

Robert MacSwain. *Solved by Sacrifice: Austin Farrer, Fideism, and the Evidence for Faith*. Studies in Philosophical Theology, 51. Lueven: Peeters, 2013. xiv-275 pp. \$71.00 (paper).

Michael Hogan
University of Arkansas

MacSwain's *Solved by Sacrifice* covers much ground, highlighting the philosophical, theological and historical elements of Farrer's life. While a bit untidy at times in its structure, the book does find a way to come back to its central thesis: what kind of fideist was Farrer? MacSwain's surprising answer is that Farrer is the kind of fideist who maintains that faith is epistemically justified not by evidence but by deeds—hence the title “Solved by Sacrifice.”

While Farrer has been known for his work on metaphysics, MacSwain wishes to move Farrerian scholarship in a more epistemological direction. MacSwain sets out to first elucidate the fideism of Farrer by setting up three interlocutors who hold different views on Farrer's thought. The first is extreme fideism, which states that faith and reason almost always come into conflict. Religious belief is said to be absurd or irrational in the sense that it doesn't follow in accord with rational rules. Then, there is moderate fideism. This says that faith is not based on reason but may find epistemic support in reason: faith is the starting point for rational understanding of God. Finally, there are skeptical versions of fideism called conformist skeptical fideism and evangelical skeptical fideism. These fideists disparage reason in an effort to prop up faith: they appeal to skepticism in an effort sustain faith. It appears here that faith is arational, neither rational nor irrational. It isn't even playing the game of being epistemically justified in believing what is true.

But what kind of fideist is Farrer? The early Farrer, drawn to Anglican thought and ordained in the Church of England, looks at first to be more of the extreme variety. Farrer states, “I never yet have decided anything by reason and probably never shall; I see both sides [of whether to be baptized in the Church of England or remain a Baptist] and can convince myself of either at will” (103). While MacSwain cautions that early statements like this ought not immediately be interpreted as of the extreme form of fideism, MacSwain does say this kind of personal struggle with reason is a recurring theme throughout Farrer's thought. Reason in all its greatness could not give the young Farrer a clear path of direction regarding his religious affiliation. This resulted in inaction and brought Farrer to a place of considering what it would be like to act without certainty. We see, then, in the early Farrer, an unsettled psychology about the role of reason.

The middle Farrer, however, seemed to move between extreme fideism and rationalism, before settling on the moderate version of fideism. This was the period between his ordination and publication of his pinnacle achievement *Finite and*

Infinite. Farrer associated with the likes of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, which no doubt had an impact on Farrer's thought. He also became captured by the "Thomist vision" as he himself put it (115). For part of Thomism was the thesis that natural theology could offer demonstrative arguments for the existence of God, while probabilistic-type arguments were offered for specific doctrinal claims of Christianity. Farrer, however, modifies Thomism as he thinks natural theological arguments are only probable in their conclusions, not demonstrative. In effect, Farrer removes the line Aquinas had between natural theological arguments and revealed theology. No demonstrative arguments can be offered, only those that render their conclusions epistemically probable.

The later Farrer appears to have settled on moderate fideism. MacSwain states that Farrer's thought situates itself in the contemporary discussion of the role of theistic evidence "not primarily in nature or reason, but in notably holy lives and our own more halting attempts to live by faith: 'It is solved by sacrifice'" (201). The most sense I can make of this position is that Farrer holds to an epistemology where the "holy lives" of Christians provide the believer with reason to think that Christianity is true. Christianity appears to be a kind of self-supporting rational practice.

For those who have come to believe in God, they must have had an encounter with God. Farrer calls this encounter being baptized into an *initial faith* (203). This initial faith has to do with the necessary preconditions for how one acquires an epistemically justified belief in God. Once this encounter happens, the human agent has the ability to evaluate for himself or herself the rationality for belief in God. From here, one can maintain rational belief in God by exercising obedience and by sacrificing one's will but also by seeing this sacrifice in the holy lives of others.

Thus, we can see Farrer as advocating that the kind of commitment to living holy lives is only understood from *within*, when one has faith. (MacSwain is clear that for Farrer the saintly lives enrich the status of the faithful's beliefs, but such lives fall short of proving in any sense of the word God's existence to those outside the faith.) Coming into experiential contact with God gives one an epistemically justified belief that enables one to live a holy and obedient life, which in turn confers further justification on the relevant beliefs. However, there is room for one to fail to encounter God in the initial way. In the absence of such an encounter, Farrer concludes that one then must abandon the entire project of faith even if purported philosophical arguments are any good.

I must confess that I find Farrer's account a bit puzzling. In particular, it not clear to me how it is that saintly lives might function as a form of evidence for the truth of Christianity. Farrer did not, at the end of his life, think natural theological arguments were any good. So, why can saintly lives be considered as reason for believing in God but not natural theological arguments? What is the difference? My sense is Farrer is operating within the bounds of a perceptual experience one has of God. This perceptual experience can happen when one encounters God but more importantly when the believer witnesses the obedience and sacrifice of saintly lives. The believer is not reflecting on the propositional truth of whether God exists. Rather, the believer comes into contact with a saintly life. The believer then perceives the existence of God's presence through the saintly life. I can't think of any other way to read Farrer's position.

I take this, then, not to be an internalist account. One needn't reflect on reasons to be justified in believing the truth of Christianity. Instead, the justification of religious belief comes from something like reliable perceptual experience.

That is all well and good. But why accept this perceptual account? Neither MacSwain nor Farrer have given us any reason to think that something like mystical perception is occurring, where one is perceiving God in a reliable, truth-indicative way. Neither has either given us any reason to think that the believer is justified in perceiving God through the lives of saints or in her own life. But if this is a book on religious epistemology, we should at least get an argument that belief in God's existence might plausibly be justified by observing saintly lives. Yet we have been given no such argument.

In the end, the book is a rich history of fideistic thought centered around Farrer's theological and philosophical views. What is most intriguing about the book is the way in which it asks the reader to consider the idea that faith is only justified from inside the practice of that faith. If this notion is right, it might explain why many of the arguments for God's existence often fall on deaf ears. It also might explain why saintly lives provide believers with restored inspiration and eternal hope. Perhaps this is a result of the believer being epistemically justified when she encounters the lives of saints.