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978-1-107-43818-7 - The Impassibility of God: A survey of Christian Thought

J. K. Mozley

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THE IMPASSIBILITY OF GOD

A SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

by

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107438187

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First published 1926

First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-43818-7 Paperback

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TO
MY COLLEAGUES
OF THE
Archbishops' Doctrinal Commission
WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE NOT FOR
ANYTHING CONTAINED IN
THIS BOOK, BUT FOR THE
FACT THAT IT WAS
EVER WRITTEN

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P R E F A C E

The present volume has grown out of a task assigned to me during the meetings of the Archbishops' Doctrinal Commission in September 1924, to prepare a historical statement on the subject of the doctrine of the Impassibility of God. How considerable an undertaking it would be, I had no idea at the time; but when I set to work upon it, it grew, I may say, almost of its own accord. More and still more relevant material from the Fathers and elsewhere kept turning up, till I realized that I could neither finish the work as soon as was desirable, nor restrict it to a statement of manageable dimensions, suitable for circulation in type to my fellow-members. Then it occurred to me that, as it had reached a respectable size, and had entailed much more work than either I or (if I may say so) the Commission had foreseen, it might, without impropriety, be submitted at Cambridge, in the hope that it and I would be approved for a doctorate in divinity. In this, I am glad to say, it was successful, and as I had found it no easy matter to find time to prepare a thesis which could be offered with a view to that degree, I am the more grateful to the Commission for the labour which was imposed upon me.

In the body of the work I have suggested or implied that there has been an astonishing lack of serious attention to the subject of Impassibility. Many theologians have, in recent times, touched upon it, and there has been a good deal of passionate reaction from the doctrine.

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But it is very curious that of monographs avowedly devoted to the question we have, as far as I have been able to discover, only two, the work of Gregory Thaumaturgus in the third century, *De passibili et impassibili in Deo*, and the work of Dr Marshall Randles, at the end of the nineteenth, *The Blessed God. Impassibility*. How it comes about that there is no classic German monograph to lighten the labours of other students, I cannot imagine. If there is one, and I have missed it, I apologise to its author: but I am still inclined to think that he does not exist. And in English, for the history of the doctrine, the student will have begun and ended his course with Principal R. S. Franks in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Passibility and Impassibility." It is an article which would show him the lie of the land, but without exhibiting in any detail the features of the country.

As to the present work, I wish to express my regret for two omissions. Of Bishop F. J. McConnell's volume entitled *Is God Limited?* and published in the Crown Theological Library I have said nothing. I had fully intended to make use of it, and it was quite without intention on my part that, when the text was finished and had gone off to Cambridge, Bishop McConnell was not travelling in the company of the other eminent modern authors who were occupying their places. So to this extent I try to compensate for my omission by referring the reader to chapter xxxiii in Bishop McConnell's book, with the title "The Wealth of the Divine Feeling." He will discover a very definite repudiation of the doctrine of impassibility, and will

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class Bishop McConnell with Canon Streeter, Mr Studdert-Kennedy, Dr Douglas White and others—whether for approval or for disapproval.

The other omission is of a different character, and I should never have realized it but for a question put to me by the Rev. E. G. Selwyn. What he asked was, in effect, this—“have you said anything about the bearing upon the doctrine of impassibility of Christian belief in the Holy Spirit?” That seems to me a very valuable question, and the omission is serious. For our Christian belief in the Holy Spirit is not simply another way of expressing our belief in the immanence of God. If that were all, I should not feel that I had been guilty of an omission; for though the word immanence is used infrequently in the following pages, the idea for which it stands is certainly not absent. But even in a historical study which does not pretend to be an examination of what may or may not be regarded as true, definite reference ought to have been made to the eighth chapter of Romans, and something suggested as to its implications.

The book is concerned with what has become a controversial—sometimes a fiercely controversial—question. It is a presentation of evidence, and, in the closing pages, an attempt to show what are the problems that must be investigated before the question can be satisfactorily answered. At least, with regard to these problems some line must be taken; it is only through them that one can scientifically approach the discussion of impassibility. Most people who are at all interested in the problems of philosophy and theology will have

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some idea where they stand. If I have said nothing about my own beliefs, that is not, I hope, through any wish to shirk responsibility, but in order that the collected evidence may make its own impression on the mind of the reader without any middleman's interference from the author of the book.

To the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, to Mr S. C. Roberts, the Secretary of the Press, and to those careful proof-readers and printers to whom the book owes so much, I would express my very grateful thanks.

J. K. M.

19 *August* 1926

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