

Schillebeeckx's Theology of History and Liturgical Theology

How to handle history is a major problem for liturgical study – not least because there is so much history to contend with! It is easy to fall into an approach that imagines a past; which may or may not have much to do with what really happened, and may or may not be heavily shaped by the ideology of the historian.

In this paper, what I will offer is mostly some initial thoughts in development as to a theological use of history in liturgical study, based on the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx. I will begin by pointing to some problematic approaches to history in liturgical theology. I will then offer in outline some pointers on how to engage history theologically from the systematic and sacramental theology of Schillebeeckx. Finally, I will start to consider how such principles can be applied to the liturgy, so we remember rightly how we got to where we are, but are not overly tied to sets of historical data.

Difficulties with History in Liturgical Theology

To take as a demonstration of the problem, perhaps an obvious example is the Reform of the Reform response to the current Roman Catholic *status quo*. Such voices have also influenced some Anglican praxis as well, but it appears to be chiefly centred on a North Atlantic Anglophone Roman Catholic world, and is often not easily divorced from wider political or ecclesial concerns. Perhaps one of the flag bearers for this movement liturgically is Alcuin Reid, who lays out his theses in his *The Organic Development of the Liturgy*. (2005)

Reid's approach implicitly recognises the need to be selective about engaging with the past. However, he does not do so in a consistent or coherent manner, despite his attempt to present his model as 'organic development'. Central for Reid is a nebulous 'tradition' that appears to contain elements chosen as having universal significance because of their importance in a narrow ideological reading of the Roman Rite. A prime example is Reid's focus on the Roman Canon, and within it the dominical Institution Narrative. Unless we are to accept that the whole of the Canon was written down on a certain Thursday evening in first century

Jerusalem from the lips of a Galilean rabbi and the manuscript only rediscovered by Gregory the Great, or thereabouts, a serious engagement must address the coming to prominence of such a prayer text if it is to be given the absolute, unquestionable prominence Reid gives it. Sadly, Reid doesn't even giving passing mention to such a process of development before Gregory, nor does he appear to be aware of early liturgies in which the Institution Narrative doesn't appear to feature, whether that is in the *Didache*, the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, the various early meal traditions that may or may not have even involved wine, or the comparatively greater emphasis on the epiclesis over the Narrative in the Byzantine tradition. (See the survey of e.g. Bradshaw & Johnson 2012)

Before this is taken as a judgement on only a particular group, it is not something limited to them. Aside from the self-identifying traditionalists and conservatives, the problem is still widespread, even if there is often a greater awareness of the problem. (cf. Berger & Spinks 2016) I quote Paul Bradshaw on an attitude to liturgical history that influenced, perhaps even directly shaped, most of the reforms of the 20th century, across denominational lines:

Traditional scholarship has also tended to paint a picture of post-Constantinian forms of worship as constituting the classic expression of the Christian faith. Liturgy is viewed as evolving from its inchoate roots in the New Testament through the refining processes of the second and third centuries and then bursting into full bloom in the light of the Constantinian era. It then threw off the shackles that persecution and poverty had put upon it, and became what it was always intended to be, reaching the zenith of form and articulation in this golden age, before its long period of slow decline, disintegration and obfuscation in the course of the Middle Ages.

(Bradshaw 2001, 270)

Against this sort of attitude, a response like that of the Reform of the Reform is not unexpected. Ultimately, a serious engagement with history cannot work like this – on either side. We cannot be arbitrary about what is examined, we cannot be shaped only by ideology. Instead, we must more genuinely engage with history, and in doing so must be more theological.

Salvation History, Secular History and the History of Revelation

For Schillebeeckx, central to a theological approach to history is the relationship between what he calls ‘secular history’ and ‘salvation history’. He takes as an example the Jewish Exodus confession, which he re-tells entirely without reference to divine action, pointing to Moses’ reaction to seeing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, in the context of forced labour, namely killing the Egyptian. Moses then goes underground, and in solidarity with him, some Semitic tribes rebel and liberate themselves from Egyptian oppression. Schillebeeckx then contrasts this narrative with the Deuteronomic tradition, which recasts it in terms of ‘believers in God arriv[ing] at the experiential insight that the Lord saved the people from Egypt’. (Schillebeeckx 2014b, 8)

The central point to this, for Schillebeeckx, is that the religious experiential tradition is a second level of interpretation, after the first level of ‘meaning finding’ that is the interpretation of the facts of the past into a history. For Schillebeeckx, ‘the secular event becomes the material of the “word of God”’. (Schillebeeckx 2014b, 6) The core element of the primary interpretation that Schillebeeckx anchors the secondary interpretation on is the fundamental understanding of an event as an experience of liberation – this is presupposed, he suggests: God only reveals Godself in experiences of human liberation.

The central thesis behind Schillebeeckx’s approach here is, as a deliberate corrective to the classical formula regarding the Church, that there is ‘no salvation outside the world’.(Schillebeeckx 2014b, 6) This rests upon a fundamental experience of contrast as a basic part of human experience: ‘What we experience as reality... is evidently not “in order”.’(5) This is not dependent on a consensus as to what an alternative might look like, instead it presumes it is unknown and undefined – and not knowable from the past, however detailed the historical account. It is an ‘open yes’ to an alternative future.

From this experience of contrast, a step towards that alternative future, the moment of human liberation is then the basic unit in which the divine revelation may be found by the interpreter. The language of liberation, argues Schillebeeckx, should remain common to the believer and the non-believer – which in his argument acts as a counter to the introduction of language of God by the handful of the rich to misinterpret events to the detriment of the oppressed.(Schillebeeckx 2014b, 7)

Schillebeeckx applies the same principles to Jesus too – we must look first for the human, historical event of liberation. In other words, Jesus' human life journey is essential to Christology, or we just have an 'ideological superstructure'. On the other hand, to overlook the positive relationship of Jesus to God, the human process of liberation witnessed in his life never leads to a 'liberating Christology'. (Schillebeeckx 2014b, 7–8) For Schillebeeckx, there is one further danger to be aware of: to assume too much. As a limited, contingent human being, Jesus cannot simply reveal God, but also in part must conceal too. At the most basic level the implication of this is that even direct face to face encounter with Jesus required the same sort of interpretation as any other moment of human encounter to reveal God. The divine presence did not just beam out of Christ indiscriminately but was encountered through the normal human means. Consequent on this for Schillebeeckx is that theology cannot be reduced to Christology.

Within this framework, Schillebeeckx is not content to claim that the history of salvation is equivalent to the history of revelation. The key difference is perhaps recognition. The acts of liberation open to interpretation as part of salvation history happen irrespective of whether or not the interpretation of faith is applied to them or not. Schillebeeckx argues that God is the true source and heart of all 'truly human movements of liberation and salvation'. In other words, God comes near, and creates meaning 'even in situations where we really experience meaninglessness'. The gift of God's presence must be accepted. (Schillebeeckx 2014b, 10–11)

Salvation history cannot be reduced to 'history of religions', even though it is religion that provides the interpretative framework to identify experiences of human liberation as divine action. Ultimately, for Schillebeeckx, *extra mundum nulla salus*'. (Schillebeeckx 2014b, 12) Religion is simply the place where awareness of this salvation grows, and so the ultimate form of the Christian ecumene is the ecumene of all humanity.

Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God: Encounter and Salvation

Alongside this framework developed in Schillebeeckx's later work focused on the contrastive experience, it is also necessary to consider the theme of encounter as presented in his early work, especially his *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*.

Schillebeeckx argued that sacramentality was a fundamental part of human engagement with the divine, based on the idea of the 'inward word of God' calling humanity to communion even before humanity had the means to name the One calling – 'a fragment of unconscious Christianity'. (Schillebeeckx 2014a, 5,7) For Schillebeeckx, this begins to take a concrete shape in the people of Israel. Again he takes the Exodus account as a point of reference, describing it this time in these terms: 'A group of Bedouin of various ethnological origins, whose forefathers had been enticed into the region by the fertile abundance of the Nile Delta, wearied beyond endurance by the forced labour which Egypt imposed, formed themselves into the caravans of the Exodus... [they became] one people which united itself in the desert under the God Yahweh who had appeared to Moses'. (7–8) It is only by gradual realisation that this people come to relationship with God, but it stems from a fundamental human experience of the encounter with the divine, described in terms of the appearance to Moses.

As Schillebeeckx develops this towards more Christological ideas, he takes the Chalcedonian definition as a starting point, developing this to give his own formula, that 'Christ is God in a human way, and man in a divine way'. (Schillebeeckx 2014a, 10) The human element of the encounter with God in Christ is significant, both with regard to the efficacy of salvation in Christ, but also – and perhaps more importantly, in the nature of the encounter it generates.

One immediate implication of the emphasis on the human is the consequent importance this attaches to the historical event. When Jesus' divinity is over-emphasised, the location of the events of his life as events within history is consequently minimised. In Schillebeeckx's approach, in contrast, the historicity of those events is of high priority.

This has immediate implications for the sacraments too. Following the conventional line that the sacraments of the Church have origin and foundation with Christ, they must be tied to the actualities of Christ's life. But this is not as trivial as traditional approaches have sometimes sought to make it. Because it requires a real engagement with the actual historical events, it is

not sufficient to simply claim direct links to individual events. At the most obvious level, the sacrament of marriage cannot simply be derived from Christ's presence at a wedding at Cana.

Instead, Schillebeeckx requires that the history is considered in connection with the sacramentality of Christ and of the Church. The sacraments are the personal activity of the human and yet glorified Christ – Schillebeeckx quotes approvingly Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis*: 'Christ baptizes... absolves, offers sacrifice'. (Schillebeeckx 2014a, 42) But the sacraments are not, for Schillebeeckx, mediation between the historical event and us, but between us and the living Christ – and similarly Schillebeeckx is clear that the sacraments are not prolongations of the historical events either. (43–44)

The sacraments must also be considered in ecclesial context – which is again necessarily historical – the Church being a creature of history. Schillebeeckx describes them as ecclesial acts, such that, the Church, in the sacraments acts as a 'saving community'. (Schillebeeckx 2014a, 47) This again emphasises the importance of the historical aspect – the sacraments are the actions of the church in a particular time and place, and are not abstract.

An Historical Liturgical Theology

These theological lines could be taken into liturgical theology in two different ways. The bigger, and more complex, question concerns how liturgy and the liturgical celebration engages with the history of the people who celebrate it – both on a local scale, and across the whole Church. However, first, the far smaller question of how liturgy should engage with its own history – which brings me back to the bad practice with which I began.

To disconnect a single moment, style or form from the entire spectrum of history does not do justice to the whole sweep of divine action interpreted out of human experience of the liturgy. In other words, to speak of an exclusive golden age is to disregard the entirely legitimate interpretation of an altogether different experience as encounter with the divine.

Even more bluntly, to say that there is – in itself – something so special about the Baroque or the Constantinian that it must be recreated for all time is to disregard how that particular

golden age comes to be established as 'special'. It is to disregard the legitimate encounter with the divine, within the frame of human experience, of another time and place.

On the other side though, there must be some measure by which limits can be set. For Schillebeeckx, in history as a whole the critical measure is true human liberation. It is usually not possible to directly map this onto the liturgy in a simple manner, but perhaps one of the more apparent conclusions from it for today is that moves which increase clericalization in the liturgy are generally contrary to the liberation of the whole baptized people of God to take their proper place in the Body. Questions of liturgical imperialism might also be recognised more simply.

A wider scope is needed though. The principle of 'no salvation outside the world' surely necessitates the need for a sacramental system. Worldly things – elements such as bread and wine, oil and water might spring to mind, though this extends far beyond simple those rites traditionally called the sacraments – are needed; there is no scope for a simply spiritual, simply ideas, based praxis. The same principle also requires liturgy to be aware of its history and to develop in conversation with that history – what one might call 'organic development' ...

Thus, we certainly cannot veer to the extreme of dispensing with something simply because it is old. Nor can we justify restoring a feature or liturgical text on the grounds of antiquity alone. We must approach these questions on theological grounds. We can ask questions as to whether a liturgical unit (whether we consider an action, a text, or the combined effect in performance) is liberating – either as an effective cause of liberation, or by the promotion of true human liberty. We can ask questions as to whether a liturgical unit is consistent with the long-standing tradition – though in doing so recognising the polyphonic character of that tradition. We can ask questions as to whether a liturgical unit is directed towards the encounter with Christ, and through Christ with the Father – through a direct sacramental encounter, or by the formation of human beings who are able to interpret their experiences as being part of salvation history.

Whilst I have taken history as the approach here, ultimately, for Schillebeeckx, the measure of the liturgy is not its historical fidelity, but the degree to which it proclaims the testimony that 'Christ lives now', the degree to which it gives life to doctrine. (Schillebeeckx 2014a, 44;

cf. Schillebeeckx 2014c, 158) Of course, given the historicity of Christ, such a proclamation is inherently tied to the historical – the Christ that it must proclaim lives now, is the historic human figure.

This principle is at the heart of the response to the larger question I pointed to. It is a question of unenviable scope, but the key principle within it, at least for Schillebeeckx, would be the proclamation of the central kerygma that ‘Christ lives now’. This must be historically rooted to speak of who Christ is – so that the one being proclaimed as living is correctly and validly identified. But just as importantly, it must recognise the significance of the ‘now’ – not simply in terms of the present moment, distinguishable in time from those moments before it or after it; but also of the people gathered in the now, and the history that has led to that gathering together.

In a sense this means that it is difficult, or even impossible, to be too precise in the abstract. For Schillebeeckx, ‘Holiness is always contextual’, and likewise a holy liturgy must be suited to the context – the understanding and implications of the history of that context included. (Schillebeeckx 1983, 336) A serious engagement with the historical aspects of that context is required, but such an engagement means more than just bolt-on extras to the liturgy than para-liturgical activities such as a ‘Day of Prayer for...’ or a second collection.

To consider concerns of universal import – their relative weights will of course be dependent on the history of a particular community – this means liturgy should reflect in an integrated manner scandals such as the sexual abuse of children within the Church, the destruction of the environment, and the legacy of cultural assumptions with regard to race, sex and gender. It may not be necessary to add a set of propers to a liturgical book for any of these things – but they should still impact the liturgy in a way shaped by the history of the particular community. This will look different in different contexts – it would not be appropriate for the whole assembly to express penance for the sins of a few (who may well be absent from that assembly), when in fact the assembly should be receiving the penance of others.

Amongst these specifics though, the universal also remains present. With this in mind, a new, creative and unique liturgical form is not required for every situation. It is the same Christ that the celebration proclaims as living in all the ‘nows’ in which the proclamation is made. Common forms and patterns that have the weight and value to transcend the immediate and

recognise the whole historical narrative are also necessary. This returns me to the central dilemma in the use and abuse of history in relation to liturgy: the tension between the vast breadth of the whole and the immediacies of the specific – both of which must be held, recognised and valued for the liturgy to use history well and to proclaim the universal kerygma it carries.

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