jesus' followers to make the praxis of the reign of God a concrete possibility for all. Finally, she observes that while Schillebeeckx's emphasis is primarily on soteriology in relation to human history and the political relevance of the gospel, in the final section of *Church*, he also addresses the cosmic dimensions of redemption and liberation.

Underlying Schillebeeckx's theological writings is a profound Christian spirituality rooted in Jesus' "Abba experience" and the conviction that the Holy Spirit is the source and guide of the living Christian tradition. Donald Goergen, in chapter 7, shows the connections between the heritage of Schillebeeckx's Dominican tradition, which stresses a twofold "presence to God" and "presence to the world," and his christological project. Locating the foundation of Schillebeeckx's spirituality in Jesus as "parable of God" and "paradigm of humanity," Goergen shows how the spirituality at the heart of Schillebeeckx's theology calls for the "following of Jesus" in a "praxis of the reign of God" that is at once mystical and political. As the prologue to this volume makes clear, Schillebeeckx writes from the context of his own Christian tradition, while remaining fully aware that all great religions at their best constitute schools of wisdom and freedom.

In chapter 8, Susan Ross suggests that Schillebeeckx's theology of church and sacraments has not so much changed as intensified over the years, precisely because of his concern for human well-being and his attention to suffering. Ross reminds readers that from the time of his doctoral dissertation and his internationally acclaimed *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (1963), Schillebeeckx has stressed that God's presence is to be found in the concreteness of human history. His later writings, however, focus on God's presence as liberating and search for that presence not in human history in general, but in the history of human suffering.

While Schillebeeckx continues to locate God's definitive revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, he now argues that Jesus is not the only way to God, and that precisely as sacrament, Jesus both reveals and conceals the mystery of God. Likewise the church, as sacrament or "sign of salvation," conceals as well as reveals the work of salvation. Highlighting Schillebeeckx's approach to sacramentality as marked by ambiguity and tension, Ross shows how he can remain critical of aspects of the church's structures and governance as failing to embody the freedom of

the gospel, while at the same time insisting on the necessity of Christian communities' practical embodiment of the reign of God.

Ross highlights Schillebeeckx's critical analysis of the concrete historical development of the church, and the role of critical local communities in preserving Vatican II's ecclesiological vision. Although Schillebeeckx continues to work on his new volume of sacramental theology, Ross identifies some of the traces of that project that have already appeared in his discussion of sacraments as "anticipatory signs" (*Christ*, part 4) and "metaphorical celebrations" of human life, in which the ongoing narrative of human history is interrupted by the narrative of the story of Jesus.

Schillebeeckx's sacramental understanding of church, when combined with his critical analysis of the historical development of ecclesial office, has serious implications for his theology of ministry, as Mary Hines illustrates in chapter 9. Tracing the main lines of *The Church with a Human Face*, Hines shows how the book serves as an excellent example of Schillebeeckx's theological method, which calls for a mutually critical correlation of present Christian experience and the past history of "the great Christian tradition." Noting that according to Schillebeeckx, the various cultural manifestations of ministry that have evolved throughout the church's history are "legitimate but not necessary" responses to various social and theological situations, Hines explains how, for Schillebeeckx, the present crisis of ordained leadership exists because of a failure to understand the implications of the sacramental nature of the church as the place where the Spirit dwells and moves freely.

Hines notes that the central conviction at the heart of Schillebeeckx's writings on ministry is that "ministry cannot be understood apart from community and there can be no community without ministry." The chapter concludes with a consideration of Schillebeeckx's recent work, in which he reaffirms his call for a more democratic church in today's social context, and for the exercise of ministerial authority in a way that is consistent with the liberating authority of Jesus Christ, in contrast to the present authoritarian exercise of governance by the Vatican and many church leaders.

In chapter 10, Bradford Hinze discusses the interrelationship of eschatology and ethics, two major concerns in Schillebeeckx's recent theological work. Hinze observes that Schillebeeckx's constant concern

with history as the arena for human encounter with God has shifted from an early sacramental eschatology to a truly prophetic vision of history. He links that move to the development of Schillebeeckx's understanding of Jesus as "eschatological prophet," and to his increasing awareness of the dimensions of human suffering and oppression at the present moment in history.

Important ramifications for Christian ethics follow. While the call to the praxis of discipleship is a constant for followers of Jesus, all concrete ethical models throughout the history of Christianity—including those of the New Testament—remain socially and historically conditioned. As Hinze explains, for Schillebeeckx ethics maintains a certain independence from religion, yet the religious manifests itself in ethical praxis and transforms ethics. Christian ethics, the following of Jesus in our day, requires searching for contemporary possibilities for realizing the task and gift of humanity in solidarity with the marginalized and the suffering. The biblical narrative provides not concrete, unchanging moral norms, but rather the ongoing power to inspire conversion and commitment to the praxis of the reign of God. As Hinze's chapter makes clear and both Kennedy and O'Meara note, Schillebeeckx's ethical writings focus primarily on history, the *humanum*, and the social and political challenges of Christian ethics. Nevertheless, in sections of *Church*, particularly the epilogue, Schillebeeckx's long-term commitment to a theology of creation and his concern for the well-being of the entire cosmos are also evident.

In a final chapter, Robert Schreiter probes some of the foundational aspects of Schillebeeckx's thought, exploring especially some of those things that contribute to his enduring influence, especially among his North American and First World readership today. He identifies four such commitments: working inductively rather than deductively; the narrative character of experience; a concern for the mystery of suffering and the contrast experience; and the primacy of soteriology in the christological project. He indicates how some of these themes surface time and again in the contributions to this volume.

The authors of this book hope that this introduction to the thought of an important theologian will be useful to those encountering Schillebeeckx's thought for the first time as well as to those who are familiar with his work.

The Praxis of the Reign of God