

Austin Farrer: Anglican Philosophical Theologian

One of the conservative Anglican blogs (which seems oddly to be moving more and more in a Calvinist direction) posted a link to a video sermon today in which the decidedly Reformed (and not any sense Anglican) theologian John Piper “explains the relationship between election and free will.” Wow. I am glad that after 2,000 years someone has finally sorted that one out. (Piper is the Calvinist preacher whose critique on N.T. Wright’s version of the “New Perspective on Paul” prompted Wright’s really interesting book on *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision*, InterVarsity, 2009).

I did not want to get involved in a fruitless online discussion, for which I have neither time nor patience. However, the link to Piper did bring to mind a review I did awhile back on a book about Anglican philosophical theologian Austin Farrer, who, in my opinion, certainly is a bit more thoughtful about these things. Did I mention that Farrer actually was an Anglican?

Austin Farrer was one of a group of critically orthodox (mostly) Anglican Christians associated with Oxford University during the mid-twentieth century. A smaller literary group connected with this circle—C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and, to a lesser extent, Dorothy Sayers and Charles Williams—is more well-known because of the continuing popularity of their (mostly fictional) writings. Farrer was friends with this group (he was Lewis’s confessor and a friend of Lewis and his wife Joy) but belongs more with a lesser-known group of academic theologians and philosophers who also knew and supported each other’s work: the Anglican theologians E.L. Mascall, Basil Mitchell, Michael Ramsey, the (non-Christian) philosopher Iris Murdoch.

There is a need for an accessible introduction to Farrer's thought for at least two reasons. First, Farrer was a polymath—his published writings include dense philosophical theology, biblical studies, sermons, and popular apologetic expositions of basic Christian faith. He wrote no single systematic theology or one-volume summary that might place his views neatly before the reader in one place. To discover his views on a topic like sin or salvation one has to snatch a passage here or there from a sermon or popular apologetic piece. For example, when Anglican theologian Brian Hebblethwaite wrote an article on Farrer's doctrine of the incarnation in response to the 1976 essay collection *The Myth of God Incarnate* (SCM, 1976, John Hick, ed.), he turned to Farrer's *The Glass of Vision* (a biblical commentary), *Saving Belief* (a popular exposition of Christian doctrine), and to some of his sermons. (See "The doctrine of incarnation in the thought of Austin Farrer," *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 112-125.)

Second, Farrer's readings are not always accessible. His philosophical theology is demanding and requires considerable intellectual effort to penetrate. His biblical exposition is unlike standard academic fare either of his own or the current generation. So the uninitiated reader benefits from help, first, to grasp Farrer's overall vision. How do the biblical commentaries fit with the philosophical speculations, if at all? Is there a coherent theological vision that lies behind and is reflected in the sermons and the popular writing? Second, those who lack Farrer's intellectual acumen can use some help to penetrate the depths of his sometimes demanding arguments.

The American and British authors of the essays in *Captured by the Crucified: The Practical Theology of Austin Farrer*, ed. David Hein and Edward Hugh Henderson (NY, London: T & T Clark International, 2004) attempt to provide such an assessment

and overall introduction to Farrer's contributions to Anglican theology.

One of the pleasant surprises of this book is that it is also to some extent an exercise in Anglican hagiography. Aside from biographical material about Farrer, the first essay by Anne Loades on "Austin Farrer and Friends" provides short accounts of Farrer's contemporaries: Donald MacKinnon, Oliver Quick, George Bell, Evelyn Underhill, Helen Waddell, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, Iris Murdoch, Helen Oppenheimer, Basil Mitchell. In David Hein's "Farrer On Friendship, Sainthood and the Will of God," there is a short summary of the life of Farrer's friend, Hugh Lister, a social reforming Anglo-Catholic, who was by turns, engineer, priest, union organizer, and military officer, who died during World War II. In our own time, when Western Anglicanism is struggling to retain its sense of identity, it helps to be reminded that only half a century ago Anglicanism produced scholars and saints. In addition to inviting one to read Farrer, the book may well lead the reader to discover the writings of his worthy contemporaries.

Farrer's most lasting contributions are as a philosophical theologian, and this is where the book focuses most of its attention. Double agency is a key theme in Farrer's philosophical theology and it is central to the discussions in chapters on Farrer's spirituality (Diognes Allen), philosophical theology (Edward Hugh Henderson) and theodicy (William McF. Wilson and Julian Hartt). Double agency provides an alternative to the contemporary standoff between divine determinism and autonomous human freedom posed in the compatibilist/incompatibilist debate. Briefly, double agency is the notion that in creation, two agents, God and the creature, produce a single effect, neither competing with one another, both entire causes of the same effect, both preserving their essential integrity. Farrer's use of the terminology "double agency" rather than dual causality is significant in that Farrer insists that everything that exists

does so insofar as it is active. In creating, God brings into being units of activity. Every creature exists and acts only because of God's prior and concurrent agency; yet God's agency does not interfere with or compete with the creature's agency. God's agency creates genuine agents. As Farrer said, God makes creatures make themselves. God gives the world room to be itself. (Allen, 53-54).

For Farrer, that God is agent also means that God is personal. God is construed by Farrer as an intentional agent, who acts freely by knowing and willing. Farrer insists that to deny personal characteristics to God means finally denying God's reality, and reducing God to a human mental construct. (Henderson, 76).

All of this is crucial not only for theology but for spirituality. Double agency does not mean that human freedom is eliminated. To the contrary, the more that creatures cooperate with divine agency, the more genuine freedom they experience. And, paradoxically, even disobedience to the divine will depends on the power that God gives us to disobey. The divine agency demands response on our part. We can use the agency that God gives us either to choose to cooperate or refuse to cooperate with divine agency. The incarnate Christ is the prime example of how double agency leads to more freedom, not less. Insofar as Jesus Christ is the Son of God, his actions simply are those of God. Yet no one has ever lived a life that was more free to be himself. Jesus' own relationship to his Father provides the model for our own spirituality, insofar as we experience the action of God in our own lives. Cooperating with divine action, we are more free than when we attempt to act apart from or in opposition to God. (Henderson, 82-85).

As the authors summarize Farrer's spirituality, it is both kataphatic (in contrast to mystical apophaticism) and intellectual (in contrast to pietist affectivity). For Farrer, the spiritual life grows out of a lived faith, rooted in

rational reflection on scripture and doctrine. Prayer is ordinary verbal prayer, not the imageless and wordless mental prayer that is often a post-Reformation Catholic ideal. Friendship also plays a key role in Farrer's spirituality, friendship with God and with others, both living and dead (saints). (Hein). I would suggest that there are parallels here to both Medieval Dominican and classical post-Reformation Anglican spirituality.

If there are any reservations about the book's ability to provide an introduction to Farrer's thought, they lie with the last two chapters, on Farrer's approach to biblical studies and his sermons. Charles Hefling points out that Farrer's biblical studies are unique. His approach did not fit in well either in his own day, nor in ours. Farrer differed from his contemporaries in focusing on scripture as symbolic and typological, and on the biblical authors as literary makers, as composers of imaginative works in their own right, rather than mere compilers of texts. One cannot help wondering how Farrer's understanding of the biblical texts as symbolic/typological constructions of imaginative authors fits in with his understanding of key themes of philosophical theology and spirituality, especially since (as Hefling notes) Farrer's biblical writings are the ones that are least read. There are beginnings of a possible clue here to unraveling the logic to Farrer's approach to scripture in Henderson's discussion of the "dialectic of images" from one of Farrer's sermons (69-73). Hefling focuses instead on Farrer's technical exposition—his arguments against the "Q Source," the typological parallels between Matthew's Jesus and Moses, and the literary structure of the Sermon on the Mount as an imaginative commentary on the beatitudes—all very interesting, but one wonders how Farrer believed understanding scripture as a symbolic and typological product of creative authors might play a crucial role in our own friendship with God.

Similarly, the last chapter on Farrer's preaching (Edwards and

Hein) focuses on the technical side of Farrer's sermon writing. He is portrayed as a topical preacher who used sermons for apologetics or moral persuasion. He used a written manuscript and seldom preached the lectionary. He did not expound biblical texts. Given, however, that some of Farrer's key theological and spiritual ideas are found only in his sermons, the relation between his theology and his preaching is left undeveloped.

In conclusion, *Captured by the Crucified* provides a good introduction to Farrer's thought as a philosophical theologian and to his spirituality. Unfortunately, it does not quite succeed in showing how the gifts of the philosophical theologian, the biblical scholar and the preacher were integrated coherently in a single individual.

(This review appeared in a small journal called *The Anglican*. I don't remember which issue.)