Being Christian on the Condition of the Relationship with God through the Incarnate Logos—Anthropological Christology of Edward Schillebeeckx

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Abstract

The research presented here is part of our project and ideology of Christism developed in other articles. It seems believable that all people are aware of the existence of the Great Thought speaking to them inwardly to guide them into truth and a pearl of practical wisdom. But the fact is that they understand it differently, some understand it as just their own reason, an inborn intelligence, or smartness; but for others, it is the intuition, common sense, or a sound of practical judgment, a mother wit. This awareness was already in the ancient Greek philosophers, from Heraclitus in the 6th century BCE onwards, and they understood the Great Thought whispering in humans as Logos, an independent entity that has access to the human mind and reasoning. To proclaim the Gospel to the Greek intellectuals, the author of the fourth Gospel used the term Logos to refer to Jesus Christ. On the basis of this, Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 CE) claims that by virtue of living reasonably, all people are Christians. Being Christian, however, is the relationship with God centered on the incarnate Logos.

Subject Areas

Philosophy, Theology

Keywords

Christian, Edward Schillebeeckx, Revelation, Incarnation, Sacrament, Anthropological Christology

1. Introduction

By reading Justin Martyr and Karl Rahner, it appears that both share the view on

the general disposal of the fact of being Christians. To interpret Rahner, for instance, George Vass asserts that "The atonement is a fact, relevant not only to the confessing Christians but to every man and woman in history. Those who are not aware of it can be called anonymous Christians". [1] The same to Justin Martyr who affirms in the 46th chapter of his Apology that "Christ is the first-born of God, being the Logos in which the whole race of human beings shared. And those who lived with Logos are Christians, even if they were called atheists, such as among Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and those similar to them." [2] But, while Rahner is referring to all people being Christians anonymously on the grounds of the availability of the divine grace in Christ, Justin Martyr emphasizes the fact of being Christians on the basis of the divine Logos' availability to all people through reason. [3] Given his understanding of Logos, Justin Martyr is believed to be Johannine, meaning his Logos is both Philonic and Middle Platonic. This is why he asserts Logos as Reason, being incarnate and referring to the person of Jesus Christ. And because of this, by Logos, Justin forges a link between the ordinary reason that all human race share and divine Reason referring to Christ, and opines that all reasonable people are Christians by virtue of Logos. This view of Justin Martyr is the background and reason for choosing this topic because the fact of being Christian should not be based on anything else apart from the relationship with God through the incarnate Logos. This is why the questions directing this research are the following: If the fact of being Christian is solely based on the divine Reason shared by the entire human race by virtue of reason, what is the value of the incarnation? What does it imply the divine-human new relationship grounded on the incarnate divine Logos? I will address these questions through the anthropological Christology in the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx.

2. Revelation as the Starting Point of Schillebeeckx's Theology

Schillebeeckx's anthropological Christology is grounded on his revelation theology. Such revelation is sacramental in nature, with a sacramentality characterizing Schillebeeckx's overall theology to be between divine transcendence and immanence. According to Schillebeeckx interpreter, Jennifer Cooper, the mode of revelation in Schillebeeckx is neither a communication of knowledge of truths that are beyond our understanding nor a revelation in human and historical form, rather, the relation between knowledge that transcends history in utter difference and yet is immanent within history and became knowable [4]. This relation is what is meant by the sacramental character of revelation, and it is often referred to as *theologia* given in *oikonomia*. These two terminologies, *theologia* and *oikonomia*, are the keys to comprehending the point here. By *theologia* Schillebeeckx refers to God the Creator and the mystery of divine ontology, and by *oikonomia* he refers to God the Redeemer. In *Revelation and Theology*, Schillebeeckx mentions that under the influence of the Byzantine theologians of

the fourth century, the concept came to have a special meaning, *theologia* was contrasted with *oikonomia*, or the theology of the mystery of Christ. *Theologia* meant the *Sacra Doctrina de Trninitate*, that is, everything concerned with the doctrine of God as opposed to oikonomia, the Christian plan of salvation. However, while those *theologia* and *oikonimia* are still viewed as opposed to each other in present-day Byzantine theology, for Schillebeeckx, both are inseparable. [5] Cooper emphasizes that Schillebeeckx *theologia* and *oikonomia* are not only inseparable but indeed, it is the *oikonomia*—divine plan for salvation—that is the basis of *theologia*—divine ontology. It is thus the God of creation who does not enter into human history is at the same time constitutive of historical humanity as God of salvation freely intervenes in human history. And his historical intervention reveals his true personal nature (p. 53). Schillebeeckx himself asserts: "It is then the history of salvation and not the creation that reveals to us who God really is and his wish to be really our God." [6]

Now, when we are back to the sacramental characteristic of God's self-revelation in Schillebeeckx, it must be that the emphasis is on the historical aspect of the divine economy of salvation which is centered on the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Based on this, Cooper argues that "For Schillebeeckx, revelation sets the agenda for theology with respect to both content and method. The subject of theology is the God who is God for humanity. Based on this Schillebeeckx describes theology as theocentric in content and Christological in method." (p. 1). Theocentric in content because the concern is the knowledge of God, but Christological in method because such a knowledge of God is Christologically conditioned. This means that Schillebeeckx's theology of revelation is Christocentric, that is, it is only through Christ that God is known. This Christ, however, is the incarnate Christ for saving the lost humankind. By this, Schillebeeckx is more precise in pointing to the ground of the knowledge of God, which is not only Christ but especially his incarnation for the purpose of human salvation.

3. Anthropological Christology of Edward Schillebeeckx

From incarnation, Schillebeeckx moves to the humanity of Christ, and this is why his anthropological approach to Christology is based upon the interpretation of the incarnation which reflects the fully personal nature of Christ's humanity. This is related to Schillebeeckx's sacramental theology which—grounded in the incarnation—is the description of the human intimacy with God that has been established in the personal nature of Christ's humanity. However, to better understand Schillebeeckx's anthropological Christology, looking into how his view of the sacrament shaped his incarnation theology is crucial.

3.1. Schillebeeckx Sacramental Approach to Christology

Schillebeeckx's Christological discourse is best started with his treatise on sacrament as he wrote his doctoral thesis: *The Redeeming Economy of the Sacra-*

ment. The two great backgrounds of his sacramental theology are Saint Augustine and Thoams Aquinas. [7] According to Kenan B. Osborne, it was Augustine who first began to develop a theology of sacrament, with his analysis of a sacred sign. [8] The greatest legacy of the Augustinian sacrament that Schillebeeckx inherited is both the sacramental sign and the sacramental reality in which reality can be manifest only through a sign. This means the visibility of the invisible reality through the visible sign. For Thomas Aquinas, sacraments are characterized "in genre sign". Their condition as signs is based on the words and other elements that make them up, manifesting their meaning and efficacy. [9] In *Summa Theologica* Aquinas defines a sacrament as "a sign of sacred reality." [10] Based on Augustine and Aquinas, Schillebeeckx understands sacrament as a "visible sign of the divine invisible reality." [11] It is so because through the person of Jesus is the grace of salvation bestowed and manifested to the world. Hence, the Man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is the sacrament, the primordial sacrament. Schillebeeckx's understanding of sacrament is the key to understanding his concept of incarnation.

On the ground of his definition of the sacrament as the visible sign of the divine invisible reality, Schillebeeckx understands incarnation to be a sacrament because the tangible historical Jesus who was earthly existent is the visible sign of the invisible reality of God, the Logos. Because of his understanding of the incarnation as a sacrament, Schillebeeckx makes a connection between the historical Jesus and the Chalcedonic Christ, arguing:

> The dogmatic definition of Chalcedon, according to which Christ is "one person in two natures." implies that one and the same person, the Son of God, also took on a visible human form… Christ is God in a human way, and man in a divine way. As a man, he acts out his divine life in and according to his human existence. [12]

If incarnation is understood as a sacrament—according to Schillebeeckx's definition of the term—it means that the historical Jesus is a visible sign of God's invisible reality. That's why Schillebeeckx states Jesus Christ is "God in a human way and man in a divine way." In his sacramental approach to Christology, thus, Schillebeeckx connects the Chalcedonic Christ and the historical Jesus, stating that the second person in the Trinity, the Logos—God's invisible reality—became flesh, incarnate and visible, in the man Jesus of Nazareth; "Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ", "God's supreme self-expression." [13] This is the anthropological Christology of Edward Schillebeeckx which is based on his sacramental approach to theology. Although Christ is no longer earthly but heavenly, his Chalcedonic Personality distinct from that of the Father and Spirit remains, and this is why Thomas Goodwin argues that in the Trinity, there are three Persons but one nature, but for Christ, there are two natures but one Person. [14] Schillebeeckx affirms: "Christ remains man in heaven." (Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God, p. 78). Incarnation as a sacrament renders the man

Christ to be a channel of the human encounter with God.

3.2. Christ: The Sacrament of the Human Encounter with God

The incarnation theology of Schillebeeckx in his understanding of the sacrament which reflects the humanity of Christ is the tunnel of the human encounter with God on the basis of Christ redemptive activity. Schillebeeckx thus examines seriously the nature of the humanity of Christ, and to better understand this, I trace back to the medieval Christological debate regarding the humanity of Christ. Actually, the Christological debate in the 5th century between Nestorianism and Monophysitism which was solved in Chalcedonic Council in 451 CE, continued in the 6th century as the Neo-Chalcedonic Christology. There was a warm Christological debate that erupted in the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 CE known as Anhypostatic Christology which simply means the impersonal humanity of Christ. [15] The Chalcedonic Christological decree is clear that One Person in two natures inseparably and unconfusedly, and this Person must be divine, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who took human nature (not personality) at his incarnation as the basis of His humanity. [16] This view is in line with the Alexandrian School with the Monophysite tendency, though not emphasizing the singularity of the divine nature as in Monophysitism. [17] It is also called the subsistence theory of incarnation since His humanity is not a reality existing in itself but receives its subsistence from the Logos. [18] The Council held in Frankfort in 794 CE went further embracing the so-called "Nihilistic Christology" which taught that the Christ human personality was destroyed or consumed by the Divine. [19] Many medieval theologians were on the view of subsistence theory, like Leontius of Byzantium (485-543 CE), John of Damascus (675-749 CE), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE). (F. LeRon Shults: Christology and Science).

The counterpart is the rejection of Christ's humanity without human personality, which contradicts the impersonal human nature of Christ. This problem was already perceived in Nestorian Christology in the 5th century, as Nestorius did not accept the existence of nature without a person, though his weakness was the adoption of two Persons. [20] So, while the anhypostatic Christology is in line with the Alexandrian school with Monophysite tendency, its counterpart was in line with the Antiochene school with the Nestorian tendency, though not adopting the two Persons as in Nestorianism. Medieval theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 CE), Peter Abelard (1079-1142 CE), and William of Auxerre (1150-1231 CE) were on this view. For Anselm of Canterbury, "the incarnation merely accomplished the union of the Divine and human personalities, and not the union of the Divine and the human natures. The Divine Person became man and formed one person with humanity assumed, but not the nature." [21] This is the *assumptus* theory of the incarnation of Abelard which means the Logos assumed a complete man at the incarnation, and since then Christ's human Person exists but only together with the divine Person. [22] And because of this, William of Auxerre argues that Christ's divine Person is really

human and his human Person is really divine. [23] What is resisted by this view is Christ's humanity without Him being a human Person, that is, human nature without human personality, which means, as Henry Goodwin argues, Christ was reduced to a mere theophany, He was no longer a real Man (Christ, and humanity; with a review of the doctrine of Christ's person, 260).

3.3. Christ Is Both Personally God and Personally Man

Schillebeeckx is on the side of the *assumptus* theory of incarnation, which implies that both Christ's divinity and humanity are now equal, not only by virtue of nature but also by Person. That's why it is stated before that from the incarnation, Christ's Personhood is sharply different from that of God the Father and the Holy Spirit as He now exists as God-Man, in Schillebeeckx's word: "God in a human way and Man in a divine way". [24] Jesus Christ is both Personally God and Personally Man. [25] He shares the same substance, not only with God, but also with the humankind, as states Vasilije Vranic: "Orthodoxos further argues from 1 Timothy 2: 5 - 6 that Christ is rightly called a human being (ʿανθρωπος) for he shares the same substance of Godhead with the Father, while with us he shares the substance of human beings." [26] This is, therefore, the basis of Schillebeeckx's anthropological Christology in which he claims Christ as the sacrament of the human encounter with God. The sacramentality of the human encounter with God centered in Christ is based upon the human substantiality of Christ, it is thus substantially based.

This human substantiality of Christ is the tunnel of the human sacramental encounter with God because as Christ shares the same substance with humanity, he thus belongs to the same kind of human beings. Schillebeeckx says: "The Son of God himself is intended by the Father to be, in his humanity, the only way to the actuality of redemption." [27] On the basis of this, the sacramentality of the human encounter with God through Christ is evident. It is based on Schillebeeckx's understanding of the sacrament as a visible sign of the invisible divine reality, that on the basis of Christ's humanity, the human sacramental encounter with God through Christ refers to the relationship with God in human way, in Schillebeeckx's words; the human mode of the encounter with God, as he asserts: "In this book, we are directing our attention to sacramentality in religion in order to arrive eventually at the insight that the sacraments are the properly human mode of encounter with God." (Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God, p. 3). Christ the sacrament of the human encounter with God thus refers to believers' human mode of encounter with God on the basis of Christ's humanity sharing the same kind with them in love. This leads to the study of the sacramental approach to the relationship with God, which is a prayer done to God in a human mode such as dialogue, intimacy, conversation, discussion, and talk as if Jesus is still historically present in bodily form. The sacramental approach to the relationship with God is perceived in what Schillebeeckx argues the following regarding theological anthropology:

Theological anthropology considers what it means to be human in light of the ultimate possibilities implied by a fundamental relationship with God. For being-in-and-present-to-the-world takes on a completely different meaning if humanity experiences this presence in the world and in history not as an isolated individual, but as a dwelling in and with the living God in the historical situation of this world. [28]

3.4. Intimacy with God as the Human Vocation

The theological anthropology mentioned above can be defined as "the description of what it means to be human in light of the creative, salvific, sanctifying, participative, and personal nature of the relationship between God and humanity," (p. 5). As stated above, at the center of such a relationship is Jesus Christ because of his humanity in the incarnation. As stated, this incarnation is a sacrament, meaning, the visible earthly Jesus as a sign of the invisible divine Logos, that is, the historical Jesus on the condition of the Chalcedonic Christology.

Contemporarily, Christ is no longer earthly existent in bodily form, but his existence is in divine form, invisible and spiritual. However, his Chalcedonic personality—one person in two natures without separation, without confusion—remains. This Christ's manhood in his divinely spiritual existence is the passageway for human beings to be able to have a personal relationship with God. Schillebeeckx argues:

> The Son of God himself is intended by the Father to be, in his humanity, the only way to the actuality of redemption. For there is one God, and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). Personally to be approached by the man Jesus was, for his contemporaries, an invitation to a personal encounter with the life-giving God, because personally, that man was the Son of God. [29]

Here we are invited to talk again about the substantial basis because Jesus Christ in his Personal humanity is our fellow human being initiatively and lovingly sharing with us the same kind as humans to whom we can talk, we can discuss, we can ask for help, and share our deep secrets, fears, and joys in a way sincere and intimate. This is for Schillebeeckx a sacramental aspect of the human encounter with God whose basis is Christ's humanity, as he argues: "Christ as the sacrament of the human encounter with God both establishes and reveals human intimacy with God." (Theologia or Oikonomia, p. 97). Now, we come to what Schillebeeckx calls the human vocation: "intimacy and encounter with God." He further develops the idea of such vocation as a dialogue of theological intimacy, affirming: "The theological definition of man's personhood is his theological intimacy with God; man is primarily a dialogue with God." (Dialogue with God and Christian Secularity, p. 216-217). Cooper, by reporting Schillebeeckx, emphasizes it by saying: "The vocation to be human is a vocation to a dialogue with God, where this vocation is intimacy with God." (p. 9) Schille-

beeckx utilizes the concept "theologal" to refer to such a relation between God and humanity. He explains that the word theologal …refers to communion with the living God which surpasses the natural capacities of man and is possible only through the gratuitous self-communication of God. It is supernatural and surpasses the human powers. (Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God, p. 15-16) It is probable that what Schillebeeckx means by the term "theologal" is the presence of the Holy Spirit as an assurance of man's ability to communicate with God, as he asserts:

> Theologically, it is certain that man becomes himself only in moving outwards from his own center of life towards God, or in a deep introversion, so as to press on in grace through the most profound depths of his subjectivity to God, more accurately, to experience personally God's presence within him (Dialogue with God and Christian Secularity, p. 217).

This means that God speaks to us inwardly through his Spirit. Schillebeeckx argues that God personally, by the attraction of his grace, is whispering in our hearts. (Ibid.)

3.5. The Implication of the Sacramental Approach to the Relationship with God Based on the Human Substantiality of Christ

Having studied the sacramental approach to the relationship and intimacy with God, I am now introducing the practical implications of this approach. First of all, a sacramental approach to prayer—in human mode according to Schillebeeckx—suggests more relationship, talk, and communication with God rather than veneration, bow, or devotion. The reason for this is that we pray to God through the human substantiality of Christ, and this implies that God in Christ is closer to us than we might imagine. [30] Christ in his humanity is a Friend and Elder Brother, and thus we can communicate with him as he is a human being like us not necessarily thinking of him as God, though he is the God-Man without separation and confusion according to the Chalcedonic principle. This is what William Channing asserts:

> He had sensibility to pain, as we all have, and shrank with natural horror from an agonizing death. Thus he was one of us, he was a man. I see in him a Brother and a Friend. I feel the reality of the large, loving, human sympathy, which so gloriously distinguished his whole character and life. [31]

This sacramental approach to the relationship with God is not in the sense of feeling, but a sincere communication with honesty, respect, love, faith, and trust, as Hazelton explains:

> Prayer is simply communication with God. As in any relationship, communication is essential but not always easy. And for a relationship to thrive, communication must be honest. In fact, honesty is a hallmark of a relationship built on love and trust. [32]

Here we need to pay careful attention not to fall into the trap of Ebionitism—thinking of Christ as a simple human but not God, [33]—but Christ's Chalcedonic principle must remain though the emphasis is on his humanity on the basis of his incarnation voluntarily choosing to share the same substance with the humankind for the sake of his love. The other practical implication of this kind of approach is that we pretend not to know Christ as God—of course without forgetting his divinity—but just focus on his humanity which implies that in this sense we consider him as not all-knowing, though he is Omniscient as God. In our human mode of communication with Christ, therefore, we need to be honest and detailing even for the deepest secrets in our lives including our weaknesses to let him know everything about us. This is the intimacy that is characterized by honesty. Here, we are drawn to study the *Theology of Intimacy* in the work of Tim Anderson. We have seen this in Schillebeeckx as the human vocation therein it is enhanced the sacramental aspect of the human encounter with God in a way sincere and intimate whose basis is Christ's humanity. Anderson defines intimacy with God as: "The movement of God and Christians toward a good place of true knowledge and close contact." [34] Based on this, intimacy for Anderson is a relational concept that adopts certain characteristics and qualities. Some aspects of these qualities are described by Thomas E. Malloy in The Dyadic Self in Listening and Intimacy:

> Speaking and listening are inherently dyadic phenomena. People have conversations with one another to share information, build bonds, coordinate behavior, plan for the future, recount the past, or to simply pass time. The evolution of Wernicke's and Broca's areas reflects the importance of listening and speaking in human interaction, and these behaviors are a line of defense against chaos and violence in the world. [35]

The treasure from what Thomas Malloy argues here about intimacy is the cruciality of listening and speaking in human interaction. This also can be a wise practical attitude in our sacramental communication with God through our Fellow Brother, Christ. In our relationship with God, we first need to know that, we can always speak and talk about everything without limit, and even the unfathomable parts of our lives and beings, and He listens and understands. His listening and understanding imply that He does not impose anything on us when communicating with us, but respects our points when we talk with sincerity. [36] Of course, the Spirit guides us in truth and wisdom as a signpost to direct our ways but never imposes specific rules to follow. [37] The choice always belongs to us, and He, in his love, respects us. The importance of communication with Christ this way shows that, honestly, we never know for sure the will of God, what we can do is a sincere observation of the reality and decide accordingly. [38] And because of this indeed, we need to think carefully and listen attentively to him speaking in our mind and reasoning as Logos, the great Reason.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the anthropological Christology of Edward Schillebeeckx supports the claim that "Being Christian is on the Condition of the Relationship with God through the Incarnate Logos". For Schillebeeckx, incarnation makes everything different in the divine and human relationship. Being Christian is not based on divine Logos which is shared by the entire human race by virtue of reason, otherwise, incarnation would not have any value. The new personal relationship between God and humans grounded on the incarnate divine Logos implies that God in Christ shares the same substance with mankind to be a personal Man, and this is Christ's human substantiality and personal humanity in addition to His divine substantiality and personal divinity. That is the true identity and character of Jesus Christ as God-Man upon which the sacramental approach to the personal relationship with God is grounded. That kind of relationship based on the human Christ is the condition of being Christian. Justin Martyr thus might be right when he says that the divine Logos exists in all humankind by reason which leads to an objective truth and practical wisdom. However, he is hardly believed to be right by affirming that based on such a general availability of Logos through human reason, all reasonable people are Christians. What makes Christian is the relationship with God through the faith in the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ. This personal relationship with God through the personal Logos can be a concept that englobes the overall ideology of the Christian faith.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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