

Reinterpreting Traditional Theology. An Interview with Edward Schillebeeckx

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ABSTRACT. This interview is a hermeneutical key to the entire thought of Edward Schillebeeckx. As it will rapidly become evident, he reinterprets traditional Christian theology to the point of drastically deconstructing it. The most important issues which he presents in a light which is not at all traditional are the role of experience for our daily life, the historically conditioned character of revelation, the power of human reason to deal with man's problems and the permanency of Christ's death. Schillebeeckx also talks about his indebtedness to Judaism, the contingency of religion, the necessity that faith should be construed rationally, his personal view of ethics, the optional character of celibacy, the essential goodness of secularism and the spiritual nature of eschatology. One should bear in mind that although Schillebeeckx maintains the form of traditional Christian language, he nevertheless completely changes the meaning of classical Christian concepts. Thus, Christ is not alive but dead, revelation is not absolute but historically conditioned and Christian doctrines are not permanent but subject to human interpretation.

RAMONA SIMUȚ: What role do you think the universe of your childhood experiences played in your becoming a Christian thinker? I would include here the traditions of your family and the time of the Second World War.

EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX: I have always said that the theology of experience is the foundation. Human experiences are the basis, not my own experience, all the experience of the Christian tradition, the religious experience which has been accumulated over time. We have to let this go through our lives

and reactualize everything—this is the norm, the norm of our actuality of the moment. The present time is a kind of criticism of tradition, but there is a mutual confrontation, a correlation between the past and the new experience of the present. We must always be very sensible with this proportionality of what comes from the past and our own experience. We cannot transform the Christian tradition into eclecticism. There is no such thing as a set of revelation placed in culture, in the times of the Scriptures, Hellenism, Patristics, the Middle Ages and so on. We must take these experiences and place them in our times by mutual criticism. We cannot absolutize either the past or the present. This revelation is embedded in culture, in historical situations. We must not replicate the past but reinterpret it. I am busy with hermeneutics. This means we can read the text of the Gospel, either the Old Testament or the New Testament. The meaning of words is always embedded in our image of the world and of ourselves. These experiences change and we must retranslate past experiences for our present experiences.

R.S.: How do you link your theological assertions made from phenomenological and existentialist perspectives?

E. S.: I was educated in the tradition of scholastic theology, I studied phenomenology, existentialist theology, then the critical School of Frankfurt, and now I study postmodern philosophy, because this is also an experience, a present experience. We cannot accept directly the revelation of God without translating the experience in the language of postmodernity.

R.S.: Taking into account that you said Jesus had acted merely as a prophet, would you agree that your theology and hermeneutics were mainly influenced by Jewish liberalism?

E. S.: I was influenced by Jewish thinking because the roots of Christendom are Jewish. Jesus was thinking as a Jew, but there cannot be any transcendent elements in what he said, because

one prophet criticized what another prophet said before him. As an eschatological prophet, Jesus was not transcendent, he was rather a messenger of the kingdom of God. The message was the salvation of humankind—this is the most important aspect of the Gospel; salvation of the poor, salvation for those who have no voice; it is a kind of liberal theology. There may be an absolute revelation through Jesus, but our interpretation of it is not absolute, as it goes through the filter of our experience and interpretation. We are restrained by language but this is not all. The New Testament was written by Jews who became Christians and spoke Greek. Their perspective on the world was different from what had been before, for instance, from those who translated the Septuagint. We must be true to the deepest meaning of the Gospel. In order to be faithful to this tradition we have to make the proper translation for our times. In this sense, the present time enters within our vision of the Gospel. It is not only that we know what the Gospel is; we are able to know the meaning of the Gospel for us today only through our experience of the present moment.

R.S.: Which of these doctrines, anthropology and theology, should be given special attention in today's theological debate (bearing in mind your definition of the *humanum* and God's intervention in view of participating in its "suffering")?

E. S.: I would say that theology is always the basis of anthropology. We are humans living in the world, in history. On the other hand, faith in revelation is transmitted by the mediation of all human traditions. We are faithful to tradition by making a rupture; there is no such thing as a smooth growth from revelation into theology. The content of revelation is always explained in human concepts, namely is historically conditioned. We always have the revelation of God which is absolute, but religion is not absolute. There is a difference between the living God and our answer to God. Our answer to God is religious and em-

bedded in culture. God is the basis of our faith; our answer is to trust God. According to Augustine, trust is the nucleus of faith, but what Jesus means for us today is the result of our thinking. Faith is trust in God *cum cogitatione*, with thinking, with reflection. Without reflection we are fundamentalists.

R.S.: What you mean then is that we can approach God only by means of human language?

E. S.: Reality is a mystery for us. We reflect the encounter with the world and history via our experiences and our sensibility. We do not create the world, we rethink the world which encounters us, and this is an act of interpretation. There is an ontological basis for our thinking. We do not create the meaning, we have to interpret the meaning which already exists. We have to be eschatologically transparent. We can approach finite concepts and the meaning of the world only by means of our human minds. We have human concepts about God, but the reality of God is unspeakable to us. God is the ultimate mystery, but parts of the mystery of God become transparent through our way of life and our experience. Christianity is a way of life, it is not theoretical speculation.

R.S.: How would you define contemporary ethics?

E. S.: There is no Christian ethics—I must say this; there is only human ethics, but we have to seek what is human and humane. To be a human being is the basis of all ethics, but when you are a believer with faith in God, this relationship with God is reflected in the community of the church. We have to take this ethics into our personal relationship with God. Belief, faith, hope, love, charity are our theological and ethical virtues. They are personal and communitary virtues. These are the immediate basis of our humanity. For a believer, however, this humanity, which is the basis of all ethics, is a gift of God. The deepest perception of ethics is God through the mediation of our feeling

and through the reflection of what ethics really is. I am in favour of autonomous ethics, but God is ultimately the foundation of ethics. It is only through our feelings that we are able to know what ethics is in reality. We know the will of God through our perceptions.

R. S.: If you were to leave a final message as heritage to contemporary people, what would that be?

E. S.: I believe rationality, human rationality, to be the way in which we think and reflect on human norms and values. I think that our rationality is under the critique of the history of suffering of the entire humanity. No religion can explain suffering or, even more, nobody can explain innocent suffering. Why do I believe in God if there is so much suffering in the world? Jesus had the message of the kingdom of God, which is that the good, not the evil, will be dominant in the world. Evil can be destroyed only eschatologically. Only goodness is eternal and transcendent to the death of human beings. This is the basis for the belief in the eternity of human life. There is no hell in which we are punished to suffer eternally. Evil is gone when eternal life outlives it. Certainty of belief—not rational certainty—must be accompanied by hope and love. You can have expectations without faith, but belief in eternal life must be accompanied by faith. You cannot prove that there will be any sort of reality after death. Surrendering to the mystery of God is the hope of eternal life and salvation.

R. S.: Why do you think moral conflicts occur within the church?

E. S.: We are human beings; this is why evil exists in the church. But we believe in the forgiveness of God and we should surrender ourselves to God. Thus, the possibility to grow in sanctity exists for humans.

R. S.: What is your opinion about today's ethical debates concerning the depravity (namely paedophilia) of some Roman-Catholic priests?

E. S.: It is a shame that even some priests, the representatives of Christ, find themselves at the extreme of what they should be. You mentioned paedophilia. In this respect, I must say that celibacy is not the cause of this evil in the church. I guess that for some priests it has to be a second cause. Celibacy must be optional. Celibacy must not be bound on the ministers of the church. Celibacy is optional, one can choose it by its own option.

R. S. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in choosing the ministers of the church?

E. S.: The role of the Holy Spirit in choosing the ministers of the church is important. Nevertheless, the Spirit works everywhere, both in profane movements and in the church. Thus, the vocation of a priest, bishop, pope, is realized by the special intervention of the Holy Spirit. The whole history is ultimately in the hands of God, but we cannot identify the work of the Spirit in the ministry of every single bishop. I believe, however, in the work of the Spirit in the church and in history.

R. S.: What is the relevance of giving Christian biblical teaching to a church living in the 21st century?

E. S.: The church should not be so angry as if living as a Christian were only believing in orthodoxy or in right doctrine. Trusting God through the mediation of Christ is the essence. Doctrines are not permanent. Old doctrines are not relevant anymore. We are not Greeks, but rather Europeans, so—for example—the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, the hypostatic union, is not relevant any longer. Christ was a human person, but he had a unique relationship with God. I have said many times that in our times, in the 21st century, holding that Jesus

Christ had both a human nature and a divine nature is like saying that he was a mermaid. Christ was a human being, he was finite as we are. Jesus Christ is a human being with a personal and unique relationship with God—we must realize this. I am not against the formula of the divinity of Jesus, but we must translate it in order to have meaning for us today.

R. S.: What is the relationship between politics and theology or ethics in contemporary Dutch society?

E. S.: There is a distinction between state and church in terms of relations, but in Holland, for Protestants, there is a relationship between state and church. It is now accepted in Holland that, although traditionally Protestant, the king could also be a Catholic. I believe that a political situation like that of a king without any religion will be possible in the future. Catholics have more feelings for the autonomy of social and religious life. Nevertheless, this autonomy must be rooted in the belief in God and this can change our human understanding.

R. S.: What is the relationship between anthropology and eschatology or between anthropology and soteriology from an eschatological point of view?

E. S.: A reinterpretation of what we call dogmas is very important and must occur. We must not be busy with what we believe. There is no obligation to believe this or that. For me, the creed has always been the foundation of life, but we must always interpret the doctrines of the creed—the resurrection, for instance. I believe in bodily resurrection, but this has nothing to do with corpses coming to life. The corpse of Jesus Christ did not leave the tomb, and whoever holds this believes in a fairy tale. I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus but not as a dead body coming to life again. Here, however, I must mention that there are two major points of interpretation. Firstly, those who believe there will be a bodily resurrection in the sense that

life will be given to dead bodies. Secondly, Paul says we have a new body coming from heaven, a pneumatological vision; there is no such thing as a corpse coming out of the tomb. The corporality, the completeness, the wholeness of being a human with God eschatologically is something which cannot be expressed by a representation. We are not souls only; the resurrected body will be spiritual. I believe in the resurrection of the body, but it has nothing to do with a corpse coming to life from the tomb.

R. S.: Is the “salvation” of postmodern man still to be considered as facile as the “salvation” of the enlightened or modern man?

E. S.: I must begin by saying that secularism is not evil. Human beings are secular, but this does not mean they are evil. Secularization will go on forever. I do not believe in a new age which is to come and all these things. Humanity is one thing. Believing in the church, in love, doing good to others and being capable to stick to an ideal, which for a Christian is the kingdom of God, is the most important thing of all. Freedom for every human being, solidarity, and above all justice, are the most relevant aspects for humanity. When people do good things they have the kernell of the Gospel even if they do not believe in Christ. Many people see this reality as a fairy tale. Our judgement, however, will be on the basis of our facts, on the basis of doing the good (Matthew 25). Giving our lives for others (not suicidally) is what really counts. When somebody is a victim of evil, we must give our lives for the sake of the good. When we do this, we are Christians. If you do the will of God even if you deny the existence of God—then you are a Christian.

R. S.: To which aspects of your theology a special attention should be given and why?

E. S.: Hermeneutics is a more technical theology and this is good for theologians but not for ordinary people. For the faith-

ful, the solidarity of human beings, love and justice are the most important things. In heaven, we will see people who did not believe in God, but did the good to others. Heaven is the destination of human beings after death, when we are in the presence of God and this becomes transparent in our bodies, in all that we are. I cannot make a representation of heaven but I can see the difference between the face of an animal and the face of a human being. A human being is spiritual; he or she has personality. We are complete when we are in the presence of God.

R. S.: Which is the difference between the experience of the modern man and the daily experience of the postmodern man?

E. S.: I would only say that we should all be thankful to our parents, but we do not show this. Our way of life must show that we are thankful. We celebrate our parents and there are days of celebration for such an occasion. Agnostics may do good things, but they do not celebrate God. This is why prayer and liturgy are so important, as celebrations of God. We must all be thankful to God for our lives, for the fact that we are human and humane.¹

¹ This interview was made possible through the courtesy of Dr. Carl Sterkens, the Director of Edward Schillebeeckx Foundation, and was taken on the 3rd of May 2002 at Edward Schillebeeckx's residence in Berg-en-Dal, the Netherlands.