

The Post-modern Universal: An Incarnational View

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Abstract: This essay outlines some suggestions for how the idea of the universal might be retrieved and rethought in the light of the contemporary experience of pluralism. It will do so by drawing upon the work of a diversity of thinkers, post-modern and modern, from philosophers such as G. W. F. Hegel, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, through to theologians such as Louis-Marie Chauvet, Bernard Lonergan, Raimon Panikkar and especially Edward Schillebeeckx. The latter part of the essay will explore the universality of human rights and discuss some of the possibilities for rethinking Christian universality in relation to sacramentality, inter-religious dialogue, and the priority of the poor.

A COMMON COMPLAINT AGAINST what is often called “post-modernism” is that it has done away with universals. This essay will explore the contention that, on the contrary, there is within post-modern thought a concern to recover the universal not so much as a limit upon humanity but as a call to transcendence in which the nature of the universal is one of mediation. The contention that post-modernism might seek to retrieve the idea of the universal may surprise some people so I will need to be a little more specific. Before offering some suggestions as to what a post-modern universal might look like using the resources of both post-modern and modern thinkers,¹ I will first need to explore briefly what is generally understood by the terms post-modernism and universal.

The post-modern condition is supposed to be characterised by an incredulity towards meta-narratives; a hostility towards totalisation; a rejection of the abstract universalism of Enlightenment rationality, and a priority given to the other that the same meta-narratives, and totalising and abstract universality are alleged to have marginalised. I accept this

1. Of the authors I will discuss, only Derrida, Irigaray and Chauvet could be classified as post-modern – though I would describe Schillebeeckx as a post-metaphysical theologian. The fact that the other thinkers that I will discuss are actually moderns does not disqualify their contributions to the post-modern project. Post-modernism, after all, grows out of modernism.

definition, but it needs some nuance. The problem with the whole post-modern discussion is, I feel, one of simplification and generalisation, and the totalisation of a wide diversity of post-modernisms that have varying degrees of merit.

Post-modernism is often understood simply to be a reversal of the many over the one. And although that may be the case with many post-modern thinkers this is simply modernity in another guise. Both Luce Irigaray and Raimon Panikkar have observed that the hegemony of the one can also take the guise of a multiplicity of private or relative truths.² For Irigaray especially, breaking the hegemony of the one does not entail an abandonment of the idea of the universal but rather a recovery of a concept of the universal freed from its metaphysical pretensions.

It is the critique of metaphysics that I consider to be the post-modernism's most significant contribution. But once more, some nuance is needed. To cite Piet Schoonenberg:

It depends on what one understands by metaphysics. If one means the projection of an ideal world behind or above the one in which we live – a sort of rationalized mythology – then metaphysics is indeed an unreal discussion, having not even the revealing character of myth. If one means the rationalizing of mystery, then it is even less serviceable for theology. Metaphysics can, however, also be the expression of the mystery that our real world does not conceal behind it, but is itself.³

Although Schoonenberg tries to rehabilitate the idea of metaphysics he does signal a break with the approach taken by classical metaphysics in refusing its founding gesture, the distinction between the concealed ideal world and the world of appearances. Schoonenberg applies the term "metaphysics" broadly, but I will reserve the term "metaphysics" for both the broad Hellenistic tradition that is founded upon the distinction between the two worlds and what Heidegger describes as metaphysics' inquiry "beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp".⁴

One could protest that the best of metaphysicians were aware of the limits of their metaphysics and even reflected upon the disparity between their own thought and the real. Louis Marie Chauvet suggests however that:

2. Luce Irigaray, "The Question of the Other", *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995), 11. Raimon Panikkar, "Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge", *Interculture* 23. 3. (Montreal: 1990), 25-44, especially 29-34.

3. Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1972) 13.

4. Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993) 106.

to ponder such a disparity is one thing; to take this disparity as *a point of departure and as a framework* for one's thought is another. This lack of interest in exploring the bias of their unconscious assumptions is what gives these thinkers a 'family resemblance' and allows us to speak of *the* 'Metaphysics' or, better still, *the* metaphysical.⁵

I have described this shift in broad terms as a movement from the "metaphysical to the symbolic" where the "symbolic" designates a process or approach never fully achieved, thus a transition to be done again and again.⁶ The symbolic process can be appropriately compared to an ongoing conversation. Metaphysics, on the other hand, looks to a final truth that will render further conversation redundant. The symbol confounds the distinction between the two worlds because the symbol not only participates in that reality to which it refers but also helps bring that world into being. The human world is, as Lonergan expresses, a "world mediated by meaning".⁷ Louis Marie Chauvet argues that it is consent to mediation that is the fundamental human task.⁸ Such an approach understands the contingent mediation of a language, a culture and a history as the very place where the subject comes to its truth.⁹

Another distinctive, and surprising, characteristic of thinkers like Derrida and Irigaray is their concern to capture what one might call the eschatological imagination with its agitation for the possibility of the impossible. At the heart of this concern is a passion for justice and a suspicion of any claims to the realisation of justice in the present. Irigaray, for example, claims that she is a "political militant for the impossible, which is not to say a utopian. Rather, I want what is yet to be as the only possibility of a future".¹⁰

Deconstruction is often misunderstood to be a sort of relativistic anarchy, but it would perhaps be better to understand deconstruction also as agitating for the impossible. Derrida even goes so far as to

5. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1995) 8-9.

6. See my "Luce Irigaray and the Advent of the Divine: from the metaphysical to the symbolic to the eschatological", *Pacifica* 12. 1. (February, 1999), 27-54.

7. Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan S.J.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 179.

8. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 145.

9. Cyril of Alexandria wrote the following in the lead up to Chalcedon: "we have admired his goodness in that for love of us he has not refused to descend to such a low position as to bear all that belongs to our nature, included in which is ignorance". It all depends upon whether one considers limitations to be part of humanity's sinfulness or simply part of the human condition. Cyril of Alexandria considered ignorance to be a limiting rather than a perjorative term.

10. Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) 10.

equate deconstruction with justice.¹¹ Justice is not the law, but is that which gives us the impulse to change and improve the law.¹² It is the condition of the possibility of the challenge and critique of the law, the laws, society as it is currently ordered. Justice for Derrida is that which spurs us on. It is a messianic concept that disappears when we attempt to tie it to a this-worldly order.¹³

Both Irigaray¹⁴ and Derrida distinguish between the determinate content of particular messianic promises and the messianic form of the promise itself. As John Caputo explains:

Once the messianic is given determinate content, it is restricted within a determinable and determining horizon, but the very idea of the messianic, of messianicity, is to shatter horizons, to let the promise of something *tout autre* shock the horizon of the same and the foreseeable. Messianicity is not a horizon but the disruption or opening up of the horizon.¹⁵

For Irigaray the ethical consists in the encounter with the other as other and not simply as one reduced to the parameters of one's own understanding or ego projections. What is at issue could be described in terms of the experience of someone as a revelation. In such a moment we see the other in their startling particularity outside of all the boxes and presuppositions according to which we have mentally catalogued that person. Such an encounter Irigaray describes in terms of *parousia*, as it is no less an encounter with the divine in the other that makes it possible to imagine that things could and should be otherwise.

Irigaray argues that the encounter with limits that the other represents establishes the necessary condition for any transcendence. This is one of the functions of sexual difference in Irigaray's thought. Being sexed means that I am not everything. Limits are the negative

11. "Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond the law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice." Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 14-15.

12. Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991) 16.

13. For Derrida, the promise of the messianic "prohibits the gathering of Being in presence, being even its condition. The condition of the possibility and impossibility of eschatology, the ironic allegory of messianism." Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: For Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 145.

14. See Luce Irigaray, "Belief Itself", in *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 25-53.

15. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) 118. Gerard Hall has described the function of religious discourse in terms of its potential to "break-through the monotony of the mundane and the pathology of evil that destroy the human capacity to be scandalized by the imaginative vision of a radically different future". Gerard Hall, *Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics of Religious Pluralism* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1994) 329.

condition of transcendence.¹⁶ The importance of limits for Irigaray draws upon what Hegel calls negativity,¹⁷ but which Schillebeeckx calls the “negative experience of contrast” where the lack of congruence between our understanding of the world and our experience of the world is a spur to both theoretical and ethical reflection.¹⁸

In the light of the above, I identify two characteristics of the post-modern recovery of the universal. The first characteristic of the post-modern universal is that it is understood in terms of its mediatory function. The second characteristic of the post-modern universal is that it is understood to be an eschatological rather than metaphysical reality.

I will return to the second point at the end of this paper. First I will discuss the idea of the universal as mediation that Irigaray describes “as a real, not merely a formal, mediation” that is related to the particularities of social functions.¹⁹ It is precisely because the universal has been associated with the formalism of human law, Irigaray suggests, that we have found it difficult to think of the universal in terms of mediation,²⁰ the modulatory effects of which, “both on the individual and the collective levels, will be such as to make a unique imperialism impossible”.²¹

HEGEL'S UNIVERSAL

The universal is often confused I feel with what Hegel called the “parochial universality” of the first stage of recognition in which the self is really only exclusive particular with presumptions of universality. From such a position the self is unable to recognise the other as other, and so finds only itself in the other; the other is reduced to the same. Truth according to Hegel requires the confrontation with an independent object, with another certainty.²² The result of the confrontation with the other is an abrupt self-transcendence as the self plunges into an otherness that challenges the immediacy of the self in its naïve and parochial certitude.

16. The positive condition is the universal by which the particular is oriented towards the infinite.

17. Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, 12-16.

18. Schillebeeckx considers these “negative experiences of contrast” to be fundamental pre-religious experiences. They express that “the principle for the interpretation of reality is not what we take for granted, but the ‘stumbling block’ of a reality that resists us”. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 28. See also Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1980) 35.

19. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 147.

20. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 128.

21. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 147.

22. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 113, para. 186.

The second phase of recognition involves the loss of self that results from the discovery that the self is not universal but a particular faced by another particular. This bears some resemblance to the normal characterisation of the post-modern condition. But according to Hegel the self needs and looks to the other to recognise and confirm its parochial universality, which is why the elimination of the other proves to be self-defeating. The self can only return out of its othered state by winning itself back in recognition. The other is needed to confirm its identity. It is this asymmetry of recognition that characterises the master-slave relation.

Reciprocal recognition that transcends the relation of domination involves a joint mediation in which each releases the other in turn and allows the other to go free. It is from this mutual recognition and release that *Geist* emerges. Being with the other then becomes an effective enhancement and concrete actualisation of freedom. It is significant that the first explicit mention of reciprocal recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* occurs in Hegel's discussion of forgiveness,²³ which suggests that only an act of grace enables one to escape the relationship of domination and totalisation and enables the Spirit as an event of intersubjectivity to emerge.

The second significant aspect of Hegel's thought for our discussion is his rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity through which he described the universal entering into particularity, the unity of the universal and particular being the realm of the Spirit. Hegel defines God "as the living process of positing His other, the world, which, comprehended in its divine form is His Son".²⁴ The Son is the principle of both creation and the incarnation – "through him all things came to be" (John 1:3) – the finite particularisation of the universal, who is in his own person being for others. From the side of humanity the incarnation is redemption as the infinite enters the finite. The Spirit is the unity of the universal and the particular. The (Holy) Spirit is the origin of community, in which "individual human subjects are, as it were, 'essentialized' in the transfigured intersubjectivity of the spiritual community".²⁵ Hegel takes the Trinity as the paradigm of the impossibility of any unmediated identity and relates these three forms directly to the structure of "subjective consciousness". God exemplifies the structure of spirit as self-recognition in the other and secures the worth of human freedom and personality.

The doctrine of the Trinity understood as being-in-the-other along with the structure of recognition provide important resources for

23. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 407-8, para. 670.

24. F. G. Weiss (ed.), *Hegel: The essential writings* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 209.

25. Peter C. Hodgson, "Editorial Introduction", *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Volume 3: The Consummate Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985) 45.

thinking through the relation between the universal and the particular. Just as the identity of the subject is enhanced through the recognition of the other, so the universal brings about an effective enhancement and concrete actualisation of the freedom of the particular. Philip Blond argues that

it is a modernist flaw to uphold a universal over any particular . . . the kenotic nature of Christ and Christian universality means that a theological universal does not give or show itself except through the singularised beings that it brings into being, for Christian universals do not negate that which they inform, but seek to bring them to their highest shapes.²⁶

The incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, who came “so that they may have life and have it to the full”, is exemplary of this mediation despite Michel de Certeau’s claim that the universal has operated within Christianity as a covert Platonism as “a compensation against the fact of Christian particularity”.²⁷

It may seem incongruous to some to invoke Hegel’s support for the post-modern project as the status of the Hegel’s universal has also been cast as the high water mark of speculative modernity. Hegel’s thought is profoundly ambiguous because on the one hand he insists on the importance of maintaining the alterity of the other in recognition, while on the other hand he attempts to incorporate every alterity and contradiction into an ultimate unity. The importance of mutual recognition in his thought constitutes his dialectic as a dialogue. Meanwhile, the drive towards unity constitutes his dialectic as appropriation. The most common criticism of Hegel’s dialectic is that the other is overcome in the unity of the absolute.²⁸

Hegel’s inconsistencies do not undermine his potential contribution. Irigaray, for instance, uses Hegel to go beyond Hegel, arguing that “his theory, without a doubt the most powerful of Western philosophies, can itself be subject to dialectic.... The spirit Hegel speaks of turns out to be less absolute than he thought.”²⁹ Irigaray remains intrigued by Hegel as “the only Western philosopher to have approached the question of love

26. Philip Blond, “Introduction: Theology before Philosophy”, *Post-secular Philosophy. Between Philosophy and Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 37.

27. Michel de Certeau, “How is Christianity Thinkable Today?” in Graham Ward (ed.), *The Post-modern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 150.

28. It is the sublation or *aufgehoben* of the other that is the sticking point when it comes to evaluating the adequacy of Hegel’s treatment of the other. Seyla Benhabib argues: “there is no way to disentangle the march of the dialectic in Hegel’s system from the body of the victims on which it treads.... The vision of Hegelian reconciliation has long ceased to convince.” Seyla Benhabib, “On Hegel, Women, and Irony” in Patricia Jagentowicz Mills (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of G. W. F. Hegel* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 41.

29. Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 55.

as labour".³⁰ Irigaray's analysis, however, focuses on the base of the dialectical structure which she argues remains unthought by Hegel in that he conceives of the family as an undifferentiated unit. This means that in the place where the personal and the political, the particular and the universal, converge, no genuine dialectic is able to emerge. For Irigaray, this means that the whole dialectical structure is crippled. Consequently, Irigaray attempts to rehabilitate the dialectical method through an ethics of the couple.

Irigaray is not alone in suggesting that Hegel's dialectic of cognition could fruitfully be supplemented by a "dialectic of love" such as was explored by the young Hegel himself.³¹ It is Robert Williams' argument that this dialectic of love also finds expression in Hegel's more mature writings. In Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel explicates the idea that "God is love" to describe the achievement of self-consciousness. "I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other." For Hegel love is both "a distinguishing and the sublation of the distinction".³² Genuine recognition transcends the relation of domination and can only be received from the other that is not at the disposal of the self.

Ethical life, love, means precisely the giving up of particularity, of private personality, and its extension – so too, with "friendship". In friendship and love I give up my abstract personality and thereby win it back as concrete. The truth of personality is found precisely in winning it back through this immersion, this being immersed in the other.³³

LONERGAN'S TRANSCENDENTALISM

Before I look more closely at a specifically Christian idea of the universal it will be worthwhile to pursue the issue from another perspective. Early in *Method in Theology* Bernard Lonergan discusses the relationship between transcendental notions and transcendental concepts. The distinction is a significant one. Lonergan suggests that the two are often confused, explaining that "quite distinct from such transcendental concepts, which can be misconceived and often are, there are the prior transcendental notions that constitute the very dynamism of our conscious intending".³⁴ Lonergan explains that transcendentals are

30. Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 19.

31. Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* (London: Collins, 1980) 164. See also Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 74-89.

32. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3. *The Consummate Religion* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1985) 276.

33. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3. 285-286.

34. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 12.

the radical intending that moves us from ignorance to knowledge. They are *a priori* because they go beyond what we know to seek what we do not know yet. They are unrestricted because answers are never complete and so only give rise to further questions. They are comprehensive because they intend the unknown whole or totality of which our answers reveal only part.³⁵

I like to interpret this comprehensiveness in terms of the aspiration towards catholicity since it seeks *kath'holou*. So, Lonergan continues

if we objectify the content of intelligent intending, we form the transcendental concept of the intelligible. If we objectify the content of reasonable intending, we form the transcendental concepts of the true and the real, if we objectify the content of responsible intending, we get the transcendental concept of value, or the truly good.³⁶

These objectifications of the transcendental are not the transcendentals themselves. They do, however, mediate the notion of the transcendental and orient us towards the horizon of our intending. I am associating Lonergan's transcendental concepts with universals in that they mediate and orient us towards transcendence and transcendent value. As such they are not denials of particularity but are constituted and nourished by it and symbolise the drive towards transcendence in terms derived from the particular.

What I am suggesting is that the universal is a projection from our particularity of our intentionality towards the transcendent horizon of our becoming. Take for instance the idea of humanity. Humanity is not merely the collectivity of men and women. Humanity represents an ideal by which we understand our essence as oriented towards infinity and as such transcending the limits of each of our individual particularities. Humanity is the horizon of possibility of what it is possible for women and men to become. It is the symbol through which the particular enters a world of possibility.

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSAL

The theology of Edward Schillebeeckx goes furthest, I believe, not only in outlining the contours of a post-metaphysical theology, but in demonstrating its necessity. Rejecting positivistic and pre-existing definitions of human nature, Schillebeeckx proposes a theology of human existence based upon what he calls "anthropological constants". These constants point towards certain "human impulses and orientations, values and spheres of value, but at the same time do not

35. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 11.

36. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 11-12.

provide us with *directly* specific norms or ethical imperatives".³⁷ Schillebeeckx argues that this is because "we do not have a pre-existing definition of humanity – indeed for Christians it is not only a future, but an eschatological reality".³⁸ John Macquarrie similarly argues, "humanity is something unfinished, even now coming into being".³⁹

In the light of this we can say that for Christians, Jesus Christ is of universal significance precisely because in him men and women find their fulfilment and completion. Christ is "firstborn of the dead" (Col 1:18), the head of the new creation. In baptism we are buried with him in the hope that we may also share in the fullness of his resurrection (Rom 6: 4-10). In the Eucharist we share in Christ, the first fruits of the new creation and so are nourished in our divinisation and growth in Christ, towards God our destination. It is in the resurrection that the fullness of humanity is revealed. The fulfilment of humanity is the divine life itself. As Rahner has expressed the matter, God "does not originally cause and produce something different from himself in the creature, but rather that he communicates his own divine nature and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfilment of the creature".⁴⁰ The fulfilment of the human person lies in his or her divinisation which is the proper end of the Christian life. This divinisation or *theo[si]s* is that Catherine LaCugna defines as "being conformed in our personal existence to God's personal existence, achieving right relationship and genuine communion in every respect, at every level".⁴¹

This Christian universal is unable to be circumscribed or contained precisely because God is both its origin and its end. And so when the New Testament writers attempt to give expression to this ultimate reality they utilise a plurality of symbols, none of which is able to be totalised. In fact, the history of Christianity demonstrates that once the eschatological plenitude of the reign of God becomes identified with any one expression of it, when it becomes identified with the status quo or when it becomes a metaphysical entity that we can grasp as a whole with our intellect, the prophetic and eschatological dimensions of the reign of God are undermined. "Definitive salvation", Schillebeeckx reminds us, "remains an indefinable horizon in our history in which both the hidden God and the sought-for, yet hidden, *humanum* disappear."⁴²

37. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1980) 733.

38. Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, 731.

39. John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM, 1990) 384.

40. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 121.

41. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) 284.

42. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 837.

Of course the reign of God is still a reality that needs to be symbolised in order for it to be realised and incarnated in the here and now. But we should not confuse the symbol with the reality. It is this confusion that I think underlies so much frustration and despair with the post-modern condition. When the symbols no longer work, when the limits of our expression of transcendental value are revealed, we throw up our hands in horror at the loss of values as such. The challenge however is to reconnect with the source of those expressions. For Christians, their source is sacramental. And this is why the sacraments are the “source and summit” of Christian life. So then if the Christian universal is revealed in the risen Christ and realised in the reign of God, how should we express that today? Unfortunately there is no consensus on what shape liturgical renewal and expression should take. This is not surprising given its fundamental importance.

Sacraments, Schillebeeckx reminds us, “are anticipatory, mediating signs of salvation”.⁴³ The indeterminacy of our historical condition means that we live in the between times, between what has already been accomplished in Christ and what is yet to be fully realised. However, the sacraments also serve to point out all those aspects of human existence which continue to fall short of what they should be in Christ. Reminding us of this they orient us towards the ultimate horizon in which the reign of God will be fully realised. In continuing the work of Jesus in proclaiming the reign of God the sacraments remain a prophetic protest against all that is yet to be reconciled with the peace and justice of God. “As long as there is still a real history of suffering among us, we cannot do without the sacramental liturgy: to abolish it or neglect it would be to stifle the firm hope in universal peace and general reconciliation.”⁴⁴

This hope can only be nourished through anticipatory symbols. The liturgy summons us to liberating action in the world. Any attempt at totality which does not recognise the failures, fragmentation and lack of reconciliation, that is to say the “not yet” of our salvation, leads to illusion, alienation and betrays the twin signs of the paschal mystery, the reality of the cross and the hope of the resurrection.

If indeed humanity is something unfinished, what then is the status of universal? We are left with the practical and the political question of our need for universals but we should proceed with caution. The pragmatic approach can blind us to the fact that for Christians

the crucifixion of Jesus shows that any attempt at liberating redemption which is concerned with humanity is valid *in and of* itself and not subsequently as a result of any success which may

43. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 836.

44. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 836.

follow...we are shown the true face of both God and [humanity] in the 'vain' love of Jesus which knows that its criterion does not lie in success.⁴⁵

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE "OPTION FOR THE POOR"

The universality of human rights is often upheld against the fear of moral relativism. Human rights are indeed universal but not absolute in that they are conditioned by the context out of which they arose. Such rights, therefore, should not be a matter of imposing an abstract and foreign template onto a situation, but should be an effective enhancement of the genuinely human in the situation. It remains the case that it is far easier to say what is *not* worthy of humanity and the reign of God than it is to prescribe exactly what the state of affairs should be. This is the principle of negativity. So yes, we can judge an unjust situation in other cultures; it is only when it comes to prescribing a remedy that the difficulties emerge, at least for an outsider.

The limitations of human rights become clearer when we look for other ways of expressing the transcendent values that they symbolise. There is no necessary reason that the enlightenment ideal of universal human rights should be able to express that which is worthy of the *humanum*, or the reign of God, any more adequately than could, to take one possible example, the Indian notion of dharma.

Raimon Panikkar in his essay, "Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?" suggests the idea of dharma as a "homeomorphic equivalent" in the Indian context to what the notion of human rights attempts to express out of a Western context. Panikkar questions whether there is "only one particular way of expressing – or saving – the *humanum*?"⁴⁶ In the process Panikkar uncovers some of the limitations of the presuppositions of the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights. First, the Declaration assumes that human nature must be knowable. Secondly, it assumes that "the human being is fundamentally the individual. Society is a kind of superstructure" and "the Cosmos is a kind of understructure".⁴⁷ Furthermore, "the individualisation does not stop at the individual, but divides this segregated entity even further into separated freedoms".⁴⁸ Dharma, on the other hand, starts not with "the individual, but the whole complex concatenation of the Real".⁴⁹ Its emphasis is upon the harmony and

45. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 837.

46. Raimon Panikkar, "Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept", *Invisible Harmony. Essays on Contemplation and Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 113.

47. Panikkar, "Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept", 117.

48. Panikkar, "Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept", 118.

49. Panikkar, "Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept", 128.

reconciliation of the whole revealing some of the limitations of the rhetoric of human rights.

Aloysius Pieris argues that human rights language is a discourse appropriate in addressing the powerful of the first-world, but that third-world theologians have other concerns, being more concerned with the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. The problem as Pieris sees it is that this difference is not respected and that "certain first-world theologians tend to universalise and absolutise their paradigm, unmindful of its contextual particularity and ideological limitation".⁵⁰

Similarly, Schillebeeckx argues that abstract universalism only serves to make an alliance with the powerful of this earth.⁵¹ The universality of the Christian message, Schillebeeckx argues, is not to be found in an abstract idea, "but by the power of its cognitive, critical and liberating character in and through a consistent praxis of the kingdom of God".⁵² Schillebeeckx considers that an essential part of the universality of Christian faith is that it should aim for the "transformation of the world to a higher humanity".⁵³ A catholic universality, if it is to be truly inclusive, cannot be neutral. The universal must, when seen in social and political terms, be in practice partisan.⁵⁴ One of the ways in which this universality is realised is in what is called the "option for the poor", which is not simply preferential, but as liberation theology has convincingly argued is a "datum of revelation".⁵⁵

This universality needs to be partisan precisely because the poor are those who are necessarily excluded structurally by social and economic forces. The Christian universal needs to be non-discriminatory. That the good news be preached to the poor is at the heart of the Christian gospel exemplified by Jesus in his identification with and mission amongst the marginalised of Jewish society. The option for the poor is a partisan, free choice of the God of Jesus of Nazareth as it is also an option for all those who are marginalised and made non-persons, socio-culturally, psychologically and religiously. The incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is not simply a becoming human, but an identification of God in Jesus with the poor, oppressed, and finally executed innocent individual, for whom Jesus stands as a model.

To sideline or ignore Jesus' particularity is in itself a form of docetism in that Jesus only appears human.⁵⁶ One could also suggest that the

50. Aloysius Pieris, "Human Rights Language and Liberation Theology", *Fire and Water. Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) 113.

51. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 178.

52. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 176.

53. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 170.

54. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 178.

55. Edward Schillebeeckx, "The Religious and the Human Ecumene", 186, in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (eds.), *The Future of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) 177-188.

56. Schillebeeckx, "The Religious and the Human Ecumene", 183.

other side of the definitiveness of the Revelation of who God is in Christ is also its necessary limitation. The divine kenosis in the incarnation weds the universal to the contingency of the particular, in the unity of the Spirit. Because the Christian revelation is the revelation of the universal in the particular, we Christians, more than any other religious group, should take our limitations seriously. "Post-modern" thinkers like Derrida and Irigaray have attempted to demonstrate that the value of such limitation ultimately is openness to the Spirit and to the genuinely new. It involves a recognition that we live in the between times, between the resurrection and the parousia in which the mission of the Church is to work for the realisation of the reign of God while remembering that it is yet to be fully realised and as such is unable to be identified with any of our achievements, no matter how worthy.