

BOOK REVIEWS

Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis*

(New York: OUP, 2018), pp. xix + 256. £20.00

Joseph Mangina

Wycliffe College, 5 Hoskin Ave., Toronto, Ontario (jmangina@wycliffe.utoronto.ca)

A capacity for time travel is one of the more important items in the theologian's tool-kit. We are prone to accept the dominant assumptions of our era as if they simply mapped onto reality: this is how things are, so this is how things have always been and must be. Escaping from these dogmas, even temporarily, allows us some breathing room – a way of calling our own positions into question and opening up the theological imagination so as to better take up the challenges of the moment. This is the impulse behind all the best theologies of *ressourcement*.

Alan Jacob's *The Year of Our Lord 1943* is a powerful and stimulating exercise in this genre. I can think of few works of intellectual history that do a better job of evoking a sense for the *feel* of an era, especially the 'near past' of the mid-twentieth century. The book is dominated by a single central conceit: that the early months of 1943 represent a psychological turning point in the Second World War, a moment when it became clear to most observers that the Allies would emerge victorious in the battle against Fascism. This realisation freed up energies to think about the shape of the postwar settlement, especially in a world increasingly dominated by science and technology, whose destructive potential was on full display even before the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In a world ruled by technique, would there still be a place for human dignity? And if not, would the victory over Fascism prove hollow in the end? Hence the work's subtitle, *Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis*; the phrase could almost have been *written* in 1943, combining echoes of W. H. Auden (*The Age of Anxiety*) and Reinhold Niebuhr (*Christianity and Crisis*), among others. Crisis – a term reintroduced into the Christian vocabulary by Kierkegaard and the dialectical theologians of the 1920s – was much in the air in those days.

The book focuses not only a particular time, but on a limited and fascinating cast of characters. Jacobs selects five leading Christian intellectuals, and sets out to determine what they were thinking about these matters as of early 1943. The five thinkers in question are Auden, Jacques Maritain, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis and Simone Weil. It is an odd list, to be sure. Readers of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* will immediately notice that, with the exception of Maritain, none was a professional theologian, and even he was more of a Christian philosopher and aesthetic theorist than a *Dogmatiker*. In their various ways, all five of Jacobs' figures were engaged in forms of the theology of culture; if one had to pin down a central dogmatic locus, it would be that of theological anthropology. One cannot ask the question, 'What is authentic humanism?' without at the same time asking, 'Who is the human being as created in God's image, fallen, and redeemed in

Jesus Christ?' And of course, looming over the anthropological question is the question of God as such, about which the five had much to say, though usually by implication

A word is called for on Jacobs' method, which contributes a great deal to the interest of the work. Rather than adopting a conventional strategy of discussing each thinker in turn, Jacobs interweaves their stories, focusing on their works in progress in the period in question. (Wisely he does not take the '1943' conceit too literally; works written in the years just before and after are also fair game for discussion.) The book is topically organised, with chapters devoted to such questions as humanism, education, the reality of evil and the Christian's relation to political power. This narrative technique has the advantage of keeping the focus squarely on the questions themselves, rather than on the particular 'systems' of the five thinkers. The method also helps to resist premature closure. Jacobs is less interested in arriving at settled conclusions than he is in allowing his readers to become privy to the lively wartime conversation that was going on about theology, politics, culture and technology among thoughtful Christians in this era. One of the primary takeaways from the book is the sense it conveys of the astonishing Christian intellectual culture that still existed at the time. Jacobs effectively conveys this part of the story through his minor characters, a distinguished list that includes Reinhold Niebuhr, J. H. Oldham, Ralph Mannheim, Robert M. Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jacques Ellul and even Richard Rorty, who as a University of Chicago undergraduate was briefly tempted by Hutchins' and Adler's idealised Thomism, before embarking on a career as America's pre-eminent pragmatist philosopher. Through these various plots and subplots, the reader will learn a great deal about the secular as well as Christian debates over the fate of humanism and *paideia* at mid-century.

As to the five central figures themselves, for Jacobs they clearly constitute an affinity group; but what is the nature of the affinity? We can begin by noting that all were migrants of various sorts. In some cases the migration was elective – Lewis from Northern Ireland to Oxford, Eliot from America to England, Auden from England to America – and in others involuntary: Maritain and Weil were both literal exiles from occupied France. More pertinently, perhaps, all five were converts. Jacobs recounts the harrowing story of how Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, as students at the Sorbonne at the turn of the century, compacted together to commit suicide should nihilism turn out to be 'true'. (They were delivered by the philosophy of Henri Bergson, a secularised Jew who served as a catalyst for their conversion to Catholicism.) Lewis underwent what was to become the most famous and influential conversion of the twentieth century. And Simone Weil, of course, was a notorious *non*-convert: her protracted refusal to be received into the Catholic Church, whose doctrines she affirmed but whose history of implication in violence troubled her, underscores the high stakes involved in conversion to Christ.

Another way of characterising Jacobs' characters would be to say that all were possessed of an apocalyptic imagination. Here it is crucial to note what they were converting from: in all five cases, a form of principled atheistic modernism. No doubt this endowed them with an especially keen sense of the boundary separating the church and the world, and they expressed this in vivid, often dualistic imagery. In their different ways all were inclined to picture evil in personal terms, a point Jacobs nicely brings out in a chapter titled 'Demons'. Lewis' dystopian fantasy *That Hideous Strength*, a fictional counterpart to the lectures published as *The Abolition of Man*, depicts a Britain sliding gradually into state-sponsored technocracy, of an almost literally 'demonic' sort. Raïssa Maritain wrote a long essay on Satan titled *Le prince de ce monde*, while Weil's political concepts of Force and the Beast could easily be characters taken out of the book of Revelation. For Jacobs' protagonists, the problem with modernity was not simply that

it was godless – that went without saying – but that it threatened to become a nightmare regime of the post-human. The assault on God and the assault on the human person went hand in hand.

Yet it was precisely these thinkers' worries about secular modernity that complicated their relation to humanism, a term that had come to be associated with the inheritance of the Renaissance and, especially, the Enlightenment. Indeed, Jacobs points out that among the group it was only Jacques Maritain who used the word 'humanism' with confidence, and that was because he knew exactly what to do with it: he sought to recover an authentic Christian humanism as embodied in the thought of St Thomas Aquinas, as an alternative to the atheistic humanism of modernity. Jacobs calls this story the 'neo-Thomist narrative of decline' and shrewdly points out its persistence among some Christian intellectuals even today. Although he clearly welcomes Maritain's positive spin on humanism, he just as clearly rejects the narrative of decline. It is a rare tipping of his own hand in a book that is, for the most part, content to advance its argument in the form of description.

Jacobs' worries about narratives of decline derive in part from their potential for nostalgia, a temptation that affected some if not all of his five figures. This is most clearly the case with T. S. Eliot, who was inclined to confuse the values of social conservatism and Englishness with Christian ideals. (Jacobs is rather severe with Eliot, both as social critic and as the author of some memorably convoluted prose. As if to compensate, he offers a powerful reading of *Four Quartets*, that haunting wartime meditation on time, mortality and the vocation of the poet.) Like Eliot, Lewis and his fellow Inklings tended to valorise the premodern over the modern. In their writings it often seems that technology as such is the evil wrought by modernity. Though Lewis hastened to add that he was 'not against science', readers of *That Hideous Strength* could be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

Of the group, the one least inclined to nostalgia was Simone Weil. Far from idealising the high Gothic as a golden age of Christendom, she argues that its lovely edifice was in fact built on a foundation of violence, symbolised by the Albigensian Crusade of the early 1200s. She proposed an alternative history of the Middle Ages, in which not the Gothic but the Romanesque best embodied Christian ideals. Here one could find a Christendom less obsessed with orthodoxy and hence more open to 'the other'. It is a typically skew judgement on Weil's part, reflecting her horror of group-think and the power of social collectives or the Beast. As she wrote concerning Satan's offer to Jesus of the world's kingdoms: 'the social is irremediably the domain of the devil'. This judgement applies to the church no less than to secular political institutions. Although 'the Church must inevitably be a social structure,' she writes, 'in so far as it is a social structure it belongs to the Prince of this World' (Weil, *Waiting for God*, quoted in Jacobs, p. 114).

But if Weil is extreme in some ways, in other ways she is typical of Jacobs' five intellectuals taken as a whole. All were united in their suspicion of technology. All lamented the modern tendency to substitute means for ends and to treat nature as so much raw material for our projects. Though it was Lewis' title, any one of them could have written about 'the abolition of man'. All were unrepentantly bookish, finding in a preoccupation with old texts an antidote to modernity's complacent equation of truth with novelty. In his preface to a 1944 edition of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, C. S. Lewis counselled students not to be held hostage to secondary literature but to engage 'the greats' on their own terms. He also suggested they read at least two old books for every new one. His advice would surely have been echoed by Maritain, Eliot, Auden and Weil. They were old-fashioned believers in *paideia*, convinced that an engagement with the literature of the past has the power to make one a better person and citizen.

Hence the interest all five evinced in the shape of education in any postwar settlement; nor were they the only intellectuals in the period concerned with this issue.

One can read and profit from this book simply as an engaging exercise in intellectual history. The characters are fascinating, and Jacobs tells the story well. But surely there is a constructive agenda hovering not far below the surface. Jacobs clearly shares his subjects' suspicion of technocracy, their worry that in modernity the human person is in danger of being sacrificed at the altar of efficiency and power. At the same time, he is wise enough to resist adopting a merely reactive stance. The Christian critique of modernity must include the Christian critique of the church itself. Stated in positive terms, if the church is going to provide any sort of meaningful alternative to the technocratic order, her members must be prepared to go through a painful process of self-examination and formation. There is a telling exchange early in Jacobs' narrative that illustrates this point. When Reinhold Niebuhr's *Christianity and Power Politics* appeared in 1940 it was reviewed by Auden, who was in process of becoming a close friend of Ursula Niebuhr and her famous husband. Although Auden's review is respectful – he had himself recently returned to Christian faith and appreciated Niebuhr's commitment to (neo-)orthodoxy – he also expresses hesitations. He worries that Niebuhr's version of Christian realism is a bit too worldly and calculating, as if theology could be practised without the theologian himself being wounded in the process. What is lacking in this vision, Auden suggests, is something like the virtue of humility as seen in the desert fathers: 'The question is: does he [Niebuhr] believe that the contemplative life is the highest and most exhausting of vocations, that the church is saved by the saints, or doesn't he?' Or in Jacobs' paraphrase, 'a vast chasm separates an Augustinian theological anthropology employed as a tool of social analysis and critique from an Augustinian theological anthropology that generates what would surely be a profoundly discomfiting self-knowledge' (p. 55).

The issue here, it should be noted, at stake here is not whether Reinhold Niebuhr as an individual was sufficiently humble, but whether the contemplative life – devotion to God simply for God's own sake – is the church's most faithful response to a technocratic age. To say that the church is saved by the saints is to say that *God* matters, not the church's prudential calculations about the prospects for her own survival. This conviction may be said to have been shared by all five of Jacobs' intellectuals. The church is saved by the saints, in the sense that she sets her mind on eternal things and not on the things of this age. At a practical level, this means investing a great deal of energy in those practices of intellectual and spiritual formation that will make possible lives of genuine human personhood. This is the church's inner task, and in a sense it is not 'for' anything other than itself. Yet despite this, all the five hoped that the church's work of saint-making could also bear fruit in and for the world. Maritain, for instance, came to believe that Christianity could serve as the secret leaven in the lump even of secular, liberal democracy. His late conversion to the importance of human rights reflects this hope. Eliot hoped that educational reform in England might come to reflect Christian virtues, if not Christian doctrines; and so in different ways for all five figures. To invoke H. Richard Niebuhr's venerable typology, all were believers in 'Christ transforming culture'.

Jacobs' book ends on a somewhat wistful note, as his five intellectuals – or the four survivors for by August 1943 the fragile, driven Weil had died of sheer burnout – arrive at war's end realising that their hopes for a renewed Christian *paideia* would go unrealized. Jacobs suggests that this was inevitable: the retrieval they sought had long since been overtaken by the sheer success of the technological revolution itself. A coda to the book examines the contribution of Jacques Ellul, a younger figure whom Jacobs casts as a worthy successor to the concerns of his five. Ellul's analysis of technique

and propaganda in *The Technological Society* both echoes and deepens their analysis of the modern era; but no more than they was he able to answer the question, 'What is to be done?' Christians (so Ellul maintained) are summoned to be a witnessing presence in the world, joining in efforts to promote the common good, while at the same time taking care not to reduce Christianity to a mere generic affirmation of justice, development and human rights. What the world needs from the church is *the gospel* – or otherwise stated, God. Wise counsel indeed, but hardly a blueprint for the church's action in society.

What is the theological reader to take from this stimulating work? At one level, it can serve as a healthy reminder that theologians have no monopoly on reflection concerning the faith once delivered to the saints. Like any discipline, theology can at times be tediously parochial. It is good to have the windows opened from time to time to let in light and air. Christian intellectuals from outside the theological guild may practice what Barth called 'irregular dogmatics'. Moreover, such figures may be more attentive than the professional theologian to the forms of training (in language, virtue and the emotions) that are *already* in place and operative in technocratic society. We are always being schooled, always being disciplined, whether we know it or not. The five thinkers examined here understood this well; hence their hermeneutics of retrieval was always accompanied by a healthy dose of suspicion. As Weil would have put it, the Beast has designs on us, and so we need to be able to decode the messages he is communicating about how we should live and, especially, what we should love. Weil's great essay 'On the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God' reads very oddly as educational theory, but it at least places the question of love at the centre of any Christian *paideia*.

Beyond this, Jacobs' book gestures toward the possibility of something like a renewed Christian Republic of Letters devoted to the question of the human good. The spaces in which this will happen are uncertain - books? journals? online forums? But whether physical or virtual, such spaces would allow for inquiry into the question of human *personhood* of a sort that Jacobs' five would have recognised. Spaces of this sort are badly needed - especially ones where Christians can bridge their own confessional divisions, and/or discuss these issues with non-Christians (a possibility Weil would have relished). That would be an authentic humanism. May the tribe of those wishing to pursue it increase.

doi:10.1017/S0036930619000693

Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*

(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), pp. xvii + 238. \$28.00.

Alexander Massmann

Faculty of Divinity, West Road, Cambridge (am2251@cam.ac.uk)

God is always merciful to creatures, creating them, pursuing communion with them, setting them free and redeeming them for eternal life, according to Elizabeth Johnson. In her new book, this argument grows out of a systematic critique of Anselm of Canterbury's theory of satisfaction, which in Johnson's view is so