

Children of Light in an Age of Darkness

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

By Alan Jacobs

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What if Jean-Paul Sartre had a point? No, no, not that “hell is other people,” the most famous line from his 1944 play, *No Exit*. That phrase conveys the kind of romantic cynicism that appeals to late-career lawyers, recently dumped undergraduates, and flunked-out philosophy PhDs looking for smart stuff to slap on mugs and T-shirts. I’m thinking of his far more insightful reading of William Faulkner’s fiction: “As to Faulkner’s heroes, they never look ahead. They face backwards as the car carries them along.” There’s a self-evidently doomed quality to this retrograde glance, and Sartre’s analogy offers a very good way of understanding the plight of modern-day people—in *The Sound and the Fury* and elsewhere—who affix themselves to a deep and distant history.

Just as hell isn’t other people, we aren’t role-playing characters from William Faulkner novels (which is a good thing, for lots of reasons). But there’s a great temptation to behave along such lines, especially for well-read religious conservatives. Such is the temptation inherent to Alan Jacobs’s new book, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis*.

Jacobs begins with a capsule history of the 1943 Casablanca Conference between leaders

of the Western Allies (Joseph Stalin declined to attend). This leads Jacobs to identify the higher-order problem confronting the Allies, beyond immediately pressing political and military issues. As he puts it, in typically clear prose, “if the free societies of the West win this great world war, how might their young people be educated in a way that made them worthy of that victory—and that made another war on that scale at worst avoidable and at best unthinkable?” A few paragraphs later, in setting out the plan of the book itself and along the way pointing specifically to writers like W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, Jacques Maritain, and Simone Weil, Jacobs offers a provisional answer by means of his own set of speculative questions:

The war raised for each of the thinkers I have named a pressing set of concerns about the relationship between Christianity and the Western democratic social order, and especially about whether Christianity was uniquely suited to the moral understanding of that order. These questions led in turn to others: How might an increasingly secularized and religiously indifferent population be educated and formed in Christian

beliefs and practices? And what role might people like them—poets, novelists, philosophers, thinkers, but not professional theologians or pastors—play in the education of their fellow citizens of the West? The circulation of those questions among these five figures is the subject of this book. All that they did and thought and suffered and wrote that does not relate to the circulation of these questions will be set aside here, though sometimes referred to parenthetically and in notes for the benefit of those who may be curious.

The great majority of Jacobs's readers will be far more than merely curious. The problem rests in how and why they're reading this book. The first temptation is to indulge in the kind of despair you'd find in a Sartre-and-Faulkner Book Club: *Oh, doom and damnation, to be so far away from a time where elites were part of the Christian tradition and vice-versa, a time where others might have looked to those elites for insight and inspiration!* The second temptation is to treat Jacobs's book like the latest thing to appear in the "You Might Also Like" section of the App Store: *OK, if I just read this intellectual life hack and convince other churchgoers and homeschoolers and righteous bloggers to buy copies, we can help redeem the culture! #WhatWouldTSEliotDo?*

Offered these responses, Jacobs himself would insist, I am sure, that this is not what he meant, not what he meant at all. Among the book's signal accomplishments is its striking lack of lamentation-soaked appeals to the past and its equally confident avoidance of cheap claims for contemporary relevance. But with those easy justifications not available, what does the book offer instead? In a word, recalcitrance. In more than a word, the necessary, and necessarily difficult, virtues of recalcitrance.

Throughout *The Year of Our Lord 1943*, and often devoting sustained attention to

specific writings, personal exchanges, and historical-biographical sequences, Jacobs re-creates both collective and private, even internalized, debates of religiously serious writers who shared a sense that the world had gone dramatically wrong and struggled to make the case for the right kind of response. They did so while contemporaneous nonbelievers like Thomas Dewey and Mortimer Adler were offering their own proposals in the context of public education and adult education, generally with more practical and immediately measurable success than, say, the outcomes of something called "the Moot." Alongside illustrious others including T.S. Eliot, Christopher Dawson was a member of this entity, which was in effect an extended conversation convened by Scottish missionary and ecumenical churchman J.H. Oldham, "to think through the role of religion in public life." Jacobs cogently re-creates points of unity among participants in the Moot—about the failure of churches to offer substantial resistance to rising totalitarianism, and about the truncating effects of "liberal instrumentalism" as the default form of anti-Axis solidarity—but is more instructively attuned to their points of difference. He is especially attentive to disputes about the details of plans and prescriptions for renewal, and the challenges associated with actual implementation.

During the meetings of the Moot, which carried across the final years of the war and featured visits by simpatico colleagues like Reinhold Niebuhr, Dawson seemed stuck on the self-destructive consequences of the West's falling away from the felt unities of medieval civilization, which were evoked with varied success ranging from stirring and revelatory to unhelpfully romanticizing in books by Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain in the 1930s and thereafter. Another member, German sociologist and secular Jew Karl Mannheim, argued that the priority was "planning for freedom: that is...[generating] social and political struc-

tures that would in turn teach the citizens of democracies how to exercise freedom responsibly.” For his part, Eliot thought that a “spiritual renewal of the working classes was clearly vital.” Everyone more or less agreed with everyone else, if never with much sense of how good discussion could lead to effectual public change. Not least of the obstacles was the problem that the very idea of comprehensive reform evoked the sort of command-and-control society these figures were strongly against, on the basis of the same religious and political convictions they hoped to promote.

In the history of the Moot, Jacobs explains, “we have caught just a glimpse . . . of the variety of answers” to the question *Quid sit homo*. And as much as we might prefer, or even expect, a simpler and more consolingly singular answer to emerge from religiously serious intellectuals from decades ago, one that reckoned with the realities of total war and totalitarianism out of millennia-long continuities of Christian belief and thought, that certainly wasn’t the case. Indeed, Jacobs’s treatments of individual figures dealing with the stubborn stuff of life itself offers the strongest evidence to this effect, especially in the examples of Auden and Weil.

Jacobs’s readings of Auden’s and Weil’s lives and work offer some of the finest passages in the book. The British-born Auden came to America in 1939 and was writing poetry and prose about the present situation, and the possible roles of the poet and the Christian in reading and redeeming the times, while teaching and lecturing at prestigious colleges. He found the earnestness around him amusing if at times stultifying. In a minor tweak of the residual puritanism that he detected, Auden intended to scandalize students at Swarthmore, a historically Quaker school, by serving beer and cheese during seminars. But Auden was more intensely focused on what Jacobs describes as “the techno-utopian mood of the mid-

1940s,” which offered “a Gospel that liberals and conservatives alike are drawn to” and that, in Auden’s own versifying diagnoses, “Under Which Lyre: A Reactionary Tract for the Times” (1946), creates a situation in which “Truth is replaced by Useful Knowledge.” Jacobs makes much of Harvard’s serving as the setting of the poem’s first public dissemination because it was from there that more secular-minded thinkers, like the university’s then-president James Bryant Conant, were advocating an efficient technocracy as the best possible system of social organization for a world at last emerging from Judeo-Christian Europe’s latest and most devastating self-convulsion. “When I was delivering my [poem] in Cambridge, I met Conant for about five minutes,” Auden wrote in a letter that Jacobs quotes. “‘This is the real enemy,’ I thought to myself. And I’m sure he had the same impression about me.”

Compared to Auden, Weil is not nearly as easy to read in exemplary terms. Strongly anti-Semitic, deeply suspicious of the institutional Church, and almost pathologically self-critical, she was convinced, as Jacobs explains, “that every kind of collectivity is a manifestation of the social Beast.” She shared Auden’s dismay at the technocratic turn but rejected any response that involved an individual giving up her autonomy to a power based in this world—even if, as would be the case in a Christian instantiation, that power itself acknowledged its basis beyond this world. To establish the congenial nature of her mercurial and deeply anti-communal tendencies, Jacobs offers an extended commentary on Weil’s wartime literary essays and private correspondence on subjects like Homer’s *Iliad* (which treated force and raw power as first goods and thus, she thought, was only too well suited to the present age) and the then-voguish medievalism that failed to acknowledge that “a Christian civilization in which the light of Christianity would have illuminated the whole of life, would only

have been possible if the Roman conception of enslaving people's minds adopted by the Church had been cast aside."

Elsewhere in the book, Jacobs's uniformly excellent readings of T.S. Eliot's lectures, essays, and poetry offer more salutary stuff with which to engage, insofar as Eliot's work was motivated not just by religiously informed dismay and skepticism, but also by a durable conviction that in looking to the great example of Christian saints, as Eliot put it in *Four Quartets*, "The ordinary person will not experience the full grace within which the saint lives, however painfully, but will have 'only hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses'; anything more will come only through 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.'"

That humility informed, depth-sounding, and realistic sense of how recalcitrant human experience proves to any complete and demystifying ultimate disclosure, in this world, points toward a set of virtues and practices for a meaningful human life that mattered in 1943 as much as they mattered in 1043 and 43—and matter as you're reading this and will still matter in 2043. As much comes across in this book, thanks to Jacobs's focusing so intensively on one period of time and one particular set of intellectuals

within it, rather than desperately insisting on the contemporary currency of such work. Indeed, it would be bleak poetic justice if we avoid the Faulkner-Sartre trap but instead treat Jacobs's effort as a winning Christian intellectual's how-to manual full of truths converted into useful knowledge: as much would signal Conant's victory over Auden. It's better to understand Jacobs's work as a thoughtfully and avowedly Christian counterpart to *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973*, Mark Greif's comprehensive study of post-war literary-intellectual searches for truths that could both matter to and resist captivity to the present world and moment. But I think it's more than that. Jacobs is a book-reading religious believer with a deep and supple appreciation for history and tradition and continuity. With his latest, he invites us to look back and learn what it means, and what it takes, to think and be in this world and never be captive to it, whether its tragic past or its app-y present.

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