

of our psychophysical unity, and if we are to get our lives back it can only be as renewed embodied persons. If we want to remain the paragon of the animals, we have to be careful that our godlike apprehensions (and we do have these) do not prompt us to forget our station in life.<sup>13</sup>

## Muddying the Waters or — A Book for Babel

Edmund Hill O.P.

I have lately reviewed, for another journal (*The Southern Cross*), a paperback new edition of a book first published in America in 1974, and in Great Britain in 1975: *Jesus Who Became Christ*, by Peter De Rosa<sup>1</sup>. No doubt it was reviewed then in *New Blackfriars*. I have not been asked to review it this time by this journal; but I offer this article on it, because it is a very bad book, and ought never to have been published in the first place, let alone reprinted in paperback, and because it strikes me as symptomatic of much that is deplorable in current theological writing. So a fairly detailed analysis of its faults may serve a useful cautionary purpose.

The book is avowedly a work of popularisation, and there is no doubt that De Rosa, then in the employment of the BBC, has the art at his finger tips. As previous reviews, quoted on the back cover, declare, "He is indeed master of the technique of communication" (*Times Educational Supplement*); "He is a brilliant communicator" (*Church Times*). And this, no doubt, is why Collins have thought fit to publish this new edition. I fear it will probably sell quite well, and Collins will profit by their irresponsibility. For it seems to me that religious publishers have a duty not just to follow whatever happens to be the current popular fashion, but to guide and educate their public in more critical reflection. The all-important question is— What does the brilliant communicator communicate? And the unfortunate answer in this case is: junk.

De Rosa is a supporter of 'progressive' theology. What he is proposing to communicate or popularise in this book is the conclusions of the latest new testament scholarship and research as vindicating the complete, normal, unqualified humanity of Jesus

<sup>13</sup> In what I have written, I am heavily dependent on the work of Professor P. T. Geach and the Rev. Herbert McCabe, O.P. If I had profited more from their writing, I should have avoided the many mistakes I have probably made.

Christ. Excellent. But unaware of the delicacy, the complexity of the task, De Rosa sets about it like a bull in a china shop, with the horns of over-simplification and the hooves of confusion of issues. Perhaps he will shrug his taurine shoulders and dismiss china shops as elitist. Still, if you wish to sell china to a wider public, they are necessary.

The general result is a betrayal of any genuine progressive theology. By his irresponsibility De Rosa presents it to the Lefebvre's and the fundamentalists of this world as being what they have always said it is—a denial of the faith. Without more ado, then, let us take a further look at his vices, symptomatic of an age of *vulgarisation*, *haute* or otherwise. I have already suggested that two of them are *simplisme* and confusion of issues; but before looking at them, I want to consider what is perhaps his cardinal and most typical sin, which I call 'modernism'.

'Modernism'. By this I do not mean any element of that subtle and complex heresy which I so often anathematised in the days when practically any excuse was good enough for requiring clergymen of the Roman Catholic Church to take the anti-modernist oath. My objection to De Rosa's book, in any case, is not that it contains heresy—I think it does, but not very much—but that it mixes heresies up and makes views that are not heretical look as if they were. By modernism I simply mean the naive equation of 'modern' with 'good'; which is really no more sensible than the naive equation of 'modern' with 'bad', which is made by the extreme traditionalists and conservatives. And really, one asks, why should the reading public who want to learn a bit of theology have to be subjected to observing the confrontation of such juvenile parties?

And so we get a naive, and really rather old-fashioned, belief in progress. "Before modern scriptural studies, theologians were unable to appreciate what a gospel is" (p. 158/9). 1900 years of Christianity without anyone knowing what a gospel is! For it appears that what the gospels are was forgotten almost as soon as they were written. Why didn't the evangelists *tell* anyone, for God's sake? The mind boggles at the ignorance of our ancestors in the faith, generation after generation of them. Thank heaven for being born in the 20th century, the age of water-closets, jet aeroplanes, and the appreciation of what a gospel is!

For—"It is reasonable to ask: since we no longer avail ourselves of mediaeval sciences, why should we be afraid of *dispensing altogether* (his italics) with mediaeval systems of theology? Commonsense, not impiety, recommends that we should. Theology is not an independent discipline, but part of the close-knit fabric—social, political, ideological, scientific—of any particular age. If we do not feel compelled to copy mediaeval politics, mediaeval drainage systems, and mediaeval means of locomotion, why should we

think it worth while, even necessary, to feed our minds on mediaeval theology and devotion? Theology is not a faith; it is the attempt to make faith contemporary. Of its nature, the finest theology is as ephemeral as the generations that produced it" (p. 12/13).

And again—" [We do not] have to go riding in steam engines in the twentieth century out of reverence for James Watt and geniuses who preceded us. Unfortunately, for many people fidelity in religion is identified with the willingness to continue travelling *mentally* in the equivalent of the steam engine. These engines are the ancient dogmas. They were invented in a bygone age. Only expert mechanics, called theologians, really know how they work; *they* are able to take them to pieces and put them together again. Bishops are not in general so knowledgeable but at least they are able to manoeuvre the machines and have authorized driving licences stamped by God himself. The rest of the Christian community just has to submit to being taken for a ride. Meanwhile, the world whizzes past us wonderingly. Why, people ask, do Christians insist on trying to use words like nature, person, substance (as in 'consubstantial' and 'transubstantiation'—to name the most infamous) in ways totally at variance with normal usage, in a manner belonging to an era long since dead? It is not right that the average Christian should have his religious life stunted, his thirst for relevancy unassuaged, on account of a *false* adherence to the past. We need to know not simply what past dogmaticians said but why they said it and in response to what kind of problem" (p. 20/21).

And in the same vein, just a little earlier "Repetition, especially in religious matters, can be the most radical sort of falsification. Doctrines, like bread, need to be freshly baked. Failure to grasp this has led to Christians being fed with stale, non-biblical formulas such as 'the Trinity', and 'three persons in one nature', with the consequence that they have been led sometimes to imagine a heavenly triumvirate, and, despite protestations to the contrary, to 'believe in' three Gods" (p. 19/20).

What comment is necessary? There are some good things said **here**: but they are said so insensitively, with such uncalled for sarcasm, that they will readily be damned by association with the more obvious silly things. No traditionalist, let alone any obscurantist, is going to take to heart the truth that mere repetition can be the most radical sort of falsification, or that we need to know not simply what past dogmas said but why they said it, when he sees it linked with the demand that we dispense altogether with the thought of the past, and serve up our doctrine in a new form every day, like fresh rolls for breakfast.

And the extended technological comparison, as though the expression of revealed truth were a mere matter of utility; the lack of any suggestion of the possibility of criticising modern ideas,

modern assumptions and attitudes; the ever implicit contempt for the past, and the frequently explicit ignorance of it: if this is what progressive theology means, if its advocates really believe that the finest theology is as ephemeral as the generation that produced it, so that we must, presumably, dismiss whatever has survived, like the Latin and Greek Fathers, as the worst theology—then is it to be wondered at that many Christians who take their religion seriously, and are rightly and loyally attached to their Christian inheritance, should view progressive theology with the gravest mistrust?

*Simplisme.* We have already seen that “before modern scriptural studies, theologians were unable to appreciate what a gospel is”. The writer of this stupendous simplification continues: “This meant they were doomed to think of Jesus as working miracles to boggle the mind, or prove some point or other of doctrine” (p. 159). Thus all pre-twentieth century theology, more or less, is reduced to the second rate apologetics of the late nineteenth century Roman manuals.

But the whole work is really one large exercise in over-simplification, this same one, as a matter of fact, that I have just drawn attention to. He writes at the beginning of his introduction: “The gospels are still too often taken as essentially a literal narration of what actually happened before, during and after Jesus’ lifetime. Worse, patristic and mediaeval speculation on the basis of this inaccurate interpretation of the gospels is identified with Christian doctrine” (p. 11). One simple cause for the ‘errors’ of centuries. No apparent awareness of the fact that one of these ‘errors’, regarded with a certain irritated disdain by some moderns (perhaps a little older than De Rosa) was the continuous assumption through the centuries that holy scripture has other senses than the literal, and that these non-literal senses, typological, spiritual, mystical, moral, whatever they were called, were more important for an understanding of divine revelation, in the opinion of not a few of the Fathers, than the literal sense. On p. 41-6 De Rosa gives us what modern research suggests as the meaning of the story of the magi, along of course with some pleasantries about St. Thomas’s wrestlings with the literalness of the story. He fails to point out, however, (or even perhaps notice) that this modern interpretation of the story, what he calls the theological meaning of the Magi—“the Lord who came for all men’s salvation and who is to come in glory (De Rosa permits *himself* to use such old-fashioned language, but would not tolerate it from ‘Aquinas’ and Co), comes now to everyone—be he Jew or Gentile—who accepts him with a joyful and humble heart” (p. 46)—that this theological interpretation is there in St. Thomas (III. 36; 3 & 5 for example); and that St. Thomas was only taking it over from St. Gregory the Great; neither of these two, of course, appreciated what a gospel

is.

Pages 92 and 93 are devoted to a rather heavy-handed *reductio ad absurdum* by over-elaboration of St. Thomas' view of Christ's four-fold knowledge. At the end of this condescending exercise, however, he is benignly excused with the remark, "The state of scripture studies in his day left him no alternative in the matter". But the fact is, St. Thomas' theory had practically nothing at all to do with scripture studies anyway. It was marginally less extreme than the theories of his contemporaries and predecessors, and arose from the study of the definition of Chalcedon and its consequences from the fifth century on, and from certain philosophical assumptions about what the perfection of human nature might involve. It is these we must examine and criticise if we wish to reject (which I do, quite as much as De Rosa) much of what St. Thomas has to say about Christ's knowledge.

Mr. De Rosa is quite honest about his intention to simplify: "I want to simplify the work of the dogmatic theologians of our time like Rahner and Schillebeeckx, who seem, alas, to revel in writing prose of labyrinthine complexity. Above all, I would like to abbreviate the findings of scripture scholars such as Bultmann and Fuller whose professional writings are to layfolk tiring in the extreme". (p. 17)

That 'like' and that 'such as' make one wonder a little. The airy avoidance of specific commitment to the views of a definite theologian or scholar, or to disagreement with them. It is possibly significant that in the corresponding footnote Bultmann becomes Cullman (n.13, p.263). Just another name to drop, after all. I suspect that all of them, and I am certain that the first two, will be greatly surprised and not a little mortified to find their work simplified, or abbreviated, as it is in this book.

*Confusion.* This is multiple, and must therefore be reduced to subheadings:

*Confusion of ideas.* There is one basic confusion which has already been illustrated in the passages I have quoted. De Rosa tells us very truly, if rather superfluously (no one as far as I know has ever dreamt of asserting the contrary), that theology is not faith (p. 13). What he does not tell us, because he does not seem to realise it, or want to realise it, is that theology is not dogma either. He constantly mixes the two up; and therefore feels quite as free to criticise or scrap ancient dogmas, like those of Nicaea and Chalcedon, as he is to criticise or scrap old theologies. That dogmas (and *a fortiori*, creeds) might have been intended, and accepted, as in some sense definitive, even though never adequate, expressions of faith, to which the faithful as such are, and acknowledge themselves to be, committed—of this he seems to be unaware. At least he never either states, or formally challenges such a view. This in a Catholic writer. or even in a writer who has been a Cath-

olic (I do not know how Mr. De Rosa now regards himself in this respect). seems odd, not to say disingenuous.

Let us come to his ideas about the Chalcedonian dogma, which expresses definitively (so I believe as a Catholic Christian), but not adequately, faith in Jesus Christ 'true God and true man'. De Rosa does not like this dogma. But his ideas about it are confused, at least if they are represented by the way in which he caricatures it. This in itself is a very serious objection to the whole style of his book, that he never presents this doctrine straight, in its own terms, then going on to offer whatever criticisms of it he thinks are required. Instead he garbles it up with sneers. Thus:

"Most Christians, when they are honest with themselves, are forced to admit that Jesus can be classified only with the utmost difficulty as a member of the human race. He seems to be an amalgam of God and man."

Interruption for comment:

Most Catholic Christians (I cannot presume to speak for others) when they are honest with themselves honestly profess to believe that Jesus is true man as well as true God. Perhaps that doesn't count as classifying him as a member of the human race. So much the worse for De Rosa's rules of classification. To whom does he, Jesus, seem to be an amalgam of God and man? Certainly not to the fathers of Chalcedon, who acknowledged 'one and the same Christ ... as existing in two natures *without confusion, without change* ...' No amalgam there. The text of the definition, incidentally, I derive immediately from *This Man Jesus*, by Bruce Vawter, a book of new testament scholarship quite as radical as anything De Rosa has to offer, but exhibiting rather greater sensitivity. We shall return to him later. But to continue with the quotation from De Rosa:

"He (Jesus) is credited with a duality of minds and wills, He is thought to be simultaneously compounded of infiniteness and finiteness, omnipotence and weakness" (p. 11-12).

Note the misleading word 'compounded' and the tendentious word 'duality'; it conveniently suggests the sinister idea of 'dualism', which a more straightforward 'with two minds and wills' might perhaps have failed to do. In the same vein, a few pages farther on in his introduction, he writes:

"Like Martin Luther, I propose to speak to the common man—by no means the unintelligent man—who for too long has been bemused and tormented by academic discussions about Jesus, God *and* man, infinite *and* finite, impassible *and* susceptible of pain, a being with two minds and two wills" (p. 17).

Clearly the common, but by no means unintelligent man cannot stand any sort of paradox, unlike his more primitive and unsophisticated ancestors. At all costs we must deliver him from the torment of those stupefying conjunctions (italicised by De Rosa to

emphasise, I suppose, the frightfulness of their assault upon the modern mind of the common man), even if it means dropping what those simple ancestors, and the odd uncommon and unintelligent Christian today, have always regarded as an expression of their faith: belief in Jesus Christ, true God *and* true man.

On page 102 there is a comparison, by no means intended as flattering, of:

“the problem of what is strangely called ‘reconciling the divine and the human in Christ’ ”

with Zeno’s paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. I myself do not know what the mathematical or logical point of Zeno’s paradox was, and I am not sure that De Rosa does either. What is quite clear is that he sees no place for “thinking of the same kind of lunatic quality” (ibid.) in respectable modern theology for the common but by no means unintelligent man.

So what are we to make of this:

“Besides expressing the nature of the Church Mary also guarantees that Jesus, the Son of God, is as completely human as we are. *This is the significance of her title Mother of God, Theotokos.*” (p. 71).

My italics this time (most of them), because this is surely a thumping paradox, that Mary guarantees Jesus to be as completely human as we are by getting herself called Mother of God. Ah, but this is a *good* paradox (as indeed it is). The common but by no means unintelligent man can of course distinguish between good and bad paradoxes. So he won’t be in the least disconcerted when on page 74 De Rosa quotes the poet Crashaw with approval for “expressing the confluence of apparent contradictions in Jesus’ divine birth:

Welcome all wonders in one sight!  
Eternity shut in a span,  
Summer in winter, day in night,  
Heaven in earth and God in man;  
Great little one! whose all-embracing birth  
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.”

Beautiful! ‘Crashaw *si*, as the Spaniards would say, Chalcedon *no!*’  
As with paradoxes, so with that unholy conjunction. For, we are told on page 157,

“The special character of the gospel as the presentation of this person (Christ) to the believer enables us to understand the astonishing tension and ambiguity which characterize the gospels: Jesus is at once weak *and* strong. If the gospels were precise, factual reporting of what the mortal Jesus said and did, it would not have this tension; nor would it have much present relevance.... Evidently, traits attributable to the Christ of glory are not attributable to Jesus in the days of his flesh, nor vice versa. Yet in the gospels we have *Jesus Christ*, at once lowly

*and glorious. The presentation of the lowly—exalted one is precisely what a gospel is.”*

So here too the common but by no means unintelligent man will be able to show the necessary discrimination. There are good ‘ands’ as well as bad ‘ands’, enlightening as well as bemusing ‘ands’. De Rosa’s ‘ands’, *si!* Chalcedon’s ‘ands’, *no!*

Before leaving De Rosa’s Chalcedonian confusions, I would like to quote once more from Bruce Vawter’s book, *This Man Jesus*.

“Only one who prefers imprecision to exact speech, or who resents those who do like to mean what they say, will object to all these distinctions (of the Chalcedonian definition) piled one atop the other. And, we repeat, we are probably incapable today of assembling a better vocabulary to draw the distinctions more finely” (p. 148).

And again:

“... the so-called Chalcedonian formulations ...achieved an enviable clarity in defining the meaning of Christ for their age. For all that, they achieved it in a language that has not been bettered with the passing of the centuries, and that has remained instead a bulwark against irresponsible and unheeding heresy or merely slipshod, bad theology. It is slipshod, bad theology, we feel, that prompts some of our present-day colleagues to denigrate Chalcedon, Nicaea, and Constantinople, as though all these early councils had been excursions into an irrelevant speculation.... The New Testament certainly invited the responses that Chalcedon gave.... William Sanday, who was a distinguished biblical scholar in his time, at the beginning of this present century, regarded the formulation as ‘the outcome of a long evolution, every step in which was keenly debated by minds of great acumen and power, really far better equipped for such discussion than the average Anglo-American mind of today. Sanday believed, as Reginald Fuller, Alan Richardson, and a host of other Anglo-Saxon authors have concurred, that Chalcedon was a genuine development out of the New Testament and that its conclusions therefore ... properly concern New Testament theology; and we believe, as he doubtless would, that its conclusions are still more faithful to the New Testament than are various alternatives more recently proposed in the name of ‘biblical relevance’.” (p. 165)

That quotation was from Vawter, *not* De Rosa.

*Confusion of issues.* I will take De Rosa’s treatment of the resurrection of Jesus as an instance. The whole account, from p. 228 onwards is so entangled that it is impossible to understand at the end of it what the author in fact believes about the subject. Whatever it is, it is full of inconsistencies. He begins by saying,

“It will probably be helpful if I first outline my approach to



Christ's resurrection as simply and honestly as I can". It would indeed, if he did; but he doesn't.

On this matter there are a number of issues, or questions that are being asked today, which all deserve discussion and answering one way or the other, traditionally or radically. But it is important, and certainly much more helpful, not to mix them up. Thus

- 1 Are the resurrection narratives straight descriptions of what actually happened or not?
- 2 Did Jesus physically rise from the dead, in the sense that his dead body, which was laid in the tomb, came to life again?
- 3 Is his risen or post-death life of the same sort as his (and our) mortal or pre-death life?
- 4 Is the resurrection of Jesus a proof of the truth of the Christian religion or of his divinity?

And then there are some connected sub-issues such as: Is the immortality of the soul a good way of describing man's undying life, and should we talk about man consisting of 'body and soul'? What is the meaning of Paul's distinction between a 'fleshly body' and a 'spiritual body'?

Now De Rosa mixes these questions up in a way that makes argument with him almost impossible. Not only does he again caricature opinions he disagrees with in the most offensive way, thus, (attacking the ordinary Christian view that answers question 2 above with a yes);

"having to conceive the resurrection in terms of Jesus' corpse being used again, as it were, after a fundamental repair job done on it by God the Father. Was the resurrection a soul-transplant on Jesus' corpse?" (p. 238).

He also argues against, for example, the 'physicalist' view of the resurrection of Jesus and the 'apologetic' view or treatment of it (question 4), as though they were the same question, and as though saying yes to (question 2) means saying yes to (question 4)—and for that matter saying yes to (question 3). But this is simply not the case, and it is wilfully obfuscating and tendentious to assume, as he does, that it is.

As for what I call the sub-issues, well De Rosa takes a good swipe at the so-called 'Greek' notion of the immortality of the soul, and the division of man into the two parts, body and soul, as a good modern man should. But then he spiritualises away the bodily reality of the resurrection, because he can't really believe in it any more than those Athenian Greeks could who first heard Paul mention it. His mind, the modern mind, is still Greek, not Hebraic at bottom. And he interprets Paul's distinction in a way that seems to involve the weirdest of gnostic myths, to be taken somehow literally. The whole man, body-soul, living body, appears to have two bodies. The first, the fleshly body, becomes a corpse when a man dies, and in the case of Jesus at any rate,

“it obviously perished *without trace* (his italics again)” (p.240).

Then what was raised was the spiritual body” (ibid.)

Where on earth, or heaven, or under the earth, did it—the spiritual body—come from? I can’t make head or tail of it.

*Confusion of antagonists.* The reader will have gathered by now that the work under review has a strong polemical flavour—as indeed has this review itself. De Rosa has many foes, and he fails totally to discriminate between them. They are lumped together in one glorious kind of porridge, which he then proceeds vigorously to thump.

We have seen that he seems to confuse dogma and theology. So, he doesn’t like dogma, he doesn’t like the theology at any rate of pre-modern theologians, who continue to survive in great numbers, he doesn’t like Chalcedon, he doesn’t like Aquinas. Wham, wham, wham; the same indiscriminate stick for all of them. Here is a revealing little aside, (footnote 10 to p. 93, found on pp. 266-7):

“Those who think that because St. Thomas was a genius his teaching can profitably be repeated in our days would do well to follow me in a recent experiment. I re-read the whole of *Tertia Pars* of the *Summa Theologica*, (pp. 1-365). Whoever goes through this will, no doubt, be as surprised as I was, not only at the utter impossibility of assenting today to Aquinas’ theology of Christ, but also at his frequent inconsistencies. Time after time, he is forced to compromise his basic philosophical principles because of his literalistic reading of many key passages in scripture. This is not meant as a criticism of St. Thomas, only of some Thomists—of whom Aquinas was not one”.

One could spend a fascinated hour analysing almost every sentence of this gem I will confine myself to the last, and ask with respect to it only one question—how did the other Thomists get off?

Then I will suggest that the writer would have satisfied logic better had he been just a little more honest, and written instead,

“This is not meant to be getting at St. Thomas, but only at some Thomists etc.”

I think that that is just about the truth of the matter all through the book. De Rosa wrote it, driven by the demons of frustration and resentment which had lodged in his soul in the course of his theological studies at the seminary, which I presume were more or less contemporaneous with mine, in the early 50’s. I can sympathise with him. A lot of rot was taught in those days in those places; and as a result a lot of rot has been preached and dished out in catechism, and no doubt still is. But not all of it was rot, even in those days. It wasn’t rot to have the text of St. Thomas expounded by enlightened Thomists of wide and contemporary sympathy like Victor White and Mark Brocklehurst.

In any case, it is not constructive, it does not contribute to the building up of the body, to work out such frustrations in public, without first subjecting them to close criticism in private. It is on the contrary a contribution to building up Babel. One of those earlier reviewers, quoted on the back of the book, wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*,

"Peter De Rosa has a fire in his belly, and the power of it sweeps the reader along with him".

Yes, demons do generate fire, and in the belly. And that accounts, no doubt, for the swirling smoke in the head.

## Reply to Edmund Hill

Peter De Rosa

The Editor of *New Blackfriars* has sent me an advance copy of Edmund Hill's review-article on my JESUS WHO BECAME CHRIST (JWBC) in case I should care to answer it. This reminds me of a judge who said: 'Prisoner at the bar, you are about to be hanged but afterwards you will of course have the right of reply.

In fact, I feel honoured that a book written so many years ago should be the object of Fr. Hill's crusade both here and abroad and merit eight pages of a journal in 1978. I mean it truly when I say the reviewer gave me immense pleasure and not a little harmless amusement. I would prefer him to have left out certain innuendoes, as when he refers, somewhat unkindly I think, to my religious affiliation and when he says I could have been 'just a little more honest'. But, for the most part, his rope tickled my neck so nicely I hardly felt it snap.

Since the Editor has allowed me a speech from the grave, I should like to draw attention to a puzzle with regard to JWBC which, try as I may, I am unable to resolve. It is this. To my knowledge, I never had a good review of that book by any Catholic priest and never a bad one by any other reviewer.

Fr. Hill's review contains phrases like De Rosa's *simplisme*, *confusion of ideas*, *irresponsibility*, his book is *junk*, contains *heresy but not very much*, he is a *demon with swirling smoke in his head* and is *very offensive*. Phrases certainly not permitted today in criticism of non-Catholics, at least not in such Christian abundance. Still, mild when compared with other priest reviewers.

Non-Catholic scholars, by contrast, have praised the book so lavishly that I cannot for the life of me take them very seriously. A few examples. William Barclay, while admitting he is less radical than I, calls me 'a scholar on his knees' and declares:

'Whoever reads this book will rise from the reading of it with fuller knowledge of Jesus himself'.

Canon Michael Green, an Evangelical theologian, after saying it is