Review Articles

CHURCH — THE HUMAN STORY OF GOD

Lode L. Wostyn, C.I.C.M.


The latest book of Edward Schillebeeckx, Church: The Human Story of God (1990) was originally intended to be the ecclesiological third part of a trilogy: Jesus — Christ — Church. Yet we are told by the author in the foreword that he changed his mind. His own and the Dutch church's negative experience with the Roman authorities may be partly responsible for this change. A more fundamental reason, however, is the shift which is taking place in the world. We are moving from closed national societies to an open, secular and pluralistic world in which people are becoming aware of their responsibility of making the world a better place to live in. Liberation and humanization are becoming the global tasks of nations and world religions. We would miss the point by dwelling mainly on domestic church problems.

For that reason, in this 'ecclesiological' book, I shall not be saying too much directly about the Church. We need a bit of negative ecclesiology, church theology in a minor key, in order to do away with the centuries-long ecclesiocentrism . . .: for the sake of God, for the sake of Jesus Christ and for the sake of humankind (p. xiii).

As a result of this change of mind, the book Church becomes a sort of new synthesis in which the main themes of Schillebeeckx's previous books are summarized and partly reworked. The real theme of the book is described as follows:
This book is about the life of men and women and their bond with God as God has become visible above all in Jesus of Nazareth, confessed as the Christ by the christian churches — which are increasingly aware that they live in a secular world amidst other religions (p. xiii).

It treats about "People as the words with which God tells his story." This is also the Dutch title of the book: People as Story of God (Mensen als verhaal van God).

I am confronted with an impossible job: to write a summary of a synthesis, and this synthesis is made by a Schillebeeckx who in the foreword tells us that he tried "to make this third part readable" (p. xv). This did not stop him from writing sentences of half a page which brought the translator from time to time to the verge of desperation. My summary will try to present the flow of Schillebeeckx's synthesis, indicating the main themes, and briefly elaborating on his ecclesiology which, though not fully elaborated, is yet everywhere in the book. In this summary, I will use the formula "See-Judge-Act" which I also use in my book Doing Ecclesiology. I believe that this formula can help clarify Schillebeeckx's struggle to write an ecclesiology for present-day christians at the grassroots who have opted for a critical presence and service with men and women in today's secular world.

I. SEE

An analysis of the present-day Church can be developed using the tools of secular sciences: history, sociology, social psychology, and so on. In chapter 4, Schillebeeckx adopts a historical point of view, and briefly elaborates on the role the Catholic Church played between the French Revolution and the period of Vatican II (pp. 198-213). The Church had already missed a first major turning point in history: the development of science and technology. The condemnation of Galileo (1616 and 1633) became a sort of paradigm of the Church’s answer to scientific progress. The Pius tradition (IX to XII) in the 19th and 20th centuries represents a second phase in which the turning point of the French Revolution — the inauguration of new socio-political structures, especially democracy — was met with an unending list of condemnations: anathema sit.
The Second Vatican Council finally caught up with the Church’s social and cultural backwardness in terms of the freedoms of Western bourgeois society. It is ironical, writes Schillebeeckx, that we succeeded in catching up just at a moment we reached a new turning point “when the Western world was beginning to become highly critical of the social and political shadow sides of the bourgeois liberal approach” (pp. 199-200). The post-Vatican II developments, in which the Church falls back on its old hierarchical patterns, seem to point to the fact that we also will miss this third turning point.

This short historical analysis explains Schillebeeckx’s own approach. Although intra-christian ecumenical problems and problems of church structure have some importance (treated in chapter 4), he believes that the real question and challenge for ecclesiology lies elsewhere. We have to adopt a post-ecumenical standpoint and look at the role of the Church in the context of the ecumene of world religions and the ecumene of humankind, especially “the ecumene of suffering humankind” [J. B. Metz] (pp. 189-90).

We live in a new world context in which human existence is increasingly an interdependent existence. Social oppression, poverty and exploitation is not any longer a problem of the South. It is a problem for all of us as human beings and as christians. Therefore, liberation theology formulates a question of universal significance. Can there be authentic meaning in one’s history if the history of more than half the human race is meaningless and absurd? That is where the problem of the “crisis of meaning” lies today. We have to speak of a new universal world context of oppression and liberation (pp. 46-55). In solidarity with Third World liberation theologians, Schillebeeckx adopts a liberation perspective in his new theological synthesis, and within this perspective he tries to reflect on the relevance of belief in God, in Christ, and also “to put the church in its proper place” (connotation of the Dutch text: “call the Church to order”) and at the same time give it “the place which is its due” (p. xix).

II. JUDGE

We are in a universal world context of oppression and libera-
tion. Schillebeeckx wants to draw up a theological framework which will encourage the Christian to become a partner in the ecumene of suffering humankind. He begins this endeavor by trying to place religions and churches within the total history of human beings in search of salvation and liberation.

RELIGIONS AND CHURCHES: SACRAMENTS AND ANAMNESIS

The Renaissance in Western Europe inaugurated the coming modern age in which human beings took their fate into their own hands through the development of science and technology. The centuries of the Enlightenment then announced the end of all historical religions. Human beings had come of age. Approaching the year 2000, we now realize that we did not do too well in this process of emancipation and self-liberation, hence we are again confronted with the religious question: what is the ultimate meaning of history?

We all have some basic human experience of contrast. We experience suffering, poverty, oppression, and yet we do not simply accept these negative experiences. Human beings also have this other basic experience of indignation which keeps saying "no" to the world as it is. This indignation discloses our openness as human beings to another situation which is filled in by the believer in religious terms. In liberating human experiences in secular history, Christians see the presence of God. A decisive factor in such a religious interpretation is the presence of Christians in the secular world, declaring their solidarity with the oppressed. It is only in liberating human experiences, in events with human meaning, that believers will be able to see the face of God.

The world and human history in which God wills to bring about salvation and liberation are the basis of the reality of faith. Extra mundum nulla salus, there is no salvation outside the human world. The world of creation and our history is the sphere of God's saving action in and through human mediation. Religions and churches are the places where people become explicitly aware of this salvific presence of the Ultimate. They are of the order of sign, sacraments of salvation: the places where salvation from God is thematized, confessed, proclaimed and celebrated. They
are the anamnesis, i.e., the living recollection among us of the saving presence of God in our world history.

Churches are not salvation. They are only sacraments of the salvation that God brings about through men and women in a very particular context. Schillebeeckx stresses this point: let us put the Church in its proper place. Salvation is brought about in the world, churches only explicitly identify it. Churches which forget this basic process of salvation that is brought about in the world “often become sectarian, clerical and apolitical — and as a result, in fact become very political in a disguised way” (p. 13).

EXPERIENCES OF REVELATION

How do we, within the churches, arrive at the explicit knowledge and faith interpretation of this action of God in history? We have to get rid of the concept of revelation which refuses to consider the mediation by human experience and sees revelation in terms of words straight from heaven. Revelation is faith experience. While revelation refers to God’s action and communication in history, faith experience indicates the human mediation of such an action and communication. So the two inseparable terms simply make us aware of two different ways of looking at the one and the same event.

Revelation is faith experience. This also means that in studying revelation, we have to fall back on the study of the cognitive structure of ordinary, human experiences. In the second part of chapter 1 (pp. 15-45), Schillebeeckx summarizes the theological epistemology and hermeneutics which he has developed in the last twenty years in dialogue with modern Western philosophy. For our study of ecclesiology, it may be important to mention that Schillebeeckx, after having robbed the Church of the privilege of being the dispenser of salvation (“no salvation outside the church”), now also rejects the idea that truth can be expressed in unchangeable infallible concepts, somehow “possessed” by a religious institution.

The source of meaning and truth are contrast experiences in which human beings say “no” to suffering and try to do away with a bit of meaninglessness through a liberating praxis. Meaning and truth are never given in a void. They are mediated by
human beings who create meaning through a praxis of justice, peace, care for neighbor, and so on. Such a praxis is an open process pointing towards total liberation which we only can anticipate in fragments. Universal liberation always remains a promise for human beings who are not themselves the lords of history.

Within our church and other religions, we find a tradition of meaning, closely connected with a liberating way of life. The value of such a tradition should never be absolutized. Meaning and truth are never given outside human mediation. This mediation is always fragmentary. Moreover, it is culturally and historically situated. This mediated truth will need an appropriation by re-interpreting it within the praxis of faith in a new particular situation. Faithfulness to a tradition will not be found in fundamentalist, literal repetition, but in a “proportional identity” in which the tradition serves as a model for our own efforts to make the message comprehensible here and now.

Again, it is important that we put the Church in its proper place. Churches should not be concerned “with the preservation or collection of ‘cultural’ relics as a memorial of the christian past” (p. 44). Their concern should be directed towards an anamnesis, a living recollection in which the perception of the meaning of the tradition comes about in a creative giving of meaning within constantly new situations. In the cultural shift which we witness today, this may lead to crisis and uncertainty for the churches. Catholics are often told that if they have criticism of the Church, the pope and other church leaders, they ought to leave. Schillebeeckx is not convinced. The Church is not a football league where you have to play by the rules or, indeed, get out. The Church is an interpretative community which, of course, knows certain rules and criteria, yet has to allow pluralism within the cultural shifts of today’s world.

THE JESUS EXPERIENCE

Schillebeeckx believes that salvation and revelation is never directly given. It is always mediated by human contrast experiences in a world in which God is present within the human liberating praxis of justice and love. After applying this basic ap-
proach for our knowledge of God (ch. 2, pp. 46-101), he turns his attention to the particular mediation of the Christian tradition: the person of Jesus of Nazareth (ch. 3, pp. 102-86). We can only give a short outline of this part, concentrating again on ecclesiology.

Jesus’ message and career, captured in the symbol of the kingdom of God, was essentially a commitment to bring liberation to the poor and oppressed in his society. The basis of this praxis of the kingdom was Jesus’ Abba experience. Since God is a God concerned for humankind, we too have to be concerned. Jesus represented a dissident God, a God who does not let himself be claimed by a caste of pious and virtuous people but stands at the side of all those pushed aside, the poor, the outcast, the women and children. The prophet of such a God had to die, and yet a group of disciples almost immediately after his death started to proclaim: this death was not the end; Jesus’ spirit is alive and continues to offer us liberation and salvation. This confession means the beginning of the Church.

Did Jesus found the Church? Historically, it is quite clear that Jesus did not have the intention of founding a new religious community. Moreover, the earliest Christian communities understood themselves as part of the Jewish religion. And yet, history is more than the result of human intentions. Jesus’ conviction and the consequent faith of his disciples that what had happened in Jesus had a definitive, eschatological and universal meaning, necessarily led to the continuation of Jesus’ mission. This resulted in the birth of the Church, a community of disciples of Jesus: “following in the footsteps of Jesus to turn people into a community which bears witness to both the kingdom of God and Jesus’ way towards it” (p. 155). Jesus left us a movement, a living community of believers which became aware of being the people of God. Two essential elements constituted this community of faith: anamnesis and pneuma. The living recollection of the story, conduct and career of Jesus of Nazareth and the active presence of the Spirit of Jesus formed two sides of one and the same reality: the community of disciples, the ecclesia or community of God.

A continuation of faith in Jesus’ message and communal discipleship of Jesus within secular history is not possible without taking on institutional aspects. “The communal aspects and insti-
tutional aspects of the Church cannot be separated, just as ecclesiology and sociology cannot be separated in the concrete phenomenon of the Church” (p. 156). But this church, communal and institutional, should not absolutize its structures and claim its bureaucratic and centralist management goes back to Jesus himself. The empirical church (and Schillebeeckx does not know of any other church) is and remains an ambiguous phenomenon. It is the authentic fruit of Jesus’ message and way of life and yet, it also represents a community of sinners who are constantly in need of metanoia. The Church is an ecclesia semper purificanda, a church which constantly needs a renewal of life in order to remain what it was at the beginning: a liberation movement. Without this constant conversion, it becomes a power structure that oppresses men and women, diminishes them and makes them suffer. The Church constantly remains under the gospel criticism deriving from the kingdom of God, a kingdom of freedom, non-violence and defenseless vulnerability.

A UNIQUE AND DEFINITIVE EXPERIENCE

We already showed how Schillebeeckx attempts “to put the Church in its proper place.” The Church is not in charge of salvation, it is not the kingdom. It also does not represent an estate of truths, claiming to possess absolute truth. The Church is a historical, ambiguous reality. If this is the case, how can we still affirm the uniqueness of Christ and the Christian church? Schillebeeckx pleads for a thorough rethinking of this question in the context of an open world in which Christianity is one religion alongside other religions: one of many.

First of all, Jesus of Nazareth is certainly the distinctive and unique feature of Christianity. Nevertheless he remains contingent, i.e., a historical and limited manifestation of the gift of salvation from God. The particularity of Jesus implies that God can somehow also be encountered at other moments of world history and in the many religions which have arisen in it.

Such an openness to the religions does not mean that we should advocate the cheap liberal modern principle that all religions are equal. It means, however, that God is too rich to have his fullness exhausted through a particular, and thus limited, religious tradi-
tion. We can and must say that there is more religious truth in all the religions together than in one particular religion, and this also applies to Christianity.

Such a view is implied in the very understanding of Jesus’ preaching and praxis of the Kingdom. Jesus’ God is the God of Israel who calls himself the defender of the poor, of the values of freedom, justice and love, and hence can never be claimed by a particular religious group. The knowledge of this kind of God is essentially bound up with a praxis by which human beings free their fellows. It is the distinctive contribution of Jesus of Nazareth to have pointed to God, Abba, who is concerned for humankind and also has to be honored both in worship and liberation. To proclaim this mystical and liberating message is the privilege of christians.

The liberation which Jesus brought is unique and universal only in so far as what happened in Jesus is continued in his disciples. The universality of christian faith should be manifested in the openness of the christian churches. It is sad to see that at present, our Catholic church universalizes precisely the non-universal: a particular historical structure, a particular catechism which is called “universal catechism,” particular liturgical forms, and so on. Universality means that the christian faith is open to all, to every people and to every culture and manifests itself in the universal values of freedom and justice. Schillebeeckx sees this universality in the present-day world context especially realized in the Church’s political diakonia.

The active presence of the christian churches among the poor and those without rights, to give voice to the cries of anguish and need from the oppressed, therefore has a universal significance: a significance for all — including the rich and the powerful. The option for the poor and the outcast is an intrinsic consequence of the specific and christian love for humankind. The transformation of the world to a higher humanity, to justice and peace, is therefore an essential part of the “catholicity” or universality of christian faith; and this is par excellence a non-discriminatory universality (pp. 169-70).

ORTHODOXY AT STAKE IN ORTHOPRAXIS

The Catholic church, in competition with the Enlightenment,
made the claim to possess universal truth in its theoretical, doctrinal framework. We realize in our present-day world in which we are confronted with so much senseless suffering that universal meaning cannot be caught in theoretical talk. We can only accomplish a thematization of universal meaning within a perspective of critical praxis in which a bit of life’s meaninglessness is done away with. The Church has to rediscover its Christian experiential tradition in which meaning and truth is sought, hoped for and still unexpected.

What is hoped for is anticipated in the career and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. The Church should continue in discipleship, in worship and praxis of the Kingdom, knowing that the universality of Christian salvation will never be given in a speculative, theoretical way, but through fragments of salvation which Christians bring to their fellow human beings, those with whom they are on the road towards fuller humanity, truth and goodness, justice and meaning.

Such an understanding apparently reduces Christianity to a secular humanism. While constantly pointing to the need of a liberating political praxis, however, Schillebeeckx also keeps reminding his reader of the other aspect of the Christian experience: the mystical experience in which we arrive at a faith awareness of being encompassed by God’s grace. Christians have indeed a distinctive contribution to make: their faith in God. There is however a problem. They often fail to ask the question, “what kind of God?” Is it the distinctive God of Jesus of Nazareth? Jesus’ God is not a God as stop-gap or a tyrannical potentate. He did not proclaim “a divine grandfather who generously smiles on and makes light of our faults and our cowardice” (p. 33). Jesus’ Abba is a God of life, a God of men and women whose honor never comes in conflict with our human worth but, on the contrary, upholds it and sustains it in pure gratuitousness. We can only honor such a God by keeping

an unbreakable bond between worship of God (let us say prayer and mysticism) and liberation in the fullest and most comprehensive sense of the word. To proclaim this mystical and liberation message (accompanied by a praxis in accordance with the Gospel, following Jesus) is the privilege of Christians. But here they must recall the saying of
Amos which I quoted at the very beginning of this book: "As I brought Israel out of Egypt, so I brought the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir" (Am 9:7)

III. ACT

How to translate such a vision of the Church in terms of pastoral or missionary practice? We pointed out that in the book Church, Schillebeeckx does not intend to develop a complete ecclesiology. A few pages at the end of chapter 3 elaborate on the Church’s mission. This is followed by a last chapter in which he discusses one particular aspect of ecclesiology: the need to develop a democratic rule in the Church.

THE CHURCH’S MISSION

The Church has to be seen in the context of the world ecumene of suffering humanity. What does this mean for its mission? Negatively, we will have to discard the idea of mission in which the Church sees itself in charge of salvation, having a universal message in exclusivist terms. From a church-centered vision, we have to move to a world-centered ecumenical vision in which Jesus’ message of the Kingdom becomes the central concern. In concrete terms, this means that Christians will, first of all, have to be found alongside the poor and the oppressed in their struggle for more humanity, for a better future. Other aspects of mission will become meaningful within the ecumenical context of the active presence of the Christian churches in the forefront of the struggle to create a more human world.

The task of announcing the good news, of creating communities, of inculturation, of dialogue with other religions is certainly part of a vision of mission. Yet, what makes such a vision really comprehensive is our insertion in the universal experience of our present-day world: the search to liberate suffering humankind. The Church has constantly been tempted to take the side of the rich and the powerful; yet, Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God challenges us to take the side of the oppressed and dishonored on this earth. Christians should only use the name of God where it belongs: in solidarity with the victims of greed, power and injustice. In the ecumene of world religions, Christianity has
to bring its contribution by being present among those who, in solidarity with the poor, search for justice and peace.

Anyone who, for example, seeks to make Christianity a mystical religion from which at least all the liberating accents of Jesus’ distinctive image of God have disappeared — and that implies the partisan choice for the poor and the oppressed — damages the originality of Christianity. In this view we then no longer have the Christian gospel. Precisely in its own option for the gospel, Christianity is, in origin and in its deepest invitation, inspiration and orientation, a religious enterprise which truly brings freedom to men and women (p. 186).

TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC RULE

Such a presence among the poor and oppressed in the context of the world ecumene is only possible if we are willing to thoroughly restructure the churches. One particular issue is the democratization of the Catholic church. Vatican Council II can be described as a movement from a static, essentialist view of the Church as an indefectible, perfect hierarchical society to a historical view of a people constantly in need of purification and reform. This second approach envisions a church in which all believers are co-responsible for the Church’s government.

After the Council, the Roman curia and hierarchy took care of taming such a democratic vision of the Church. We returned to the immune, storm-free zone of the societas perfecta by splitting up the Church in “what is mystery” and “what is secular and social reality.” Considerations about community, democratic structures, participation, and so on belong to the realm of sociology. They do not touch the “heavenly part” of the Church. Ratzinger’s ecclesiological thought is the most striking representative of such a dualist, Platonic thinking in terms of essence and appearance. In a recent letter of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (The Church as Communion, May 28, 1992), we read that “ontologically, the Church-mystery, the Church that is one and unique, precedes creation, and gives birth to the particular churches as her daughters.” And behold, it is the universal Church, represented by Peter’s successor, of course, which mirrors the Church-mystery!

Schillebeeckx refuses to entertain this kind of abstract, essen-
tialist thought. The real mystery lies in reality itself or there is no mystery. Either grace works in and through human freedom in our earthly realities or we refer grace to the area of "mystery" in which we cease to have active responsibility. Either the Church is present in the socio-historical and politico-cultural realities of our world or we end up in a dualism. The church community as mystery cannot be found behind or above concrete, visible reality. It is to be found in this reality which can be demonstrated here and now. We too, along with all those in the base communities, are part of this living mystery, even when for reasons of church politics bishops do not want to enter into dialogue with what for them are nuisances at the grass roots.

This premise leads to a rethinking of the structures of the Church. Authority in the Church is often ideologically backed up by an ecclesiology which describes the essence of the Church in terms of hierarchy. The argument is that God has willed the Church in this form, hence democracy cannot be the model of the Church. Schillebeeckx suggests that we do some restudying of history (the post-Constantinian church and the influence of the Neoplatonic works of Pseudo-Dionysius) and of the Church's foundation in Jesus and the Spirit. Jesus indeed called his followers to faithfulness to the will of God, but this will of God told them "not to lord it over others." "Not lording it over" does not exclude democracy! Why then should the Church not be able to democratize its model of government without harming its subjection to the word of God?

This basic consideration can be supported by other arguments of the Christian story. The New Testament vision of the Church sees the Spirit at work through many mediations. Would it not be possible that the Spirit works through the mediation of a variety of forms of democratic participation and co-responsibility of all members in the Church's government? Moreover, our Christian story finds its origin in a God who rules in history, certainly not like emperors, potentates and prelates, but rather with the utmost respect for human freedom. The God of Jesus is a silent God because he has to listen carefully to the story of human beings. Such a God will probably be served better by a leadership which listens to people who try to take up the thread of the Christian story in order to write their own chapter. Why then all that babbling
of church hierarchy?

A democratic exercising of authority has its consequences for the teaching authority in the Church. The study of the process of revelation-faith made it already clear that an unchangeable rock of dogmas simply does not exist. All teaching is relative, has to relate to God’s coming rule, to Scripture, tradition, and the present-day situation. Moreover, the ministry of teaching was not entrusted to only one group, the hierarchy, as if it could have control over the Holy Spirit. The teaching authority of the leadership, the theologians and the believing community are dependent on one another in trying to pass on the Christian story to the next generation. Tension cannot be avoided but we hopefully will get rid of today’s witch-hunt in which theologians are accused of superbia theologica, theological pride, as though there were not also a superbia hierarchica.

HAS THE CHURCH STILL A FUTURE?

Criticism addressed at the Church’s hierarchy may have a discouraging effect on some. Schillebeeckx, however, is an optimist. He firmly believes in the fundamental goodness of God’s creation and of what is happening in history. He then also ends with an encouraging note. Has the Church still a future? We are indeed questioned in our present-day world by the process of secularization and its own search for salvation and humanization. The Church has often given a poor reply to this challenge. And yet, Christianity still has a unique contribution to make if we dare to join humankind in its efforts to create a better world to live in, in its search for co-humanity and co-creaturiness.

In and through human action it must become clear that God wills salvation through humankind for all his creation. For the Bible ‘humankind’ is God’s representative on earth: for the salvation of human beings, of nature and of world history. And although human beings seem more often to fail than to succeed in their task of creation, this in fact opens up space for a truly human ethic governing our attitude to the world and nature. The challenging call from God is thus: ‘Come, my dear people, you are not alone’ (p. 246).