

CHRIST AND ORIGINAL SIN, by Peter de Rosa. *Geoffrey Chapman*. 1967. 138 pp. 25s.

This book should prove a liberation for many people, both Christians and those who have a perhaps undefined sense that Christianity is implausible. Both groups may be suffering from a sense of the implausible: the Christian from the apparent necessity to defend, or at least not to call in question, a received teaching about Christ and about Original Sin, although he is aware of a gap between his language and experience and the received expression of these mysteries; the non-Christian because, for example, he has never lived in an environment where such expression was common currency.

Fr de Rosa has not merely effected a translation of words written in an ancient tongue: rather does he show us Christians that much of our defending was unnecessary and misplaced, and that we do well to pay heed to our own and contemporary perceptions of what it is to be human. For it is this 'being human' that both parts of this book are concerned with. In the first part, 'The Incarnation', he shows persuasively that the very strong emphasis on 'Jesus was God' has immobilised our thinking and speaking about him. We have felt bound as it were to preserve Jesus' divinity for him, whereas of course his humanity was his way of being God, and he, the man, is the only, and more, the perfect, revelation of God to us who are also men. One most unfortunate product of the over-emphasis on Jesus' divine nature has been the make-believe quality of his sufferings and temptations, his growth in maturity and wisdom. But if we are prepared to follow Fr Schillebeeckx and say that Jesus was God in a human way and human in a divine way, then we do not need to be afraid to recognise that there was recognition in Jesus too, realisation, awakening to the significance of what was happening in his life, how in him the function of the Servant of Jahweh was to be fulfilled to the end. Hence there could be and was real and recognisable choice, and so real and recognisable acceptance.

Throughout this small book Fr de Rosa makes considerable use of a number of eminent contemporary theologians, notably Frs Schoonenberg, Karl Rahner, Dubarle and Tresmontant; in fact he would probably not claim more for his book than that it faithfully presents an introduction to the work of these thinkers on these matters; work which readers may find to be surprisingly intelligible to them.

The book's second part is concerned with Original Sin. Here again Fr de Rosa's concern

is to relate a familiar notion, that of Original Sin, to what we ourselves know about being human, to place the notion as it were in a context of contemporary intelligibility. The last half century has seen an increasing awareness of the potentialities for good and ill of group bias as something identifiable. Historical man has always been aware of his apparently fated involvement in sin which he had not committed but which somehow made him guilty and preconditioned him to sin himself. His only way of thinking and speaking was biologically: his progenitor had sinned; he, because he is Adam's descendant, is born in sin and bound to sin. Eventually metaphor is frozen into formula and Christians are saddled with a way of speaking which seems to commit them to monogenism and seminal transmission of sin. The fact, the actuality of Original Sin as handed on by inheritance is not in doubt; but Fr de Rosa offers us a way of talking about its transmission which is immensely liberating because recognisably continuous with contemporary experience. In the words of Fr Smulders quoted on p. 119:

Procreation can include not only the strictly biological aspects, but also all the factors by which mankind makes someone its member, including education, environment, and example.

To men who have known the virus of racialism and religious prejudice, an interpretation of Original Sin in terms of group bias and group conditioning will make immediate sense. Not that Fr de Rosa neglects the Scriptural warrant for his way of speaking, showing that for neither Testament is it biological birth and biological death which are the real poles of human existence. I don't think that he would claim to have answered every question that might come to mind, for example about the necessity of infant baptism: does baptism have any effect on the individual child besides enrolling him in the saving environment of the Church? But I have no doubt that this contribution of a new language is theologically valuable. Each of us is born into a biased environment; from the beginning the Church's *raison d'être* has been to provide a correcting and transforming agency whereby we may so live that our death is an achieved and committed Christian deed. This is a truly Christian book in that it makes explicit and intelligible both our illness and Christ who is our remedy.

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