

# Book Reviews

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

Times of crisis naturally provoke intense reflection and soul-searching. The occasion for Augustine's *Civitas Dei* was at least in part the impending collapse of the Roman Empire. Oswald Spengler wrote *The Decline of the West* just after World War I. Not all those who reflect have been intent on preparing the way for the future, particularly if they did not think there would be one. Yet soberly anticipating the years following the crisis is surely as important as discerning the nature of the crisis itself. It could be argued that after the pioneering days of the Reformation, most leaders were concerned to lay the groundwork for the future. Admittedly, some, like Martin Luther, were not sure there would be much more time before the end. But when they did think about the next generations, often their attention turned to *education*. Thus, Jan Amos Comenius, the Czech Reformer, advocated learning as the only sure way to preserve and develop any gains. The same was true in Geneva, where John Calvin, and especially Theodore Beza, took pains to consolidate the advances made by the Reformation in that city by means of schools and the university.

We can also think of the consequences of failing to plan as well. Examples abound of leaders who never quite faced the issue of succession and whose movements paid the price. When things are going well, we do not tend to worry about the future as much as when they are not.

Important voices spoke out during one of the greatest crisis periods of our time, or any time, World War II. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, near the end of 1942, a dreadful year for European civilization by any account, declared, "The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to

extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation is to live” These words, and the sentiment they contained, appear as a leit-motif throughout this remarkable volume by Alan Jacobs. In his own words, “the primary task of this book is to explore this [previously described] model of Christian humane learning as a force for social renewal” (51).

The book is an extensive, learned examination of the views of five Christians, who, from very different backgrounds, address the question of the aftermath of the most global war in history. What they hold in common is the view that the principal location for the deciding way forward will be education. This does not entirely distinguish them from their more secular peers. What does is the view that without the Christian faith the outcome will be fruitless.

The five authors examined are Jacques Maritain, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, and Simone Weil. Others, like Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr, have walk-on parts, and a short afterword is devoted to Jacques Ellul. At first blush, one might wonder how such odd bedfellows could be on the same page about the future. In numerous details, they are not. But what Jacobs manages to do is find commonalities that, when combined, give weight to the central message. If they generally agree that somehow education within a Christian worldview is going to be crucial to the survival of civilization after the war is over, they also appear to unite on the diagnosis of the danger to be faced. In a word, it is *force*. In different ways, all five interlocutors worried about systems. Eliot railed against repetition. Weil, though a Christian, could never quite join the church, fearing institutional “spiritual totalitarianism.” Auden wrote against “the planned society, caesarism of thugs or bureaucracies, paideia, Scientia.” He famously sparred with Harvard’s president James B. Conant, who wanted the college to become a powerhouse of science and technology, downplaying the humanities.

The authors all want to see the humanities kept alive amidst threats of various kinds. Lewis delivered his remarkable sermon, eventually titled “Learning in War-Time,” at Saint Mary the Virgin, the University Church in Oxford, six weeks into the war. The question was obvious: what good is it to engage in studies when the country is at war? His answer is compelling: “The war creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we no longer can ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice.” A life of learning is good but is only one of many lives we can live—that is, as long as we do it, as well as all things, to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). Perhaps, as Jacobs speculates, Lewis not only has students in mind but himself. Cultural pursuits may matter, or they may not. It simply depends on what you do with them whether in wartime or not.

Lewis began to write *The Abolition of Man* in 1942, arguing that science, or an imperialistic view of it, was about to triumph over the other disciplines. “Man has nature whacked” he said, quoting a friend, warning of the dangers of the conquest of nature, which in the end is always driven by a few men. In this same book Lewis argues with the authors of a text on English grammar, which he calls *The Green Book*, who claim that when someone says, “That waterfall is beautiful,” they are really saying they have a subjective feeling of beauty; that is because no object can be intrinsically beautiful. Lewis retorts that the viewer might have feelings of humility before the cascade but not of beauty. The grammarians are making the philosophical mistake of saying objects cannot have objective beauty, but we can have feelings about beauty. It would be like reducing any declaration of an action as unfair to a feeling of unfairness. But in fact, if we have any feeling about it, it would be from our sense of justice, which is an assertion that there are objective standards.

Maritain pleads for the recovery of true humanism in an age where all around it is being crushed. He is the only one of the five who thinks the term *humanism* ought to have a wholly positive connotation. He argues that Thomas Aquinas supplies the tools for authentic humanism. In fact, he laments the “dissolution of the Middle Ages” and says that today “humanism” has become the opposite of Thomas’s view. Today we have the cult of humanity, which has produced the Nazis and other perverse forms of oppressive régimes. Yet he is not pessimistic. In *The Twilight of Civilization* he explains that the present trials are but a prelude to a rebirth of true humanism.

Interestingly, he admires Karl Barth but finds him in the end dismissive of anthropocentric humanism. Barth’s theology of grace does not vivify but leaves man in his annihilated state. We need much more. We need the true humanism of the Christian worldview, which centers on man as God’s image-bearer. We need a God who meets us with grace, not with dialectical encounter.

Weil may be the least known of the five, although she wrote extensively and is enjoying something of a revival today. She shares Maritain’s sense of a decline but differs radically on his assessment of the Middle Ages. The high point for her was the Romanesque era. Unlike many art lovers, she does not care for the Gothic, with its heaviness and scaffolding. Such a totalitarian mindset allowed the church to crush the faith of simple folks. Humanism, even the humanism of the Renaissance, which may have begun in an attempt to free people from the “evil” thirteenth century, was in the end incapable of turning humanity toward a God of grace.

Eliot's masterpiece, "The Four Quartets," is, among other things, a kind of lens onto the war through spiritual eyes. After the remarkable turnaround at Dunkirk, when 350,000 soldiers were freed from nearly certain captivity, all eyes were on Winston Churchill, who was able to claim not victory, but temporary resistance against the dark powers in air and fire. Eliot, who had become English for all intents and purposes, declared that the best we can do is to "keep alive aspirations which can remain valid throughout the longest and darkest period of universal calamity and degradation" (101). Jacobs comments that the ethic undergirding this extraordinary poem is "homely": do your duty without grumbling in circumstances that are anything but propitious.

Auden gets as much attention as any of the five, perhaps because Jacobs has spent so much of his life studying him. His marvelous book, *What Became of Wystan: Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry* (1998), showcases the author's skill in deciphering and then exhibiting the poet's artistry to the average reader. Auden wrote four long poems during the war years. One of them, "The Age of Anxiety," describes some of the psychological results of war, particularly the "displaced person." Intriguingly, the poem describes four New Yorkers, who, like Auden himself, have been spared the horrors of war, at least directly. One of the four, Rosetta, is Jewish and has escaped the harrowing realities of the Shoah. The best she can say about God is that somehow, despite all appearances, he is there. "His Question disqualifies our quick senses / His Truth makes our theories historical sins / It is where we are wounded that is when He speaks" After the war, the displaced persons are more qualified to address ultimate questions, though the answers may be elusive.

These brief words cannot adequately describe the remarkable cataract of insights in this book. They combine to form a real symphony of perceptions about the human need to defend *humanity* in a time of crisis. That may only be hoped for within a Christian framework.

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Elizabeth Agnew Cochran. *Protestant Virtue and Stoic Ethics*. London: T&T Clark, 2018.

With her latest work, Elizabeth Agnew Cochran continues her project of retrieving virtue for Protestant theological ethics. In particular, she argues that an ethic of constructive virtue emerges from the works of magisterial