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Van Til: Defender of the Faith (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by John M. Zinkand

Van Til: Defender of the Faith, by William White, Jr. Nashville and New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979. 233 pages, \$4.95. Reviewed by John M. Zinkand, Professor of Classical Languages.

Here is a book for which many may have great expectations — a biography of one of the great philosopher-theologians of this century. The hopes will probably be unfulfilled as White provides not an exhaustive life-story but a series of vignettes.

Though it claims to be “authorized” there is no acknowledgement of this authenticity by Van Til, either in a foreword or elsewhere. The closest the reader comes to anything “authorized” are the Bible quotations from the *Authorized Version*. (White is a participant of the Authorized Version updating project sponsored by Thomas Nelson, publishers of this volume.)

Material relating to the upheaval at Princeton Theological Seminary and the involvement of J. Gresham Machen — perennial stock-in-trade for articles on Westminster venerables — serves as filler. Surely White did not need private interviews with “C.V.T.” to gather these data. Ned B. Stonehouse’s *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954, 1958 and Westminster Theological Seminary, pb 3rd ed. 1978) and Edwin H. Rian’s *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) made these accounts public.

White sketches Van Til’s skirmishes with J. Oliver Buswell, Gordon H. Clark and Karl Barth, while passing over conflicts with James Daane (though Van Til devoted a whole book to his theology). *Calvin Forum*, a now defunct journal, marshalled its major forces to attack “Westminster

Apologetics” in a series in 1954 (Vol. XX, 1-2, 3, 4, 5.), but the authorized biography provides blank pages here. The same is true for Van Til’s relation with Francis A. Schaeffer, promoted by Evangelicals as today’s greatest living Christian thinker. Schaeffer, to this reviewer’s knowledge, never mentions Van Til in his published works. (He did study two years at Westminster Theological Seminary.) White’s book provides support for concluding that there might be a gentleman’s agreement that neither apologist acknowledge the other’s existence.

Readers might have wanted White to probe Van Til on differences with his long term colleagues John Murray (Systematic Theology), and Ned B. Stonehouse (New Testament). The latter disagreed with Van Til on Paul’s view of the point of contact as expressed in the Areopagus address recorded in Acts 17. Van Til’s relationship to the present North American exponents of the Christian philosophy which originated in the Netherlands is not clear. How Van Til relates to current Christian action groups is also excluded from the purview of this accredited life history.

The *Festschrift* produced for his seventy-fifth birthday contained a bibliography of Van Til’s publications. Since *Jerusalem and Athens* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed) appeared in 1971, the present work ought to have included an updated reference list. Documentation is lacking in this biography. This and the jocular style, e.g. “What Do You Do With a Naked Atheist?”, cast

doubt on how seriously this work should be taken.

Typographical errors include strange spellings of *afscheidung*, a garbled *Anknüpfungspunkt*, as well as others. Among the most glaring errors of fact is the designation of the new (in 1936) Presbyterian Church as the "Orthodox Presbyterian Church." Its being called the Presbyterian Church of America was the grounds for legal action by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Lack of

The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720, by Margaret C. Jacob. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976. 288 pages, \$17.50. Reviewed by Arnold Koekkoek, Associate Professor of History.

Professor Jacob, in a well-researched and carefully documented work, sets out to provide what she describes as a "social explanation for the triumph of Newtonianism" (p. 18). It is her thesis that "the primary reason" for the early success of the Newtonian natural philosophy was not its "supposed correspondence" (p. 18) with the actual behavior of the natural order, but the fact that the latitudinarians vigorously promoted the new science because it served their interests. "The ordered providentially guided, mathematically regulated universe of Newton gave a model for a stable and prosperous polity" (p. 18). It was this model polity, and especially the role of the church in it, which these latitudinarian churchmen tried to defend and uphold against the attacks of "atheistical freethinkers" on the one hand and millenarian enthusiasts on the other. The Newtonian natural philosophy seemed to provide the ideal vehicle for their apologetics. Therefore, says Jacob, "if I seek to establish anything, it is the vital role played by social and political issues in the formulation and acceptance of the new science, in particular of the Newtonian natural philosophy" (p. 21).

The author is to be commended for this presentation of the social-political matrix for the development of a very important scientific teaching. All too often, it seems, such intellectual activities are seen in a very limited way that does not take the contextual situation into account. It is good that scholars of Jacob's caliber recognize the incompleteness of such a narrow view. Reading Jacob's account, one is convinced that the latitudinarian Anglican churchmen did not understand all the scientific implications or calculations involved, but that they surely grasped how valuable Newtonian theories could be for their purposes and that they eagerly and vigorously promoted them for those purposes.

Having said that, however, I am not ready to accept Jacob's major thesis. The latitudinarians' period of predominance in the Church of England

attention to detail is obvious in relocating Westminster (in 1937) on an estate in *Chestnut Hill*, rather than Laverock. (The former community merely provides the Philadelphia connection for mailing purposes).

Controversial figure, prolific author, skillful pedagogue, a humble Christian — surely such a complex person deserves more thorough consideration than White has given.

is, by Jacob's own admission, very short. Given the length of time which it takes for major scientific changes to be widely accepted, it seems unlikely that these men were the "primary reason" for the triumph of Newtonianism, whatever their motives. To assign such a role to these men is to see them as major figures in English intellectual history, an assessment which is at the very least open to question. (See in this connection the curt and skeptical review by Richard Westfall in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 82, No. 2 April, 1977, p. 355.) Furthermore, the author ignores or brushes aside (p. 17) what one might call, for present purposes, any narrowly scientific explanations for the triumph of Newtonianism. Such internal factors are not refuted or recognized, merely dismissed with knowledge of their existence and possible worth assumed. It seems a rather cavalier way of proceeding to one's own thesis with hardly a method calculated to convince skeptical readers that those narrowly scientific factors are really not important after all.

In short, I will take step one with the author — the milieu in which a theory is presented is very important. I will also take step two with the author — the latitudinarian churchmen of late 17th-early 18th century England recognized the importance and value for themselves in the theories of Newton, and they urged acceptance of those theories for reasons not directly related to the mathematics or mechanics involved. But I will not take step three with the author — that this latitudinarian sponsorship was the main reason for the Newtonian triumph. I cannot accept that Professor Jacob has provided what the publisher confidently claims in the dust jacket blurb: "a convincing new explanation for the triumph of Newtonianism." The book is scholarly, worth reading and discussing, and it should not be merely shelved by the historian of science; but its arguments do not compel one to accept the author's conclusion.