

Słowa kluczowe: Zmartwychwstanie, teologia antropocentryczna, teologia teocentryczna, nawrócenie, Schillebeeckx, Tomasz z Akwinu

Keywords: Resurrection, anthropocentric theology, theocentric theology, conversion, Schillebeeckx, Thomas Aquinas

Matthew Levering

MUNDELEIN SEMINARY
ILLINOIS, USA

THEOLOGY AND CONVERSION: ANTHROPOCENTRIC OR THEOCENTRIC?

In this brief essay, I am going to argue against any notion of conversion that does not hold the action of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ at its very center. A theology becomes anthropocentric when it supposes that its focus can be the graced human community. A theocentric theology of conversion, by contrast, will focus concretely on the action of Jesus Christ in and through his Holy Spirit in healing and elevating the human community. The theology of conversion should focus upon the need of all believers, clergy and laity, to smell like the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. For a properly theocentric theology of conversion, the challenging words of Jesus will be central, including his difficult moral teachings and his demand that we take up our cross and follow him. If Christianity were easy, then we would not need conversion. If we did not need to be converted and to smell more like the Good Shepherd than like the fallen sheep that we are, then we would not need the Cross of Christ. At the core of all good theology is the mandate for theocentric conversion, brought about by Christ himself, who configures believers by the Holy Spirit to the law of love embodied by his words and deeds.

As an example of an anthropocentric and inadequate theology of conversion, one that seems to me to be increasingly prevalent again, I will exhibit the

perspective of Edward Schillebeeckx. Essentially the whole of this brief essay will be devoted to describing Schillebeeckx's theology of Jesus' Resurrection. My goal will be to show something of the unfortunate consequences of Schillebeeckx's anthropocentric approach to conversion. Although Schillebeeckx assumes the working presence of grace, his focus is upon the community's faith emerging out of the community itself rather than emerging as a response to the action of the crucified and risen Christ.

I.

In his 1974 book *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, Schillebeeckx states that "in and through the very experience of Jesus' renewed presence and the renewed offer of salvation (after his death) the disciples were enabled to arrive at the settled conviction that Jesus had risen" (ibidem, p. 646). What does the "experience of Jesus' renewed presence" mean here? Schillebeeckx suggests that the key is conversion to faith, which provides the organ for experiencing Jesus' "renewed presence". For Schillebeeckx, "The Easter experience lies in the experience of an event: namely, the reassembling of the disciples [...] in the power of the risen Christ himself" (ibidem).

Schillebeeckx denies that seeing the risen Jesus could simply be an empirical, individual, natural action. He emphasizes, "Precisely in and through the (faith-motivated) Easter experience and the experienced renewal of life (expressed in the New Testament model of 'appearances') there is articulated what happened to Jesus himself: He is alive!" (ibidem, p. 647). Any account of the Resurrection appearances that supposes that the disciples, using their natural powers, simply saw and touched and heard the risen Jesus, prior to experiencing a conversion of faith, is for Schillebeeckx a rationalistic account. The disciples' faith-saturated experience may be logically and ontologically separate from Jesus' bodily Resurrection, but their perceiving the truth about the risen Jesus happens in and through conversion and the communal eyes of faith. Schillebeeckx argues that he is not advocating "fideism", let alone proposing that Jesus is solely risen in our hearts (Bultmann); rather, he considers that he is simply moving "beyond empiricism" (ibidem).

What is the "empiricism" that Schillebeeckx fears? It is the notion that the disciples could have seen the risen Jesus without already possessing the eyes of faith; it is the notion that the appearances of the risen Jesus could have been accessible to people who were not equipped by conversion and interior faith for true seeing of a supernaturally charged reality. In the accounts of Jesus' Resur-

rection appearances, Schillebeeckx holds, those who lacked the eyes of faith were unable to recognize him properly; they had first to be converted. They could not simply see the risen Jesus just as one sees a normal person; rather, their seeing of Jesus involved a “subjective, interiorizing, experiential aspect” that is necessary for seeing the risen Jesus (*ibidem*).

When I think of Jesus’ Resurrection appearances, I ask an empirical question: was his risen body visible and tangible? If his risen body was visible and tangible, I do not understand why one would need conversion and faith in order to see or touch it, though I can understand how seeing and touching could and would *cause* conversion and faith. In Schillebeeckx’s view, however, an empirical emphasis undermines the symbiosis between the Resurrection appearances and the faith of the community. The faith of the community was a generative part of the Resurrection appearances. The idea that Jesus’ Resurrection appearances confront or surprise people (for instance, Saul/Paul) and cause them to come to faith does not make sense for Schillebeeckx, since it would separate the risen Jesus’ appearances from the community to which the Spirit has given the eyes of faith, and it would place the community in a decidedly secondary and non-generative position. Schillebeeckx describes the Resurrection appearances consistently in terms of symbiosis: “the intrinsic relation between the risen Jesus and the faith-motivated experience of the community of God or the Church” (*ibidem*). On this view, we encounter the risen Jesus today in the same essential way, although Schillebeeckx grants “the unrepeatable and peculiar status of the first apostles, who had known Jesus before his death” (*ibidem*).

Schillebeeckx points out that in emphasizing the community in this way, he is seeking to ward off the empiricist position that God was not necessary for proper perception of the risen Jesus. He reiterates that “the conviction that Jesus has risen... is an assurance of faith that comes from God alone” (*ibidem*, p. 649). Natural powers cannot be sufficient to tell anyone that Jesus is risen. Such knowledge can be attained only by the person who, through a conversion brought about by God’s Spirit, possesses the eyes of faith.

Earlier in his book, Schillebeeckx asks whether “the Easter manifestation of Christ derive[d] from what we might call a Christian »conversion vision«” (*ibidem*, p. 380). What does he mean by a “conversion vision”? After explaining that the Resurrection of Jesus, in itself, is “meta-empirical and meta-historical,” he locates the historically knowable side of the Resurrection in the interpreted “experiential events” of the disciples (*ibidem*). He argues that these “experiential events” cannot be Jesus’ Resurrection appearances, since as recorded in the New Testament, these appearances “already presuppose belief in the resurrection” (*ibi-*

dem, p. 381). He points instead to the “conversion process” undergone by the disciples, in which they moved from despair to confident proclamation (ibidem).

In Schillebeeckx’s view, therefore, “The resurrection was believed in before there was any question of appearances” (ibidem, p. 354). He holds that in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ Resurrection appearance serves to ground the Church in Jesus’ authority as the Christ; the actual words that (in Matthew) the risen Jesus speaks were in fact spoken by Jesus prior to his death. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ Resurrection appearance again serves to manifest Jesus as the Christ, and John’s Resurrection appearances of Jesus are also about accepting Jesus as the Christ. In such Resurrection appearances, the doubts expressed by the disciples (such as doubting Thomas, or the doubters in Matthew 28:16) make clear that when it comes to perceiving Jesus as the Christ, everything revolves around “a divine act of grace” (ibidem, p. 360). Human resources do not suffice to perceive Jesus as the Christ.

Paul exemplifies the “conversion vision,” which is in fact an experience of grace. Schillebeeckx remarks, “What Paul actually experiences is, because of its character as grace, extrapolated in advance as a »vision«” (ibidem, p. 368). In Acts 9, Paul moves from not knowing Christ, to being blinded by Christ’s light, to seeing Jesus as the Christ through “a pure act of grace on God’s part” (ibidem, p. 369). He does not actually see Christ in his “conversion vision”, but he hears Christ. Schillebeeckx argues that Paul’s blindness in Acts 9 is spiritual (vis-à-vis Jesus), not physical, whereas in Paul’s recounting of his “conversion vision” in Acts 22 the blindness has become physical, so as to enhance the emphasis on Christ as the light of the Gentiles and on Paul as the missionary to the Gentiles. In Acts 26:12-18, Paul tells the story of his conversion again, and this time we find “an »Easter appearance« of Christ”, again with an emphasis on Paul’s vocation. In all three accounts, Schillebeeckx finds a common thread, namely that “a Jesus appearance is not the object of neutral observation; it is a faith-motivated experience in response to an eschatological disclosure, expressed in a Christological affirmation of Jesus as the risen One, that is, disclosure of and faith in Jesus in his eschatological, Christological significance” (ibidem, p. 378).

Thus, the Resurrection appearances are not what at first glance they might seem to be, namely an encounter in which the physical and tangible presence of the risen Jesus breaks in upon the disciple(s). Rather, the Resurrection appearances testify to the experience of God’s sheer grace and faith-filled conversion to Jesus as the Christ. As we have seen, Schillebeeckx does not want to reduce the Resurrection to *solely* an interior event (as though Jesus were not risen from the dead), but Schillebeeckx also insists that the conversion of the disciples from

despair to confident proclamation cannot have been caused by the Resurrection appearances, let alone the empty tomb, since the appearances already belong to the side of faith: the “[a]pppearance stories... assume the fact of the reassembled community and its Christological *kerygma*” (ibidem, p. 382).

If the Resurrection appearance stories are already on the side of faith, how is it that they can also be about *coming* to faith, through “conversion to Jesus as the Christ, who now comes as the light of the world”? (ibidem, p. 384). Schillebeeckx suggests that the answer lies in the redaction of the Resurrection appearance stories, which may first have been about conversion (to Jesus as the Christ), but now are planted solidly within the realm of faith, presupposing the existence of the Church. He argues, “In the gospel account the apostles have already come together *before* the appearances, apparently in expectation of things to come” (ibidem, p. 385). From the appearance stories as they now exist, we cannot gather anything about what originally brought about the conversion and re-gathering, since the latter are presupposed.

Schillebeeckx adds that in the narratives of the Resurrection appearances we can find a recollection of a primal “historical occurrence” (ibidem, p. 386). This historical occurrence, he speculates, was the disciples’ coming to acknowledge Jesus in “the totality of his life” (including his death) (ibidem, p. 387). When they grasped the meaning of his life as a whole, including his death, they came to perceive that he was the Christ. This was their “Easter experience”, their experience of finally truly “seeing” Jesus, a true seeing that, for Schillebeeckx, is the point of the stories of the Resurrection appearances (ibidem). They come to faith because once his life is complete, they see it as a whole and recognize it for what it is. Simon Peter was the first to “see” Jesus in this way, and it comes about by sheer grace, God’s gift. Having undergone his “conversion”, Peter would have reassembled Jesus’ disciples. When they talked together, they confirmed each other in “belief in the resurrection”, a belief that involved seeing Jesus truly as the Christ and thus seeing God’s offer “of salvation through the heavenly Jesus, which meant that the disciples’ return to Jesus became a return to the living, crucified One” (ibidem, p. 390).

Schillebeeckx’s reconstruction of what lies behind the stories of the Resurrection appearances amounts to the following: the disciples, viewing for the first time Jesus’ life and death as a totality, recognize (through grace and by faith) that Jesus must have been the Christ and that therefore salvation is available through God’s Christ. Although Schillebeeckx insists that he believes that the person of Jesus is truly risen, his reconstruction of what lies behind the stories does not cause one to brim with confidence that Jesus actually has risen from the

dead. Instead, Schillebeeckx's reconstruction suggests that what happened was that Jesus' disciples, after his death, came to think even more highly about Jesus' life in its entirety, and resolved that he was the Christ, from which the claim arose that he was alive as the source of salvation. No wonder that for Schillebeeckx the "Resurrection appearances" are already faith-filled, already rooted in the assembled community of faith. No wonder that he holds that it would have been impossible for anyone, without the eyes of faith, to see the risen Jesus. It would have been impossible because after his death, Jesus in the flesh did not actually encounter anyone.

Schillebeeckx proceeds to interpret 1 Corinthians 15:4, "he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures". The same argument appears as we found above: Schillebeeckx suggests that the disciples reasoned about the totality of his life and death, and eventually arrived at the conclusion that he must be the Christ and must be alive. As Schillebeeckx puts it, "At first those Christians did not know what to make of Jesus' suffering and death; so great however was their faith in God that they had more confidence in him than in all that the concrete and painful facts of history so manifestly shouted aloud" (ibidem, p. 526). The confidence of the disciples, as they contemplated the totality of Jesus' life and death, eventually overcame the seeming fact that he was dead. Gradually, they came to a realization that he was alive: "The insight provided by their faith may have needed time; in the end they knew: through their official authorities men might give judgement against this righteous one; but he cannot be forsaken by God" (ibidem). Whatever the seeming fact of his death might suggest, they knew that God was with him, the same God who had redeemed Israel from Egyptian slavery. Their claim that "he was raised on the third day", therefore, describes their own interior recognition that it must have been so. The "determining factor" in this "credal affirmation", says Schillebeeckx, was the combination of their memories of Jesus' earthly life, their experience of a graced and merciful process of conversion, and the Jewish religious expressions and scriptural teachings that they knew well (ibidem, p. 527).

For Schillebeeckx, then, the disciples' proclamation of the risen Jesus ultimately stands upon their conversion to a shared understanding that given the totality of Jesus' life and death, his "*Abba* experience" and his unique "religious consciousness" of "being of the Father" (ibidem, p. 654–655), he must be and is alive as the Christ and thus as the source of salvation. According to Schillebeeckx, when the disciples arrived at this trust-filled understanding of Jesus' praxis, they attained to the same trust-filled understanding that had distinctively marked Jesus while alive (through his distinctive "*Abba* experience"; see also

p. 660). Jesus “brings to us – through his person, preaching, way of life and death – the vital message of the unrestricted self-giving which God is in himself and is also willing to be for us human beings” (ibidem, p. 669), and so that now we too can live in this way. Thus, according to Schillebeeckx, the apostles proclaim their new understanding in faith that Jesus’ “pro-existence [existence for others] as man is the sacrament among us of the pro-existence or self-giving of God’s own being” and is the “sacrament of God’s universal love for human beings” that models “the praxis of the kingdom of God” (ibidem, p. 670–672).

II.

Despite Schillebeeckx’s frequent references to divine grace, his account of the disciples’ conversion to faith involves, at its core, not the embodied action of the risen Jesus, but the community’s arrival at a consciousness of Jesus’ ongoing presence due to the form of his liberative praxis during his life and death. Conversion here rests upon the community’s new consciousness of the totality of Jesus’ life and death. Thus for the disciples, once Jesus is dead, grace does not require the embodied action of the risen Jesus, who in fact never comes on the scene. Grace flows upward through the community, so much so that the community can take it upon themselves to proclaim that a dead man is risen without any embodied evidence that such might be the case. The community here takes charge of Jesus, rather than the risen Jesus taking charge of the community. This is precisely the understanding of “conversion” that is increasing today, a conversion in which the community, not the actual words and deeds of the crucified and risen Christ, stands at the center and becomes the fundamental norm. By contrast to this mistaken anthropocentric notion of conversion, theologians today must be converted by Christ, and, in repentance and prayer, must seek to bear witness to his converting power.

THEOLOGY AND CONVERSION: ANTHROPOCENTRIC OR THEOCENTRIC?

SUMMARY

The paper focuses on the solutions to the crisis in theology. The author claims that the root of the problem is anthropocentrism of theological considerations. Theologians underline the importance of grace received by the human community. The tendency of such theology is often to ignore the importance of God's action and to interpret the events connected to the resurrection of Christ in a symbolic way, as it is exemplified in the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx. The paper sees a needed theological conversion in return to Jesus Christ Himself; to His demanding words and example.