

Love or Holy Love?

Nels Ferré versus P.T. Forsyth

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THERE IS an interesting section in Nels Ferré's *The Christian Understanding of God*¹ where Ferré speaks of the theological tendency to make either holiness or love central to the nature of God. While coming out strongly in favour of abolishing all tension between the two, he explains that this most desirable end will be achieved by placing holiness under love. Such a solution, in any case, is required because "God is conclusively love in the New Testament and this fact constitutes its deepest unity."² Holiness, on the other hand, is love in its negative aspect of relatedness to the unholy, and "its definition must ever be in terms of God's love, of ultimate truth as such."³ He then goes on to criticize P. T. Forsyth for separating holiness from love and for placing it over love. He quotes several of Forsyth's sayings on the subject, including the following: "you can go behind love to holiness, but behind holiness you cannot go," "holiness is the root of love, fatherhood, sacrifice and redemption," "the new revelation on the cross was more than 'God is love'. It was this 'Holy Father'."⁴

Now, Ferré's aim may be to do away with the rivalry between the two concepts, but plainly the way he takes to reach his goal is quite as much a choice between them as is Forsyth's. His plan for reconciliation is for the Kingdom of Love to annex the Kingdom of Holiness and incorporate the latter as a province within its own borders, justifying such an act of theological imperialism by an appeal to Divine Right. Yet, if this plan is permissible, so may be its converse—the annexing of the Kingdom of Love by the Kingdom of Holiness. Neither has a moral edge over the other. In what follows I wish to argue Forsyth's case as against Ferré's, for the implications of this issue run deep and will open up two totally contrasting viewpoints about the meaning of the Christian faith and the nature of the God revealed in Christ.

To begin with, it is perhaps not accidental that in so much of what he wrote Forsyth should have been critical of the two terms which in Ferré's theology are "pillars of the house," namely, *love* and *spirit*. Of course, Forsyth died in 1921 (when Ferré was thirteen) and the atmosphere of theology has changed vastly since then. It is not possible to know whether

1. (New York: Harper, 1951), pp. 114–18. The section is headed "Sovereignty and Holiness."

2. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 116f.

he would apply to these terms as they occur in the context of Ferré's thought the same strictures which he employed when he found them in the works of his contemporaries. Yet the fact that Ferré should be led to quarrel with him over the very point which was central to his polemic against what he called "merely spiritual religion" is not without significance. For Forsyth spirituality, like patriotism, was not enough—even though it appealed to the religion of Jesus as its source and inspiration and called itself Christian. Similarly, love as a standard of values was not enough, unless it acknowledged that *one* love alone mattered—the holy love found in the Cross which won for us forgiveness of sins. He felt that true Christianity could not exist without a firm basis in dogmatic theology, shored up by specific beliefs about that which God had done for mankind in Jesus Christ. And so he wrote of his own "conversion" to dogmatic Christianity: "I was turned from a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace."⁶ His understanding of the need for grace grew out of his conviction that man's basic problem was to be found in his divided conscience (Paul's experience described in Rom. 7), "a standing state of collision, war, and sin."⁸ Therefore he argued that mankind cannot find rest except in a Holy God as a Saviour, "absolutely mastering the world's one moral crux, its unholy sin." He wrote:

Religion is our relation to the absolute as holy. Without such an absolute there is no faith, no obedience, because no authority. If it be not holy it is not a moral absolute; and if it do not save it does not love.⁷

Ferré's starting-point is another place altogether. Instead of beginning with what we experience he begins with what he believes we can evaluate. His basic presupposition is a general principle, *the most high is the most real*. From it he deduces that the Personal-Spiritual is ultimate, as highest, and is seen in love, which therefore cannot be other than God. Love unites all: "On the level of being and becoming, spirit is the ultimate category. On the level of purpose, however, or of meaning, the personal category is primary. The category uniting these basic terms is God as love."⁸ To love is "to be by becoming."⁹ It is to be essentially creative, and God shows that he is love pre-eminently in "the begetting of children."¹⁰ God is no static *being-itself* (as Tillich, for instance, proposes) but eternal creativity. If we put Ferré's thought into Forsyth's language we may say that religion is our relation to the absolute as love.

Now, it is not at once apparent that the New Testament, when it speaks

5. P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Independent Press, 1953), p. 193.

6. P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority* (London: Independent Press, 1952), p. 5.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

8. *The Christian Understanding of God*, pp. 45f. For an explanation of the principle that the most high is the most real, see Nels Ferré, *Faith and Reason* (New York: Harper, 1946), pp. 198ff. For an explanation of the "Personal-Spiritual," see Ferré, *Evil and the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper, 1947), pp. 20–31.

9. *The Christian Understanding of God*, p. 26.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

about God as love, attaches just this meaning to the word. Might not *holy love* rather than *love-which-is-by-becoming* be the love to which the First Letter of John refers as it exhorts Christians to see what love the Father has given us? To this suggestion Ferré would return a decisive "No!" on the grounds that love in terms of his definition is precisely that Agape or eternally self-giving love described by John, Paul, and the other New Testament writers. He asserts:

Agape is the kind of love which God is, which received conclusive expression in Jesus, and which lives ever as the central and controlling reality wherever there is genuine Christian fellowship.¹¹

All the same, such an assertion cannot banish the doubts that arise as to whether the term Agape is not being used as a general idea possessing a content not found in New Testament usage. When John tells his readers that God is love he at once goes on to tell them also, "and his love was disclosed to us in this, that he sent his only Son into the world to bring us life." Here the demonstration of God's love is the *sending* of the Son, whereas Ferré's explanation is that God being love, we see this love *expressed in Jesus*. At the very least, the stress is not being put in the same place; for in the first instance love is seen in an action having a specific focus, while in the second instance love is produced as a universal category (the personal-spiritual level demands it!) having a particular application. Questionable, therefore, is Ferré's assumption that the Christian *kerygma*—which he accepts as fully authoritative¹²—can be extended legitimately in order to allow it to undergird statements about the nature and acts of God which do not appear there. We must ask whether the implications that he finds contained in the declaration that God is love really are unavoidable implications, or whether they are constructions built upon his personal view of what love is bound to be in God if it is to exemplify his love-ideal.

At this point Forsyth's argument has cutting force. He states the thesis that Christianity

is the act, the gift, the grace, the creation, the communion of the God of Holy Love, if we take its own account of itself. It is not the infusion of a mere vitality, a mere colourless oxygen, which revives our native spiritual resources. The gift, the life, is something very positive. It is Christ, as His apostles were instructed and empowered to transmit Him—a positive Christ, as crucified for our guilt and raised for our life; Christ, not as a prophetic or revelatory person merely, but as redeemer, as God in the act of Redemption.¹³

Quite otherwise, Ferré appears to believe that Christ is essentially a revelatory person. He writes:

The exceptional love in Jesus, at least as far as its point of conclusive arrival is concerned, is seen to be dominantly important only because it reveals the general nature of God and His total relation to the World as a whole.¹⁴

11. *Evil and the Christian Faith*, Appendix A, p. 140.

12. *The Christian Understanding of God*, p. 8.

13. *The Principle of Authority*, p. 124.

14. *The Christian Understanding of God*, p. 157.

And again:

This understanding of God as Agape which was conclusively revealed in life and light through Jesus is not only the distinctive but also the determinative meaning and reality of the Christian faith.¹⁵

Closely linked with this contrast in approach is another one. Forsyth speaks of the act, gift, and life which is Christ. Ferré speaks of the Event-Meaning of God's Christ-deed, stating that "God's Christ-deed, His own incoming as Agape" explains "why we are here, what we can do about it, and what is the meaning and reality of our eventual destiny."¹⁶ In other words, what comes in Christ is information and example, since "Jesus Christ as Agape is the pattern that affords the maximum of explanatory meaning."¹⁶ The accent upon salvation as the removal of guilt in consequence of God's act in Jesus is absent. And the reason for this is that salvation from sin is not in any real sense believed to be in the centre of the picture.

With Schleiermacher (whom he brings forward as a witness) Ferré considers evil to be no intrusion into God's universe but the logical concomitant of man's freedom and "relatively necessary" in view of God's final purpose in creation. Thus he concurs in Schleiermacher's judgment that sin is the other side of the coin of grace, so that its presence in the world is no more to be questioned than the fact of the Cross of Christ. Both are means to the same end. Take sin away, and the Cross becomes accidental.¹⁷ Such a view presupposes that salvation, far from being the apex of the Gospel of Christ as the complete act of God on behalf of his rebellious people, is simply one stage in a process. We are told that the perspective of salvation has to be transcended in order that we may see how God has ordained

this kind of world as the perfect means for the perfect end of the Agape fellowship. . . . From the perspective of the family fellowship of God we see what a plan and goal our process has for us. We see sin and its needful punishment as a stage toward the fellowship of Agape. We see also beyond this stage . . . how the acceptance of God's free, overflowing love makes sin appear as the foolish rebellion of little children against their own father's rules for their own good.¹⁸

Because he believes that this is an inclusive perspective, Ferré can talk about salvation in terms which appear to accept the salvation-perspective. He can speak about incarnation, redemption, atonement, the centrality of the Cross, and grace regnant in the heart of God. He can even find a place for a doctrine of substitution. Yet any real salvation-perspective is excluded, as is evident from the following explanation:

15. *Evil and the Christian Faith*, p. 142.

16. Nels Ferré, *Christ and the Christian* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 67.

17. *Evil and the Christian Faith*, pp. 47-53. See also *Christ and the Christian*, pp. 141ff.

18. *Evil and the Christian Faith*, pp. 49, 52. In very similar terms Forsyth describes the view that one day we may see how our sin "had its place in the divine scheme of things" and "we may even be ashamed of the potter we made about it." Such a view, Forsyth insists, "is absolutely incompatible with the sin that brought death to God in the Son of God" (*Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 162).

Grace is not a primary word eternally, only existentially. God's love goes before and behind our background of sin. Redemption is not a primary word eternally, only existentially. Fellowship is the eternal word, the fellowship of God. Not the juridical but the family perspective is central to the Christian faith.¹⁹

Because he adopts the family perspective, Ferré argues that our symbol of God should be found in the Father of the Prodigal Son instead of in any God of judgment. If we act on the principle that the best we know, the most high, is the most real, then we will choose unhesitatingly "the better parent."²⁰ Once more, Forsyth presents a totally opposed viewpoint. Objecting to those who believe the parable of the Prodigal Son to be "the culmination of Christ's grand revelation of God," he points out that we ought not to expect the whole of the Gospel in any one parable. This parable portrays the outgoing grace of God, but "as to the *method* of God's free and flowing grace the parable has nothing to say." God's total dealing with his prodigal world, as we see it in Christ, was more than kindness; it involved doing something to alter the relation permanently. "And this is what set up that world's reconciliation with Him. It was set up by an act of crisis, of judgment."²¹

In the clash of these two perspectives, each claiming to represent authentic Christianity, there is brought to light the great gulf between a theology of process and a theology of crisis. Forsyth's *positive* Christ is, as he liked to say, the Christ of the Apostles and the Epistles. If the love of the Prodigal's Father is the essential Christian message, says Forsyth, then why did the Apostles never even mention it? But they did proclaim Christ as the Son who came for our redemption and died for our sins! Ferré, advocating the "universal truth" that God is Agape, admits that this may have the result of making historic Christianity into a sectarian confession,²² but he hopes that this will not be the case since, in any case, to start with Christ as Truth is the proper Christian procedure. Thus the two theologies are separated from the first over the meaning of the Christian Gospel. Process theology believes we can know general truths about ourselves which the Gospel illuminates. Crisis theology believes that the Gospel gives us specific information about the way God deals with us and what the truth about ourselves is. Process theology argues from "the Truth within experience and history that most fully explains and fulfills both."²³ Crisis theology argues from "soul-certainty and not rational certainty; a certainty which is the state of a soul, and not a truth held by it; and the state of a soul in a moral universe, with a Holy God."²⁴

Although Ferré often speaks of Forsyth with warm approval (even quoting his words about being turned from a lover of love to an object of

19. *Evil and the Christian Faith*, pp. 46f.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 43f.

21. P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1938), p. 109. Cf. pp. 106-09.

22. *Christ and the Christian*, p. 53.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

24. *The Principle of Authority*, pp. 41f.

grace),²⁵ this is because he understands his own perspective as inclusive. Yet, as we have seen, it can be inclusive only by altering what it includes, making holiness subordinate to love and redemption a moment in fellowship. So, over against almost any statement by Ferré can be placed a statement by Forsyth contradicting it. Where Ferré writes, "The living Christ is God as Son conclusively fulfilling those who understand and accept him."²⁶ Forsyth warns, "God was in Christ reconciling and redeeming rather than developing man."²⁷ To Ferré's reasoning that men will not hear a theology "if what they hear does not correspond with what they feel to be true in the depths of their own lives,"²⁸ Forsyth responds: "We do not echo God nor corroborate Him, we obey His self-revelation."²⁹ Ferré concludes about Christian experience that "only as Christ becomes incarnate in us as the hope of glory, therefore, can the nature and the power of Christian experience become real for us and through us."³⁰ But Forsyth witnesses, "Not His power, His influence, but His holiness. I am not a sensitive atom affected by Him, but a moral monad judged by Him."³¹ Simply to include the findings of a crisis theology within a process theology is impossible, because they rest on different foundations and see the universe from different perspectives. Forsyth's insistence upon what he called the evangelical understanding of faith issued out of his conviction that "a God of redemption means more than a God of magnified fatherhood, forgiveness, or reconciliation."³² It is this "more" which a process theology cannot include, however comprehensive it seeks to be.

Forsyth opposed those "who light their lamp at the social and moral relation of fatherhood" and teach an ethic of the family because he believed that the Cross of Christ challenges us with its own revelational standard and cannot simply be fitted into the ethical standard which we wish to impose upon it.³³ From this standpoint he located the divergence of a "liberal" theology of spirituality from a "positive" theology of the Cross, saying: "*The liberal theology finds Christ's centre of gravity in what He has in common with us, a positive theology in that wherein He differs.*" He added that liberal theology offers a Christ who consummates humanity, while positive theology offers a Christ who redeems it—being "much more impressed by His treatment of human nature than by His incarnation of it."³⁴ In this connection it is interesting to find that Ferré, with deliberate intent, has entitled his book on Christology *Christ and the Christian*. It is his firm conviction that the two parts of the title belong together. He writes:

25. *Christ and the Christian*, p. 25.

26. Nels Ferré, *Searchlights on Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 138.

27. *The Principle of Authority*, p. 56.

28. *Evil and the Christian Faith*, p. 101.

29. *The Principle of Authority*, p. 39.

30. *Searchlights on Contemporary Theology*, p. 195.

31. *The Principle of Authority*, pp. 40f.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

33. *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 218–21.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 145. Italics in the original.

Jesus is the human being who first conclusively fulfills the conditions of humanity, namely, to be organically united to God and fulfilled by the coinherence of God. Jesus lived love; God is love and has made men for love.³⁵

And later:

Because God himself is in man, man, in right relation to God and through the power of God, can do what man apart from such personal presence of God cannot do. . . . Incarnation is the key to all ultimate truth for humanity.³⁶

Jesus thus becomes the example of what man really is and the standard for all who aspire to be true children of the father, for: "the uniqueness of Jesus is the uniqueness of a historic fact, not a relation to God inaccessible to anyone else."³⁷ Incarnation is an *event in history*.³⁸ But this means that the Cross too is an event in history, and therefore its transcendent dimension as a *judgment upon history* cannot be maintained. The Cross does not tell us, in the last resort, anything else than the fact of sin tells us, even though it takes us further along the route of understanding why God has put sin into history in the first place. It pushes us into another stage of the continuous (though uneven) process of growing into fellowship with the Agape that created us. Christ comes into history through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in order to consummate humanity.

The contrast between Forsyth's "act of crisis" and Ferré's "event in history" thus points up the true difference between *love-which-is-by-becoming* and *holy love*. God's redemption in the Cross judges us by reconciling us. The Event-Meaning of God's Christ-deed shows us what we ought to know for ourselves, as it makes sin appear as the foolish rebellion of little children against their own father's rules for their own good. It cannot be a true judgment, because it invites us to judge ourselves and to mend our ways in the light of what we now realize so much better than we did before. By the same token, it cannot be a true forgiveness, because it is conditional on our accepting and living Agape as Jesus did. It may look like forgiveness, but in reality it is a thousand miles away from that. The foolish rebellion of little children against the rules laid down for their own good does not require to be forgiven but merely to be overlooked—after all, they have probably punished themselves sufficiently by the time that they have learnt their lesson. So the rather remarkable result of making love the all-sufficient category of Christianity is that we are left with no assurance of present salvation or of victory won but only with the knowledge that we are to go on striving. If the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, Christ is equally our schoolmaster to bring us to what Ferré describes, somewhat enigmatically, as graduation and commencement exercises. God, the all-inclusive Agape "that needs a pedagogical process by its very nature and for purposes intrinsic to it," is a School Principal who wills before

35. *Christ and the Christian*, p. 73.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

everything else that we keep on until we finish our education.³⁹ We can trust that all is for the best, but we do not know where we are going or how long it will take us to get there: "*God alone knows what He has in store for us.*"⁴⁰

Is this a sufficient Gospel? Ferré seems to overlook the fact that his words can have ominous as well as hopeful overtones. But, at the best, hope stands alone. All we know for certain is that the process will continue right to the end. Even the fact that Christ is the Centre of history brings no more than "the absolute command to proceed at the fastest possible pace toward the center."⁴¹ This Gospel voices a New Law, which is no less oppressively demanding because it is named Agape. And, although Ferré speaks of our knowing the power of salvation in us when we join the Church of Christ, yet he tells us that we join the church "when our hearts are moved by the living Christ, the eternal Son, to let him rule our lives, which is precisely to be given in complete dedication and service to the world."⁴² Again, the onus is thrown on our endeavour. Who can say that Christ *does* rule his life and that his dedication or service is complete?

To such a question Forsyth has a ready answer. It is this:

That God is love is a very great faith, to be sure, as things are. But we need more. Has this love all power in heaven and on earth? Is it final? Is it eternal? Can I be sure that He has power to give His love final and eternal effect? . . . The thing is done, it is not to do. "Be of good cheer, I *have* overcome the world." "This is the victory which *has* overcome the world—your faith." The only teleology is a theodicy, and the only theodicy is theological and evangelical.⁴³

While Ferré's process theology discloses in the end God the Divine Pedagogue, Forsyth's crisis theology brings the Eternal King.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 227. Ferré adds: "All of life, then, becomes God's School, for decision and for information. . . . Death is promotion or demotion to an unknown schoolroom and to a different kind of teaching" (*ibid.*, p. 229).

40. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 182f.

43. P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent Press, 1948), pp. 165-7.