

'Making Possible what is Necessary for Human Salvation'

1

Edward Schillebeeckx's *Political Holiness* as Response to the 'Sinned-Against'

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The 'signs of the times' of the twenty first century include not only the phenomena of globalization and intercultural encounters but also the concurrent barbarous excess of innocent suffering. Hence, the experiences of the 'sinned-against' are becoming privileged sites for theological reflection and the cries of the dehumanized have emerged forcefully in many 'global theological flows'.¹ In this article, I will argue that Edward Schillebeeckx provides one adequate response to the problem of the innocent suffering of the 'sinned-against' in his concept of 'political holiness'. This is because 'political holiness' is a mystical-political praxis that Schillebeeckx argues is an authentic mode of Christian discipleship and effective response to innocent suffering.² 'Political holiness' is a convergence of spirituality and social action ori-

1 Theologian Robert Schreiter adopts the term 'flow' from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and communication studies to describe 'global theological flows' such as feminism, liberation, ecology, and human rights, among others. Schreiter writes that the term 'flow' denotes 'cultural and ritual movements, a circulation of information that is patently visible yet hard to define. Flows move across geographic and other cultural boundaries, and, like a river, define a route, change the landscape, and leave behind sediment and silt that enrich the local ecology'. Furthermore, 'global theological flows [...] are theological discourses that, while not uniform or systematic, represent a series of linked, mutually intelligible discourses that address the contradic-

tions or failures of global systems'. R. SCHREITER, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and Local*, Maryknoll 1997, 15-16.

2 For the purposes of this essay, I approach the term 'mystical-political' as a development of the 'emotional-volitional' element of religion offered by Friedrich Freiherr von Hügel that accompanies the 'institutional' and the 'intellectual' elements. See F. VON HÜGEL, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in St. Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*, 1, London 1961. I follow the lead of J. Matthew Ashley who connects 'mystical-political' with Von Hügel's 'mystical-volitional'. J. ASHLEY, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz*, Notre Dame 1998, 201.

ented towards participating in God's ongoing work of salvation, albeit fragmentary.³

2 My argument will proceed in four steps. First, I will discuss the contours of the term 'sinned-against' as articulated by Raymond Fung. Second, I will discuss Schillebeeckx's soteriology that is at the heart of a Christian praxis of 'Political holiness'. Next, I will provide an analysis of 'Political holiness' through investigating the mutually-critical and mutually-informing relationship between mysticism and politics that resides at its core. Finally, I will argue that Schillebeeckx's mystical-political praxis of 'Political holiness' offers at least one adequate response to the suffering of the 'sinned-against' in the current globalized and intercultural context: articulating a mysticism to enable 'the art of making possible what is necessary for human salvation'.⁴

A

The Experiences of the 'Sinned-Against'

The term 'sinned-against' refers primarily to the experience of the poor and marginalized in a world of injustice. In this way, it adequately accounts for the experiences of the majority of the world's population in the twenty first century and in particular in the Global South. According to Raymond Fung, 'sinned-against' is the experience of exploitation and injustice that is caused by the 'powers and principalities', the dehumanizing social structures of the world. Fung observes that all human beings are both sinners and sinned-against,⁵ however, there is an experiential distinction that must be made in order to make Christianity intelligible and salvific. The message of Christian salvation functions in different ways depending upon the social location (class, race, sex, et cetera) of the hearer. For the men and women whose primary experience is a life of perpetual 'sinned-againstness', the proclamation of salvation for sinners is insufficient. It is necessary but secondary to the work of solidarity and action on behalf of the non-believing 'sinned-against' that is paired with a prophetic critique of Christians who are the 'sinners' that sustain unjust social structures. Fung writes,

When the gospel addresses itself to the sinned-againstness of a person, that person will also allow the gospel to deal with sinfulness. Or from the

3 There is no consensual definition of the term 'spirituality'. For various definitions that are being debated in the academic literature, see E. DREYER/M. BURROWS, *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, Baltimore 2004, 1-78.

4 E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*. Transl. J. Bowden, New York

1980, 743.

5 R. FUNG, 'Compassion for the Sinned-Against', *Theology Today* 37 (1980) 162. On the same page, he also writes, 'My emphasis at this point is that people are not only willful violators of God's law, they are also the violat- ed'.

perspective of that person, awareness of sinned-againstness comes first, followed by awareness of sinfulness.⁶

3

Fung argues that Christians must acknowledge and embrace the experiences of the ‘sinned-against’. For example, he points out that when middle-class Christians attempt to evangelize non-believers of a lower socio-economic stratum, by calling for repentance from sinning, the have-nots perceive the Christian message as hypocritical. This is because the managerial class calls upon the working class to repent and convert yet they still exploit and mistreat the workers. He writes,

In evangelism, especially of the poor, we must focus primarily on the sinned against. This is not to take lightly the fact of sin, this is to take sin seriously, in all of its deadly forms. This is not to absolve people from personal responsibilities, but on the contrary, this is to make them see how they can be personally responsible.⁷

This experience of the ‘sinned-against’ is a reality in need of greater theological reflection and Edward Schillebeeckx’s concept of ‘Political holiness’ provides one adequate theological response.

B

The Soteriology of Edward Schillebeeckx: ‘Extra Mundum nulla Salus’⁸

The Flemish Dominican Schillebeeckx (1914-2009) was a prolific writer and thinker who, in the third part of his career,⁹ fully embraced the question of

6 FUNG, ‘Compassion for the Sinned-Against’, 167. Fung’s argument is contextual. He ministered in the Urban Industrial Missions among the poor and exploited workers of China and Hong Kong for many years.

7 FUNG, ‘Compassion for the Sinned-Against’, 169. One important development of Fung’s concept of the ‘sinned-against’ that I am unable to explore due to space constraints, is the anthropology of *han* (恨) that is the woundedness carried by the ‘sinned-against’. In the U.S., Christian theologian Andrew Sung Park has provided the clearest and most developed treatment of *han* as the experience of the sinned-against and has integrated it into Christian theological discourse. Although *han* is essentially untranslatable, Park connects it to a holistic understanding of woundedness

– body, mind, spirit – and connects it to sin, healing, liberation, salvation, and atonement. See A. PARK, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Nashville 1993.

8 This phrase accurately characterizes Schillebeeckx’s later soteriology and is suggested in one of his last writings. E. SCHILLEBEECKX, ‘Letter from Edward Schillebeeckx to the Participants in the Symposium “Theology for the 21st Century: The Enduring Relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx for Contemporary Theology” (Leuven, 3-6 December 2008)’, in: *Edward Schillebeeckx and Contemporary Theology*, ed. L. Boeve e.a., New York 2010, xiv-xv.

9 William Portier points out three distinct periods in the intellectual development of Schillebeeckx: he moved from engaging with

radical suffering, on a global scale, as the heart of his theological project.¹⁰ In articulating the problem, Schillebeeckx adopted a term from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, namely that of ‘negative contrast experiences’. These contrast experiences possess a revelatory value by unveiling the inherent injustice in the world within the structures of human experience. Through this unveiling a demand is brought to the fore that men and women take action to eradicate all that makes humans suffer.

As Schillebeeckx argues, contrast experiences have an epistemological edge that critiques two types of modern knowledge, both radically contemplative and technologically utilitarian types. With regard to a radically contemplative posture that seeks knowledge as an end in itself such as purely academic theology or philosophy, Schillebeeckx argues that innocent suffering defies logic and theory. These academic disciplines lose their voice when faced with the harsh reality of evil, sin and suffering because they find the pure irrationality of evil unintelligible and in defiance of theory. When faced with the irrationality and anti-theoretical character of evil, philosophy and theology lose their voice and can have no valid response. They can only offer a call for concrete resistance.¹¹

Similarly, contrast experiences also critique purely technologically utilitarian pursuits such as a completely goal-oriented knowledge of science and technology. Schillebeeckx argues that this type of knowledge is only concerned with humankind’s ability to master and manipulate its surroundings. When faced with the reality of evil and suffering, this pursuit loses its voice because it lacks any ethical vision. It has no capacity to judge whether or not an action is just or moral. It only can tell whether something is possible and if so in what way to make the possibility a reality.¹²

Consequently, contrast experiences provide decisive criticism of purely contemplative theory and technological knowledge while also seeking to bring them together. As Schillebeeckx observes, ‘only the passive contrast experience (with its implicit ethical demand) is able to establish an intrinsic bond between the two, because it alone possesses characteristics of both forms of knowledge’.¹³ As Robert Schreiter points out, this epistemological edge critiques not only intellectual and technological prowess, but also the

French Phenomenology (1957-1966) to Hermeneutics and Anglo-American Linguistic Philosophy (1966-1971), to Critical Theory (1971-2009). W. PORTIER, ‘Interpretation and Method’, in: *The Praxis of the Reign of God: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. M.C. Hilbert / R. Schreiter, New York 2002, 26.

10 For a study of greater depth into Schillebeeckx’s earlier writings – from the nineteen forties to the Second Vatican Council – on theological anthropology and understanding

of human experience, see J. COOPER, *Humanity in the Mystery of God: The Theological Anthropology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, New York 2009. For a critique of Schillebeeckx’s understanding of human experience see D. ROCHFORD, ‘The Theological Hermeneutics of Edward Schillebeeckx’, *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 251-267.

11 E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*. Transl. H. Hoskins, New York 1979, 620-622.

12 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jesus*, 620-621.

social structures and human relationships that are based on these types of knowledge that enable and cause suffering. It critiques societal, practical and intellectual paradigms that claim to fully account for human experience and flourishing.¹⁴

These contrast experiences are at the core of ‘political holiness’ and are the engine that churns Schillebeeckx’s conception of the mystical-political. For Schillebeeckx, a contrast experience embraces the full horror of innocent human suffering but does not seek to explain it away. These experiences of contrast confront humans with radical suffering and lead to experiences of conversion that Schillebeeckx argues are the deepest experiences in being human. They compel one to cry out ‘this should not be!’ Through their negativity, these experiences lead to a breaking down of an old identity for the purposes of rebuilding and integrating a new identity no longer blind to radical suffering.¹⁵ Schillebeeckx thinks that this is a basic human experience that reveals the fundamental injustice in the world.¹⁶

Contrast experiences enable Schillebeeckx to place his discussion of soteriology firmly within the concrete reality of human experience and a focus upon human experience allows him to condense his soteriology into a phrase: *extra mundum nulla salus* – ‘no salvation outside the world’. Schillebeeckx argues that God’s salvation is experienced in the secular world and subsequently thematized and articulated in the churches that are the sacrament of God’s salvation.¹⁷ As Schillebeeckx observes, ‘Salvation from God comes about first of all in our worldly reality of history, and not primarily in the consciousness of believers who are aware of it’.¹⁸ Schillebeeckx clarifies this claim, however, in light of the Christian understanding of God. He argues,

God and his initiative of salvation are a reality independent of human consciousness, and independent of our expression of God in experience. But our experience of God and his saving initiative is dependent both on the divine initiative and on the historical context in which human beings express him.¹⁹

Salvation may be experienced within the world, but it remains God’s own free initiative that is mediated within human history. It is a divine gift and not the fruit of solitary human achievement.

The salvation that we experience from God within the world is true sal-

13 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jesus*, 622.

14 R. SCHREITER, ‘Edward Schillebeeckx: His Continuing Significance’, in: *The Praxis of the Reign of God*, ed. Hilbert /Schreiter, 186.

15 E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *On Christian Faith: The Spiritual, Ethical, and Political Dimensions*. Transl. J. Bowden, New York 1987, 48.

16 E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church: The Human Story of God*. Transl. J. Bowden, Eugene 2005, 5-6.

17 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church*, 11-15.

18 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church*, 12.

19 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church*, 13.

vation,²⁰ that Schillebeeckx describes as human wholeness through ‘the conquest of all human, personal and social alienations; salvation is man’s wholeness, his world and his history.’²¹ Schillebeeckx thinks that salvation from God for humankind occurs in *this* world and is intrinsically connected to human wholeness. This is a mode of existence that Janet O’Meara calls ‘Living Communion with God’ and that Kathleen McManus calls ‘Unbroken Communion’.²² Earthly salvation, however, is incomplete. It is comprised of fragments that point to and make present, imperfectly, God’s salvation for humankind. Schillebeeckx writes,

[...] human salvation is only salvation, being whole, when it is universal and complete. There cannot really be talk of salvation as long as there is still suffering, oppression, and unhappiness that we experience, in our immediate vicinity or further afield.²³

This means that although salvation from God for humankind in *this* world is true salvation, it remains fragmentary. These moments of ‘fragmentary salvation’ are a foretaste and a glimpse of God’s final salvation for humankind that will arrive with the fullness of the *basileia tou theou*, God’s final reign here on earth.

Schillebeeckx adopts two additional concepts to provide a more concrete vision of both fragmentary and final salvation: the *humanum* and seven ‘anthropological constants’. The *humanum* is the fullness of humanity that is always threatened and that will not come to ultimate fruition until the eschaton. In order to clarify this concept, Schillebeeckx provides a set of coordinates to suggest what the *humanum* may look like through seven anthropological constants. The constants are common, observable human characteristics that cross cultures to some extent and that constitute part of a shared human experience. As Schillebeeckx proposes, these constants are:

- 1 Relationship of human beings to their embodied experience and to their ecological context.

20 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church*, 5-13.

21 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 814. I am acutely aware of the problem of sexist and gender exclusivist language in referring to God and human beings. However, my Dutch translation skills are inadequate and thus I follow the translations of Hubert Hoskins and John Bowden. Also, I have opted for readability by retaining the masculine language of their translations.

22 See J. O’MEARA, ‘Salvation: Living Communion with God’, in: *The Praxis of the Reign of God*, ed. Hilbert/Schreiter, 97-116. See also

K. MCMANUS, *Unbroken Communion: The Place and Meaning of Suffering in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, Lanham 2003.

23 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 727. In addition, as Schillebeeckx writes, ‘[...] in the context of fragmentary experiences of salvation we may rightly – metaphorically and with real depth – speak the word of God and his promise of eschatological salvation which transcends all expectations of experience and is yet recognized as what is familiar and evident’. See SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 643.

- 2 Relationship of human beings to one another.
- 3 Relationship of the individual person to social structures.
- 4 Contextualization of human beings by time and space.
- 5 Intrinsic relationship between theory and practice in being human.
- 6 The religious dimension of human consciousness.
- 7 The synthesis of the previous six constants into human culture that is healing and liberating.²⁴

These coordinates help to illustrate the eschatological *humanum* and provide a guide for what the fullness of humankind may look like.

In summary, salvation, for Schillebeeckx, is rooted in the problem of innocent suffering and is characterized by the confluence of redemption and liberation that occurs fragmentarily within human history.²⁵ Contrast experiences are its foundation and salvation from innocent suffering is experienced within the world and only subsequently articulated in the Church. The heuristic concepts for what this may look like are the *humanum* and anthropological constants. In the work of human salvation, God redeems sinners and liberates the ‘sinned-against’. God’s salvation for humankind is related to humankind’s liberation from all the personal and social structures that oppress and alienate.²⁶

C

‘Political Holiness’: Schillebeeckx’s Understanding of Mystical-Political Praxis

Schillebeeckx has argued that, due to the present excess of suffering in the world, the Christian confluence of the mystical love of God and the political love of neighbor should be considered a type of holiness. It is what Schillebeeckx calls an option for the poor as an asceticism.²⁷ ‘Political Holiness’, a term he borrows from Jon Sobrino, is an asceticism of discipleship to Jesus Christ and his God and brings these two objects into a marriage of sorts. The point is to participate in God’s saving work in history, and especially to help realize moments of fragmentary salvation for the ‘sinned-against’.

Schillebeeckx thinks that both mysticism and politics are necessary for Christian discipleship and are mutually critical and mutually informing. They provide a check upon each other that prevents either one from becoming all-consuming and they also enhance each other’s potential for participa-

24 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 733-743.

25 For a more detailed discussion of the problem of the connection between redemption, salvation, and liberation in Schillebeeckx’s thought, see D. SIMON, ‘Salvation and Libera-

tion in the Practical-Critical Soteriology of Edward Schillebeeckx’, *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 496-499.

26 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jesus*, 624-625.

27 SCHILLEBEECKX, *On Christian Faith*, 72-74.

tion in God's salvation. Schillebeeckx explains that in the mystical aspect of Christianity, the object in life is God whereas in the ethical or political aspect of Christianity, the object is full human flourishing, especially for the poor and the marginalized.²⁸ He argues, 'Without prayer or mysticism politics soon becomes cruel and barbaric; without political love, prayer or mysticism soon becomes sentimental or uncommitted interiority'.²⁹

In defining the mystical, Schillebeeckx argues that mysticism is in tune with the rhythms of ordinary life. He observes that 'from a Christian perspective, mysticism is essentially the life of faith, and therefore not a separate sector in Christian life to which only a few, or individuals are called'.³⁰ Mysticism is comprised of experiences of 'mediated immediacy',³¹ and 'cognitive union with God',³² and Schillebeeckx employs these concepts to argue that God is immediate to us, but due to human finitude God's presence is always interpreted through the concrete structures of human experience. Schillebeeckx thinks that mysticism is inseparable from fragments of salvation.³³ For him, our prayers to the God of Jesus Christ ground us in God's presence and sustain us in our personal, social, and political struggles. It finds its legitimacy in sustaining hope in God's final triumph over evil and our subsequent actualization of fragments of salvation in this world.³⁴ For Schillebeeckx, this kind of prayer life provides Christian faith with its 'most critical and productive force'.³⁵ He writes:

Thus, real liberation, redemption, and salvation always diverge into mysticism, because for religious people, the ultimate source and foundation for the healing and salvation of mankind, living and dead, is to be found in God. His honor is man's salvation. We cannot set up any 'reasonable' expectation apart from him, since the only credentials that history can give us are in the event of Jesus the Christ.³⁶

The mystical aspect, in isolation, is unable to provide an authentic way of Christian discipleship that participates in God's salvation for the 'sinned-against'. It easily can dissolve into a 'sentimental, uncommitted interiority' that is aloof from the reality of human suffering. The way of discipleship also is political: it is 'the art of making possible what is necessary for human

28 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church*, 91-92.

29 SCHILLEBEECKX, *On Christian Faith*, 75.

30 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church*, 69.

31 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 815.

32 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church*, 69.

33 See M. HILKERT, "'Grace-Optimism': The Spirituality at the Heart of Schillebeeckx's Theology", *Spirituality Today* 44 (1991) 220-239 and M. HILKERT, 'Edward Schillebeeckx: Encountering God in a Secular and Suffering

World', *Theology Today* 62 (2005) 376-387.

Also see E. TILLAR, 'Critical Remembrance and Eschatological Hope in Edward Schillebeeckx's Theology of Suffering for Others', *Heythrop Journal* 44 (2003) 15-42.

34 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Church*, 70-71.

35 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 817.

36 E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ*. Transl. J. Bowden, New York 1980, 60. Italics added.

salvation’.³⁷ For Schillebeeckx, action on behalf of full human flourishing in the political realm is the natural outgrowth of Christian mysticism.³⁸ The ethical vision is the realization of the *humanum* as illustrated through the seven anthropological constants. Schillebeeckx thinks that the political Christian draws sustenance from her spirituality and is led to exercise a prophetic or critical activity by calling powers and governments to responsibility for the suffering that they enable. This means that Christians must analyze and critique political plans with reference to the well-being of the downtrodden and to expose the faulty anthropologies of political parties. With this in mind Schillebeeckx argues that ‘belief in God radicalizes efforts for a better world’ and that Christian love is only possible when faith flows into social analysis and action.³⁹

Even though he also acknowledges that God’s saving action is never identical with any one movement, Schillebeeckx thinks that when politics is rooted in the mystical it can indeed be a possible location for grace to be mediated.⁴⁰ This means that a ‘political holiness’ serves the world through exercising a critical force towards political powers and has its roots in a deep spirituality. Schillebeeckx thinks that unless the church is in solidarity with those who suffer, the gospel becomes impossible to understand or to believe. This means that as the church strives to be in solidarity with the sufferer it realizes that human liberation also is part of human salvation, which entails the conquest of all human, personal and social forms of alienation. To this end, faith in Jesus the Christ empowers Christians to affirm that the two theoretical irreconcilables – unwarranted human suffering and a God who brings final salvation – will culminate in God having the final say.⁴¹

In other words, mysticism and politics are mutually informing and mutually critical and as such can hold the Christian in the tension between them. Schillebeeckx links God’s salvation to human liberation and argues that any political movement that authentically struggles to achieve good for humankind and resists evil can be seen as a place of God’s revelation and God’s salvation. Schillebeeckx realizes the danger associated with such a connection and quickly points out that God’s salvation cannot be equated with any political party, movement or agenda since this salvation is only fragmentary.⁴² It can only be completed in the eschaton. For the present, however, Schillebeeckx’s emphasis on concrete salvation exhorts Christians to participate in the ongoing work of God’s salvation through prayer and discernment for how to act as Christ in the world. In Schillebeeckx’s estimation, we should be careful of political distortion of the gospel but not to an

37 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 743.

38 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 815-817.

39 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 780-788.

40 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 813.

41 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jesus*, 623-625.

42 For an example of Schillebeeckx’s reservations about politics running away with faith, see SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 770-788.

extent that we refrain from engaging the political arena altogether.⁴³ As he writes:

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Salvation cannot be identified exclusively with political liberation; exclusively with 'being nice to one another'; exclusively with ecological efforts; exclusively with identifying oneself either with micro-ethics or macro-ethics or with mysticism, liturgy and prayer; exclusively with concerning oneself with education or geriatric techniques, and so on. *All this* is part of the concept of *salvation* or *wholeness* of mankind, and is therefore also essentially concerned with salvation from God, which may be experienced as grace.⁴⁴

D

*'Political Holiness': An Adequate Response to the Experience
of the 'Sinned-Against'*

As Raymond Fung summarized the call of the gospel in light of the 'sinned-against',

to the sinner in the person, the gospel says, 'Know your sinfulness; bow in humility before God, and receive forgiveness'. To the sinned against in the same person, the gospel says, 'Know that you have value; stand in defiance against the forces which deprive you of it, and receive strength'.⁴⁵

Schillebeeckx's concept of 'political holiness' answers this call in solidarity with the 'sinned-against' and offers at least one adequate response by focusing upon the articulation of a mysticism to enable 'making possible what is necessary for human salvation'.

Mysticism provides discernment for action that does indeed make possible what is necessary for human salvation. This discernment is necessary because there is no guarantee that men and women within a specific context can and will acknowledge the validity of the experiences of the 'sinned-against'. Contrast experiences enable one to acknowledge, see, and hear the experiences of the 'sinned-against' but cannot be automatically assumed. The mystical aspect of 'political holiness' acts as a corrective that enables social action because it is a practice of opening one's eyes and ears to innocent

43 As Schillebeeckx points out, 'Mysticism lies in the extension of prayer: it is a prayer in which an attempt is made to transcend the elements of faith which are also mediated by politics, ethics and conceptuality in order to put oneself directly into the immediate prox-

imity of God'. SCHILLEBEECKX, *On Christian Faith*, 67.

44 SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ*, 779.

45 FUNG, 'Compassion for the Sinned-Against', 162.

suffering. Prayer plays a central role in the opening of one’s eyes to the ‘sinned-against’ and opening up one’s self to a contrast experience. It also enables one to acknowledge himself or herself as both sinner and ‘sinned-against’ before the Living God.

11

Schillebeeckx described in concise terms what it means to pray to the Christian God. He points out that prayer is a continued conversation with the hidden God upon whom one relies.⁴⁶ As Schillebeeckx argues, ‘Exercises of interiorization are not prayer. For a Christian and for the followers of the monotheistic religions, prayer is putting oneself before a person with whom one can talk and dialogue and to whom one can listen’.⁴⁷ Prayer is the expression of a relationship with God that is the ground for one’s healthy relationships with other men and women. He writes:

I do not look for God only in extreme situations, in which people are impotent and fall silent – when there is suffering and death. No, I also look for him in ordinary, everyday life, in situations in which people are looking for meaning in the midst of non-sense and are hoping to find justice, happiness and greater humanity. It is within that context that I want to look for what ‘God’ may mean.⁴⁸

Prayer brings one into conversation with the Christian God who listens, responds, and also poses ethical demands. Hence, the mystical aspect of ‘political holiness’ can help Christians compassionately embrace the ‘sinned-against’ through enabling contrast experiences that lead to action to make possible what is necessary for human salvation. This relationship leads to more adequate social action to eradicate all that causes unjust suffering and includes the prayerful realization of one’s own complicity with unjust social situations that perpetuate and exacerbate an excess of suffering.

The experiences of the ‘sinned-against’ have become a privileged location for theological reflection in the twenty first century. The violent and unequal encounters among cultures and the creative destruction of globalization have marginalized millions of people whose experience has become primarily ‘sinned-against’. Also, the structural sins of patriarchy, colonialism, and global racism, among others, are additional phenomena that continue to create multitudes of women and men whose primary experience is ‘sinned-against’. As these problems continue to grow in the years to come, Schillebeeckx’s mystical-political praxis of ‘political holiness’ offers at least one adequate response: articulating a mysticism to enable the art of making possible what is necessary for human salvation. Schillebeeckx’s concept is

46 E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *God is New Each Moment: In Conversation with Huub Oosterhuis and Piet Hoogeveen*. Transl. D. Smith, London 2004, 18.

Conversations with Francisco Strazzari. Transl. J. Bowden, New York 1994, 50.

47 E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *I Am a Happy Theologian*:

48 SCHILLEBEECKX, *God is New Each Moment*, 107.

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rooted in the experience of a barbarous excess of innocent human suffering and is oriented towards realizing and participating in God's fragmentary salvation within human history.

12

EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX ESSAY PRIZE