CRITICAL REMEMBRANCE AND ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE IN EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX’S THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING FOR OTHERS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The biblical prototypes of suffering for others – the eschatological prophet and messianic high priest – are correlated in the present article with Edward Schillebeeckx’s examination of two vital concepts to provide the basis for a critical praxis: anamnesis, or the critical remembrance of history, and eschatological hope. The dialectical opposites of anamnesis and hope, which Schillebeeckx deems crucial for solidarity with suffering and its alleviation, are embodied by the aforementioned scriptural figures. Indeed, critical remembrance and hope are intrinsic to the images of Jesus as the ‘suffering righteous one’ and the eschatological messianic high priest in Schillebeeckx’s theology of suffering for others. Both the images and the critical concepts prove essential in his historical reconstruction of the eschatological communities, religious figures, and symbols in Hebrews and 1 Peter, among other New Testament documents. Moreover, they attest to Schillebeeckx’s deep engagement with the Frankfurt School of social critical theory. In his later work (published during the 1970s and 1980s), such critical ideas serve to cultivate an eschatological sensibility and an ethical praxis, made possible by grace mediated through voluntary suffering.

II. ANAMNESIS, OR CRITICAL REMEMBRANCE OF HISTORY

Anamnesis, or the remembrance of Christ’s passion and the history of suffering humanity, is defined by Schillebeeckx in terms of its prophetic and critical function: ‘In the sense of biblical anamnesis (zikkaron) or
remembrance, remembrance in the history of God with man in Jesus Christ is not just a matter of reminding oneself what took place at an earlier stage. It is a return to the past with an eye to action in the present. God “reminds himself” of his earlier saving acts in and through new acts of liberation.” Schillebeeckx applies Jürgen Habermas’s unification of theory and praxis to his re-conceptualization of liturgy.¹ This example of his applied method embodies the recognition that liturgy – the heart of which is the memoria passionis Christi – contains an intrinsic element of protest against unjust socio-political structures and any human enterprise that causes suffering. Indeed, as the critical dimension in liturgical remembrance, socio-political protest is a stimulus to ethical action in the present.²

Reference to what is actually done here and now is an essential part of the biblical view of memory. From a social and historical point of view, the revolutionary critical epistemological value of the memoria passionis Christi, which presents a challenge to the world and society, does not lie directly in the past history of suffering (though that is where it has its origin) or in the kerygma or dogma, those so-called ‘dangerous memorial formulas’ which describe his suffering; rather, it is communicated by the living Christian community, that is, by the contemporary church itself, in so far as it is an active memoria passionis of the risen Lord.³

Schillebeeckx reminds us that the association of liberating actions of particular people (the magnalia dei) with the elements of liturgy – narrative, doxology, hymns, and the Eucharist – has a biblical basis and is thus an integral part of the Judeo-Christian traditions: ‘It is therefore unbiblical to draw a contrast between the doxological or hymnic character of the liturgy and a so-called “activism” which is concerned with the betterment of man, his world and society.’⁴ The sacramental dimension of the church and social activism, i.e., contemplation leading to the articulation of socio-political theory and theologically informed praxis are eminently compatible.⁵

We cannot experience God in the church’s liturgy if we can no longer see him anywhere outside the church. Were that to happen, then I fear that our liturgical sensibilities would have no religious content of reality; and this liturgical void cannot be filled, at least for the longer term, with a liturgical appeal to ethical action or a critical attitude towards culture. That would be to misunderstand the ‘balance’ on which the deepest ethical stimuli are based.⁶

The Epistle to the Hebrews is the main scriptural source for Schillebeeckx’s development of anamnesis, or remembered suffering, as a critical concept – one which has been expanded by theologians and social scientists to include the critical recollection of any tradition.⁷ The Epistle depicts a Jewish-Christian community practising a new way of life, recasting old forms of worship in Christological terms, and abolishing a few of the ancient liturgical traditions. As a marginalized
group, the congregation of Hebrews practised prophetic criticism in following Jesus’ way of life. Schillebeeckx characterizes the congregation as eschatological and ‘episynagogal.’ The sacrificial mediation of Jesus as high priest in the Epistle to the Hebrews reveals liturgical continuity (from a Jewish to a Jewish-Christian assembly) that reflects Jesus’ role in the context of Israel’s salvation history, but the author of Hebrews contrasts the provisional nature of Mosaic sacrifice with the efficacy of grace mediated by Jesus, in obedience to God and in solidarity with suffering humanity.

Schillebeeckx perceives the community of Hebrews, despite its (perhaps unavoidably) closed character, as a fitting model for the contemporary church. First of all, the community of Hebrews has an ethical orientation based on the belief that the heavenly things of the future age must be realized in history. That does not mean, says Schillebeeckx, that the boundary between the present and the parousia disappears; for the author of Hebrews, the Jewish proton and eschaton remain the temporal poles of history within which the spatial (two-storey) Greek model of the universe has been integrated. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the ‘true tent’ of the covenant is the future world, positioned above the earthly plane, and the church is its ‘vestibule’ – already elevated to the heavenly realm yet still separated from eternity by the curtain of the holy of holies. Schillebeeckx interprets the congregation of Hebrews as ‘an eschatological assembly in which the church on earth is already taking part, albeit in confident expectation of the parousia (10:37–39).’

Bradford Hinze says of Schillebeeckx’s own non-dualistic conception of history and salvation: ‘Rather than speak about a history divided into the city of humankind and the city of God, a natural plane and a supernatural plane, or a secular history and a sacred history, there is an insistence on the oneness of history.’ In The Mission of the Church, Schillebeeckx specifies the relationship between the historical and the eschatological realities in contemporary Christianity, a perspective that reflects that of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

The good fruits of humanity and human activity – especially human dignity, brotherly love, and freedom (there is an echo here of the slogan égalité, fraternité, liberté) – which are propagated on earth in the spirit of Christ will be found again in the eschatological kingdom, but purified from all stains and inwardly transparent and transfigured. At the end of time, there will be a kingdom of justice, love and peace. But this kingdom is already present in a veiled form in this world. It will ultimately be completed in Christ’s parousia.

Johann-Baptist Metz’s overriding concern with remembered suffering reverberates in Schillebeeckx’s theology; and their shared emphasis on the realization of salvation within secular history largely accords with the viewpoint of Hebrews. A non-dualistic conception of history and salvation is essential to a theology of suffering that is focused on the
realization of the *humanum*. Schillebeeckx is largely in accord with Metz’s view of history/salvation history:

Metz opposes an attitude which can often be seen, in which a distinction is drawn between the history of suffering within the world and an other-worldly history of glory, and only in this way does he also reject the dichotomy between secular history and salvation history. World history itself must be made into salvation history. One cannot reconcile the two of them either speculatively or theoretically – nor, however can they be formally contrasted. Therefore for Metz salvation history is in fact world history itself, in so far as in it salvation and meaning are found for the oppressed, rejected, and suppressed expectations and the sufferings of humanity.¹⁸

Importantly, for Metz, as for Schillebeeckx, social movements or political institutions cannot be the universal subject of history; only God ‘in his eschatological freedom is the universal subject and meaning of history.’¹⁹ As Metz conceives it, the ‘eschatological remembrance’ of Jesus’ passion and resurrection liberates, protects, and gives direction to political life; and it prefigures a future for those who have been abandoned, victimized, and vanquished. It is ‘a future which must be created through solidarity with the weaker and the weakest among us.’²⁰ The *memoria passionis* can potentially result in a new direction for politics in the management of economic and technological affairs and a new sense of responsibility toward the ‘other,’ including all of those whose experiences have been omitted from the ‘canonical’ histories of civilization:

It forces us to look at the *theaticum mundi* not merely from the standpoint of the successful and the established, but from that of the conquered and the victims. This recalls the function of the court fool in the past: he represents an alternative (rejected, vanquished, or oppressed) to his master’s policy; his function was strictly political and in no way ‘purely aesthetic.’ His politics was, so to speak, a politics of the memory of suffering – as against the traditional political principle of ‘woe to the conquered,’ and against the Machiavellian ruler.²¹

Both Metz and Schillebeeckx refuse to espouse a definite plan of salvation, but Schillebeeckx finds Metz too reluctant to elucidate the positive connection between history and eschatological salvation. Although he applauds Metz’s refusal to dichotomize the two and commends the critical reflection on human suffering in Metz’s theology,²² Schillebeeckx also expresses his reservation:

But what I miss in Metz is a really theological consideration of the *memoria* thesis. Metz does not reflect on the concept of God as he is understood in the light of Jesus, as a God of pure positivity, as the author of good and enemy of evil. And this concept of God must colour what is in itself a correct theory of the narrative communication of the history of human suffering in a special way which Metz does not analyse.²³

Even though Metz correctly posits God rather than humankind as the universal subject of history, Schillebeeckx surmises that – in the absence
of a positive articulation of God vis-à-vis the \textit{memoria passionis Christi} – suffering humanity inadvertently usurps God’s role in Metz’s theology. ‘In other words, his political theology seems to be to be [sic] unfinished and insufficiently worked out.’\textsuperscript{24}

A theological corrective to Metz, with respect to the aforementioned critique, can be found in Schillebeeckx’s analysis of Hebrews, in which he articulates God’s relation to Jesus’ self-sacrifice and the history of human suffering. The epistle stresses the humanity of Jesus, who suffers corporeally for the sake of others, while at the same time it venerates the transcendence of God with whom Jesus achieves eschatological communion:

What lies between the \textit{proton} and the \textit{eschaton}, the first and the last, is the human history of suffering, atonement, guilt, and unrighteousness. It is therefore in accordance with the character of God – who is absolutely the first and finally the last in creation – that in seeking to bring men to this \textit{eschaton} in and through Jesus, he should make Jesus follow the same human career, the way of human suffering. He bears our sorrow, our anxiety, our burden of sin, in order to be the first to achieve perfection \textit{by means of a human life}. In other words, he achieves eschatological communion with God, so that on the basis of his self-sacrifice … we may be brought through him and with him to this eschatological communion with the living God…\textsuperscript{25}

For Schillebeeckx, Christ’s hypostatic union extends into the realm of history; although the sacred and the secular are not yet synonymous, they are intimately conjoined through the mystery of grace: ‘The history of this world is therefore not sacralized, because it preserves its specific quality, but sanctified, included in the absolute and gratuitous presence of the mystery.’\textsuperscript{26} With respect to the attainment of eschatological communion with God, Schillebeeckx perceives the capacity for human self-transcendence as originating in ‘the transcendence of God, who, in a transcendent yet inward manner, enables man to go beyond what he has already accomplished and move towards what he hopes for and what has been promised to him. In other words, man is able, by virtue of the divine transcendence within him, to transcend the “already” and strive towards the “not yet”.’\textsuperscript{27} In Hebrews, Jesus as the eschatological high priest is a paradigm of humanity’s capacity for self-transcendence through his voluntary sacrifice of life for others in obedience to God’s will, which he experienced inwardly: ‘Jesus experienced his sacrifice for his fellow men as God’s cause. The recognition of the deity of God is at the same time the recognition of the unexpected humanity of man.’\textsuperscript{28}

With respect to its relevance for the contemporary church, the community of Hebrews has a mystical dimension and a liturgical form that focus its attention on the transcendent reality of God, which the church on earth ideally enshrines. At the same time, the ‘exodus community’ is shown to be radically critical of society and of its own religious traditions in keeping with Jesus’ prophetic criticism. In brief, it is a congregation
committed to the belief that what has been promised in heaven must be realized on earth:

Thus, following the tradition of ancient Israel, Hebrews preaches the model of the church as an exodus community. This happens in all New Testament writings, but Hebrews and 1 Peter are the most radical. The exodus is that of a community of God which lives on the periphery of this world and is critical of it; it lives alongside worldly society and inwardly builds up a new specifically Christian community….39

Like the dual emphasis of that congregation, anchored in Hebrew prophecy and Jewish worship and simultaneously focused on the consummation of a Jewish-Christian vision, the contemporary church’s dialectical orientation – to its formative period and ancient liturgical traditions, at one pole, and to its promised future, at the other – is imperative. ‘A simple appeal to the present, to immediacy and to contemporary basic human experiences without anamnesis or memory, and without prolepsis or eschatological reference is not a Christian possibility.’30 But contemporary experiences also have an intrinsic authority – mediated by reference to the history of suffering and to the eschatological hope of redemption:

The concern for contemporary human experiences in nature, history, with people in a very concrete society, also shapes the authority of ‘Christian experiences.’ Seen from a Christian perspective, ‘experiences’ have authority therefore first of all in the living context of a mutual theoretical-critical and practical-critical correlation of apostolic experiences of faith then and our experiences now, wherein the intervening period plays a special role.31

Schillebeeckx identifies the ‘principle for the interpretation of reality’ as the resistance of mundane reality to human aspirations and projects. Such ‘crucifying experiences’ evoke a change of being – a metanoia – that propels individuals and society toward a new integration and orientation.32 ‘The authority of experiences therefore culminates in human stories of suffering: stories of suffering over misfortune and failure, the suffering of pain, the suffering of evil and injustice, the suffering of and in love, sorrow or guilt. Here lie the great elements of the revelation of reality in and through finite human experiences.’33 Schillebeeckx perceives human existence as having a narrative structure, which is the basis of traditions: ‘Traditions, formed from collective experience, become the social framework for understanding – the common stories of families, communities, and cultures.’34 Narratives of suffering – whether of remote historical events or recent experiences – must be recited or recounted in liturgy to provide the leaven for a contemporary praxis of liberation and the evolution of the humanum. That is to say, the liturgical expression must embody and demonstrate an ethical praxis; if it is to be truly productive of good works, liturgy must be critical of unjust social and political structures, including ecclesiastical structures. It is through anamnesis, when defined as the critical remembrance of Christ’s passion and the
history of suffering humanity, that new saving acts are initiated. ‘It is precisely the Christian gospel which lives by the critical recollection of the human history of suffering: it recalls the message and praxis of Jesus, who was concerned for the poor and the oppressed and therefore also himself experienced suffering and a painful death.’\textsuperscript{35} In Schillebeeckx’s conception of critical praxis, the ‘revelatory power’ of narrative – or stories of past suffering narrated in liturgy – evokes emancipative action, which, in turn, occasions ‘new memories’:

Specifically in the context of human suffering, narrative has the further power of retrieving the history of those whose lives have been forgotten, the invisible characters in the human story who have been dismissed as insignificant. Narrative and praxis are integrally related because remembrance of past human suffering carries an implicit ethical demand – it becomes a stimulus for liberating action. At a new moment in the tradition new responses to the gospel imperative are demanded; ‘new memories’ of Jesus are discovered.\textsuperscript{36}

The critical recollection of tradition also includes the analysis and critique of the history of the church, especially with a view to the retrieval of lost human potential and disregarded traditions or contributions of oppressed individuals. ‘Often the history of theology is, too, a history of conquerors and powerful ones who marginalize evangelically possible alternatives or even, once conquered, silence them – although only for a time, because forgotten truths always work their way back to the surface.’\textsuperscript{37} Susan Ross designates Schillebeeckx’s conception of the contemporary church’s critical-prophetic role as that of ‘critical community,’ a construct steeped in his profound awareness of ecclesiastical/human historicity and his prodigious knowledge of biblical scholarship.\textsuperscript{38} Ross defines such critical-prophetic communities, or ‘cells,’\textsuperscript{39} in her essay on Schillebeeckx’s soteriology: ‘These communities are critical not only of unjust structures in society but also of those within the church. Based in the local community, these groups strive to live out the message of the kingdom by confronting injustice wherever it is found and by developing new forms of community that respond to the needs of the present day.’\textsuperscript{40}

It is well to recall that critical communities are precisely what we find in the primitive Christian era – separate, yet overlapping local congregations, such as the particularized community of Hebrews critically and selectively appropriating its Jewish heritage and revisioning the future of humanity in Christological terms. Schillebeeckx discerns in the critical remembrance of specific religious traditions (such as the Levitical priestly tradition of Hebrews, which the eschatological Jesus-Melchizedek supersedes, the means by which past values are either rejected, or reconsidered and preserved for the future.\textsuperscript{41} Scripture and the history of the church abound with examples of the critical examination and re-conceptualization of various traditions in light of new experiences. Blind conformity to the \textit{status quo} obscures that fact of ecclesial
history in the interest of maintaining the equilibrium of the present. The following case study may help to elucidate the critical impulse in anamnesis, broadly conceived as the critical remembrance of church tradition, which constitutes part of the task of a contemporary prophetic theology.

As someone who, though tempered by a sense of realism, champions critical communities, Schillebeeckx addresses several issues taken up by them – the mandatory celibacy of priests and the exclusion of women from the ordained priesthood, to mention only two such examples. In reconstructing the historical development of these ecclesiastical patterns, he shows that priestly celibacy and the ban on women’s ordination have sprung, in part, from laws of ritual purity (as did the genealogy of the Levitical priesthood). Such fossilized impediments to the renewal of the church ministry should be removed, says Schillebeeckx, while at the same time we ought to preserve what is truly apostolic and dogmatic. The ‘ideology critique’ of priestly ordination in which Schillebeeckx engages in his book *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* is a prime example of the critical recollection of the past as well as a concrete product of his dialogue with social critical theory. In exposing the self-serving character of such traditions, as he understands them, Schillebeeckx is paving the way for the renewal of ministry.

Although the subject of *Ministry* is too complex for detailed treatment here, suffice it to say that Schillebeeckx examines conciliar decrees or doctrines and theological ideas in the history of the priestly office with an eye to whether they authentically convey the gospel message or promote self-serving ecclesiastical traditions. In his discussion of apostolicity – the central issue addressed in his controversial book, the influence of hermeneutics and critical theory is evident: ‘the specific, legitimate contemporary forms of the apostolicity of the community and therefore of the ministry (which are constantly changing) cannot be discovered in purely theoretical terms, but only in a mutually critical correlation (which must be both theoretical and practical) between what the New Testament churches did and what the Christian communities do now.’

Applied even more comprehensively to the literature of suffering, the concept of ‘critical remembrance of the past’ includes the recollection of any tradition with a view to the retrieval of the under-represented or neglected aspects of history, especially of past human suffering, whether in the church or in society as a whole. The vantage point from which the past is combed for such ‘missing links’ is the anticipated future of a more humane and egalitarian society:

People are concerned with what in many countries is called ‘anti-history’: the history of the conquered, of unsuccessful revolutions, exiled heretics and millenarians, of unfulfilled expectations. People look for ‘forgotten truths’ in the past, for everything that has been suppressed from our historical memory by civic prejudice,
rationalistic censorship and the church’s campaign against heretics. So here, too, people look for support and inspiration in the past.45

In addition to scriptural sources, ecclesial histories, and conciliar documents, Schillebeeckx has plumbed both theological and non-theological writings of his contemporaries in the effort to assess the provocative role of remembered traditions in the humanization process and the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. In his essay titled ‘Critical Theories and Christian Political Commitment,’ he makes mention of several contemporary thinkers whose work has been incorporated into his distillation of the value of remembered traditions:

Kolakowski has said that, in order to solve the conflicts of human history, man has to depend on an arsenal of means ‘which can only be found in human traditions.’ Paul Ricoeur too has often drawn attention to the fruitful practice of critically remembering human traditions in a society such as ours, which has lost its historical roots and has come to depend on scientific planning and prognosis of the future. A true revival of the principle of Enlightenment cannot take place either by rejecting all traditions or by making them all hermeneutically present. It can only be done by a critical remembrance of certain traditions. It was precisely in this way that the Western movement of emancipative freedom came about. We internalize the past not in order to make it present here and now, but rather to save for the future certain values which might otherwise have been lost in the past. An option for the future thus always mediates the critical remembrance of the past.46

The critical importance of traditions and institutions from the past has been fully acknowledged in sociological analysis. Schillebeeckx notes the concern of Frankfurt School theorists Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas, and Marcuse (among other notable thinkers) with critical remembrance in relation to a ‘meaningful programme for the future.’47 Adorno’s most incisive comments on the subject, particularly the vital importance of remembered suffering, appear in his article ‘Tradition’:

To insist on the absolute absence of tradition is as naive as the obstinate insistence on it. Both are ignorant of the past that persists in their allegedly pure relation to objects; both are unaware of the dust and debris which cloud their allegedly clear vision. But it is inhuman to forget because accumulated suffering will be forgotten and the historical trace on things, words, colors, and sounds is always of past suffering. Thus tradition today poses an insoluble contradiction. There is no tradition today and none can be conjured, yet when every tradition has been extinguished the march toward barbarism will begin.48

Schillebeeckx’s positive assessment of the critical remembrance of traditions is encapsulated in a single sentence in Jesus: An Experiment in Christology: ‘The “critical recollection of the past” has a humanizing importance which the Enlightenment failed to notice.’49 In the place of tradition, he argues, the Enlightenment rationalists envisioned a brotherhood based on an ‘ideal universal humanity,’ so ahistorical and amorphous
as to be meaningless. ‘A general concept of humanity is always itself ambiguous; it needs a critical point of reference, a criterion; and this is in fact given in the record of our human suffering, which since the Enlightenment has not been all that much alleviated, unless we are to identify humanity with the welfare of a consumer society based on science and technology.’\(^5^0\) The identification of Jesus with outcasts, the poor, sinners, and the disabled provides the needed criterion; Jesus’ compassion embodies the principle of ‘universality through a historically particular intermediary.’\(^5^1\) For Jesus, the person near at hand, the neighbour in distress, was the focus of his healing ministry. The message of universal fellowship that has radiated out from the historical point of reference – Jesus of Nazareth – to many millions of people throughout the world ‘without thereby losing anything of its own concretely historical reference’ is still directed to particular people in need, the inter-subjective and universal focus of Christianity attested in the New Testament: ‘Above and beyond all boundaries, those who require help simply because of their need are “brothers of Jesus”. Thus the brotherhood is grounded in the long course of human suffering, which has to be surmounted and which summons us to universal solidarity.’\(^5^2\)

The historical specificity embodied in the Christian creed has the interests of all people at heart. Therefore, Schillebeeckx contends, we cannot accept the Enlightenment assumption that universal salvation mediated by Jesus of Nazareth is ‘below the dignity of man, impossible and pre-critical.’ Schillebeeckx impugns that position as itself unhistorical and uncritical.\(^5^3\) Although the Enlightenment’s critical impulse was often judiciously employed to analyse and challenge social phenomena to the betterment of the world, Schillebeeckx believes the self-criticism derived from critical reason was ‘evidently beyond the capacity of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century.’\(^5^4\) Yet Schillebeeckx applauds Enlightenment reason in his book *God and Man* for the purifying effect it had on Christianity through its ‘critical impulse.’\(^5^5\) Indeed, the critical faculty – as expressed in the well-wrought synthesis of discursive and intuitive modes of thought achieved by Schillebeeckx himself and brought to bear on the study of Christianity – owes a great debt to the Enlightenment. His commitment to contemporary Christian faith, embedded as it is in the matrix of secularism, has challenged Schillebeeckx to scrutinize the old models of Christianity through a critical recollection of traditions: ‘That in this process of re-thinking the faith mistakes will be made goes without saying – how could it be otherwise? But these are the humanly unavoidable byproducts of what are authentically Christian attempts to prevent the faith from becoming a historical relic and to make it a living reality here and now.’\(^5^6\)

Schillebeeckx’s criteria for a renewed and vibrant tradition – one that is commensurate with the demands of contemporary life in all of its ambiguity, yet without making unwarranted concessions to secularism
– are tantamount to a deepening of the faith tradition. The resistance of the church hierarchy to Schillebeeckx’s innovations has sometimes been ardent. With respect to such opposition, it is well to recall that the tradition has always been in flux, i.e., reinterpreted anew in each historical era and in various cultural contexts, especially by individuals of keen spiritual sensitivity. However, Schillebeeckx calls for more than the inevitable, perennial sort of change; he advocates an assiduously self-critical stance on the part of the church:

the criticism of particular images of God, especially images of God which threaten our humanity, is also an essential aspect of the gospel message of Jesus of Nazareth; it is even a focus in this message…. On the basis of the parables of Jesus and his praxis of the kingdom of God we have also seen an analysis of the way in which the biblical concept of God is essentially bound up with a praxis by which human beings free their fellows, as Jesus showed us. Precisely because in the course of church history this link was weakened and even forgotten, and God was ‘objectified’ so that he became the cornerstone and guarantee of all human knowledge, human order and action, the one who was appealed to for legitimation of the existing order, and therefore the enemy of all change, liberation and emancipation, the crisis of the Enlightenment was historically not only possible, but even ‘inevitable.’

Similarly, Hans Küng rouses theologians to practise a responsible scholarly, even scientific approach to Christian apologetics and hermeneutics. Such a rigorous endeavour entails an indefatigable inquiry into the history of Jesus, as uncovered through the historical-critical method – yet another example of anamnesis, defined here as the critical remembrance of tradition. Such a thoroughgoing effort is exemplified par excellence by Schillebeeckx’s prodigious books Jesus and Christ. With respect to the historical-critical method, Küng asserts unreservedly:

Only a theology which seriously considers and, as far as possible, attempts to solve those problems enunciated by history can be seen as functioning at the contemporary level of critical awareness current among those (in the West and in the East) who have undergone a Western education. Only such scientific theology stands on a par with the scholarly spirit of our time. Thus it is an unavoidably arduous task to employ the historical-critical method in a comprehensive sense in order to find out what we can establish about the Jesus of history with scientific certainty or great probability. The result of this endeavor is not to abrogate the biblical canon or church tradition, for indeed the history of dogma finds its roots at the very beginning of the Christian movement, even in the New Testament.

The self-critical approach to theology, scripture, and ecclesial history that both Schillebeeckx and Küng endorse, so necessary for the future of the church and the world, in no way implies a disregard of tradition. On the contrary, the critical correlation of our apprehension of historical tradition, on the one hand, and our analysis of the contemporary situation, on the other, are essential to any perspective on faith and praxis: ‘This constant looking in two directions by the believer means that the process
of interpretation in faith will consist in bringing the earlier phases of the tradition of faith as we understand them into relationship with our analysis of the contemporary situation … both in the general cultural and in the specifically Christian sense.' Even the authors of the New Testament creatively adapt ‘what Jesus said in another situation to new situations, which Jesus did not or could not know in the Palestine of his time.’ The adaptation of the gospel within the concrete socio-cultural circumstances of each Christian fellowship and in every historical era is, indeed, the history of the church.

In its varied subjects, the church community is the vehicle of this actualization: it knows that Jesus lives in the church through the gift of the Spirit. This actualization and even adjustment in faith in no way does away with the historical memory of what Jesus had said and done. The church community living now bears witness to the living actuality here and now of Jesus’ gospel which was recorded definitively in scripture.

Within Schillebeeckx’s conceptual framework of experience and interpretation, critical remembrance of the history of tradition is dialectically related to present experience and the theoretical-practical meaning we ascribe to it: ‘Interpretation and praxis make new traditions, in creative trust (as we can already see in the multiplicity of the Old and New Testament writings). That is the living transmission of the tradition of gospel faith to coming generations.’

In conclusion, the primary focus of Schillebeeckx’s own theological ethics, firmly established in the historical point of reference of Jesus of Nazareth and honed by his encounter with critical theory, is solidarity with those who suffer in fidelity to the church’s living memory of Jesus as that is embodied in scripture and encountered in concrete experiences of suffering. With respect to Schillebeeckx’s view of the church’s role in salvation history, Hinze says: ‘Christian conversion to a mystical and ethical way of life requires searching the possibilities for realizing the as yet unrealized gift of humanity. The gift and task of humanity will be concretely determined differently in each period in history. However, the anchor of the church’s ethics, in Schillebeeckx’s view, must be the commitment to solidarity with the marginalized and the suffering.’

When the memoria passionis Christi – the memory of Jesus’ suffering in the body of the church – is expressed in language that is prophetic and critical, it promotes action that overcomes suffering. Indeed, the kerygma is a liberating force, says Schillebeeckx, only when the memory of Jesus’ passion and resurrection challenges the church to act in solidarity with the suffering and the oppressed; otherwise, it is mere ideology:

the church is a critical memoria Christi to the degree that its particular way of life can be shown to and is visible to all, presenting a challenge and leading to revolution, and in this respect is a living remembrance of Jesus which overcomes suffering.
Unless it goes with a liberating way of life which overcomes suffering, kerygmatic remembrance cannot have any critical epistemological force. The kerygma of remembrance is more the interpretative epistemological aspect of what is in actual fact a challenging church way of life.  

III. ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE AS A CRITICAL CONCEPT

In the corpus of Schillebeeckx’s later work, one can also identify hope as a critical concept in his theology of suffering for others. Especially in times of crisis, in negative contrast experiences, hope is the antidote to suffering: ‘It is those contrast experiences which make hope real, since hope then becomes so necessary. They reveal to us the fragility of the humanum and how incapable we are of saving ourselves. Our history of suffering becomes a powerful reminder of how the humanum can be threatened.’ Schillebeeckx understands Jesus’ proclamations about the coming kingdom of God as an eschatological hope that emerges from his consciousness of the contrast between the history of suffering and his experience of God as Abba: ‘Out of his Abba experience Jesus is able to bring a message of hope not inferable from the history of our world, whether in terms of individual or socio-political experiences – although the hope will have to be realized even there.’ Schillebeeckx perceives the figure of the eschatological prophet as consistent with Jesus’ fundamental self-understanding; it is a category that can encompass his various earthly activities: ‘Jesus’ preaching of the Reign of God, his proffer of salvation, and his relationship with sinners and outcasts expressed in parables, healings, and table fellowship, and grounded in his Abba experience fit the profile of this expected one who comes to offer a last chance before the culminating divine act.

The Sermon on the Mount with its poetic ‘benediction’ of hope attests to the ‘already now’ and the ‘not yet’ of eschatological salvation – especially for the poor, the hungry, and the sorrowful. Schillebeeckx’s understanding of Jesus as eschatological prophet is demonstrated by the Beatitudes, partly through the ethico-symbolic association of Jesus with Moses, the prototypical eschatological prophet:

the parallels with Moses who, followed by his nearest companions and after them a great multitude, ascends the mountain of God, where he gets from God the tablets of stone and promulgates the Decalogue to Israel, are obvious: as a new Moses Jesus, ‘when he sees this multitude,’ goes up the mountain and, just as Moses took his closest associates higher up with him, ‘his disciples came to him’ (Mt 5:1), and Jesus ‘opened his mouth and taught them, saying: blessed are the poor.’ (Mt 5:2–3). As Matthew sees it, in the beatitudes Jesus is operating as the leader of the new people of God, to whom a new constitution is being given – not a law but a benediction, a promise of salvation.
Schillebeeckx cites an element of tradition in the popular imagination of Jesus’ time that had its origin in the pre-urban history of Israel – a confident expectation preserved in the lower classes of society that the eschatological prophet would come to alleviate the oppression of the poor and downtrodden. Jesus fulfills their expectation in the Sermon on the Mount; the kingdom of God is breaking into history:

Against humanity’s incomprehensible suffering – in so far that our being as men affords no remedy for it – God himself now moves into action. First of all Jesus, through that compassion of his, brings the message ‘from God’ of God’s radical ‘no’ to the continuing course of man’s suffering. The whole point of history, although only the eschaton will make this clear, is peace, laughter, total satisfaction: the ‘final good’ of salvation and happiness.

But Schillebeeckx finds an even deeper meaning in the Beatitudes: ‘What they quite unmistakably enshrine is a spiritual affirmation of the ultimate power of powerlessness.’ By this he means that irrespective of what human beings can and must do to improve social structures and ameliorate poverty, disease, and oppression, only God in his graciousness can save humanity: ‘at the deepest level there is a suffering, an impotence which no human being can remove and from which we can be liberated only by virtue of the fact that “God will rule” for the final good of all men.’ In the Beatitudes Jesus proclaims the profound being of Abba – creative love and compassion; for Jesus, God is a transcendent Being entirely opposed to evil and the conditions that cause suffering. Even in an unredeemed world Jesus’ message is cause for celebration: ‘Jesus gives us on God’s behalf only the message that God stands surety for us. And therefore the poor, the suffering and the deprived do indeed have grounds for positive hope.’ Schillebeeckx anticipates his readers’ sceptical reaction to his unsubstantiated claim by immediately asking: ‘How? Perhaps the rest of the story of Jesus’ life, as well as the failure of his message and activities, can tell us more about that.’

Using the historical-critical method, Schillebeeckx supports his assertion that, given our powerlessness to overcome all suffering, confident reliance on God is well-placed trust – assurance of hope for all, especially the poor. Schillebeeckx establishes his position by critically examining Jesus’ career: his acts of healing, forgiveness of sins, table fellowship, cleansing of the temple, parables and enlightening discourses, and fulfilment of the two great commandments. After nearly a hundred pages of exegesis, Schillebeeckx answers the question he asks at the end of the section on the Beatitudes. In the person of Jesus, God reveals his own cause as the well-being of humanity: ‘human beings are “people whom God cherishes”’. Thus there is positive hope for everyone without exception; and in both casual and constant contact with this Jesus many of his fellows find salvation and healing there and then. In that way many come to a new life; they are enabled to hope once more and renew their
The following examples of Jesus’ eschatological activities serve to illustrate Schillebeeckx’s extended development of ‘the ultimate power of powerlessness’ – perhaps what in the Beatitudes is called ‘poverty of spirit.’

It is partly through Jesus’ forgiveness of sins, as recounted in several gospel narratives, that eschatological hope is dispensed to humanity. In his exegesis of Lk 7:36–50, the story in which Jesus forgives the woman of ‘ill repute’ who washes his feet, Schillebeeckx contrasts the greater love of the sinful woman with the law-abiding but lesser virtue of the Pharisee – on eschatological grounds: ‘The sinner-woman recognizes the kingdom of God in Jesus: and that is just what the Pharisee does not do. So she has the greater love; for the least in the kingdom of God is greater, even, than a John the Baptist.’

In another, post-Easter context (Mk 2:10 with parallels in Mt 9:6, 8 and Lk 5:20–26), Jesus – as the ‘son of man’ – is said to have the authority to forgive sins. The remarkable aspect of Mark’s declaration is that neither in the book of Daniel nor in later apocalyptic traditions is the son of man vested with the power to forgive sins. Therefore, concludes Schillebeeckx, the earliest Christians, who were all Jewish, did not ascribe the forgiveness of sins to Jesus on the basis of pre-existing models in their tradition. Rather, real historical events, namely Jesus’ ‘liberating intercourse with sinners,’ must be the basis for such an unprecedented claim in early first-century Jewish Christianity: ‘Both for the Jews and for Jewish Christians the remission of sins is an eschatological doing of God. In the oldest, purely eschatological interpretation of Jesus as the coming son of man[,] redemption and the remission of sins still appear to be for some Christians a purely eschatological occurrence.’

Finally, in Mk 2:15–17 (see also Mt 9:10–13 and Lk 5:29–32), we have a report of another historical event – Jesus’ attendance at a dinner party of tax-collectors, who were regarded by Jews as (impure) sinners. In verse 2:17c, Jesus assumes the role of servant-messenger of the host Levi when he declares: ‘I have not come to call the righteous but sinners’ (considered an authentic logion of Jesus by Bas van Iersel and Rudolf Pesch). Schillebeeckx interprets Mark’s report in eschatological terms:

Although himself Levi’s guest, Jesus sees his own sharing of a meal in company with a lot of taxCollectors in the light of his role as the ‘eschatological messenger’ of God, that is, as the one who proclaims the near approach of God’s lordship and rule and brings to taxCollectors (that is, sinners) on God’s behalf the invitation to the eschatological feast of fellowship with God (Mt 22:1–14; Lk 14:16–24).

Jesus’ ultimate invitation to the eschatological banquet – the symbol of salvation – was his crucifixion. Mark perceives his ‘being delivered into the hands of sinners’ (Mk 9:31 with 14:41), or his association with sinners, as the real meaning of Jesus’ death. Schillebeeckx aptly defines the crucifixion in this context as ‘the seal set on a life with the conscious
calling to invite sinners into fellowship: the eschatological fellowship with God, a foretaste of which may be experienced when we extend forgiveness to our fellow-man (Mk 11:25; Mt 6:14–15; 18:21–35).  

Jesus also embodies the role of the prophet proclaiming eschatological hope in other narratives of table fellowship and in the story of the multiplication of loaves (a story often overlaid with a eucharistic interpretation). In his meal-sharing association with notorious sinners, with friends, and with his disciples – most notably in those stories in which he acts as ‘host’ – Jesus pours the eschatological bounty of the end time into the template of history. ‘In his earthly, historical life the eschatological praxis of the coming rule of God is already coming into view within the dimension of our human history here on earth.’  

We should not see a retrospective Eucharistic gloss in the Marcan account of the ‘miraculous feeding’ (Mk 8:1–9), Schillebeeckx argues, but an actual historical memory of Jesus’ tradition of table fellowship. The ‘historical kernel’ of the story cannot be retrieved, yet Schillebeeckx maintains that its purpose is revealed in Mark’s interpretation of the episode (Mk 8:14–21): ‘This coming and being together definitely has an eschatological significance: the dawning of the joyous time of plenty, thanks to the presence of Jesus.’  

Jesus’ interpretation of his anticipated death in the Last Supper narrative is an intimate expression of eschatological hope, offered to his disciples in the form of a memorial meal. Implied in that promise of salvation is Jesus’ integration of his imminent death into his life of service, despite the apparent failure of his message about the coming kingdom of God: ‘Jesus’ death on the cross, inner consequence of the radicalism of his message and reconciling praxis, indicates that every praxis of liberating reconciliation that is man-directed, is valid in and of itself and not only a posteriori, because of possibly subsequent success. It is not success that counts, neither failure mainly due to others.’  

Moreover, the hope symbolized by Jesus’ final repast with his disciples is also a call to praxis, an invitation to continue his work as the eschatological prophet. But it is a summons to action that the disciples comprehend only after the crisis of the crucifixion has been resolved in the resurrection event (recall the second invitation in the parable of the Reluctant Wedding Guests): ‘Despite the objective foundation of this hope, namely what has already been achieved in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, liberation remains a task which is to be realized in the dimension of our history.’ That unfinished task includes the achievement of unwavering love for God and humanity and the recognition of human failure as an inevitable ingredient in the fragmentary reconciliation of the world and God:

In Jesus’ ‘gratuitous’ love and identification with others, aware that it is not measured by success but by itself in its radical love and identification with others, the true face
of both God and man were revealed. Reconciliation or liberation is only then not a pure change of power structure and consequently a new rule, if it will claim universality, although it yet proceeds from a historically determined and unfinished situation. To deliver others is a given mandate; but it remains a not-yet-realized reconciliation, which for the recalcitrant nature of our history will always bear the marks of failure, suffering, and death – the marks of a love, powerless in this world, but never yielding.

Schillebeeckx explicated the historical ‘fiasco’ of Jesus’ life and ministry as the ironic source of Christian hope. In his view, it is Jesus’ steadfast faith in God, as reported by the evangelists in the contexts of Gethsemane and Golgotha, that gives redemptive meaning to his death and hope to the world, despite the apparent defeat of his proclamations about the coming kingdom. The episode in Gethsemane embodies the existential crisis in which human failure and success are redefined by Jesus in religious terms; and God’s silence at the crucifixion reveals the full gravity of Jesus’ oneness with the divine will:

There is a good deal in the New Testament to suggest that he did not completely understand God’s way (Gethsemane), but that he willingly accepted his fate in the end, despite the fundamental problem that this presented to his message of the imminent kingdom of God. Existentially, then, Jesus had to reconcile an evident human experience of failure with his trust in the God by whom he knew that he had been sent. He resolved to trust in God despite the darkness of his situation. This may well be seen as the heart of the event in Gethsemane. He entrusted to God what from a human point of view seemed to be the failure of his message.

Jesus was not immune to the ‘ambiguity of history,’ and his identity is not directly revealed by him but disclosed indirectly through his lifestyle, his proclamations, and his response to death, all of which are subject to interpretation. In accord with Schillebeeckx’s own perspective on Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross, Richard G. Cote characterizes the spiritual transformation occasioned by the extremity of God’s silence as the divine potential latent in situations of ambiguity:

What this great mystery illustrates is that ambiguity, however threatening, harbours a singular grace: it can unleash the most ferocious instincts of fear and abandonment, while at the same time it can expand the souls of those who put their complete and ultimate trust in God. As with Jesus, or Mary, who on more than one occasion exclaimed, ‘How is this possible?’, or Abraham, our father in faith, ambiguity invites us to reach down deeper within ourselves and there, in the ‘dark night of the soul,’ to surrender more completely to the God of Mystery. In short, ambiguity provides the occasion, while the Spirit within gives us the grace to respond.

Perduring communion with God, even in the desolate circumstances of human betrayal and God’s apparent absence, mysteriously transforms Jesus’ failure into ‘a manifestation of the power of God, the power of love which is apparently helpless and impotent, a love which is disarmed but at the same time disarming.’ As in the case of the archetypal
‘suffering righteous one,’ God identifies with the one whose faith in him and capacity to love others prevail in the most desperate situations:

the Christian knows that in the face of tyrannical power God identifies himself with the one who can take upon himself such a historical fiasco, unarmed, but offering exemplary resistance, in faithfulness to communion with the one who is in the last resort the Lord of history…. At the same time this divine power in the fiasco of Jesus reveals to us that ultimate failure, definitive evil and unreconciled suffering have their real, final and terrifying form only in man’s reluctance and inability to love.96

The resurrection of Jesus is the full manifestation of the radical redefinition of historical failure and success: ‘It is the resurrection which gives the lie to the failure of the message and the life of Jesus, and at the same time to merely human conceptions of what “real success” must and can mean.’97 To express the same idea differently, the death-and-resurrection of Jesus ‘is the ground of hope for a general resurrection’ and thereby the basis for a living communion with God despite personal violation, persecution, and strife.98 Indeed, resurrection faith is a prophetic indictment of the political powers that conspired not only in the crucifixion of Jesus but in the subjugation and deaths of countless others throughout history. ‘Therefore Christian belief in the resurrection is a fundamental protest against the violation of personal freedom, because this Christian faith can only be born of the conviction that a definitive meaning is possible for human personal freedom within the total significance of the whole of human history.’99 Death did not have the last word in antiquity nor does it today;100 on the contrary, compassionate solidarity with suffering humanity empowers people to establish the kingdom of God in the here-and-now: ‘where the church lives by Jesus Christ, lives by praying and liberating men and women in the footsteps of Jesus, belief in the resurrection does not undergo any crisis.’101

The hope kindled by the resurrection of Jesus has a collective thrust: ‘There is not only an individual hope; the Christian opens up “the divine virtue of hope” towards and to the advantage of his fellow man.’102 The exemplary conduct of Christians, who live out their faith without the fear of death, is the ‘evidence’ of which Hebrews speaks: ‘Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’ (11:1 KJV). Only through actions consistent with their faith in the resurrection of Jesus and his promise of eternal life can Christians generate hope: ‘In other words, the question whether Christian belief in the resurrection, through which death unmistakably takes on another meaning, opens up a real future for man, will have to be “proved” again and again, here and now, from corresponding behavior on the part of Christians, from their activities in this world.’103 Schillebeeckx poignantly expresses the cyclic nature of such earthly activities, both within the church and outside it, which culminate as often in failure as in success: ‘The church sees man’s ambitious attempts to transform the world situation and she also
sees the wonderful success of these ambitious undertakings today and their failure tomorrow. Yet, despite this cycle of success and failure, man always continues to set about this task again and again and to begin anew the arduous work of building up the world. Schillebeeckx, like the author of 1 Peter, says Christians have a responsibility to make evident to others the ground of their perennial hope, the wellspring of their ambitious endeavours:

A veiled hope seems to sustain and strengthen this world in spite of certain signs of despair on all sides and a sense of the absurd in the history of the world. In its teaching the church, ‘always prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you’ (1 Pet. 3:15), must seize hold of this concealed hope and invite the world to its explicit expectation: ‘If you knew the gift of God’ (Jn. 4:10) from which you, world, are unconsciously living! If only you recognized God’s gift.104

In his explication of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Schillebeeckx states the relationship of faith and hope concisely: ‘Faith gives substance to hope, and as a result for believers the future is not uncertain and disquieting, despite all the disappointments that may have been experienced. Faith is the matrix in which hope is cast; it does not make hope into any kind of illusion.’ The author of Hebrews admonishes Christians to persevere in their still veiled apprehension of eschatological reality. Schillebeeckx says, in tandem with the imagery of Hebrews, that hope has pierced the veil of the holy of holies, ‘with a faith which still lacks vision.’

The suffering servants’ incisive hope has its point of origin in the faith engendered by the expiatory death and resurrection of Jesus, eschatological high priest, understood by the author of Hebrews in the context of Israel’s salvation history. Noah and Abraham are recalled as prototypical examples of ancient Hebrews who followed the intangible call of God, experienced inwardly as a summons to action, and who vigorously persevered despite the derision and suffering occasioned by their faith.107

There is a whole series of mocked, suffering men who nevertheless have an unshakable faith, of whom Hebrews profoundly says, ‘They were too good for this world’ (11.38); they were already men of the new age, the world of the future – ‘yet not one of them saw the promise fulfilled’ (11.39b). It was this that showed their faith to be so strong, and at the same time it shows what the author understands by faith. ‘God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they (the Old Testament men of faith) should not be made perfect’ (11.40). ‘With us’ and ‘apart from us’ refer to the community of God, the Christians. None of these great figures saw the promise fulfilled, because the eschatological time begins only with the exaltation of Jesus to God (2.10; 5.9; 7.28; 10.14); only then is access to God free (9.11f.; 10.19f.).109

In a play on the word ‘rest,’ Schillebeeckx shows how the author of Hebrews connects faith and hope through his conceptual-pictorial vision of Jesus’ intercession for humanity in heaven. The appellation ‘God’s
rest’ is variously defined; literally, it designates the holy of holies in the
tent of the covenant and, within the tent’s interior depths, the ark –
God’s throne of grace.110 The future world, a replica of the heavenly
realm symbolized by the holy of holies, is God’s rest in which we will
share – and already do share in acts of selfless service – as well as a
support on which we can rest in the present world through faith:

In Hebrews rest always has a liturgical colouring. Thus Christian rest is both present
(4.3) and still to come (4.11). But for Hebrews rest also means ‘rest on,’ to be able
to support oneself on something or someone in order to rest. Just as Jews rest on the
Law and animal sacrifices, so Christians – by virtue of the content of their faith,
which gives substance to hope (Heb. 11), rest directly on God. For Hebrews, rest is
the same thing as justification by faith; it is present and eschatological; it will only
be realized fully after the paroikia or earthly pilgrimage of the ‘strangers in this
world’ (4.3; 4.11).111

The motif of pre-existence is integral to the concept of hope and
hope’s ultimate goal, namely rest, as elaborated in Hebrews. Not only is
Christ conceived as pre-existent, but other elements in salvation history,
such as the eschatological climax of the first age, are said by the author
of Hebrews to pre-exist: ‘Things promised for the future are already
present in heaven.’112 The hope of Hebrews makes manifest in the present
– albeit in a limited way – what has been foretold:

The understanding of hope in Hebrews, as the presence of the future, is important
for the idea of pre-existence. Christ, the representative man, is Lord of the future;
his exaltation shows this. But what precisely is the ontological status of the future?
Does it exist already or not? The answer which the auctor ad Hebraeos gives to
these questions takes the form of a doctrine of hope, founded on the eschatological
idea of pre-existence.113

Although the curtain of the holy of holies remains drawn, we can
enter into the eschaton imaginatively with the insight cultivated by hope,
grounded in faith. For Hebrews, the ‘object of this hope’ – God’s rest –
is deduced from scripture: Ps 95:7–11 (Heb 3:7–11) and Gen 2:2
(Heb 4:4).114 With respect to the humanum, Schillebeeckx interprets ‘rest’
as ultimately the eschatological consummation of selfless service.115
‘Biblical rest, perfected in Jesus Christ, is in fact a human society free
from compulsion, which only finds rest in selfless living; for others with
God and Christ in their transparent midst.’116

The New Testament document of 1 Peter is another text in which the
critical concept of hope is developed with a view to the building up of a
specifically Christian vision of community. The motif of pre-existence
informs the presuppositions of this document, just as it does Hebrews.
In 1 Pet 1:3–12, the source of hope is expressed in eschatological terms
and sets forth the notion of a pre-existent heavenly birthright:

God is blessed, who has ‘begotten us to a living hope through the resurrection of
Jesus Christ from the dead’ (1:3). The fundamental Christian theologumenon – the
resurrection and exaltation of Christ – is thus introduced. Christ is the ground of our hope, and, since he lives, it may be described as a living hope. Its object is located where he is, in heaven, and is described as an 'imperishable, undefiled and unfading inheritance,' kept in heaven and waiting to be revealed in the last time … (1:4–5). 117

However, there is an important distinction between the two letters vis-à-vis a theology of suffering for others. Schillebeeckx perceives the expiatory sacrifice in 1 Peter not in a cultic sense, as in the Epistle to the Hebrews, but as the Christians’ call to vulnerable love in which their hope resides:

The great difference between 1 Peter and Hebrews, which is so closely related to it … is that while 1 Peter interprets suffering for others as an expiatory sacrifice, it does not understand it in a cultic sense (sacrificium propitiatorium). It sees it as an invitation, to vulnerable love for others. Herein lies the hope of which the author says that Christians ‘must always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls them to account for the hope that is in them’ (3.15). Christians must tell the story of this hope, but, the author adds, they must not do so in a triumphalistic way, but ‘with gentleness and with reverence’ (3.15). 118

Such hope has its ground in innocent suffering for others ‘so that these others may be led to reflect and even to be converted, “to be brought to God” (3.18), just as through the suffering of Jesus, Christians and sinners are brought closer together.’ 119 In 1 Peter undeserved suffering accepted humbly is purposive, for by its example non-believers may be led to accept the offer of salvation. The unrighteous may be converted by the example of the suffering servants, who cause their persecutors to reflect on their hostile actions and turn away from their sins. 120 Although 1 Peter grants that innocent suffering is intrinsically worthy, prior to the sufferer’s exaltation by God, that is not the text’s main focus; rather, the potential conversion of sinners through the innocent suffering of the righteous is 1 Peter’s central theme and the mainspring of its hope:

In 2.12 we have clear evidence of the theme of the ‘righteous sufferer’ who is put out of the way by his enemies; however, these have to bear the sight of the innocent sufferer in the heavenly council, thus recognizing their mistake. They are forced to acknowledge the true son of God. The innocent sufferer is rehabilitated before the heavenly court of justice, and those who once mocked him have to pay homage publicly. This theme, which is connected above all with the wisdom tradition, underlies 1 Peter. However, it amounts to more than that. It is an anticipation of the past [sic] judgment. For 1 Peter, suffering for others has one particular result: it puts wrong-doers to shame (3.16; 2.12; cf 3.1) and thus converts them. 121

The life and ministry of Jesus resonate in the discipleship of the suffering servants of 1 Peter, thereby shedding light on his actual identity. 122 To put it yet another way, Jesus’ faithful response to his anticipation of death – for the sake of the kingdom of God – is the Christians’ touchstone for the value of their own vulnerability to suffering through and for others: ‘the power of a love which is apparently helpless and impotent,
a love which is disarmed but at the same time disarming.' Faith in Jesus’ unbroken communion with God in the face of death motivates Christians to fearless and hope-filled activity. Even when there is no longer a rational basis for hope in a given situation, Schillebeeckx says that Christians must work as if there is, joyfully embracing the limitation or risk inherent in any selfless act: ‘So joy is bought even in negative suffering, in failure and helplessness. That, too, is a form of liberation, albeit in a world that is still unhealed.’ This may even be the deepest import of Jesus as our prophetic, eschatological prototype – the transformation of failure and suffering into a constructive and critical force.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Anamnesis, or critical remembrance, and eschatological hope – perceived as intrinsic to the eschatological images of Jesus as prophet and priest – are models for Christian praxis. Anamnesis – the memoria passionis Christi – is understood as a living biblical tradition from which new memories, new experiences of resistance to suffering emerge. The critical remembrance of Jesus’ passion and of suffering humanity inspire practical action in the present; the liturgical tradition of recounting liberating actions of biblical personages is the paradigm for socio-political protest against existing structures that oppress, dehumanize, or impoverish people. Habermas’s principle of the unity of theory and practice is also influential in Schillebeeckx’s conception of critical remembrance, which comprises a balance of socio-political theory derived from contemplation and theologically informed praxis. His principle for the interpretation of reality – the authority of experience mediated by reference to the history of tradition and to the eschatological future – is central to his re-conceptualization of liturgy as a spur to action that overcomes suffering. The authority of experience, mediated by reference to both past and future, culminates in narratives of suffering that eventuate in Christian praxis.

The Epistle to the Hebrews illustrates several of the elements of anamnesis as Schillebeeckx conceives it: the continuity of world history and salvation history; critical recollection of tradition with a view to the eschatological future as promised by Christ; a dual focus on the redemptive suffering of Jesus and the transcendent reality of God; and the practise of prophetic criticism resulting from the tension between the remembered history of suffering and a vision of pre-existent salvation history in the heavenly realm. Schillebeeckx’s dialogue with Metz regarding the realization of salvation within world history is relevant to the paradigm in Hebrews. Although both theologians espouse the essential unity of world history and salvation history, Schillebeeckx criticizes Metz’s political theology on the grounds that the relation of God to
Christ’s passion is not adequately developed in Metz. Specifically, he finds that suffering humanity inadvertently assumes God’s place in Metz’s theology. Hebrews provides a theological corrective to Metz in its dual emphasis on God’s transcendence and on Jesus’ humanity and self-transcendence through conformity to the will of God.

The retrieval and re-evaluation of forgotten or suppressed traditions in the history of the church is also a type of critical remembrance. The contemporary phenomenon of critical communities exemplifies the mutually critical correlation of past ecclesial traditions and present experience, leading to liberating practices, such as the active ministry of now-married priests and the celebration of the mass by women and other non-ordained church leaders. Through his critical analysis of priestly ordination by way of its historical reconstruction, Schillebeeckx identifies laws of ritual purity as an ossified rationale for the exclusively celibate male clergy. The redefinition of priesthood in Hebrews, namely the rejection of Levitical exclusivity, parallels the contemporary challenge to the official priesthood by alternative communities, which Schillebeeckx has championed and for which he was called to account by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Schillebeeckx has also integrated into his theology of suffering for others the more comprehensive interpretation of ‘the critical recollection of tradition,’ drawing upon the works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Kolakowski, and Ricoeur (among others). The remembered traditions of world history, especially the forgotten and suppressed contributions and values of marginalized, conquered, or disempowered peoples, is integral to Schillebeeckx’s critical, eschatological orientation. Related to the critical recollection of traditions is his critique of the amorphous Enlightenment ideal of universal brotherhood; as a corrective to the ahistorical Enlightenment vision, Schillebeeckx posits Jesus of Nazareth as the essential historical criterion for a universal human community. For Schillebeeckx, *anamnesis* is not only the commemoration of a holy event but a critical tool – a kind of divining rod – in the quest for the kingdom of God, which includes all those who have gone before and suffered for the sake of a renovated world. Although Schillebeeckx is adamantly unwilling to define the *humanum* in a definitive manner, the following passage provides an intimation of his eschatological sensibilities:

‘Kingdom of God,’ a key term in the message of Jesus, is the biblical expression for the nature of God – unconditional and liberating sovereign love – in so far as this comes to fruition in the lives of men and women who do God’s will, and is manifested in them. The kingdom of God is a new relationship of human beings to God, with as its tangible and visible side a new type of liberating relationship between men and women, within a peaceful, reconciled society.

Schillebeeckx’s discernment of hope as an eschatological concept is predicated on the transformation of the history of suffering into a
constructive and critical force, as exemplified particularly in Jesus of Nazareth. He understands Jesus’ preaching about the coming kingdom of God as a message of hope that emerges from Jesus’ consciousness of the contrast between the history of suffering and his experience of God as Abba. Schillebeeckx’s exegesis of the biblical passages discussed above – taken from the Beatitudes, narratives of Jesus’ forgiveness of sins, and stories of his table fellowship – lay the foundation for the development of hope as the antidote to suffering and as a presentiment of eschatological salvation. The Last Supper narrative is also a summons to liberating action issued by Jesus to his disciples, just as the anamnesis of liturgy, derived from the same narrative, is a call to praxis in the present. Implicit in the account(s) of the memorial meal is Jesus’ integration of his death into his life of service, giving redemptive value to his ultimate sacrifice for the sake of others. Schillebeeckx sees in Jesus’ inseparable life, ministry, and death the tacit redefinition of historical failure and success. The poignant ambiguity of Gethsemane and of Jesus’ forlorn cry from the cross are interpreted by Schillebeeckx as Jesus’ abiding communion with God (to which Psalm 22 in its entirety attests). Rather than the defeat of his message, Jesus’ crucifixion – his steadfast devotion to God’s will for human salvation – is the transformation of failure into the fulfilment of the eschatological promise. And it provides a model for all Christians in the context of their own existential crises.

The resurrection of Jesus is the full manifestation of the redefinition of failure and success and issues in the disciples’ living communion with God and the hope of a general resurrection. In a more radical vein, resurrection faith is a prophetic criticism of political abuses and the violation of personal freedom as well as a vindication of the suffering righteous ones. The hope of which Hebrews speaks is defined in relation to faith, which engenders hope through Jesus’ vicarious and expiatory sacrifice as well as through his resurrection. The aim of the Jewish-Christian community’s hope is rest, symbolically construed as both the Sabbath – God’s rest – and a support during the time between Jesus’ exaltation and the eschaton. Schillebeeckx interprets Hebrews’ concept of rest as the eschatological consummation of selfless service patterned after Jesus’ unremitting petition for humanity in heaven during the intervening period. The pre-existence of salvation history is vital to the development of the ‘doctrine of hope’ in Hebrews. Even though the curtain of the holy of holies separates humanity from full participation in the kingdom of God, Christians can anticipate the eschaton and strive to actualize salvation history with the foresight nurtured by hope.

The source and object of hope in 1 Peter, as in Hebrews, is conceived as a pre-existent heavenly inheritance – the promised salvation accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But there is an important distinction between the two letters: Schillebeeckx perceives the expiatory sacrifice in 1 Peter not in a cultic sense but as the Christians’ invitation
to vulnerable love, which is the very ground of their hope and their inspiration to engage in selfless activity for the sake of God’s kingdom. The core presupposition of 1 Peter is that undeserved suffering, by its very example, leads others to accept the offer of salvation. Suffering is not valued for its own sake, rather only in so far as it promotes the conversion of the unrighteous. The life and ministry of Jesus are reflected in 1 Peter’s picture of the suffering servants, who illumine Jesus’ actual identity. His unbroken communion with God in Gethsemane and on the cross motivates the intrepid Christians of 1 Peter to persevere despite the many acts of persecution that assail them. Even when hope has been exhausted in a given situation, Schillebeeckx says that Christians must willingly accept their vulnerability and carry on despite the limitations and inherent dangers of their particular circumstances. He proposes that the transformation of failure and suffering into a critical and constructive force is Jesus’ eschatological legacy to the world and a model for the suffering servants of any age.

Notes
4 Schillebeeckx, Christ, p. 812.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 811.
7 Schillebeeckx’s conception of critical remembrance has been influenced by the work of P. Ricoeur, M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, J. Habermas, H. Marcuse, L. Kolakowski, J.-B. Metz, and W. Oelmüller (ibid., p. 896 n. 147).
8 Ibid., pp. 287–288.
9 Ibid., pp. 275–276.
10 Ibid., p. 239.
11 Ibid., p. 288. See ibid., pp. 561–567 for a discussion of the early Churches’ recognition of the need for ethical action and structural reform, even though their praxis was limited to the boundaries of their local congregations.
12 Ibid., p. 283.
13 Ibid., p. 285.
14 Ibid., pp. 275–276.
15 Ibid., p. 275.
18 Schillebeeckx, Christ, p. 752.
19 Ibid., p. 753.
20 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 754.

23 Ibid., p. 755.

24 Ibid., p. 756.

25 Ibid., p. 278.


28 Schillebeeckx, Christ, p. 815.

29 Ibid., p. 287. See also Schillebeeckx’s statements about the ‘exodus’ model of church community, which he thinks must be reinterpreted in different historical contexts (ibid., pp. 560–561).


31 Ibid.


33 Ibid., p. 28.


35 Schillebeeckx, Church, p. 30.


40 Ross, p. 108.

41 Schillebeeckx, Christ, p. 249.

42 Edward Schillebeeckx, ‘The Church’s Ministry,’ in The Schillebeeckx Reader, pp. 231–239. Schillebeeckx identifies the dichotomy of the heavenly church and the earthly church as the mistaken concept that obstructs the renewal of the official church ministry, despite the statement of Vatican II (Lumen Gentium I, 8) that the earthly and heavenly churches must be understood as indivisible (ibid., p. 233).


47 Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 896 n. 147.
50 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 591. It is instructive to contrast the vague utopia of the Enlightenment with the ‘ground-level communities’ or ‘cells’ that some social scientists think are ‘the only effective means of influencing the whole for the good of all’ (ibid., p. 592).
51 Ibid., p. 592.
52 Ibid., p. 593.
53 Ibid., p. 594.
54 Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 733.
58 Ibid., pp. 170–171.
60 Schillebeeckx, *Church*, p. 40.
61 Ibid., p. 109.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., p. 44.
64 Hinze, p. 142.
65 Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 820. See also Hilkert, p. 47.
71 Ibid., pp. 174–177.
72 Ibid., p. 177.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., p. 178.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., pp. 179–271.
78 Ibid., p. 269.
79 Ibid., p. 208.
80 Ibid., pp. 208–209.
81 Ibid., p. 209.
83 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 211.
84 Ibid., p. 212.
85 Ibid., p. 213.
86 Ibid., p. 215.
87 Edward Schillebeeckx, ‘Rejection, Death, and Resurrection,’ in *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, p. 154. ‘Now religions and the church are precisely the anamnesis, the memory of this universal salvific will and saving presence of God, ground of all hope’ (idem, ‘The Christian and the World,’ in *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, p. 257).


89 Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 514.
92 Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 829.
93 Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 637.


95 Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 830.
96 Ibid., p. 831.
97 Ibid., p. 829.
98 Ibid., p. 801.
99 Ibid., p. 800.
100 See the section titled ‘Victory over death, the “last enemy”’ on the history of ideas about death in the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions (ibid., pp. 797–801).

101 Schillebeeckx, *Church*, p. 130.
102 Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, p. 801.
103 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
107 Ibid., p. 280.
108 Ibid., pp. 280–281.
109 Ibid., p. 282.
110 Ibid., p. 269.
111 Ibid., p. 289.

113 Ibid., p. 249.
114 Ibid.
116 Ibid., p. 289.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid., pp. 227–228.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., p. 229.
123 Ibid., pp. 228–229, 830.
124 Ibid., p. 514.
125 Ibid., p. 743. The radical understanding of failure that Schillebeeckx has developed, as it applies to Jesus and others who seek to promote good and discredit evil, is relevant to this point (ibid., pp. 793–794, 827–829).

127 Portier, p. 191. See also Swidler, pp. iii–viii.