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Introduction: The Nature and Structure of this Enquiry

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, Nels Ferré was an internationally-known and prolific author of theological works, some of them written for scholars, others for ministers and interested church members and enquirers. Today, while Ferré's contemporaries, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr continue to inspire veritable theological industries (for good and ill), Ferré is almost entirely forgotten.¹ It is not too much to say that for three decades, he flashed like a meteor across the theological horizon, and then vanished. Why return to such a largely forgotten figure? In the first place, I sought an explanation of the sudden lack of interest in his writings. I shall be able to speculate upon the reasons for this when I have analysed the works themselves. But this matter would not, by itself, have required the writing of a detailed study.

Secondly, as I worked through the texts, the breadth of Ferré's interests became ever clearer. Writing for a variety of readerships, he ranged over theology, philosophy, spirituality, Christian education, church and society and world religions. While he did not produce a copper-bottomed system either of philosophy or of theology, on many of his topics he has helpful, often provocative, things to say, and some of the matters discussed remain live issues to this day—reason and faith, the viability of classical Christology, world religions among them—and it is interesting to see how far Ferré can help us on these matters. But the marshalling of such topics of interest would not, by itself, warrant a book. I am not here concerned to present Ferré as a sadly neglected theologian to whose writings we should return with all speed.

1. For example, his name is not to be found in Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, 3 edns from 1977; or in Hart, *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*. However (hence my "almost"), he has not been overlooked by Dorrien. See *The Making of American Liberal Theology*; cf. his article, "Theology of Spirit: Personalist Idealism, Nels F.S. Ferré, and the Universal Word," 3-31.

Thirdly, as I probed further, it became clear to me that I was confronted by a body of work that raised the significant question of the relations between philosophy and theology, especially as these bear upon the method and content of Christian theology. To draw an analogy from forensic science, it was as if I had unearthed a cold case, an intact corpus that, as far as the scholarly community was concerned, had lain almost entirely dormant for more than forty years. I shall hope to show that, with one exception that is so uncharacteristic as to be staggering, there is what one might call an “ontological drag” that runs throughout Ferré’s writings. To put it otherwise, when discussing many topics, we find that Ferré, for all his cautions against tying theology to “alien” philosophies, actually gives precedence to ontology (with process thought adhesions) over morality. “Being” characteristically, though not invariably, weighs more heavily with him than moral obligation or the right and the good. Ferré is no Kantian, and Immanuel Kant’s Welsh predecessor, Richard Price, who anticipated Kant at a number of points, had nothing to teach him.¹ It is entirely conceivable—in fact (throwing caution to the winds), it is manifestly the case—that other theologians have made the contrary emphasis, while some have contrived, forlornly in the opinion of some, to tiptoe past the ontological and moral routes into theology altogether. While unable to see how ontological or moral considerations can be excluded from theology, I shall suggest that Ferré’s undue emphasis upon ontology adversely influences his thought at certain points—when he expounds *agape* or the Creator-creature distinction, for example—and, above all, it leads him to offer an attenuated account of the doctrine of the atonement. This case study of Ferré’s writings will thus bring to the fore the importance of appropriate philosophical-theological relations, and will focus attention upon the general and perennial question of alternative starting-points in Christian theology. To put it otherwise, I am not simply providing a description and analysis of Ferré’s thought; I am attempting to stand back and to raise the metatheological question: What is going on here concerning theological method *vis à vis* the resulting theological content? If I manage to persuade even one toiler in the theological vineyard that methodological decisions taken early in the process may have untoward consequences for doctrine later on, I shall feel that my analysis of Ferré’s body of work has not been a labour in vain.

Not surprisingly, my objective has influenced the structure of the book. In the following chapter, I shall briefly introduce Ferré. I shall sketch his career and focus upon the deep spirituality that informed his person and bubbled up in his scholarly, no less than in his more popular, works.

1. See further Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals*; Sell, *Philosophy, Dissent and Nonconformity, 1689-1920*, (2004), 73-77 and *passim*.

But this is not a full scale theological biography, still less the uncritical hagiography or (less frequently) the spiteful “hatchet job” that some such works turn out to be. My primary interest is in Ferré’s intellectual context and the ways in which he responded to it. Thus, in chapter 3, I shall seek to place Ferré in relation to the philosophical thought of his day, with special reference to the personalism and process thought in which he was reared. This seems the right place to begin, because it is not entirely inappropriate to suggest that the most comprehensive aspect of Ferré’s work is the apologetic. He wrote widely on the relation between faith and reason, and declared, “Clarifying the relation between faith and reason seems to be my life assignment.”¹ He sought to remove the doubts and difficulties that many experience regarding religious claims; he was earnest in seeking “to ward off a destructive irrationalism which wearily surrenders all Christian apologetics”² and he was ever reaching out to others—increasingly, as time went by, to those of other faiths. Moreover, he was doing this not simply as an academic exercise, but in fulfilment of a vocation: “I have never felt more called into [God’s] service than in the writing of this volume”³—that is, *Reason in Religion* (1963). He undertook his task at a time when apologetics was despised as strictly nonsensical by logical positivist philosophers on the one hand, and nigh impious by theological positivists on the other—all of this to the regret of more discerning (and temperate) theologians, who donned their tin hats in face of brickbats from either side, who stood for a reasonable faith, and have now, we may hope, received their reward. We shall see how Ferré sought to make good the deficiencies of personalism and process thought by appealing to *agape* and the Spirit.

In chapter 4, I shall analyse in some detail a number of epistemological terms that recur throughout Ferré’s writings. In chapter 5, I shall set Ferré in the theological context of his day, setting out from his understanding of authority and his concern to avoid the Scylla of what he regarded as the more vacuous varieties of theological liberalism on the one hand, and the Charybdis of unintelligent pre-critical theological conservatism on the other. His approach to the theologies of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann and, above all, Paul Tillich will then come under review. I shall proceed in the following chapter to show how he approached the doctrines of the person of Christ, the Trinity, humanity, the church and eschatology. In the final main chapter, Ferré’s work on ethics and society, mission and world religions will be considered. The following will be among the topics discussed: the nature of ethics, the right and the good, natural law, conscience and freedom; society

1. Ferré, *Reason in Religion*, unpaginated Preface.

2. Idem, *The Christian Faith*, x.

3. Idem, *Reason in Religion*, unpaginated Preface.

as constituted by the Eternal Purpose, Christian social action and the Holy Spirit, the deficiencies of the Social Gospel, the eschatological dimension; Ferré's critique of current missionary practice, missions and naturalism, missions and the atonement; Ferré's attitude towards world religions *vis à vis* Christ, *agape* and the Spirit, the possibility of a universal religion and the concept "unimunity". I shall draw the several strands of my argument together in chapter 8.

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