

Eternal Questions and Ultimate Concerns

Stephen Gurney

Religion From Tolstoi to Camus,
edited by Walter Kaufmann, *New
Brunswick and London: Transaction
Publishers, 1994. xiv + 479 pp.*
\$24.95.

THE LATE Walter Kaufmann's anthology of religious writings makes a welcome re-appearance in this new edition of Paul Gottfried's. Indeed, the occasion of its publication reminds one how sorry the state of theological and philosophical affairs has become in recent years. For in lieu of those giants, from Tolstoi to Camus, for whom matters of faith were issues of ultimate and inescapable concern, we have now—filling book-shelves formerly occupied by Maritain, Buber, Tillich, Marcel, Berdyaev—an array of self-help books exhorting us to worship the god within, or a celebration of goddesses and defunct fertility cults garbed in the latest fustian of the academic left. It is with some relief, then, that we can turn from the self-regarding therapies and vacuous mystery cults of the present to the solid and substantial nourishment which the discourses collected in Professor Kaufmann's classic text offer to the spiritually starved reader.

Of course, a wide-ranging anthology of this kind reflects the peculiar emphases and orientation which Kaufmann—a quasi-Nietzschean philosopher who nev-

ertheless adhered to the ethical core of his Jewish roots—cherished as peculiarly important in those years following the Holocaust.

In his introduction to the new edition, Professor Gottfried cannily notes that Kaufmann was preeminently concerned with and distrustful of the fanaticism and the intolerance which have often insinuated themselves into creedal and ritualistic expressions of belief. Despite the many selections from Nietzsche and Freud which warn against these aberrations, Kaufmann remains an impartial scholar who includes, among others, selections from the twentieth-century Popes expressing an image of faith free of the sectarian bigotry which Kaufmann strongly reprobated. Notwithstanding his insensitivity to devotional and sacramental elements in religion, Kaufmann remained a great and sound scholar—allowing the ventilation of attitudes antagonistic to his own and exciting the free play of ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect. How far this is from the distortion or the suppression of certain opinions in the academically correct atmosphere of the present age, and how salutary to enter, by way of contrast, into a genuinely liberal debate which this anthology fosters.

Despite the heterogeneous and sometimes eccentric collection of writings by

secondary authors and the exclusion of major figures such as Newman, Simone Weil, Berdyaev, and C.S. Lewis, Kaufmann's text brings together a group of thinkers who were, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, united by the strife which divided them. That is to say, these are writers whose affinities lie in the fact that they all regarded issues of faith, belief, and the ethical and moral life as paramount and all-embracing, even though they may have differed in their particular conclusions. And friendship, as C.S. Lewis sagely admonished, consists not in arriving at the same conclusions but in agreeing on the vital importance of certain questions. In the current age of therapy and self-help, it is imperative that these vital questions—buried, neglected, or suppressed by a culture of distraction—should be reexamined. And it is to be hoped that the publication of this anthology will signal a renewal of those ultimate concerns and contemplative virtues formerly given serious attention in the academy and the church.

The two writers most generously featured in this anthology stake out the debate which ramifies through the volume as a whole. The dialectic set up by the juxtaposition of Tolstoi and Dostoevsky is seminal, for Kaufmann, in distinguishing between the dangers and the benefits of religious faith. Kaufmann, moreover, is forthright about the benefit of the Tolstoian as opposed to the Dostoevskian approach to Christianity—an opinion which this reviewer and doubtless many readers would want to contest. Like many agnostics who regard God as an improbability, immortality as an impossibility, and duty as an unconditional necessity, Kaufmann is solely at ease among those for whom faith is exclusively a matter of ethics and social responsibility. Mystery, sanctity, reverence, awe, the poetics of devotion are almost entirely outside his ken. As a result, he is frequently a shallow com-

mentator on Dostoevsky and insufficiently self-critical in his praise of Tolstoi. He fails to discern the central theme of the Grand Inquisitor, and he seems remarkably unaware of the self-righteous strains and sanctimonious deceptions entwined in Tolstoi's gospel of social equality and ethical correctness. For Kaufmann, like Tolstoi, would denude faith of its supernatural character, denigrate the doctrine of the atonement to a status of lesser importance, and emphasize, almost exclusively, the practical application of Christ's words to the policies of the state and the regulation of society. The problem, of course, is that the Gospel does not give us an easy formula by which to discriminate among those social policies or ideologies which best reflect its values—Christ's words being, in this regard, so infinitely elastic and supple in their application to human affairs. The Gospel is not something that can be easily translated into a specific social agenda without oversimplifying or potentially disfiguring its message. Yet in his essay "My Religion," to which Kaufmann gives unqualified assent, this is precisely what Tolstoi does.

Still, Tolstoi was a great religious writer whose moral imagination operated at the highest level of spiritual intensity and human empathy in his great novels and stories. This truism, which is generally accepted, Kaufmann contradicts by claiming that Tolstoi's true greatness resides in the later theological writings rather than in novels like *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. The depth of human sympathy and breadth of moral compassion, which for Lionel Trilling constituted the hallmark of Tolstoi the novelist, are perversely overshadowed for Kaufmann by those sometimes crabbed and cranky pronouncements which belong to Tolstoi at his most exegetical—and pharasiacal. In fact, Kaufmann goes out of his way to refute Trilling's judgment when he as-

serts that Tolstoi "loves almost none of his characters"—perhaps one of the most perverse observations ever made about this supreme novelist. Nevertheless, Kaufmann does include *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* in his text by way of witness to Tolstoi's preternatural sensitivity to the patterns of psychological evasion with which human beings endeavor to keep an awareness of their mortality and, in consequence, their dependence upon God, at a safe and undemanding distance. The manner in which this distance is gradually foreshortened in the consciousness of Ivan Ilyich, until he is forced by progressive debility to recognize truths which he has spent most of his life avoiding, is communicated by Tolstoi with a spiritual tact of far greater significance than the blustering assertions which characterizes the novelist's theological writings. But for Kaufmann these writings, in their attempt to realize a "kingdom of God on earth," are the apex of Tolstoi's achievement.

According to Gottfried, Kaufmann was "a religious rationalist, who respected whatever in religion could be made to serve human intellectual and social advancement." What Kaufmann, in his fear of obscurantism, failed to recognize, however, is that the pursuit of such advancement, for its own sake and without reference to a sense of the holy, is a sterile and self-defeating endeavor. The great creative epochs of civilization in which the arts have flourished and human relations have been leavened by a spirit of charity and refinement are precisely those in which civilization *per se* was not considered the end and aim of human existence. The need to propitiate, to praise, and to give thanks to a higher power has ever been the primary impulse out of which vital cultures have arisen as a secondary by-product. But to escape that impulse and aim at the by-product alone results in all the regimented horrors that we associate with

all those political regimes and social engineers who believe they can create a heaven on earth. As John Henry Newman avers:

knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view, Faith. Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles.... Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man.

Being a "religious rationalist," however, Kaufmann would doubtless have been as dubious of Newman's words as he was of the metaphysical and otherworldly content of Dostoevsky's novels. Kaufmann thus sees "The Grand Inquisitor" as a story which simplistically opposes the notion of loving and, therefore, suffering freely for Christ with the notion of resigning one's independence to an institution that will satisfy one's basic needs and necessities without reference to a transcendent power. That this dialectic exists in Dostoevsky's tale is beyond dispute—but Kaufmann's socialist orientation blinds him to certain more fundamental issues central to this story. For Dostoevsky's main point is to affirm that God's love is of an altogether different kind from the coercive and binding power which the state can exercise over its citizens. Thus, the crucifixion presents us with the image of a God who has deliberately resigned his power in order that we might love Him freely and, as it were, without ulterior motive. For the self-sacrificing values made apparent in the passion of Christ—which his disciples are called upon to emulate—could only be possible in a world where virtue is not immediately

rewarded and vice not automatically punished. The apparently haphazard nature of human destiny in a world where we are free to follow the example of Christ independently of any reward that might accrue from such discipleship, is the only world in which God would be loving enough to allow us to love—to love, that is to say, without the self-interest that would invalidate the impulse for right action.

When compared with Dostoevsky, there is finally something contradictory about Kaufmann's rational religion: for an ethic which is not grounded in a divine order risks the danger of either deteriorating into self-righteousness or devolving into subjectivism. When Kaufmann tells us "most religious beliefs I should class with ritual: at best beautiful; more often, superstitious," there is no longer any stable ground upon which to base a system of ethics. The only thing left is ideology—ideas, that is to say, which can be twisted in the direction of any party that controls the power centers of a culture or state. Virtue remains in tact only insofar as it derives from an authoritative and changeless source independent of the human mind. Otherwise virtue is simply defined by the mob most capable of outmaneuvering or outshouting its opponents. Or as Pope Pius IX puts it in *The Syllabus of Errors*, without a divine ground "Authority [becomes] nothing else but numbers and the sum total of material forces"—in a word, a thing sustained by the most votes, the most money, or the most guns.

The fact that Kaufmann includes the foregoing Papal observation in his book is an indication of the richness of this volume. As scholar and editor, Kaufmann's credentials are impeccable, for he includes points-of-view divergent from his own which allow the discriminating reader to assess the contradictions inherent in Kaufmann's own philo-

sophic scheme. One can, of course, understand Kaufmann's scepticism with regard to the efficacy of institutional religion—especially in the years following the Holocaust when it became increasingly apparent that generations of anti-Semitic bias had softened the consciousness of many Europeans to the idea, and subsequently, to the reality of a Jewish pogrom. This dark side of Christianity is explored in two selections by Morris Cohen and Morton Enslin, which are truly shocking in their detailed account of the pervasiveness and depth of anti-Semitic propaganda in the Christian heritage.

As a Jew writing after World War II, Kaufmann, as Gottfried notes, "refused to separate the ages of Christian faith from the intolerance they had occasioned." In his time and in his place, Kaufmann's refusal is both understandable and commendable. But without reducing the horrors of Hitlerian anti-Semitism, surely it is possible to discriminate between the integrity of the Gospel message and its distortion and disfigurement in the hands of those fallible and culpable "Christians" who have used it to justify aberrations and atrocities completely antithetical to the theological virtues and the Christian evangel. In consequence, Christian faith and belief cannot be entirely faulted here. The principal fault lies with the triumph of the Prince of this world during the 1930s and 1940s. These were years that marked the defeat of sacramental life and the emergence of a mad nihilism. Anyone who takes part in the celebration of the divine liturgy knows that when the sacramental life is pushed aside, holocausts are inevitable. Nevertheless, more work needs to be done in this regard. The recent concert memorializing the Holocaust, sponsored by the Vatican, and the daily prayer of the Anglican Church during Passion Week, asking that the Church be forgiven for its

historical anti-Semitism, are two positive instances of a recognition which needs extension on a larger scale—for there are still among Christian laymen many who are inexcusably unaware of the Judaic roots of the Christian faith and the Hebrew ambiance in which the whole of the New Testament is unambiguously steeped. When Jacques Maritain declared that “anti-Semitism is tantamount to spitting in the face of Christ’s mother,” he articulated a truth in a language so bold as to be unmistakable. We can agree with Kaufmann that it is incumbent on every professing Christian to come to terms with this truth.

Furthermore, Kaufmann is fully aware, as the selections from Martin Niemoeller and Pastor Paul Schneider underscore, that there were exceptional Christians willing to suffer for the sake of their Jewish brothers and sisters. Schneider, in especial, was subject to unspeakable brutalities, which Kaufmann details with awe at the thought of such heroism and self-sacrifice. But it is precisely here that Kaufmann, the skeptical philosopher, splits from Kaufmann, the susceptible man—for the emotional response which Schneider’s sacrifice calls forth is immediately distanced by Kaufmann in a way that reveals a fundamental dissociation of sensibility that infects his understanding of religious faith. Acknowledging that Schneider’s martyrdom belongs to a category of sacrifice and heroism which must affect any but the most brutalized and callous of individuals, Kaufmann, nevertheless, goes on to comment that “the Nazis also persecuted Communists; does the heroic martyrdom of individual Communists prove the truth of Communism? Or does the martyrdom of Nazis at Stalin’s hands establish the doctrine of Stalinism?” These obviously rhetorical questions imply that Pastor Schneider’s death no more proves the doctrines of Christianity than the deaths of a communist or a

fascist prove the veracity of their respective ideologies.

Here one is compelled to recognize that Kaufmann’s ingrained skepticism has undermined his capacity to make crucial distinctions of high philosophic order. For there is a fundamental difference between first principles of the moral order and their distorted reflections in the minds or in the behaviors of those who parody those principles. When Pastor Schneider accepted death at the hands of his captors it was out of loyalty to a Christian ethic which puts the love of one’s fellow human beings above the instinct of self-preservation. When a fascist dies at the hands of a Stalinist it is a matter of one aggressor having simply been overpowered by another. Indeed, the bad faith which wraps itself in the collectivist ideology of communism or of fascism as a means of avoiding the ardor of self-examination and personal responsibility is at the antipodes of the genuine faith according to which Pastor Schneider lived and died. Kaufmann *feels* this, of course, but his insensate notion that truth can only be arrived at through the operation of impersonal logic leaves him dubiously suspended between the demands of the head and the reasons of the heart.

This Pascalian dilemma equally affects another group of philosophers whom Kaufmann includes in his text: namely, those who endeavor through rational argument to adduce proofs either for or against the existence of God. Among these, the most interesting debate takes place among three English philosophers: Anthony Flew, Richard Hare, and Basil Mitchell. This debate epitomizes the distinction that Newman made between *notional* and *real* assent in matters of faith. If Pastor Schneider illustrated a real assent to the doctrines of Christianity by dint of the living witness and sacrifice which he made for his Jewish brethren, then all attempts to

prove the substance of the faith on a rational level alone—in terms of abstract proposition and syllogistic reason—are fated to miss the point. As Gabriel Marcel has repeatedly noted, faith is a mystery in which we are called to participate, not a problem which we are asked to solve with the cool deliberation of the uninvolved spectator.

When the English agnostic Anthony Flew raises the immemorial question at the heart of all theodicies—how do we account for a world in which the extremity and pervasiveness of suffering apparently belie the existence of a compassionate and all-powerful God?—he approached the issue as a problem insoluble to analysis. Notionally, of course, there is no satisfactory answer to this indictment of the universe (though one might wonder why Flew should trust his own moral concerns and arguments if he, like the rest of us, is the irrational by-product of an amoral universe driven by impersonal laws and inhuman forces). But if we slightly shift the terms of the argument, it becomes apparent that we, as human beings, are not simply confronted with this issue on the level of abstract argument but rather in terms of the most intimate human loyalties that tug at our hearts, flutter in our diaphragms, and play pain-fugues on our nervous systems. These are *real* and not merely *notional* issues.

Citing the example of a child dying of inoperable throat cancer, Flew asks his fellow symposiasts: “Just what would have to happen...to entitle us to say ‘God does not love us’ or even ‘God does not exist?’” To this question, both Hare and Mitchell see that there is no adequate response—for the sort of empirical evidence which Flew demands is entirely outside the realm of faith, which requires that the believer activate and make real in his own response to suffering the gospel principle that God is love. To return to Flew’s example, we can choose to tell

a dying boy and his grief-stricken father that these things are an inevitable part of nature’s blind process and they must bear it as best they can. We would thus contribute to the physical and psychological suffering to which they are already handed over, the superadded spiritual anguish of knowing that their suffering is purposeless, irredeemable, inconsolable. Conversely, we can tell them that the fidelity of their affection for one another and their determination to sustain that affection, despite the inevitability of pain and loss, bear witness to a Love that suffers with them, to the supreme Love who handed Himself over to the contradictions of creation to the point where he loved us unto death, and who can lead us through suffering to an awareness of that Love which abides beyond the torments of temporality and the contradictions of mortal life. But, of course, to say this we must first make it real for ourselves—we must do more than honor it with our mouths, for people can always tell when they are being humored or patronized. In short, faith, here, is not a matter of argument, but a witness to those values we affirm despite the evidence of our senses—an affirmation which recognizes that God is the source of our own capacity to love, hope, and endure when it would be easier to steel ourselves against that Love.

Faith, as Paul Tillich understood in the selection from *The Dynamics of Faith* which Kaufmann includes in his anthology, does not require our passive acquiescence in a philosophic formula, but rather involves an activity of the whole being by which God allows us the supreme dignity of recreating and making real for ourselves and others that Holy Spirit which discerns Love as the cause and end of things. But this reality requires participation as well as observation and, in this regard Kaufmann, in the sequence of his selections, no less than in his introduction, remains uncertainly

and fascinatingly balanced between the two—for the depth of his moral concerns is undeniable and exemplary.

Significantly, the volume ends with an indictment by Flew of those “religious intellectuals” who engage in what he calls “doublethink.” But if “doublethink” means being open to that knowledge which comes from communion and participation, as well as reason and observation, then it is Flew who remains myopically imprisoned in his own “singlethink,” to coin a somewhat awkward neologism. For has not the English mystic and poet, William Blake, prayed, “May God us keep / From single vision and Newton’s sleep.” Blake’s twofold vision—looking *along* the light we call faith as well as looking *at* it¹—is a necessary corrective to the stance of those who will not step within the luminous circle of revelation. Still, we only know our own story. And so-called agnostics from Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov to Walter Kaufmann and Anthony Flew may well be animated in their dissident response to traditional faith by a genuine search for God which transcends the complacency of the smug sectarian.

Though Kaufmann’s anthology sometimes reads like a chaotic farrago of everyone talking in every possible way about matters of faith and doubt, it nevertheless brings these issues into a focus where they burn with an incandescent energy. The reissue of this book is, moreover, more timely than ever. For a generation that seems to be engaged in a blind rush into the future, trusting in technology, scrambling to be “empowered,” ignorant of the historical past, indifferent to metaphysical axioms, bereft of aesthetic standards, broken into competing interest groups defined by race, gender, or sexual orientation, ungraced by immortal longings and unaring of spiritual recollection, Kaufmann’s anthology of religious reflections from Tolstoi to Camus comes

as a welcome reminder that we are never more united than when we raise those eternal questions and face those ultimate concerns which are the true index of our common humanity.

1. The distinction between “looking along” and “looking at” in matters of knowledge and perception is discussed by C.S. Lewis in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, 1970), 212-216.

Willmoore Kendall:

The Early Years

M. SUSAN POWER

Oxford Years: The Letters of

Willmoore Kendall to His Father,

edited by Yvona Kendall Mason;

with a Foreword and Epilogue by

George W. Carey, *Bryn Mawr, Pa.:*

Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1993.

xxiv + 527 pp. \$14.95.

JEFFREY HART, John East, and George H. Nash regard Willmoore Kendall (1909-1967) as a foremost founder of post-1945 conservatism. However, Kendall’s conservative genealogy causes some problems. Some commentators claimed that Kendall associated with Trotskyites and supported the Spanish Republicans during their Civil War. Others have discovered an early radical, left-wing Kendall. The issue around which “wings” flutter is majority rule. But is majority rule an identifying characteristic of conservative or liberal philosophies? Those who delineate conservatism as grounded on absolute individual rights and anti-government, laissez-faire utopianism never had Kendall in their ranks. However, portending future fireworks, in 1949 Kendall translated and published A. Rossi’s *A Communist Party in Action*. In the 1950s Kendall emerged as an ardent anti-Communist. The recent publication