

PLATE XXXIX



*Photograph by Studio Edvardi, Delft*

AUSTIN MARSDEN FARRER

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1904-1968

THE sudden death, on Sunday, 29 December 1968, of Austin Marsden Farrer, Warden of Keble College, Oxford, at the comparatively early age of sixty-four has removed, both from the Church of England and from the academic world, one of the most original and versatile theologians of the present century. Born on 1 October 1904 into a clerical family, he was educated first at St. Paul's School and then at Balliol College, Oxford. His university career was brilliant. He obtained three first classes, in Mods, Greats, and Theology successively, and was awarded both a Craven Scholarship and a Liddon Studentship. He was ordained in 1928 and spent three years in parish work at Dewsbury, Yorkshire. In 1931 he returned to Oxford as Chaplain and Tutor of St. Edmund Hall. In 1935 he was elected to the Chaplain-Fellowship of Trinity College and remained in that office until 1960, when he succeeded the present Dean of Westminster as Warden of Keble. Trinity made him an Honorary Fellow in 1963 and he became a Fellow of the British Academy shortly before his death in 1968. His chief published work, which was voluminous, was in the fields of philosophical theology and the exegesis of the New Testament.

In the philosophical realm his most important book is without doubt the first, namely the massive *Finite and Infinite*, which was written during the *Blitzkrieg* and was published in 1943. In this he came forth as a firm advocate of natural theology against the fashionable school of the 'revelationists'. Steering a middle course between the Thomists, whom he accused of rigid Aristotelianism and of making untenable claims of inescapable demonstrations, and the 'Moderns', whom he accused of evading real problems and refusing to philosophize seriously if at all, he set out to rehabilitate the doctrine of analogy in a modern form. Later he came to detect unpurged vestiges of Aristotelianism in his own thought and undertook the final process of catharsis in his much later work *Faith and Speculation* nearly a quarter of a century later, in 1967. In 1943 he saw his task as fourfold: to restate the whole working of the principle of the analogical transition from finite to infinite being, to show the necessary involvement of theology with an at least implicit doctrine of finite substance and to restate this explicitly, to show how deeply

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faith (not necessarily in the theological sense) is involved in our common thinking and, finally, to show what the traditional arguments for God's existence are and to discriminate between valid and invalid types. His outlook was thus, if not Thomist, at least (to use Dom Gregory Dix's apt phrase) para-Thomist.

The book fell into three main parts, in accordance with this scheme. In the first he made a careful analysis of the nature of rational theology, which he saw as resting not so much upon an argument from the finite to the infinite as upon an intuition of the mutual implication of the finite and infinite in what he described as the 'cosmological idea'. In the third part he applied this analysis in a dialectic of rational theology, distinguishing carefully between the 'usiological' approach, based on the nature of finite being as such, and the 'anthropological' approach, based on the particular kind of finite beings most familiar to us, namely the human. Between these two comparatively brief and easily readable parts, which are all that most students make the effort to absorb, there is interposed what to Farrer was the essential element in the whole system, a detailed investigation of finite substance, starting from the will and the self, and only then moving to finite being in general. With this emphasis upon human nature as the starting-point for a metaphysic of being, Farrer was anticipating, by a decade or more, that concern with human existence which has marked the metaphysicians of the modern existentialist schools; and his perspective was, it may be suggested, more satisfactory than theirs, since he was fully conscious of the deep affinity and continuity between human and subhuman beings and never allowed himself to think of human beings as simply hurled into an alien and unfriendly world.

After this initial plunge into metaphysics, which was well received by a discriminating audience though a much narrower one than it merited, Farrer turned his attention to a very different theological field, which was to exert a fascination over him for the rest of his life, namely that of Biblical exegesis. In this he manifested an imaginative genius which provoked both the admiration and, occasionally, the apprehension of his friends; it could only have been possible to one who had that almost photographic knowledge of the text of the Old and New Testaments which was due largely to his evangelical upbringing. Even those to whom his interpretations seemed frequently to be extravagant were very rarely in a position to refute them. To those who did not know him personally this transition from

metaphysics to speculative exegesis was both unexpected and baffling; to his friends it was less so, for they knew that his mind was, in a very rare combination, both that of a philosopher and of a poet.

The principle that governed Farrer's exegetical work was that of typology, according to which the thought and the writing of the authors of the New Testament was dominated by the conscious or, more frequently, unconscious assumption that the words and deeds of Christ were the fulfilment of the great Old Testament themes. This does not mean that Farrer, like the contemporary scholars of the 'demythologizing' school, thought that the Gospels were imaginative writings with little reliable historical basis; on the contrary, for him, God, the ultimate ground and guide of history, was himself the supreme typologist, who had arranged both the prophetic character of the events and the interpretative skill of the evangelists. At times he could go into very great detail and make suggestions that strained the credulity of his hearers; is Aenon near Salim, where John baptised (John 3:23), really an echo of Elim, where there were twelve springs of water (Exodus 15:27)? The present writer has vivid memories of an occasion when a passage which, by an oversight, had been applied to one pair of Jewish patriarchs was, in the next lecture, shown to apply even more accurately to another. But then, as Farrer himself remarked, with the modest humour which was one of his most attractive traits, if it would have been very clever for a German scholar to have discovered this mistake, it must have been even more clever for Farrer to have discovered it himself! His friend C. S. C. Williams, in his commentary on *The Acts of the Apostles*, produced a brilliant piece of Farrerian typologizing on Acts 10-12, which no one has ever been quite sure whether to take altogether seriously or not. But two things need to be remembered by anyone who is tempted to dismiss Farrer's typology as the undisciplined exuberance of an over-fertile imagination. The first is that he himself drew a sharp distinction between the central typological themes, which he held to be firmly based, and what he would describe as 'luxury points' of detail, which could be accepted or rejected without harm to the structure as a whole. The second point is that, while rejoicing in imaginative detail, Farrer always saw this detail as lying within the great pattern of type and antitype, of prophecy and fulfilment, which related God's redemptive acts in Jewish history to his supreme redemptive act in Christ. It must also be remembered that, while Farrer was ready to subject his own

work to a *retractatio* which would not have been unworthy of his great namesake of Hippo (thus he followed his *Study in St Mark* of 1951 by *St Matthew and St Mark* in 1954, and *A Rebirth of Images* in 1949 by *A Commentary on the Revelation of St John* in 1964), he always held that an author was not in most cases the best critic of his own work. He once remarked that he appeared to have a flair for producing his kind of stuff but it was for others to decide whether it was worth anything. There was something much more magisterial and synthetic about his handling of typology than was characteristic of the even more elaborate but less co-ordinated typologizing of Lionel Thornton; it was indeed amusing to lesser mortals to note the mingled appreciation and reserve with which these two able practitioners of the same art regarded each other's work. The method was less happy in the hands of some of Farrer's disciples who were infected by his enthusiasm while lacking both his ability and his sense of humour. And it should never be forgotten that, while he was highly critical of the work of many contemporary New Testament scholars and rejected many of their conclusions, he was perfectly well equipped to engage in the more humdrum type of Biblical scholarship. Thus, his article 'On Dispensing with Q', which appeared in 1955 in the memorial volume to R. H. Lightfoot, *Studies in the Gospels*, and in which he launched a head-on attack on one of the most widely held hypotheses about the composition of the synoptic gospels, was a highly competent piece of work; it may not have routed the ranks of Tuscany but it drew their reluctant cheers.

Fundamental to Farrer's Biblical exegesis was the conviction, congenial to the poetic side of his nature, that divine truth is far more adequately expressed through images than through concepts. Indeed, it was apparent to him that it was precisely this method that had been chosen by God himself in inspiring the scriptural writers. Farrer never worked out in detail an epistemology of the image, parallel to the many epistemologies of the concept which philosophers have devised; the nearest that he came to this was in parts of his Bampton Lectures, delivered in 1948 and published under the title *The Glass of Vision*. He described these as an attempt to bring together his thoughts on three things—the sense of metaphysical philosophy, the sense of scriptural revelation, and the sense of poetry. He was clearly more interested in showing how images worked—especially the great scriptural images—than in constructing a formal theory about them. For him, the epistemological function of images is best made plain by the provision of examples; there is a glowing

passage in which he displays the monumental way in which the New Testament amasses and interlocks the great images which it employs to declare the mystery of the Holy Trinity. He was insistent that the images cannot fulfil their proper function of communicating knowledge if they are approached in a merely rationalistic spirit. To understand them it is not necessary or indeed possible to find purely conceptual equivalents for them or to get behind them to a non-metaphorical understanding of fact; the images themselves illuminate us. Furthermore, the images through which the Christian revelation is mediated to us do not function simply in virtue of their iconic character, by being the sort of images they are. Their efficacy does not depend merely on the natural power of the human mind to recognize likenesses, to abstract universals from particulars and so on; they were provided by God to his ancient people the Jews, they were taken by Christ and refashioned and synthetized, and this work continues in the Apostles and the Church. Here Farrer's epistemology of the image coalesces with his doctrine about revelation and about the way in which that revelation is communicated and developed; it is perhaps not surprising that his method was not very acceptable either to rationalists, for whom it appeared to be over-subjective, or to traditional evangelicals, for whom it seemed to do less than justice to the place of faith in Christian commitment. He was, for example, criticized by Professor H. D. Lewis for detaching images from their anchor in experience and allowing them to take wing on their own.

It was a source of joy to Farrer's friends when he was lured back to philosophical theology proper by his election as Gifford Lecturer at Edinburgh for 1956. For his subject he chose the well-worn topic of the Freedom of the Will, but he treated it with remarkable freshness. Like almost everything he wrote, his Gifford Lectures appeal as much to the ear as to the eye, in spite (or because) of their highly polished literary form. Farrer was in fact one of the few recent writers in the fields of philosophy and theology who seem to have paid much attention to style as such, though he never allowed his power of writing to cover up lacunae in argument. *The Freedom of the Will* is written in a soliloquizing idiom which is rarely absent from his books but is more prominent here than in most; it provided him with a medium in which objections could be stated amply and could be refuted, though his critics complained not altogether justly that he was rather unfairly conducting both sides of the argument himself. Certainly the book runs on rapidly and happily,

and the reader is sometimes surprised to find how far he has been taken; the method is nevertheless well adapted to the subject under treatment, in which introspection and the registration of its results play an inevitable and constructive part. As Farrer himself said, 'to keep myself and my readers awake, I have used the device of a running debate between the doctrines of freedom and of necessity'; it must be added that he used it very successfully.

His shorter works are by no means negligible. *Saving Belief*, published in 1964, was considered by him, though this is nowhere stated, as his reply by implication to *Honest to God*; it is a straightforward and penetrating piece of apologetic, answering expressly the questions: Can reasonable minds still think theologically? How much, if so, of the traditional pattern must they discard? Is theology a science, or can it be made so? *A Science of God?*, written three years later as a 'Lent Book', has a weight about its simplicity which is not always evident in that genre of religious literature; like many of his books it combines the detachment of apologetics with the expression of a deep personal spirituality. *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, based on lectures given in America in 1961, is a courageous discussion of the problem of evil. And, as has been said already, *Faith and Speculation* contains a mature reconsideration of the basis of theistic religion, made less than three years before Farrer's death.

Farrer was a highly accomplished preacher, with a very characteristic and quite inimitable style. His sermons combined literary elegance, humour and pungency in a remarkable way and he was as much at home in a college chapel as in the university pulpit. As Chaplain of Trinity it fell to him to deliver a homily every Sunday at the college Eucharist, and he put himself under the unusual, but admirable, discipline of writing a sermon that should be no longer than the portion of the Gospel that it was concerned to expound. (Incidentally, he seems never to have preached except from a fully written manuscript.) The results are to be found in a small volume entitled *The Crown of the Year*, which has been of great utility to many less spontaneous, but more voluble, clerics.

Farrer's influence in the intellectual life of Oxford was immense, but he made an impact far beyond the bounds of college and university. Perhaps his most impressive intellectual characteristic was his ability to take full account of contemporary fashions in thought and action, both sacred and secular, without ever being carried away by them. Both the excessively linguistic

bias of English philosophy and the excessively sceptical outlook of German New Testament criticism failed to throw him off his balance. He was, in the Anglican setting, an almost perfect example of what Cardinal Suenens has happily called the 'extreme centre'. It would, however, be quite false to suppose that his impact was solely, or even chiefly, in the intellectual realm.

For all his brilliance, and his deceptively distracted appearance, Farrer was the antithesis of the detached and desiccated Oxford don of popular fiction. While Keble wisely protected him from having his scholarship submerged under the mass of administration that usually quenches the intellectual activity of the modern head of a house in the university, he was in fact a very capable administrator. For some years at Trinity he played a highly important part in the life of the college behind a beautifully written notice which read:

The Junior Dean  
may best be seen  
from 10 a.m.  
to 10.15.

though his constant accessibility to both young and old far outstripped the exiguous limits thus indicated. Modest and shy as he was by temperament, he had a remarkable capacity for winning the confidence of seniors and juniors alike and he was untiring in helping them to solve their problems, both worldly and spiritual. He was a charming companion on any social occasion and an accomplished writer of humorous verse in English, Greek, and Latin. The following brief specimen, whose reference will be familiar to Fellows of the Academy, is typical:

The Scrolls and Tablets now their truths disclose,  
*Ventris* digesting these and *Gaster* those.

Or this, sent from Edinburgh and written on the back of a post-card of Raeburn's well-known painting of a solitary cleric skating on a frozen loch:

While the fierce hounds of *Calvin's* savage pack  
Skate on thin ice, half hoping it will crack,  
The Gifford Lecturer from Oxford's strand  
Makes circles round them and returns to land.

Nobody who knew Austin Farrer will suspect any malice in either of these!

Those who lamented that he was not appointed to any of the



chairs which his intellectual gifts would have so fittingly adorned may take comfort from the reflection that it was his vocation to write not only on paper but also on human souls. His death has occurred when his powers, so far from being exhausted, were at their height; had he lived longer we should have been enriched with many further writings from his pen. We can only speculate about their content, but we can be sure that they would have been as valuable as those which we are fortunate to possess.

He leaves behind him a widow and a daughter. Katharine (*née* Newton), whom he married in 1937, is herself an accomplished writer, who has several novels to her credit and has also performed with accuracy and grace the not very easy task of translating writings by the French Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel. She was an ideal partner for Austin and the sympathy of all who knew them will go out to her in her loss.

E. L. MASCALL