

## **Schillebeeckx and Interreligious Dialogue: An Asian Perspective**

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My association with Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. is very much linked to my going to the University of Nijmegen to pursue doctoral studies. While there I was alerted to the impact which Schillebeeckx had made on the university in particular and on the Netherlands and Europe and the world of theology in general.

The beginning of my studies coincided with the release of the Vatican document *Dominus Iesus*. And since I was already for some years involved in the ministry of interreligious dialogue in Asia it was of particular significance to me, especially the critical stance it took towards religious pluralism. I thus decided it would become the primary topic of my research agenda. I was then introduced to my supervisor, Prof. Wilhelm Dupre, who was a good friend of Fr. Schillebeeckx. He gently nudged me into looking at Schillebeeckx's works and that was how I ended up writing a dissertation entitled "Towards a Theology of Dialogue: Schillebeeckx's Method as Bridge between Vatican's *Dominus Iesus* and Asia's FABC Theology." And that was how Prof. Robert Schreiter also ended up co-supervising my thesis.

In a sense, the research had a ready-made problem, since *Dominus Iesus* was concerned about how Christian theologies can address the phenomenon of religious pluralism without compromising the Gospel proclamation of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ and the evangelizing mission of the Church. My task was to explore how this could be practically realized in light of my experience of working in the Asian Church. From Schillebeeckx I discerned an appropriate theological methodology which not only helped me to make sense of this but of contextual theologies in general, and especially of how interreligious dialogue is practiced in Asia.

Of significance is that in addressing the concerns raised by *Dominus Iesus* and especially the new phenomenon of religious pluralism I began by looking at Schillebeeckx's three-volume Christological tome where he himself was reflecting on what it meant to believe in Jesus Christ in an increasingly post-modern and post-religious world. In a way I saw the trilogy as Schillebeeckx's way of confessing "Jesus is Lord" or, put another way, his very own version of *Dominus Iesus*. Moreover, it did address more or less the same issues which the Vatican document had addressed; issues such as revelation, salvation, the uniqueness of Christ and of the Church, and the relation of Christianity to other religions.

In his trilogy, Schillebeeckx explores the specific questions of "Who do you say that I am?" (*Jesus*); "What does salvation from God in Jesus mean to us?" (*Christ*); and "What is the Church's response to this offer of salvation?" (*Church*).<sup>1</sup> These, respectively, are Christological, Soteriological, and Ecclesiological questions. Likewise, *Dominus Iesus* asks similar questions about Jesus Christ's identity (Christological question), his salvific value (Soteriological question), and the Church's mission and relation to the world and to other religions (Ecclesiological question).

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Collins and Crossroad, 1979); idem, *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1980); idem, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

What did I gather from Schillebeeckx's theology and how did it help me to appreciate *Dominus Iesus*, or at least its concerns? Firstly, it is premised on the need for hermeneutics. Schillebeeckx posits that theology is about discerning God's dialogue with the world, commonly referred to as revelation or the Word of God. This "word from God," Schillebeeckx asserts, does not come to us "without alloy," "coming down to us, as it were, vertically in a purely divine statement."<sup>2</sup> It is always in an interpreted form. This is because God's Word is always given within a particular context and history. It is "necessarily *situated* -- it had a social setting, a living historical context."<sup>3</sup> Its interpretation is contingent upon the context, employing ideas, concepts, languages and media which abide by that particular setting and culture. Therefore, Schillebeeckx believes, a literal repetition of Scripture and Tradition in order to address present-day issues is tantamount to an act of unfaithfulness to the Word of God.

Instead, Schillebeeckx advocates that "we should not be afraid of serious attempts to reinterpret the faith." More importantly, one must keep in mind that "the correctness of these interpretations cannot be tested simply by setting earlier formulae of faith against them, since these too always require interpretation and have still to be *made true*." Our task as believers striving to be faithful to the promise of the gospel is to *reinterpret*: "to present the original Dialogue (a living prophecy!) again and again, and above all to put it into action and to let it be heard as the word of God in constantly changing situations in life." Such is the task of hermeneutics and such is the task of theology. Such also is the task of the Church.<sup>4</sup>

That accounts for why we discern an obvious difference between the attitude and tone of Schillebeeckx's theology and that of *Dominus Iesus*, even as both were developed in the West and addressing the similar concerns of the challenge of religious pluralism and/or of religious indifferentism. For example, *Dominus Iesus* had a seemingly domineering and authoritarian tone, while Schillebeeckx's tended to be tentative and conditional. *Dominus Iesus* appeared to reveal clear-cut, resolute and rigid teachings, while Schillebeeckx's theology was more inclined to display a sense of openness, indulgence and even ambiguity. *Dominus Iesus* seemed to take a somewhat confrontative and apologetic stance towards other religions, while Schillebeeckx's was generally acquiescent, accommodating and even accepting of plurality and difference.

It seemed to me that the foundations which undergird the respective theological methods made for the difference. Significantly, *Dominus Iesus* understands revelation as primarily a "deposit of faith" waiting to be communicated to others. It understands evangelization as the conversion of persons who are not Christians and interreligious dialogue as a strategy and instrument for this evangelizing mission. On the other hand, Schillebeeckx's theology, which understands revelation as God acting in history, sees the Church's task as the discernment of this Word of God. This discernment has to be accompanied by the praxis of faith, in anticipation of the kingdom of God, the salvation for all. Following from this understanding, the mission of the Church is to invite all persons to "actually realizing

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<sup>2</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, "Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics," in *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

salvation and liberation for all, in freedom, through a praxis in accordance with the gospel, in the steps of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

Such a theology looks upon other religions and their adherents as partners and collaborators in the mission towards God’s Kingdom. As partners, each has a contributing role. The Church’s role is unique, but so are the roles of the other religions. The task of interreligious dialogue, therefore, is to discern how the different religions complement one another, so that together they may all work towards actualizing God’s Kingdom. Dialogue is not only useful, but necessary. It is imperative for it is only through the dialogue with the other religions that the Church can discover the fuller aspects of God’s will for humankind. In dialogue, asserts Schillebeeckx, the Church “allows itself to be challenged by other religions and challenges them in return on the basis of its own message.”<sup>6</sup>

Such an orientation is actually in keeping with Pope Paul VI’s call in his 1964 encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*,<sup>7</sup> promulgated in the ambience of the Second Vatican Council, which urged the Church to be in dialogue with the world, with other religions, with other Christians and within the Church. Schillebeeckx suggests that this call was a result of a basic attitude change within the Church. It was an attitude change in response to an ever changing world and which was leading the Church to embrace the world with a sense of openness it had never displayed ever before. The Church saw itself as having a new role in the world, viz., to promote dialogue not only within the Church but outside of it as well. The Church has therefore become a “sacrament of dialogue.” Schillebeeckx believes the Church is well poised for this role as evidenced by “certain fundamental changes in emphasis in the Church’s understanding of herself.” These new understandings were appropriately articulated in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which provides the blueprint for the Church to become a Church of dialogue.

With the mandate from the Second Vatican Council, the Church’s task in the post-Vatican II era is to discover its appropriate role as “sacrament of dialogue.” In the context of the issues raised by *Dominus Iesus* this search becomes even more urgent and critical. It has to discover its mission as facilitator of dialogue in the religiously pluralistic world. Such is the task of the Church if it takes seriously the challenge of *ecclesia semper purificanda* (“the Church must constantly purify itself”), or as Schillebeeckx has it, “the Church has to be put in its place, as well as given the place which is its due.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 176.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, “The Religious and the Human Ecumene,” in *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology, and the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 256-257.

<sup>7</sup> Encyclical letter of his Holiness Pope Paul VI: “On the Ways in which the Church must Carry out its Mission in the Contemporary World” (Vatican City, 6 August 1964).

<sup>8</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, xix.