

KAUFMANN'S RELIGIONS IN FOUR DIMENSIONS *

THIS VOLUME IS A DELIGHTFUL WORK, challenging to the mind and pleasing to the eye. In the field of comparative religion, the author is best known for his trenchant critique of conventional "truths" in his *The Faith of a Heretic*. A heretic cares enough about his faith to examine it closely, to relate it directly to his own experience, and to purge it from its dross. Religion is therefore to him a vibrant reality, a blend of affirmation and negation too precious to be left to the tender mercies of true believers.

The author describes this book as a "love child, born without benefit of clergy." He was raised in Berlin on the boundary between Christianity and Judaism, by ethnically Jewish parents who had been converted to Protestantism. With the tide of Teutonism flowing ever more menacingly, he decided at age twelve to return to Judaism. At thirteen he toyed with the idea of turning Buddhist, but under the influence of Buber he came to appreciate the religious experience that lies at the heart of Biblical religion and Hasidic Judaism. He grew up with an abiding reverence for Leo Baeck as well as Martin Buber, although the two savants represented the opposite poles of Judaism, classical Reform and Zionist mysticism. In 1939, at the age of seventeen, the author came to America and pursued his studies in religion and philosophy in American universities.

As a mature philosopher, the author continues to live "on the boundary," as it were, dedicated to critical thought yet deeply awed by the wonder of faith, disdainful of theologies yet appreciative of the glories of religious experience. In respect of ethnic loyalties, he affirms his Jewish identity explicitly and in a strongly partisan way recounts the story of the Jewish past and the rebirth of Israel. Yet in line with Aḥad ha-'Am's statement to the same effect, he writes, "If Israel became a state with an established religion that discriminated against those who did not share that religion, while treating as second-class citizens those of different descent who have no desire to convert to Judaism, then the ancient dream has come to nothing" (p. 107).

The argument of this work, from cover to cover, is developed in a distinctly personal vein. The author may dwell lovingly on some as-

* Walter Kaufmann, *Religions in Four Dimensions—Existential, Aesthetic, Historical, Comparative*. New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976.

pects of the subject and ignore vast areas in which he is not particularly interested. For example, he devotes four pages to the fall of Massada and only eight pages to Jewish history from 73 to 1873, twelve pages to the events from Jeremiah to Massada and ten pages for the establishment of the State of Israel. He describes the rise of the Zionist movement and the Phoenix-like emergence of the State of Israel out of the ashes of the Holocaust with deep sympathy, but not without a quizzical look. He calls attention to the secular Jews who identify with Israel emotionally, while intellectually rejecting both the validity of nationalism and the cogency of an Orthodox faith. "To complicate matters, many of these Jews no longer believe in the religion of their ancestors, though they are proud to be Jews. Even if they do not feel that it would be treason for them to become 'like all the nations,' even if they do not feel that they somehow owe it to their fathers, who suffered so much for so many centuries, to remain different from other people, very large numbers of them feel that the State of Israel must somehow be a very different and special country. But how?" (p. 104). Evidently in ethnicism, as in religion, Pascal's observation applies—the logic of the mind is too small for the human heart.

In recounting the rise and world-wide expansion of Christianity, the author calls attention to the negative aspects of "the religion of love." How can a faith which condemned the vast majority of mankind to burn in hell for ever and ever, be designated as a universal religion? When Abraham was told by God of the impending fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, he protested, saying, *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?* (Gen. 18:25). But the Gospel of John offers a simple test for escaping the fires of hell, a test which the vast majority of mankind could not possibly accept, and the early Christians were not horrified by this injustice. "Not one of them interceded, as Abraham had done for Sodom and Gomorrah" (p. 126).

Kaufmann quotes from the Westminster Confession of 1643, in which predestination to perdition is reaffirmed: "The rest of mankind God was pleased . . . to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath . . . Works done by unregenerate men—although, for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands . . .—are sinful and cannot please God" (p. 159).

The author does not fail to stress the undemocratic anti-freedom bent of Christianity. In a discussion of the persistence of slavery and the castration of children in Moslem lands, he remarks, "It may seem odd that Islam should even have been considered egalitarian, but then many people have also associated Christianity with democracy" (p. 200).

Dr. Kaufmann is not unmindful of the ethical ardor of Christianity, which opposed and contradicted the sheer dogmatism of Christian theology. In every historical religion, not excepting Judaism, contrary impulses are included in an uneasy balance. Indeed, he calls attention from time to time to the humane aspects of Christianity. But in keeping with Maimonides' maxim that in spiritual matters one must correct the errors of the past by stressing the opposite temperamental habits, he sets out to undo the canards which were preached and written for so many years by some Protestant theologians, those who believed it necessary to denigrate Judaism in order to extol Christianity. The usefulness of this procedure may be doubted. But those who are polemically inclined will find keen arguments in this book, as well as a wealth of interesting data illustrating the slow and agonizing ascent of mankind along the many and diverse paths winding tortuously toward the summit of "the mountain of the Lord."

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