



The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis

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By early 1943, it had become increasingly clear that the Allies would win the Second World War. Around the same time, it also became increasingly clear to many Christian intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic that the soon-to-be-victorious nations were not culturally or morally prepared for their success. A war won by technological superiority merely laid the groundwork for a post-war society governed by technocrats. These Christian intellectuals-Jacques Maritain, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, and Simone Weil, among others-sought both to articulate a sober and reflective critique of their own culture and to outline a plan for the moral and spiritual regeneration of their countries in the post-war world.

In this book, Alan Jacobs explores the poems, novels, essays, reviews, and lectures of these five central figures, in which they presented, with great imaginative energy and force, pictures of the very different paths now set before the Western democracies. Working mostly separately and in ignorance of one another's ideas, the five developed a strikingly consistent argument that the only means by which democratic societies could be prepared for their world-wide economic and political dominance was through a renewal of education that was grounded in a Christian understanding of the power and limitations of human beings. *The Year of Our Lord 1943* is the first book to weave together the ideas of these five intellectuals and shows why, in a time of unprecedented total war, they all thought it vital to restore Christianity to a leading role in the renewal of the Western democracies.

The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis Details

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From Reader Review *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* for online ebook

Joy Matteson says

What is the role of education and religion in an age of violence and war? Professor of Humanities Alan Jacobs explores the theological perspectives on this monumental topic, outlining the articulations of C.S. Lewis, Simone Weil, T.S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, and W.H. Auden during a crucial year of World War II: 1943. In an increasingly secular culture, Christian culture looked helplessly at the giant war machines of Hitler's SS, defying the generally accepted Victorian concept that modernity and progress combined with a religious culture could solve all society's ills. Unfortunately, the Christian thinkers were not able to come to a reasonable conclusion for the technocracy they found themselves enmeshed in and after 1943. However, Jacobs concludes his work reaffirming the good work done by universities to ensure future generations did pass on Christian humanism combined with a socio-political framework for peace and progress. Veteran narrator Paul Boehmer's elegant tonal quality lends itself well to the vast array of accents needed for this audio rendition. He speaks slowly and deliberately, giving the reader time to reflect on the ideals expressed. Lewis and Auden's crisp British accents are immediately recognizable from Jacobs' interpretations, which is sorely needed after long paragraphs of letters and references quoted in the work. Boehmer's French accents for Weil (pronounced "Vey") and Maritain are slightly more pronounced and slightly more difficult to understand, but Boehmer's commitment to performing an excellent narration of an academic subject is commendable. Recommended for academic and historical readers.

Michael Nichols says

Dr. Jacobs has written a book about Christianity, education, culture, and time (that most blessed and elusive gift). He tells of Christians (Auden, Eliot, Lewis, Maritain, Weil) who proposed visions for the post-war West. The story Jacobs tells, though, is a tragedy. Despite their serious, clear-sighted proposals to redeem civilization from the hell of WWI and WWII, his characters are too late; their hopes were stillborn. The technocrats won the day and shaped people to operate according to the technocratic values of efficiency and objectivity in a world constituted by force and will rather than love and order. This gives us, Christians living in the technocratic and (purportedly) amorphous world these predecessors so earnestly sought to avoid, occasion to reconsider how we achieve meaningful lives, shape people and organize communities, and how we read the times.

Murtaza says

In the midst of World War II, a group of Christian intellectuals sorting through the wreckage of their collapsing world tried to articulate a basis for its spiritual rejuvenation. Simone Weil, W.H. Auden, C.S. Lewis and Jacques Mauritain were among a group of sensitive people who began to realize during the war that the "machine civilization" of modernity had gradually evolved into an instrument of mass dehumanization. Their hope was that the darkness of the war would give way to a new dawn in which Western society would be rebuilt according to a more humane vision, necessarily informed by Christian values.

In retrospect, as Jacobs describes, their effort was mostly a failed one. If anything the barons of industry and technology gripped the world even more tightly after the war was over. With their otherworldly and metaphysical outlook and behavior, the Christian intellectuals stood little chance of matching the organizational power of their relentless secular competitors. Like Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and many others before them, these Christian humanists had warned that there would be little to celebrate in winning the war if it meant assimilating the basic materialistic outlook of the enemy. Their great fear was that even if Hitler lost, "Hitlerism," which could be defined as a technocratic and power-driven view of human relations, might still win.

They warned too that a morally drifting, relativistic society could not survive its own internal contradictions, nor could it defend itself against a barbarous enemy whose convictions are solidly rooted. Echoes of these concerns continue to exist today. To my mind they stand as a warning to those who would uncritically adopt every aspect of the modern West, considering such mimicry to in itself constitute positive progress.

As Lewis wrote:

“Progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.”

Of all the figures in this book the ones I've had the most longstanding interest in are Weil and C.S. Lewis. I've always been amazed at Weil's prodigious literary output over her short life (she died at 34) and been humbled by her spirituality. C.S. Lewis is undeniably one of the greatest Christian intellectuals of modernity and is justly celebrated by many today. My only complaint with this quite good book is that in its style it seems to mimic the unworldly, head-in-the-clouds attitude of its protagonists. If you don't pay close attention to what the book is trying to tell you, you could easily miss it. Nonetheless there is a subtle and powerful message about modernity in here, and it is a good reminder of some of the sensitive people who tried, to the best of their necessarily limited ability, to raise the alarm about where Western society was headed.

Anthony Rodriguez says

First of all: Always read Alan Jacobs. On the book at hand: It was hard going in patches. But the book demonstrates the genuinely incredible breadth of learning that Jacobs has. The themes he saw to unite these five thinkers leaves one wondering how no one wrote this book before. But that really just illustrates Jacobs' brilliance. This book left me with a lump in my throat and a bit of a pit in my stomach. But it also left a hope for my kids and my students. How do I help to address what these thinkers saw? I hope I'm part of a subversion of technocracy.

Jeremy says

Miles Smith gave this book to me as a gift (Christmas 2018). Review by Jeff Bilbro. *WORLD* comments here. Birzer review here. Jake Meador's TGC review here; Jake also recommends it here. Review at *Comment*.

Jordan J. Andlovec says

I haven't read all (or even most) of Jacob's books, but this one really stands out in my mind. Not only does he almost seamlessly weave together the thought of five major Christian thinkers in mid-century, but does it in a way that bespeaks to his resourcefulness and clarity but bringing to the forefront the major threat to the personalist Christian Humanism that Maritain, Auden, Lewis, Elliot, and Weil all defend and illumine, as well as the society that it feeds, corrects, and sustains. That threat is, in a word, technocracy.

In these thinkers minds it's not atheism, socialism, or "the liberals" that are looming dangerously over a Christian view of the world, but the elevating of efficiency and an opaque objectivity as the solution to the state of man and his problems that is at risk for turning us from humans to "producing things", like little worker bees only concerned with task and not reason, outcome and not obligation. This is a book one must take care to read well (there is much poetry to be interpreted in these pages), but it deserves your full attention as it illumines our our time as it exegetes one now fading from memory.

Samuel James says

This is a lucid and fascinating work of scholarship on how a group of Christian intellectuals thought and wrote through the Second World War. Jacobs is one of the finest Christian writers doing work today, and his prose is as sharp and clear as ever. The only reason for 3 stars is that I wasn't quite prepared for how academically oriented this book is. It would be best to read this after consuming a primer on 20th century Christian intellectualism and literature, and then to appreciate Jacobs' work as a historical survey that could apply to our own fractured, anxious age. A fine work that deserves to be read.

Jordan says

Very good. 4 stars until the afterword, in which Jacobs brings together and puts into perspective the experiences and thoughts of the five writers followed through the book, wallops you, and sends you off with a lot of food for thought. Going to be mulling this a while.

Mark Robert says

This a very engaging book focusing on five thinkers and writers -- C. S. Lewis, T.S. Elliott, W. H. Auden, Simone Weil and Jacques Maritain. They aren't the only ones Jacobs engages (there is actually a reference to Pink Floyd's Roger Waters), but Jacobs reflects how these particular five individuals responded to the post-war situation after the Allied victory with the threat of totalitarianism or existential nihilism. For all their differences, all five sought to conserve the great western tradition.

Adam Shields says

Short Review: I really appreciate Alan Jacobs. I always learn something (usually lots of things) and come away from his writing with a new perspective. This is basically an exploration of six thinkers that broadly fall into the category of Christian Humanists during WWII. Other than CS Lewis I was not really familiar with any of the thinkers. So I need another reading, to really understand the broader argument that Jacobs was making. I was too focused on being introduced to new people and ideas on this first reading.

My not much more than this review on my blog is at <http://bookwi.se/the-year-of-our-lord...>

Steve says

Alan Jacobs wants to answer this question “how might an increasingly secularised and religiously indifferent populace be educated and formed in Christian beliefs and practices?” Pivoting around a key moment: 1943, Jacobs does this through the thought of Jacques Maritain, TS Eliot, CS Lewis, WH Auden, and Simone Weil. His conclusion is that by end of World War II the question these writers are trying to diagnose and answer had been surpassed. Invoking the diagnosis of Jacques Ellul he claims that the “reign of technocracy had become so complete that none can foresee the end of it while this world lasts“.

Jacobs claims, following Ellul, that “technocracy” fundamentally changes the way we see human nature, education and purpose: “All human beings under technique are instruments of something- are technicians - and Elul argues that the primary function of education within this regime is to use psychotechnique to create those technicians. “Education no longer has a humanist end or any value in itself; it has only one goal, to create technicians““(202)

Bryan says

I loved this book. It covers a variety of Christian thinkers such as C.S. Lewis, T.S. Elliot, Simone Weil, Jacques Maritain et al, as they grapple with the causes of the Second World War and question how the future of the Western/Christian world would look like after the conflict. Going into this I was not familiar with some of the texts discussed, but I found Jacobs to be an excellent guide throughout 200ish pages of the story. This book raises many interesting questions and has made me interested in delving deeper into a few of these writers. I would highly recommend for anyone with an interest in Culture, Christianity, and Intellectual History.

Jacob says

Alan Jacobs seems to be indicting our technocratic age by way of Christian humanism’s skepticism that technocracy would be the best, lasting bulwark against totalitarianism. Writers like Eliot, Lewis, Auden, Weil, and Maritain, as presented by Jacobs, in their wartime writings worried that unless a truly personal education that valued not just what we could do, but asks, “Should we do it?” was valued in the West, then even liberal democracies like France, England, and the US we’re doomed to repeat the errors of Nazi Germany. We all have Hitler within us. 73 years after the war ended, we see a fracturing and return to

extremism's in our society, and would do well to reclaim something of the Christian humanist tradition and classical education to guide our use of technology.

Kyle Dunn says

A Sort of Tragedy of Christian Thought

The world wars of the twentieth century signalled the power of totalitarian, technocratic states and a consequent smothering of personhood. Jacobs guides the reader through the thought of five Christian thinkers who lived during the second world war and actively pursued the question - "what kind of people, what kind of culture, must we become, if the Nazis are defeated?" C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot, Auden, Maritain, and Simone Weil. Most of their answers required that intellectuals again take up the task of identifying what a human is and why he/she has value. In line with this they all valued education as a means to cultivate the kind of person they believed that democracy needed. Against the groupthink of fascism, these thinkers believed democracy needed a renewed Christian/humanistic individualism. Jacobs is a delightful guide to this story - I felt like we were sitting in a London pub or Parisian cafe. The story Jacobs tells is a tragedy - for as Jacobs points out - all these thinkers were too late - the states were here, the wars were being fought. Yet I felt it was also tragic because these thinkers perhaps used the world wars as a pretense to justify their pre-existing concerns, T.S. Eliot telling us society needs poetry, C.S. Lewis telling us we need education. They looked at the second world war and saw their ideal "civilization" as the victim (admittedly they saw it as both victim and perpetrator). Such an abstraction may even be true, but more tragically it might be a distraction from the concrete victims - the Jews, the poor, the bombed. I wish these thinkers had paid more attention to them. Even Weil, who cared so much about the outcast, was an anti-semite.

This book will rattle around in my brain for a long time. Raising questions, providing guidance, and inviting conversation. It is a quick read and well worth your money. My only real negative is that I would have been helped by more structure and guidance - tell me why we're going to read this Auden poem before we get there. I'm not smart enough to follow some of these thinkers on my own.

RoF says

I received a free copy of this book in which the author presents 5 thinkers/philosophers/poets who tried to articulate a vision including the christian religion in the upset environment of WWII and its probable upcoming end with the victory of Allied forces against totalitarian regimes.

Therefore the study has a quite narrow scope and this is perfectly fine. With all the quotations and the different additional elements that put the thinkers' assertions in the particular context of this war, it is clear that the author has performed a thorough deep dive in their writings and behaviors.

The aim of the book is to present their ideas and scratch the surface of their recommendations which are basically to include christian thoughts in the education of people who will survive or will be born after the peace treaties are signed. According to them, that would be a cure to foster peaceful behaviors and also a means to fight the technocracy which is identified as a rising threat.

It would have been interesting to have the author involving himself and criticizing the thinking of the 5 chosen people. To move from presenter to analyst. Were their acts in line with the ideas they shared during lectures or seminars and published in books ? What is his take on the fact that they recommend to replace a

doctrine (national socialism for instance) by another one (the christian set of rites, instructions and beliefs) ? They are limited by their understanding of their present environment and do not think out of the box or share many concrete ideas. Their search for transcendence may not be a complete solution for real problems, the victims of war and technocracy are present here and now.
