

**Rob MacSwain and Ann Loades (ed.), *The Truth-Seeking Heart*,
Review by Mark Edwards
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The Truth-Seeking Heart: Austin Farrer and His Writings. Edited by Ann Loades and Robert MacSwain. xv + 236 pp. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006. ISBN 1-85311-712-9.

A junior contemporary and friend of Lewis in Oxford, Farrer seems to many to be the more formidable apologist. He has no fame as an imaginative writer, but his *Study in Mark* commanded the esteem of literary critics as soon as it was published, while his essay 'On Dispensing with Q' is among the hardy perennials of New Testament scholarship. The invitation to give the Gifford Lectures, which was never extended to Lewis, resulted in his subtle book on *The Freedom of the Will*; his most ambitious essay in metaphysics, *Finite and Infinite*, is the stuff of dissertations. Those who find Lewis glib would never say this even of such popular books by Farrer as *A Science of God?* or *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*. Whereas Lewis rises to expectation like a barrister in the service of a distinguished client, Farrer is a philosopher who manages his own brief.

As the two were unlike in temper, so they have proved unequal in reputation; hence the necessity for this book, in which the connoisseur of Farrer's works may be disappointed to find so little of his idiosyncrasy. His interpretation of Mark is represented by a pungent sermon, rather than by his labyrinthine pursuit of the man in the linen cloth who escapes arrest at Mark 14.52. Programmatic passages from his study of Matthew and *The Glass of Vision* exemplify his cardinal tenet that gospel and history are indissolubly fused in the inspiration of the scriptures, so that, just as the believer cannot cling to the symbol without the fact, so he cannot hope to refine the pure adamant of history from the alloy of interpretation and take a confident stance on this alone. What the sun is to natural objects, the Christian revelation is to the Old Testament: The surest proof of its power to illuminate is not our seeing it, but our seeing by its light what would otherwise be erratic, formless or opaque. (The simile is familiar to readers of Lewis, and was derived by both from Plato). As a Nonconformist who had turned Anglican, Farrer held that the church is authoritative but not infallible: Her certitude rests, not on an *a priori*, but on the improbable truth of testimonies that, if false, would admit of historical correction. Nor is it the mere proclamation of dogma, but the apprehension of it in life and thought, that makes the Christian a child of God. Christ possessed a latent rather than a credal knowledge of his own Sonship, which disclosed itself in his intimate consciousness of the Father's love; in the same way, the Christian understands his

own creed through prayer, through the discernment of Christ in others, through embracing lesser creatures in that love which we feel pre-eminently for members of our own species. By purity of intent and single-heartedness the Christian comes to feel disbelief to be more of an evasion than the faith which others call credulity.

Farrer's thought can seldom be distilled into an epigram. His characteristic medium is the parable, often protracted to a length that seems exorbitant and punctuated by his own caveats. The sententiousness of Lewis is as foreign to him as the levity of Chesterton or the trenchant chauvinism of Dean Inge. Like these three, he is constantly engaged in a public duel with the despisers of religion, but it is not his custom to name his interlocutors, let alone to caricature or ridicule them. Arguments conducted in this allusive manner may seem to us circuitous and evasive, but it is difficult for a thinker to argue otherwise when he grasps both sides of every case and readily warms to the convictions of a sincere antagonist. His intellect, like that of many of the best Anglican writers, is unstintingly hospitable to 'honest doubt', if not to Tennyson's paradox that such doubt contains more faith than 'half the creeds'.

Mark Edwards