

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF CHRIST II

AS FAR AS I am aware, there exists in English only one serious treatment by a catholic writer of the gospel evidence for the nature of Christ's human knowledge and consciousness, and this is to be found in the second half of Fr Raymond Brown's valuable little book, *Jesus, God and Man*. Much of this concluding section of our bulletin¹ will be devoted to a resumé of his short but painstaking analysis of the available evidence. But first there are two other books to be considered, one by a well-known german writer, Romano Guardini, which represents (or so one would hope) the end of an era of popular writing about Christ's life and personality; the other is by an english author, Fr Peter De Rosa.

The Humanity of Christ, by Romano Guardini, first appeared in 1958, and the english edition dates from 1963. It is an honest insignificant little book, and might well be left, one would think, to slumber in peaceful repose on prie-dieu or library shelf. I blow the dust off here simply because the book affords such a good illustration of the deleterious effects of bad theology upon popular devotional literature.

Guardini is uneasily aware of the onset of critical exegesis, and his reaction to it reminds one forcibly of Bossuet's response to Richard Simon's *Histoire critique du vieux Testament*, as long ago as 1678, except that where Bossuet set to with a will to reply to the arguments he found so confusing and bewildering (having first

¹ The works treated in this survey are as follows:

- (1) ROMANO GUARDINI. *The Humanity of Christ, Contributions to a Psychology of Jesus* (London, 1964), translated by Ronald Walls from *Die menschliche Wirklichkeit des Herrn*, Werkbund-Verlag (Wurzburg 1958), pp xxiv, 146.
- (2) PETER DE ROSA, *Christ and Original Sin*, (London 1967), pp xi, 138. Half of this book is devoted to a study of 'the Incarnation', the other half to 'Original sin'. Only the first theme, discussed on pp 1-14 and 23-72, is treated here.
- (3) RAYMOND E. BROWN, S.S., 'How Much Did Jesus Know?', ch. 2 (pp 39-102) of *Jesus God and Man* (London-Dublin 1968). This chapter, Fr Brown tells us in a foot-note on p 39, 'was given in preliminary form at the Twentieth Annual Convention of the [American] Catholic Theological Society', a circumstance which may go some way to explaining the rather excessive deference to theology and theologians that is criticized in this bulletin. It also appeared in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29 (1967), pp 319-345.

taken the precaution of getting the offending book banned by an order of Royal Council), Guardini simply buries his head in the sands of piety: 'We are perfectly aware that both the object and the method of our undertaking will be called "dogmatic" in a derogatory sense, by that theology which calls itself "critical"; that this school considers such a subject matter to be chimerical and its method unscientific. In fact, however, the attitude of this school is based upon a false premise, namely that the person of Jesus and its historical witness must be treated in exactly the same way as any other historical phenomenon' (p xxiv). After this categorical refusal to answer or even to consider any of the arguments raised by critical exegesis, Guardini feels free to proceed with his fanciful and unattractive portrait of a superman 'governed by a mighty, unerring, indomitable will' (p 39).

His technique rather resembles that of the natural theologian: he first divides up his subject into a number of different 'qualities' or 'attributes', thought, will, emotion, attitude to material things, to human beings, to life and death, and so on, and then proceeds to show how all these human characteristics are shared by Jesus, but only in an analogous fashion, for he was and remains 'unique' and 'utterly other'. Discussing for instance the nature of human existence, Guardini remarks, in much the same way as we have seen Karl Rahner doing, upon the extraordinary fact that no man is ever fully himself: 'Even the greatest and most perfect of men is not more than approximately himself. He is not fully at one with his own will but is striving to become so. . . He does not possess himself, finally and truly, but is searching for himself and struggling to obtain himself' (p 91). But whereas Rahner attempts to understand the humanity of Jesus within the limitations imposed by this kind of consideration, Guardini feels bound to assert that 'in this respect there is in Jesus something radically different from other men' (p 92). 'He was not seeking himself, he had himself. He had complete and final possession of himself' (p 95). Even 'our notion of health, worked out inevitably on the basis of our experience, does not apply to Christ. His state is altogether beyond our notions of sickness and health' (p 59). He always 'knew exactly what was going to happen' (p 40). 'He is sane and self-assured at every point, in control of himself and even of his fate' (p 83f). All evidence to the contrary, such as Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross, Guardini feels justified in ignoring, because Luke omits all mention of the cry, and Luke 'cannot have intended to convey a different impression from the others' (p 75).

It is largely against this type of 'circus-horse' theology of the Incarnation that Fr De Rosa is reacting in his book, *Christ and Original Sin*. He observes that 'the insistence on Christ's divinity in the presentation of the catholic faith has tended to obscure the true humanity of Jesus' (p 2), and he has marshalled a good deal of evidence in support of this thesis. But what one is entitled to expect from a book claiming to be 'theology in the making' is a careful, precise account of how the new theology is consistent with old dogmas; and this is conspicuously lacking. So it is hard to see what the interested layman will carry away from this book except a general impression that theology manuals are mostly junk, and that, in order to be theologically 'with it', one must now shift the main emphasis in christology from the divinity to the humanity of Christ.

Speculative theology, if it is to be of any real value, must be rigorous. Instead of rigour, what we get from Fr De Rosa, admittedly along with some valuable *aperçus*, is muddle and confusion. He is good on what he calls 'the general drift of modern christology' which, with respect to Christ's consciousness, he outlines as follows: 'Jesus did truly grow in wisdom; he did need to pore over the scriptures; he did have to pick up the threads of his Father's will for him gradually, day by day; he did share with us something of our ignorance, our apprehension, our need to wait humbly and in patience' (p 14). He is also good at selecting passages from the fathers, the great scholastics and the modern manuals, which illustrate what one must agree with him in finding an unacceptable view of the humanity of Christ: 'We cannot believe that Christ did not learn from men, but only seemed to be learning, or that he was not really tempted, but only gave us an example of how we ourselves should behave when faced with temptation' (p 49).

But when he turns from generalisations to a consideration of the particular problems that arise in christology as soon as the theologian pokes his nose out of the scholastic compound, De Rosa falters badly. He has no clear idea, for instance, of the real meaning of consciousness or self-awareness, which he defines at one point as 'the capacity for reflective thought'. He says that Christ, like other men, had a 'reference-center (*sic!*) for all his thoughts and actions, a psychological Ego we might call it. In fact, it is necessary to speak of the human personality of Christ' (p 62); but he does not bother to explain how this view, which seems dangerously close to positing a human 'subject' in Christ, is consistent with the chalcedonian

definition, (to which, of course, he fully subscribes). Leaving Lonergan's dry but careful observations on the same topic for De Rosa's casual generalities is like passing out of sunlight into fog.

In some passages he makes large (some would say too large) concessions to the familiar thesis of Jesus' special relationship with the Father, and then, apparently, withdraws the concession by rejecting the arguments on which this view is traditionally based:

It is true that Jesus professed himself to be in a unique relationship to God (the Father), an eternal relationship: he claimed to be the Son. But we cannot infer that every time Jesus accepted the title Son of God – he, in fact, always seems to have referred to himself as Son of man – he accepted it as a token of belief in his divinity. 'Son of God' was a messianic title like 'Son of David'. As such, it had no reference to his divinity (p 6ff).

If all that follows this 'but' is true, where, one is inclined to ask, is the evidence for what precedes it?

Elsewhere, quite unnecessarily it seems to me, De Rosa makes placatory gestures in the direction of his more traditionally-minded adversaries: 'He (Christ) was aware – and all his speech testifies to this – that his whole human being was dedicated, and given over to the Word and existed by the Word' (p 62). But does it? Quite apart from the fact that 'the Word' is a johannine conception never found on Jesus' lips, what precisely does this dedication of his human being to the Word involve, and how and where does his speech testify to his awareness of it? Faced with such oracular imprecision, which to say the least blunts the edge of any argument on behalf of Christ's true humanity, one can only guess at what the author is trying to say and charitably surmise that it is vaguely correct. De Rosa eschews clarity. Instead of taking precise aim at a clearly delineated theological target, he points his pen rather waveringly somewhere in the direction of what he takes to be the truth. The right, the wrong and the unintelligible are almost inextricably mixed.

My final cavil against Fr De Rosa, which brings us on to the main topic of this part of our bulletin, concerns his use of scripture. Early on in his book he warns us, quite rightly, that:

Only the exegete can tell us whether it is possible to work out *some* of the details of Christ's evolving consciousness. He will do so after examining thoroughly the accounts of Jesus' preaching, seeing whether there was any alteration in it as time went on. This is not a

simple task because the exegete will have to decide how much of the text belongs to Christ's original preaching and how much has been elaborated by the evangelists and early teachers for the sake of their hearers (p 13).

Unravelling the threads so tightly woven by the evangelists is, as De Rosa sees, a task of considerable delicacy and complexity. But when we turn to the section of his book entitled *Seeing Christ in scripture*, we find him cheerfully employing the good old rod-and-line technique familiar to us from the theology manuals he despises. Even the inventive psychologizing of the meditation manuals is given free rein: 'He found parts of his life a trial and a burden, and as days wore on he yearned deeply for happier times' (p 59). More serious than either of these defects, however, is De Rosa's propensity for raising difficult problems only to side-step them neatly, leaving the issues without solution. The incident of the finding in the temple is certainly, as he observes, 'mysterious', but is it enough to comment, as he does, that 'Luke's intention. . . is clearly to show Christ's humanity and possibly his thrill at being in the temple of his Father and able to ask learned men about the scripture which he himself pondered at such depth' (p 58)? Apart from the superficiality of this exegesis, the real problem (demanding a solution) is whether or not the reference Jesus makes to his Father when answering his parents' reproaches is intended as an allusion to his divine sonship, and if so, whether the story is to be taken at its face-value as recording an actual incident in his boyhood.

The questions De Rosa raises are important ones, but he is evidently not yet fully equipped to handle them properly, and it would be a pity if people were left under the impression that the case for a new theology of Jesus' consciousness can be put no more strongly and convincingly than is done in his book.

A much better case, though more cautiously and hesitantly put, is to be found in the chapter in Fr Raymond Brown's book, already referred to, *How much did Jesus know?*. A short survey such as this can scarcely do justice to the careful and compelling arguments Fr Brown advances, and I shall skip over the first two sections of the chapter (headed respectively *Jesus' knowledge of the ordinary affairs of life* and *Jesus' general knowledge of religious matters*) and turn straightaway to the third main section, *Jesus' knowledge of the future*. The first question that arises here is that of Jesus' foreknowledge of his own death. Brown argues that even if there was an authentic tradition of a saying in which Jesus prophesied his own death, to

be followed by an ultimate vindication (and he is unsure about this), such a prediction could have come from his interpretation of the Old Testament (e.g., of Is, and perhaps of Dn) and would not presuppose superhuman knowledge. It could represent the unshakable conviction of a man who was sure that he knew God's plan. A similar conviction can be found in the career of Jeremiah and in Deutero-Isaiah's portrayal of the Servant (p 66).

Brown rejects those theories which suggest a psychological development of knowledge through various stages of the ministry as 'exercises of the imagination'. He mentions one such popular thesis, 'that at first Jesus hoped to bring about God's reign through his preaching and miracles, but the discouragement of being rejected by the crowds and having the parables misunderstood led Jesus to realize that his own death would be required' (p 66). Such a thesis certainly appears to involve a return to viewing the gospels (in a way long since discredited by form criticism) as materials for a biography of Jesus. Brown is rightly suspicious of such theories, but it may be that there is more in them than he is prepared to allow. But if, eventually, just such a 'popular' view should prevail, it will be because it has been argued exegetically, that is, by the application of principles and techniques hammered out in the course of the last half-century. In the present state of research, Brown's conclusion is a fair one: 'Scripture alone neither favours nor disproves a theory that posits a psychological development of Jesus' knowledge of what lay in store for him' (p 68).

One of Jesus' predictions to which Brown pays particular attention is that which concerns the destruction of Jerusalem in the eschatological discourse. Following C. H. Dodd, he points out that none of the three accounts requires us to attribute to Jesus a clear insight into the future. Mark and Matthew simply elaborate upon Daniel's 'abomination of desolation', while the Lucan description, the only one to contain a clear prediction of the city's fall, is modelled upon the prophetic description of the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the 6th century B.C.: 'Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jesus would be threatening disaster to a rebellious Jerusalem, and he would be using traditional language to do so. The saying would not indicate that he knew when or how this disaster would come about' (p 69). Then what of Jesus' seemingly precise prediction that the temple would be so utterly destroyed that not a stone would be left upon a stone? In answer to this, Brown wryly reminds us 'that the gigantic blocks of the temple foundation are

still standing firmly one upon the other in Jerusalem' (p 69f).

These questions are, however, relatively unimportant beside the extraordinarily complex problem of Jesus' foreknowledge of the Parousia. So many conflicting statements on this topic are attributed to Jesus in the tradition, and so many conflicting theories have been urged by successive scholars to explain them, that any short treatment, as Brown readily acknowledges, is bound to entail oversimplification. The simplest solution, which would forestall any further proliferation of the problems presented by this many-headed hydra, is to accept at its face-value 'the admission of Mk 13, 32 that Jesus did not know when the Parousia would take place' (p 77). This was the solution proposed by A. Vögtle, one of the ablest of German Catholic exegetes, in an article appearing in 1964. Brown tentatively suggests an advance on Vögtle's conclusions: 'Is it totally inconceivable that, since Jesus did not know when the Parousia would occur, he tended to think and say it would occur soon? Would not the inability to correct contemporary views on this question be the logical effect of ignorance?' (p 78).

The last and most important section of Brown's argument concerns *Jesus' understanding of himself and of his mission*. He underlines the reason for the wariness with which theologians and exegetes approach this most sensitive of all areas – that it is 'an area with theological repercussions for the hypostatic union and an area where the Church has shown itself consistently opposed to a minimalist solution' (p 79). It is my belief that the 'Church' (how difficult it is to get out of the habit of identifying Church and *magisterium!*) has hitherto been far too ready to follow theologians in their labyrinthine speculations on the nature of Christ's knowledge, a subject on which dogma, as we have seen, tells us nothing at all. I have already argued that where the mystery of the hypostatic union is concerned the step from ontological to psychological is, to say the least, not self-evidently legitimate. Fr Lonergan takes one step and then stops: most of his scholastic predecessors have gone much further. Is it not time to say frankly that *all* we know about this very obscure topic is to be found in the pages of the New Testament? If the Chalcedonian definition stops short on the threshold of the psychological, then why should the modern theologian feel himself obliged to keep on oiling the creaking, antiquated machinery of abstract speculations concerning Christ's beatific vision and infused knowledge? Mediaeval theology was supported by interpretations of the gospel-evidence arrived at uncritically

and unscientifically. Very often these interpretations, although insecurely based, exhibit a profound sense of the general thrust of the scriptures, and we must not commit the elementary logical error of supposing that because the premises are false the conclusion must be also. Frequently old insights derive unexpected support from modern exegesis. But it must be said unequivocally that in the area we are at present concerned with this is not generally the case.

In introducing this question, Brown comments that 'modern biblical discussions in this area have centred on the titles of Christ'. For want of space, he singles out two of these, 'one title, Messiah, that might be a key to Jesus' knowledge of his salvific mission to men, and another title, Son of God, that might be a key to Jesus' knowledge of his relationship to Yahweh' (p 79).

With regard to the first title, Brown concludes that 'it is dubious whether we should speak in any strict sense of messianic knowledge on Jesus' part since he may never have really identified his role with that of the Messiah' (p 86).

With regard to the second title, his considered opinion is, that although Jesus undoubtedly claimed a special relationship to God, 'it remains difficult to find in the synoptic account of the public ministry an incontrovertible proof that he claimed a unique sonship that other men could not share' (p 91). There are, however, two parcels of material that have not yet been scientifically exploited by catholic exegetes. One is the historical material of the Fourth Gospel, the other the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. No reliable judgment can be passed on these until a lot more work has been done.

By way of consolation to those who might be disappointed by this rather meagre harvest, Brown suggests two alternative approaches that might lead, he thinks, to a solution of the problem. The first is theological, and consists basically of the distinction between consciousness and express knowledge that we have already seen worked out by Lonergan and Rahner. Applying this distinction to our problem,

one would then be able to say that his *knowledge* was limited, but such limitation would not at all exclude an intuitive *consciousness* of a unique relationship to God and of a unique mission to men. The struggle of his life could have been one of finding the concepts and the words to express that relationship and that mission (p 95).

How far this solution would be accepted by Lonergan himself I

am not sure. I think he would say that Brown is not using 'consciousness', as he would himself, to imply a cognitive act that precedes *all* reflection, and that though Brown's position is coherent, plausible and attractive, it does in fact postulate a greater awareness on Jesus' part both of his divinity and of his mission than is strictly required by the definition of Chalcedon.

Secondly, on the exegetical level, Brown suggests that instead of confining our attention to the *titles* of Jesus, we should ask ourselves how, in the most ancient gospel traditions, Jesus describes his own mission and his relationship to God. This proposal is perhaps not quite as revolutionary as Brown implies. Work has been going on along these lines for some years, both in Germany and America, although it has not yet, unfortunately, found its way into more popular types of theological writing. Brown sketches only very cursorily the sort of thing he means, and rather than give an outline of an outline I propose to quote the relevant paragraphs in full.

... it seems that an irreducible historical minimum in the Gospel presentation of Jesus is that he claimed to be the unique agent in the process of establishing God's kingship over men. He proclaimed that in *his* preaching and through *his* deeds God's kingship over men was making itself felt. From the beginning of Jesus' ministry to the end he exhibited unshakable confidence that he could authoritatively interpret the demands that God's kingship puts on men who are subject to it. We have seen above that when Jesus spoke of the next life or of the signs of the last times, he seems to have repeated the descriptions current in his time; but when he spoke of God's rule over men, he spoke with startling originality. This was his *métier*, and here he brooked no opposition. He could and did declare sins forgiven, modify the Law of Moses, violate the Sabbath ordinances, offend against the proprieties (eat with tax collectors and sinners), make stringent demands (forbid divorce; challenge to celibacy and to leave family ties), defy common sense (encouragement to turn the other cheek) – in short, teach as no teacher of his time taught. And if one allows that he worked miracles – an allowance that has sound exegetical backing, no matter how much it offends liberal philosophical presuppositions – then what he did in the interests of the kingship of God was also astonishing, for he acted against evil with a power that went far beyond the range of ordinary experience.

There follows a short conclusion in which Brown insists that 'the evaluation of the Gospel evidence given above *does not predetermine the theological interpretation to be drawn from it*' (p 99), but makes his

own preference plain. He finds himself more at home with those theologians who are prepared to argue that

neither the hypostatic union nor other possible privileges extended to the God-man necessarily endowed him with extraordinary knowledge in the matters just mentioned. They tend to attribute to Jesus some sort of intuition or immediate awareness of what he was, but they recognize that the ability to express this in a communicable way had to be acquired gradually. Thus they distinguish between two forms of knowledge (or, as has been suggested above, between self-consciousness and expressible knowledge) (p 99f).

And the reason is obvious enough, namely, that these theologians, unlike some others, 'would have no difficulty at all in accepting at face value the limitations of knowledge that scientific biblical criticism finds in Jesus' statements' (p 100).

What is really astounding here is the readiness, the complacency even, with which Brown, a qualified exegete, hands over to the theologian authority to adjudicate on all the really crucial questions. It is all very well for him to insist, as he does, that 'the biblical evidence does not decide the theological problem or conclusively support one theory over another' (p 42). In that case what is the value of all the evidence which points to Jesus' ignorance? The conclusion to which any impartial perusal of Brown's own account of the evidence would lead is that Christ had no clear knowledge of his divinity and only an obscure sense of his mission to redeem the human race; his direct knowledge was completely conditioned by his cultural milieu, which meant that there were many things he did not know and others on which he held opinions that are demonstrably false. Brown's answer to this (and, were it not for his repeated insistence that it is the theologian who must have the last word, one would be certain that in writing this he must have had his tongue in his cheek) is that whatever evidence the exegete adduces of ignorance or error on Jesus' part, the theologian can always reply that he was just pretending. His knowledge of the bible was complete, but he conformed to the hermeneutics of his time because it suited his purpose. 'He was perfectly capable of phrasing exact statements about his divinity but avoided doing so lest he cause scandal' (p 99). Here one feels more at ease with De Rosa's contemptuous dismissal of such tricks, which reduce theology to the level of a parlour-game. What kind of theology would it be that could swallow any fact that history or exegesis might set before it

without turning a hair or modifying a proposition? If theology appeals for support to history, it must be prepared to adapt itself to the evidence it is given. A proposition which cannot in *principle* be disproved by appeal to facts must be either tautological or meaningless or else have no relevance outside a tightly enclosed logical system.

Early in the chapter we have been reporting, Brown invites the theologians to assume his findings into a larger synthesis which would also take into account the creed, the councils and, if possible, the traditional teaching of previous generations. But even this is not enough. For a living theology must reflect a living faith; the holy Spirit is heard differently by successive generations: somehow the theologian must respond to the mood of his own day and catch the distinctive form and shape of its christian experience. Only in this way, by reflecting back a borrowed light, can he fulfil his task of contributing to the *understanding* of the faith. Only in this way can he answer the pressing demand for *relevance*.

The work of Brown in exegesis and of Lonergan and Rahner in theology is relevant in this sense because it corresponds to a desire which one supposes always to be present, in however dormant or subdued a fashion, to the human psyche, but which modern catholicism feels, I think, especially strongly, a desire for simplicity, honesty and unpretentiousness in the presentation of religious belief, accompanied by a readiness to question all kinds of traditional pieties that do not belong to the central core of the faith. With regard to the theme of this bulletin these attitudes are manifested, it seems to me, in a mistrust of what Guardini calls 'the utterly other'. Too often in the past Christ has been portrayed as a God in fancy dress ('Enter Wotan, disguised as a mortal'). He is and will always remain for christians 'the Way, the Truth and the Life'; but the true mystery of the Incarnation, which the labours of men like Brown, Rahner and Lonergan have succeeded in revealing in more of its original paradoxical starkness, is that the leader we are asked to follow is no superhuman hero but a man like ourselves, conscious no doubt of a divine calling but capable even so of disappointment, bewilderment and fear. And this is the man in whom we see the Father; this is the man who exhibits for us, in his courage and generosity and supremely beautiful and authoritative teaching, the mind and heart of God.

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