

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LOW COUNTRIES: THE INTERPRETATIONS OF ORIGINAL SIN OF SCHOONENBERG AND SCHILLEBEECKX

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Rightly, when considering the doctrine of original sin, neither Edward Schillebeeckx nor Piet Schoonenberg jump immediately to mind as expositors of the traditional form of the doctrine. If one were to accuse Schillebeeckx of ignoring original sin completely, it would not be entirely unfair: in his published works, he certainly never addresses the topic at any length, and what references there are, are scattered and diffuse. Schoonenberg did at least give the topic a little more attention, but his approach represents a significant departure from the traditional approach to the question, and has, not unreasonably, been accused of failing to answer some of the core questions that motivate the doctrine. Nonetheless, to a contemporary discussion of the question of original sin, they each raise important questions that must be answered for the doctrine to remain credible.¹

Both Schoonenberg and Schillebeeckx spent the main part of their careers at the Catholic University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands (now Radboud University), and while both were heavily inspired by the *nouvelle théologie* movement, they had different approaches and were seemingly not the greatest of friends.² The slightly older Schoonenberg was educated by the Jesuits and then entered the Society of Jesus in 1930. His doctorate, awarded in 1948, was a response to the developments of French *ressourcement* theology on the articulation of faith. He then worked in Jesuit formation houses and the Higher Institute for Catechetics in Nijmegen. He was eventually appointed to a chair in dogmatics in the university in 1964, where he remained until retirement in 1976. Aside from the work on original sin I will consider below, his main theological contribution was in Christology, where he developed a ‘Spirit Christology’. His approach to both attracted more than a little controversy.

Schillebeeckx was also educated by the Society of Jesus, but in 1934 chose instead to enter the Dominicans. His formation in the *nouvelle théologie* came at Le Saulchoir in Paris under Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar, with the former being the man to whom he attributed the greatest influence on his thought throughout his career. His doctoral work was published in 1952,

¹When quoting the works of both Schillebeeckx and Schoonenberg in this paper, I will frequently depart from the published translations when it comes to the language for humanity: the Dutch word ‘mens’—common parlance and used by both authors—has usually been translated as ‘man’. In today’s English, that carries a gendered connotation completely absent from the original. I have therefore revised translations to reflect the original more accurately.

²Jürgen Mettenpenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie - New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 126. Mettenpenningen provides more comprehensive biography than I do here, see p. 126ff.

with the title *De sacramentele heilseconomie* ('The sacramental economy of salvation'),³ and after teaching for a time in Leuven, he was appointed professor of dogmatics and the history of theology at Nijmegen from 1958, where he remained until his retirement in 1983. Perhaps his most famous (or, in some quarters, infamous!) works are his re-reading of the sacraments in *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, and his Christological trilogy—*Jesus, Christ*, and *Church*—where he engages hermeneutics and critical theory in aid of Christology and ecclesiology.⁴ As I have noted already, Schillebeeckx never wrote specifically on original sin, or even substantially on adjacent topics such as theological anthropology or creation.⁵ His influence on the Second Vatican Council through his role advising the Dutch bishops (though not as a council *peritus*) is also noteworthy, as are the series of inquisitions he faced from Vatican authorities.

Some similarity between Schoonenberg and Schillebeeckx should be expected. As well as sharing a number of common influences in the *ressourcement* movement, they wrote in the same context: the rapid secularisation and decline of the Church in the Netherlands in the second half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, both here and elsewhere in their work, the conclusions these circumstances brought them to are not the same.

In this paper, after a brief note on the so-called 'New Catechism' produced by the Dutch bishops with the Higher Institute for Catechetics, I will review Schoonenberg's articulation of the doctrine, and highlight some of its strengths and weaknesses. I then turn to Schillebeeckx's use of the doctrine within his theological project, and identify the implicit place and context to it shown by this usage. Finally, I turn to some of the later, incompletely developed aspects of Schillebeeckx's work, where he begins to question further the received understanding. From these pointers, I briefly outline key directions from these two thinkers for the contemporary reconsideration of this idea.

I. THE DUTCH CATECHISM

Given the context in which both of these theologians wrote, before considering their individual contributions, the description of the doctrine presented by the Dutch bishops in the so-called 'New Catechism' should also be noted.⁶ The intention was, as the editors describe it in the foreword, to produce a 'new type of catechism... suitable to the present day', inspired by the optimism and sense of renewal in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands after the Second Vatican

³Henricus Schillebeeckx, *De sacramentele heilseconomie* (Antwerpen: 'T Groeit, 1952).

⁴Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter of God*, First published 1959, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus, an Experiment in Christology*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 6 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Christian Experience in the Modern World*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 7 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 10 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁵Though see Jennifer Cooper, *Humanity in the Mystery of God: The Theological Anthropology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology (London: T & T Clark, 2009); and Martin G. Poulson, *The Dialectics of Creation: Creation and the Creator in Edward Schillebeeckx and David Burrell* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) respectively.

⁶Bischoppen van Nederland and Hoger Katechetisch Instituut Nijmegen, *De nieuwe katechismus: Geloofsverklaring voor volwassenen* (Hilversum: Paul Brand, 1966); ET: The Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands, *A New Catechism: The Catholic Faith for Adults: With Supplement*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Search, 1980).

Council.⁷ It is possibly true to say that there was expectation of radical change in the Church in the Netherlands, including on mandatory celibacy for priests and the ordination of women, in the Dutch Church at this time more than anywhere else. The *New Catechism* was prepared in this spirit by the catechetical institute at Nijmegen, and while no individual author is named, it has been suggested that it is the work of the Jesuit Willem Bless, who was director of the institute from 1954 to 1969.⁸

The reaction to this text was strong.⁹ A critical letter published in the newspaper *De Tijd* in December 1966 claimed that 'several dogmas are interpreted in a sense that differs completely from the way the Church has understood and still understands them, and this notwithstanding the explicit condemnation of Vatican I'; the dogmas seen as defectively understood include original sin.¹⁰ In his article defending the *New Catechism*, Schoonenberg argues that the critics are failing to engage with necessary hermeneutical work to understand dogma in the contemporary situation. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that the *New Catechism* provides only that interpretation, and not its foundations, though he suggests this is not improper for the type of book it is.¹¹

When it comes to original sin, the *New Catechism* rejects the idea that the tendency towards sin in humanity can be treated as 'retarded development' or 'immaturity',¹² before developing a sense of original sin from the early chapters of Genesis and Romans 5. In this discussion, there is a clear suggestion that the interpretation of original sin should be teleological more than protological, both in the understanding of the goodness of creation and the reality of sin and corruption within it.¹³ Furthermore, it clearly defends human culpability for sin. Such sin is presented as collective, and the importance of its contagious character is highlighted along with its ubiquity through the human race.¹⁴ The text also challenges the idea that original sin is transmitted 'merely by way of generation, but from all sides, along all the ways in which people have contact with one another', finally calling it 'the sin of the world'.¹⁵ This conception of sin is kept, throughout the discussion in the text, alongside the parallel, yet superior, 'attractive power

⁷The Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands, *A New Catechism*, v.

⁸The front matter describes the *New Catechism* as 'compiled on behalf of the bishops of the Netherlands by the Higher Catechetical Institute in Nijmegen in collaboration with many others'. Bischoppen van Nederland and Hoger Katechetisch Instituut Nijmegen, *De nieuwe katechismus: Geloofsverkondiging voor volwassenen*, iv. The attribution to Bless personally is made by Charles Napier, 'Dutch Honesty to God', *Frontier* 10, no. 3 (1967): 4. As theological advisors to the Dutch bishops, both Schoonenberg and Schillebeeckx joined Bless in the delegation to Rome in the controversy over the book, see Willem Bless, ed., *Witboek over de nieuwe katechismus* (Utrecht: Ambo, 1969), 33, but neither seems to have had a hands-on role in its compilation.

⁹A wider review of the initial reaction is made by Bless, *Witboek over de nieuwe katechismus*; see also Aldo Chiaruttini, Leo Alting von Geusau, and Fernando Vittorino Joannes, eds., *Het dossier van de Nederlandse katechismus* (Utrecht: A. W. Bruna en Zoon, 1969); and Jan van Lier and Jan Simons, eds., *Geloof leren geloven: twintig jaar 'De Nieuwe Katechismus', leren van het verleden met het oog op de toekomst* (Nijmegen: Hoger Katechetisch Instituut, 1987).

¹⁰Quoted by Piet Schoonenberg, 'De Nieuwe Katechismus en de dogma's', *Verbum* 34 (1967): 9-31, 9.

¹¹Schoonenberg, 'De Nieuwe Katechismus en de dogma's', 12.

¹²The Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands, *A New Catechism*, 260.

¹³The Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands, *A New Catechism*, 263.

¹⁴The Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands, *A New Catechism*, 265.

¹⁵The Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands, *A New Catechism*, 266.

of grace'. Much of the language and way of thinking used in this discussion of original sin has clear similarities to the work of Schoonenberg.¹⁶

II. SCHOONENBERG'S DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN

Originally published as *De macht der zonde* ('The power of sin') in 1962, *Man and Sin* is, at least in English, one of Schoonenberg's best known works.¹⁷ It is an attempt at a theology of sin, although to get its full measure, it should stand alongside his *God's World in the Making*, which fills in some of the structure of his overall project.¹⁸ The four chapters of *Man and Sin* address, respectively, the essence of sin, its consequences, 'the sin of the world', and original sin. In the spirit of the *nouvelle théologie*, there is an attempt to return to sources to understand what traditional doctrines mean in the modern world, and to this end, Schoonenberg's initial starting point in each chapter is the biblical text. He is concerned to locate sin as historical event. He charts the development of the concept through the history of theology, the relation of sin and freedom, the scholastic distinction of mortal and venial sins, and the distinction between sin and so-called 'physical evil'. As Christa Betty has noted, throughout Schoonenberg is more concerned with and more engaged in the biblical texts than the magisterial ones.¹⁹

The first major problem that Schoonenberg identifies in traditional descriptions of sin is that attention is too narrowly turned to the individual. That is to say, according to Schoonenberg, classical approaches to sin focus alone on the individual sinner, not giving sufficient attention to the context in which the sin occurred, nor the activity of multiple individuals in that milieu. He suggests that the magisterium gives only a sense of solidarity between sinners in the 'mysterious bond' of original sin through the first father of humanity, and nothing in the more immediate of family, community, and world.²⁰ Seeing the importance of this relation between sinners for the understanding of sin in his day, Schoonenberg's first substantial proposal is in his presentation of 'the sin of the world'.

The sin of the world

Here, Schoonenberg begins with the biblical concept of 'the world', in the sense that the idea is used in the Pauline and especially the Johannine literature. Sin has dominion over the world, not through direct power but by virtue of prevalence. Alongside this, Schoonenberg notes how initially in the biblical accounts the individual sinner and the group to whom they belong (family,

¹⁶Nonetheless, Schoonenberg thinks some of the language used by the authors does not go far enough in interpreting the dogma for the contemporary world. See Schoonenberg, 'De Nieuwe Katechismus en de dogma's', 22–23.

¹⁷Piet Schoonenberg, *De macht der zonde: inleiding op de verlossingsleer* ('s-Hertogenbosch: Malmberg, 1962); ET: Piet Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, trans. Joseph Donceel (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

¹⁸Piet Schoonenberg, *Gods wordende wereld: vijf theologische essays* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1962); ET: Piet Schoonenberg, *God's World in the Making*, Duquesne Studies: Theological Series 2 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1964); this is also the argument of Christa Campbell Betty, 'Piet Schoonenberg's Theory of Original Sin, *Thought* 45, no. 1 (1970): 83–101, <https://doi.org/10.5840/thought19704515>.

¹⁹Betty, 'Piet Schoonenberg's Theory of Original Sin', 96.

²⁰Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 98.

tribe, nation...) cannot easily be separated, meaning there is solidarity in successive generations in sin, and in good.²¹ In the prophets, he argues that we begin to see the development of a protest against shared responsibility, perhaps in part in response to the breakdown of the bonds of the community caused by exile. This does not involve a loss of solidarity altogether, but an increased recognition of the personal responsibility of the individual who committed the offence.²² In this, 'the sin of a community, ultimately the sin of the world, is more than the sum total of the individual sins considered without inner connection', and is more than simply sharing guilt or punishment.²³ Furthermore, 'today's sin may not only draw others along through seduction but it may also in the same way influence posterity, which has lost its bearings on account of the sins of the parents.'²⁴

Schoonenberg calls this 'the situation caused by sinful acts'.²⁵ He makes considerable effort to argue that this 'situation' is not a limitation on freedom *per se*, but a statement of how freedom does not exist outside some specific context. The embodied human person does not exist except within given circumstances, and therefore it can be no limitation on liberty that the choices a free person can make are determined by the possibilities of those circumstances. This situated freedom is shaped by the actions of others, for good and for ill.²⁶

Schoonenberg posits a connection of bad example and obscuration of values and norms as the way in which the sins of one situate another. Clearly, he sees something equivalent for the propagation of good works, too, but does not explicate it here.

Bad example has an effect on the situation because, without examples of good, a learning human individual does not learn good but only evil ways. This can be intensified if the situation causes the individual to neglect doing good because it is easier or appears better, or because it fosters a desire to retaliate. Without removing freedom to act completely, much pressure can be applied to push the individual towards sin.²⁷

At a more unconscious level, if the norms of virtuous behaviour are—either in part or, in the asymptotic case, absolutely—absent, then the individual increasingly loses the capacity to choose another option. At the extreme of this, it becomes impossible for the individual to realise a particular value in their situation; in such circumstances, Schoonenberg argues, it becomes impossible to attribute guilt to them, even if their action amounts to material sin. Within this category, he points to how historical sins such as colonialism and war may imprison certain groups.²⁸

This shaping of the situation of being makes, Schoonenberg's argument continues, each person 'in some way, a mediator for his fellow human being'.²⁹ On the positive side, he argues:

²¹Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 98–99.

²²Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 101–3.

²³Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 103.

²⁴Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 104.

²⁵Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 111.

²⁶Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 104–6, 116–17.

²⁷Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 112–14.

²⁸Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 115–18.

²⁹Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 119.

first, each contact by which a person communicates his or her interior life to another person is, explicitly or not, a testimony about his or her relation to grace. Next on account of our being human and especially on account of the humanity of God's Word, there is no granting of God's grace in which the world and one's fellow human being do not have a part.³⁰

The same can be said for the deprivation of grace. He considers it to follow that 'there is a possibility of a situation deprived of grace which may precede all our free decisions and which encompasses them'.³¹ He posits that the rejection of Christ in his crucifixion is one such pinnacle of the dominion of sin in the world, which can then be seen as a 'second fall' or 'ratification' of the Fall.³² This stands within a history of sin where the choice for evil has been made repeatedly, climaxing in the total loss of the cross. This creates a situation that limits the possibilities of the free person to choose the good to the greatest possible extent.

In his exposition of what he means by the sin of the world, Schoonenberg leaves humanity in that state of sin, and, it might be suggested, leaves Christ on the cross. In the epilogue to the book, he does briefly return to offer the necessary hope and balance provided by the history of salvation, climaxing in the resurrection. The overall effect in this volume is unbalanced, especially given his own claim that sin can only be understood in the context of God's universal salvific will. Nonetheless, in light of the resurrection and the redemption offered by God in Christ, Schoonenberg ends up with two sides situating the current state of humanity:

since Christ's death on the cross, every person enters the world in the disastrous situation of original sin... [but also] every man enters the world in a situation of salvation, for the Lord has risen and his Spirit fills the earth.³³

The sin of the world as original sin

Central to Schoonenberg's problem with the classical formulation of the doctrine of original sin is ensuring it remains credible in light of scientific advances on the question of the genesis of humanity. Without completely and explicitly stating that humanity did not descend from one parental couple, it is clear that Schoonenberg does not consider such monogenism a credible starting point for theology to take. If pressed, he could argue that his proposal is utterly consistent with the historical existence of Adam and Eve as the only first parents of humanity, but that his proposal is neutral on their existence. However, given scientific understandings of the origins of humanity, he finds polygenism more credible. In this light, he turns to his conception of the sin of the world as an alternative.

Schoonenberg's concern for the re-articulation of the dogma to maintain its credibility is pastorally rooted, which is fitting given the pastoral origin of the doctrine. Why has the Church baptised infants, according to Origen, as an 'apostolic custom'?³⁴ The question rapidly becomes

³⁰Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 119.

³¹Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 120.

³²Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 120–21; the language of 'second fall' Schoonenberg attributes to Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, trans. Elinor Castendyk Briefs (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), 96 et passim.

³³Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 197.

³⁴Quoted by Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 59. Johnson refers here to both Origen's Commentary on Romans and his Homilies on Leviticus.

one of exegesis, especially of Paul's argument in Romans 5. As Schoonenberg notes, the difference that emerges between the Greek exegetes and the Latin pattern canonised with Augustine's response to Pelagianism is critical.³⁵

As I have already indicated, Schoonenberg's desire to re-articulate the doctrine of original sin is at least partly motivated by a desire to locate it with regard to salvation history and its antithesis, the history of sin. In this view, he considers the history of sin since Adam to have been neglected in classical approaches. It is not enough to connect all sin simply through reference back to Adam, it should be connected at a more immediate level. In light of this, Schoonenberg proposes that being situated by the sin of the world places the human person such that they are bound by the same lack of the life of grace, the same powerlessness, the same state of death in relation to the supernatural life as the traditional formulation of original sin puts upon the person.

In so doing, he highlights the traditional distinction between original sin and 'even the slightest personal sin'. The importance of this lies in overcoming the potential objection that it is not sufficiently connected with the individual, and he seeks to cement this by noting how both nature and situation are of necessity also at least in part assumed by the person in their creation of the self.³⁶

The questions of transmission and universality are significant to understand how Schoonenberg sees his position relating to the classical one here. Noting the certainty expressed by the Council of Trent that procreation is the means of transmission of original sin, Schoonenberg is forced to consider how the situation of the sin of the world can be understood to be transmitted. He suggests that if procreation is seen as an indirect cause of original sin, then given that the only means by which a human being comes into the world is through procreation, it can also be said that it is only through procreation that a person comes into the situation defined by the sin of the world. He suggests that this also has the beneficial side effect of removing the suspicion of sexuality that derives from the Augustinian approach here and makes the exceptional status of the Virgin Mary less extrinsic, given her ordinary generation.³⁷

When it comes to the universality of original sin, Schoonenberg freely acknowledges that the classical model has a clear logic. If all are descended from Adam and Eve, then all may—by whatever means of transmission—share in their sinful inheritance. If, however, the presumption for monogenism is removed, then, he argues, it is hard to see how original sin can be universalised. However, by virtue of being in the world, all human beings are located within the situation of the sin of the world. Hence, if that situation is what constitutes original sin, then it is clear that all human beings share in it, whatever trajectory shaped human descent.³⁸

Sources and method

Having surveyed Schoonenberg's proposal, I now want to note a few underlying details. He gives significant attention to the biblical roots, the formulations by major theologians of the tradition, and to the magisterial teaching on original sin. Yet it is never made explicit how

³⁵Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 140–49.

³⁶Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 181.

³⁷Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 185–87.

³⁸Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 187–91.

Schoonenberg considers his model of the situation of original sin to be directly an outworking of the claims of those authorities.

He clearly considers that what he says about the sin of the world can be derived from biblical sources, but he does not locate it in the accounts that have conventionally been used to locate the doctrine of original sin, namely Genesis 3 and Romans 5, important though he sees those to be. Instead, it is the language about the 'world' of the fourth gospel that is his starting point. This is not to say that there is clear evidence in either Genesis or Romans to reject Schoonenberg's position, simply that he does not fully develop it.

Schoonenberg's use of the magisterium is also particular. He perhaps even places so much stress on the importance of the magisterium and the subordination of constructive theology to it that one could accuse him of deliberately doing so to protect himself from the accusation of being unfaithful to it. Nonetheless, he lays out what he believes the fundamental content of the magisterial teaching to be, and how he believes that should be interpreted in the world today. Then, he uses this as a measure against which to test his hypothesis. And it appears to be this way around: the magisterium is, for Schoonenberg here, a test of the content of his exposition. It is extrinsic to his work and not intrinsic to it, a test at the end and little else.³⁹

Perhaps the most significant thinker in shaping Schoonenberg's conclusion here is one who is rarely named throughout the work before the epilogue. Only there does he recognise the importance of the evolutionary picture of the world that he draws from his Jesuit confrere, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.⁴⁰ Of Teilhard, Schoonenberg writes: 'Even if this book has occasionally criticized some of his views, it has been deeply affected by his inspiration.'⁴¹ This perspective runs through Schoonenberg's work, and, perhaps more than the desire to locate sin historically, it is the evolution of the world towards its fulfilment that shapes his articulation of original sin. For Schoonenberg then: 'Paradise lies not at the beginning, but at the end, so that sin and Redemption, too, should be measured in their deepest meaning against that fulfilment.'⁴²

Evaluation

What then are we to make of Schoonenberg's proposed understanding of original sin? As the similarities of language show, it was clearly influential enough in the Netherlands immediately after its writing to be taken up by the *New Catechism*. There certainly seems to be continuing

³⁹There is significant similarity of hermeneutic approach between the way Schoonenberg addresses the teaching of Trent on original sin and Schillebeeckx addresses it on eucharistic real presence in *The Eucharist* (London: Burns & Oates, [1968] 2005), which may warrant further consideration. Nonetheless, the difference in how the findings of the hermeneutical work are integrated into their respective conclusions is stark.

⁴⁰For a more substantial consideration of the influence of Teilhard, see Nathan Halloran, 'Evolution and the Nature and Transmission of Original Sin: Rahner, Schoonenberg and Teilhard de Chardin', *Colloquium (Auckland)* 44, no. 2 (2012): 177–93; see also, for a wider perspective on the place of the evolutionary perspective on original sin, James P. O'Sullivan, 'Catholics Re-Examining Original Sin in Light of Evolutionary Science: The State of the Question', *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1083 (September 2018): 653–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12234>.

⁴¹Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 192; Schoonenberg does not use many citations throughout his work but does refer here to his own *God's World in the Making*, where the use of Teilhard is more explicit; Betty, 'Piet Schoonenberg's Theory of Original Sin' suggests Schoonenberg's two works must be read together to make this clearer.

⁴²Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 194.

merit in two of the key pillars of his proposal. His claim that the doctrine, as classically formulated and within the broader classical understanding of sin, fails to engage with the corporate aspect of sin in history, cannot be quickly dismissed.⁴³ Sin—however personal the fault—is never an individualised affair, but always also communal, in its causes and its consequences. The interwovenness of this history of sin with the history of salvation, and the very *Christian* response to it Schoonenberg gives through his centring of the person of Christ, is also important. Furthermore, the principle of seeking to present the doctrine in a way that is credible alongside the fact that we cannot seriously read the early chapters of Genesis as history in light of current understandings of the coming-into-being of the human race, cannot be disputed. There is too much *theological* truth in those ancient texts to leave them as merely outdated scientific statements.

Alongside these positive remarks, a number of difficulties with Schoonenberg's proposal must also be noted. Chief among these are:⁴⁴

1. Schoonenberg's conception of 'situation' is not rigorous enough. It seems too quick to reduce original sin to simply the accumulated mass of the sins of humanity shaping the situation of the present individual. It has no metaphysical character and it seems to be simply external influence.
2. Schoonenberg does not take seriously enough another truth from the early chapters of Genesis: that creation is *good*. The classical formulation of original sin offers at least some answer to the shift from the divine pronouncement of the goodness of the creation to what follows. In Schoonenberg's evolutionary alternative, how do we get from there to the climax of sin at the cross?
3. With respect to the universality of original sin, does one born into a 'more sinful situation' experience 'more' original sin? It is clear that it is universal in that no-one is born outside such a situation, but as Schoonenberg presents it, it seems that one born into a situation where virtue is more obscured is burdened with 'more' original sin.
4. In treating the sin of the world as original sin, Schoonenberg fails to give sufficient weight to the guilt proper to the maintaining of the structures of sinful situation. He allows that guilt to be dismissed as simply part of the situation, and those who maintain it to be free from responsibility for it.

III. SCHILLEBEECKX AND ORIGINAL SIN

Turning now to Schillebeeckx, there is insufficient evidence in his work to unfold a full presentation of his position on original sin as I have just done for Schoonenberg.⁴⁵ Furthermore, his position appears to change between different texts in which he references the doctrine. Up to somewhere in the early 1970s, he seems to accept the doctrine and uses it to make methodological critiques, albeit noting that it should be re-articulated for the contemporary world. Later on,

⁴³This point is briefly picked up by Karl Rahner, with quiet reference to Schoonenberg, see 'Original Sin', in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner, Cornelius Ernst, and Kevin Smyth, vol. 4 (London: Search Press, 1973), 328–34.

⁴⁴Betty, 'Piet Schoonenberg's Theory of Original Sin', 96 offers similar points at greater length.

⁴⁵Note though how Daniel Minch, "... dat jullie dan als God zullen zijn": Erfzonde en ideologiekritiek', *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 54, no. 4 (2014): 350–63, <https://doi.org/10.2143/TVT.54.4.3200492>, offers a reading of the doctrine in light of Schillebeeckx's critical hermeneutics.

Schillebeeckx appears to shift his position and, rather than seek a re-articulation, he begins to suggest it is no longer needed.

In the early 1960s, when teaching on original sin, Schillebeeckx's approach was still largely in a Thomistic mode and does not make a significant step towards the work on the doctrine he would later identify as necessary.⁴⁶ By the end of that decade, though, Schillebeeckx is clear that renewed hermeneutical work is required.⁴⁷

Original sin, the body, and the created order

I offer here three examples of how Schillebeeckx uses original sin to support his theological method. The first two are in an essay published in its final form in his book *World and Church* in 1966. It was originally prepared in two parts, one as a lecture to students of the medical faculty at Nijmegen in 1959 on the significance of the body as a *human* body, and one given at the opening of an animal testing laboratory, also at Nijmegen, in 1960. In each of these parts of what becomes one essay, Schillebeeckx makes reference to the doctrine of original sin in different ways.⁴⁸

In the first case, Schillebeeckx is articulating what he sees to be the distinctive humanity of the body over and above the biological facts that were perhaps the more obvious to the medical students he was addressing. Rejecting any body-soul dualism, he recognises that 'an act of the human will is really a biochemical process', and yet the human being 'is more than this biological nature *primarily*'.⁴⁹ Having introduced discussion of the relationship between creation and evolution and the theology of death, Schillebeeckx considers the sacramentality of the bodily life. In this regard, he suggests that in the embodiment of the soul, 'the body is the soul itself' and thereby there is 'a glorification here on earth of matter in and through its being included in human spirituality'.⁵⁰ He considers whether this glorification, this humanisation of matter, can proceed so far as to overcome death, and suggests that from a biological point of view, there is no reason why it cannot. However, 'at least as the consequence of original sin', he concludes that this is not possible, and that the spirit does not have 'an *unlimited* power over matter'.⁵¹ While far from a complete consideration of the dogma, it clearly has a role for Schillebeeckx in shaping the make-up of the human being in the world, as a limit upon human power over the material world of creation.

⁴⁶See Edward Schillebeeckx, 'De erfzonde' (Udenhout, 1963); and Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Collegedictaat "Theologie van de aardse waarden" (algemene dogmatiek). Grotendeels geordend. Met aantekeningen over erfzonde en bijlagen.' (1962, 1964-1965, 1991 1961), Nijmegen, Archief E.C.F.A. Schillebeeckx, SCHI.275.

⁴⁷Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics', in *God the Future of Man*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 3 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13; first published in 1967. There are similar sentiments expressed in Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 543.

⁴⁸Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Man and His Bodily World', in *World and Church*, by Edward Schillebeeckx, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 4 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 177-205; in Dutch, Edward Schillebeeckx, 'De mens en zijn lichamelijke wereld', in *Wereld en kerk* (Bilthoven: Nelissen, 1966), 227-55; originally Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke benadering van de menselijke lichamelijkeheid', in *Het centrale zenuwstelsel: zijn relatie tot de psychische activiteit. Symposium voor de studenten van de medische faculteit der R.K. Universiteit Nijmegen, 16-20 maart 1959* (Nijmegen, 1959), 1-16; and Edward Schillebeeckx, 'De zin van het dier voor de mens', *R.K. Artsdenblad* 39 (1960): 59-63.

⁴⁹Schillebeeckx, 'Man and His Bodily World', 184, 182, emphasis original.

⁵⁰Schillebeeckx, 'Man and His Bodily World', 192.

⁵¹Schillebeeckx, 'Man and His Bodily World', 193.

In the second case, the context is a justification of the legitimacy of animal testing. It appears that Schillebeeckx is being asked to defend the proposed programme of research for a new facility within his Catholic university. Schillebeeckx's argument is that the value of animals stems from human processes of meaning-giving, and as such there can be no objection to proportionate and responsible experimentation on animals that serves the cause of humanisation of the world. Along the way he engages with the question of the apparent cruelty of the natural behaviour of the animal world. In so doing he rejects as 'fantasies' the idea that this 'so-called cruelty' can be a consequence of original sin.⁵² Schillebeeckx's evaluation of animal testing may not stand up to thorough critique today, but offers again a valuable insight into Schillebeeckx's conception of original sin: it should be understood as limited in its effects on creation beyond the human world, not affecting substantial change in the relationship between other creatures. This appears to envisage the impact of original sin and the Fall more narrowly than Schoonenberg's placement of it in the context of the Teilhardian view of the evolution of the world, and certainly more so than the cosmic scale often seen in theologians of the early Church.⁵³

Original sin as necessary counterweight to critical theory

As a third example, I turn to the early 1970s when Schillebeeckx had begun to supplement his hermeneutical method with insights from critical theory, especially as developed in the Frankfurt school by Habermas, Adorno, and Horkheimer. He sees important and necessary challenges to the work of theology from this approach, if appropriately engaged, and contributes later to this work himself. One of his chief concerns is with the human optimism of the critical theorists, asking, 'can we really insist that humanity itself, on the basis of critical theory with its emphasis on the unity of theory and praxis, can achieve a really emancipative history entirely and exclusively on its own initiative and power?'⁵⁴

Schillebeeckx suggests that the doctrine of original sin offers the appropriate counterweight. He implies that there is a certain similarity between the Pelagianism opposed by Augustine and the emancipative praxis by purely human means of critical theory. There is, he highlights, an ideological framework deriving from the historical context of its formulation that must be stripped away from the dogma, but underneath, he suggests, in language borrowed from Johann Baptist Metz, there is a 'subversive memory' of significant historical experiences. Pointing to the shared conclusion of the dogma of original sin and of critical theory that the present situation is wrong, Schillebeeckx suggests that the 'optimism of reason' of critical theory should be seen in light of 'a pessimism that changes into an "optimism of grace"' that original sin, grounded as part of the doctrine of redemption, provides. He concludes, 'it is therefore possible to say that the dogma of original sin enshrines critical negativity, but does this when this is situated within the positive sphere of understanding of the promise, which has then to be constitutively linked to a Christian praxis'.⁵⁵

⁵²Schillebeeckx, 'Man and His Bodily World', 200.

⁵³See the discussion of Olivier Clément, 'Le sens de la terre. Notes de cosmologie orthodoxe', *Contacts. Revue française de l'Orthodoxie* 59 (1967): 252–323. Equally, Schillebeeckx might criticize the approach Clément presents for the early church and subsequent Orthodox theology as insufficiently grounded in history.

⁵⁴Edward Schillebeeckx, 'The New Critical Theory and Theological Hermeneutics', in *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 5 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), 130; Schillebeeckx develops some of the same points a little further in Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Critical Theories and Christian Political Commitment', *Concilium* 9, no. 5 (1973): 31–45.

⁵⁵Schillebeeckx, 'The New Critical Theory and Theological Hermeneutics', 131.

Obviously, none of these three examples are substantial contributions to the understanding of original sin, nor do they necessitate substantial departure from the classical formulation of it. But we do see an indication of how it can be part of a critical approach to theology. When properly located in relation to redemption, and linked to Christian praxis, it can provide the proper anchor to understand the liberation of the world in the reign of God as the true, ideology-free, emancipation of humanity.

The later move away from original sin

Towards the end of his life, Schillebeeckx was planning to write a final book returning to the sacraments; sadly, he never completed the project. Among the draft material preserved in his archive for this, there is a brief discussion on original sin, that together with some of his works from the late 1970s onwards, directs us towards where Schillebeeckx arrived at on the dogma.

We begin to see this change of approach in the rejection of the idea that human finitude can be treated as a consequence of original sin. Death is not simply the result of the loss of some preternatural gift. Quite the opposite, suggests Schillebeeckx: in Genesis, 'the so-called primal human sin' is that humanity 'does not want to *accept* its finite or contingent condition, that [humanity] craves infinity: immortality and omniscience, in order to become like God'.⁵⁶ Subsequently he elaborated this with the interpretation of the first creation story in Genesis as 'know[ing] no "original sin" (but a growing human history of sinfulness and murder)'.⁵⁷ While clear about the contrast between human behaviour and God's plan for creation, it certainly suggests that Schillebeeckx has become very hesitant to point to the origin of that sinful behaviour in a single historical act by humanity's first parents. Instead, he seems to lean towards a theme central to his hermeneutics of original sin being a way of referring to the negative experience of contrast on the cosmic scale: the idea that creation is not as it should be.⁵⁸

In the draft material towards the planned book of sacramental theology,⁵⁹ Schillebeeckx is seeking to ground sacraments in creation. Here, he emphasises the importance of Augustine having placed original sin firmly within the doctrine of redemption and not that of creation. However, on the basis of current scientific understanding, especially with regard to evolution, he sees no place for Adam and Eve as historical first parents.⁶⁰ And Schillebeeckx has no interest in re-articulating the doctrine of original sin, instead calling for 'a development of dogma

⁵⁶Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 8 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 99, emphasis added.

⁵⁷Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 243.

⁵⁸cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Liberating Theology: Reflection on J.-B. Metz's Political Theology', in *Essays: Ongoing Theological Quests*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 11 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 79.

⁵⁹Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Verzet, engagement en viering', *Nieuwsbrief Stichting Edward Schillebeeckx* 5 (October 1992): 1–3.

⁶⁰In contrast to the openness to ambiguity on this point expressed by Schoonenberg, two decades later, Schillebeeckx seems to feel no need to equivocate.

“by subtraction”⁶¹ It is, he claims, an auxiliary hypothesis to the doctrine of redemption and no longer required in the conceptualisation of it.

As part of this discussion, he alludes to Schoonenberg’s approach to the sin of the world, not as a reformulation as Schoonenberg himself presented it, but as a necessary recognition of the effects of the history of the personal sins of human beings that situate and shape personal actions. Framed this way, rather than as a re-articulation of the traditional doctrine, it avoids some of the problems that arise when using this approach as Schoonenberg did; it becomes an answer to a different question than that asked by the classical dogma. Similar references to that approach, with greater emphasis on how the sin of the world can be ‘lodged in institutions and structures created by human beings’, were made by Schillebeeckx in his articulation of salvation in his famous work *Christ*, though there he seems more open to this complementing the classical dogma.⁶²

Schillebeeckx concludes the brief reflection in these late drafts of his with the suggestion that it requires a change to the practices of initiation, where baptism has so often been framed as ‘the laundering of a sinful status acquired by inheritance’. In this way, he believes, original sin has become in the present day an ‘obstacle’ that obscures the authentic view of the Christian sacraments.⁶³

In some of his last published articles in the 1990s, we see Schillebeeckx develop some of these same thoughts. In an essay published in 1994 entitled ‘Discontinuities in Christian Dogmas’, original sin is one of Schillebeeckx’s targets.⁶⁴ What he proposes is not an outright rejection of the Tridentine formulation. Instead, he suggests the council, and others including Augustine and Thomas, had no framework in which to express the truth at the crux of the dogma ‘other than by laying down a dogma that through procreation the personal sin of the so-called first human couple was passed on to all descendants of Adam and Eve, so all people enter the world with a blemished soul’.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, he calls this ‘absurd’ today, saying that ‘no Christian in a secularized world can take such a story seriously’. Central to his reason for considering it absurd is, he suggests, that we have realised that it is a function of the literary genre of Genesis that this cannot refer to ‘a matter of two parents’.⁶⁶ Despite this, Schillebeeckx still wishes to affirm that the dogma,

⁶¹Edward Schillebeeckx, ‘Onderbroken verhaal: inzet, engagement, viering’ (1992), 106, Nijmegen, Archief E.C.F.A. Schillebeeckx, SCHL.5428. He suggests there he first proposed this mode of the development of doctrine in Henricus Schillebeeckx, ‘Dogma-ontwikkeling’, in *Theologisch woordenboek*, vol. 1, 3 vols (Roermond: Maaseik, 1952), 1087–1106; republished as Edward Schillebeeckx, ‘De ontwikkeling van het apostolisch geloof tot kerkelijk dogma’, in *Openbaring en theologie* (Bilthoven: H. Nelissen, 1964), 50–67; ET: Edward Schillebeeckx, ‘The Development of the Apostolic Faith into the Dogma of the Church’, in *Revelation and Theology*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 2 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 43–61. He does so much less explicitly than he seems to remember.

⁶²Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 828.

⁶³Schillebeeckx, ‘Onderbroken verhaal: inzet, engagement, viering’, 106.

⁶⁴Edward Schillebeeckx, ‘Breuken in christelijke dogma’s’, in *Breuklijnen : grenservaringen en zoektochten: 14 essays voor Ted Schoof bij zijn afscheid van de theologische faculteit Nijmegen*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx et al. (Baarn: Uitgeverij H. Nelissen, 1994), 15–49; in English translation, see Edward Schillebeeckx, ‘Discontinuities in Christian Dogmas’, in *Essays: Ongoing Theological Quests*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 11 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 85–109; a version of this argument was also included in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament: notarieel nog niet verleden* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1994); in English translation, Edward Schillebeeckx, ‘Theological Quests’, in *Essays: Ongoing Theological Quests*, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx 11 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 141.

⁶⁵Schillebeeckx, ‘Discontinuities in Christian Dogmas’, 101.

⁶⁶Schillebeeckx, ‘Discontinuities in Christian Dogmas’, 102.

tells us something quite real about our human condition. Every human being who enters this world arrives to a society that is a product, partly of a lot of good that happened in the past, partly of the accumulation of a lot of evil. The actual society into which we are born exists, so to speak, in a state of sin. The 'sin of the world' precedes our free will. Even before we embark on a voluntary act [...] We are already steeped in sinfulness, as it were; it has lodged in our inner being as a vague propensity and remains as a threat of personal sin.⁶⁷

IV. CONCLUSIONS

I began with the suggestion that both Schoonenberg and Schillebeeckx were unusual choices of theologians from whose work to seek discussion of the traditional dogma of original sin. Schoonenberg's approach can be dismissed as not taking the problem seriously enough. Schillebeeckx did not write at length on the topic.

I have laid out Schoonenberg's position, and indicated how this position was popularised through the *New Catechism*, where original sin is reduced to little more than the situation created by the sin of the world and how that determines the space in which the individual can act freely. Possibly fearing controversy on what is not a necessary step in his argument, he attempts to frame this approach as being neutral on the existence of Adam and Eve and their status as the first parents of humanity; certainly, he is willing to do away with them and any specific act by either of them which directly causes some state in subsequent generations. All that remains is some indirectly causal situation.

Schillebeeckx's position was never laid out so clearly. He was evidently sympathetic to the need to re-articulate the doctrine at the time Schoonenberg did so, but nonetheless clearly felt there was something of enough substance there to support other elements of a systematic approach to theology, especially a challenge to secular over-optimism. Later in his life, he moves to a position that might be seen as even more opposed to the classical formulation than Schoonenberg's, calling for the doctrine to develop 'by subtraction'. Nonetheless, even then Schillebeeckx seeks to speak of something that is not as it should be, which is more fundamental and intrinsic to the human condition than Schoonenberg's proposal is capable of providing.

The work of both authors on this question identifies the need for a doctrine which fills the gap that original sin traditionally accounted for, namely that humanity, and the world in which human beings live, is not as it should be. Likewise, both engage in this exploration in full recognition that the first sin cannot any longer credibly be attributed to a specific individual who is humanity's first parent. Furthermore, the importance of the history of sin, alongside the history of salvation, and humanity's community in sin (equally alongside its community in grace), identified by Schoonenberg, cannot be omitted in any attempt to articulate the shared propensity to sin of all human beings. Of final note is Schillebeeckx's gentle insistence that any reformulation must be intrinsic to the understanding of the human condition as it currently is—and not some external extra imposed merely by the situation of the world, despite the importance of that situation and the guilt correctly attributable to those complicit in maintaining it—in order to understand sin.

⁶⁷Schillebeeckx, 'Discontinuities in Christian Dogmas', 101.