THEOLOGY AS THE ART OF LIBERATION
Edward Schillebeeckx’s Response to the Theologies of the EATWOT

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The fact that Edward Schillebeeckx published an article on liberation theology and the theology of the EATWOT in the Festschrift for Johann Baptist Metz’s sixtieth birthday is symbolic.¹ Metz and Schillebeeckx are the two Catholic academic theologians in the First World who most consequentially tried to integrate the impulses of liberation theologies in their theological project. In the case of Metz, the connection with liberation theology is in a sense obvious. Starting in the late sixties, Metz has tried to establish a New Political Theology, not a renewal of pre-modern religious control over politics, but a theology that is conscious of the fact that its effects are political and deals responsibly with that fact. Third World liberation theologies clearly are political theologies in the sense in which Metz understood the word. They do not settle for an abstract truth, but consider the social consequences as integral part of a theology, just as Metz advocated.² Schillebeeckx’s connection with liberation theology is less obvious to many people. Schillebeeckx is internationally known for his sacramental theology, his Christology and his work for a more democratic Church both at the Second Vatican Council and after, not directly for his political involvement, although he always considered himself not only a personal, but also a theological friend of Metz’s. Be this as it may, Schillebeeckx’s solidarity with liberation theologians is at least as profound as Metz’s and extended to defending Latin American liberation theology when it came under pressure of the ecclesial hierarchy.³

In this article I will trace the origins of Schillebeeckx’s connection with liberation theologies and explore what it entails. The article is written in the grateful recognition that it is to a large degree through Schillebeeckx’ influence that the impulses of liberation theologies strongly stamped my education as a systematic theologian in Nijmegen at the second half of the


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1970s and the first half of the 1980s. It has led to my dissertation on different forms of liberation theology – Latin American, Black and Feminist Theology – and the impact they should have on doing theology at a university in Western world. This, as we shall see, was also a very strong concern for Edward Schillebeeckx.

1. Although quiet a few of them were educated in Europe or the United States, in the final statements of their meetings the theologians of the EATWOT mainly criticize Western theology. The criticism is severe: Western theology is accused of being ‘too wedded to Western culture and the capitalist system’. It is called ‘highly academic, speculative and individualistic, without regard for the societal and structural aspects of sin’, and thus for the necessity of liberation from it. At the very first meeting of the EATWOT in 1976, the final statement solemnly rejected as irrelevant this ‘academic type of theology that is divorced from action’ and its subscribers declared to be ‘prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World’. Seven years later, this is was developed further:

Because commitment is the first act, theology is inseparably connected with the Christian community out of which it emerges and to which it is accountable. Theology partakes of the rhythm of action, contemplation, worship, and analysis that marks the life of the people of God. Thus the fundamental subject of theology is the Christian community in its witnessing to the restless presence of God in the history and culture of the oppressed. In this basic sense, all Christians are theologians. The rationale, the logic, the truth of theology is that which persons are actually living out in their every day lives.

However, the traditional Western theology was not only criticized by the EATWOT because it lacks roots in ordinary life and every day faith. It was not only ‘alienated and alienating’ for the Third World according to its theologians, but also ‘has been incapable of responding to the social problems of the First World’ itself. Not only in the Third World, but in the

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4 Sporen van de bevrijdende God: Universitaire theologie in aansluiting op Latijnsamerikaanse bevrijdingstheologie, zwarte theologie en feministische theologie, Kampen: Kok, 1990 [Tracing the Liberating God: Academic Theology in Connection to Latin American Liberation Theology, Black Theology and Feminist Theology].