

NEGATIVE CRITICISM

WALTER KAUFMANN: *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. 325pp. Faber and Faber. 25s.

An impressionistic style is not easily acceptable in philosophy, but it is difficult to complain when a number of nails are neatly hit on the head by means of it. The real trouble with Professor Kaufmann's book is that these are nails in the coffins of various philosophies and religions, and we do not seem to be offered any adequately developed view of things to take their place. Professor Kaufmann says that "an accurate map may mislead us," but the Bellman's map, which was "a perfect and absolute blank," is even less useful.

The critique of philosophy takes little notice of anything except the two contemporary fashions of positivism and existentialism. This restriction is justified on the ground that they represent two perennial extremes in human thinking, the tendency to throw over all that is not completely clear and precise and the desire to do justice to all the facts even at the cost of obscurity and mystery. Professor Kaufmann adds that "we need a new empiricism which neither flees experience nor ravishes it but tries to do justice to it." This is well said, but we wish that the book had contained a more systematic effort to fulfil the need.

The major part of the book is occupied by the critique of religion, which considers mainly Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism. We soon find that Professor Kaufmann is not going to criticize some religious statements for the sake of upholding others; he objects to expressing the religious impulse in the form of statements at all. He is consistent in this attitude; not only is negative criticism applied to the doctrines of traditional

Judaism and Christianity but the higher critics also come in for some shrewd blows on account of their confidence in hypothetical reconstructions of the history of religion and the development of ancient texts. A criticism of the traditional arguments for the existence of God is intended to show the incapacity of philosophy to support religious belief, and a discussion of historical evidence has an equally negative effect on claims to divine revelation. Professor Kaufmann has genuine regard for the moral content of Judaism and Christianity, but these are religions in which it is comparatively difficult to dissociate the moral from the doctrinal elements. He is really more at home with a naturally undogmatic Buddhism.

Professor Kaufmann suggests at an early stage that "the great philosopher is a poet with an intellectual conscience," and he ends by saying that "among the things that remain is the aspiration which is the soul of religion." But an aspiration to what? That is the kind of question which an intellectual conscience condemns you to try to answer. At least it should lead to some attempt at a statement of ethical principle, for moral aspiration without moral principle is apt to lead to odd results. The classical example is the biography of Shelley. And we may well go on to ask whether moral principle can be upheld without metaphysical principle. In Victorian times we might have been content to praise Professor Kaufmann not only for his vigorous style but as a genuine seeker after truth. But there have been too many seekers after truth who have found nothing, and the phrase has gone bad on us. We ask for something more from a contemporary writer on the philosophy of religion.