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Robert B. Slocum  
Marquette University

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## Review Article

### Light in a Burning-Glass: The Theological Witness of Austin Farrer

ROBERT B. SLOCUM\*

Austin Farrer (1904-1968) was an Oxford don who has been described as "the greatest Anglican thinker of his generation."<sup>1</sup> The son of a Baptist minister, he was trained at St. Paul's School, London, and Balliol College, Oxford. After ordination as a priest in the Church of England and brief service in a Yorkshire parish, he returned to Oxford, where he served as chaplain and tutor at St. Edmund Hall from 1931 to 1935, as fellow and chaplain at Trinity College from 1935 until 1960, and as warden of Keble College from 1960 until his untimely death in 1968. Farrer was a philosophical theologian and biblical scholar, as well as a noted preacher and pastoral writer who published extensively in all these areas.<sup>2</sup> One editor of a collection of Farrer's lectures characterizes him as "a Prayer-Book Anglican in the Tractarian tradition" and "a quintessential Anglican Catholic"—though one who also believed that "Protestant and Catholic were not fundamentally opposed and that each needed the other."<sup>3</sup> Another commentator identifies the foundation of Far-

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\* Robert B. Slocum is a lecturer in the department of theology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

<sup>1</sup> Austin Farrer, *Words for Life*, Charles Conti and Leslie Houlden, eds. (London: SPCK, 1993), vii.

<sup>2</sup> There are several bibliographies of Farrer's publications. See Charles Conti, "A Chronological List of Austin M. Farrer's Published Writings, 1933-1981," in Jeffrey C. Eaton and Ann Loades, eds., *For God and Clarity: New Essays in Honor of Austin Farrer* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1983): 191-200; Charles C. Conti, "Chronological List of Published Writings: 1933-1973," in Austin, Farrer, *Reflective Faith*, Charles C. Conti, ed. (London: SPCK, 1972), 227-234; "Chronological List of Published Writings by Austin Farrer, 1933-1976," in Philip Curtis, *A Hawk Among Sparrows: A Biography of Austin Farrer* (London: SPCK, 1985), 250-257; "An Annotated Selection of the Works of Austin Farrer," in Charles C. Hefling, Jr., *Jacob's Ladder: Theology and Spirituality in the Thought of Austin Farrer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1979): 127-132.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Howatch, "Introduction," in Austin Farrer, *Saving Belief: A Discussion of Essentials* (London and Harrisburg, Pa.: Mowbray and Morehouse Publishing, 1994), viii. *Saving Belief* presents the texts of lectures by Farrer to undergraduates. It was first published in 1964 in London by Hodder & Stoughton.

rer's thought and the center of his vision to be the mutuality of theology and spirituality.<sup>4</sup> Farrer made connections and perceived relationships between faith and everyday life. He was a philosopher and theologian whose "writings combine, to an unusual degree, the qualities of philosophical sensitivity and penetrating faith."<sup>5</sup> In light of Farrer's synthesis of reflection and Christian believing, this study will focus on his theological themes and witness as presented in his sermons, addresses, and devotional writings, which provide an accessible and substantive introduction to his work.

### *Style, Analogical Method, and Attention to Salvation*

Farrer's presentations from pulpit and lectern were distinctive and compelling. Some of this can be understood in terms of his personal style. His sermons were "conversational yet literary, effortlessly delivered yet intricately constructed."<sup>6</sup> Farrer "could be inspirational while possessing a sharp edge." He was one who took "light things seriously and serious things lightly." He could be "clever *and* to the point."<sup>7</sup> But the distinctiveness of Farrer's preaching and teaching was ever so much more than mere cleverness or an engaging manner. Even the most casual-seeming illustrations invite the listener or reader into the depths of his reflections, and prove charged with meaning. This is clearly seen in his use of analogy and metaphor so that the ordinary in daily life is turned to moving, thought-provoking, and at times surprising purposes. As Farrer explains, "God alone has access to the life of God in God; his creatures will scarcely claim to know anything of him, but through the part he plays in creaturely existence."<sup>8</sup>

With respect to analogies and metaphors, it is important to note that Farrer was well aware of their limitations. His biographer, Philip Curtis, explains that when Farrer "says we know nothing about God absolutely, we are to take it that our knowledge is never expressible in completely straightforward terms and that one metaphor on its own can and does mislead: analogy is to be corrected and supplemented by analogy and we are the best clue to the nature of God since our experience of God clothes itself in creaturely elements and we have the best knowledge of creaturely existence in ourselves."<sup>9</sup> Lived experience provides the starting point for Farrer's method by which analogies and metaphors suggest the theological truth he indicates.

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<sup>4</sup> Hefling, *Jacob's Ladder*, xii.

<sup>5</sup> Charles C. Conti, "Editor's Preface," in *Reflective Faith*, vii.

<sup>6</sup> Howatch, *Saving Belief*, viii.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Conti, "Preface," *Words for Life*, viii.

<sup>8</sup> "Faith and Evidence," *Saving Belief*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Hawk Among Sparrows*, 49. Curtis was asked by the trustees of the Farrer estate to write a biography of Farrer. "Preface," *Hawk Among Sparrows*, vii.

At the heart of Farrer's use of analogies and metaphors is the question of how we know God. He observes that the problem of knowing God "is never a problem of his being made present, but always of our being able to apprehend his presence." With respect to the question of our receptivity for God, Farrer uses the image of a ray of light to wonder whether God will "pass through us completely, as perpendicular light through a pane of perfect glass, or, to change the metaphor, will he find nothing to illuminate in us, like a ray passing into a hollow sphere lined with velvet black?" Knowing God requires analogies because "we can only know God in expressing God: and we can express him in no other terms than such as are already significant to us, terms we already have in familiar use." Therefore the resources of our finite experience will be the basis for our power of knowing God, since we can only "actualize an apprehension of God" to the extent that "our experience of finite existence affords analogies in terms of which God can be discoursed upon." As a shadow will be imperceptible until it lands on something, "so perhaps our awareness of the infinite Act depends on the materials for a shadow of him presented by finite existence."<sup>10</sup> Our lived experience of finite existence gives us the materials to embody and express our knowing God by analogy. Indeed, the mind "cannot become aware of the infinite except by symbolizing it in terms of the finite."<sup>11</sup>

The breadth of Farrer's use of analogies can be illustrated by a quick review of several of his sermons. He offers a twofold analogy for the Trinity, stating that "our society with our friends" reflects the "real society" of "real persons" in the life of the Trinity, and that a person's "discourse with himself better represents the oneness of the Trinity: the divine Persons are as close to one another as a man's own thought is to a man; yes, and closer than that." And Farrer provides an application for these analogies, concluding that anyone "who has the character to be either a thinker or a friend lives the Trinity in some fashion, whether he is a Christian or not." He then asks, rhetorically, "Has not God made us all in his own similitude?"<sup>12</sup>

Concerning death, Farrer describes how the sun's parallel rays may pass through the lens of a magnifying glass (a "burning-glass") and be focused to cross in a single point with no magnitude, "which point being passed, they fan out again into a fresh cone. The cone spreads to light, and, were it unbroken by any obstacle, should expand to all infinity." Death, Farrer explains, "is the

<sup>10</sup> "Lecture V," *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), 85-87. Farrer was the Bampton lecturer for 1948, and his eight Bampton lectures were published as *The Glass of Vision*.

<sup>11</sup> "Lecture V," *Glass of Vision*, 90.

<sup>12</sup> Austin Farrer, "Thinking the Trinity," *The Essential Sermons*, ed. Leslie Houlden (London and Cambridge, Mass.: SPCK and Cowley, 1991), 79. Preached in Trinity College Chapel, Oxford, on Trinity Sunday, 1961.

point of no magnitude into which our being must contract, if it is to expand into the flower of glory.”<sup>13</sup> With the image of a magnet and iron filings, Farrer underscores the relational context of religion, which is cohesive for the participants “by the action of their magnet, the life of God, thrust among the iron filings which we individually are, and drawing us into fellowship with eternal love, the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Ghost.”<sup>14</sup> And he warns that we may be oblivious to God’s gift, scarcely regarding “our only treasure, the pearl of great price,” which we handle “like postal sorters passing packets and not thinking what they contain.”<sup>15</sup> It is through seemingly simple analogies and illustrations such as these—light in a magnifying glass, iron filings moved by a magnet, indifferent postal workers handling packages—that Farrer ushers his listeners and readers into the depths of his theological reflections.

Clearly, for Farrer, God’s activity in the world is for the purpose of our salvation. We are to know the fulfillment of sharing Christ’s life and love, completely and forever. Farrer is not just presenting an intellectual puzzle or an interesting question; he is not merely considering supernatural or metaphysical matters as a subject of academic inquiry, or a way to satisfy curiosity about the divine. He preaches, teaches, and writes about salvation in Christ. In Christ, the human story “loses all its opaqueness” as the natural medium for divine action.<sup>16</sup>

The process of salvation that Farrer describes takes place by God’s initiative, not ours. Farrer also offers the image of light in a burning-glass to emphasize the role of divine initiative: “the fire is kindled by no business of ours, no preparing or striking of matches on our part, but by sunlight falling through the burning-glass of faith.”<sup>17</sup> It is the sunlight of God’s grace, received by faith, that initiates the saving process for us—not our feeble efforts, our striking matches. “We come to throw ourselves on grace,” Farrer explains, “but it is by grace that we throw ourselves on grace. Before we touch the cross, Christ has shouldered it; before we shape a prayer, Christ has prayed it.”<sup>18</sup> We are deluded if we imagine that “it is for us, by our own unaided effort, to set our house in order before we venture to entertain our divine guest.” On the contrary, it is only with God’s wisdom and power that we

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<sup>13</sup> Austin Farrer, “Gates to the City,” *A Celebration of Faith* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), 97.

<sup>14</sup> “The Magnet of God,” *A Celebration of Faith*, 90. Preached in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, 1967.

<sup>15</sup> “The Death of Death,” *Essential Sermons*, 58. Preached in Keble College Chapel, Oxford, 1968.

<sup>16</sup> “Creed and History,” *Saving Belief*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> “The Burning-Glass,” *Essential Sermons*, 20. Preached in St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford.

<sup>18</sup> “The Burning-Glass,” *Essential Sermons*, 21.

can put our house in order.<sup>19</sup> For us as Christians, "there is no such thing as finding God," but "there is such a thing as being found by God, and there is such a thing as acknowledging that we have been thus found, and picked up, and taken into keeping."

Our willingness to be found by God and receive God's gift makes all the difference. Although we cannot "find" God, Farrer warns, we may lose God. Even if this happens, the initiative for saving us remains with God. "We have not so much to seek about, as to stand still, and let ourselves be overtaken by the swift, determined and accurate search of God." For example, Nicodemus comes "groping" in the dark for God, but he is encountered by the divine will, "a far more swift, determined and powerful movement" seeking to find him. Accordingly, Nicodemus can only find God "by learning to see and live divinely," and this can only happen by his "yielding to the God who has found him."<sup>20</sup> Farrer underscores the divine initiative for our participation in the saving process by drawing upon the gospel stories of the visit of the Magi and the anointing of Jesus by the woman with the alabaster flask:

Our incense may rise, like that of the Magi, from unbroken vessels, if we present our bodies a living sacrifice. Yet a living sacrifice is also a sacrifice, and is made so by some participation in the shattering of the vase. Christ, sacrificing himself, joins us with him in sacrificing him; Christ, sacrificing himself, sacrifices us, for he has made us parts of him. We come to offer our homage to Christ, but his star has brought us, and the breaking of his mortal vase has furnished all the perfume of our offering.<sup>21</sup>

We are drawn to the point of self-offering and empowered for self-offering by Christ, whose offering we share, making our offering possible. And it should be emphasized that Christ's initiative and activity in our lives for salvation does not diminish us, or reduce the importance of our own choosing. God's grace "does not remove our own initiative. Far from it," Farrer states. Instead, the one "who receives the grace of God says: Now I am really myself; now I am caring about what I really care about; now I am making a genuine

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<sup>19</sup> "Self-Reliance," *A Faith of Our Own* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1960), 62-63.

<sup>20</sup> Austin Farrer, "Finding God," *The Brink of Mystery*, ed. Charles C. Conti (London: SPCK, 1976), 143. Preached in Trinity College Chapel, Oxford, 1956. See John 3:1-21.

<sup>21</sup> Austin Farrer, "Epiphany," *The Crown of the Year, Weekly Paragraphs for the Holy Sacrament* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1952), 13. See Matthew 2:1-12; Mark 14:3-9.

decision."<sup>22</sup> God's grace completes and does not destroy who we are. Indeed, Farrer holds that in resurrection, as God "remakes the life of the dead in a new and glorified fashion," God does not force or violate their natures "in thus fulfilling and transforming them."<sup>23</sup>

We are meant for union with God. Our calling and destiny is to be divinized, to be made one with the heart of God.<sup>24</sup> Nothing less will do. Our duty from God, our work in God's service "is the means of union with his most glorious life."<sup>25</sup> In communion with Christ, even in this world, "we plant a foot on the risen and spiritual state." Our participation in Christ means everything. As we are incorporate with Christ, "we are not only incorporate with the Son of God, we are incorporate with a man who has reached the goal of creaturely existence."<sup>26</sup> We see the process of human salvation fulfilled in Christ, and share it through Christ. Although "the work has been finished in Christ," it is not yet complete in us. "What never ends is our receiving the grace of Christ, our growing up into the image of Christ, until we see the face of Christ."<sup>27</sup>

This is a saving process that we can disrupt, at our peril. Alienation from God is "a positive malfunctioning" and "a frustration of our total aim." Farrer warns that "if we are not reconciled to God, we are spoiling the music, we are not just letting the music alone."<sup>28</sup> We need God's grace, which inspires our free will.<sup>29</sup> Grace is "Jesus Christ entering us, Jesus Christ under the skin, the sacrifice of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus spreading and fulfilling themselves in us."<sup>30</sup> Farrer draws on Jeremiah's image of the potter and the clay to describe the interaction of God's grace and our will in the saving process. This process begins with God, but it requires our cooperation. Farrer explains, "Nothing comes of the clay—or our life, that is—but what God makes of it. The clay makes no shapes for itself except crazy shapes by distortion of the shape intended; a crack here, a lump there, a ruin and a confusion." But "the true life of the clay is to spin into symmetry under the maker's hand," so that our true completion is in the fulfillment of who and what God would

<sup>22</sup> "Grace and Resurrection," *Essential Sermons*, 139. Preached in Mercers' Chapel, London.

<sup>23</sup> "Creed and History," *Saving Belief*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> "A Christian's Dilemmas, (1) Submission to God or Mastery of Nature," *Essential Sermons*, 127. Preached in Keble College Chapel, Oxford, 1966.

<sup>25</sup> "A Christian's Dilemmas, (2) Piety or Happiness," *Essential Sermons*, 131. Preached in Keble College Chapel, Oxford, 1966.

<sup>26</sup> "Heaven and Hell," *Saving Belief*, 126.

<sup>27</sup> "The Potter's Clay," *Essential Sermons*, 18. Preached in Trinity College Chapel, Oxford. See Jeremiah 18:1-6.

<sup>28</sup> "Sin and Redemption," *Saving Belief*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> "Grace and Resurrection," *Essential Sermons*, 139. Preached in Mercers' Chapel, London.

<sup>30</sup> "The Burning-Glass," *Essential Sermons*, 21.

have us to be, and our free will is never taken away or overwhelmed. Farrer states that "nothing results, either, by the mere force of the hand unless the clay is fit and responds." He adds that "the clay in which God works is our free will, and though he gave it us, it is free."

Farrer emphasizes that the saving process is ongoing. There is "no escaping" from God's hands; "there is never a moment for the clay, when the potter is not doing something with it," and "his fingers are on us all the time." God will not fumble with the clay, although he will meet faults in us—"a lump here, and there it crumbles; here something too stubborn and resistant, there nothing firm enough to make a shape." Through it all, the process of God's interaction with us for salvation keeps going. Farrer allows for different outcomes as this process unfolds. If we love God's will, "we take the shape of it. If we are lazy and selfish, his fingers oppose us and make war on us, and crumble us back into obedience." But when we repent, "without a moment's delay the ever-active fingers are moulding us back into the divine image." Farrer states that "the skill of the divine potter is an infinite patience of improvisation," so that "no sooner has one work gone awry than his fingers are pressing it into the form of another."<sup>31</sup> God continues to reach out to us to shape our lives for salvation, and we continue to choose whether to accept God's invitation. As Farrer explains, "the entry of the divine into the human may be called inspiration on the one side, and co-operation on the other."<sup>32</sup> We can accept or resist the divine grace that saves us.

### *Farrer, a Man of Prayer*

It is imperative to understand Farrer first and foremost in terms of being a man of prayer, one who did what he did and said what he said as an expression of his love for God and hope to share that relationship with others. The theological fine points were never for their own sake. He explains that "prayer and dogma are inseparable," and that "either without the other is meaningless and dead." True dogmas must be prayable, and true Christians must pray them.<sup>33</sup>

Farrer encourages all kinds of prayers. He emphasizes the importance of regular participation in the eucharist, asking his hearers, "Don't you know that Christ wants you there, that he has died to give you what you there receive, at what is the weekly resurrection of the body of Christ?"<sup>34</sup> He re-

<sup>31</sup> "The Potter's Clay," *Essential Sermons*, 17-18.

<sup>32</sup> "Creed and History," *Saving Belief*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Austin Farrer, *Lord, I Believe: Suggestions for Turning the Creed into Prayer*. 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1962; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1989), 9-10.

<sup>34</sup> "Sabbath and Sunday," *A Faith of Our Own*, 86.



sponds with scorn to the suggestion that familiarity breeds contempt in terms of receiving the eucharist,<sup>35</sup> and urges the tradition of "a thousand years and half a thousand more" that a Christian choosing to be absent from the Sunday eucharist without being physically prevented "would be guilty of maiming the physical body of Christ."<sup>36</sup>

With respect to prayer, as with all of life, our receiving the generous outpouring of divine love is to lead us to our own right actions and concern for others in the world. Farrer states that praying for others "is not something different from bringing yourself before God." As we pray, he advises, "the more you look outwards, the more you will be yourself."<sup>37</sup> Prayer "that does not issue in practical resolutions is a delusion,"<sup>38</sup> and "if prayer issues in no resolutions, and if no resolutions are ever kept, little will happen towards our sanctification."<sup>39</sup> We literally *cannot* pray for the effects of God's love in our own lives while rejecting the effects of God's love through us on others. "That prayer is unprayerable," Farrer states. Similarly, we cannot ask for God's compassion on us just as we are, "without one plea," while rejecting others, "just as they are, not with any number of pleas." If we apply such a double standard, "the whole channel of our communication with our creator is blocked," so that our prayers cannot "find heaven," and God's grace cannot descend on us.<sup>40</sup>

We are not just to pray for what we want, offering a kind of heavenly wish list, but we are also to pray in ways that may be difficult for us. We may be surprised by the ways God transforms us. Farrer explains how we may experience "fruits of grace" in prayer: "We pray for those whom we dislike, and care for them; we pray to do the duties we detest, and delight in them."<sup>41</sup> He likewise states that we should not be reluctant to pray an "insincere prayer until he who is sincerity and truth itself overcomes" us. We should pray until our prayers cease to be ours alone and we are warmed into life by "the sun of God's charity." We can pray ourselves "out of prayerlessness."<sup>42</sup> "We find our true being," he states, "by letting God make us what he would have us."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>35</sup> "Holy Otherness," *Essential Sermons*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> "Fish Out of Water," *A Faith of Our Own*, 140.

<sup>37</sup> "You Want to Pray?," *Essential Sermons*, 106-107.

<sup>38</sup> "Ivory Towers," *A Celebration of Faith*, 200. Preached in Keble College Chapel, St. Luke's Day, 1965.

<sup>39</sup> "Soul-Making," *Essential Sermons*, 156. Preached in Little St. Mary's, Cambridge.

<sup>40</sup> "Considerateness," *A Faith of Our Own*, 199.

<sup>41</sup> "The Burning-Glass," *Essential Sermons*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> "Epstein's Lazarus," *The End of Man* (London: SPCK, 1973), 29. Preached in New College Chapel, Oxford.

<sup>43</sup> "Ivory Towers," *A Celebration of Faith*, 200.

We can know God, and we are to know God—especially in prayer. “We know, on our knees, and in the depth of our heart, what Christ is, by knowing what he has made us,” Farrer states, “and we know what he has made us, by knowing what he is.”<sup>44</sup> For Farrer, knowing is praying. The life of prayer is our primary epistemology. As we pray, we may become aware that we are called to more than an abstract sense of duty. The “secret of life” is that “we know our lives in terms of God,” which distinguishes the Christian from the “serious atheist.” Therefore, “it is infinitely worthwhile to pray, if only to realise that in all our life it is God’s will with which we have to do.”<sup>45</sup>

We know God, and know ourselves in God, by prayer. And we do not pray merely to fulfill a religious duty. Our prayer is life, as we share God’s life in prayer. Farrer explains that “God’s presence, spirit, power and love” are poured into our church, our bodies, and our souls “like wine into cups, as much as they will contain, and then overflow.” With respect to God’s generous outpouring of love, Farrer promises that “all the room you give him, he will fill.”<sup>46</sup> And so we are to “abide” in God, “springing” back to God again and again, with “a certain elasticity.”<sup>47</sup> Farrer’s metaphors and analogies are wonderfully mixed throughout his sermons and addresses, but his message is so altogether clear: we are to live in prayer, and know the love of God, and care for others generously.

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<sup>44</sup> “History and the Gospel,” *A Celebration of Faith*, 45. This was the Hulsean Sermon, preached in Great St. Mary’s, Cambridge, 1948.

<sup>45</sup> “You Want to Pray?,” *Essential Sermons*, 105.

<sup>46</sup> “Human and Divine Habitations,” *The End of Man*, 167. Preached in St. Barnabas, Oxford, at the feast of dedication.

<sup>47</sup> “Finding God,” *The Brink of Mystery*, 140. Preached in Trinity College Chapel, Oxford, 1956.