

Preface

THIS book contains the first of the two series of Gifford Lectures which I have been invited to give at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. This first series was given in the year, 1970. The second series, entitled "Critique of Earth", is to be given in the year, 1972.

Critique of Heaven and Earth is the over-all title of this Series of Lectures. My title may seem on first encounter slightly enigmatic, but it should be clear from the outset that my first series of Lectures will at any rate focus on a theological subject. "Heaven" has traditionally been held to be the main and, as has sometimes been falsely supposed, even the sole concern of theology. Conversely, many people have appeared to claim the earth for the non-theologians. My Lectures start from a different premise, namely, that the "critique of heaven" is a central task for theology, and that a "critique of earth" is its necessary corollary. On both levels theology can and should accomplish its essentially critical task.

I would be more inclined to call this kind of theology "critical theology" than "natural theology", but I am convinced that there is no essential contradiction between those terms. If the development of modern natural science is based on critical research and critical knowledge, then a theology similarly qualified as "natural" must present the same critical features. The interpretation given by Lord Gifford to the conditions laid down when the Lectureship was founded has impressed me by its profoundly critical implications. He directed that the Lecturers appointed should be subject "to no test of any kind and shall not be required to take any oath, or to subscribe any

PREFACE

declaration of belief, or to make any promise of any kind; they may be of any denomination whatever, or of no denomination at all (and many earnest and high-minded men prefer to belong to no ecclesiastical denomination); they may be of any religion or way of thinking, or as is sometimes said, they may be of no religion, or they be so-called sceptics or agnostics or freethinkers, provided only that the patrons will use diligence to secure that they be able reverent men, true thinkers, sincere lovers of and earnest inquirers after truth”.

This description seems to have a remarkable relevance to the subject of my lectures. Though I am myself a convinced member of the Church and a committed theologian, I shall invite you in the following lectures to listen attentively to the voice of a man who belongs without any doubt to that group of thinkers whom Lord Gifford referred to as being of no religion or as being so-called sceptics or agnostics or freethinkers. It is my conviction that this man has a crucial contribution to make to what might be called a “natural theology” or as I would prefer to say, a “critical theology”.

I hope in this way also to meet the expectation expressed in the letter with which I was invited to become a Gifford Lecturer: “We should certainly very much like to have as our lecturer a scholar from Holland, a country with which, in the past, Scotland has had close links.” Only once before, in the years 1896–1898, has a Dutch scholar been elected a Gifford Lecturer. He was Cornelius Petrus Tiele, Professor of the History of Religions at Leyden University. The title of his lectures, delivered in Edinburgh, was “Elements of the science of religion”. It has been my privilege to study at Leyden University myself and to have received my education in the history of religions there. However, although it is my intention to continue the tradition of which Professor Tiele has been such an eminent representative, there is a gap of more than seventy years, in other words, a gap of two generations between his age and ours. And what is even more important, the fateful occurrence of the Two World Wars, separating the end of the nineteenth century from the second half of the twentieth. It is to my way of thinking no longer feasible to pursue the science of religion without understanding the gulf which separates that pre-world war period from our own. As I shall hope to show, the revolutionary

PREFACE

break in the religious tradition was already there, in the middle of the nineteenth century; only we have tried, without success, to ignore or belittle its importance.

In conclusion I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the *Senatus Academicus* of the University of Aberdeen and especially Professor Edward M. Wright, Principal at that time, for inviting me to become a Gifford Lecturer. The privilege accorded to me was equalled by the generous hospitality I enjoyed during the weeks spent at the University. I cannot imagine my first steps to becoming an Aberdonian without the guidance of Professor John M. Graham, Dean of the Theological Faculty at that time, and of Professor David Cairns, of Christ's College. I would like to thank all those, especially the staff and the students of Crombie Hall, who made my life in Aberdeen a great pleasure.

Driebergen, February, 1972
A. TH. VAN LEEUWEN

Second Preface

A GENEROUS invitation of Union Theological Seminary, Richmond (Va.), gave me an opportunity to present and discuss part of the material contained in this volume for the James Sprunt Lectures of the year 1971. A glance at the list of lecturers over the past sixty years seems to suggest some special relationship between Richmond and Scotland, notably with the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh. As one of the rare lecturers from the continent of Europe it was my privilege to confirm that tradition. I remember with warm gratitude the hospitality offered by the Seminary, President Fred R. Stair, Jr., and several members of the faculty. It is my sincere hope and expectation that the present volume may be accepted by Union Theological Seminary of Virginia as a presentation of the James Sprunt Lectures of the year 1971.