

# Schillebeeckx's Anatomy of Experience\*

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I should like to begin this paper on a personal note. I suppose it was in my late teens that God began to make a really personal claim on me and over the next four years or so I found that more and more of what I experienced and read spoke to me of God – not only the Mass and spiritual books but all my experience and reading: travelling in the London underground in the rush hour as well as visits to the country; my first experience of girls as well as my discovery of contemplation; films, novels, articles in the secular as well as Catholic journals. It was as if my experience of the present enabled me to begin to understand what I received from my culture and Christian past, but also as if what I thus, so variously and fragmentarily, received from the past put in question, corrected and filled out what I experienced in the present. Present and past thus interacted, sometimes challengingly, sometimes consolingly, sometimes shockingly, but vitally. Everything tended to become a medium and an occasion of the experience of God.

Then I entered the Order and was gradually initiated into traditional Church studies, and little by little I had it impressed on me that the right and proper way to become a theologically-minded person was to start from the beginning in the person of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures and then to move through the various reformulations of this fontal inspiration in the various forms of the Tradition (to be spelled now, I discovered, with a capital T), such as the liturgy, the writings of the Fathers and above all the thinking of St Thomas, and only through thus assimilating the successive formulations of the Tradition could I hope to acquire a Christian and theological mind. In this process one thing was not even raised, let alone questioned, and that was the possible relevance of anything I had, as a child of my age, learned before, let alone what I continued to experience and think in the present. The tacit supposition was, therefore, that my own experience, that is to say, the experience I had gained through my family, my schooling, such culture as I had, let alone the experience I continued to gain, was irrelevant to the business of acquiring a Christian and theological mind. It was only very gradually that I became aware of this as a

problem and then made explicit the supposition that had until then been largely tacit and, later still, even more slowly, began to question and challenge it. In this regard it was, therefore, for me a great breakthrough to have the then recently elected provincial, Fr Ian Hislop, coin a phrase to the effect that our business in the Order was to give a *theological articulation to contemporary experience*. For this phrase at last allowed for what I had long known but lost awhile, namely, the potential of all experience, contemporary as well as some privileged and canonised experience of the past, therefore also of continuing and forward-moving experience, to speak of Christ and God. Fr Ian's phrase also allowed for the creative process of mutually critical interaction between past and present, between tradition and the contemporary, in a way that the other model of initiation into being a Christian and a theologian did not explicitly allow for. What I had missed during the years of my formal studies in the Order and what Fr Ian's phrase had now begun to supply was a concept or way of looking at things that would permit and even encourage me simultaneously –

- a) to do justice to everything that was alive in the present;
- b) also to challenge this and –
- c) therefore to relate it critically but also creatively to similar Christian efforts in the past to seize *their* present experience and especially to the fontal or primordial attempt by Jesus and his immediate followers.

I have begun in this personal way because I think that it is more than personal so that you may be able to recognise from within yourselves the central problem which Schillebeeckx seeks to address above all in his second volume of Christology, suggestively translated into English as *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (but originally entitled, according to a literal translation *Righteousness and Love: Grace and Liberation*). The problem is simply this, a very old, a perennial problem: What is Jesus Christ for us today? How is the Jesus of history and our tradition to be made re-present, reactualised for us alive now? Or again: if Jesus is truly the Christ, so that the historical Jesus is also the risen Christ, is he not present somehow in every generation and culture, and now as well as in various previous generations and cultures and nows, especially in the fontal generation and culture and now of what we have come to call the *anni Domini*, the years of the Lord *par excellence*? And if he is so present now as well as then, *how* is he present, how is he to be discerned, how is he to be re-expressed now, and, above all, perhaps, how does the Christ who is thus somehow present now relate to the Christ and Jesus who was present before? The writers of the New Testament and then the Fathers of the Church in their turn assumed rather

than made explicit their own answers to this question; the great Cardinal Newman in the generation of Darwin and the new sense of history sought to elaborate his answer to this question in a more explicit way, in terms of his theory of the development of doctrine; and now Schillebeeckx in our time – some five years ago to be precise so far as the English-reading public goes – seeks to formulate his even more self-conscious, ‘critical’ answer to this abiding question. And our business here is to try to begin to understand Schillebeeckx’s answer. This is concentrated in Part One of the four-part volume of *Christ*, entitled ‘The Authority of New Experiences and The Authority of the New Testament’ (pp 27-80; and from now on I shall refer to the author of this volume as S.)

How, then, does S. proceed?

He proceeds by stages, and it would perhaps simplify things if I began this explanation by first outlining these stages in an admittedly schematic way;

1 He begins simply enough by telling us the etymological meaning of the Dutch (and Germanic) word for experience: *ervaren* (no doubt related to the German word *erfahren*), to travel, so that, as he says in a note, ‘*ervaren* means to get to know something, not only by hearsay but by seeing for oneself: by sight and living contact’ (p 854).

2 He then points out that experience always includes some interpretation as part of its being experience; it is not a matter of some ‘brute’ or ‘raw’ or ‘core’ contact, with some knowing element then imposed on it like an optional superstructure; no, ‘experience is always interpreted experience’ (p 31).

3 He then questions even this already sophisticated notion of experience further and discloses behind whatever *we* make of our encounter with the world the notion of a reality that is not of our making and that can therefore always surprise us. And it is because experience as thus conceived criticises what we have already experienced interpretatively and therefore produces further ways of knowing and interpreting the world that experience can be said to have its own ‘authority’.

4 Experience therefore includes an interpretative element in its very being but it is open to new interpretations. It is thus also intrinsically unfinished and therefore finite. The question therefore arises whether there cannot be a way of expressing the fact of this limitation and therefore, through this very limitation, what might lie behind this limit. More particularly the question arises whether the concept of revelation is not an ‘indirect expression of reality on the basis of real experiences’ (p 46). To quote *Gaudium et spes*: ‘God reveals himself in revealing man to himself’ (quoted

at p 45). Thus a notion such as revelation that usually seems to connote something given from *above and outside* can be seen somehow to belong to experience *from within* and as a response to the realisation of our very finitude. The concept of revelation therefore becomes an element of interpreted experience.

5 We can thus begin to see how transcendence occurs from within our very experience, although in such a way that 'this experiential content contains an intrinsic reference to what makes this experience possible and is not constituted by the experience itself' (p 55). In this sense transcendence itself can somehow be immanent. The question therefore arises how we can express the inexpressible, and S. suggests that we can do so in two main directions – in terms of the presupposition and source of the human religious response of faith (the mystical direction), and in terms of what lies beyond our capacity to do (the ethical direction).

6 And the outcome of all this is that we find a way of thinking according to which the hitherto supposedly disparate elements not only of experience and revelation, immanence and transcendence, but of experience and authority, and, finally, the authority of present day experience and the authority of the New Testament turn out to be, not antithetical, but complementary.

It is therefore, not merely a question of, in S.'s words, 'revelation having the structure of experience' (p 63) but, somehow, taking his words further, of experience having the structure of revelation, so that the business of the Christian and the theologian is not to choose between starting from contemporary experience *or* from Scripture (p 71; and see also p 29), but so to relate one to the other, at once critically and creatively, by a profound discernment of spirits, as to make them complete each other: the deepest meaning of contemporary experience is unveiled in terms of the Jesus of Scripture, and, contrariwise, interactively, interinanimately, the Jesus of Scripture lives again in terms of contemporary experience (see e.g. pp 43, 632, 633-634).

Such, in outline, are the stages of S.'s argument. Let us now go through them again, but in greater detail, and, where possible, allowing S. himself to speak.

### 1 *The Root Meaning of Experience*

I have already indicated something of S.'s notion of experience according to its root meaning but I shall quote the opening paragraph of this section, since it seems to me to contain his whole argument in seed-form:

The basic meaning of the Dutch word for experience is travelling through the country and thus – through exploration – being taken up into a process of learning. Experience means

learning through 'direct' contact with people and things. It is the ability to assimilate perceptions (p 31).

And I should like to emphasise these last words – 'it is the ability to assimilate perceptions' – since everything else that he says seems to me to be virtually contained in them. In particular, this initial indication of what he understands by experience already suggests what I have already schematised as his second point: that 'experience is always interpreted experience' (p 31). Thus:

## 2 *'Experience is always interpreted experience'*

It is already implicit in the notion of experience as the 'ability to assimilate perceptions' that there are two elements in experience: on the one hand, the coming into the presence of something fresh but also, on the other hand, the preceding presence of something into which to 'assimilate' that fresh thing, some pre-existing interpretative framework. And it is the co-presence of *both* these elements and, further, their co-presence to each other in mutual challenge or productivity that is crucial to S.'s argument. By the same token it may need to be emphasised further that both these elements are present to each other from the beginning and as belonging to each other. It is *not* that there is first some irreducible 'brute' or 'raw' fact or contact that is the same for all and *then* some subsequent and secondary and optional interpretative element that is particular to each person experiencing. No, interpretation is an inherent part of experience. In S.'s own words:

It is of the nature of this process of learning by experience that the new experience is always related to the knowledge that we have already gained. This gives rise to a reciprocal effect. The discoveries about reality that we have already made and put into words open up new perspectives: they direct perception in our experience to something particular; they select and demarcate, they guide our attention. In this way they become the framework within which we interpret new experiences, while at the same time this already given framework of interpretation is exposed to criticism and corrected, changed or renewed by new experiences. Experience is gained in a dialectical fashion: through an interplay between perceptions and thoughts, thought and perception. The function of experience is not to find room for constantly new material in existing patterns of thought which are taken as unalterable, and which are constantly confirmed as a result – though there are also experiences which bring confirmation. No, the connection between experience and thought is rather that the constantly unforeseen content of new experiences keeps forcing us to think again.

On the one hand, thought makes experience possible, while on the other, it is experience that makes new thinking necessary (pp 31-32).

This way of putting things immediately raises for the alert reader the problem of whether there is not then a difference between the objective and the subjective. Here S. seeks to go beyond Cartesian dualism and repeats that experience is experience and interpretation *at the same time*, so that the 'experience influences the interpretation and calls it forth, but at the same time the interpretation influences the experience. Man experiences actively, with his whole being and having, and contributions of object and subject can never be distinguished with complete exactitude. What we experience as objective – what comes to us – is dependent on our concepts and our terms of reference, even independently of our projects and the interests which are served as a result' (p 32).

He then adds that 'the content of every new experience is put into words: a new experience is also a speech event. Speech is an ingredient of experience' (p 32). That, however, is not all: 'a whole tradition of experience has already been accumulated in the pre-existing language which we use to describe experience, and this also colours our experiences. For the believer, this also means that the original element of religious experience will be expressed in the structures of the prevailing tradition: experiences are communicated socially. For that very reason, experience is only competent where it takes into account the presuppositions under which it came into being' (pp 32-33). And from there it is a small step to indicate that 'moreover there is the objectively existing form of society in which we live here and now, for example in the West. This form not only exists outside us but also lives within us. Thus the subject who experiences is in reality also part of existing society and not an "abstract individual" . . . Therefore new experiences have "authority" only when all this has been taken into account' (p 33). These few sentences, early in the book as they appear, are important as they already contain in germ much of what he will later elaborate in terms of the 'narrative structure' of experience (p 38). He thereby indicates the primitive but also a new way of constructing theology by way of story rather than by way of philosophical discourse, and anticipates what he will have to say about the detection of the social and cultural determinants of successive formulations of the Gospel in order to disengage its essence again for our own time (see e.g. pp 77-78, 539-627).

Leaving these hints aside, however, we come back to the main highway of S.'s intention here, namely, that 'our real experiences are neither purely objective nor purely subjective. On the one hand, they are not purely subjective; for we cannot simply

make something out of something at our whim. At least partially, there is something which is "given", which we cannot completely manipulate or change; in experience we have an offer of reality. On the other hand, it is not purely objective; for the experience is filled out and coloured by the reminiscences and sensibilities, concepts and longings of the person who has the experience. Thus the irreducible elements of our experiences form a totality which already contains interpretation. We experience in the act of interpreting, without being able to draw a neat distinction between the element of experience and the element of interpretation' (p 33).

'This analysis,' S. therefore concludes, 'shows that there is no experience without "theorizing," without guesses, hypotheses and theories. Specific, private, so-called direct experiences are always communicated by general terms – in pre-reflective experience as well as in scientific empiricism and philosophical experience' (p 34). 'It emerges from this that man is a constructive, rational being: a *projecting* existence' (p 34). At the same time, it also emerges that 'reality remains the final criterion: it can destroy all our projects or at least weigh them down or change them. . . . where reality offers resistance to such outlines and implicitly therefore guides them in an indirect way, we come into contact with a reality which is *independent* of us, which is not thought of, made or projected by men' (p 34). And it is with this reminder of the other side of the dialectical 'ingredients' of experience that we can move into the next stage of S.'s argument. Let us therefore see how he concludes this stage. He says:

This demonstrates that human experience is *finite*, that man is not lord of reality, for all his plans, though without them experiences would be impossible. *Absolute knowledge is not granted to man, yet he refuses to take refuge in scepticism.* Reality constantly directs our planning and reflection like a hidden magnet (pp 35-36; the emphasis is my own).

And it is because 'on the one hand, man is a theory-forming, rational being, and . . . on the other, precisely because of this he stands under the norm of a reality which he has not planned' (p 36), that we need to attend further to this element of a reality that is independent of us. And this takes us to our stage 3:

### 3 *Experience has its own Authority*

What we have become aware of so far is that there are two essential components of experience: on the one hand, what we bring to anything fresh and new, the interpretative element, on the other hand, that which comes to us in its novelty, in its refractory reality. Now it is the latter element that begins to show that experi-

ence can be seen to have its own authority. This is further confirmed by the fact that establishments and powers-that-be tend to mistrust new experiences as upsetting the *status quo* and that they tend to manipulate or suppress such new experiences, referring only to 'experience if this is not critical and traditional, but confirms what exists' (p 37). 'A new "divergent" experience is a challenge, it subjects the prevailing models of experience to criticism. Experience is therefore never "innocent"' (p 37).

There is, however, more to it than this. For experiences taken as a totality can be called, in the case of the individual, his or her 'life-experience', in the case of an historical collective, 'tradition', the 'particular tradition of experience in a community which makes history, e.g. of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Eastern or African cultures. Experience is retained in reminiscence and language; it becomes a living "deposit", which is handed on as a tradition' (p 38). But this means that 'experiences which are handed down – tradition – are at the same time means of objectifying new experiences and integrating them in what has already been attained. Experience is traditional experience: experience and tradition are not opposite *per se*: they make one another possible. Even new experiences are possible only within the sphere of a tradition' (p 38). There is therefore a reciprocal relationship between 'even a very old tradition of experiences' and the 'challenge of new experiences' (p 38), and, since 'we have no guarantee at all that the history of human experience is only progressive and not at the same time also regressive' (p 38), a discerning of spirits is necessary. And this discerning of spirits becomes 'an essential part of what we call the authority of experience' (p 38).

This very analysis, however, uncovers the further question whether the power of any particular tradition of experience rests not so much on the capacity for mutual discernment on the part of tradition and new experience as on its 'meaningful authenticity and its foundation in truth' (p 38). And it is perhaps in the measure in which the dialectic between new and old is thus founded in truth that 'the experience of something new and surprising will always also be an experience of the familiar, though of a different kind from what we might have imagined' (p 40).

An analysis of the apparently subjective and somewhat arbitrary notion of experience has, therefore, led us to raise the question of the foundation in truth or its truth-value. And so we are ready to come to the still further notion of revelation, since this of itself suggests something from outside and underlying experience and thus the possibility of validating that experience. Before we move on to this, the fourth stage, however, let me sum up what I take S. to mean by his somewhat elusive but crucial notion of



'the authority of experience'. For him experience seems to include

- a) openness to refractory reality;
- b) interpretation of reality that is shared and social and that therefore goes to make a tradition;
- c) the mutual questionability of tradition and new experiences in a process of discernment of spirits, and –
- d) the dependence of all this on truth; and it is to the extent that it includes all these elements that experience has *authority*.

Analysis of experience therefore brings us to go somehow beyond experience, and so we come to the question of experience in relation to revelation:

#### 4 *Experience and Revelation*

At the point in the exposition of S.'s idea that we have reached so far, I have introduced the question of revelation in terms of a reference to experience. I should, however, interject that this is not quite the way in which S. himself presents his idea. At the corresponding stage of his own presentation, he proceeds from the notion of experience [as being inherently interpretative and having authority, my points (2) and (3)] to the notion of revelation, and without any explicit explanation of why he thus proceeds. The transition from experience to revelation can, therefore, appear to be a jump rather than a progression. I think, however, that this move is quite defensible, not only because the notion of revelation, like that of God himself, is part of our received cultural inheritance and therefore illustrates S.'s own thesis that we live the present from our past, with which we need to come to terms, but also because this notion of revelation is analysed as subtly as the notion of experience in such a way as to uncover its inherent connection with experience. S.'s strategy is, therefore, to show that the notion of experience is as compleitive of the notion of revelation as the notion of revelation is compleitive of the notion of experience. But for this very reason, I prefer to organise my own presentation of S.'s ideas on revelation as I did the first time round, namely, by way of passing on from the starting-point of the notion of experience.

Here S. approaches his objective by a pincer movement.

The first line of his attack is to remind us of the refractory, the resistant character of reality in our experiences:

This resistance directs all our reflections. It reveals a reality which is independent of all human plans, which does not come from men, but 'from elsewhere'. That does not mean that it comes from above, but rather that something which escapes the prevailing pattern of human knowledge makes this knowledge possible, directs it and shatters particular identifications.

The basis of human thought is something that has not been contrived by men . . . Man comes up against limits in all his experiences of knowing and trying. In these boundary experiences he is no longer the prisoner of the system of his transitory planning. Consequently reason is only rational if it recognises this boundary experience . . . This raises the *question* whether he may not and cannot experience reality, to the degree to which it escapes human planning, as *gift* which frees man from the impossible attempt to find his basis in himself, and makes it possible for him to *think and plan* endlessly, although this reality which is independent of him is for its part the basis and source of responsible human action in reason, freedom and planning (p 47).

S. goes on to concede that 'it is by no means immediately clear that the character of this gift is *personal*, i.e. that it comes to us from the hand of a living and creative God who establishes the basis of all meaning and in so doing at the same time opens the future to mankind' (p 47). But, on the one hand, all this 'talk of God' in our culture is there as a possible answer to the question that does emerge from our experience. And, on the other hand, an honest examination of our experience shows us that such religious language has to be able to cope with 'experiences of meaninglessness' as well as with 'fundamental experiences of meaning': experiences of 'suffering as a result of evil and injustice; of suffering as a result of grief and inadequacy; of suffering as a result of love-elements which cannot be rationalized or removed, and which cannot be done away with through any human attempts at projection or productivity' (p 47). But this 'appearance and disappearance of meaning shows that we cannot grasp it, and that meaning comes to us from reality. We are addressed, called and summoned by it. All this has a structure which seems to compel us – however tentatively – to adopt a personal model in order to explain as fully as possible this experience of meaning, though without taking into account the limitation which inalienably divides two people, for all their intimacy' (pp 47-48).

Now the point of this is that there is therefore a question: 'Does experience of God not have an understandable foundation precisely in the context of the experience of meaningfulness? In other words, is a perspective opened up *within the horizon of experience* on a meaning which cannot be reduced to our history of projects, discoveries and constructs of meaning and yet reveals itself in this very history of human projects? However, that is only possible if this perspective too can be *experienced* as a perspective: as the token of a greater, final salvation to come; in other words, if in fact we have partial experiences of meaning, salvation or "being

saved". What makes negative experience of contrasts in reality into productive experiences is the meaning that can be found in them as we struggle with the pain of the contrast . . . The transcendent lies *in* human experience and its expression in the language of faith, but as an *inner reference* to what this experience and this language of faith have called to life. . . .' (p 48).

S. is thus seeking to enable us to see how revelation occurs at the *limits* of our experience but in that sense *within* our experience, for experience includes limit, perspective, contrast, a reference to what lies beyond experience. 'What is involved is, however, a sense for the depth or the height in the world. The gift, or God's grace, is not revealed either from above or from below, but horizontally, in the encounter of human beings with one another within our human history' (p 49).

This is the first line of S.'s pincer movement.

The second line consists in an account of human existence as the 'dialectical interweaving of encounter with the world (above all in and through actual practice), of thought and language, in a historical "entanglement with history"' (p 49), such that the interpretative element in such experience is not some optional extra but a constituent part and that revelation is not *merely* an interpretative element. S. goes about this by relying primarily on the tradition of British linguistic philosophy as expounded by such men as Wittgenstein, Wisdom, Flew, Hare, our own Hepburn here in Edinburgh, Hick, Barbour. He recalls Wittgenstein's example: 'in the twilight we see a small bush as a rabbit. Are we seeing something as . . . or are we interpreting it as . . .?' (p 50). He elaborates this but concludes that 'in fact we have experiences within a concept (I experience or see a chair). We are aware of the possibility of different frameworks of reference. The problem ends up by being that with conscious men there is no such thing as uninterpreted experience . . . Not only the reflective but even the pre-reflective consciousness makes identifications in the course of experiencing . . . Thus the element of identification lies *in* the experience itself; one might say that we see "the interpretation", or better, we see interpretatively. There is no neutral given in experience, for alternative interpretations influence the very way in which we experience the world' (p 53). 'It is not a question of a contrast between experience and interpretation, but of alternative "interpretative experiences"' (p 54). Thus 'not only does the religious man interpret in a different way from the non-believer, he lives in a different world and has different expectations. Thus for the believer the exodus through the Red Sea can in fact be taken as an expression of an *experience* and not as a secondary interpretation or a superstructure which can be detached from this context of experience' (p 50).

So S. is once again, by a different method, seeking to show how religious language – including in that not only propositional but metaphorical and symbolic language – can be seen to be part and a legitimate part of experience, an expression of a certain dimension of experience. More particularly, religious knowledge is ‘a protest against the exclusiveness of language which is directly descriptive and assertive’ (p 46), an ‘indirect expression of reality on the basis of real experiences’ (p 46). He thus concludes that ‘the element of “revelation” can thus be known *in* the experiential encounter with the reality of the world, *in* the interpretation of this experience as an intrinsic element in that encounter, and *in* the religious language of faith. . . . *Allowing oneself to be determined* by a surprising disclosure of reality is given *limited human expression*’ (p 54).

S. has thus been trying to show that ‘the blunt opposition between the authority of a revelation handed down in tradition and the authority of a new experience is at least pre-critical and naive’ (p 43), and that the two sorts of authority do not lie *alongside* each other but somehow *involve* each other. He completes the argument on this point by going on to indicate how in a more general way the transcendent, which we usually think of as opposite to the immanent, can and in some sense must be seen as itself immanent. This brings us to the fifth step in our scheme:

##### 5 *The Immanence of Transcendence itself*

The question that S. puts to himself is whether, granted that experience is intrinsically incomplete, limited, points beyond itself, anything can be said about what is thus beyond us. This is how he puts it himself:

I said earlier that transcendence lies *in* human experience, but in such a way that this experiential content contains an intrinsic reference to what makes this experience possible and is not constituted by the experience itself. Can we say anything about this reality which escapes us? Does it allow itself to be expressed? I believe that this is possible and necessary in two directions:

- a) in a ‘mystical’ direction and –
- b) in an ethical direction. (p 55).

Let me therefore now briefly indicate what S. says under both heads. In regard to the first point, the few pages S. devotes to what he calls ‘the mystical thematization of the inexpressible’ are very closely reasoned and defy easy summary beyond saying that he asserts that ‘relationship with the unconscious and inexpressible is an essential part of critical human reason’ (p 56); that ‘the supra-rational is part of the structure of human rationality, with-

out our having to think of two worlds' (p 56); that this has to be expressed somehow in a way that avoids both the pretence to adequate formulation that is dogmatism and the abandonment of the attempt to speak about it at all that is scepticism; that the appropriate mode of this expression is the symbolic language of metaphor, contemplation, liturgy, thanksgiving and praise; and that this language for all its tentativeness and indicative rather than dogmatic and descriptive character has to be open to criticism. I quote a few of his own phrases:

In so-called mystical or 'religious' thematization man seeks to express the foundation and source of the human religious response of faith. Of course this attempt is only tentative, and because of the transcendence of its concern, it has to be expressed in symbolic language. It is not therefore a question of a pattern of 'two worlds', ours and another. *Our own* reality is itself different from and more than what we believe; this reality itself, and not another higher world, is a surprising revelation of what has never been conceived of by man. (p 55).

However, the inadequacy of our talk of God is no reason for silence (any more than it is in the sciences). Unless linguistic expression is given to the reality which escapes us but grounds our being, even though this may only be through the 'poverty' of symbolic expression, it threatens to disappear into forgetfulness. Out of sight, out of mind. (p 55).

Relationship to the unconscious and the inexpressible is an essential part of critical human reason; 'dogmatism', on the other hand, identifies reality with what is expressed adequately, whereas scepticism falls silent because of our ignorance . . . By contrast, critical knowledge of our own ignorance does not give up the will for truth, but rejects any absolute knowledge (p 55).

Any religious statement about the God who reveals himself is in fact a statement about man and his world, but understood in such a way that any religious statement about man and the world is also in fact a statement about God. Theology is not anthropology, but a theological statement is *at the same time* an anthropological statement (p 56).

Liturgical and symbolic language and theological thematization makes it possible to express the unconditional without however speaking unconditionally. This language is neither 'dogmatic' nor sceptical (p 57).

The sciences are in themselves by no means reductionist (though they often look that way); they simply pose other, *limited* questions, to which the answer may be right but, given the nature of the question, equally limited. They only become

reductionist when they are offered as *the* answer. For that reason they can never express the nature of man and his religion (nor criticise it); these are only accessible to philosophical, critical-reflective and theological thought (p 59).

This, then, is the 'mystical' direction in which the 'reality which escapes us' (p 55) can be expressed, however partially. In regard to the other, the ethical direction, S. begins by saying that religion cannot be reduced to ethics but that ethics has to be considered since it is what gives the 'density of reality to "mystical" thematization' (p 59); it is, we might say, what brings it down to earth. 'Ethics has a certain independence, but the believer or the religious man sees its deepest foundation, source and ground in the reality of God' (p 59). 'Grace and religion are therefore essentially an ethical task' (p 59). 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only' S. quotes James as writing (1: 22), and adds that Yahweh 'requires righteousness in this world'. This practical and ethical 'thematization' of the mystery of God, the ground and source of religious experience, is a special and necessary 'interpretation' of the inexpressible mystery.

What God is must emerge from our unrestrained involvement with our fellow man, between one man and another, and through building up liberating structures without which human salvation proves impossible (p 60).

At the same time –

It is also the case that man is limited even in his most responsible ethical action and that he experiences his limitations. Ethics demands too much of him (see Part Four). The rationality of human action is only rational to the degree that it also leaves room for the surprising event of reality, which transcends human ethical rationality (p 60).

And thus,

. . . despite its relative autonomy . . . ethics in the last resort itself points towards religion and the 'mystical' thematization of the astonishing world event (p 60).

And so, having indicated the way in which the very notion of experience prolongs itself in the notion of revelation, so that 'revelation has a structure of experience' (p 63), S. can devote a few pages (pp 65-71) to the formation of the 'canon' of the New Testament. In the light of what he has already said, he can do this in such a way as to explain how the very process of selecting a canon could involve 'a first possible hardening of the story of the living Jesus which has continually to be taken up by other Christians' (p 69) and therefore the gradual elimination, almost, we might say, the excommunication of 'new structures of Christian experience' (p 70).

The canonisation should not make us forget that this particular literature has only laid down the basic story as a model. New stories of Christian experience remain possible, provided they are a legitimate transformation of the original story in which the person of Jesus Christ is allowed a voice within the mediation of all kinds of other historical conditioning. In the centuries after the completion of the biblical canon the churches understood this well, and they saw their scripture not as the letter, but as spirit: inspiration and the indication of a particular direction (p 70).

In other words, the very notion of the canonical New Testament, when properly understood, calls for the notion of new experience to complete it – just as the very notion of experience calls for the notion of revelation to complete it.

We are, therefore, ready to move on to our sixth and final stage:

#### 6 *Experience and the Scriptures as Mutual Complements*

In this final section of this first part of his opus, then, S. states quite explicitly the conclusion for which he has been arguing:

At the beginning of our analysis of the authority of experiences and of the authority of the New Testament we saw that some people feel that theology should no longer begin from scripture and tradition but from contemporary experiences. I would regard this as a false alternative for anthropological, hermeneutic and religious reasons (p 71).

Valuable as his exposition of these separate but cumulative reasons is, I do not want to linger on it, beyond saying that under the first head he points out simply that ‘men in fact live in the present, but they live from a past and are directed towards a future’ (p 71) and that a ‘creative foundation in our own past is a presupposition for a new future’ (p 73); that under the second head he states that ‘on the other hand, a romanticism about origins is just as much an error in interpretation’ (p 73) and that the ‘putting of questions to the beginning, described as a norm or canon, will be intrinsically governed by the horizons of the questioner, who will belong to a later historical period’ (p 73); and that under the third head he says that –

... it is therefore essential to have a constant movement to and fro between the biblical interpretation of Jesus and the interpretation of our present day experiences. We cannot begin with one without beginning with the other, otherwise the Christian succeeds neither in interpreting the Bible nor in interpreting our present-day experiences (p 76).

S. can thus conclude that ‘the contrast between the two starting points proves to be a false dilemma: the one does not work

without the other. *Revelation* is brought about through *experiences*' (p 77).

And so S. realises his project of resolving the apparent antinomies of experience and revelation, present and past, immanence and transcendence, into polar complements so that each has to be interpreted in the light of the other.

All this, however, is only the theory of his procedure in the rest of the book. Thus in Part Two he embarks on no less than an exegesis of most of the New Testament (in fact practically everything except the synoptic gospels and the Acts, which takes up over 600 pages), before moving in Part Three to eliciting from all this material what he calls four 'structural elements of the New Testament theology of grace' (pp 629-644), 'which Christians must take account of in any contemporary reinterpretation in which an echo of the gospel of Jesus Christ can be detected, if they want to preserve the gospel in its wholeness while at the same time making it speak to their own age in word and deed' (p 634). And this in turn is the preparation for drafting, in Part Four, a sketch of what salvation by God in Jesus Christ could be taken to mean today. This is how the dust-jacket summarises this final section:

How do we plan for our own future, the future of the world and not just of limited societies, when virtually every criticism seems to have been shaken? Probing deeply into these questions leads Professor Schillebeeckx to look at the experience of suffering and the responses made to it, not only in the major religions of the world, from Zoroastrianism and Buddhism to Judaism and Islam, but also in the Enlightenment and in Marxist thinking. Salvation must include a positive response to, and an attack on suffering, and this conviction prompts a thorough discussion of the extent to which a Christian ought to be involved in political action.

And this book concludes in a way that is as surprising as it is also in accordance with the deepest logic of S.'s thinking. For if experience includes reflection and reflection issues in talk about God, God-talk, theo-logy, and theology finds perhaps its purest expression in preaching, and preaching ends up in praise, then it is of a piece with the intent of the book for this nervously, toughly philosophical volume to conclude with a *homily* that resumes the basic ideas of the two volumes of *Jesus* and *Christ*, which in turn is only the preface to a canon composed by S. himself.

In an important sense, then, what S. is expounding is not a model of development at all in Newman's sense. It is an attempt to do justice to the dynamic inter-relationship between present, past and future from a profoundly historical point of view. But it is not



developmental, it is rather an account of what might be called transformation in identity. And because it is historical without being developmental it does, to my mind, do greater justice to the discontinuities, the crises, the catastrophes even, the new starts in history than the model of development can do.

The whole book thus represents a magisterial, even a majestic, achievement, a sustained attempt to renew the typically Roman Catholic tradition of philosophical theology from within the best of modern exegetical science. It enacts what it presents, namely, the conviction that the most modern thinking and experience can be as much the vehicle and occasion of the traditional message of Jesus as the thinking and experience of, say, thirteenth century Europe or fourth century Hellenism: even the modern world is charged with the revelation of God.

And it is in this latter respect that I have wanted to present S.'s major intent and his own theory of that intent. For, if his theory is right, then it is the likes of members of the Newman Association, lay-people, 'ordinary' people 'in the world' who have at least as much chance to do and forward theology in its deepest sense as professional and still largely clerical theologians. It is the likes of such people, folk who marry and bring up children, or who take on the single life without a special ecclesiastical or secular sanction, folk who hold down jobs and are members of unions and therefore to this extent at least engage in politics, who assume the struggle with money, sex and power in the ordinary way, it is the likes of such people who can in principle lead their experience and thinking back through the Jesus of the Scriptures to God and in so doing inform that experience and thinking and make it the expression of a theology for our time that is as valid as the great theologies we have inherited from the past.

\* This is the substance of a paper originally given to the Edinburgh Circle of the Newman Association.