

Jude P. Dougherty

***Walter Kaufmann: Philosopher, Humanist, Heretic*  
by Stanley Corngold\***

Walter Kaufmann was born in Freiburg, Germany, in 1921 and died prematurely in Princeton at the age of fifty-nine, having served more than thirty years as a professor at Princeton University, USA.

Upon completion of the gymnasium in Germany he was, as a Jew, denied by the Nazi regime, admission to a university. Influenced by Rabbi Leo Beck and Martin Buber, Kaufmann began the study of the Hebrew scriptures and the Talmudic tradition with the thought of becoming a rabbi.

The Kaufmann family fled Germany in 1939, migrating to the United States. Walter entered Williams College where he earned a bachelors degree, having studied with John William Miller who lectured on the philosophy of history and James Bissett Pratt, who occupied the chair of intellectual and moral philosophy. Walter subsequently entered Harvard University. After a year at Harvard, Kaufmann joined the Army Air Force. The war was over by then and Kaufmann was sent by the Army to Germany as an interrogator for the Military Intelligence Service.

Corngold relates that early in his undergraduate years, Kaufmann abandoned his commitment to Jewish ritual while developing a deeply

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\* Stanley Corngold, *Walter Kaufmann: Philosopher, Humanist, Heretic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), xvi+744 pages, ISBN 9780691165011.

critical attitude toward all established religion. When posted to Germany, he chanced upon an edition of the collected works of Nietzsche. Upon returning to Harvard he completed a doctoral dissertation in 1971, "Nietzsche's Theory of Values." The same year he began teaching at Princeton. Three years later he published *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, a book which still receives widespread use. At Princeton, Kaufmann subsequently brings his knowledge of Hebrew moral and cultural traditions to bear in a criticism of Christianity in general, the Gospels and St. Paul in particular. The Trinity, he finds absurd. Upon reading Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, he concurs, "there is no supreme being beyond; the spirit is not to be found in another world."<sup>1</sup> Defending Judaism against Christianity, he shuns the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle which Catholics regard as the rational preamble to the acceptance of the Faith.

Kaufmann identifies himself as a humanist. In his sense, *humanism* implies, first of all, anthropological study, one centered on man's subjectivity—his thoughts, feelings, velleities, moods, accompanied by his sense of self. Kaufmann can say, "I am much less interested in metaphysics and theology than in what religions do to people—how they affect human existence."<sup>2</sup> In the aggregate, a more likely story (of Christ's redemptive act) would be hard to invent. From that insight, Kaufmann finds kinship with Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, and others. He intellectually engages Sartre, Bultmann, Tillich and Niebuhr, but is repelled by the lukewarm Protestantism of uncritical Americans who unlike their European colleagues need to "be brought to their senses."<sup>3</sup> The son of a clergyman, Kaufmann has a grasp of the varieties of Christendom, he is well aware of the differences between Lutheranism and Anglicanism, and between Catholicism in France, Italy and Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> Corngold, *Walter Kaufmann*, 251.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

He will have none of it. He will eventually bring out a three volume work, *Discovering the Mind*, vol. 1: *Goethe, Kant and Hegel*, vol. 2: *Nietzsche, Heidegger and Buber*, vol. 3: *Freud versus Adler and Jung*.<sup>4</sup>

Stanley Corngold does a remarkable job welding into a chronological whole his subject's multifarious writings, a *tragic humanism*, he calls it in his "Epilogue" to the book. Kaufmann's treatise on Nietzsche is shortly followed by his *Critique of Philosophy and Religion*,<sup>5</sup> and *Faith of a Heretic*.<sup>6</sup> In the late 1970s, he reaches a much wider audience by publishing versions of his thought in the *Reader's Digest*: (1) *Religion in Four Dimensions: Existential and Aesthetic, Historical and Comparative*,<sup>7</sup> and (2) a trilogy entitled *Man's Lot*.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, he is not a detached scholar, but an apologist for a materialistic point of view.

Corngold's book certainly acquaints the reader with the thought of Walter Kaufmann, but it does more than that; it acquaints the reader with the thought of a prominent, late twentieth century generation that in effect rejected the source of the very culture that nourished it.



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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Stanley Corngold, *Walter Kaufmann: Philosopher, Humanist, Heretic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). The author concludes that Corngold's book acquaints the reader not only with the thought of Walter Kaufmann, but also with the thought of a prominent, late twentieth century generation that in effect rejected the source of the very culture that nourished it.

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<sup>4</sup> New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1980.

<sup>5</sup> New York: Harper, 1958.

<sup>6</sup> New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1959.

<sup>7</sup> New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> New York: Reader's Digest Press / McGraw-Hill Inc., 1978.

## KEYWORDS

Walter Kaufmann, humanism, religion, atheism.

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