

Doubts of a Freethinker

THE FAITH OF A HERETIC. By Walter Kaufmann. 432 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. \$4.95.

By MARTIN E. MARTY

ONLY if a Presidential candidate were an atheist would religion be an issue in a campaign. In saying that last year Richard Nixon was reflecting a broad consensus of national opinion, Americans ordinarily prefer any religion to no religion. Even in the days when church members were a minority in the nation, freethinkers were regarded with suspicion. Walter Kaufmann, Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, rejects this unreflective tendency in our religious ethos. He elects to call himself a heretic because he finds himself "at variance with established or generally received principles."

Kaufmann is at variance with Western religion, particularly Judaism and Christianity. Raised a Lutheran, then choosing to be a Jew, he is now an agnostic philosopher. In his new book he sets out to find fault with today's revolution in philosophy. A twentieth-century publicist for the nineteenth-century god-killers, he brings up to date criticisms against thoughtless religious attitudes. He resents the suffocating embrace of religious thinkers who would twist his anti-theology to make him a hidden theologian.

Why then write a book that gives these sophisticated ones opportunity to do just that? First, to confess. Articulate honest men feel impelled to assert their faith; Kaufmann has written a worthy nonreligious confession, an impassioned personal document. Second, to convert, to find company, as all believers seek to do. Given the nature of religious rootage and communication, that task is difficult. Third, to confirm those whose heresy has been vague. Kaufmann's call to the tragic vision against a background of mystery has appeal. His virtues are love, courage, honesty

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and—an unfortunate coinage—"humbition" (humility fused with ambition). (Conventional religions, he says, cloak those virtues.) Fourth—and best of all—to criticize majority religion.

One need not be equipped technically in philosophy to read "The Faith of a Heretic." A rather loose-jointed collection of themes, it offers improvisations, soliloquies, reasoned arguments and passionate outbursts, dispassionate discourse and personal reference—in short, it has a Nietzschean feel.

Little in Kaufmann's criticism here is original. It complains of hypocrisy, deception, meaningless sense of commitment. It accuses theologians of serving parties, of gerrymandering with documents. It charges that religious people give too little thought to heaven and hell, to the meaning of faith in a God who permits suffering. It castigates the frequent self-serving of organized religion, its failure to produce morality.

THESE complaints of the author in summary sound trite, but to be told in simple detail the plot of a familiar novel need not exhaust the riches of its texture. So with this book, which intrigues not by its sustained argument but by a line-for-line brilliance.

The real importance of the book lies in Kaufmann's hunch that extensive unbelief is shrouded within organized religion. He sees its existence as not just a cultural problem but a question of personal faith. If people were thoughtful they would ask questions not about the usefulness but about the truth of religion—and churches and synagogues would quickly empty.

Nowadays, it is said, we no longer stone the prophets; we invite them to dinner. Mr. Kaufmann is not likely to be taken out and stoned. As the man who came to dinner, he is certain to be an excellent confessor, confirmer and critic. He knows he is less likely to be able to convert.

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