



“Donnez-Moi une Place”: An Introduction to the Theological Ethics of France Quéré¹

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One of the benefits of having regular access to the work of churches in other countries is the chance of discovering something or someone quite unexpected. Every week the French Reformed Church produces a high quality newspaper covering current events and theological and social debates. Every now and then the paper produces a special issue to mark a particular event or anniversary. So it was that I came across the work of France Quéré, whose name I had never encountered before, in an issue to mark the tenth anniversary of her death. Her range of interests and style of thought and writing held an immediate attraction, and it seemed appropriate to use the collection of her writing, and of writing of others about her, to produce a talk for the inaugural meeting of the Church of Scotland’s Church and Society Council, raising as it does many of the ethical issues with which that Council now has to deal. The talk is reproduced here as a small window on to the work of a name worth discovering. Most of the discussion (apart from that on drugs) is translated from French; so, if there is anything lost in translation, it will be I who has lost it.

France Jaulmes was born on the 27 April 1936 in Montpellier, where she also studied. She was married in 1961 to Yves Quéré, and had three children – David, Anne and Emmanuelle. She died on 14 April 1995 as a consequence of an asthma attack.

Her initial work was in patristics, giving her both a taste for exegesis and the realisation that intellectual rigour and liberty of thought were intimately connected. At the same time, she was also developing her

thought in the evolution of the family, the place of women in society, and the implications of disability, which brought her to the sociological and philosophical question of the nature of humanity. The answers she found to this question from scientists and theologians alike left her unsatisfied. This dissatisfaction led her to a long list of publications and an even longer list of conferences addressed. In turn, this led to her membership of the French National Consultative Ethics Committee, on which she served for ten years.

She is remembered for her vast knowledge, her ever-present humour, her innate teaching gift, and an exceptional openness to others – particularly to the young, who responded instinctively to her direct language, which lacked any hint of complacency. Because of all this she was invited regularly to teach and to speak in Algeria, Belgium, Canada, Greece, Romania, as well as all over France – and also in Great Britain.

The title of this paper, “*Donnez-moi une place*” (give me a place), is her rather enigmatic, self-chosen epitaph. It is a quotation from “On the Death of a Friend” by Montaigne – and it appears that even her closest associates are not quite sure what she meant by using it. This gives us the freedom to suggest, from her life and work, what might be taken from it. So let me suggest a few themes to have in our minds as we look a little at France Quéré’s work.

The obvious one, perhaps, given the context of its usage, is a place in memory: do this in remembrance of me. But also, it seems to me, we will hear more than a hint of a place at the table – the boardroom table, where deals are done and decisions are made; and the dining room table, where a place is left for the unexpected guest and a toast is drunk to absent friends – and if there is the hint there of a table in an upper room, where friends absent themselves, leaving an empty place that only faith can fill, that may be no coincidence. It may also be, as we will discover, a plea for a place for those who have no place; and a call to make a place where life is worth living – life worth living for those whose desperation drives them to denial or betrayal, whose

suffering causes them to plead for any life but this life, whose internal empty place is placated by every passing empty promise.

Because in the work of France Quéré life is the beginning and the end of ethics: life as miracle, life as gift, life as goal, life as fullness, life as newness. In her own life she refused stagnation, always looking for new challenges and new insights. She believed in life before death, as well as after it – and insisted on using her own life to ask again and again about what makes life worth living.

She worked alongside her husband in the defence of human rights, heavily involved in Amnesty International. She campaigned for those deported to Siberia, for the Jews of Russia, for the “disappeared” of Argentina. She organised a petition for the liberation from the exile of the gulag of Charanski, and highlighted the case of Federico Alvarez-Rojas – an Argentinean doctor who, with his wife, disappeared, leaving two young orphans. She led a long and active struggle against the mistreatment of children – particularly drawing attention to the inability of victims to express themselves, and to the fear of those near them who could not dare to testify. And in the silence where evil was done by individuals and by states, and where no one spoke, she asked: “where, then, is God?” Her answer was this:

In the heart of where he has always been: nailed to the cross with his face full of suffering, from which we prefer to turn away our face. He is in these children with arms like bare twigs, with stomachs blown up, who die with their eyes open, with a look of sweet astonishment which holds their innocence in the midst of their agony. Yesterday these children were from Biafra, today from Cambodia. They are from all the countries of the world.

And in the heart of the silence of complicity and fear, she called for a silence that would call the world to action – a minute of silence all over the world which would, like the silence of Antigone in front of Creon, cry out for justice.

The elements of this justice are respect and dignity for life and being. This understanding runs through her consideration of procreation, euthanasia, the human body, the human genome, suffering, disability. But she also understood that the path of respect, that she as a protestant theologian might seek to walk, had also to appeal to those who did not share her motivation. Axel Kahn puts it this way:

What is remarkable in these texts written by a protestant theologian is their clear universal potential. People of faith as well as materialist evolutionists can find themselves there. Across her generosity and openness France Quéré throws a challenge to whomsoever, an invitation full of hope: this is where my faith has led me; and you, wherever you come from, will you join me?

Paul Ricouer, to whom we will return before the end, saw her as one of the great educators who could serve as a mediator between science and public opinion. Those who take on this role, he said, had to take a detour through science before returning to their own country.

Those who worked with her on the National Consultative Ethics Committee saw Quéré as providing a model for ethical discourse – that of the relationship between the soul and the environment, an alliance between, as Jean Bernard, President of the Committee, puts it, “a love of tomorrow and a deep spirituality, between intuition and reason, between rigour and generosity, between courage and perspicacity.” And from these alliances came clear, lucid and often simple solutions to the debates of the Committee.

In her book, *Ethics and Life*, she defines morality by three words: deliberation, obligation, and compassion, and said that the fundamental ethical question is this: if you can do it, must you do it? Her fundamental answer was: if you must do it, you can. But above all, her belief was that ethics is a communal activity; we must always be open to the voice of the other – listening is at least as important as speaking.



Suffering and Death

Professor Didier Sicard, another president of the National Committee, remembers seeing France Quéré “blue with asphyxiation, but still smiling, almost radiant with energy.” He says, “her lungs had become accustomed to not being the only depositories of her life. That life was animated by such a faith in God and in humanity that ethical reflection was natural to her.” She took that faith, and that experience of fighting for breath and life, into her discussion of death and dying, and into what she called death’s legalisation – euthanasia. Her discussion dates from June 1991.

She begins by questioning the idea of “dying with dignity” because, in the discussion current at the time, this dignity was viewed “as a good which is lost as a disease worsens”. Worse still, she says, is the idea that “the level of consciousness defines human being”. She points out that this sliding scale of humanity would make an infant less human than an adult, an ill person less human than a healthy one (one might say, an in-valid person). A person with learning disabilities would be practically excluded from the human race. Where, she asks, does this leave the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – which says that all are equal in rights? It leaves the declaration lacking the claim to universality. And she asks if this is a mistake or a belief system. It seems, she says, to reintroduce the idea of “less human” which so disfigured some societies in the recent past. Dignity, France Quéré declares, is common to all people, from the beginning of their existence to its end – and whatever the state of suffering or alienation. Dignity, she says, adheres to our humanity and not to its expression.

Also, it is not the person dying who decides that dignity is being lost; it is those around them. This is a reflection not of our desire for “death with dignity” but of our reactions to death and dying: reactions of defeat and shame. We find it difficult to live with death and seek, as onlookers, to get it over with. “The great events of our lives have been reduced to the very basics,” she says, “stripped of their spiritual or existential depth. Many see marriage simply as a formality; why should death not also be simplified and expedited?”

And if it is not the ill person who decides that dignity is being lost, neither is it that person who asks to die. They call for death because they are suffering – but if pain is controlled the patient can regain a taste for life. The patient does not wish to die, but to live differently. It is not death they seek, but love. Medicine, she suggests, has to choose between death and love and she reminds us that Paracelsus announces that “all medicine is love”.

In her discussion of euthanasia Quéré uses words like “murderers”, “perfect crimes”, “this sad perversion”. She compares the figures of her time for the Netherlands – and brings those statistics into conjunction with the population of France. At the same rate, France would have some 50,000 euthanasia deaths every year – what she calls a new death penalty, for which it does not do to claim the support of dignity or charity.

The language is uncompromising – and perhaps sits uneasily with the picture of the woman given by those who remember her. But it comes, I think, from the same source as her involvement with Amnesty International. She herself links the argument about how we approach death with arguments about human rights. It is the temptation to “dispose” of the uncomfortable or the inconvenient, the unsightly or the imperfect or the expensive. When the Argentinean junta “disappeared” the people who opposed it, when the Soviet government sent Charanski to the gulag, they were disposing of what disturbed their equilibrium. And we have the temptation to do the same with suffering and death. They are not part of what we think life should be.

But if the ethics of life we embrace come from Jesus of Nazareth, then suffering and death must be central to our understanding of life itself. France Quéré speaks of suffering as being “as mysterious as God”. We are forced, in our contemplation of mortal life, to consider not only mortality but also life. The Bible, she reminds us, dismantles all idealistic pretensions about life – *you are dust, and to dust you will return*. And yet this dust is capable of suffering, proof after all that it lives. And this unique, unified life manages to combine flesh and soul to prove that we are more than a collection of cells or genes. We are

the children of one father, each one unique and irreplaceable. We need a definition of life, and indeed of what makes life worth living, that takes suffering, dying and death seriously.



Life and Love (and Sex)

When turning to love and sex, Quéré does so primarily as a theologian. In 1972 she begins an article on “The Ways of Love” with the observation: “love ... a vagabond word that, alas, has travelled too much.” She describes how it has wandered from its own kingdom of lyricism and found its way into morality, theology, psychology, and even politics. “It has returned,” she says, “*abîmé*”, which is to say spoilt, damaged, injured. It has been pushed against its nature from emotion to abstraction. We are forced into trying to close it down, define it, restrict it, circumscribe it, to set it against other words in pairs of opposites. But lest we try too hard to work it out, we are faced with: “God loved the world so much that he gave his only son”. We live in a faith that ties love to its God – and, just in case love becomes a clear, comprehensible notion, it becomes by this association with God the most incomprehensible, the most indiscernible, the most moving.

In order to help us get hold of this, Quéré takes us back to early religion – which did not separate sexuality from the sacred. The joy and the fecundity of sex represented the only answer to suffering and death; in the face of undeniable weakness against cosmic powers early humanity turned to the force that brought life and a future. Phallic cults and temple prostitution affirmed the human part in creation and, in the midst of an ambivalent world of nature that was both prodigiously creative and prodigiously destructive, saluted the grand rhythms which ruled, as she puts it, “the monstrous ballet of life and death”. (And there is plenty of evidence of a human reaction to danger and imminent death being to fling oneself into desperate sexual activity – think, for example, of London under the blitz.)

In the world of Homer and the world of metaphysics, with the rise of monotheism, logic and rationality, with the development of cities, social planning and idealism, this approach to sexuality could not last.

Earth and heaven had ceased to be seen as the sovereign divinities of life and were no longer the objects of adoration. Once seen as the creation of a unique God, the world was de-divinised – an object rather than a subject. The creation now acted as evidence and as sign and as expression of a creator – and it was the creator rather than the creation that was to be worshipped.

And this separation of creation from creator set up in humanity a corresponding division. We now saw ourselves as a double entity: a dependent, earthly body which was subject to variation, to instincts and to death; and a spirit which was to purify itself of its “sluggish surroundings” and lift itself to the contemplation of heaven. And with this division of our humanity came a division in our love: the one vile, sinful, full of taboos and forbidden fruits; the other noble and spiritual, attaching itself to the beauty of ideas and mysteries. Sex, as the expression of love, became utilitarian – there to assure the continuation of the race and, in the proper context of a family unit, to maintain a lineage and a source of power. This expression of love became an institution with its own rules and disciplines – and lyricism gave way to law.

So where, in this movement from disorder to order, from exuberance to discipline, is the influence of Christianity to be found? There were certainly plenty of early Christians who joined in the flight from the flesh – those who took themselves off to the desert, those who believed in self-flagellation. Sexuality was for many to be tolerated only for procreation when, Quéré points out, procreation was not itself the subject of questioning. Eros, she says, has gone from absolute master, to being under house arrest, to being sent to the dungeons to be forgotten. (Think, perhaps, of *The Man in the Iron Mask*.)

But is not love a Christian word? Quéré wants to affirm that it is, but points out how unpleasant we have often found it. We are asked to love all people when we are multiplying to plague proportions, even when they embarrass us or cause the suffering of the earth; to love our enemies, even the most disagreeable; to love as we love ourselves

and, finally to embrace lepers. That, she says, is our heritage – a view of love as a duty, but not a delight. And we should not be surprised when those such as Nietzsche recoil from it, identifying Christianity with a horror of life and of joy. There is historical justification for this reproach – a way of thinking about love that associates it with sadness and even hypocrisy.

Quéré seeks to offer an alternative, a new reading of our tradition. She wants to suggest that, “imagination and liberty take us to a more profound faithfulness than results from constraint.” The feeling that is subject to duty, surrounded by suspicion, on its guard, morose and coercive is not to be found in the scriptures. On the contrary, the gospel agape is, right from its beginning, both the crowning glory of creation and the loving folly that leads God to lose twice – first in the loss of his divinity, and then in the sacrifice of his humanity. This love, according to Christianity, is the way in to all loves. It reconciles the primitive, jubilant thrill of life, which discovers God at the heart of things, with the ethic of historical civilisations, the establishment of political and personal ties between people. The fiendishness of love does not allow itself to be calmed down too much by its institution – endurance has replaced intensity, hypocrisy is constrained by joy.

It is when we move to her consideration of the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself that we begin, it seems to me, to move to the heart of Quéré’s thought. She briefly, very briefly, describes the rule contained in the commandment – that we are to treat others as we treat ourselves, giving them a priority and an unlimited understanding that we would wish for ourselves. But that is the boring bit: “*passons, dis-je*” (let’s move on, I say). Above all what she finds here is the affirmation of a “sovereign unity of our natures and our destinies”. Humanity is a strange fabricator of exclusions – either because of our nature or our civilisation. We create barriers based on sex, age, language, class, wealth, ethnicity, religion, ideology, culture, and denomination. We identify huge numbers of human beings as being “not me”, as being therefore “less than me”. And she identifies original sin with this separation.

The commandment urges the rediscovery of the unity lying beneath the differences – the cry of surprise that comes from Adam: bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. And Quéré asks if this rediscovery of naïve joy in unity is the ultimate goal of love. Her reply to that question is that this unity is the first benediction of love, but that it leads on to the more astonishing discovery of a deep-seated duality: behind the similarity, we discover difference. The other exists. That is the marvel that continually revives love and offers more existence than I possess:

At the time of the encounter, it is not I who is found, but the other, and I love him not only because he is I, but above all because he is he. To the poetry of the man Adam, which blossoms in the sensation of the whole universe, is added the ethical demand of the man Christ, who exists in the discovery of the other in his difference and his liberty.

This leads to two conclusions. The first is that we have heard a higher word, one that is based on equality and on social bonds. It introduces into love certain principles, such as respect for the other, justice, and reciprocity – and a Christian understanding of love must include all these. But the second goes beyond ideas of bilateral agreements; it is the offering of the self, which is above and beyond all justice:

The gift of my goods, my well-being, perhaps my life, will be the sole measure of my love, the only way to revere in the other this difference, which is no longer an enemy but which has become an enigma, a mystery: in the place of desire is the need she has created in me, the attraction to what is not me ... if the other appears to me in the fascination of his difference, he reveals himself to me in the risk of his liberty ... Christian love remains an adventure where defeat lies in wait, with the other free to respond by inflicting on me the injury of his infidelity ... The injunction of Christ to love my enemy

means to love even those who refuse to love. Christian love has created in me a dependence that leaves intact the decision of the other. It is the real history of the incarnation: God compromises his liberty for humanity, but humanity does not accept the ultimate sacrifice and, on the cross, Jesus accepts their refusal and brands it a victory ... Jesus has lost, but love has won.



Drugs

Most of the material for this paper came from the edition of *Réforme* dedicated to France Quéré's memory. I also found a piece of work in which she had been involved with the National Committee on Ethics. The ethical report on drug addiction has a note added at the end by Quéré – explaining where her opinions diverged from the Committee as a whole. And it is in this divergence that we can see what really made her “tick”. Let me look first at what the Committee as a whole had to say. The Committee's comments can be put under ten headings: society, legality, identity, uniformity, delinquency, morality, autonomy, solidarity, liberty and responsibility.

They point out the near universality in today's *society* of the experience of a substance acting on the central nervous system – the most common one being alcohol: “French citizens who have never partaken of a glass of wine are rare indeed.” But they also quote addictions to cigarettes, sleeping pills, and coffee. They speak of the difference from one society to another in those drugs that are tolerated and those that are not – noting that this distinction is rarely drawn by the degree of harm a drug is likely to do to its consumer. They also note the preponderance of market forces acting on the consumption of drugs.

They discuss legal distinctions, noting that licit drugs are more likely to be used to commit suicide than are illicit ones. And they suggest that *legality* is set, not by the harm a drug may do to the individual, but the harm it may do to society. Within the society they suggest that often people gain part of their *identity* from the drugs they use or do

not use – from the “smokers clubs” outside offices, to the gatherings in places where alcohol is served, to the secret societies of those who want or have or control access to illegal drugs.

The recent tendency in France, as here, to put drugs on a more equal footing – such as increased attempts to marginalize smokers – has brought with it an increased *uniformity* in treatment of those suffering from the effects of licit or illicit drugs. It has not led to the abolition, however, of the distinction between *delinquent* (illegal) use or abuse of drugs and non-delinquent (legal) use or abuse. Because of this they seek a course that provides both “adequate security” and “controlled freedom”. Partly this arises from the desire to tackle, not the drug use, but rather the risks to health that can result.

They warn against hasty *moral* judgement, but affirm the importance to morality of the distinction between use and abuse. The circumstances and the consequences of use have to be weighed by any individual. And it is as an *autonomous* individual that one can make that moral judgement. They are therefore keen not to confuse the societal realm of law with the individual realm of morality. And they go on to suggest that society has a responsibility not to reflect back to a damaged individual the delinquent identity they may feel they have taken on themselves. Help is more important than punishment.

A health service, however, is an act of *solidarity* between the healthy and the ill. The Committee wants to ask what is done to that solidarity by those who bring ill-health on themselves. What then are the limits of *liberty*? They suggest that tolerance is only in effect due to a recognised inability to control another’s life. Drug addiction is an alienating condition, to which the only answer is education and information enough to make an individual properly *responsible* for their own actions. If those actions lead to harm, help must be available which is not based on the single theme of abstinence.

I actually found their discussion helpful in the way it took me through many of the issues that trail in the wake of this subject. France Quéré, however, wanted to say more: “For my part, although I subscribe to

these recommendations, several reasons prevent me from agreeing to this text, which I find too serene in the face of so many potential tragedies.” She wants to look at the reality of drug addiction in a way which allows the real stories of real people to be spoken, stories of tragedy and poverty, unemployment and failure, family disintegration, and “the distress of still hesitant personalities whose expectations of love, purpose and meaning to life are met all too frequently by society with nothing but absurdity.” She questions the report’s suggestion of an autonomous moral actor making a decision to enter into drug abuse:

The door to addiction is suffering, or pressure of an offer in the guise of a gesture of friendship which nevertheless is backed by a formidable machine in the service of lucre and crime, spread over the planet. Can one seriously entertain the notion of freedom in this context?

She questions the distinction between use and abuse, suggesting that very often the one slips imperceptibly into the other. And she worries that, in the same way, policies that aim to help will slip imperceptibly into those that approve or accept or condone:

These measures should not, ever, authorise a single step, however tiny, in the direction of any kind of theoretical recognition of drug consumption, even in its most moderate forms. Drugs incapacitate; they are habit-forming poisons; they open the way to dependence and desocialisation. In trying to deal with the problem, we must protect those who are most vulnerable.



Reception Theory

It is in this debate with the Committee of which she was a part that we begin to see the centre of Quéré’s ethics. Her reference to tragedy is instructive. The tragic hero is one who must choose, whose choice can have devastating consequences, but must nevertheless be made. Choice

between life and death is seldom obvious and clear and, anyway, there are times when death can seem just as attractive. To be or not to be: the choice between a world of outrageous fortune – or oblivion.

The suffering to which Quéré draws our eyes is suffering that cannot simply be transformed by individual decision, but it is nevertheless suffering which is felt by the individual – and threatens that individual's very being.

One of those who was called on to “remember” France Quéré was another French Protestant, Paul Ricoeur – whose recent death was marked by another edition of *Réforme*. One of his wide range of philosophical explorations was an involvement in consideration of Reception Theory. Ricoeur wrote of the historical determination of our existence and of the inevitable presuppositions that such determination brings. For him the basic presupposition is our existence in relationship to others – a relationship that allows us, not to become another person, but to see and understand as they see and understand.

Reception Theory recognises that what one sees depends on from where one looks. It is at the heart of Liberation Theology – the truth that the poor and the oppressed, who look at society and history (and also scripture) from the underside, see these things differently – and they can inform those who do not have that epistemological privilege of what they have seen. And it has been shown that that view, the view from below rather than from on high, is both instructive and inspiring not only to those who see it directly, but also to those who are enabled to appropriate that understanding as their own.

Quéré reminds the National Ethics Committee, and reminds us, that until you have seen from below you have not seen what you need to see. Where suffering is felt and experienced and lived daily – that is where understanding grows, and where ethics begins. It is hardly life at the sharp end or the cutting edge, but life that is a dull daily grind. For France Quéré, theological ethics begins where there is suffering and poverty, rejection and oppression, where people search for meaning in the midst of emptiness, where people are vulnerable. And ethics

begins there with the question: what is it that makes life worth living? – and deals with the real questions that are asked and the real answers that are offered by those who receive life not in all its fullness, but in all its foolishness.

In this way those who can so often be objects of study, or assistance, or pity, can become subjects – and can be treated as such. The vantage point from which life is best viewed and understood, the highpoint where the clearest vista is to be found, is the cross. Unless we can learn to see from the suffering that leads to drugs or to death, and from the vulnerability to which relationship opens us, we cannot offer life at all. Quéré, it seems to me, seeks to ground our ethics in the real, not allowing them to become theoretical or inaccessible – and she affirms that theological ethics happen when the cross is planted firmly in the earth, where the cries of the oppressed ask why God has forsaken them.

“*Donnez-moi une place*” is her epitaph; it is above all a call for inclusion. Our faith cannot be identified by those we manage to exclude – it has to find a way of giving a place to those who seek to lose themselves in sex or drugs, whose place is being denied them through illness or poverty, whose hold on life as they know it, or would like to know it, is slipping. Life in all its fullness is offered, life worth living is experienced, in a radical, transformative inclusion. Those who knew France Quéré talk most often about her smile and her gift of life; these, along with a gift for speaking of deep things in ways that were both understandable and poetic, gathered people in – and helped them understand what life worth living might be.

It would be good to think that the Church and Society Council could help the Church to do something similar.

- ¹ This paper was originally delivered to the inaugural meeting of the Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council in Churches House, Dunblane, June 2005. The author is heavily indebted to the gathering of articles by and about France Quéré in *Réforme* no.3123. *Réforme* is the weekly journal of French Protestantism.