



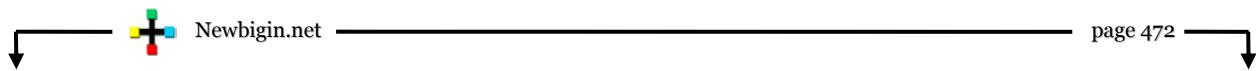
A Review of "Jesus in our Western Culture: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics," By Edward Schillebeeckx SCM Press 1987

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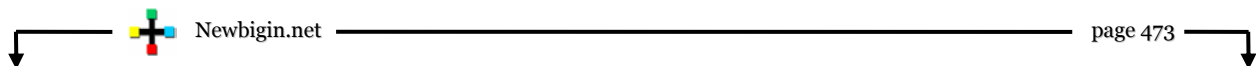
J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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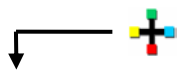
These are the Abraham Kuyper Lectures given in the Free University of Amsterdam in 1986. The reviewer's task is difficult because, in spite of its small size the work is compressed yet wide-ranging. Starting



from the human need for liberation, or salvation, and from the fact that science and technology have not provided the liberation they promised, Schillebeeckx affirms that in the modern world which does not 'need' God in the sense of a necessary explanation, we need him as 'the supreme luxury', the God who is supremely gracious and liberating. Salvation is not primarily religious; it is secular. 'Salvation history' is not religious history; religions are just the place where God's universal saving work is recognized. Chapter 2 explores the role of Jesus in God's liberating work, the relation of the 'Jesus of history' to the 'Christ of Faith' and the need to learn from the Christians of the Third World what it means to believe in a liberating God. Chapter 3 affirms that 'God wants to make secular history in this world a salvation history through human mediation', and this leads to discussion of the role and the limitations of the Church. The final and longest chapter explores the necessary relation between mysticism and politics, with ethics as the 'hinge and link' between the two. In dialogue with Kuitert he affirms the elements of truth in both of the rival opinions-that which affirms the autonomy of politics and that which affirms the necessity for a political theology. He agrees with Kuitert that official church pronouncements on political issues should be reserved for real emergencies, but suggests that the whole contemporary political world is 'one great emergency situation over its length and breadth, height and depth.'

The title of the book leads one to expect a dialogue between the gospel and our culture. To this reader it seemed that the terms of the dialogue were being too much determined by the second party. Though much is well said about the decisiveness of Jesus, it is the starting-point of the discussion which determines the rest. The starting-point is the human need for liberation, rather than the given revelation. The concrete facts about the ministry of Jesus are prominent in the whole discussion, but this reader occasionally had the feeling that he was back in the old liberal Protestantism. ('What Jesus said and did so that others began to experience decisive salvation in him, salvation from God, ultimately raises the question, Who is he that he could do such things?', p. i6.) 'Religion' is taken as a general class of which Christianity is one example. This leads to statements which could hardly be defended. Could one really say of Buddhism, for example, that it is 'by definition directed towards human history, towards happiness in our world' (p. 33) ? And is it really true that the historical-critical method is 'free of any authoritarian pressure' (p. 37) ? Surely even in the Free University of Amsterdam it would be too optimistic to suggest that the academic world has no authoritative positions.

The book raises a lot of questions that I would like to discuss. My basic question is whether the terms of the dialogue have been too much controlled by one party-'our Western Culture'. But I am grateful for the last chapter with its affirmation of hope as the supreme



contribution of the Gospel to our political tasks.

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