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Religious liberty as concept and reality. Two perspectives from Schillebeeckx and Nolan's anthropologies

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Summary: This paper is an analysis of two influential theologians who advocate the need for the Church as an institution to break with its tradition and set out on a journey of accommodation with the new realities of the world today. This journey proposed by Edward Schillebeeckx and Albert Nolan is panoramic since it investigates the possibility and necessity for the church to engage in a fair dialogue with society. At the end of this irregular trip into cohesion, this study will present the outcome of both Schillebeeckx and Nolan' positions toward liberal theology as an alternative to dogmatism and political crisis. Therefore, the main objective of this study will be to facilitate a better understanding of the church and its tenets in its relationship with the oppressed and marginalized of the present times. The context in which Schillebeeckx and Nolan develop their respective theologies will be approached as two separate social realities of our present time, namely the Western culture and the African society. The aim is to determine the degree in which the liberty they both search for is taken into account by these two thinkers and how illustrative and relevant their perspective on church, God, history and suffering is for men and women living in nowadays eventful history.¹

Keywords: Schillebeeckx, Nolan, church, religious freedom, liberation theology, humanum

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag bietet eine Analyse von zwei einflussreichen Theologen, die die Notwendigkeit für die Kirche als Institution, mit ihrer Tradition zu brechen, und einen Weg der Anpassung an die neuen Realitäten der heutigen

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Welt befürworten. Dieser von Edward Schillebeeckx und Albert Nolan vorgeschlagene Weg eröffnet ein weiten Überblick, insofern er die Möglichkeit und die Notwendigkeit der Kirche betrachtet, in einen fairen Dialog mit der Gesellschaft einzutreten. Am Ende dieses irregulären Weges zur Geschlossenheit, wird diese Studie das Ergebnis von Schillebeeckx and Nolans Position gegenüber liberaler Theologie als Alternative zu Dogmatismus und politischer Krisis aufzeigen. Deshalb ist der Hauptgegenstand dieser Studie, ein besseres Verständnis der Kirche und ihrer Lehren in Beziehung zu den Unterdrückten und Benachteiligten der Gegenwart herauszuarbeiten. Der Kontext, in dem Schillebeeckx und Nolan ihre jeweiligen Theologien entwickeln, steht in Beziehung zu zwei gegenwärtigen sozialen Realitäten, speziell der westlichen Kultur und der afrikanischen Gesellschaft. Es ist das Ziel, den Grad zu bestimmen, in dem die in beiden Kontexten angestrebte Freiheit von diesen beiden Denkern berücksichtigt wird und wie anschaulich und relevant ihre Perspektive auf Kirche, Gott, Geschichte und Leiden für Männer und Frauen, die in der gegenwärtigen ereignisreichen Geschichte leben, ist.

Schlüsselwörter: Schillebeeckx, Nolan, Kirche, Religionsfreiheit, Befreiungstheologie, humanum

I Introduction

Whoever takes a look at the more recent books written by Edward Schillebeeckx could be surprised to notice a work which comprises his vast area of interests up to the 1980s. It is with the third chapter of the book *Jesus in Our Western Culture* (Schillebeeckx, 1987) that Schillebeeckx moves toward more precise definitions of the concepts of ministry, anthropology, and social ethics, concepts that he already analyzed in his previous works. This third chapter opens what we previously called the second-half of the book. If the first-half was mainly orientated towards the relationship between the God of the Old Testament and the cosmic ethics articulated in the experience of creation and salvation through Jesus of Nazareth, the chapter about the church-world relationship opens somehow strategically the second-half of the book. From the very beginning, Schillebeeckx introduces us to a new area of interest so far, namely the doctrine of the church and its “human face”, the world. Consequently, what Schillebeeckx goes on to suggest both the way of interpreting the outcome of Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross, that is, the birth of the church, and the reason for the existence of the church, that is, the mediation of the divine disclosure into our human history. Thus, given the inner structure of the book and of Schillebeeckx’s thought, the

church is sought to proclaim the transitional character of ethics from a cosmological to an anthropological dimension. That is, the church is the place in which the act of salvation in Christ becomes a genuine historical event for nowadays men and women. As a true Catholic, Schillebeeckx is surely entitled to saying that the church makes the transition from doctrine to history, from things belonging to the cosmic order to things belonging to contingency. But the questions he asks are: is the church free in its authority and is it related in any way to the secular world? These two questions seem important not only for this particular study, but also for other writers inspired in their quest for religious liberty by Schillebeeckx's thought, such as the South African theologian Albert Nolan.

II Church and world in Schillebeeckx's concept of freedom

Contrary to the directives of the Catholic church, Schillebeeckx does not give much credit to the Church as an institutional *defensor fidei*. Rather, he tries to develop a new way of talking about the church with an accent on the social and natural character of Christian dogma. The reason why Schillebeeckx finds it difficult to depict a traditional image of the church is that, as he says, hundreds of years of church life have taken the doctrine away from people and thus broken the balance between theology and humanity:

We need a bit of “negative ecclesiology”, church theology in the minor key, to achieve a healthy balance, in order to undo the centuries long ecclesiocentrism of the empirical phenomenon of “Christian faith”... for God's sake, for the sake of Jesus the Christ and for the sake of humanity. (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 31)

Schillebeeckx's main concern is not to discuss all over again the doctrinal status of the church, but to reiterate the idea belonging to the *Nouvelle théologie* that theology must start from below and go upwards, according to Yves Congar's mention that “we must not make another Church, but... a different Church” (Congar, 1950: 251), based on its living tradition. We must define our faith in human language so that the Christian phenomenon might regain its empirical dimension and become the religion of the people as it once was. As a consequence of this idea, Schillebeeckx stresses that the redefinition of the church infers as a precondition the redefinition of the main Christian doctrines to which we payed attention in the first chapter of *Jesus in Our Western Culture*.

Hence, Schillebeeckx speaks of the church from a twofold perspective. In the first place, he refers to the doctrinal or the theological dimension of the church.

The first chapter of *Jesus in Our Western Culture* left us with an open question regarding the role of the church within God's eternal plan of transforming the "secular history" into "salvation history". The question, as Schillebeeckx put it, refers to the role of the church in this process, whether it mediates the significant transformation or not. As we see it and as we have said before, this dimension of the church implies the clarification of Christian doctrine and is more theological in nature. It envisages rather the rethinking of the concept of God, Jesus and creation, without giving an explicit statement about the role of the church as mediator. Only in the second place, Schillebeeckx speaks of the church as having a relational dimension. He clarifies the church in the salvation history when it comes to "the relationship of the church of Christ to Jesus of Nazareth". As Schillebeeckx states in the first chapter of *Jesus in Our Western Culture*, if the death of Jesus was necessary in order to redo the unity between God and humanity, his resurrection would set Jesus of Nazareth in a new light as the Christ of faith by the mediation of the community of faith which is the church:

One can say that the 'church of Christ' which came into being on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus is the deepest significance of the 'appearances of Jesus': in the church community 'assembled' in faith there appears, is present, the crucified but risen Christ. (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 27–28)

Thus, the church of Christ already receives a relational significance secured only by the resurrection of Jesus. The church was the one to interpret the "appearances of Jesus" as resurrection and in this power was enabled to mediate the message of Jesus' death to the world as salvation from suffering. In this sense, the second perspective from which Schillebeeckx sees the church is relational and also ethical in structure. It implies the mediation of the benefits of Jesus' death to the "dehumanized" and its purpose is to bring about the Kingdom of God, *i.e.* the *humanum* or what Schillebeeckx calls the full realization of humanity within history, according to God's eternal plan (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 27, in line with Congar and Chenu's perspective on the *humanum*, see Nicola Ottiger, 2006: 133, note 68; compare further to the *humanum* understood in its social and relational capacities, in Eduardus van der Borght, ed., 2008: 337).

In the closing part of his discussion on the church, Schillebeeckx approaches a more recent theme in theological talk about this institution, namely the communion of the Church with other Christian churches, which he calls the "pluralism of the Christian churches". Schillebeeckx makes it clear that he understands the concept of pluralism in this context as unity between all the churches of Christendom (see Wayne Teesdale, 2004; the same fractionary dialogism in Elizabeth A. Johnson, 2002), in line with the new political orientation of the Roman Catholic Church since the 2nd Vatican Council.

Given the two perspectives from which Schillebeeckx defines the church, *i.e.* doctrinal and ethical, future discussions will follow the logical path already familiar to us from the first chapter. Thus, the subject of the relationship between church and world will take the place of the previous debate regarding the relationship between God and creation, whereas the subject of the relationship between church and Jesus of Nazareth will replace the previous Jesus-world debate. This circular orientation of the book gives Schillebeeckx the opportunity to reiterate the importance of Christian dogma and faith in the light of a new and redefined reality for contemporary men and women, and also to draw near to the final part of his book, the importance of Jesus as ethics for nowadays society and politics.

As previously stated, Schillebeeckx's soteriology in *Jesus in Our Western Culture* proves to be more historical, in a chronological way, than dogmatical. What is meant by this is that Schillebeeckx keeps reminding his readers that at first the idea of salvation did not have a religious character but was historically bounded. It was a "worldly reality" due to the fact that it was born in the very context of creation without any religious influences whatsoever. In fact, in the first part of the book, Schillebeeckx gives so much credit to creation that he attributes to the natural order a sacramental meaning. Creation is indeed the sacrament of God in history because it encapsulates all the particularities of the future Kingdom of God, given both the characteristics of human persons and the purity of the natural environment. As Schillebeeckx put it,

Creation is a blank cheque to which only God himself stands guarantor. It is a vote of confidence which gives the person who believes in the creator God the power to believe... that the kingdom of God... is in fact in the making for humanity, in the power of God's creation... (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 18)

Therefore, creation in itself was, in the Old Testament, the unveiling of God's love and salvation and it was perceived as such in the consciousness of ancient men and women. Likewise, Schillebeeckx continues his thoughts in the third chapter by saying that, in the new order we are faced with in the New Testament, the church is perceived as a "sacrament" or a sign of God's salvation in this new historical context. What is interesting here is that one may feel the need to make a necessary difference between the church in itself as the unveiling of God and the church in the world or an outward church, the two being separate realities, and Schillebeeckx recognizes and decries such gap. This situation is interesting because it does not naturally flow from the early view that although one, the church reflects both its inward reality (Christ) and its outward appearance through its testimony/word, in such way that "the inward church is expressed through the outward church" (Witness Lee, 2005: 122). Today's church seems to

represent two separate realities, namely one that is authoritarian and one pre-occupied with the well-being of people both in and outside the church. The reason is that in the first chapter Schillebeeckx presents a specific situation where the revelation of God in creation meets the religious need of the human person and thus revelation comes to be understood as liberation from historical suffering. Either way, the outward disclosure of the divine comes differently for the believer and for the non-believer (see Mary Catherine Hilkert, Robert J. Schreiter, eds., 2002: 69). In this circumstance, Schillebeeckx understands to explain the revelation to the believer as particular and higher than the revelation to the non-believer or to the religious man because they do not interpret the meaning of revelation in the same way.

Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx is very careful not to misuse the meaning of salvation when he clarifies the sense of revelation. This is to say, though particular religions and different churches are the expression of man's need for salvation, they are not in themselves salvation, because salvation entails a much higher meaning and a special human mediation in the person of Jesus from Nazareth. Though Schillebeeckx does not make very clear yet what is the role of the "church of Christ" and whether it can be identified with the church witnessing a post-Easter Jesus, it is less clear whether Schillebeeckx allows for any difference at all between religion and church as soteriological sacraments. This question comes on the basis of Schillebeeckx's statement that

[religions and churches] are the explicit identification and ultimate fulfillment of... salvation. Churches are the places where salvation from God is made a theme or put into words, confessed explicitly, proclaimed prophetically and celebrated liturgically. So there is an unbreakable relation between 'world' and 'religion'. (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 32)

The question above stays if one thinks at the implications of Schillebeeckx's statement on his theory about the church *ecumene*. It identifies the ecumenical character of the church and indeed the very concept of *ecumene* with the unity of the Christian churches and not with great world religions as Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. Moreover, in the first chapter Schillebeeckx himself argued that the soteriological experiences of the believer are to be set above the liberation experiences of the non-believer (called the religious experience). How, then, is Schillebeeckx right to affirm that both religions and churches are the "*anamnesis*" of God's saving presence in the world? In this context, the ecclesiastical sacraments find their basis in the events before and after Easter, so much that the existence of the church is not sustained exclusively by social and political activity. This Christian conviction is a biblical statement and it represents the very Roman-Catholic teaching regarding the birth and the future of the church (Matthew 16:17–19). Contrary to this, Schillebeeckx asserts that religions and churches

must prove effective social implication, on one condition however: that of not perverting their functions which can be sacramental or ritualistic:

...the churches have a wrong understanding of themselves: (a) if they do not understand themselves in relation to the world events... and (b) if in their participatory and interpretative relationship to world events they think that they can abandon specifically religious forms like confession, word and sacrament. If the churches have a political significance, this significance must find its basis in the mystical dimension of the church and not in secular power. (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 33)

This last statement prevents Schillebeeckx from being confounded with a religious partisan, even if one may still need some explanations regarding the meaning of genuine mysticism and politics which he only offers at the end of his book. Nevertheless, the impression that is being created here is that one needs to divide the concept of religion and church into two separate and very distinct aspects of human faith. This is because Schillebeeckx identifies the so-called universal conscience of creation about God and salvation with a “universal saving presence” which the concept of religion entails without embodying the latter more particular characteristics. What is meant here is that in this context the conscience of creation is one with the religious conscience of the modern man. Thus, the concept of church is not at stake here any more that the concept of religion, though one individual does not share the same religious conviction with another individual and even if the fundamental doctrines of world religions do not share a common content and practice.

Schillebeeckx speaks indeed of world religions individually, but the concept of church is not identified as a unique ecclesiastical instance. Moreover, the Christian church is not at all “the one [and only] church” as a particular concept (see Edward Schillebeeckx, 1985: 135) like in Hans Küng, but is a “segment of faith” among many other “segments of our human history”. Consequently, “synagogues and pagodas, mosques and churches” are religious forms and religions as “Hinduism, Buddhism, Israel, Jesus, Islam... are a segment of our human history and cannot be understood without this ‘profane history’” (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 33).

What is more interesting is that Schillebeeckx makes a transfer of content between the functions of the church and the particularities of religions. The fundamental functions of the church are well known and Schillebeeckx identifies them as confession, word (or the function of proclamation) and sacrament (his writings on the eucharist, ordination and marriage, for example, have had a sound influence both on clergy and laymen in the Roman Catholic Church). With Schillebeeckx, however, these ecclesiastical functions receive a broader meaning as “specifically religious forms”. This is precisely the reason why we mentioned

earlier the need to divide the interrelated concept of religion and church at Schillebeeckx into two separate concepts. As specificities can also be found in other religions, Schillebeeckx reckons that unless we try to avoid both “absolutism and relativism in connection with what is called religion”, we show “a new form of modern ‘indifferentism’ toward religion on the wrong account that “all religions are equally relative, or equally wrong” (see Schillebeeckx quoted in Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, 2012: 104). We also have to keep in mind Schillebeeckx’s comparison between the church as the unveiling of God and the world as the veiling of God, especially if religion is understood as segment of the ‘profane’ history, as we have already shown. In this context, to identify religion with church would be to erase the imminent line of demarcation between the “sacrament” of the Christian faith (as title of the church in Schillebeeckx) and the “outside event” of human experience of God which world religions encounter.

Confession and word, sacrament and practice of faith, action to heal and to open up communication... do not make the experience of the world event superfluous, while the so-called worldly ‘outside event’ makes speaking in the language of faith and Christian praxis necessary... Historical and also social and political praxis in the world cannot be separated from action in proclamation, pastorate and sacraments. To break this connection is to damage the inner structure of religion and church. (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 34)

In the same line with Schillebeeckx’s accent on the interfaith collaboration for the propagation of good deeds as the true religion, another Dominican from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, by the name of Albert Nolan proposes a definition of religious life and liberty in a setting dominated by a multi-layered concept of Christianity. Since for many years during the South-African Apartheid regime, Nolan was the prime-vicar of the country’s Dominican order, he was also a key-figure in the events leading to the “State of Emergency” on July 1985 (see, for this political crisis the South African History Archive, http://www.saha.org.za/ecc25/ecc_under_a_state_of_emergency.htm, retrieved October 2016; also Shaun Johnson, 1989), when the Catholic Church took a sharp position against the white power, proclaiming the need for religious leaders to finally come down to the people and be involved with the current state of affairs in what he called a “liberation” theological praxis. Nolan’s “theology from below” was a result of his interest in same life situations as the one he was living on a daily basis in his home country. When he began reading priest Thomas Merton’s work like, for instance, the *Seven Storey Mountain* sort of novel written in 1948, Nolan finally understood what the role of the church should be in life-threatening contexts, namely social activism, and also reached the conclusion that Christianity could not stand alone in this project, since Merton himself promoted Christians dialogue with other pacifist religions in his studies on comparative religion.

III Albert Nolan's battle for freedom in South Africa

Albert Nolan reached the international (and South-African) public for the first time in 1976, when he published his imposing book *Jesus before Christianity: the Gospel of Liberation*. In this first book with an international character, Nolan is rather a student of Schillebeeckx's work in hermeneutics, as the book is an analysis of those biblical texts that mainly show Jesus's life, message and ministry happening before the rise of Christianity to its worldwide fame. This work is meant as a reminder that Jesus became incarnate and then worked in a particular nation and time, that is, on the territory of a very turbulent Palestine, and his pioneering message was about installing a social equilibrium in the midst of injustice.

Nolan's four-part book prompts men and women to first liberating themselves from presuppositions and act like Jesus by reaching to their neighbors not by lecturing them on the value of their religion, but by showing their compassion in the public sphere. The Gospel itself was, Nolan says, a liberating event. For instance, if one takes into account Harvey J. Sindima's *Gospel According to the Marginalized*, there is also fifth Gospel, namely a "Gospel of the marginalized" (Sindima, 2008: 16 fwd). If the Gospel was indeed a liberating event for Jesus' listeners and disciples, then their actions should be toward social equity with a hint that there will always be poor people on the face of the earth which need to be liberated through our actions; however, Nolan's efforts do not spring from some Communist doctrines, but from his exegetic investigations which by the example that Jesus set forth are universal in tone.

More situational or "contextual" than this first work is his 1988 book *God in South Africa: the Challenge of the Gospel*. In the same year another work illustrating Catholic situational theology was written by Gustavo Gutierrez, titled *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, published like Nolan's 1976 work by Orbis in New York. Around the same period of time (1976–1986), Schillebeeckx's writings on the theology of ministry and Christology came under the investigation of the Council for the Doctrine of the Faith, and his orthodoxy on the said doctrines was questioned once again based on Schillebeeckx's hermeneutical insights on who Jesus really was and the social input of his earthly ministry. And in 1987 a survey of Schillebeeckx's publications up to that moment was reprinted under the title *The Schillebeeckx Reader* by Robert J. Schreiter as editor, an important step towards the familiarization of Catholic and non-Catholic readers with the theologian's writings on Christian dogma and experience. As Lieven Boeve et al. latter explained, "it is precisely this link between the modern human experience of searching for liberation and the Christian message of salvation that

presents the best argument in support of the plausibility and relevance of Christian faith today, both within and with respect to secular society” (see Lieven Bovee, Frederiek Depoortere, and Stephan van Erp, eds., 2010: 14 fwd).

These other primary writings and references are particularly significant here because they remind us of the real setting of Western theological debated today, *i.e.* the secular society, in which neither Christian dogma nor church authority are given prominence outside a social end and activism. For what is worth, Nolan’s 1988 book *God in South Africa* is about africans’ liberation from under white domination just as Gutierrez’s liberation program for Latin American nations is, and beside those books’ social overtones there is also a strong accent on Christians’ involvement with politics and their power to bring corrupt political leaders to justice. Nevertheless, Gutierrez’s study continues to be influential today due to the idea that what happens with South American politically and socially oppressed nations reflects same situations in other third-world countries. On the other hand, Nolan’s anti-Apartheid notes from *God in South Africa* are local and situational in nature (for instance, they talk about the concepts of sin and deliverance explicitly in South Africa), and they only resemble war conditions found in Merton and Gutierrez’s works but without their universal applicability and interests.

As an English-speaking white priest attempting to suffer alongside South-African natives, upon the publication of this book Nolan had to keep away from the secret police in order not to be arrested for the ideas and depiction of black lives in his book, which soon became an international best-seller with a probably unintended autobiographical timbre. Few books with an African descent today managed to parallel Nolan’s work, and perhaps another illustration of the hardships met by local social and political activists is Nelson Mandela’s autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* from 1994, which is another example of how activism turns its advocates into humans (not soldiers, machines) in search of liberty. In all these writings, including Nolan’s *God in South Africa*, the fact that activist are humanized to the point of embodying Jesus’ worldly mission and sufferings is a key-point whereby liberation theologies are recognized all the way through. Resuming Nolan’s affiliation to the Continental theology, it should be said that his sympathy for thinkers like Schillebeeckx does not take into account the latter’s warning from his 1987 book *Jesus in Our Western Culture* that activism and religion come to a breaking point in one important caption. First of all, Schillebeeckx warns in his own academic style, one has to understand that religion does not support violence; it rather is

the place where men and women become explicitly aware of God’s saving actions in our worldwide history and in which these saving actions within history call religions and religious salvation to life. (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 8)

Indeed, by this Schillebeeckx does mean that the whole history of salvation is anthropocentric, since its language is available to men and women, thus salvation and related concepts are to be found in human history. Concepts like well-being (which we have to promote) and the concept of evil (which we fight against) help us see the God of love who brings salvation in a known way to us. It is true that Schillebeeckx says that the different religions provide the scenes of interpretative experiences of salvation from God, and hence he encourages religious dialogue at a greater extent that the Catholic Church would have expected (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1987: 9). However, in quite the opposite fashion than Nolan, Schillebeeckx was rather cautious not to entrust secularism with a far too optimistic task which would replace some of God's roles in the life of religious people. He maintains that

God, the hope of religious man, had in the past to function as his refuges in those secular spheres in which he had not yet achieved a firm hold on the world and human society... Now that man seems to be capable of coping with the world on his own, he no longer appeals to God and the Church to supply for his impotence. This aspect of the modern phenomenon can legitimately be called secularization. (Edward Schillebeeckx, 1968: 173–74)

As dramatic as human suffering may be, Schillebeeckx advises that one should not minimize the role of God in any “liberating” event, as God is still the totally other in every instance. It is significant to notice that since in the 20th century they reached prominence, there are other “liberation” theologies apart from those in Latin America (see, for instance, Omar Naseef, 2007; for a map of liberation theologies, see Alfred T. Hennelly, 1990; regarding many liberation theologies in Easter Europe, the former Soviet Union, and China, see Ian Linden, 1997–2000: 27 fwd.; also, for Australia, see Jione Havea, ed., 2014).² Although he is sympathetic to Latin American Liberation Theology (or any other theologies of liberation), for Schillebeeckx God retains his attributes as the *alterus*, which mean that there's still a break between mysticism and politics, between communion with God and action for humanity. Under no circumstance would Schillebeeckx maintain that God encourages such acts of “liberation” which involve the kind of violence that can be associated with the natives' fight against their colonizers, for instance, or

² See also Alexander NEGROV, *An Overview of Liberation Theology in Orthodox Russia*, <http://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/13375>, retrieved, October 2016; “Obama Picks Cuban Liberation Theologian as U.S Ambassador to the Holy See”, *Catholic News Agency*, May 28, 2009, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/diaz-nomination-obama-passes-major-catholic-test>; Ion Mihai PACEPA, *We Created Liberation Theology*, at <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/for-mer-soviet-spy-we-created-liberation-theology-83634/>, retrieved October 2016.

vice-versa. On the official site of South African Presidency we find a lot about the Africans' sympathy for Nolan's theology, as we are informed that after 1954,

Nolan travelled widely to research the rationale of liberation movements... Whilst on the run from the South African security police in 1988, he wrote *God in South Africa*, a key exposition of the theological vision that arose from the struggle for the salvation of communities and individuals... He played a key role in the production of the seminal *Kairos Document*, which both widened and focussed the support of the Church for the liberation struggle.³

It is precisely Nolan's work to promote the *Kairos Document* dealing with the need of the Church to participate in the social struggle for liberty, which as he points out is not solely a religious liberty, that brought him praises from the proponents of freedom in South Africa, while it stirred up havoc among South African critics of tribal-like violence such as Edmund Hill, Mogobe B. Ramose, etc. (see Mogobe B. Ramose, 1990). Ramose is also the author of "The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Ubuntu as a Philosophy", a very actual theme of discussion among both intellectuals in African countries (see Ramose quoted in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux, eds., 2002: 230–237), and as an African himself his view on African "well-being" and religions is worth following for an in dept reading of African culture. Ramose notices that Nolan wrote exclusively for South-African Christians, which means that should other Christians like to share in the book's thoughts, they might as well keep their opinions for themselves, since the book is not about them. Easy to fathom, since it is an example of contextual theology. To resume, both Hill and Ramose consider Nolan's reflections in this work to be theological, however the tone and "mode of theologizing" (Mogobe B. Ramose, 1990: 18) is far from the expected scientific or academic style, even if Nolan himself sought to offer "the Christian community [presumably local, we add]... an articulate and systematic account of its faith" and "a genuine theological reflection of what God is doing in our country today" (Albert Nolan, 1988: xiii, 4; also quoted in Ramose, 1990: 18).

Further on, Ramose is also critical about Nolan's subjective understanding and interpretation of the historical truth behind his country's present destiny, and

³ See the official news platform of South Africa's President Jakob ZUMA, at <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=7877>, retrieved October 2016. Zuma's polity is known in South Africa to support the country's africanization rejoycing international back up and stirring frequent riots and revolts all over the country, especially among workers trying to salvage their jobs in the face of immigration, and among students mitigating for a free university education, see their recent violent attacks against school administration and the policy in Johannesburg, Pretoria and other cities, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/04/south-africa-students-attack-police-protests-tuition-fees-escalate>, retrieved October 2016. As the official platform informs, Albert Nolan was a longtime university chaplain assisting black and white Christians in their search for liberation.

accuses Nolan of “a lack of honesty about the real, a reluctance to confront history and be open-minded about it...; Nolan’s reflections do not wholly satisfy the criterion of ‘critical and rigorous thinking’ nor do they issue in a doubtlessly ‘genuine theological reflection’” (Ramose, 1990: 19). Even more so as, a few lines later, Ramose notices Nolan’s accent on the fundamental differences between Europeans and Africans not only on social ground, but also from a theological and missionary point of view, which does not work well with trying to advertise an objective view on the indigenous peoples. And since the colonizers left these indigenous South African peoples in poverty by “stealing” their land and cattle. Nolan also has the experience of walking among and comforting the homeless in South Africa, and armed with it he goes further to call his situational theology various names according to the area it represents, thus a “theology of homelessness” is born out of his life among the oppressed:

Where is God in South Africa today? God can be seen in the face of a starving black child. God can be heard in the crying of the children in detention. God speaks through the mouth of a person whose face has been disfigured by a policeman’s boot. It is not their innocence, their holiness, their virtue, their religious perfection that makes them look like God. It is their suffering, their oppression, the fact that they have been sinned against. (Albert Nolan, 1988: 67)

After such intense and emotional images of suffering which (in spite of Schillebeeckx’s concept of God as the *alterus*) identify God with the oppressed, a logical conclusion that arises in Nolan’s book is that “the poor are the authentic theological source for understanding Christian truth and practice and therefore the constitution of the Church” (Ramose, 1990: 27). All this at the expense, that is, of the fact that before being colonized it can hardly be said that African nations had anything in common with Christianity, but that then, as in present times, a great variety of indigenous religions and practices mingled with the Christian religion to form a still indigenous Christianity. In this particular case, we are really not talking about religious freedom from a Christian perspective, but rather about attempts to rid themselves of colonial politics and culture.

In the same line with Ramose, Edmund Hill⁴ in his rather short review on Nolan’s *God in South Africa* enters abruptly in Nolan’s assessment of his book as a work of “evangelisation rather than as theology” (Edmund Hill, 1989: 17–18), and finds two main flaws to this writing. First, Nolan goes tribal with his appraisal

⁴ Edmund HILL, O.P., is a Dominican priest who taught dogmatic theology in various South African theological institutions, and he is also the translator of St. Augustin’s *On the Trinity*, having published eight volumes of St. Augustine’s Sermons, see <http://www.ewtn.com/library/THEOLOGY/MALECHAU.htm>, retrieved October 2016.

of South African idea of power and liberty, and though Nolan is convinced that power corrupts, he fights his battle against the system with the very weapons the system employs, thus “brushing” aside an obvious paradox. Second, Nolan’s favorite refrain in his book is “The Bible says...”, and accordingly, in the name of liberty he supports a biblical imagery of war, considered as sufficient for his idea of religious liberty. This might be, however, at the expense of what Hill calls the Bible’s whole harmony of images, most of them forbidding almost ontologically the violent vibes such as those exemplified by the African battle cry *Amandla! Awethu!* (a power slogan cried out with a risen fist) which Nolan dearly cares for. While Nolan’s inner cry for justice is a universal sound in Africa, his theology of liberation is hardly about religious freedom; it is rather a touching and grieving call to social and political delivery, and it should not minimize the wide impact of the many African religions in the country by claiming that the oppressed are only the Christians in South Africa.

Nolan’s four-part book prompts men and women to first liberating themselves from presuppositions and act like Jesus by reaching to their neighbors not by lecturing them on the value of their religion, but by showing their compassion in the public sphere. The Gospel itself was, Nolan thinks, a liberating event.

IV Conclusions

We looked in this paper at the main concerns that both Schillebeeckx in Europe and Nolan in South Africa show for the role of the church in today’s society, and the presence of God for that matter in the religious man’s life. They do not simply discuss all over again the doctrinal status of the church, but they feel they have to reiterate the idea which was first expressed by the proponents of the *Nouvelle théologie* that theology must start from bellow. For them this means that the church should be reorientated towards the people rather than exult endless authoritative decrees for the Christians to observe. Schillebeeckx and Nolan advise that churches today must define faith in human language so that the Christian phenomenon might regain its empirical dimension and become the religion of the people as it once was.

It has been shown that Schillebeeckx spoke of the church from a twofold perspective. In the first place, he referred to a doctrinal or theological dimension of the church, and thus he is concerned with the role of the church within God’s eternal plan of transforming the “secular history” into a “salvation history”. Hence, salvation and liberation in his view are possible directly in our human history and among common people. Schillebeeckx then asks about the role of the church in this process, and whether or not the church mediates the significant

transformation, be it ontological or social. This question takes him to the idea that Christian doctrines are better off in their theological setting, and that informed council should be sought in order to keep God and history as still two different realities.

Schillebeeckx's stress on the two realities envisages rather the rethinking of the concept of God, Jesus and creation; however, Schillebeeckx does not offer explicit statements about the role of the church as a mediator between the two. In the second place, Schillebeeckx insists, the church must be focused on its relational dimension, since it has to get out of the institution and come among people. Schillebeeckx used these two roles of the church to stress that only in what "the relationship of the church of Christ to Jesus of Nazareth" is concerned, the role of the church in the salvation history becomes clearer, and the church must be engaged in this history of salvation.

With this idea, it would seem that Schillebeeckx navigates toward clashing discussions about the relationship between church and world, which to him is only an outcome of the previous debate regarding the relationship between God and creation. In his thought, the subject of the relationship between church and Jesus of Nazareth is tantamount with the Jesus-world debate, a circular problem that actually allows Schillebeeckx to reiterate the importance of Christian dogma and faith in the light of a new and redefined reality for contemporary men and women. Also, he draws nearer to discussions regarding the importance of Jesus' work as ethics for nowadays society and politics.

Interestingly enough, Schillebeeckx makes a transfer of content between the functions of the church and the many particularities of religions. The functions of the church are identified as being the confession, word (or proclamation) and sacrament (the eucharist, ordination and marriage), with a clear influence both on clergy and laymen in the Roman Catholic Church, traits which he called "specifically religious forms".

This study investigated Schillebeeckx's place with these ideas within liberation theology, and it showed an important gap which he eluded, namely the kind of liberation theology represented by Gustavo Gutierrez and the kind, and the contextual or situational liberation theologies of which Albert Nolan is a leading figure for their South African correspondent. The main conflict between the two lies in the fact that mainstream liberation theologies continue to be influential due to the idea that what happens in South America politically and socially reflects same situations in other third-world countries. On the other hand, Nolan's anti-Apartheid notes are imbued with local notes and are situational in nature, resembling more accurately war conditions rather pleas for universal rights.

Nolan's accounts of situational theologies make him loose sight of the ontological distinction between God and man, which Schillebeeckx sought to avoid by

leaving such intensely emotional images of suffering, which he also depicted, aside from the doctrine of God. His idea of God maintained the concept of *alterus*, thus although God suffered for the salvation of man, he is not to be identified with the oppressed. On the contrary, an important conclusion that arises in Nolan's work is that the marginalized are perhaps the only true vessels of the Christian truth who are thus able to change not only society, but the church also.

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