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The Year of our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Year of our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis. Alan Jacobs. Oxford University Press, 2018. 280pp. ISBN:978-0190864651. Reviewed by Dr. Walker Cosgrove, Associate Professor of History, Dordt University.

I wrestle often with matters of faith and the ways it ought to shape me as a human, though rarely do I arrive at satisfactory answers. When I first saw the publication of the newest book by Alan Jacobs—Distinguished Professor of Humanities in the Honors Program and Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, as well as author of many notable, diverse books on religion and literature—I thought it could possibly assist me. I was immediately drawn to it because in my early 20s I ransacked many used bookstores for works by the key literary figures discussed in Jacobs’ book, in particular T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, and W.H. Auden; as well, I have turned to Jacques Maritain and Simone Weil in subsequent years, who are also Jacobs’ main subjects.

Upon reading this book, I realized that I was not wrong to think it would help. However, I did not foresee Jacobs’ tone of pessimism at the end, which left me with more questions than answers.

At its core, this book is about five “humanistic” intellectuals active in 1943 and beyond—Eliot, Lewis, Auden, Maritain, and Weil—who attempted to cast a vision for Western society after the Second World War, a vision in which Christianity played a central role in the rebuilding process (xv). As Jacobs writes, “The war raised for each of the thinkers I have named a pressing set of questions about the relationship between Christianity and the Western democratic social order, especially about whether Christianity was uniquely suited to the moral underpinning of that order” because each thought that the entrenchment of positivism and relativism in society led to a politics of power, which made the West as morally suspect and as dangerous as Hitler (xvi, 9, 13).

A major challenge Jacobs faced with this book is that these intellectuals do not form a cohesive group and did not directly interact much; all that holds them together is that as Christians, each struggled against the West’s descent into technocracy. That said, Jacobs is successful in providing a unifying theme to his otherwise diverse cast of characters, namely, that they were Christian humanists who feared the

unbridled power and force leading to technocratic empires and the kind of post-human society we are experiencing today. To combat these dark trends, they encouraged society to re-engage its Christian heritage, particularly through a specific vision of educating the next generation in the line of Augustine’s notion of *ordo amoris* (137).

In chapter 2—which along with chapter 1 provides the intellectual background for the rest of the book—Jacobs explores the first half of the book’s subtitle, “Christian Humanism,” emphasizing the literary bent of his subjects. Here, which is in some sense a defense of his whole project, Jacobs connects his subjects with humanists of the early Italian Renaissance, since both thought that literature possesses a certain power to transform individuals and societies in more humane ways. He argues that while these thinkers focused on literature and not philosophy or theology, they were no less theological or Christian for doing so (39). He is quick to add that none of these thinkers, other than Maritain, thought of themselves as humanists. But, with the early Italian humanists of the 14th through 16th centuries, they desired a kind of restoration of society through a vision cast by literature and the arts (50).

The “crisis” in the second half of the subtitle of Jacobs’ book, “An Age of Crisis,” is about what vision would be cast for the future of the post-war West. While Lewis abhorred Nazism, he thought that what was equally dangerous was a kind of unbridled nationalism that emphasized self-interest and the politics of power over anything else, and which also attached the church and Christianity to any national cause (9, 11). Lewis feared that absent higher ends, especially if the state co-opted the church, leaders will base their ideas of justice and peace on the interest of a powerful nation-state. Instead of seeking the flourishing of humanity, the state then pursues the entrenchment of the powerful and wealthy, and it uses people to achieve this end (16). He suggests that this is seen mostly clearly when society replaces First Things with Second Things, arguing in *The Weight of Glory* that part of the problem is that society absolutized

politics and moved people to the periphery (56, 61).

In his reflections on power, Auden compares mid-20th century Europe with the Roman empire from Augustus to Constantine (79-80). For Auden, according to Jacobs, great care had to be put into any sort of Christian renewal of society because the danger of the state co-opting the church was strong. Auden points to Christianity under Constantine, which became a means to an end, namely the thing that would save the Roman Empire (81). Reflecting on Auden's ideas, Jacobs writes,

And what is Caesar? What President Eisenhower, in his farewell address to the nation in 1961, called the "military-industrial complex"; what Michel Foucault called the "power-knowledge regime"; what Auden himself in "New Year Letter" had called "the machine." In a word, Caesar is Force (82).

For Auden, the only possible end of Force and power is the birth of Jesus Christ, as he writes, "This Child marks the end of the machine, the end of the military-industrial complex, the end of *force*" (85, italics original).

Similar to Auden, Weil saw "Force" as the dark underbelly of Western history since the Greco-Roman era. She was unsure if the West had developed a counternarrative to the *Iliad*, that great epic about force, and as Jacobs writes, "In the three remaining years of her life, Weil would devote much of her intellectual energy to the attempt to ask what might prompt and ground an authentic and adequate answer to Homer's 'poem of force,' and epic of another power, another ethos" (94). She also worried about the lure of power and force for the church in its attempt to bring the gospel to the world, and locates this problem not with Constantine but rather the Gothic era of the high medieval world (96-97). That said, when the church eschews power, it fulfills its fullest potential, as Weil writes, "...the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is preeminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others" (57). The only way to combat Force, according to her, is through humility and spiritual poverty, and the church is most successful in its humility and weakness (157-158).

Jacobs' book builds to a crescendo in the answer these intellectuals provided for the problem of the post-war West. The West got to the brink of destroying itself because of poor education, and thus the mid-twentieth-century Christian humanists attempted to cast their visions for true education as the solution for

the rebuilding efforts (xiv, xv, 36). It was essential that Christian virtue and truth had to infuse these efforts because, as Lewis writes, "war creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice" (103). The end of the war was not the end of the problem but was instead the moment to begin addressing it more intentionally.

For these intellectuals, education—and thus cultural formation and rebirth—ought to be properly centered around formation, or becoming more fully human, rather than simply the accumulation of pragmatic information. As Auden writes, lack of good teaching means that students do "not wish to *become* wise, only to *be* wise, to graduate cum laude" (145), which Jacobs follows with, "[Auden] thereby drives a wedge between the quest for genuine wisdom and the desire to be academically (and then, of course, socially and economically) successful" (145-146).

As well, Jacobs writes this about Maritain:

The best summary I can make of Maritain's subtle argument goes like this: "Though intuition and love cannot be taught directly, it is the task of the teacher to help form young people so that when the opportunity comes, outside of school, for them to acquire intuition and love, they will be prepared to do so. Teachers, then, play a pivotal role in the building and sustaining of meaningful human culture: if they do not intervene in young people's lives, in the indirect yet distinctive way that only they can, the culture will surely, if slowly, fall." (127)

It is easy to criticize despotic totalitarianism of the 20th century for destroying true human culture; however, Maritain was equally concerned about dangers of pragmatism in the west and its influence on the future of education and culture in western democracies. It seems clear that in the nearly 80 years since the end of the Second World War, Maritain prophetically predicted the technocratic pragmatism that undergirds much of the American economy. He thought post-war society was not educating in a truly human way but merely training each person to become a tool of a technocratic society, leading, ultimately, to the death of genuine humane culture (129-130).

Whether intentional or not, Jacobs' book ends on a note of pessimism. The final chapter examines these intellectuals post-1943, when they realize that the post-war will go in a different direction than the

one for which all in their own ways advocated, and thus all move into different projects disconnected to their war-year efforts. The sense one gets is that they all give up, with the exception of Weil, who had already died by this point (170ff, 190ff). In the afterward Jacobs concentrates on Jacques Ellul, and the ways in which Ellul moves in a different direction from these intellectuals as he thinks about Christian life in a post-Christian world. It is hard to know if Jacobs is optimistic or pessimistic about the place of the Christian intellectual in helping to shape the world today. While he lauds his subjects, ultimately he has to admit that “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). And he seems to know, or at least hope, that another generation of thinkers will rise and attempt

to shape the patterns of culture. But he also seems to question whether or not they will arise on time, or show up too late like these thinkers (206).

Jacobs’ book is well worth a read by anyone interested in wrestling with the Christian’s role in post-Christian society, those interested in any of these literary figures particularly, or even those who simply enjoy Jacobs’ prose. One of the most enjoyable aspects of this book for me is Jacobs’ readings on a variety of texts by these intellectuals. At times, it was almost as if I had the opportunity to eavesdrop in a Jacobs’ seminar on these writers, and as a result I look forward to carving out time to reread many of these texts. Alan Jacobs has my thanks for writing this book that has shaped my subsequent thinking, teaching, and writing.

Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know. Daniel R. DeNicola. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017. 250 pp. ISBN 978-0-262-03644-3. Reviewed by Dr. Carl P. Fictorie, Professor of Chemistry, Dordt University.

In *Understanding Ignorance*, Daniel DeNicola invites us into a paradox, an attempt to understand what we don’t know. Early in the book, he acknowledges this paradox and confronts possible objections to his efforts to understand ignorance: “[p]rofessing to write a whole book on ignorance,” he says, “reeks of clever irony and invites sarcasm” (10). Yet the paradox of the title drew me into reading this book. I learned that there is a wealth of knowledge about ignorance, and understanding facets of our ignorance aids in our understanding our knowledge. In this comprehensive but not exhaustive overview, DeNicola shows that understanding something about ignorance is very helpful to knowledge and wisdom.

DeNicola is Professor of Philosophy at Gettysburg College, and while the book is philosophical in tone, it is not overly technical, so it meets his goal of being approachable by a wide range of readers (xii). At the same time, the book serves as groundwork for the development of a new field of epistemology that integrates knowledge and ignorance into a single discipline (13, 208). Time will tell whether that goal was achieved and whether this field takes hold in academic circles.

In the opening chapter, DeNicola provides his impetus for studying ignorance. He surveys modern Western culture and observes a “tenacious strain of anti-intellectualism in American life” (7). Published in 2017, *Understanding Ignorance* was presumably

written just before or at the start of Donald Trump’s term as president, and the author clearly sees and laments the era of “fake news” in this larger anti-intellectual context. It is precisely because of this anti-intellectualism that a book such as this is needed. DeNicola reminds us that Western culture from the time of Socrates has placed great value on knowledge while viewing ignorance as a vice (9). As we progress through the book, the author argues that not all knowledge is good and not all ignorance is bad. In fact, understanding ignorance is, for the author, necessary if we are to gain knowledge.

A nuanced discussion of two conceptual challenges is the subject of the second chapter. First, DeNicola describes ignorance as a negative concept, one which indicates the absence of something, in this case the lack of knowledge (16). This concept can become problematic when we try to treat this lack as a real entity in and of itself. The author suggests that “ignorance implies the capacity to learn,” making ignorance a key part of the structure of knowledge (18).

The second conceptual challenge is the paradox that to try to understand ignorance must necessarily destroy that ignorance with knowledge, the problem implied in the title of the book. However, DeNicola argues that this is conflating the concept of ignorance with the content or subject of that ignorance. It is possible to know that one does not know something without specifying what that something is (19).