

Introduction

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Austin Farrer (1904–68) served as Warden of Keble College from 1960 until his sudden death of a heart condition on 29 December 1968. The present volume celebrates his legacy in relation both to the 50th anniversary of his death in late 2018 and to the 150th anniversary of Keble College in 2020.¹

Farrer’s appointment to the Wardenship came at the culmination of a long and distinguished Oxford career that had successively seen him linked with Balliol College as an undergraduate, Cuddesdon as an ordinand, St Edmund Hall as a Chaplain and Tutor (1931–35), and Trinity College as a Fellow and Chaplain (1935–60).

Aside from his institutional service to Keble and other colleges, Farrer was a distinguished and well-known scholar of several different disciplines. He made lasting contributions to philosophy, Christian theology and biblical studies.

In New Testament circles, Farrer is best remembered for challenging the prevailing theory of a lost sayings source (‘Q’) behind the Gospels and for articulating a very brief but elegant alternative account for the literary origins of the Synoptics.² His exegetical interest was particularly attracted by the Gospel of Mark.³

Farrer’s contributions to Philosophical Theology revolved around the topics of providence, free will, the Problem of Evil, and his theory of ‘dual causation’ or ‘double agency’ to understand divine action in the world.⁴

Interested as he was in the role of inspiration and imagination for literary artistry, he became a key associate and conversation partner in Oxford literary circles during and after the Second World War, as well as a close friend of C. S. Lewis. He is also remembered as a remarkable preacher throughout his long Oxford career – up until his last sermon at St Andrew’s Headington a week before his death, which was broadcast on the BBC and presciently entitled ‘The Ultimate Hope’.⁵

Not unlike many other polymaths then and now, Farrer found that his sometimes idiosyncratic originality tended to be viewed by specialist colleagues in the various disciplines with something between suspicion and disdain, as we will also see later in this volume. Nevertheless, with the benefit of half a century’s hindsight his eclectic yet catalytic contributions to each of these fields turn out to have left an enduring mark on subsequent scholarship. (Stories like his might encourage a sentiment of caution to Her Majesty’s latter-day academic bottle-top counters, committed as they are to Research Excellence measurements involving instantaneous judgements of ‘impact’.)

To mark the 50th anniversary of his death on 29 December 1968, an international day conference was held at Keble College on 18 January 2019. While this initiative arose from a recurrent short feature of Oxford’s New Testament Seminar to commemorate influential biblical scholars, the idea of a conference soon took hold and plans grew in scope and size: around 90 registered conference participants heard speakers from Oxford, St Andrews and Duke University in the USA. Following a welcome by the Warden Sir Jonathan Phillips and an introduction by Ian Archer to Farrer’s work as Warden of Keble, four other speakers each highlighted one of the major facets of Farrer’s legacy in the Academy and the Church: his scholarship on the gospels (Mark Goodacre); his role as an Oxford literary figure (Judith Wolfe); his work on the Problem of Evil (Michael Lloyd); and his profile as a preacher (John Barton). After the formal proceedings, the conference ended appropriately in Keble College Chapel with choral Evensong,

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including a sermon preached by Bishop Stephen Platten, one of the editors of the current volume.	1
Giants of an earlier age tend to make one feel that the life of the present is impoverished, and that ‘we shall not see their like again’. In Austin Farrer’s case, that question of legacy presses upon us with a peculiar urgency. Parts One and Two of this book amply illustrate Farrer as exceptional in combining his memorably incisive preaching in the University with lasting contributions to the study of the New Testament, philosophical theology and theology and literature. But would he be able to do so today? Does the Church of England still care to educate clergy of such scriptural and theological acuity? Conversely, do university departments of theology and religion any longer retain the ability to recognize and value their subject’s reciprocal relationship to the core historic convictions held by living communities of faith?	2
In a recent volume on the challenge of holding together academic and pastoral vocation in the church and academy, one Oxford chaplain raises the pointed question, ‘Where have all the Austin Farrers gone?’ (Henson 2016, 25). He goes on to highlight the contrast between Farrer and the present-day scholar-priests being steadily driven to extinction by a deliberate deprivation of ‘habitat’. Pincer-like, that deprivation closes around them in the form of relentlessly detheologizing departments of religion and, on the other hand, the process-focused managerial regimes of training for ministry.	3
A sense of panic in response to the secular has rapidly debased the church’s idea of ‘mission’ amid widespread gasping for the supposedly clean air of management and leadership. That ‘mission’ has in the Church of England narrowed to the point where ‘relevance’ becomes the primary criterion for the selection of its spiritual leaders: bishops, deans, residentiary canons. Theology, by contrast – the skilful, patient and public articulation of the love of God with the mind – seems non-essential and even counterproductive to that new currency of ‘mission’. And thus Farrer’s participation in the dialogue of faith and reason, church and university, comes to be actively devalued and disincentivised.	4
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Fifty years after his death, Austin Farrer's profile contrasts sharply against the present century's accelerating re-estrangement of the church from biblical scholarship, from the interdisciplinary engagement of philosophy or of literature – and conversely of serious intellectual engagement from the task of expounding the gospel in the church. To those with eyes to see why these things matter, Farrer's work and example sounds a call for change that could not be more timely.

We are delighted to be able to include in this volume not only the 2019 conference proceedings celebrating Farrer's work (Part One), but in addition a newly edited set of four lectures that Farrer delivered in the United States in 1966, and which are here published for the first time (Part Two).

Part One: Farrer at Keble – The Gospels, C. S. Lewis and Philosophical Theology

Ian Archer's opening chapter offers a vividly fascinating and bracing account of Farrer's eight short years as Warden of Keble, beginning with his narrowly successful election to that office against the background of a good measure of scepticism among the Fellowship. In the face of some continued opposition, and somewhat against the expectation of those who doubted his ability to focus on the task of administrative and institutional leadership, Farrer made a success of the job. Although admittedly intense, shy and impatient with the politics of college governance alongside certain eccentrically obstructive members of the Fellowship, he could nevertheless be remarkably hands-on and generous – for example in his pastoral engagement, the hospitality he and Mrs Farrer extended to members of the College and University in the Warden's Lodgings, and his commitment even as a reluctant convert to the need for development and fundraising. Less surprisingly, perhaps, he was actively engaged in the Chapel, not least as a regular preacher. Above all, Archer stresses the distinctive commitment of key initiatives, relationships and practical wisdom that Farrer deployed as Warden in service of the Keble community.

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Turning to the first of three chapters on Farrer's scholarship, Mark Goodacre begins with an examination of Farrer's contribution to New Testament studies through the often sceptical eyes of his contemporary critics. Doubtful about atomising dimensions of the mid-twentieth-century preoccupation with form criticism, Farrer preferred instead to attend to macrostructural patterns and symbolism in the Gospel of Mark – though not always persuasively. More influentially, Farrer explained the relationship between the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke without reference to the classic nineteenth-century German hypothesis of Matthew and Luke both having used Mark along with a sayings source 'Q'. Instead, Farrer boldly proposed it is simpler and more persuasive to see Luke as using Matthew, while both of them used Mark. Where once Synoptic Gospel criticism dismissed this theory out of hand, it has in recent years gained a substantial following in the wake of its reception and influential development by others (including, most influentially, Michael Goulder and indeed Mark Goodacre himself). ⁶ Goodacre underscores Farrer's work on the Gospels by reference to an unpublished manuscript on Mark. Despite its old-fashioned tone and underdeveloped ideas in many respects, Farrer's attention to the symbols and patterns of the evangelists' work was vital not only to his understanding of inspiration but would turn out to energise a new generation of scholarship on the Gospels.	I 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25
Michael Lloyd explores Farrer's work on the Problem of Evil as one among several influential contributions to the field of philosophical theology. Farrer downplayed the idea that sin – original or otherwise – is to blame for human frailty and mortality: to him, it can only be seen as the cause of moral evil, but not of natural evil. Evil for him is not instrumental to God's purposes, but it is rather inevitable and even necessary for the vitality of the physical world that God in fact has created. Lloyd suggests that Farrer's steadfast refusal to instrumentalise evil within God's purposes represents one of the many strengths of his theodicy, as is the consoling importance of an eschatological resolution. Lloyd objects on the	26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37

other hand that a Trinitarian conception of God more readily and more satisfactorily allows for an account of physical creation that prioritises peace over conflict and a less ‘Platonised’ eschatology.

Judith Wolfe documents the relatively little-known friendship between Austin Farrer and C. S. Lewis, including the former’s pastoral care for Lewis both at his marriage to Joy Davidman, and at her death as well as at his. Lewis celebrated several of Farrer’s writings and admired them for their theology as much as for their style.⁷ Conversely, Farrer in turn appears to have been somewhat more critical of various aspects of Lewis’s work – whom he regarded as a much better apologist than a theologian. And yet, Judith Wolfe persuasively drives home the point that the mutual engagement of Lewis and Farrer shows them both fundamentally concerned with an imaginative ‘vision of the world’ – whether in apologetics, in philosophy or in theology, and despite their significant disagreements on the role of what Farrer regarded as Lewis’s ‘superfluous unrealities’ and myths that have ‘become fact’. Farrer, she concludes, may in the end offer an important ‘ascetic’ correction to Lewis’s extravagant theological imagination.

John Barton personally knew Farrer and in 1967 was tutored by him on the New Testament – before eventually embarking on a distinguished career as an Old Testament scholar. For this conference and volume, Barton offers an appreciation of Farrer’s extensive oeuvre of sermons. Despite his acoustically unimpressive presence in the pulpit, Farrer was a celebrated preacher. Several volumes of his sermons were published. Among these, Barton singles out a Christmas Day sermon entitled ‘A Grasp of the Hand’ to illustrate the power of this preacher’s pastoral, rhetorical and imaginative engagement with his subject matter, showing that ‘God does not work in the world or in us by massive frontal assault, but by making our wills in line with his – “by weakness not by strength”’. Without visible intervention or special revelations, God’s action in the world is above all through the Christian life and its care for others. The themes of his philosophy, theology and New Testament

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scholarship showed themselves to be remarkably integrated in his preaching.

Part Two: Farrer in America – Four Unpublished Lectures (1966)

It is, to some degree, this integration of philosophical, doctrinal, biblical and ascetic theology that has assured Farrer of a perennial and seminal reputation and influence within the academy. Rowan Williams devotes to him much of the opening chapter of his 2018 monograph *Christ the Heart of Creation*; indeed he ventures to suggest that Farrer was the twentieth century's 'subtlest and most eloquent Anglican thinker'.⁸ In a collection of brief biographies and reviews, the philosopher Anthony Kenny implies something very similar. Kenny wrote his own doctoral thesis on Farrer's philosophical theology; he confesses that each time he returns to Farrer's first book, *Finite and Infinite* (Farrer, 1943), he remains uncertain as to whether he has yet fully appreciated the entire argument.

One further stimulus on the occasion of the recent conference at Keble was the discovery of the four unpublished lectures given by him in Dallas and elsewhere in the USA in 1966, just two years before his death. Here, once again, the remarkable integrity and variety within his thought and his capacity to contribute across the boundaries within theological studies are notable. Increased specialisation in this past half century has made such an approach more problematic. These lectures, however, suggest that this cross-fertilisation and interaction may still offer an important corrective to the sometimes myopic concentration within theological disciplines.

So many of the issues upon which he focuses remain current. One of the fascinations of Farrer's work is his confidence to proceed without the now universally assumed use of the intellectual apparatus of footnoting or endnoting and the subsequent clear reference to sources. Even in the process of editing these lectures, this has proved to offer powerful challenges. Our editorial response has been to remain true to Farrer's

approach and for the most part to avoid adding our own references, despite our reduced confidence in contrast to that of Farrer. References have been added only where they might add clarity or help to demystify comments now made obscure by the passage of the five decades since the lectures were delivered.

These four unpublished lectures have been left to retain their original style, as delivered in the lecture room. Very few editorial changes have been made. One or two rare examples of a certain chauvinism have been lightly revised: despite a general unfailing modesty, Farrer was not entirely innocent of the sin of hubris. (He once noted, when asked if he had read a certain book, that he did not know it, but then reflected that he tended to write books rather than read too many of them.)

Some brief introductory notes on the four lectures follow. Understandably, remembering that these were delivered more than 50 years ago, the language remains in several respects 'exclusive'. We have left it so, in order not to interfere with Farrer's characteristic style: doubtless were he writing today he would have adhered to the sensitivities of a changing culture. The lectures follow in the order in which he appears to have delivered them.

I *Something Has Died On Us: Can It Be God?*

In reading these essays, one has to transpose oneself into the atmosphere and issues of the day. The 1960s were years of some intellectual and cultural upheaval, often leading to stimulating new thoughts and pathways, but also frequently in ways that abandoned previously assumed intellectual compass bearings. Theology was by no means immune to this and notably in a more or less rigorous adoption by some of Friedrich Nietzsche's talk of the 'Death of God'. A number of American writers engaged with this enterprise, sometimes accompanied by a celebration of a secularised society: Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (Cox, 1965) is perhaps the best known example of this genre.

In Britain too, similar themes emerged, notably in the so-called 'South Bank Theology', emerging from the Anglican Diocese of

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Southwark. Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* (Robinson, 1963) was its most celebrated publication, translated into numerous languages, selling over one million copies and remaining in print until this day. Robinson did not press for a 'Death of God' approach, but instead attempted to popularise the work of Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In America, others – including Thomas Altizer, Paul van Buren and William Hamilton⁹ – extended this approach into a more radical critique of theology and religious language. Interestingly enough, a number of enthusiasts moved in the direction of 'non-realism', a path later trodden in Britain by Don Cupitt¹⁰ and his disciples. Thomas Altizer receives particular focus in Farrer's lecture. He responds with a sharply argued philosophical critique, but sets this within the attractive narrative and dialogue style generally adopted in his sermons and much of his theological writing. A more accessible style is adopted here than that in his two early books of philosophical theology, *Finite and Infinite* (Farrer, 1943) and *The Freedom of the Will* (Farrer, 1958); instead there is a greater resonance with his later work in *Saving Belief* (Farrer, 1964b) and *Faith and Speculation* (Farrer, 1967).

This lecture suggests that Farrer would have made short work of the recent outpourings of the so-called 'New Atheists'. He dismissed what he describes as 'cosmic rationalism'; his philosophical writing here reflects a similar use of 'reason' to that encountered in the theological writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Farrer is never flippant in his dismissal of others' arguments. Nonetheless, he spares little scorn for some of the cruder arguments that emerged in the decade within which he was writing. Interestingly enough – and Farrer would doubtless have seen the irony were he still around – 'Death of God Theology' has long since ~~found its place~~ as a historical phenomenon in reference volumes, dictionaries of theology and web references.

2 *How Far Is Christian Doctrine Reformable?*

If in the first lecture Farrer is responding directly to a current phenomenon in terms of 'Death of God Theology', then in this

second lecture there is even a sense of prescience. The next decade would see an upsurge of interest in precisely the focus captured in the above title. In Britain, Anglican theologians responded to this theme: from the Patristics direction emerged Maurice Wiles' *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (Wiles, 1974); later, the multi-author volume *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Hick, 1977) touched on similar themes. It is regrettable that those authors did not have this essay before them, with which to be challenged.

Farrer's answer to his own question is not simply a conservative closing of the door, indeed far from it. Instead he begins by exposing the weaknesses of propositionalism with regard both to revelation within scripture and also truth within doctrinal statements. As ever, he is keen to use imagery as his way into the debate. He refers to the work of the Second Vatican Council, noting a more nuanced approach to 'infallibility', following the Council. Farrer was often counter-suggestive in dealing with Roman Catholicism (he had been brought up a Baptist; his father had been a minister). Here, however, Farrer is keen to indicate how the expression of doctrinal truths can be re-stated and re-thought in the context of changing cultures and in the face of new philosophical insights. He is more than sceptical of Rudolf Bultmann's existential theology with its embarkation point in a wider programme of 'demythologisation'. It is interesting, once again, to see how unfashionable most existential thought has become, both within and outside Christian theology. In an earlier volume, *Kerygma and Myth* (Bartsch and Fuller, 1961), Farrer had already responded to this trend both within contemporary German theology and beyond. Farrer is keen, here as elsewhere, to affirm the importance of the 'supernatural'. By this he refers, not to the miraculous, but to the agency of God within our world alongside human agency.

3 *Bultmann and All That*

This lecture extends some of the argument outlined above into the realms of New Testament theology. Issues relating to

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demythologising reappear, but this time more particularly in relation to the historical roots of the Christian faith. Farrer notes what he describes as three prejudices in relation to Christianity and history. The first prejudice is that truth about man's (*sic*) spiritual nature and the way of his salvation cannot be pinned to historical facts; history may be important, but one cannot universalise from it. Second, the special presence of a divine person, at the centre of a uniquely revelatory event cannot be accepted. Third is the prejudice against a divine person (he uses this term as shorthand and not in a docetic sense) acting miraculously.

Here again, Bultmann and his disciples are Farrer's main targets. Bultmann's desire to recast our understanding of the New Testament by dispensing with myth, offering an existential understanding both of Jesus and his message, lies at the heart.

Farrer is concerned to avoid the road towards various forms of reductionism. He describes Bultmann's approach as being rooted in a 'rationalistic historiography'. He points to Paul as the primary witness and the author of the earliest material in the New Testament. Farrer also reacts to the 'atomisation' of the biblical documents implied in the crudest methods of form criticism. His own use of images and poetry and literary critical methods places him alongside the early proponents of redaction criticism, and this fits well with his rejection of the Q hypothesis. He touches upon issues current and alive in present scholarship in a creative manner.

4 *Does Social Structure Bow to Christian Morals, or Vice Versa?*

It is almost uncanny how these four lectures feel alive to subsequent theological debate. The very title of this lecture brings to mind the focus of both John Milbank's *Radical Orthodoxy* with its starting point in *Theology and Social Theory* (Milbank, 1990), and also the broad compass of the writings of Stanley Hauerwas pleading for no further collusion with social studies or society more widely. Farrer's question stands astride

the questions they both ask. Here there are resonances with the first of these lectures, since he is clearly responding to the ‘new morality’ of the 1960s, captured particularly in Joseph Fletcher’s *Situation Ethics* (Fletcher, 1966) and in the writings once again of Bishop John Robinson in Britain. Situation ethics is specifically mentioned, and Farrer spends much of the lecture debating the question of ‘moral rules’. Although rules remain helpful, Farrer’s starting point is with ‘measureless respect for others’ and ‘seeing with God’.

Effectively, his argument directs us toward Aristotle and, although it is not spelt out in as many words, he points precisely in the direction of ‘virtue ethics’ which, following Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 1981), once again became central to Christian moral thought. Farrer hints too at ‘natural law’ theory and points to common moral codes inter-relating across very different cultures. His friend C. S. Lewis’ book *The Abolition of Man* (Lewis, 1944) makes the rare appearance in a direct reference.

Here, then, is a considered response by a philosophical theologian to issues that remain at the heart of Christian moral debate. Farrer is realistic and generous to those who have focused on ‘situations’, but he is equally serious about reminding his audience of the crucial significance of an objective anchorage point for the moral life, where rules will be useful, without them being the primary focus or starting point.

Epilogue

The sermon that closes the volume was delivered at a special choral evening service in Keble Chapel, immediately after the conference. It uses the same discipline employed by Farrer, inasmuch as it takes as its starting point the set readings for that evening in the lectionary. It happened that one of these was the story of Cain’s murder of his brother; and the other an extract from the Gospel According to St Matthew including two controversies between Jesus and successively the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

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The story of Cain offers the sort of trope with which Farrer would frequently like to toy, using the imagery as the prompt for some deeper reflection on the nature of the gospel. Here, themes of humanity's fallen nature and the need for redemption are effectively rehearsed. Farrer's Bampton Lectures, *The Glass of Vision*,¹¹ focus on the nature of revelation and the seminal role played by controlling images within that process. One of the key passages from those lectures, speaking directly to the question of revelation and poetic imagery, is quoted briefly in the sermon. The gospel passage is also mentioned in the light of Farrer's approach.

Sermons focusing in this way were at the heart of Farrer's preaching which could remarkably speak to people both of theological specialism and others without such training. Even his very brief homilies composed for early morning quiet celebrations of the Eucharist, and whimsically labelled by some as *Farrergraphs*, offered a similar approach. Again, his integrated theological reflection is there even in his homiletic writing.

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Stephen Platten

29 June 2019

St Peter and St Paul

Notes

¹ This recent event at Keble succeeded a 2004 Oxford conference prompted by the centenary of Farrer's birth. Durham and various American venues have also hosted symposia on Farrer. For further treatments of Farrer's life and work see Curtis, 1985; Loades and MacSwain, 2006; Slocum, 2007.

² Notably in his famous article 'On Dispensing With Q' (Farrer, 1955).

³ Cf. e.g. Poirier and Peterson, 2015; Titley, 2010 and see Mark Goodacre's treatment below.

⁴ See e.g. Conti, 1995; Hebblethwaite, 2007; Hedley and Hebblethwaite, 2006; Kennedy, 2011.

⁵ Cf. Curtis, 1985, p. 168.

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6 See e.g. Goulder, 1977–8, 1996, 1999; Goodacre, 1996, 2001, 2002. A substantial number of other scholars have in recent years offered support to this view with a greater or lesser degree of confidence.

7 Lewis dedicated his *Reflections on the Psalms* (Lewis, 1958) to Austin and Katharine Farrer, and also wrote the preface to Farrer's 1960 collection of homilies (Farrer, 1960b; US edition Farrer, 1960a); as Judith Wolfe shows below, he expressed admiration for several other of Farrer's works.

8 Williams, 2018, p. xiv.

9 See e.g. Altizer and Hamilton, 1966; Van Buren, 1963.

10 E.g. Cupitt, 1980, 1997.

11 Farrer, 1948; cf. the re-edition with commentary by MacSwain, 2013.