Part I

Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Borderlands of Theology

The philosopher of religion today knows that his task is primarily critical. He may well be led to suppose that his first task is that of elaborately and exhaustively describing the various forms of religious discourse so as to bring out their likeness to, and their difference from, other forms of discourse. He must not shirk the detailed exploration of the most varied manifestations of religion. Thus if one confines one's view to Christianity, the language of the pulpit and the priedieu, the formal utterance of liturgical prayer, the descriptive prose of the Gospel narrative, the parabolic in careful distinction from the allegorical, the dogmatic theologian's borrowings from the stock-in-trade of the traditional metaphysician, the language which seems to hesitate between the frankly metaphysical and the factually descriptive (one thinks of some of the language of the Fourth Gospel) – all these and other forms of Christian discourse will call for examination. The philosopher may indeed hope that if he pursues his work with sufficient thoroughness and patience, with sufficient flexibility of cross-reference and example, the nature of religious discourse will begin to emerge. Description and redescription will (he may hope) almost imperceptibly pass into vindication; we will begin (again he may hope) to feel ourselves at home in the sense of knowing what we can and what we cannot do, with the language whose logic we are exploring.

On the other hand, such hope may remain unfulfilled. The philosopher may find that the work of description and redescription leaves him with a further task which, borrowing a useful expression

from Jeremy Bentham, I will call "censorial". The philosopher *may* well find that very much that belongs to the most deeply ingrained and most pervasive styles of traditional religious discourse cannot possibly be accepted without gross violation of principles which in the investigation of natural, and indeed of historical fact, we all of us take for granted, whether or not we possess the technical expertise, or the training in the philosophy of logic, required to formulate them explicitly. No serious philosopher can hope to dodge the questions involved in the claim of religious credenda to *truth*.

I shall mention only one among the various suggested contemporary devices for avoiding these questions; the suggestion that they can be evaded by an analysis of faith in terms of self-commitment to a person leaves unanswered (or even deliberately seeks to evade) the distinction between such commitment and that involved in a *Führerprinzip*. Self-commitment is made validly to this person rather than to that because *this* person said and did certain things, thereby at once defining and authenticating, or at least effectively suggesting, certain claims. To take the simplest and most familiar example, when Peter at Caesarea Philippi is recorded to have said in answer to Jesus' question: "Thou art the Christ", his words had a definitive sense. They were not a mere acclamation; Peter believed that what he said was true, even though it is certain (if we may trust the historical narrative to be in any sense an account of what actually happened) that he had very much, almost all, to learn of the analysis of what he affirmed to be the case. But what is crucial is that he was affirming something to be the case, on the basis of evidence, which he could have given if pressed, even if what he affirmed outran the evidence at his disposal. "Flesh and blood have not revealed the secret to you, Simon, son of John", says Jesus at once to Peter, according to the elaborated version of the incident given by St Matthew. Thereby Jesus seems clearly to suggest that what Peter affirmed was something beyond the reach of human ratiocination, although it in no sense implied that Peter could not have formulated the premises on which his affirmation rested. What account can be given of the status of such supposed facts, and of the evidence which warrants our affirming or denying this or that proposition concerning them? To some more familiar than myself with the experimental methods of the exact and natural sciences the very notion of such a fact as the one affirmed by Peter will seem something unintelligible and as such inadmissible as a subject of discussion. It falls under the same censorship that Bentham in his ethical writings rigorously applied to

the seemingly sterile preoccupation with their supposed inner life which he judged characteristic of those who found the moral value of actions in the motives from which they were done. Yet it is with the status of *such* facts as that affirmed by Peter that the philosopher of religion is professionally concerned.

Already I may have succeeded in indicating to my audience some of the grounds which led me to choose for this inaugural lecture the subject of the "borderlands of theology". It is with the pressures coming from the other side of the theologian's supposed frontiers that the philosopher of religion is concerned. But that philosopher would make a great mistake if he failed to take account of the fact that the Christian religion itself is subject today (as indeed constantly in the past) to its own special sorts of discontent experienced both by those who profess it, and by those who look at it from without in a mood of mingled irritation and sympathy, and by those who reject its claims outright for other motives than a repudiation of its credenda as unintelligible. We can, and must, predicate "critical" of these discontents; a glance at some of them may reveal something of their relation to the kind of difficulties the philosopher is primarily concerned to articulate, *with which in certain places they overlap*. It *may* be that this brief study will serve further to illustrate some of the characteristic tasks of the philosopher of religion.

The phrase "Your God is too small" has obtained currency primarily through its use as the title of a popular book. But it is a phrase which, for all its crudity, evokes a quick response from many who will never read the volume to which it gives a name. "Your God is too small": here we note that the fact of something answering to the description "divine being" is not called in question; rather there is implicit a challenge to worshippers of such a being of having made him too exclusively after the image of their own parochial requirements.

In one sense there is nothing altogether unfamiliar in this. The charge the words convey in the contemporary idiom is the old one of anthropomorphism. And here the professional student of the history of philosophical theology is bound to remember that if according to the venerable tradition of the "way of analogy", a middle road must be sought between agnosticism and anthropomorphism, it is the latter which is the worse offence against the metaphysical and indeed the religious light. If we can predicate analogically of God (and I am not concerned this afternoon to argue for or against the possibility of such predication), we do so by a method wherein we dare follow the "way of

eminence" only after we have evacuated the attributes we predicate of God of any hint of the anthropomorphic by a radical following of the "way of negation"; so too according to one possible interpretation of the opening sections of his work, the *Parmenides*, Plato is concerned to bring out how transformed out of all recognition our notions of participation and copying (*methexis* and *mimēsis*) must be if we are to employ them of the relation of particulars to Forms. One might point to an even more obvious example of the presence of self-criticism as an essential element in religious life, to the witness of the prophets, whether one thinks of the eighth-century Hebrew prophets, or of those who in other ages have by their activity earned more or less deservedly the title. A philosopher might even wish to label the sort of criticism of which I am now speaking "same level" criticism, to distinguish it from his own "other level" criticism which must include "same level" criticism among its objects. Only there is (as perhaps my reference to the issue of analogical predication will have indicated) an important overlap between the two.

In one sense then we are simply concerned with a new set of variations on a familiar theme. But we do ourselves ill-service if we fail to observe the novelty. For what we have to reckon with is a criticism of our habitual religious idiom and imagery which is the more searching for being diffuse and hardly assimilated, more easily described and illustrated than set out in a few neat formulae.

Now one distinguished Cambridge theologian has expressed in some of his writings one most important aspect of the sort of discontent which I am trying to capture. I refer to Dr C. E. Raven, and to a warning that one can find very frequently repeated in his writings from popular, occasional addresses to the sustained argument of his Gifford lectures. I refer to his insistence that theologians and indeed religious teachers cease from treating the created universe as if it were no more than the stage for the drama of redemption. The image is surely worth comment. Its inspiration, of course, lies deep in Dr Raven's long pondered efforts to assimilate with an evolutionary model of the universe, one might say a particular empirically based cosmology, the supposed finalities of Christian faith. These efforts have made him the sustained opponent of any presentation of the person and work of Christ which presents him simply as a divine intruder. He pinpoints the frequency with which in popular apologetic, and indeed in the writings of sophisticated theologians, Christ is portrayed as a strange invader from another world, whose brief and sudden appearance in

this world confers upon it what little significance its history may have; and this significance is only that of the stage, or setting, of his life.

We are familiar with the experience of seeing (to take one example) *Hamlet* played now against one carefully designed background, now against another. May be on occasion we are moved seriously to criticize the sets, the *décor*, the costumes of this production or that; but the substance of the play is relatively unaffected.

To make this point clearer (using the technical language of the philosophy of logic) I might say that Sir Michael Redgrave's or Sir Laurence Olivier's realization of the character and history of the prince is in external relation to the background, and to the peculiar conceits of those concerned with the stage-management of the production in which one or other plays the part of Hamlet. (To explain by illustration how I use here the term "external relations", I might say, for example, that the geometrical truth that the angles of a Euclidean triangle are equal to two right angles is in external relation to the fact that Octavius defeated Marcus Antonius at Actium; the geometrical truth would still obtain as a geometrical truth, however the truth of such truths be understood, if Antonius and not Octavius had been victorious.)

If this explanation of my use of the term "external relation" is plain, you will understand what I mean when I speak of Redgrave's or Olivier's conception of the Prince being in external relation to the settings of the production, and what therefore I think Dr Raven wishes to formulate when he suggests a tendency on the part of theologians and religious teachers to treat the universe simply as the stage-setting for the drama of redemption. Dr Raven argues rightly that a Christian has only to bring together his understanding (however half-formed and ill-digested) of the origins of the world to which men and women and their history belong, to see how utterly unacceptable the implied suggestion of much popular Christian teaching that the world in its prolonged and perhaps now faintly decipherable history is to be regarded simply as a setting for something frequently described as the "drama of redemption". The phrase "the drama of redemption" itself may have a partial legitimacy as underlining the fact that we are here dealing with a thing done as well as a word spoken, with drama as well as *rhema*, with something, moreover, which in its detail manifests suggestive and important likenesses to (as well as differences from) the tragedies achieved by ancient and by modern dramatists; yet in itself it has the inevitable effect of detaching altogether the events of the life and death of Jesus and their *sequelae* from the setting to which they

belong, that is, from the history of the universe as a whole. They are rendered powerless to illuminate their context, and moreover, in spite of the crucially significant fact of the readiness of Jesus to speak to the generality of men and women in parables, that context is rendered powerless to illuminate the supposed mysteries of faith.

We can surely discover in the kind of thinking and speaking which aroused Dr Raven's protest a half-deliberate, half-unrecognized diminution of the stature of the Christian revelation to something which traditionally religious men find manageable and familiar. In a work written in 1927 but published only a few years ago in France, and now about to appear in English, *Le Milieu Divin* (Collins, 1960), Père Teilhard de Chardin (for whose work Dr Raven publicly expressed his admiration) has voiced these discontents with hardly exampled force and insight.

"Where are the roots of our being?" he asks. "In the first place", he replies, "they plunge back and down into the unfathomable past. How great is the mystery of the first cells which were one day animated by the breath of our souls ! How impossible to decipher the welding of successive influences in which we are forever incorporated ! – however autonomous our soul, it is indebted to an inheritance worked upon from all sides – before ever it came into being – by the totality of the energies of the earth" (p. 30).

No English translation can do justice to the subtle French prose in which the author pursues to its end this self-interrogation. The student of French literature will at once recognize in Teilhard a kinship with Descartes and Pascal, contrasted fellow-students of the writings of Montaigne. "What am I?" he asks, putting the question as a man aware of the hardly limitable vastnesses of the universe to which he belongs. And although he wrote this work more than thirty years ago, his meditation, at once intellectually informed and spiritually mature, is singularly enlightening for men and women today.

When I speak of men and women today I would insist that I am not thinking simply of those with the technical training necessary to judge between competing empirical cosmologies ; I am thinking also of those quite ordinary men and women who are filled with an understandable, and indeed entirely proper, awe as they stand or believe themselves standing on the threshold of the space-age. To such men and women it seems that human beings are beginning to emancipate themselves from the bonds of their earthly parish and they await the changes in perspective which such emancipation must bring,

as if they were altogether unafraid of any altered view of their own status which such changes must bring. Their awe before the space-age includes among its ingredients an element of sheer exhilaration as well as alert curiosity. It is hard altogether to acquit professional theologians, and indeed religious teachers generally, of ignoring the events which have aroused these emotions as if nothing very remarkable had happened, or were going to happen. Teilhard's book is an instance of a genre of religious writing, achieved at a deep level of combined spiritual and intellectual self-consciousness, of which in this age of new-style Copernican revolution we stand in urgent need.

To speak in these terms is not for a moment to ignore the critical problem of which I spoke at the outset of this lecture; the language of such an essay as the one by Teilhard which I have mentioned raises its special problems of validity, intelligibility, etc. But the critical philosopher who takes religious discourse as his province must not leave out of account the impulse represented and expressed by such essays towards the reconciliation of opposed elements in our spiritual and intellectual inheritance as the one I have mentioned and others whose need I have advertised.

Again the same philosopher equally cannot afford to neglect the protest which any manifestation of the synthetic impulse comparable to that displayed by Teilhard, and indeed by Dr Raven, immediately elicits from those who without failing to appreciate the validity and the importance of Dr Raven's protest, yet distrust any doctrine, any image of the relation of the world to God which blurs the reality of evil, both physical and moral (both in the sense of *Übel* and of *Böse*). Whatever else we may question, we may not question the reality of the pain from which sufferers from various forms of cancer are suffering even as this lecture is delivered. If the "world is a vale of soul-making", it shows many signs of being a badly botched job (if I may echo a familiar comment on the so-called "argument from design", most empirically vulnerable of all traditional forms of theistic proof).

It is perhaps worth recalling at this juncture that the atheist, who in his argument emphasizes such points, by his emphasis makes it clear that his temper is closer to that of the believer than that of the agnostic; his criticisms are in a profound sense "same level criticisms" (to revert to the phrase I used earlier), whether directed at the premise of some version of the "argument from design" or invoked to impugn some image of the unity of creation. Moreover, the language in which