BOOK ESSAY

New Resonances in Classic Motifs
Finding Schillebeeckx’s Theology in Translation

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The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx generate renewed insight into one of the main theological traditions flowing out of Vatican II, and make a significant contribution to current debate about the hermeneutics of the Council. Some of the material is newly translated,¹ and a section on Latin American liberation theology, which Edward Schillebeeckx added to the second Dutch edition of Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World, is incorporated into the English translation for the first time.² The translations of his major post-Conciliar works, beginning with Jesus: An Experiment in Christology, have been revised,³ resulting in “authoritative”⁴ texts that can be studied by new generations of English-speaking readers.

As Schillebeeckx acknowledged in 1969, “translation remains, as everyone knows, difficult and very few translations may really be called

¹. See especially the contents of Volume XI, Essays: Ongoing Theological Quests, much of which has not been available in English before (Collected Works XI, p. xiii).
³. See the “Introduction to Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx” by Nico Schreurs that can be found in each volume.
⁴. See the prefatory note “How to Use this Book” in each volume, and especially in Volumes VI to X.
completely successful.” The *Collected Works* fulfil two helpful roles. On the one hand, they provide a secure basis for assessing the contribution made by Schillebeeckx, and for moving forward from his work, in critical and productive ways. On the other hand, they offer the possibility of charting more successfully the development of his thinking over the period they cover (1952-2000). This review will treat two major (and somewhat controversial) themes that will allow both of these aims to be taken up simultaneously, showing one way in which theology *sequela* Schillebeeckx might be undertaken.

**Continuity and Discontinuity**

At the beginning of Part Four of *Jesus*, Schillebeeckx spends six pages taking “a (deliberate) detour [… ] to produce a fairly detailed outline of the religious situation in which we find ourselves as a result of the radical change in experiential and interpretive models representing fresh attempts to render the old beliefs faithfully.” He begins by noting that an analysis of history which speaks of an interaction between two elements is unsatisfactory. He draws instead on one that is offered by “French cultural critics,” which he describes as follows:

There is ‘factual’ or ‘ephemeral’ history with its brief duration and fast rhythm: everyday events come and go; there is ‘conjunctural’ history, which is more expansive, has a more profound impact and is more comprehensive, but proceeds at a much slower tempo – in other words a cultural conjuncture lasts a long time; lastly there is ‘structural’ history with a timespan of many centuries, verging on the zero point between motion and immobility, albeit not a-historical.

It is the inclusion of the conjunctural that is decisive here, as the new translation of the chapter title makes clear. Without a “Conjunctural Hermeneutic Horizon,” there is a tendency to fall back into an older mode of analysis that is not able to express the complexity of the processes of history adequately. He gives, as an example, Aristotle’s attempt “to catalogue, as it were, or identify [the] ‘root ideas’ of human thinking. But he failed to distinguish between the structural and conjunctural aspects of our thinking, so his attempt strikes us as obsolete.

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Still, it was a start.” 10 Introducing the conjunctural aspect into the analysis has two advantages: first of all, it allows for conjunctural continuity through a process of ephemeral change, and for structural continuity through conjunctural change. It also helps us to understand that the structural elements found in human thinking, and in expressions of faith, are still part of history, so they are not static. In these features of history, “the change process is extremely slow and cumbersome; basic structures survive even the most radical revolutions.” 11

The chapter title also speaks of the “a-synchronous rhythm” of these three strands of history. 12 This musical metaphor is much easier to hear in the new translation, and joins a host of interconnected ways of speaking about history that Schillebeeckx uses, making it clearer than ever that he is not using a single master image of which the others are merely expressions. This a-synchronicity helps us to realize that the “older hypothesis that a mental or material revolution triggers convergent and synchronous development in all cultural sectors […] turns out to be wrong – a myth.” 13 This helps to distinguish Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutical theology from others that draw on Kuhnian paradigm theory and other related notions. He says that he “would situate what has been called the ‘epochal hermeneutic horizon’, or thought in terms of the hermeneutic models of a specific period or a contemporary experiential horizon, on the second plane of history.” 14 It is the inclusion of the conjunctural that is decisive in his analysis.

Schillebeeckx continues to use this idea, though it is not always described in relation to the structural and ephemeral, as it is in Jesus. The sources that he draws upon also change, as Ted Schoof and Carl Sterkens note in their “Introduction” to Volume XI: “Soon after Vatican II he started expanding his knowledge and understanding of hermeneutics in various directions: the profound German analysis of verstehen, more recent French semiotic and structural analysis, and especially English linguistic philosophy, which was becoming widely influential.” 15 Two of the pieces in the newly translated material highlight the ongoing relevance of the idea, and how it changes over time.

10. Collected Works VI, p. 541 [578].
12. Collected Works VI, p. 539 [566].
In “Discontinuities in Christian Dogmas,” written in 1994, he observes: “The socio-cultural transmission of faith means that when the socio-cultural pattern or paradigm and its concomitant living, experiential and mental categories change radically, believers find earlier cultural forms – including that of their religious tradition – problematic.”

Sometimes, when this happens, “a historical break with bygone cultural forms may be the only possible way to reformulate dogma so that it remains true to the gospel and the Christian religious tradition.”

This can make Schillebeeckx sound like an advocate of a hermeneutics of rupture, but seen in the light of the earlier material, a number of observations can be made about the development of his thought over this period which give a rather different impression.

To address this situation, he analyses “the basic structure of cultural change and a-synchronicity.” This language echoes his earlier formulation, that when there is change – even radical change – it need not happen simultaneously on all three levels of history. So, even a complete paradigmatic break at the conjunctural level of a culture or tradition may not be accompanied by breaks at the other levels. Although his treatment is by no means identical with the earlier articulation, the heading of the next section in the article, “Conjunctural and structural changes,” is worth noting. He hardly uses the term structural at all after the heading, but a careful reading makes it clear that his analysis of history has distinct depth-dimensions to it: “The fact that patristics, the Middle Ages and modernity – despite fundamental conjunctural disparities – concur on so many points […] makes me think that the aforementioned three paradigms together constitute a single cultural era, each displaying different conjunctural paradigms.”

This point is very much in continuity with the earlier treatment – and with that found in his article “The Role of History in what is called the New Paradigm,” given at a conference on paradigm change in theology in 1980.
Schillebeeckx’s account changes over this twenty year period, as does the scholarly material he interacts with, but many of the changes are ephemeral, so this is only to be expected. Conjuncturally, there are also important shifts: the comparison with paradigm theory becomes less important, and may even move from the conjunctural to the ephemeral as Schillebeeckx gradually distances himself from the theological application of a Kuhnian model. Structurally, though, change takes place more slowly. In 1974, he argues that the traditional idea of the development of dogma is better expressed by saying that continuity and discontinuity can be compatible, as long as the interaction between them uses a three-term, rather than a two-term, structure. Twenty years later, this position has developed into the claim that, sometimes, structural continuity can only come about through conjunctural discontinuity. This is a stronger thesis, but may well apply to a smaller number of cases.

The stronger claim is also stated in the newly translated excerpt from Schillebeeckx’s *Theological Testament* in Volume XI, where he says that “‘continuity’ only comes about via discontinuities.” Because faith and culture interact, sometimes “a historical break with bygone cultural forms may be the only possible way to reformulate dogma so that it remains true to the gospel and its reverberations in our history.”22 This material, as Schoof and Sterkens note, overlaps a good deal “with the first pages of the preceding article ‘Discontinuities in Christian dogmas’ written in the same year,” but, at least in the English translation, it is not a “verbatim overlap.”23 They might usefully be called parallel texts, in which Schillebeeckx adapts and rearranges the material slightly to suit the new situation – unless, of course, the differences that can be discerned have been introduced in the translation process, and the Dutch texts are verbatim. This open question means that there is still plenty of scope for English-speaking researchers to read the Dutch texts alongside the English translations and critically assess the translations offered, which is good news for doctoral students and Schillebeeckx scholars alike.

Schillebeeckx speaks of his own development in a similar way: “My theoretical thinking clearly displays not just smooth continuity but also fluctuating ups and downs, as well as forms of continuity that could only be achieved by way of discontinuities.”24 Breaks, such as that with the theology of Dominic De Petter, do not lead to rupture at all levels of his

24. *Collected Works* XI, p. 120.
thinking. Sometimes, the only way to profess the same faith as your predecessors is to make a complete break with the conjunctural system that they used to give voice to that faith. It is not that the structural elements that motivated them, and which motivate you still, remain identical, in spite of the break. It is, rather, that you want what they wanted: for “the Christian faith [...] to remain recognisable to present-day people as belief in the gospel of Jesus confessed as the Christ.”

As a result, the structural aspects of Schillebeeckx’s theological writings can be seen as a depth-dimension of the narrative he offers at a particular time. When, for example, he describes a three-year course of lectures on modernity that he gave in the late 1970s, he says: “I saw this study as an extension of my earlier lectures, particularly those on religious consciousness generally, Christian consciousness and the distinctive identity of the Christian experiential tradition.” A number of these earlier texts were collected in his *Theological Soundings*, some of which form the first five volumes of the *Collected Works*. It is these reflections on hermeneutics that form the springboard for the second part of this review.

**Hermeneutics**

When Schillebeeckx introduces the material on continuity and change in *Jesus*, he says that it is “impossible ‘first’ to determine the essence of the Christian faith and subsequently – in the second instance, as it were – to adapt the interpretation to our own time.” This is very similar to the statement he makes a few years earlier in *The Understanding of Faith*, that it is no longer possible to make “an affirmation about the ‘unchangeable’ element in faith and a ‘new’ element,” which arises in a particular situation. At more or less the same time, he also calls this the “Older Solution: The Kernel and Its Mode of Expression.” Admittedly, these texts are written reasonably closely together, between 1968 and 1974, but in all of them, he opposes an older two-term model which, he claims, is no longer workable. A more hermeneutical understanding is needed, because there is a much closer link than this older solution postulated between the essence of the Christian faith and the believer’s interpretation of it in a particular time and place. In order to

27. *Collected Works* VI, p. 537 [575].
28. *Collected Works* V, p. 54 [60].
29. *God the Future of Man, Collected Works* III, p. 6 [10].
investigate this more closely, Schillebeeckx’s newly translated retirement speech in Nijmegen is helpful, in which he explicitly returns to these issues, reflecting on the “Theological interpretation of faith in 1983.”

As he begins, he says that “Christian theology fundamentally concerns what I shall provisionally, without further specification, call ‘two poles’: tradition and situation.” It is vital to note the inverted commas here, which are still present when he edits and re-uses some of this material in *Church*, and to note his comment that the language is provisional. This way of expressing the matter is being used a good deal around him at the time, especially by other theologians involved in the discussions about paradigm change in theology. Schillebeeckx, however, is somewhat reluctant to do so, though he, too, wants to find a way to relate tradition and situation to each other hermeneutically.

He says that traditions have “the power to disclose meaning: through all historical ups and downs, their history is a cumulative disclosure of truth and meaning.” This sounds similar to the way he expressed his threefold analysis of history in the texts examined earlier, calling to mind the ephemeral and structural elements of the history of tradition. The emphasis on meaning and truth is a development of ideas that he dealt with in *The Understanding of Faith*, where the main question was what orthodoxy, “right faith,” consists in. In 1983, Schillebeeckx’s position has not changed a great deal structurally, but it has a new conjunctural aspect. He points out that this disclosure “is not primarily a disclosure of theoretical meaning, but in the first place a narrative revelation of meaning.” This adds the conjunctural notion of narrative, one that he applies extensively in his Jesus books. The change, all the same, is not a discontinuity but an enrichment, which is made clear when he goes on to say that this narrative revelation of meaning “is nonetheless consistently accompanied [… by at least a preparatory theological reflection.” In the earlier material on hermeneutics, Schillebeeckx speaks of “a ‘matter’, which we are trying to understand,” and what is being disclosed is a theoretical meaning. In the 1983 material, he says that analysing truth and meaning using “the science of narration […] discloses] its structures in broad outline.” A relation to truth is established thereby, but in both accounts truth is never captured

31. *Collected Works* X, p. 33 [34].
34. *Collected Works* XI, p. 54.
in its entirety and, as such, can never be expressed completely in theoretical terms.

The next point he makes is, again, very similar to what he was writing in the 1960s. There, he stresses that Christianity is not “a question of pure *theoria*; it is ultimately a question of action in faith,” using the term *orthopraxis* to express this. In 1983, he states that “human history is not just a story but also praxis […]. The relation to praxis – let’s call it *orthopraxis* for now – is essential for theological theory per se.” The ephemeral expression has changed a good deal, thanks in part to the conjunctural addition of narratology. The structure of his position has developed, too, though he is still presenting very similar arguments. He describes the relation between tradition and situation as a dialectical one, again employing terms that he seems to be distancing himself from, even as he uses them: “This process of interaction can be called a ‘correlation method’, although the term strikes me as ambiguous: by ‘correlation’ I simply mean interrelationship in a very general sense.”

When he reworks this material for *Church*, he does not speak of a correlation method, saying that he has “chosen the term ‘interrelationship’ deliberately,” because “it is vague enough to cover the broad spread” of possible relations, listing correlation alongside a number of others.

Though it is true to say that Schillebeeckx uses the term correlation to describe his theological method in the 1970s and into the 1980s, the expression seems to be moving from the conjunctural to the ephemeral in his 1983 retirement lecture. In *Interim Report* in 1978, he says that “the critical correlation between […] sources [in] theology” was a “hinge on which my two Jesus books” turned. By 1980, at the *Paradigm Change in Theology* conference, he is starting to express reservations about the term as a methodological principle, which become more visible

38. It seems to me that a better translation of the title at this point in the retirement speech would be “Dialectical relation between tradition and situation,” for two reasons. One is that, in English, the term dialectical flows more easily than the one found in the new translation, “Dialectic” (*Collected Works* XI, p. 57). The other is that, in Dutch, the word is *dialectische*, an adjective, describing the kind of relation (verhouding) that pertains (see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983* [Baarn: Nelissen, 1983], 9).
40. *Collected Works* X, p. 35 [36].
41. *Collected Works* VIII, p. 43 [50]. It is, in fact, expressions from this period of his writing that David Tracy cites when he proposes this method to the paradigm change conference in 1980 (see David Tracy, “Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm,” in *Paradigm Change in Theology*, 34-62 [p. 59]).
in the 1983 retirement lecture. By 1989, the term has been discarded, strongly suggesting that referring to Schillebeeckx as a correlational theologian, as many writers do, is at best an over-simplification.

In the next section of his retirement speech, he notes that “when we speak of two poles and one source we need to [nuance] this elliptic[al] expression precisely.”\textsuperscript{42} What needs to be avoided, in particular, is the identification of the source with one of the poles, a mistake that Schillebeeckx says is made by Hans Küng. The problem is that, in identifying the source with the Bible and Christian tradition, Küng does not recognize the situation as a source, but only “a pole and a horizon,” thereby “creating a theology-free zone: the situation.”\textsuperscript{43}

This objection is structurally very similar to the position that he takes on the traditional approach to the development of dogma in the late 1960s, which speaks of “the ‘essential dogmatic affirmation’ (the \textit{id quod}) and its ‘mode of expression’ (the \textit{modus cum quo}). The first pointed to the ‘unchangeable essence’, the second to the changeable, varying elements.”\textsuperscript{44} There is a grain of truth in this way of speaking, because the Catholic tradition is typically realist about truth. Tradition is \textit{about} something, it is aiming at something, which Schillebeeckx calls a “matter” in this material.\textsuperscript{45} However, this twofold analysis “is also virtually meaningless and unmanageable, precisely because this ‘essence’ is never given to us as a pure essence, but is always concealed \textit{in} a historical mode of expression.”\textsuperscript{46} The matter or essence at the heart of faith is something that both the tradition and also we, in our current situation, are trying to express.

Returning to the retirement speech, we can see a deep structural continuity in the way that Schillebeeckx expresses our access to the source of faith alongside the interaction between theory and praxis: “That requires critically yet continuously relating past Christian tradition and our contemporary socio-historical and existential situation to the concrete praxis of present-day Christians, in such a way that the actualisation does not impair the liberating disclosure of the truth of the Gospel tradition.”\textsuperscript{47} It is not possible to link current praxis to the truth of the Gospel directly, for Schillebeeckx, because doing so would make

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} \textit{Collected Works} XI, p. 59, translating \textit{nuanceren} somewhat more literally than the \textit{Collected Works} translation does, in preference to ‘differentiate’, and rendering \textit{elliptische} as an adjective more clearly (cf. \textit{Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983}, p. 12).
\item \textsuperscript{43} \textit{Collected Works} XI, p. 59.
\item \textsuperscript{44} \textit{Collected Works} III, p. 7 [11].
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{Collected Works} III, p. 12 [18].
\item \textsuperscript{46} \textit{Collected Works} III, p. 8 [12].
\item \textsuperscript{47} \textit{Collected Works} XI, p. 60.
\end{itemize}
one of two mistakes. It could result in us mistakenly thinking that we can gain direct access to timeless truth, but to do this we would have to be capable of escaping history and transcending finitude absolutely, and this is not possible for us as creatures. Alternatively, it would be an identification of the truth of the Gospel with a past Christian tradition, or with Scripture, but in that case, the fact that these are also situated would be forgotten, and the current situation would then risk being merely a place of application, a theology-free zone.

How, then, can we legitimately claim to have the same faith as those who have gone before us? How can we say with confidence that we believe what they believed? Schillebeeckx says that “the evangelical identity of meaning […] is only to be found at the level of a corresponding relation between the original message (tradition) and the constantly changing situation, then and now. […] In that case the fundamental identity of meaning […] does not refer to corresponding terms […] but to corresponding relations between such terms (message and situation, then and now).”

This is a norm, he says, for “faithful expression of the Christian message. […] Christian identity, that which is one and the same, is not a matter of equality but of proportional equality.” Schillebeeckx’s talk of identity here is not a search for something that remains unchanging throughout history – as his characterization of history has made clear, postulating this would remove whatever that was from history, precisely by making it changeless. It is more akin to the questions that all human beings ask about personal identity: whether, in spite of all the changes in my life over the last twenty years, I am still, in some real sense, the same person.

Schillebeeckx’s argument here is, once again, structurally very similar to the one that he presents in the earlier material, where he says that the norm “is therefore proportional: it consists in the relation between the intentionality of faith and a given (variable) referential framework. The relation must remain analogically the same in different referential frameworks.”


50. Author’s translation of Edward Schillebeeckx, Geloofsverstaan: Interpretatie en kritiek (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1972), p. 104 (cf. Collected Works V, p. 55 [61-62]). Translating verhouding as ‘relation’ here, as Marcelle Manley does consistently in translating of Schillebeeckx’s retirement speech in Collected Works XI, pp. 62-63, is to be preferred to the term relationship, because the term is used of a wider range of connections between relata and, as a result, is better suited to the complex set of interrelations that Schillebeeckx has in mind. The term analog, present in the Dutch text but omitted from the English translations, is also included, because it speaks of the kind of relation that Schillebeeckx has in mind in this 1960s material.
“models of structurisation of faith, of which scripture supplies the first and therefore the normative one.”\textsuperscript{51} He clearly has in mind a series of structurisations, and the diagram he draws in the 1983 material develops this further, as does the way that he expresses the norm in words: “The diverse interpretations of the same religious substance by various historical vehicles of cultural transmission are not contradictory, but neither can they be harmonised on a single, level plane.”\textsuperscript{52} Distinguishing between the structural and conjunctural planes of history, then, helps us to avoid a two-term analysis that risks, on the one hand, removing the element of continuity from history altogether and, on the other hand, condemns all changes to be termed ephemeral and therefore of little theological consequence. As Schillebeeckx says immediately after this, in a sentence that seems to have been inadvertently omitted from the new translation: “The unity is a unity-in-depth.”\textsuperscript{53}

The unity between these expressions of Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutical methodology is not to be found at the conjunctural level, although even here it seems fair to say that the positions are not as far apart as the conjunctural and ephemeral discontinuities in his work in the intervening period might suggest. Although we may well live in a different conjunctural period to that in which he lived and worked, and may even be moving into a new structural era, his emphasis on hermeneutics and on the compatibility of continuity and change can serve theology sequela Schillebeeckx well. As the last stage of this analysis has shown, the quality of these new translations does not at all preclude English-speaking readers from turning to the Dutch texts from time to time. Indeed, it shows that there is much to be gained from setting all the texts side by side and allowing them to interact with each other, helping both a better understanding of Schillebeeckx, and of how to do theology today, to emerge from that interaction.

Were one to wish for more after such an eleven-volume feast, two things spring to mind. The first would be a republication of the two volumes of \textit{Theological Soundings} that were not included here, \textit{God and Man} and \textit{The Mission of the Church}. Given the decision not to retranslate the \textit{Theological Soundings}, this is by far the lesser of the two. A more fervent wish would be for a translation of the third volume of

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Collected Works} V, p. 56 [62].
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Collected Works} XI, p. 63.
his collected homilies, which he was working on just before his death.\footnote{Verhalen van een levende: Theologische preken van Edward Schillebeeckx (Nijmegen: Valkhof, forthcoming 2015).}

The previous two volumes contain a lot of helpful and accessible material, which can unlock Schillebeeckx’s often complex and challenging theology. Perhaps a new three-volume translation of these writings is a little too much to ask for, but it would indeed be a delectable dessert to follow this nourishing and enjoyable main course, as well as providing a good way in to the riches of Schillebeeckx’s thought for the more casual twenty-first century reader.

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