Book Review Supplement

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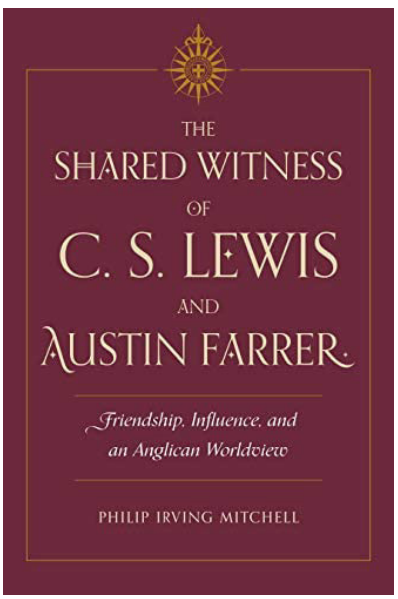
Philip Irving Mitchell, *The Shared Witness of C.S. Lewis and Austin Farrer*. (Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2021).



Philip Irving Mitchell's *The Shared Witness of C.S. Lewis and Austin Farrer* is a thought-provoking work of comparative analysis that offers a fresh perspective on two of the most influential Anglican authors of the twentieth century. With his Christian apologetics, literary criticism, and fantastical fiction having affected millions of readers, C.S. Lewis is widely recognized as one of Oxford's most famous scholars. Austin Farrer, though far less known to the popular audience of both his time and ours, was considered—particularly by his colleagues and students—to be one of Oxford's best philosophical theologians and mentors. The two men shared an admiration for a good argument and a feisty debate, as evidenced by their participation in the Oxford University Socratic Club and their readiness to defend Christianity.

In the book's introduction, Mitchell explains that his "goal is to give readers a larger sense of Lewis and Farrer's intellectual worlds in hopes that their continued applicability may be understood without unintentionally distorting what they actually said and why" (xiv). Not only does Mitchell attain his goal, but he does so in a manner that is captivating and lucid. In addition to this, each of the seven chapters is dedicated to (and titled for) a specific topic, making for a rich and pleasant read. In order, the topics are modernity, myth, analogy, virtue, history, theodicy, and apocalypse.

In the first chapter, Mitchell positions Lewis and Farrer as champions of the counterargument to modernity's charms, making their work part of the mid-twentieth-century debate on humanity's purpose and role in a world of tumultuous events and rapid change. This is followed by a comparative biography that does a very good job of showing how much Lewis and Farrer had in common. Although the content is compact, the many names and associations Mitchell refers to remind us that both men were dedicated to defending Christianity from the hodgepodge character of theological modernism. By

the close of the chapter, Mitchell delivers a simple but pertinent point: Lewis and Farrer neither ran away from nor sought to escape modernism. They confronted it head on and produced some of their best work along the way.

The second chapter begins with an even-handed explanation of myth in the scholarship of the two authors. This is followed by an excellent subsection entitled "Debating Myth Before 1960" (34-38), where the twentieth-century study of myth is identified as being a major aspect in the broader debate over the history of ideas. Fans of Lewis's fiction will be rewarded with Mitchell's appeal to *Till We Have Faces*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and *Perelandra* as expressions of Lewis's defense of the numinous ends of myth. Mitchell examines how Farrer's sermon "Fathers' Sons" and his second Bampton lecture, "The Supernatural and the Weird," exemplify how past mythologies can offer insight into Christianity. According to Mitchell, a similar pattern can be seen in Farrer's *The Glass of Vision*, which argues that master images found in scripture can lead to "poetic associations that expand in relationship to divine actions" (50). In one of the better examples of Lewis and Farrer working through similar concerns, Mitchell offers an analysis of Lewis's essay "Myth Became Fact" and Farrer's subsequent essay, "Can Myth Be Fact?" both of which were presented to the Oxford University Socratic Club.

The third chapter covers Lewis's and Farrer's views on the controversy surrounding "*analogia entis*," or "the analogy of being that draws comparisons and contrasts between creature and Creator" (68). Put simply, Lewis and Farrer defended analogic language as a means for comprehending God's divine nature, leaving both men at odds with popular trends such as logical positivism, psychoanalysis, and Swiss theologian Karl Barth's objection that "philosophical theology was guilty of 'not allowing the self-revealing God to be his own interpreter'" (69). To narrow in on the significance and passions that surrounded this debate, Mitchell delivers a quick tutorial on Barth's argument and the counterarguments of Jesuit priest and philosophical theologian Erich Pryzwara. The rest of the chapter demonstrates how the debate over *analogia entis* directly affected and influenced Farrer's *Finite and Infinite* and *Reflective Faith* and Lewis's *Letters to Malcom*, *A Grief Observed,* and his May 22, 1944, Pentecost sermon, "Transposition." The chapter concludes with a look at how both authors responded to the claims made by psychoanalysis and how their appeal to "the language of analogy" strengthened their understanding "that analogy is a natural condition with supernatural orientation, and God created such a condition with a final, teleological end always in mind" (92).

In the fourth chapter, "Virtue," Mitchell presents a nuanced assessment of Farrer's and Lewis's foundational views on ethics and grace by offering selections from their published works. Highlights include a sharp analysis of Farrer's highly regarded essay, "The Christian Doctrine of Man," and his 1957 Gifford Lectures and book, *The Freedom of Will*. In like fashion, Mitchell refers to Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* as demonstrative of Lewis's contention

that we all answer to a natural law "constructed within a hierarchy of nature and grace" (112). Mitchell approaches Farrer's views on virtue and theosis by asking us to consider that "true submission to the will of God comes with loss" (126), a point that is brought forward in such works as *A Faith of Our Own*, *The End of Man*, and his 1956 sermon, "Radical Piety." The latter half of the chapter asks us to consider both authors' arguments for moral refinement as a process that eventually will "shape" us for theosis. Mitchell closes the chapter with a compelling reading of Lewis's *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters* as "theological fantasies" that call for an "explicit Christian moral analysis" (122).

Chapter 5, "History," takes on a different tone and approach than the other chapters for the simple reason that the two authors worked "in different fields and thus focused on different [historical] problems" (131). While several examples from Lewis's and Farrer's works are highlighted as examples of how both men interpreted and presented historical progression, the real value of this chapter resides with Mitchell's analysis of their views on the nature and function of history. Mitchell skillfully shows the influence that historians G.M. Trevelyan and J.B. Bury had on Lewis's historical perspectives. He continues with an analysis of Lewis's call for sympathy in historical judgments and caution in associating past events with so-called established periods. Mitchell refers to Lewis's 1945 essay, "Addison," his 1956 address, "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages," and his introductory chapter to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century—Excluding Drama* to demonstrate how Lewis employed different interpretive means to explain past practices. Mitchell then looks at the influence that philosopher R.G. Collingwood had on Farrer's historical sensibilities, offering several examples of how Collingwood's principles affected Farrer's writing on sacred history. The chapter wraps up with a look at how Farrer responded to the "naturalist interpretation" (e.g., Christ-free and/or relativistic) of history, and Lewis's distrust of theories of historical change, particularly those that end up with relativistic conclusions that cast doubt on foundational principles.

In chapter 6, readers are given an intriguing comparison of how both authors grappled with theodicy, best exemplified in Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* and Farrer's *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*. Mitchell wants "to argue that the role which explicit Christocentric theology played in Farrer and Lewis differed more in emphasis than in essential particulars" (172). His argument is successful in large part due to his excellent presentation of both works. One of the more interesting comparisons is how both authors dealt with animal pain, complemented by Mitchell's comments on why the suffering of animals matters to the argument at hand. As Mitchell delves into the differences between the two authors, he concludes that Farrer's and Lewis's works remind us that suffering can "reveal the radical love of God, a transformative love that prepared one for a divinized state in eternity" (206).

In the final chapter, "Apocalypse," Mitchell focuses on how apocalyptic literature has been received in the past and how Farrer and Lewis responded to it. He is quick to point out that both men avoided "predictions as to when and under what conditions the end might come, for both assumed that genre's chief value was in its mythic form" (212). After making an impressive reference to Farrer's *The End of Man* and Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, Mitchell further examines Farrer's and Lewis's past scholarship on the apocalypse and eschatology. This is followed by an insightful look at the apocalyptic imagery in Lewis's *The Last Battle* and *That Hideous Strength* and Farrer's *A Rebirth of Images* and *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*. The chapter ends with an inspirational section entitled "The Sense of the Endless," where Mitchell concludes by pointing out that the "symbolism of apocalypse is a special kind of myth, a myth (that is an analogy, archetype, or poetic) that invites its readers to fill the present with the beauty of Christ" (238).

Mitchell's tasteful conclusion includes his perspective on the state of faith in both the world and the wider academic community of the twenty-first century. Mitchell also shares his final thoughts on what Lewis's and Farrer's work has to say to our generation and what we might do with the knowledge they impart to us. Overall, *The Shared Witness of C.S. Lewis and Austin Farrer* is one of the finest works of comparative analysis that I've come across.

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