

Brian Hebblethwaite,
The Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer,
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Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*,
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To be a Christian philosopher and theologian in Oxford during the middle years of the twentieth century required intellectual courage and tenacity. Logical positivism had declared theology (and metaphysics) ‘meaningless’, and natural scientists (no longer benevolent Anglican clergymen) increasingly speculated on the origins of creation in a way that suggested that God might indeed be dead. Meanwhile, Biblical studies was undergoing transformation in the form of Bultmann’s de-mythology and radical historical-critical analysis. This pushed British theology increasingly in the direction of Protestant liberalism. In this climate, a number of Oxford figures emerged as prominent and committed Christian apologists of a more-or-less orthodox bent: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Austin Farrer come to mind most readily. Their contributions were distinctive. Farrer was a philosophical theologian, priest, pastor and preacher. He wore his learning almost too lightly, yet he is regarded as amongst twentieth-century Anglicanism’s finest philosophical theologians.

Brian Hebblethwaite is one of Farrer’s greatest champions and commentators. This volume, *The Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, collects together the substance of nine previously published essays on Farrer’s work, with one further new and brief essay on Farrer’s understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Unlike many collections of essays, Hebblethwaite’s forms a very lucid whole that constitutes an excellent guide to Farrer’s thought. The material is arranged thematically and tackles topics which concerned Farrer throughout his career: the rationality of religious belief, experience and faith, the relation between finite and infinite, the nature of divine providence and action, the problem of evil, freedom, theology’s relation to science and the meaning of the revealed doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity.

Given the empiricist concerns of twentieth-century Anglophone philosophy and the influence of logical positivism, it is unsurprising that the experiential verification of faith was one of Farrer’s key concerns. He was frequently insistent that faith must make a *difference*: ‘what do we have to do with God?’, he asked. Hebblethwaite analyses Farrer’s contribution to this debate in the first two chapters of this volume. Because Farrer was insistent that the hand of God remains perfectly hidden, one might ask how such divine action in human lives could make any discernible

empirical difference. Hebblethwaite easily replies to this concern, noting that the manner of God's action is not discernible, but its effects most certainly are. For Farrer, it is the embracing of the divine will through personal relation with God that forms the discernable identity of the faithful: '[According to Farrer] if I embrace God's will I find him acting in and through me by his grace in a manner over and above the basic Creator/creature relation.' (19). The emphasis on will, particularly in Farrer's late work *Faith and Speculation*, led some to accuse him of voluntarism. This accusation has some substance, but Farrer's approach to the will must be seen in the context of his strikingly catholic sacramental theology and understanding of grace.

The hidden hand of God, discernible in its effects, is a theme in many of Farrer's writings and it is expounded through one of his characteristic contributions, namely double agency. This can be summed up in the mantra that 'God makes the world make itself'. God does not act in the world as a cause amongst causes; He is not just another agent in human history. God is the primary cause which enables there to be genuine causation within creation. Hebblethwaite successfully defends Farrer's view and, in chapter 6, distinguishes it from other apparently similar approaches to divine providence such as that of Keith Ward in his *Divine Action* (1990). For Farrer, the 'causal joint' between God's agency and created agency is not discernible (that is, we cannot point to any aspect of causation and say 'that is where creaturely causation ends and God's begins'); God works by persuasion in and through created causes.

It is in his articulation of the concept of double agency that Farrer seems to wear his learning almost too lightly. His view is remarkably similar to the Neoplatonic notion of primary and secondary causes. The anonymous *Liber de Causis*, and St Thomas' commentary thereon, immediately spring to mind. Is this the source of Farrer's view? Farrer's position is not worked out in such sophisticated philosophical or historical detail. Moreover, the notion that there is a causal joint—albeit not discernible—may already be to concede too much in the direction of univocity. A similar sense of debt to the tradition occurs in Farrer's view of the freedom of the will. How was his thought informed by St Augustine, and to what extent would Farrer's writings have benefitted from a more thorough-going engagement with such patristic sources?

However, one must remember that for the vast majority of his career Farrer wrote lectures, short works and sermons for an educated but general readership. The thick scholarly apparatus and impenetrable jargon which characterise so much contemporary academic theology are largely absent. In this spirit, Hebblethwaite's

analysis is generous and extremely lucid. Occasionally, he is prone to overstating the case. For example, I am not sure how the claim that Farrer's works of the 1960s 'include the most direct, sustained and searching treatment of the problem of divine providence that modern theology has to offer...' (41) could be true. However, although Farrer has been perhaps the greatest influence on his own thought, Hebblethwaite is not beyond criticising his subject. Most particularly, we find disappointment that Farrer wrote so little systematic theology. The doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity are the subject of the final two chapters of this volume and, while finding much of value, Hebblethwaite is clearly ambivalent about Farrer's contribution in this area. This collection of essays is, therefore, very fair and balanced.

Farrer died relatively young at the age of 64 whilst Warden of Keble College, Oxford. One wonders how his philosophical theology would have developed if he had been exposed longer to the effects of Vatican II, the force of the *ressourcement* movement and the influence of the writings of Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar. While it is clear that Farrer anticipated many of the key issues which have dominated theology and philosophy over the last twenty years, Hebblethwaite's volume leaves me unconvinced that Farrer is of crucial importance to contemporary academic theology. However, by treating Farrer's essays and sermons in a remarkably seamless fashion, Hebblethwaite does demonstrate how Farrer's irenic and lyrical communication of the truths of catholic Christianity and the depths of his own spirituality—particularly in sermons and devotional works such as *Crown of the Year*—is of enormous and enduring value.

Simon Oliver