The Prophetic-Liberating Schillebeeckx

Reclaiming a Western Voice for the Third World

Antonio D. Sison, C.P.P.S.

Schillebeeckx’s prophetic-liberating voice in systematic theology has been, for the most part, neglected for more than four decades. A robust recovery of the liberative stream of his later theology can aid pastoral leaders, educators, and students from East and West as they read the signs of the times in our day and offer them a critical and hopeful dialogue partner in their work.

Not too long ago, I chanced upon a CNN news feature on the impact of the U.S. economic recession on cash-strapped citizens. American consumers, CNN reports, have found themselves making the difficult choice of giving up pricey steak and buying much more affordable chicken instead. Without trivializing the struggles of the poorest people in the United States who are directly affected by the aftermath of the economic meltdown, it is relativizing to remember that a recession in the First World could mean starvation in the Third. For many in the Third World, there are hardly any choices. The 2005 U.N. Human Development Report notes that a billion people in the world live on less than $1 a day. In stark contrast, a fifth of humanity who live in affluent countries will think nothing of spending $4 a day on a cup of cappuccino. Extreme global inequality continues to thrive notwithstanding the utopian promise of global integration; the Third World as a description of a quality of life characterized by abject poverty and structural oppression is still very much in existence.

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Though the existence of suffering in the world is a mystery, what is clear is that suffering is not ordained by divine will. The scandalous reality of an unequal world leaves theology with no other option but to recognize a kairos, a propitious time, in which it is called to read the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel (Gaudium et Spes 4). One of the theologians who bears special witness to this call is the eminent Dutch thinker Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. Among the great western theologians of his generation, Schillebeeckx stands unique in that he speaks directly and prophetically about the Third World situation. Schillebeeckx’s sensitivity for a sociopolitical context that is not his own issues from his epistemological project of addressing the “ecumene of suffering,” the scandal of wide-scale human suffering that continues to afflict our world notwithstanding the salvific claims of science and economic progress. This starting point is characteristic of Schillebeeckx’s later theology, the result of a theological turnabout that took place around the time of the Second Vatican Council where he would break away from a Thomistic framework to a more praxis-oriented theology. Schillebeeckx’s liberative trajectory would take on a more concrete configuration in the seventies when he encountered the critical theory of the Frankfurt School during his travels to the United States and when he would later assume the role of western conversation partner to Latin American Liberation Theologians. His open-minded dialogue with the philosophical and theological currents along his intellectual journey would become the humus for the flourishing of a later theology that is attuned to the concrete experiences of suffering in the world. In a 2002 personal interview I conducted for my doctoral research, Schillebeeckx categorically asserted, “The liberation of human beings is the golden thread of my theology” (Sison, 144).

Having painted in broad strokes Schillebeeckx’s journey toward a praxis-oriented theology, I am motivated to write this article by what I describe as an ironic theological anomaly—the inordinate muting of Schillebeeckx’s prophetic-liberating voice in systematic theology for more than four decades. While due attention has been given to a number of topics from Schillebeeckx’s formidable corpus of works, there has not been sufficient scholarly material on the liberative stream of his later theology, especially in the Euro-American reception of his work.

I unwind this liberative thread here and bring to deeper focus Schillebeeckx’s incontestable solidarity with the weakest links of the global community. It is my hope that pastoral leaders, educators, and students from East and West will hear...
the resonant voice of the prophetic-liberating Schillebeeckx and find in him a critical and hopeful dialogue partner as they themselves read and interpret the signs of the times.

**Quest for the Humanum**

Robert J. Schreiter has underscored the anthropological emphasis of Schillebeeckx’s theological perspective, which points to the human as the paradoxical pathway to the divine: “Indeed, for Schillebeeckx, it is the human that is the royal road to God” (Schreiter, 14).

The focus on the latent potential of the human, however, runs against the hard reality that something is out-of-joint in human existence. If the human is the royal road to God, what is missing is a royal road map to what is truly life-giving and whole, indeed toward the divine. The quest for full human flourishing or what is construed by Schillebeeckx as the *humanum* (Schillebeeckx 1974, 91), seems to have always been analogous to the search for the elusive holy grail. Where is the *humanum* in the Rwandan genocide? The political repression in Burma? The food shortage in Zimbabwe and Haiti? The AIDS epidemic in most of Africa? Surely, if there is anything that the scandalous overspill of suffering in our world establishes, it is the fact that the *humanum* is constantly threatened. In view of the reality of an ecumene of suffering, Schillebeeckx recognizes that God does not antecedently serve us the *humanum* on a silver platter; it remains a noble goal to be sought after and struggled for in history.

For Schillebeeckx, the God who is “mindful of humanity” and who is “pure positivity” cannot be identified as the source of human suffering. Though the existence of suffering in the world is a mystery, what is clear is that suffering is not ordained by divine will. On the contrary, God stands opposed to suffering and this opposition is seen in God’s active presence in creation through human agents who work for emancipation and greater justice. In this, we see that God wills to be our God in our finitude even as we journey toward the elusive *humanum*.

**Negative Experiences of Contrast**

Notwithstanding Schillebeeckx’s proposition that God does not will human suffering, he acknowledges that suffering has a paradoxical, revelatory character. Living within the crucible of the meantime where suffering is a constant reality could yield cognitive power through a *via negativa*, “a negative and indirect mediation” (Schreiter 1984). Drawing from critical theorist Theodor Adorno,
Schillebeeckx proposes the notion of “negative experiences of contrast,” a dialectical concept posited on the premise that although the humanum remains threatened, liberative currents are made manifest in the human refusal to acquiesce to situations of suffering and oppression. While suffering, in and of itself, is a “negative mis-experience,” the indignation and protest over what is experienced as “not-God” is the key to the positive, liberative force within the experience of suffering. The experience of suffering then becomes the very oil that inflames protest and resistance so that a new praxis becomes possible.

Where do we locate God, we may query, in the protest and resistance? “God is the source of a creative dissatisfaction with all that is less than God’s vision of humanity” (Hilkert, 222). In negative experiences of contrast, the indignation over the “is,” presumes a given consciousness of the “ought.” Schreiter explains:

As a contrast experience, the experience of suffering presumes, after all, an implicit impulse toward happiness. And as an experience of injustice, it presumes at least a dim consciousness of the positive prospects of human integrity. As a contrast experience; it implies indirectly a consciousness of an appeal of and to the humanum. In this sense, activity which overcomes suffering is only possible on the basis of at least an implicit or inchoate anticipation of a possible, coming universal meaning. (Schreiter, 55)

Schillebeeckx maintains that the integral attributes of negative experiences of contrast—protest, promise, and praxis—take on a prophetic character. The ground principle for this prophetic character is the vision of the eschaton, the eschatological in-breaking of the kingdom of God as incarnated in the life praxis of Jesus. The promise of definitive eco-human salvation militates against the present multiform realities of woundedness and alienation. Schillebeeckx clarifies, however, that negative experiences of contrast need not be circumscribed in religious terms. There is a universal consensus in the human “no” to evil and suffering, which is also a disclosure of the “yes” to an alternative, life-giving reality.

**Jesus and the Praxis of the Kingdom of God**

In the book *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, the first of the famous triptych that includes *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* and *Church: The Human Story of God*, Schillebeeckx discusses the centrality of the gospel symbol of basileia tou theou, or the kingdom of God, to an understanding of Jesus Christ and his mission. This would necessitate a closer hermeneutical engagement with the gospel sources considering that Jesus himself does not give an exact definition of what the kingdom is, although he consistently alludes to its imminent coming. Schillebeeckx asserts that Jesus gives “historical likeness” to the kingdom; it is
what he lived and died for (Schillebeeckx 1979, 153–154). It is then possible to unpack what the kingdom means by giving regardful consideration to the life praxis of Jesus.

The praxis of Jesus consists of two aspects: what Jesus proclaimed as expressed in parables and the Beatitudes and the saving acts of Jesus made concrete in miracles and fellowship meals. While considerations of space preclude a detailed examination of these two aspects, it is instructive to explain in some detail how Schillebeeckx understands them.

A parable is a simple story that communicates God’s saving activity in Jesus. God does not literally affix his signature on the parable but those whose hearts are open to the story will come to an understanding of God’s salvific message. Jesus tells parables and he himself is the “parable of God.” For Schillebeeckx, the salient feature of a parable is the call to action contained within its story, the ignoring of which keeps the parable open-ended: “The parable remains ‘suspended,’ therefore, so long as the listener has not decided for or against the new possibilities for living opened up in it—and decides for or against Jesus of Nazareth” (Schillebeeckx 1979, 158). The Beatitudes serve to communicate the new order of things brought about by the kingdom of God. At the very heart of the Beatitudes is the good news that blessings shall finally come to the poor, accompanied by a “radical ‘no’ to all forms of evil” (Schillebeeckx 1979, 178).

Related to parables and Beatitudes are Jesus’ saving deeds, which consist of miracles and fellowship meals. The gospel miracles are not circus-type spectacles meant to banner Jesus’ credentials. In performing miracles, Jesus is just being true to who he is. Schillebeeckx proposes that Jesus is the Mosaic-messianic “eschatological prophet,” the one who would bring glad tidings to the poor: “Jesus, the eschatological prophet . . . is not a Davidic but a prophetic ‘anointed’ figure, who brings salvation to the poor and so can call them happy and felicitate with them even now” (Schillebeeckx 1979, 174).

Schillebeeckx notes that the coming of the eschatological prophet formed part of the popular expectation among the poor and oppressed of the time. As the first century Eastern Mediterranean world is very different from ours, I find it illuminating to paint a picture of the societal milieu where Jesus lived and carried out his ministry. A social-science lens proves useful for this purpose. Consider the following statistics presented by social historians on the agrarian, pre-industrial society during Jesus’ time (from Malina and Rohrbaugh 2003):

- Ninety percent of the population was rural and agrarian.
- Only 2–4 percent of the population was literate.
- Life expectancy in first-century Rome was 20 years old; at best, 40.
- More than half of all agrarian families were broken during the childbearing and child-rearing years by the death of one or both parents.
The harsh reality of Jesus’ world was characterized by the notion of “limited good” where all goods are in short supply and already distributed. Since the pie does not grow larger, an appropriation of a larger piece by certain individuals means a smaller piece for the rest. That said, there is a direct line of causation between the greed of the rich and the oppression of poor. Note that “good” here is understood in an expanded sense so as to include “social goods” such as honor, status, security, and power. Scholars point out that being poor did not only mean material poverty, it was a loss of one’s honor standing in society because of injustice and misfortune (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 400–401). The import of this conception is that the poor during Jesus’ time were poor economically, religiously, domestically, and politically. Given this understanding of what being poor meant in Jesus’ world, we gain a deeper grasp of the lively expectation for the coming of the eschatological prophet. The poor were in hopeful anticipation that salvation would come home to them in the most profound way and would radically transform their lives.

In Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ, Schillebeeckx points out that Jesus’ identity as the eschatological prophet, while not rendering other honorific titles superfluous, has not been accorded due attention in the preaching ministry. This oversight could prove problematic as it may lead to the identification of Jesus as a “heavenly icon” devoid of any critical force in the face of present-day socio-political realities (Schillebeeckx 1980, 66).

Finally, Jesus also shared meals with people as a concrete, communitarian way of celebrating the new lease in life that springs from communion with God. In an expanding table fellowship, Jesus would include sinners, tax collectors, and many other outcasts. Schillebeeckx notes that such fellowship meals provide clear evidence that Jesus was not interested in abstractions as a basis for daily life, he always saw the human in his or her most concrete situation (Schillebeeckx 1979, 203).

Taking into account the praxis of Jesus as seen in his preaching and in his saving activities, Schillebeeckx clarifies what the kingdom of God means:

The Kingdom of God is Jesus’ central message, with the emphasis at once on its coming and its coming close. . . . And for Jesus this means the proximity of God’s unconditional will to salvation, of reconciling clemency and sufficing graciousness, and along with them opposition to all forms of evil: suffering and sin. (Schillebeeckx 1979, 140)

Schillebeeckx emphasizes that the kingdom is both an eschatological and an anthropological reality:

It does not denote some area of sovereignty above and beyond this world, where God is supposed to reside and to reign. What Jesus intends by it is a process, a
course of events, whereby God begins to govern or to act as king or Lord, an action, therefore, by which God manifests being-God in the world of humankind. (Schillebeeckx 1979, 141)

Further, Schillebeeckx considers it useful to delineate that _basileia tou theou_ has two interrelated aspects. One aspect is the “kingdom of God,” the eschatological vision of a complete and definitive eco-human salvation to which God’s saving activity is directed. The other aspect is the “reign of God” referred to in the Marcan and Lucan traditions, which emphasizes “the dynamic, here-and-now character of God’s exercise of control” (Schillebeeckx 1979, 141) and is invoked by historical signs of justice, solidarity, and an option for the poor. The kingdom of God and the reign of God are two sides of the same coin. In this conception of _basileia tou theou_, Schillebeeckx underscores the marriage of divine and human agency in the quest for greater justice and equality in the world.

**Salvation and Third World Liberation**

Schillebeeckx consistently maintains that Christian salvation, as mediated and exemplified by the life praxis of Jesus, has profound sociopolitical implications. While not discounting the interpersonal dimension of salvation, Schillebeeckx criticizes soteriologies that fail to take seriously the interaction between salvation and sociopolitical liberation. He astutely describes a privatized view of salvation as “a flight into the social status quo” (Schillebeeck 1980, 744).

Derek Simon rightly laments the fact that despite the definitive link between salvation and liberation in Schillebeeckx’s later theology, there is scant evidence of this trajectory in the reception of his work. Simon notes two “depoliticizing” tendencies: (1) The tendency to relegate Schillebeeckx’s exposure to critical theory as a mere philosophical excursion that had little to do with the development of his Christology; and (2) The tendency to represent Schillebeeckx’s Christology in a purely theoretical-hermeneutical manner detached from its liberative trajectory (Simon, 340).

It is surprising that these depoliticizing tendencies caught on despite the sociopolitical synthesis that characterizes Schillebeeckx’s later theological formation. In my interview with him, Schillebeeckx himself could not validate why the liberative cast of his theology had not been given due attention in the reception of his work (Sison, 144). For him, the only meaningful salvation for the contemporary human situation is one that takes into account “the existential context of oppression and liberation” (Schillebeeckx 1979, 191).

The link between salvation and liberation in Schillebeeckx’s soteriology is strongly evidenced by his project of developing a western liberationist theology
that may serve as a dialogue partner for Third World liberation theologies. He is careful to underscore that such a theology could not ignore the marked difference in context between the affluent West and the Third World. Schillebeeckx appropriately names his prophetic-liberating project as the “Praxis of the Kingdom of God,” further clarifying that it is a western inculturation of Third World liberation theology and not an implausible cut-and-paste version. He credits his twenty-year, personal interaction with Latin American liberation theologians Clodovis Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez for the praxical emphasis of his later theology.

Schillebeeckx envisions liberation theology’s western counterpart to take on a prophetic and necessarily self-critical approach to doing theology. He issues a challenge to Euro-American theologians to get down from ivory tower theology and recognize the ethical imperative of the Gospel—“the Praxis of the Kingdom of God is human, social, societal liberation in which the ethical is assumed in our faith relationship with God” (Sison, 143). Along these lines, he admonishes his fellow European theologians to critique the developed world’s vested interests in globalization:

Our problem here in Europe is that the theologians who try to create a liberation theology for the West have no movement in which the theology can grow from. Thus, the liberation theology in the western context must have knowledge of what is going on in Europe, above all, the globalization of the whole Western economic system, which is one of the greatest threats to the Third World. But we are the cause of that. America and the rich states of Europe have great economic interests in globalization. (Sison, 142)

The emergence of Schillebeeckx’s prophetic-liberating voice evinces his uncanny sensitivity for the suffering peoples of the Third World. We can see this clearly in the book *Church: The Human Story of God* when he examines the continuing existence of “non-persons” in the global community, most especially, in nations that have suffered the sentence of a Christian colonial history:

There is good reason for the statements in the EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) conferences of Third World theologians that ‘the believing but exploited people’ in the Third World contrast with ‘the secularized and exploitative West.’ The two problems are interconnected and cannot be separated. The existence of the ‘non-person,’ the poor and the oppressed, in a subcontinent like Latin America or a country like South Africa, lands which have been dominated by Christians for centuries, is a scandal for any belief in God. For many people it makes belief in God incredible. Therefore in the West we can no longer talk about God without relating our thought about God to the massive suffering of men and women elsewhere and anonymously among us. . . . (Schillebeeckx 1990, 54)
In *Christ: The Human Story of God*, Schillebeeckx stridently criticizes the greed and duplicity of the world’s wealthy powerholders in their perpetuation of dehumanizing structures that confine a large base of impoverished countries to the lowest rungs of the economic pyramid:

While two-thirds of the world population is crying out for justice and love, a powerful block made up of the remaining third, in East and West, is concentrating all its knowledge and its science, its power, its diplomacy and its tactics and means of subjugation on keeping what it has . . . nothing alters the fact that the great majority of those who may call themselves human beings here and elsewhere are kept down and oppressed, made slaves in practice, despite the all-too-similar slogans of all these power-blocks. They promise freedom and happiness and true democracy, and at the same time themselves decide what is good for others. (Schillebeeckx 1980, 647)

In the fittingly titled “The ‘Gospel for the Poor’ for Prosperous People,” one of his homilies compiled in the book *God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed*, Schillebeeckx lays bare the “scandal” of an unequal eucharistic table that is bereft of true gospel meaning because of the disregard for Third World poverty and oppression. Schillebeeckx rebukes the western propensity to problematize interdenominational issues while turning a blind eye to the real, core issue of gross inequality that threatens the very authenticity of Christian communion:

How is it possible for defenders of oppressive systems and those they oppress, all of us and the Third World, to celebrate the one eucharist together as Christians? We drink from our full cups but do not share the one cup among one another. The great scandal is not intercommunion among Christians of different communions: that is a sign of hope. The scandal is the intercommunion of rich Christians who remain rich and poor Christians who remain poor while celebrating the same eucharist, taking no notice of the Christian model of sharing possessions: the sharing of the one cup of salvation among one another. For this salvation also has social and economic consequences. Everyone, not just an elite group, has to be full enough to be able to laugh because salvation has happened to him or her. (Schillebeeckx 1983, 178)

The shortage of praxis, in Schillebeeckx’s purview, may be attributed to the positivistic outlook that posits the salvation of humans by fellow humans. He traces its roots in the Enlightenment mantra of “unlimited progress,” which has all but endangered humankind and the natural environment. Schillebeeckx decries this positivistic tendency and names it as the modern incarnation of the “demonic”:
The programme of a total liberation of man by man at present seems to be the greatest threat to all humanity. The “modern western world” is in particular need of salvation today, for liberation and redemption precisely from those dark powers which modern man has himself called to life. The demonic in our culture and society has taken on a different name and content from the demons of the Medieval Ages, but it is no less real and just as threatening. (Schillebeeckx 1983, 250)

Consistent with the prophetic-liberating project of his soteriology, Schillebeeckx would thus describe the sociopolitical implications of Christian salvation as follows:

What then is salvation in Jesus from God? I would want to say: being at the disposal of others, losing oneself for others (each in his own limited situation) and within this “conversation” (which is also made possible by structural changes) also working through anonymous structures for the happiness, the goodness, the truth of mankind. (Schillebeeckx 1980, 838)

The focus on the reign in Schillebeeckx’s soteriology clearly emphasizes that salvation may be experienced in the here and now, albeit fragmentarily, in movements that promote social justice, equality, and reconciliation. But it is clear to him that ultimately, it is only God who can bring a definitive eco-human salvation to fulfillment.

A Call to Political Holiness

Schillebeeckx proposes “political holiness”—the integration of mysticism and political engagement—as the contemporary form of ascetic spirituality appropriate for our times. Mysticism and politics cannot be divorced from each other, he argues, for prayer without political engagement is merely sentimental, while politics without prayer is pessimistic. As a contemporary prophetic vocation, political holiness demands the interpretation of sociopolitical realities in the light of the reign of God; as Schillebeeckx eloquently asserts, “For the signs of the times do not speak, we must cause them to do so” (Schreiter, 273). For Schillebeeckx, political holiness is rooted in the negative experience of contrast between the God who is mindful of humanity and the ecumene of suffering. In this contrast experience, it is God who is at the heart of all truly human liberation.

From the general rubric of political holiness as proposed by Schillebeeckx, there are a number of threads that may interweave into our understanding of theology as it relates to pastoral ministry. Allow me to tease out at least three of them.
The prophetic-liberating Schillebeeckx challenges us to break free from abstract theology that has very little to do with the concrete reality of human suffering in the world today. Whenever we are tempted to cache theology within the confines of intellectual gymnastics, the reality of an ecumene of suffering challenges us to acknowledge the poor and oppressed—most especially our sisters and brothers in the Third World—as theology’s privileged interlocutors. For them, the reign of God must be brought closer to home.

Further, the prophetic-liberating Schillebeeckx issues a reminder that it is not enough for us to be placard-bearing activists, we are called to be mystics of justice, members of the messianic community of Jesus Christ, whose creative, liberating spirit breathes in and through us when we stay close to the heart of God. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of the reign whose desire is to end all asymmetries so that the poor may indeed be called “blessed.” We find this God not only when we celebrate signs of salvation in the world, but also whenever we protest unjust situations and express our solidarity for the poor when these signs are negated.

Finally, the prophetic-liberating Schillebeeckx encourages us to remain hopeful despite the numerous contradictions of the world. It is all too easy to be discouraged by the sheer magnitude of the sociopolitical issues before us. Who could ever make heads or tails of the problem of global inequality, for instance? Schillebeeckx’s proposal that definitive eco-human salvation is in God’s hands, not ours, liberates us from our control issues, and reassures us that our ministry does not come to nothing. Our praxis in the in-breaking reign of God is a glimmer of the eschatological future. We do not have all the answers now but we believe that God, who is pure positivity, does. In the wise words of Schillebeeckx, “God is mystery, but the mystery of God is the mystery of goodness.”

References


