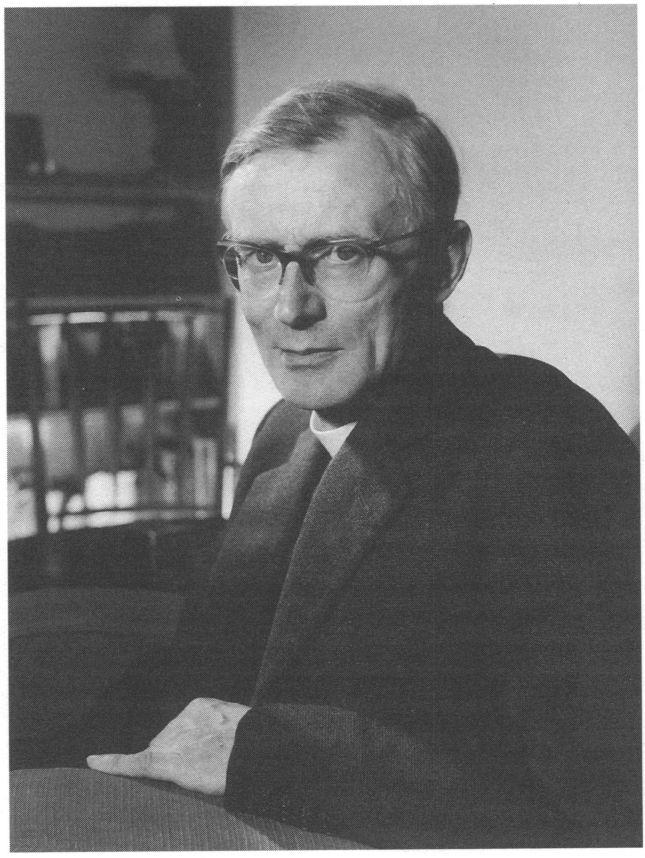
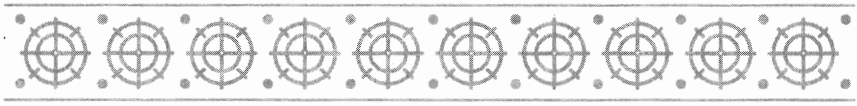
Light in a Burning-Glass





Light in a Burning-Glass

A Systematic Presentation of Austin Farrer's Theology

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Acknowledgments and Dedication

This book reflects the assistance and encouragement of the many people who made it possible. I want to acknowledge several conversations and presentations that made a difference for me as I worked on this project. In a presentation for the Captured by the Crucified Conference in honor of the Farrer Centenary in November 2004, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Ann Loades of the University of Durham, in a passing comment, suggested the topical and thematic approach that I have used to complete this basic introduction to Farrer's thought.

Ed Henderson of Louisiana State University challenged me to prepare a paper on Farrer's eschatology for that same conference (which he organized), and my work for that presentation is now reflected in a chapter of this book. John Barton of Oriel College, Oxford, recalled for me his experiences as a student of Farrer at Oxford and helped me see the living person through his eyes. John Fenton recalled hearing a presentation by Farrer in the 1960s in which he said the theories of the atonement are "more like poetry" than an explanation of how electricity works. The importance of this comment is evident in one chapter in this book, "Poetical Inspiration and Literary Interpretation." I also had a helpful conversation with Margaret Yee, of Nuffield College, Oxford, and conference director for the Farrer Centenary at Oxford, who suggested Farrer's connection to the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray. I appreciated discussions of Farrer with David Brown of the University of Durham and Charles Hefling of Boston College. Phil Rossi of Marquette University suggested Dorothy Emmet as a helpful source on metaphors and analogies.

I greatly appreciate the cooperation of Nick Newton on behalf of the Trustees of the K. D. Farrer Trust. I also want to acknowledge the assistance of Robert Petre, college archivist of Keble College, University of Oxford, and Colin Harris, supervisor, Modern Papers and John Johnson Reading Room ("Room 132"), Department of Special Collections and Western Manuscripts, New Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Photographs of Farrer were reproduced by the kind

permission of the Warden and Fellows of Keble College, Oxford. I am also most thankful for the help of Trish Hayes of the BBC Written Archives Centre and Joan Sommer, interlibrary loan librarian at Raynor Memorial Libraries, Marquette University.

I wish to thank Alex Trkulja, Rose Howarth, and Vivian Alexander for their assistance during my visit to Oxford, and Victoria Charnteski, Barbara Lewczyk, and Ashok Bedi for their encouragement. I must acknowledge the support and wise suggestions of Barry Blose, acquisitions editor at the University of South Carolina Press, throughout the years of researching and writing this book. I also thank Karen Beidel of the press, who has helped to bring this work to completion. Special thanks to Rick Bate, who provided important technical assistance for publication of photographs. Portions of the introductory chapters on Farrer's history and method appeared in my review articles in the *Anglican Theological Review.*

I dedicate this book to the next generation of readers and students who will learn from Farrer, as well as the writers and teachers who will help them. The pages of Farrer's works have much to offer. I dedicate this book to my children, the next generation in my family, Claire, Rebecca, and Jacob. And I dedicate this book to Victoria Charnetski.

Preface

The Challenge and Promise of Farrer

Austin Marsden Farrer (October 1, 1904–December 29, 1968) was the most remarkable theologian writing in English in his era. Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury, said recently that Farrer was "possibly the greatest Anglican mind of the twentieth century."[1] But Farrer has also been described as a "sadly neglected writer,"[2] one who "deserved a wider audience than he received during his lifetime."[3] This neglect may be due in part to the challenges encountered by anyone who seeks to comprehend him. Farrer published not only sermons and spiritual and theological meditations but also works in argumentative philosophy, critical biblical study, and doctrinal theology. He wrote in many genres and forms, including treatises, essays, lectures, replies, and reviews, and covered three theological areas: pastoral, biblical, and philosophical. In a prolific writing career that spanned some thirty-five years, he addressed a variety of audiences and contexts.[4] Few have published so many significant works in so many areas of theological study. Indeed his productive and varied writing career has inspired several bibliographies of his publications.[5]

Farrer's style could be "light, even whimsical," and his learning, which was impressive, was "carried so easily."[6] His sermons were "conversational yet literary, effortlessly delivered yet intricately constructed."[7] He "could be inspirational while possessing a sharp edge," and he took "light things seriously and serious things lightly." As one editor of his works noted, he could be "clever *and* to the point."[8] As a writer, Farrer "had the almost unique distinction among modern theologians of writing brilliant and clear English," and "nobody could pack so much into so few words."[9] Yet Farrer "wrote as a Christian not concerned to reduce Christian theology to what is commonly acceptable."[10] Basil Mitchell of Oriel College, Oxford, noted in an interview that Farrer's thought was "extremely comprehensive," and that in his thought "everything was joined up." In Farrer's sermons,

whatever his topic, "there was always a hinterland of thought-out theory brought into it."[11]

Farrer can be fascinating to consider but difficult to master—daunting, even. His biographer, Philip Curtis, states that "when he wrote philosophy he let you off nothing."[12] Farrer demanded much from himself and his readers. He did not hesitate to contend with some of the most difficult questions in theology, and he did not offer easy answers or avoid controversy. He was often original—sometimes unconventional and even surprising. His was a "peculiar combination of traditional convictions with independence of mind."[13]

Who was Farrer? It is my goal to understand Farrer the person as well as Farrer the theologian. When he died, a number of people wrote to his wife, Katharine, to say what Farrer meant to them. These letters provide a number of insights concerning him. Chad Walsh said, "In his presence, words like 'love' and 'God' seemed simple, natural, believable," and that "in the last analysis, it is people like Austin who make me believe that resurrection must be true."[14] Martin W. Jarrett-Kerr, wrote from the monastic Community of the Resurrection to say that "but for Austin I doubt much if I should have ended up here. He had such a way of awakening the slumbering minds & once woken what unpredictables could not happen?" Jarrett-Kerr also noted Farrer's "marvelously fertile insistence that it is the often unpredictable jumps & decisions of the human will that reveal the real nature of freedom."[15] John H. Heidt stated, "This among all his many virtues was perhaps his greatest: that by his own goodness he made all of us much better."[16] These friends and former students were shaped by Farrer, and they remembered him clearly.

But it was Katharine who knew him best and most fully appreciated Farrer's complexity. Around the time of their engagement she wrote him to say, "What a delightfully complex person you are! A different bit of you writes to me every time and I have fun guessing which manifestation it is going to be, and then am Foiled Again because it is either a new one that I didn't know about or an old one that I had forgotten, yet they all fit together like a Chinese puzzle."[17] And in another letter she said, "You are like those Chinese balls within balls; you think each one is the innermost, and the farther in they are hidden the more beautifully carved they are."[18] These letters provide significant clues for understanding the complexity of Farrer as a person and as a theologian.

Farrer does not fit neatly into theological categories or schools of thought, although there are helpful points of comparison. Charles Conti states that the neglect of Farrer "was due (in part) to his intellectual independence," that he was "at odds with the then-current fashions of Form Criticism, Positivism and neo-Orthodoxy," and he was, in any case, "never an easy writer to understand." He was capable of "philosophical leaps" that "could—and often did—leave the reader

stranded."[19] At times Farrer presented his positions in the form of written dialogue, and these presentations can be difficult to understand. Regarding *Finite and Infinite,* Farrer's first book, I. M. Crombie states that "it is sometimes essential to know whom he is arguing with, or what distant allusion is being caught up, if one is to get the significance of what he is saying."[20] There is no one theme or principle that neatly organizes the many aspects of Farrer's theology. Scholars have tended to focus on the area of Farrer's work that corresponds to their own training and discipline, leaving his other areas relatively neglected. Such an approach does not comprehend the interplay within and underlying integrity of his entire theological contribution.

This book is an introduction to the study of Farrer's theology in terms of his basic methods and central themes, and it draws upon the various areas of his work in the presentation of each main theme. In some instances, it is possible to discern the underlying connectedness of his many writings. For example, Farrer's philosophical ideas are often at work in sermons, and his pastoral insights are visible in his theological and philosophical arguments.

I have quoted Farrer extensively in this book so that he may speak to the reader in his own words. Paraphrase often falls short of Farrer's originality, and there are times when his theological expression is inseparable from his theological understanding. His work is distinctive for its precise expression, vivid language, penetrating insight, and imaginative clarity. Theology comes alive in his words—words that are transparent to his depth of faith.

This book is certainly not exhaustive in its treatment of Farrer. There is much more to be said concerning him. In Farrer's preface to *The Glass of Vision,* he states that "if we were never to say anything unless we said everything, we should all be best advised to keep our lips sealed." Fortunately, for his task and for mine, he adds that "we are all vain enough to think that if we express within a limited compass what in fact interests us, it may have the luck to interest our indulgent friends."[21] Similarly, if "we were never to say anything unless we said everything" about Farrer, just about everyone would have to be silent about him.

I have expressed within a limited compass the basic aspects of Austin Farrer's theological understandings and methods. I hope this book will introduce a new generation of students to his varied, brilliant, and comprehensive theological legacy, and I hope others will appreciate the beauty of his work and take up the challenge of studying it. Farrer deserves to be heard. And if his work seems challenging, even overwhelming, at times, we may recall Farrer's statement that we are to find the strength of God "by getting beyond our powers and out of our depth."[22] That has been my experience in this and other things. Farrer was willing to take the risk of faith, and he invites us to follow him.

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Farrer's Background, Method, and Perspective

Austin Farrer, the son of a Baptist minister, was born in Hampstead, London, on October 1, 1904. He was trained at St. Paul's School, London (1917–23), and Balliol College, Oxford (1923–27). At Oxford, Farrer earned first classes in classical honor moderations, *literae humaniores,* and theology, winning a Craven Scholarship in 1925 and the Liddon Studentship in 1927. He was ordained in 1929 as a priest in the Church of England, and he served at All Saints, Dewsbury, until he returned to Oxford in 1931. He lived and served in Oxford for the rest of his life. Farrer was chaplain and tutor at Oxford University's St. Edmund Hall from 1931 to 1935, fellow and chaplain at Trinity College from 1935 until 1960, and warden of Keble College from 1960 until his untimely death in 1968. He was a fellow of the British Academy, an honorary fellow of Trinity College, and a member of the Church of England Liturgical Commission.[1]

Despite the difficulties and challenges associated with the study of Farrer, his work continues to attract scholarly attention. The centenary of his birth was celebrated in 2004 by programs at Oxford and in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. But Farrer's reputation was mixed. As A. N. Wilson observes, Farrer was the "author of incomparably the most interesting theological books ever to come out of the Oxford Theology Faculty," but he was "passed over for professorial chairs over and over again."[2]

Farrer's personality seems to have been as many faceted as his work. He was a man with a family. Philip Curtis notes that his "growing friendship" with Katharine Dorothy Newton was "the most important event of Farrer's years at St

Edmund Hall." Katharine, then "in residence at St Anne's (then the Society of Oxford Home Students)," met Farrer in 1932 in Rickmansworth, where her father, the Reverend F. H. J. Newton, was vicar. Farrer did not propose to Katharine until after she had taken her degree. He was "shy about being seen with her at Rickmansworth or Oxford, resorting to remarkable subterfuges" to keep their meetings secret. They were "like children playing pirates," Katharine recalled. The two were married on April 15, 1937, and they had a daughter, Caroline, in 1939.[3] According to Walter Hooper, Austin and Katharine Farrer "were an extraordinary couple —generous and open and kind to everyone."[4]

Caroline Farrer "did not seem to learn" as she grew out of infancy. Although Farrer and Katharine were "both bookish people," they "had to help Caroline to cultivate goodness and skill in other directions." At the age of eight, Caroline was sent to a special school in Kent, which involved "both a painful separation and a triumphant success." She left the school at eighteen and learned embroidery in a religious community. Her parents had to work hard "to acquire the money for her school fees and to provide for her future." Caroline's situation, Curtis notes, caused Farrer "great anxiety over many years" and motivated him to publish "some of his smaller works."[5] After Caroline went to school, Katharine "found a satisfying outlet in writing," which "helped with the fees" and produced, among other works, three "very successful" detective novels, a "curiously off-beat novel" with religious themes, and a translation of Gabriel Marcel's *Être et Avoir*.[6]

Farrer "was no stranger to suffering in his home life," states Susan Howatch, "for his wife became addicted to alcohol and his only child, Caroline, had learning disabilities."[7] Curtis notes that Katharine had chronic insomnia and became "addicted to alcohol and to the barbiturates prescribed for the insomnia," which led to "unhappy scenes at night destroying the sleep of both." Farrer "feared to leave her alone," and "he would drive enormous distances from outside appointments to be with Katharine at night." The strain, Curtis notes, "increased as time went on."[8] In July 1967, Farrer "collapsed with hypertension" while at the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, England, to deliver the addresses for the community retreat. Rather than rest, he "insisted on delivering the addresses."[9]

Farrer died of coronary thrombosis on December 29, 1968, "after months of strain and overwork."[10] About a month before he died, he returned from a visit to Kelham in Nottinghamshire and was so weak that "he had to crawl upstairs on his hands and knees." On the night he died, he went to bed early with an upset stomach. Katharine got up during the night and broke her arm in a fall. She was taken to the Radcliffe Infirmary on the next morning, and Farrer died before her return.[11]

Farrer was described as a "private man," one who "was better in the pulpit than as an after-dinner speaker." He was a person "with the mentality of a philosopher