ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

THE PASSIONATE GOD

"*The Passionate God* is a great work that proceeds from profound spiritual experience. . . . It sets forth the ongoing exchanges in living and loving that constitute the vitality, the development and ultimately the self-effacing heroism of members of the Body of Christ."

—Bernard Lonergan

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This book is dedicated to The Company of the friends of Wisdom, for whom—

'The hint half-guessed, the gift half understood is Incarnation. Here the impossible union of the spheres of existence is actual.'

References

Biblical quotations are in general from the Jerusalem Bible, published and © 1966, 1967 and 1968 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd and Doubleday & Co. Inc., and from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted 1952 and 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

References in the text have been kept to a minimum, but full publication details of works cited can be found in the bibliography at the back of the book.

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Introduction

Wisdom, Poetry and Romance

As a confirmed introduction-skipper myself, I hesitate to ask, but finally do ask, the reader not to skip this one. The book is its own best explanation but it will make sense more rapidly if I begin by giving some account not of why—the book will show that—but of how it came to be written. Out of that arises a kind of 'scene-setting' exercise, to show the necessary locus of what is being done, including some explanation of apparent oddities which might cause a degree of culture shock in the reader if encountered unprepared.

The ground from which this book grew was an increasing preoccupation, over many years, with an apparently naive question: What difference did the resurrection of Jesus make? It seemed to me that Christians talked as if the answer to that question were obvious, but on examination there seemed to be much talk and little evidence. What *kind* of difference *should* it make? Does it make a difference to how we feel about life? Or does it affect our bodily being? If so, precisely how? What difference did Paul see? Have his views been proved right or do we just *assume* he was right? And anyway, what did he really *mean*?

This has to do first of all with the nature of material reality; resurrection is bodily or it is nothing. We are, after all, talking about the event Christians call 'incarnation', flesh-taking, before all else a bodily, material event. So what happened to material reality, what happened to *bodies*, when Jesus rose from the dead? And embedded in all this there was the other question: why did he die at all? Why death? Why *evil*? And what is it?

In Arthur Koestler's mammoth book *The Act of Creation* he shows how a sudden transformation such as conversion, a new scientific insight or (on a more everyday scale) the catharsis of laughter, or of tears, occurs when two irreconcilable 'matrices' of thought and experience coincide in the mind. What makes people laugh at the pompous gentleman slipping on the banana skin is the incompatibility of his dignity and his sudden predicament. What makes people

weep is the break in one order of comprehensible and imaginable living caused by a disaster which 'undoes' it. Discoveries, spiritual and intellectual, are the outcome not of a progression of reasoning along one line but of disparate experiences knocking up against each other. Without conscious thought or will, at a certain narrow point, they touch, explode, and something new is born. This process is the one which created this book, for my wrestling with the theological questions produced for a long time nothing but a quantity of waste paper. But at the same time I rediscovered Charles Williams, the strange poet-novelist-dramatist-theologian who was a friend of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, and in the last years of his life (he died aged 46 in 1945) one of the group around Lewis called the 'Inklings' who met in an Oxford pub to read and discuss each other's work. Brilliant as the group was, and rightly revered as Lewis and Tolkien have become in different ways, Williams was in a class by himself. Where they saw things head on, with beautiful and uncompromising clarity, Williams saw them all round and with a stereoscopic vision of unparalleled intensity. But his thought is, therefore, ambivalent, obscure and richly allusive. He could not be popular, but those who catch fire from him are never the same again.

Williams had first come into my life when I was in my teens and a new Christian. I knew him only through a few of his poems, and for some time I was delightfully drunk on the stuff, but I have a poor head for strong poetry, and I forgot him. I rediscovered him through *The Descent of the Dove*, sub-titled 'A History of the Holy Spirit in the Church', his idiosyncratic book of historical theology or theological history. Thrilled, I went back to the poems, found and read all his six weird and unclassifiable novels (recently republished in paperback). I discovered the doctrine of Exchange which is the mainspring of this book. One day or other, this idea knocked up against the questions on my mind about resurrection, an explosion occurred and a breach was made into new regions. In exploring the territory to which this explosion gave me access I needed a language. I had it to hand in the study of Romance and Romantic love which I had pursued for some time.

Finally, there was a third thing which proved to be the context and in one sense the reason for the whole adventure. Over the last six years I had been part of a small, new, poor, insecure but

obstinately hopeful community of mixed Christians and not-particularly-Christians, trying to help each other to find ways and values to make sense of life now, and to help those damaged by the evils of life now (including their own). At the same time and for many years before that, my work as a lecturer had taken me all over North America, staying always where possible in homes, and in the very rapid intimacy of such visits getting to know lives, hopes, efforts, experiments. And everywhere I found evidence that people were being drawn together in just such little, unknown, yet obstinately hopeful groups as that from which I came. In country or city, permanently or briefly, people were gathering to live, study, work, pray together.

After a long time, through events in my own life, I became aware of all this in a new way. Finally this awareness touched that other awareness already at work as I explored the world in the light of the doctrine of Exchange. The explosion this time was much greater. In a sense this book is a photograph of that event. But my questions continued. Why am I seeing these things *now*? Why are the things that I am seeing going on *now*? And what is the reason for the intersection of the events, and my seeing them, and the kind of language available to me to express what I see?

My knowledge of my own past partially answered the first question for me. My knowledge of cultural history, interpreted by means of a peculiar language I had developed for this, partially answered the second. The answer to my third question can only emerge from the assertion that true answers to fundamental human questions must have the nature of poetry. Poetry brings to a point the experiences of the past and mediates them to the future through the narrows of the present. The present is now, this minute, with all the people in it. It is the menu at the restaurant this evening, the people in the local prison tonight, the lessons the kids are learning in class this afternoon, the debate going on in the chambers of government and business—the open one and the secret one. It is the conversation in the supermarket check-out line and by the tractor still hot from ploughing. It is the unquestioned basis of work in the laboratory, of the kinds of questions well-trained, well-paid people are feeding into computers and of the kinds of questions the dying are asking (or wanting to ask) in their hospital beds. Now is a cultural moment of the most bewildering concreteness and of a

totally inmeasurable precision. Therefore 'now' is our stifling limitation and our essential challenge, but our particular 'now' has deprived us of so many poetical tools that the challenge is more acute than perhaps it has ever been.

I was driven to pursue connections and enabled to perceive gaps and openings which well-trained and -equipped craftsmen did not notice, for they were busy with their craft. And at a cultural moment when history itself was revealing, through cracks, the light of new worlds, I groped for tools to deal verbally with the extraordinary nature of what I was perceiving and found them under my untutored hands. My use of them is clumsy, but I believe that in use they will be seen to be the right ones because they are not more complicated than they need be. They are not crude, nor are they sophisticated. They are simple, made of old materials but shaped for new needs and by new techniques. They are, in fact, common to all, like divine Wisdom.

'Wisdom' is a human gift and a name of God. It is both subject and context. In Scripture Wisdom is 'she', and she sets her table in public and summons one and all. What Wisdom offers, as I have attempted to follow her signs, is intended for the little ones, the people in the highways and hedges, and not only for those with gilt-edged invitations. In one sense this book's purpose is to extend that invitation. It is an invitation to experience Heaven and Hell, life and death, to know them in facts of nuclear power and food co-ops and police methods, of attitudes to babies and the poor and the handicapped and what we put in the soil. So it has to do with God, and with bread, and with sex, because there is a God-bread-sex continuum as there is a matter-energy continuum, and in exactly the same way. Wisdom is simply the apprehension of God in human experience through its whole extent.

That is Christian theology, for Christianity is the revelation of that Wisdom in one historical yet eternal point, physical and spiritual and personal and cosmic. People become Christians because they discover Wisdom in Christianity. They discover that it is true, in the clear and obvious sense of truth which is that it corresponds with their experience of reality. This is so in two distinct but related ways. People 'discover' that Christianity is true by a conversion experience, in which they perceive, very simply and directly and without argument, that the revelation of God in Christ is what life

is all about. And again they 'discover' its truth over a lifetime's experience, in which personal growth and reflection, and increased and increasingly sensitive knowledge of the environment—social, 'natural', biological and historical—in which one lives, come together to confirm, year by year, the fundamental and living truthfulness of what Christianity has to say about the nature of reality. Inward deepening and outward observation interact with revelation, and the result is the growth of Wisdom. But it can only be communicated in poetic terms.

A book such as this must therefore include, as poetic, description and allusion, direct address to the hearer and at the same time indirect evocation of matters which lie deep in the region where speaker and hearer meet. To do this is theology, which is a particularly exacting kind of poetry. This may appear to be one of those statements which are intended to provoke thought rather than to be taken seriously as a statement of fact, but it is a statement of a fact which is important not only for this book but for all thinking about religion, God, faith. There are 'areas of concern' which are so ultimate that they are literally out of sight and can easily be not only out of mind but dismissed as not worthy of being in mind because they cannot be thought of in the way we think about breakfast, or geography, or pneumonia. But this is the case not only about religious matters but about all those things in human life which are, in the end, of greatest importance—not only concepts like 'God' and 'faith' but 'compassion', 'loyalty' and 'truth'.

Kipling, in his short story 'Wireless', said that he thought the most powerful lines in all poetry were Keats':

> Magic casements opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas and faery-lands forlorn.
> ('Ode to a Nightingale')

Not all may agree, but the lines do have an extraordinary terror and beauty. For a moment, those windows are opened in the mind of the hearer, and he leans over the sill, afraid and breathless, aware of the unquestionable and untameable reality of an inner and common world, twilit and yet lucent, still and yet tingling with arrested movement, so new it has no language, yet dying. This is the land where Psyche searches for lost Eros, where the hermit ventures in

search of God, where the child lives familiarly in her moments of solitary fantasy, where the poet goes, in fear and trembling, to find the materials of his craft, and where he meets the prophet and visionary on the same errand.

The theologian also must open those windows onto the land whence culture draws its common life and whence it must continually revivify it, if it is not to stagnate in cliché and rhetoric. The languages of poetry and of theology, therefore, are always searching for words which will convey a truth whose essence is (so the poet and the theologian know) infinitely precise yet never capable of complete articulation. Poetry is not 'illustration' of prose by adding imagery; it is rather the most accurate way in which some inkling of an incommunicable experience can be communicated, and theology is exactly that also. It is in the struggle to articulate truthfully that the words become capable of actually communicating truth, for if they are the right words they take to themselves some of the power of the experience and break through into the mind that listens, creating a communion of experience.

This book has in its title not only the word 'God', but the word 'Passion', and the ordinary experience just mentioned is an example of the kind of experience from which the theology of this book takes its name and its symbols and its dynamics. For its thesis is that we can begin to make some sense of the way God loves people if we look very carefully at the way people love people, and in particular at the way of love we can refer to as 'passionate' because that kind of love tells us things about how love operates which we could not otherwise know. We can say 'love' and mean a restful, gentle and essentially kind experience. But if we say 'passion' we evoke something in motion—strong, wanting, needy, concentrated towards a very deep encounter. It is a violent word. Yet it has, in its roots, obviously a 'passive' sense. 'Passion' also implies a certain helplessness, a suffering and undergoing for the sake of what is desired and, implicitly, the possibility of a tragic outcome.

This is a book about the passion of God for human beings; it is a phenomenology of divine love for, in, through and between people, which means the entire, mysterious and infinitely complex system of inter-relationships which is creation, and the Creator in creation. But most of all it is about that point at which the passion of God drove him to become incarnate, and that is how 'Romance' language

is able to help me to answer the question which I asked at first, for it leads, quickly and surely, to ways of thinking about Incarnation.

'Incarnation' is a word to which most people find it hard to give a meaning. It violates, as a concept, our sense of divine and human decency, it crosses a barrier which we require, for our mental and psychological comfort, to be impermeable. A God who creates, who orders, a God whose bliss we can, maybe, come to share beyond death—this kind of God many can accept as *thinkable*, even if not believable. He is whole, glorious, benevolent and (if sometimes inexplicable) comforting. And an 'All' kind of God who has no distinctness but is a presence within, the Ultimate Ground, our final Good—such a God can command intellectual assent and even adoration. He is sufficiently numinous for worship, sufficiently pervasive to be attainable. But a God who is immediate, historical, demanding, personal, passionately human—that is altogether too much.

And Jesus, also, we can take. Jesus who was heroic, gentle, 'whole', healing, poor and persecuted—we have plenty of time for him. Everyone can love Jesus, as long as he is not God. But Jesus who is God is too difficult and demanding. Separately they will do, God and Jesus, in some kind of close but imaginable relationship. But a totally unimaginable oneness, a God so passionate he has to be Jesus, a Jesus so passionate he has to be God—he is so outrageous a demand on human intellect and human courage that there are only two possible responses: utter faith or utter rejection.

In practice, the inability to cope with the concept of Incarnation has always gone hand in hand with an inability to accept the miraculous element in the gospel accounts, and so with a desire to dispose of it either by making Jesus so much God and so little human that the 'miraculous' is merely his home territory, or by making him so much a man and so little God (no more than every human being) that miracles become an affront and must be disbelieved. This real and huge mental stumbling-block is important and has to be understood at the beginning of such a book as this. It is helpful to realize that what is acceptable as miraculous in this sense, and what is not, varies, and the reasons for this will illuminate our prejudices. At one time, *all* the 'miraculous' things in the Gospels were explained away as either suggestion, fabrication or hallucination. Nowadays, many people find 'miraculous' physical and

mental healing acceptable, and the reason for this has to do with styles of thinking, those changes in a culture about what it is or is not possible for people to think at a given time. We do not often realize to what an extent our theology is also limited and directed by such cultural fashions.

In the emergence of scientific disciplines as a reliable guide to the nature and operation of the universe, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the climate of thought created was naturally inimical to anything that could not be fitted into available scientific categories. It was not any process of reasoning which excluded all non-scientifically-verifiable phenomena as 'unreal', but rather a profound human need for a manageable universe. The medieval universe had been manageable because of God, an intellectually manageable kind of God. The 'Enlightenment' exploded religion (though some 'enlightened' people kept God as a pet) but quickly and necessarily offered a substitute with which to prop up the universe. It is intolerable to human beings to live in a meaningless universe. Even those few who attempt this in the name of realism end up, like the Existentialists, making a kind of meaning out of the conscious assertion of meaninglessness. So, when scientific discovery seemed to be about to explain everything, it was natural that things which it manifestly could not explain should be dismissed not as unexplainable—this would have left a hole in science—but as simply non-existent. But time and experience have shown the limits to strictly 'scientific' exploration, and travel in the border areas of scientific discovery has led scientists to draw on imaginative rather than strictly 'scientific' concepts. In this changed climate of opinion Jesus the healer, for instance, is once more intellectually respectable, but only so long as he is not divine.

What has happened is not that people have learned to accept a different category of experience, one in which 'inexplicable' things happen, but that they have widened the original category within which they find it possible to think. This category can be called 'everydayness'. Things which at one time were dismissed as fables or frauds by all 'reasonable' people are now quite thinkable; in fact it is even fashionable to think about them and speculate on their relationship to other, more usual, phenomena. They are included, therefore, in the category of the 'everyday', or if they cannot quite be fitted in there they are on the borders of it, in the category we

can call 'strange'. These are not precise terms, but they evoke very precisely the state of mind with which we approach and judge the status of experiences, as 'everyday', or strange, or perhaps as so-strange-they-can't-have-happened, though we have now moved the borders of this category a long way outwards.

'Romantic' experience is one kind of verifiable human experience which is both 'strange' and 'everyday'. It opens on 'perilous seas and faery lands forlorn', but one stands at the window with one's feet firmly in the house of verifiable everydayness. That is why it will help us to ask and answer the question: What happens if we take Incarnation seriously?

There has been a move not only among non-Christians but among many Christians, since the last century, to answer this question by saying, '*Don't* take it seriously; in fact don't take it at all.' But the rejection of the idea of Incarnation is not primarily an intellectual decision but an emotional and spiritual revulsion against inadequate (un-poetic) theology and therefore inadequate (un-poetic) Christianity. Instead of refuting, therefore, I am trying to discover the radical implications of the poetic and scandalous statement that God became, and remains, human. This brings me finally to a brief discussion of Scripture as poetry. As soon as we move out of the areas of life in which things have names and uses and not much else, we find that the words we are using change. We flounder and gasp in the unfamiliar atmosphere, trying to find words to express what we experience. We cannot, for instance, convey the experience of a really good Christmas celebration by describing the food we ate, or the presents we received, or who was there. So we say it was 'wonderful', or some such word, and hope desperately that the person who was not there will, from his or her own experience, evoke the proper response. But we still feel there must *be* words to express 'what it was like', and if we find them they will be poetic words, evoking by imagery and association an experience impossible to describe in 'everyday' terms. This is why poetry is essential for *accurate description* of any sphere of experience beyong the 'everyday'. Wordsworth had no doubt seen thousands of daffodils in the course of his life before the day in which he suddenly 'saw' them differently and wrote the poem about them which, alas, is too often now used to insulate bored school-children against any such experience in their own lives. But for him, thenceforwards, daffodils must have

carried the 'feel' of that other sphere of experience into which, seeing them, he had momentarily entered.

This perception is important in understanding the language used in Scripture. In this book I have drawn on the only direct sources of information we have on the subject, which are the four Gospels and other New Testament writings. And since I do not want to spend a great deal of space within the discussion itself over questions of exegesis and biblical criticism, it may help if I outline here the nature of my approach to the New Testament writings.

My approach to the Gospels in particular may strike some as naive, since it is based on the assumption that all four evangelists were writing about things actually seen and heard (not necessarily by themselves, of course, but by witnesses) and using whatever poetic categories of religious and historic imagery they needed to clarify the nature of what was seen and heard.

The assumption of many exegetes seems to be that one cannot do *both* these things. Either one reports something actually seen with the bodily eyes or heard with the ears, or one evokes an inner experience by means of relevant symbols and associations. This separation is, however, quite contrary to normal experience. If, for instance, I visit a house where I was once intensely happy, my memory of that happiness will transform my experience of the house in the present. The familiar covers on the chairs, the view from the window, cause me deep emotion which actually changes the way I *see* them and which I cannot possibly account for by acknowledging that the design of the furnishing fabric is beautiful, or the view dramatic, though both things may be true. I am not tempted to say, therefore, that I don't see the chairs or the view but am only 'really' experiencing a memory. I am doing both, authentically and simultaneously. The objects I see evoke the emotion, and the memory gives unique meaning to the objects.

It seems to me reasonable and realistic to assume that this is what the evangelists were doing, too. Of course, the reason why many people cannot accept this in the Gospel accounts, though they would have no difficulty with the example just given, is that the events reported by the evangelists are often of a kind we do not expect to see. Being unwilling to accept the breakdown of categories on which we rely to make sense of our physical and even spiritual surroundings, we want to enclose the report in one manageable

'sphere'. If the incident cannot be explained in terms that fit our normal expectations of the physical world, then we explain it in (equally expected) terms of symbolic evocation of inner experience. But my bold assumption in working with the Gospel account is that this is unreasonable. I think it is, in fact, an *a priori* assumption, not a conclusion based on evidence, and that it is only maintained by excluding without examination all evidence which seems to contradict it.

If we can say of a reported action or reaction, 'that rings true as a report of human behaviour', then we are saying something important, and it is the criterion by which we are accustomed to judge the 'truthfulness to life' of novels or biographies. It is difficult (though not impossible) to analyse just why we react to a description of a human incident by a definite, and usually immediate, acceptance or rejection of its 'truthfulness', but we do, and we recognize this as proper.

So, too, in the Gospels I find it helpful and reasonable to use this criterion. I can say, 'this rings true', this is how human beings might be expected to behave in the circumstances described. But someone may say: 'Such circumstances *couldn't* exist, therefore he/she/they must have been reacting to something else—or maybe the evangelist wrote this to evoke some deeper truth.' Then we reach the point at which I want to say that what 'rings true' might well *be* true, and that it is simplest to suppose so unless there is strong evidence that it did not happen.

I quote here a somewhat unkind but witty comment on what happens to the minds of those students of Scripture who are perhaps insufficiently aware of the cultural influences which shape their thinking. The quotation is from *John Who Saw* by A.H.N. Green-Armytage, itself quoted by J.A.T. Robinson in his book *Re-dating the New Testament*:

> There is a world—I do not say a world in which all scholars live but one at any rate into which all of them sometimes stray, and which some of them seem permanently to inhabit—which is not the world in which I live. In my world, if *The Times* and *The Telegraph* both tell one story in somewhat different terms, nobody concludes that one of them must have copied the other, nor that the variations in the story have some esoteric significance. But