

Review of Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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In *The Year of Our Lord 1943*, Alan Jacobs brings together a diverse group of thinkers in order to explore their response to the crisis of the Second World War. The quintet Jacobs chooses as his focus—W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, Jacques Maritain, and Simone Weil—spreads across the Atlantic Ocean but also across various literary forms and cultural milieus. These are not thinkers that are perhaps usually considered together as a group, but, despite their many differences, Jacobs presents a compelling argument for their treatment together as representatives of “Christian humanism”. Jacobs argues that during the war years all five writers were, mostly independently of each other, concerned with similar problems and found surprisingly similar answers to them—they saw the economic and political crisis of war as a symptom of a deeper, spiritual crisis; they were in support of Christian democracy but feared that its foundations were being undermined by secularism and the rise of technocratic societies, which the war had accelerated; they thought that the solution to the moral and spiritual crisis of the West lay largely in educational and cultural reform or—as Jacobs calls it—“Christian humanism”.

While the longest chapter of the book focuses on what Jacobs’s quintet was working on in 1943, he begins by providing an extensive background through the first five thematic chapters. We discover that, during the early years of the war and those preceding it, all five thinkers were starting to formulate their questions about the spiritual, and indeed metaphysical, foundations of Western democracies as they were facing their greatest existential threat yet in the form of totalitarian ideologies. Here, similar themes begin to emerge in the writings of these thinkers. It had been the mistake of liberalism to think of democracy as self-sustaining: what was needed was a renewed public interest in asking the necessary fundamental questions about human nature and the values upon which Western democracies were built.



Liberal instrumentalism, that willingness to defer ultimate questions as the price to be paid for getting along with one another, had left the democratic West unable to generate the energetic commitment necessary to resist the military and moral drive of societies that had clear answers to *Quid sit homo?* (34)

Eliot, Auden, Lewis, Weil, and Maritain all came to believe that the renewal of Christian faith and learning was at the centre of answering this question. Thus, all came to think carefully “about the relationship between Christianity and the Western democratic social order, and especially about whether Christianity was uniquely suited to the moral underpinning of that order” (xvi). Consequently, Christian cultural and educational restoration became a central theme for the five writers. However, they shared the conviction that “this restoration will not be accomplished only, or even primarily, through theology as such, but also more effectively through philosophy, literature, and the arts” (50), that is, through a humanistic approach. Thus, although Maritain was the only one that found some kind of direct appeal in the concept of humanism as such, the approach of all these thinkers could be characterized as a form of Christian humanism because they all perceived Christian understanding of humanity and humanistic learning to be vital in the formation of the ethical foundations of democracy: “The proper response to the Nazis therefore required not just fighting them but also re-emphasizing the *imago Dei*, for otherwise the Nazis’ opponents could become all too much like them” (46).

Thus, in the chapters “Demons” and “Force” Jacobs argues that mere Nazi ideology as such was not the only concern of his quintet: they were all in one way or another also critics of what they understood to be the illegitimate power of technocracy in all areas of society—a development which the war had accelerated and which they saw as antithetical to truly humanistic values. While the chapter “Demons” focuses mostly on Auden and Lewis, when it comes to “Force” the focus is understandably mostly on Weil. Jacobs, however, is again able to find creative and fascinating connections between Weil and the others: Weil’s concerns over the power of the “collective” and the oppressive potential of all religious and political institutions are echoed in the way other members of Jacobs’s quintet saw the powers of science, technology, and bureaucracy threatening the truly human way of living and learning. It is with Weil, however, that these concerns find their most powerful and distinct expression. Here, Jacobs is also able to draw more on the differences between some members of his group, especially those between Maritain and Weil, in regard to the differing attitudes of the two towards anti- or nonreligious humanism. Weil thus emerges as the necessary critical voice amongst the five thinkers, checking some of the more domineering tendencies of their thought.

After the thematic chapters, Jacobs finally leads us to the climax of his narrative. In 1943 the tide of the war was turning, and the Allied victory began to seem inevitable. This new situation turned the attention of Jacobs’s five thinkers towards the future, post-war societies that would emerge. Their chief concern could be characterized through Niebuhr’s favourite phrase: they feared that the Allies would “win the war but lose the peace” unless the Allies addressed the deeper spiritual crisis underlying the crisis of war. In other words, they worried that the Allied victory would be

merely a victory of one force over another, rather than a manifestation of the superiority of democracy as a value-system over fascist totalitarianism. Thus, all five thinkers began—in their own voices and formats—to formulate a vision of Christian humanistic learning that draws from wells deeper than those of the emerging technocracy, an education that focuses on the holistic development of the person and aims towards spiritual and moral goals higher than merely producing new parts for the machine of the modern state.

Despite these great visions and hopes, Jacobs ends his book with a somewhat pessimistic tone: he offers an honest assessment of the weaknesses of the proposals of these five thinkers and the minimal if not non-existent impact most of them had on the actual formation of post-war societies. According to Jacobs, his thinkers were, in the end, too late in generating their reflections: “They came perhaps a century too late, after the reign of technocracy had become so complete that none can foresee the end of it while this world lasts” (206). It is thus “no wonder that after having spent the years of the war narrating, dramatizing, and arguing for a richly humane model of personal and cultural formation, they all—save Weil, lying in her grave in Kent—turned to other matters” (206). Despite this, Jacobs thinks there is much that we can learn from these thinkers.

Moving creatively through associations and similarities from one thinker and theme to another, Jacobs finds unexpected connections and new clarity through comparison. His freely flowing narrative is structured mostly chronologically—although at times the chronology is broken deliberately in order to further illuminate a particular issue—and, despite the plurality of his thinkers and the complexity of their ideas, he builds his argument confidently, manifesting an impressive command of his craft in so doing. However, the narrative method Jacobs employs, while mostly being perfectly suited for the purposes of his argument and employed with impressive skill, may occasionally obscure important and fascinating differences between Jacobs’s quintet and make the connections between various thinkers sometimes feel forced. Jacobs’s exclusive focus on the threat of fascist totalitarianism might also disappoint those readers who would have hoped to learn more about the way these thinkers interpreted the uneasy alliance between the Communist Soviet Union and Western democracies. Reflection on those questions might have also been helpful in illuminating some features of Jacobs’s main argument about the importance of Christian humane learning in building societies built, not on force, but on values. These, however, are in the end minor issues that should not obscure the achievement of Jacobs’s fascinating and important book which offers a rich resource for anyone who wishes to think seriously about the way in which Christians can engage their societies in the face of the current crises they encounter.