

# Schillebeeckx's Soteriological Agnosticism

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Edward Schillebeeckx's richly thought-provoking explorations of Christology are focused in his two studies, *Jesus and Christ*.<sup>1</sup> These works have brought out with considerable force the need to acknowledge differing, yet parallel interpretations of the person of Christ which are embodied in the life and experience of very different communities in contrasting periods of history. The New Testament itself bears ample witness to this diversity in so far as it is marked by a density of imagery and variety of interpretation which is the product of the churches both of the Jewish Diaspora and the Hellenic world which gave it its shape. The limits of this rich diversity are clearly established by discovering an identity between the exalted Christ and the life and ministry of the earthly Jesus: what Jesus said and what he did provides the necessary ground for the developing Christology of those who follow after their master.<sup>2</sup> Schillebeeckx recognises what Donald MacKinnon insists on, in talking about 'the explosive intellectual force' of Jesus' life and ministry, which confronts those scholars who would seek to reduce the earthly reality of the Christ event to 'an acted parable of intellectual reconciliation'.<sup>3</sup>

Schillebeeckx argues powerfully that the "Jesus affair"... is not just a vision born of faith and based solely on the disciples' Easter experience; it is his self-understanding that creates the possibility and lays the foundation of the subsequent interpretation by the Christians'. (*Jesus*, pp 311–312) For Schillebeeckx, the fundamental tenets of soteriology are established by developing the implications inherent in the call to follow after Jesus rather than by way of a developing reflection on the saving significance of Jesus' death as such. Jesus' death is not to be isolated from the pattern of his life and treated as a discrete event: it is Jesus' whole life and ministry which provides 'the hermeneusis of his death' (*Jesus*, p 311)<sup>4</sup> and it is that very life and ministry which should form the focus of our own discipleship. It is Schillebeeckx's understanding that 'in the most primitive form of the synoptic Passion narrative, therefore, there is no trace of soteriological motivation for Jesus' suffering and death; no saving function is as yet ascribed to them as being propitiation for sin' (*Jesus*, p 284).

There is much to be said for this position but it is clearly a position

which differs from the New Testament texts themselves. There is little doubt that the New Testament authors put a much greater emphasis on interpreting Jesus' death as such than is to be found in the work of Schillebeeckx. This is something that warrants examination.

The gospels, both shaping and, in turn, shaped by the experience of the first generation of Christians, understand Jesus' death on the 'cursed tree' of the cross in terms of atonement. So, too, did Paul: the early creedal statement preserved in I Cor. 15.3 preserves the belief which Paul inherited from Palestinian Christians and most probably from the Jerusalem church itself.<sup>5</sup> The crucifixion is set firmly in the context of the Passover. Whether the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal is a subject of debate—it has often been noted that John records Jesus' death as occurring at the hour of the slaughtering of the Paschal lambs by the Temple priests, 'not a bone of which is to be broken' (Jn 19: 31–37: See Ex 12.46, Num 9.12)—but there is no doubt that the gospels, as well as Paul, understand the Passover as furnishing a hermeneutical framework for the events that follow. It might well be that this New Testament emphasis on the death of Jesus as the ultimate atoning sacrifice is a product of the theology of the early community arising from its concern to answer the challenge posed by the proclamation of a 'crucified messiah', 'a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Greeks' (I Cor: 1.23). It may be, however, that we can find the roots of an understanding of Jesus' death grounded in an interpretation of Jesus' death as atoning sacrifice which takes us back to the life and ministry of Jesus himself. It will be the argument of this paper that we can indeed make this claim. While seeking to remain within the strict boundaries set by Schillebeeckx's hermeneutic rigour in regard to Jesus' death, I shall hazard a rather more detailed account of the soteriological significance of his death than does Schillebeeckx himself.

Schillebeeckx suggests that the New Testament offers three solutions to an enquiry regarding the motive which lay behind Jesus' voluntary embracing his passion and death: as that of a prophetic martyr; as an event included within God's unfolding plan of salvation; and finally as possessing a saving efficacy to bring about a 'reconciliation between God and men, in other words, he is a sacrifice' (*Jesus*, p 274). Schillebeeckx rejects the second and third of these interpretations as later interpolations and argues that the earliest Christian interpretation of Jesus in the pre-New Testament period was most probably that of the 'eschatological prophet like Moses' (*Jesus*, pp 475–499; *Christ*, pp 309–321). Schillebeeckx identifies this figure with the Moses tradition shaped by the Deuteronomic authors. In the Old Testament world Moses is understood as the mediator *par excellence* between God and his people—a suffering mediator (Deut: 15–19, 25–99).<sup>6</sup> 'Here' argues Schillebeeckx, 'we have a historical echo of Jesus' own self-understanding' (*Interim Report*, p 67). It is clear that Schillebeeckx is anxious to dissociate the tradition of a suffering mediator

in the tradition of Moses from the sacrificial language which from a very early period came to be associated with Jesus' work of redemption.

In the study, *Christ*, Schillebeeckx points to 'sixteen key concepts which occur repeatedly in all parts of the New Testament, (which) are enough to give us a good idea of the New Testament understanding of what redemption through Jesus Christ is from and what it is for' (*Christ*, p 477). No doubt this list is far from definitive. One thread in this rich tapestry is provided by the language of sacrifice. As scholars have pointed out, while this is not a theme to be found to the fore of most of the New Testament writings 'the whole of the New Testament is permeated by sacrificial thought and symbolism'.<sup>7</sup> Schillebeeckx is not only hesitant about using sacrifice as a category by which we might interpret the saving significance of Christ's death for us but goes much further in professing what Donald MacKinnon identifies as an agnosticism regarding the soteriological significance of Jesus' death as such and, in particular, a marked reluctance in attributing to Jesus himself any understanding of the saving significance of the death he was to suffer as he set his face to Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

Suggesting that the earliest sources see Jesus as a prophet and teacher rather than as a messianic figure, Schillebeeckx argues that the legal grounds for Jesus' condemnation must be sought in the Deuteronomic legislation which demands the condemnation of a false teacher (Deut 17.12). It is Schillebeeckx's point that the ambiguities of the particular case brought before the Sanhedrin against Jesus left sufficient doubt and confusion amongst the members of the council to make it appropriate for them to relinquish their supreme prerogative and hand Jesus over to the Roman administration:

the Jewish Sanhedrin found no adequate juridical grounds for condemning Jesus to death and could reach no common mind on the matter (despite the pressure likely to have been exerted in particular by the Sadducees and Herodians) What they could and did reach was a majority decision to go and hand over (for allegedly political reasons) a compatriot, Jesus of Nazareth, to the Romans ... (*Jesus*, p .317).

It is part of Schillebeeckx's argument that under the Roman administration at the time of Jesus the Sanhedrin retained the right to execute someone by stoning in certain circumstances (*Jesus*, p 299). This remains a highly disputed question. Schürer, after careful examination of the evidence argues that although the Sanhedrin still enjoyed considerable freedom of jurisdiction in non-capital cases the evidence for its competence to preside over capital cases without the necessity of referring the matter to the Roman governor remains seriously inconclusive, neither side of the case being effectively proved.<sup>9</sup> F. F. Bruce argues that it is unlikely that the Romans conceded such a privilege to so turbulent a

Province as Judaea and that most of the incidents appealed to as evidence 'have features which stamp them as exceptions'.<sup>10</sup> Be this as it may, the issue must be left an open question.

I suspect that we can say a little more than this. The issue is one of blasphemy. Although Jesus had not blasphemed in the technical sense, his teaching represented a challenge to the heart of Judaism. The Jewish leaders were in open conflict with Jesus on the matter of contemporary attitudes to the Law, Sabbath observance, the sanctity of the Temple. In teaching, highlighted by such provocative parables as that of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12 1–12), and parallels, by his very presence among them and through all that he stood for, Jesus was demanding from the Jews a radical change of attitude towards the things they considered central. The Sanhedrin, although consisting of individuals who held significantly different views regarding aspects of Judaism could agree on one point: that Jesus must be dealt with. Unable to reconcile the teaching of Jesus with their belief, they were convinced that he was a dangerous person who was perverting the minds of the people and who must be totally discredited. An illegal lynching, or back street stoning, though possible (as just a short time later the stoning of Stephen bears ample witness), would not be sufficient to discredit Jesus and might even turn him into something of a martyr for upholding the cause of the common people with whom he was identified. The New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias points out that 'it is not inconceivable that Matt 23.37 par. Luke 13.34 hints that for a time Jesus considered the possibility of stoning, the penalty of which he had repeatedly incurred'.<sup>11</sup>

The Sanhedrin needed to seek a motive at law by which they could do away with Jesus. From the official Jewish point of view the abhorrent Roman punishment of crucifixion would be particularly appropriate: it would placate the Roman administration, showing that the recalcitrant and suspect Jews were prepared (quite unusually) to have someone put to death for treason against the Roman occupying forces. More significantly, for the Jews themselves the very act of crucifixion was a Sign of God's curse (Deut 21.23): there are possible allusions to this text in the sermon passages recorded in Acts (See Acts 5.30; 10.39; 13.29). Crucifixion would demonstrate beyond doubt that Jesus was a 'false teacher'. This is the argument that Paul turns on its head in Gal 3.13. Schillebeeckx suggests that this debate emerged as part of the early community's catechetical reflection as it wrestled with the Scriptural challenge (*Jesus* p 283), but I suggest that one might assert that such a Scriptural background might well underlie the inconclusive debates of the Sanhedrin and suggest a motive for this particular choice of death as they rushed Jesus to crucifixion.

The question remains whether we can regard this interpretation as a feature of the earliest tradition and indeed associate it with the teaching of

Jesus himself. We have already seen that Schillebeeckx does not do this. He refuses to acknowledge a soteriological motivation in the most primitive form of the synoptic Passion narrative, 'no saving function is as yet ascribed to them as being propitiation for sin' (*Jesus*, p 284). Schillebeeckx rightly suggests that sacrificial language of expiation, which has God alone for its subject, slips all too easily into talk of the priest offering propitiation for sin to God. It is not inevitable that it should do so. Schillebeeckx is careful to acknowledge that the Old Testament refrains from a complete identification of the sin-offering with what he considers to be the priest's task of 'bringing about expiation "for someone"'. He seeks to establish a clear distinction between the forgiveness of sins (which can have only God for its subject) and expiation of sins (the subject of which, he suggests, remains at least ambiguous, and which at times is not necessarily divine): 'the forgiveness of sins and the expiation of sins involved two different semantic fields', the former belonging to the 'juristic priestly acquittal from sin, rather than to the New Testament experience of salvation in Jesus from God' (*Christ*, pp 485–490). Schillebeeckx refuses to recognise that expiatory language can appropriately be used to proclaim God's healing forgiveness.

This refusal provides the grounds for Schillebeeckx's rejection of sacrificial language as an appropriate way of talking of Jesus' death. It seems that he is unable to isolate sacrificial language from what he regards as inevitable overtones of propitiation. Schillebeeckx seems unprepared to make the distinction (which is just about universally accepted in English) between propitiation and expiation. The former has God for its object and is understood in terms of a human attempt to avert divine wrath while the latter has God for its subject. I Jn 4.10 makes it clear that to understand Jesus as a *hilasmos* does not mean that he renders a hostile God friendly but that it is because God loves us that he sends his Son as an *hilasmos* to take away our sin.<sup>12</sup> Bearing this distinction in mind, we can rightly understand, and accept wholeheartedly, Schillebeeckx's abhorrence of the language of propitiation. This is a point he confirms in his *Interim Report*:

'It is precisely when the message and conduct of Jesus which led to his death are ignored that the saving significance of this death is obscured. Jesus' death is the intrinsic historical consequence of the radicalism of both his message and his way of life, which demonstrated that all master-servant relationships are incompatible with the kingdom of God. The death of Jesus is the historical expression of the unconditional character of his proclamation and life-style in the face of which the fatal consequences for his own life faded completely into the background. The death of Jesus was suffering through and for others as the unconditional endorsement of a practice of doing good and opposing evil and suffering. Thus the life and death of Jesus must be seen as a single whole. Furthermore it was not God, 'who abominates

human sacrifices', who brought Jesus to the cross. That was done by human beings, who removed Jesus from the scene because they felt he was a threat to their status. (*Interim Report*, p 133)

The language of propitiation is indeed completely 'foreign to Biblical usage'<sup>13</sup>, as C.H. Dodd argued as long ago as 1932 in his important commentary on Romans, and very few modern New Testament scholars would disagree with this interpretation.

Inappropriate propitiatory overtones, easily to be associated with the concept of sacrifice, should not lead us to dismiss the language of sacrifice too hastily from a discussion of Jesus' death. The point can be developed further by exploring the tendency to read Mk 10.45 by way of Isaiah 53.10 which is evident in the work of such eminent New Testament scholars as Joachim Jeremias.<sup>14</sup> Such an identification of these two texts leads the reader to see Jesus in terms of the sin-offering. This is something that must be examined with care. C. K. Barrett differs from Jeremias in basing his argument on the Septuagint text rather than on the Hebrew, or Aramaic text. In a meticulous examination of the background of Mk 10.45, Barrett makes it clear that it is incorrect to read the Greek text of Mark in the context of the Septuagint text of the fourth of the so-called 'servant songs' (Isaiah 52.13–53.12). Barrett's discussion makes clear that 'the linguistic connection between *lytron* in Mk 10.45 and Isa 53 is non-existent: *lytron* is not found in the Septuagint as a translation for *asham*.'<sup>15</sup> The Hebrew word found in Is 53.10 includes the notion of guilt-offering which is absent from the Greek word. Morna Hooker develops this theme by arguing the case that the noun *lytron* itself is not used in the Septuagint as a sacrificial term but only in the technical sense of 'purchase money'.<sup>16</sup> It is the verb *lytroō* that, though often still retaining the technical sense, is sometimes found both in the Pentateuch and in the prophetic writings in a figurative sense which refers to God's redemption of his people either from their bondage in Egypt or from Exile in the East:

It should be noted that the primary thought in this conception of God as Redeemer is one of historical activity by Yahweh... Nor is there any emphasis on the payment of an equivalent, the original meaning of ransom: it is enough that Yahweh acts decisively; the result, not the method of his action is what is important... The emphasis is on death and deliverance rather than on sin and suffering. The words are thus in keeping with the spirit of the first half of the first century A.D. which as we have seen, was still concerned with deliverance from foreign oppression, rather than with theories of atonement as such.<sup>17</sup>

Professor Barrett finds the true linguistic background of *lytron* (ransom) in the Rabbinic use of *kapparah* (expiation), and suggests a more cogent general context for the verse by relating it to the Greek text of Maccabees. The last of the seven brothers martyred because of his refusal



to eat pigflesh makes this prayer, 'I, like my brothers, give up body and soul for our fathers' laws, calling on God to show favour to our nation soon, and to make thee acknowledge, in torment and plagues, that he alone is God and to let the Almighty's wrath, justly fallen on the whole of our nation, end in me and my brothers' (2 Macc 7. 37–38)<sup>18</sup>

Further weight to this reading can be offered by two texts, one from the close of the Jewish period and another amongst the earliest of non-Biblical Christian sources. These are the Fourth Book of Maccabees and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. 4 Maccabees takes the form of a sermon probably addressed to an audience in Alexandria somewhere between 63 BC and AD 38, that is 'within two generations before or one generation after the Christian era'.<sup>19</sup> In this text Eleazar's dying prayer from the flames of the pyre is depicted in the following way: 'Thou, O God, knowest that though I might save myself I am dying by fiery torments for thy Law. Be merciful unto thy people, and let our punishment be a satisfaction on their behalf. Make my blood their purification, and take my soul to ransom their souls (*kai antipsycon auton labe ten emen psychen*) (4 Macc 6.27–29). Reflecting on the horror of the torture and death of Eleazar and his family, the author understands them as 'a ransom for our nation's sin' (*hosper antipsycon gegonotas*) and a means of expiation (*hilasterion*) (4 Macc 17.22). The letters of Ignatius put us in touch with a similar world. Just a short time later than 4 Maccabees, if we retain the traditional, early date for the letters of Ignatius, we find the author entreating the Ephesians in the words, 'I am a ransom for you' (*antipsycon hymon ego*).<sup>20</sup> Lightfoot commenting on the meaning of *antipsycon*, 'a life offered for a life'. refers to the two passages of 4 Macc we have already mentioned and suggests that 'the direct idea of vicarious death is more or less obliterated, and (that) the idea of devotion to and affection for another stands out prominently'.<sup>21</sup> Ignatius understands this offering of his own life as an echo of Christ's offering praying that he might be allowed to be 'an imitator of the passion of my God' (*epitrepsate moi mimeten einai tou pathous tou theou mou*).<sup>22</sup>

Barrett makes a strong claim that we should look to Ex 39.30 for the biblical roots of the term.<sup>23</sup> In this verse we see Moses' preparedness to stand in the breach and make atonement for the people's sin incurred by setting up the Golden Calf. Here, Barrett suggests, we can identify the roots of a rich tradition. For Schillebeeckx, Moses is to be understood as the archetype for the eschatological prophet and Barrett suggests that it is precisely in this tradition that we find a correct understanding of the Hebrew noun *kapparah* (expiation), a word still used in modern Hebrew as a conventional expression of commitment and love. Like many of the Old Testament martyrs, Jesus is expressing 'his devotion—a devotion that would shrink from no sacrifice—to the true welfare of his people... the *amme ha'ares*, the great mass of the people as opposed to (though not in

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this case necessarily excluding) the pious groups'.<sup>24</sup> If this verse has its origin in an expression that initially includes no immediate reference to the death of the speaker, Jesus' commitment to the outcast and his challenge to the security of the reigning powers might suggest that this might lead inevitably to death and that his death be understood as the clearest expression of such a commitment:

Once the connection with the death of Jesus was made the saying would inevitably be exposed to theological polishing. Comparison of Mark 10.41-5 with the partial parallel in Luke 22.25-7 not only shows that such polishing has taken place but also that the two Gospels contain independent traditions. Each has some features that are more primitive than the other. The theological development was not all on Hellenistic soil. The purpose of the present note is not to deny the existence of this theological development of the tradition, but to suggest a possible starting-point, itself of both historical and theological significance, for the tradition. If Jesus did not say: I am (or, My soul is) a *kapparah* for all Israel, he acted in this principle, and this service to the mass of his people occasioned, and at the same time provided the interpretation of his death.<sup>25</sup>

Professor Barrett's suggestion that we should understand *lytron* (ransom) by way of the Rabbinic *kapparah* (expiation) suggests that we should be rather more cautious in disassociating the notion of sacrifice from Christ's death too swiftly. Schillebeeckx is clearly correct in arguing against an understanding of sacrifice as propitiation. As we have seen, however, sacrifice has a much wider range of reference in the Jewish world to which Christ belongs. Such contemporary understanding is far from alien to Schillebeeckx's reading of the life and ministry of Christ. His starting-point, in a manner akin to the position we have elaborated here, rests in the tradition of an eschatological prophet rooted in an understanding of Moses as a suffering mediator. At the same time, our current discussion allows us to say significantly more about the soteriological significance of the death of Jesus than Schillebeeckx will allow. Using texts such as those we have explored all too briefly in this paper, we can conclude that a sacrificial interpretation of this death is at least consonant with, and indeed not unlikely to have its origin in, the life and ministry of Jesus himself.

1 Edward Schillebeeckx *Jesus An Experiment in Christology* Collins 1979, *Christ the Christian Experience in the Modern World*, SCM, 1980.

2 Professor J D G Dunn has developed independently a very similar position in, for example, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, SCM 1990.

3 Donald MacKinnon, 'Faith and Reason in the Philosophy of Religion', in *Philosophy, History and Civilisation*, eds David Boucher, James Connelly & Terry Modood. University of Wales Press, 1995, p 86. Some of the implications of this position have already been explored by Robert Butterworth in his important article, 'Has Chalcedon a Future?' *The Month*, April, 1977, pp 111-117.



- 4 Schillebeeckx develops this theme of Jesus' death in a sermon of 1981: Without Jesus' violent death there would have been no special seal on his message. his life-style and his person and nothing would have been known of his Galilean mission. Jesus risked all to the death as did Peter later; Monsignor Romero and many others with him go on risking all today. There are circumstances, like those of Jesus, like those of Bishop Romero, in which one can predict a violent death. These do not call for any extraordinary revelations: what is extraordinary is trust in one's own calling to serve justice in a world of injustice power and slavery. In that case the dramatic dénouement of trust in one's own calling, is obvious. "Christian 'to the death'", in Schillebeeckx, *God among us*, SCM, 1983, p 202)
- 5 See Martin Hengel, *The Atonement*, SCM, 1981, p 37–39.
- 6 Edward Schillebeeckx *Interim, Report on the Book Jesus and Christ*, SCM. 1980, pp 65ff.
- 7 I. U. Dalfert, 'Christ died for us', in *Sacrifice and Redemption*, ed Stephen Sykes, Cambridge, 1991, p 302.
- 8 *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, Spring, 1981; reprinted in Donald MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology*, T & T Clark, 1979, pp 208–226.
- 9 Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* revised & edited Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar & Matthew Black, T & T Clark 1979, pp 219ff.
- 10 F. F. Bruce. *New Testament History*, Oliphants, 1977 p 191.
- 11 Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, vol 1, SCM, 1975, p 284.
- 12 I owe this point to the kindness of my colleague Bernard Robinson.
- 13 C.H Dodd *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Fontana., 1970, p 78. The Team, under the direction of Dodd, which produced the New English Bible translates Rom 8.3 'by sending his own son... as a sacrifice for sin' reserving 'to deal with sin' as an alternative reading. While it is correct that the Greek expression here (*peri hamartias*) was sometimes used in the LXX as a translation of the Hebrew 'sin-offering' (*asham*), the meaning is much better conveyed by the phrase 'to deal with sin'. This was acknowledged in the text of *The Revised English Bible* See also. C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Adam & Charles Black, 1971, pp 77, 156.
- 14 See Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* vol 1. p 292ff, where Jeremias argues that we should accept a reading of *lytron* which does not exclude the notion of substitutionary offering (*asham*).
- 15 C. K. Barrett, 'The Background of Mark 10:45' in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson*, ed. A. J. B. Higgins, 1959, pp 1–18 esp p 7.
- 16 Morna Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant*, SPCK, 1959, esp. pp 74–79; *The Son of Man in Mark*, SPCK 1967, pp 144–147.
- 17 Morna Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant*, p 76, 78.
- 18 Moffat's translation in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol 1, Oxford, 1913.
- 19 Townshend, in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol 2, Oxford, 1913, p 654,
- 20 Ignatius, *Ephesians* 21: See also *Smyrnaeans* 10 *antipsycon hymon to pneuma mou*, Polycarp 2, *kata panta sou antipsycon ego*.
- 21 Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, part 2, Vol 2, Macmillan, 1889, p 87–8.
- 22 Ignatius, *Romans* 6.
- 23 C. K. Barrett 'Mark 10–45: A Ransom for Many', in *New Testament Essays*, SPCK 1972, pp 20.
- 24 Barrett, 'Mark 10–45: A Ransom for Many', p 24
- 25 Barrett, 'Mark 10–45: A Ransom for Many', p 25.
- 26 See also C. K. Barrett *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition*, SPCK, 1967, pp 45–52, 67.