



Erich Fromm and Thomas Merton: Biophilia, Necrophilia, and Messianism

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Presented at the Italian-English conference “Death and the Love for Life in Psychoanalysis. In Memoriam Romano Biancoli” on June 5-6, 2010 in Ravenna. First published in: *Fromm Forum* (English Edition - ISBN 1437-1189) 15 / 2011, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2011.

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Erich Fromm’s thought was largely motivated by “messianism,” a partially secularized version of the traditional Jewish hope and enthusiasm for the coming of the messianic age.¹ The concept of messianism, though initially developed in the context of theology, has proven to be a useful tool for understanding revolutionary change and human hopes for utopia. Messianism was a topic in the air during his youth, when Fromm was a young religious Jew attempting to differentiate his messianic philosophy of history from the various other “messianisms” that were to be found among left-wing Jewish intellectuals of the time, and he returned to the question in the 1950s, grappling with it from the time of his book *The Sane Society* (1955) to his death in 1980.

Fromm distinguishes between two kinds of messianism, “prophetic” messianism (which he defends) and “catastrophic” messianism (which

he criticizes).² *Prophetic* messianism works for and hopes for a future “messianic age” or utopia, which will be characterized by justice, fulfillment, peace, and redemption, and it believes that this future will be brought about by human effort in history. Prophetic messianism is characterized by a “horizontal longing”; it looks *ahead* to the future with hope.³ It sees the future fulfillment of its hopes not as a dramatic “rupture” with history but as a result of historical progress.

Erich Fromm’s *messianic hope* rests at the core of his philosophical, psychoanalytic, and political program. This messianic hope is highly future-oriented; it looks not to some golden age of the past but to a “golden age of the future,” in which humanity’s long-held dreams of justice, peace, wisdom, and love, will find fulfillment. According to Fromm, this radical, future-oriented, messianic hope is central to the psychologically healthy individual and society. This hope is manifested not in passivity or patient waiting, but in *action* aimed at bringing about a better future for humanity; it is a commitment

¹ Those of Fromm’s works that directly discuss messianism include, among others, *The Sane Society* (1955), *Let Man Prevail: A Socialist Manifesto and Program* (1960), *Marx’s Concept of Man* (1961), *May Man Prevail? An Inquiry into the Facts and Fictions of Foreign Policy* (1961), *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (1962), *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament* (1966), *The Revolution of Hope* (1968), *To Have or To Be?* (1976) and his late, posthumously published manuscript *Marx and Meister Eckhart on Having and Being*.

² Fromm gives the two kinds of messianism a variety of names, but in a late manuscript he uses the terms “prophetic messianism” and “catastrophic or apocalyptic messianism” (which I am shortening to “catastrophic messianism”), and I will use these terms here (cf. Fromm, *On Being Human*).

³ Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 133.



to continually working for a better world, with realistic understanding of the obstacles facing one's action, and without cynicism or a naïve optimism.

This paper explores Erich Fromm's concept of necrophilia, as discussed in his 1963 pamphlet *War Within Man*. There Fromm contrasts the healthy "biophilic" character orientation, which is open to growth, change, and the future, with the unhealthy "necrophilic" character, which is characterized by sentimentality, dwelling upon the past, and an attempt to render the world static, fixed, predictable, and dead. While the former is future-oriented, like Fromm's messianic hope, the latter attempts to flee the burdens of personal responsibility, freedom, and individuality through psychological regression into the past. I conclude by exploring Fromm's concepts of necrophilia and biophilia in light of his long-time correspondence with Thomas Merton.

About the pamphlet

Fromm's 1963 pamphlet *War Within Man: A Psychological Enquiry into the Roots of Destructiveness* was published as part of a series of pamphlets by various authors entitled "Beyond Deterrence," sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee, the pro-peace activist organization of the U.S. Quakers. The pamphlets opposed the nuclear arms race at a time when the majority of people in the U.S. were gung-ho, nationalistic proponents of the arms race against the Soviet Union. Prior to writing the pamphlet *War Within Man*, Fromm had already played an important role in spearheading the U.S. movement against nuclear weapons, and the first major anti-nuclear weapons organization in the U.S. at the time, SANE, was named after Fromm's book *The Sane Society*. *War Within Man* consists of an approximately twenty-five page essay by Fromm, exploring possible psychological causes of the peculiar apathy of Americans about the nuclear arms race, followed by brief critical responses from Trappist monk, writer, and peace activist Thomas Merton, psychoanalysts Roy Menninger and Jerome Frank, Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, political scientist Hans Morgenthau, and sociologist and anti-Communist Russian émigré Pitirim Sorokin. These responses are followed by

a brief reply by Fromm, responding to his critics.

The critics' contributions to the pamphlet mainly fail to capture the essence of Fromm's argument and are diverted by misunderstandings of Fromm's essay. Some of them misunderstand necrophilia and biophilia to be mere instincts or biological drives, despite the fact that Fromm makes clear in his essay that biophilia and necrophilia are "character orientations" and that he is rejecting Freud's assertion about the existence of a death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Roy Menninger particularly plainly misunderstands, or perhaps intentionally distorts, Fromm's argument. For example, although Fromm states in the essay that he does not believe there are simply two types of people (biophilic and necrophilic), but that most people display a mix of biophilic and necrophilic tendencies, Menninger claims that Fromm believes there are simply "two species" of people.⁴ Of Fromm's critics in the pamphlet, only Thomas Merton seems to understand Fromm's argument and to take it seriously. I will outline Fromm's assessment of necrophilia in the main part of the pamphlet, and I will return to address Merton's response in light of Fromm's long-time dialogue with Merton.

Fromm's argument

The struggle to overcome the desire to regress, and to devote oneself to a future-oriented messianism, stands at the center of Fromm's 1963 pamphlet. An ongoing theme in Fromm's work is the desire of individuals to "escape from freedom," i.e., to flee the burdens of individual freedom, responsibility, and loneliness, often through regression to a childlike dependence upon leaders or other societal influences, or through politically reactionary efforts to reinstate some lost golden age of ancient history or prehistory. As early as the mid-1930s, Fromm explored this question in an essay on J.J. Bachofen's theory of matriarchy or "Mother Right." According to Fromm, both socialists like Marx and Engels and anti-socialist reactionaries like Klages and Bäumler, all praised Bachofen's the-

⁴ Roy Menninger, in Erich Fromm, *War Within Man: A Psychological Enquiry into the Roots of Destructiveness* (American Friends Service Committee, 1963), p. 39.



ory of a pre-historic “matriarchal” world that existed prior to the rise of contemporary, “patriarchal” societies.⁵ However, the reactionaries praised Bachofen’s theory because they “looked back to the past as a lost paradise,” while the radicals praised Bachofen’s theory from a very different standpoint, since they “looked forward hopefully to the future.”⁶ The reactionaries yearned to return to a “lost paradise,” a state of helpless dependence upon a fascist leader, much like the infant’s helpless dependence upon an all-giving, all-nurturing mother. The Nazis’ desire to return to infancy manifested itself in passive submissiveness towards nature—a belief that history is “fated” or cyclic—a strong preference for those with whom one is related by blood, a predilection to honoring the dead through rigid repetition of rituals, and an attachment to land and “soil” (symbolically associated with motherhood and feminine fertility).

After escaping Nazism and accepting exile in the United States, Fromm continued to worry about the political ramifications of desires for psychological regression. His new milieu—the United States in the midst of a paranoid and irrational anti-Communist “red scare,” soon to be in the midst of the cold war arms race—presented new but similar problems to his old milieu in Germany. Fromm grew increasingly concerned with Americans’ passivity about the arms race and the threat of nuclear catastrophe. He was especially disturbed by discussions of bomb shelters and by the widely held view in the U.S. that families could hide below ground in the event of a nuclear catastrophe and then simply emerge to rebuild civilization. That so many people were willing to accept such a possible outcome to human history, Fromm saw as profoundly pathological.

Fromm’s concerns about nuclear deterrence were highlighted in his letters to Thomas Merton. Fromm questioned the sanity of those who suggested, for example, that in a nuclear catastrophe

“only [only!] sixty million Americans [would] die,” and he was acutely aware that, “Almost literally the fate of the human race will be decided within a year.” In a 1961 letter to Merton, he added,

I have been thinking a good deal lately about the increasing discussion of what people will do in their fall-out shelters in case of an atomic attack. It seems that most people take it for granted that they would defend their shelters with guns against neighbors who want to intrude...This whole discussion shows what kind of life we would have, even if millions of people could stay alive by protecting themselves from fall-out in shelters. Of course big cities are written off, and those who would survive would be the part of the population in the country, removed from the cities. It would be a life of complete barbarism...Neighbor defending his life against neighbor by force, children starving, life reduced to its most primitive components of survival. Anyone who believes that in this way we can save freedom, I think, is just dishonest or cannot see clearly.⁷

The irrational passivity of Americans in the face of the impending destruction of civilization seemed to Fromm to manifest an unconscious death wish, in the sense of a desire to escape life through a return to the comfort of the womb. According to Fromm, this desire arose since individuals felt lured to escape the burden of their freedom and individuality through various mechanisms of psychological regression.

As noted above, Fromm’s early reading of socialists’ and reactionaries’ interpretations of Bachofen contributed to his conclusion that a radical, prophetic messianism must not seek to regress to earlier stages of human development but must proceed towards a future that fulfills the hopes of the past and present. The desire to restore a lost paradise is reactionary, while the revolutionary looks forward to a future. In his later work, Fromm expressed this dialectic allegorically, drawing upon the story of Adam and Eve. According to Fromm, history began with an

⁵Erich Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx, and Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1970), pp. 84-85.

⁶Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), pp. 84-5.

⁷Erich Fromm, Letter to Thomas Merton (Thomas Merton Center), October 9, 1961.



act of disobedience. Adam and Eve's disobedience of God was, allegorically speaking, the first historical act, through which human beings began to develop freedom and awareness of themselves as separate individuals.⁸ Disobedience was an important step in human development, a part of humanity's process of "growing up," learning not to obey orders blindly (orders such as, "Don't eat from that tree"), and breaking its infantile bonds to blood and soil.⁹ Adam and Eve's disobedience was "the condition for man's self-awareness, for his capacity to choose...man's first step toward freedom."¹⁰ With this act, humanity lost its primal lack of differentiation; that is, it lost its original oneness with nature and with its fellow humans.¹¹

Despite the great advance represented by Adam and Eve's disobedience—the achievement of self-awareness, freedom, and individuation—something was tragically lost with the expulsion from Eden. Like the infant undergoing the traumatic experience of birth, Adam and Eve were thrown from the comfort of Paradise into a world of loneliness, isolation, and homelessness, and were left yearning for a union that seemed impossible to reclaim. Perhaps love could build a bridge out of this isolation, but Adam and Eve's lovelessness is evident from their eagerness to blame one another for the act of disobedience, rather than defending each other when faced with God's interrogation.¹²

Humanity is thus faced with a difficult choice of alternatives: it can either seek to escape the reality of its expulsion from Eden through psychological regression, or it can squarely face the problem, move forwards towards a future in which humans will experience *both* individual autonomy *and* a sense of unity with nature and one another. According to Fromm, humanity has so far been unable to recognize the promise of the serpent in Gene-

sis—"You shall be as gods"—as a blessing and not a curse. Terrified and burdened by its newfound freedom, humanity throughout history has submitted to authoritarian leaders, seeking to return to the undifferentiated unity of Paradise through blind obedience.

Among the paths by which humans seek to escape their freedom and to regain "Paradise" are three "mechanisms of escape," which Fromm discusses in his book *Escape from Freedom*: (1) *masochism and/or sadism*, characteristic of the "authoritarian personality," in which the individual merges his or her identity with that of another, through either dominating, or being dominated by, the other, (2) *destructiveness*, in which the individual seeks oneness through annihilation of what is other,¹³ and (3) *conformity*, in which the individual attempts to merge with the world by making him or herself identical with it (adopting the same thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, etc., as others).¹⁴ All three options bode ill for an emancipatory politics.

But the way back to Paradise is barred; "two angels with fiery swords watch the entrance and man cannot return."¹⁵ There is no simple escape, no mere regression, that can return the individual to Paradise. Though in some sense the messianic age will be like the prehistoric Paradise—it will provide once again for unity of humans with nature and with one another—it will not simply restore it. The messianic future envisioned by Fromm is a dialectical synthesis in which the individual will feel united with nature and with fellow humans while still possessing the self-awareness of being an independent, autonomous person. The coming messianic time is something *never before achieved* in human history. While the prehistoric state of paradise was defined by "man's not yet having been born," Fromm writes, the future messianic age is defined by "man's having been fully born."¹⁶

In *War Within Man*, Fromm argues that the psychological roots of Americans' passivity to

⁸ Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, p. 167.

⁹ Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, pp. 122-3.

¹⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 20.

¹¹ Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 122.

¹² Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 100.

¹³Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 202.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 208.

¹⁵Erich Fromm, *On Being Human* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 75.

¹⁶Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, pp. 123-4.



impending destruction could be found in a “necrophilic,” or death-loving, character orientation. By “necrophilia,” Fromm explains, he does not mean specifically a sexual desire for corpses. Rather, he is describing a general psychological orientation towards the world, characterized by an attraction to all that is static, mechanical, dead, predictable, and easy to control. Fromm writes that the necrophiliac is “fascinated by all that is dead,” feels drawn “to corpses, to decay, to feces, to dirt,” and “[loves] to talk about sickness, about burials, about death.”¹⁷ He or she is attracted to darkness, night, caves, and hiding places.

Fromm’s interpretation of “necrophilia” clearly has political implications. For example, Fromm writes that the necrophiliac loves “law and order” and bureaucracy.¹⁸ The necrophiliac, like the Nazi bureaucrat Eichmann, “transform[s] all life into the administration of things.”¹⁹ The necrophiliac is attracted to nationalism, since he loves what is “home-made” and that to which he is accustomed, while he is afraid of what is new or different. Finally, the necrophiliac, like the Soviet Communist, misunderstands justice, seeing justice as a merely quantitative matter of equal distribution. Both capitalist and Soviet bureaucracy, along with fascism, seem to Fromm to foster a death-loving, necrophilic character orientation.

Fromm states that necrophilia is closely related both to sadism and the death instinct, although neither concept fully explains necrophilia.²⁰ As noted previously, Fromm saw “somasochism” and “destructiveness”²¹ as mechanisms of escape from freedom. The somasochist seeks to subject the other or be subjected by the other, while the merely destructive orientation seeks to *annihilate* the other. Somasochism he linked to the “authoritarian character,” which views the world solely through the lens of power relations. Both the somasochist and the destructive personality are dependent; the somasochist needs an other to subjugate or to

be subjugated by, while the destructive personality needs an other to annihilate. But neither the somasochist nor the destructive personality are truly concerned for the other. Each feels personally stunted, and each takes revenge upon another—attempting to render the other a powerless object or non-entity—in order to avoid facing the reality of their own unfulfilled, un-lived lives.

Merton and Fromm

Of the various commentators included in Fromm’s pamphlet, Thomas Merton had an advantage; he had already been in dialogue with Fromm for some time and had a good grasp of Fromm’s project. Fromm and Merton exchanged roughly thirty letters from 1954 to 1966, in a lovely example of Marxist/Christian dialogue on a range of philosophical, religious, and political topics. Merton initiated the correspondence, having already read three of Fromm’s books (*Psychoanalysis and Religion*, *Man for Himself*, and *Escape from Freedom*) in 1954. In the course of the exchange, the two frequently sent one another books, with Merton reading Fromm’s *The Sane Society* and *Marx’s Concept of Man*, and Fromm reading Merton’s *The New Man* in 1958 and probably reading *Disputed Questions* in 1960, and some other of Merton’s writings, including probably *Ascent to Truth*, *No Man is Island*, and Merton’s early biography *The Seven Storey Mountain* and, judging from references to these books in their discussions. The dialogue between Fromm and Merton incorporated extensive discussion of the worrying passivity of Americans about the nuclear arms race and culminated with a joint effort by Merton and Fromm to get the pope to sponsor a conference on peace, with the early letters emphasizing the two activists’ frustration with apathy about the nuclear arms race among U.S. citizens.

In his response to Fromm’s essay in *War Within Man*, Merton agrees with Fromm’s assessment of the prevalence and danger of necrophilia, though he questions whether Fromm’s radically future-oriented, biophilic messianic hope can be adequately grounded without a theistic faith in a God who can bring human hopes to fulfillment. In Fromm’s concluding re-

¹⁷ Fromm, *War Within Man*, p. 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²¹ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*



sponse to his critics, Fromm sings the praises of Merton, praising him for being a “true religious humanist” and for giving a charitable reading of Fromm’s essay (something some of the others, especially Menninger, seem not to have done). According to Fromm, Merton’s charitable reading “transcend[s] the words of the author and [seeks] to understand what he means or even what he *might* mean if he were fully aware of the consequences of his own ideas.”²² In speaking of Merton’s ability to “transcend words,” Fromm was alluding to something he saw as centrally important: the need to oppose an *idolatry* of words, that is, to refuse to cling to fixed and dead descriptions and to understand reality instead as continually living and becoming.

Fromm grew to believe that dialogue and collaboration between Marxists and people of faith should be based upon a common rejection of “idolatry,” a theme that comes up several times in the correspondence. This theme of idolatry is in the background in *War Within Man*, where Fromm writes that he feels an affinity with Merton, despite their differing religious conceptualizations, since Fromm holds that religious *experience*, which transcends language, has primacy over religious *concepts*. This theme can be found throughout his correspondence with Merton. In his first letter to Merton, for example, he stresses his agreement with Merton’s interpretation of religious mysticism, “that the true mysticism does not know God after the manner of an object.”²³

Although literally an atheist, Fromm’s description of his non-belief at times borders on negative theology; his atheism is not so much a rejection of God’s existence as it is a rejection of all positive statements about God. Just as he rejects positive theology as religious “idolatry,” Fromm rejects capitalism as idolatrous, in that both place more value upon the products of human thought and labor than upon human beings themselves. Although from a theistic standpoint, Merton shares Fromm’s worry about “idolatry.” Responding to Fromm’s worries about conservative religious leaders in the U.S. at the time (Billy Graham, Rev. Peale, Bishop

Sheen), Merton states, “I am deeply worried by the falsity, the superficiality and the fundamental irreverence of what is so often hailed nowadays as a ‘return to God.’ People have resurrected a lot of ‘words about’ God...” and he follows this statement with a reference to idols, to the “golden calf.”

Perhaps one of Fromm’s most significant intellectual influences on Merton was through exposing Merton to the work of French social theorist and Catholic mystic Simone Weil (1909-1943).²⁴ Weil’s analysis of oppression and force, as well as her negative theology, probably appealed to Fromm. In 1955, Fromm recommended that Merton read Simone Weil’s essay, “*The Iliad or The Poem of Force*.”²⁵ The essay employs Homer’s epic to describe the nature of “force,” which Weil defines as “that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing.”²⁶ In his books Fromm frequently quotes Weil’s definition of force as the power to transform a human being into a thing or a corpse.²⁷ This is paralleled by Fromm’s statement in *War Within Man* that sadism seeks to make its victim into a thing, a “living corpse.”²⁸

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Ultimately, the problem that Fromm seems to see with necrophilia is that it attempts to render

²⁴ Merton later makes various references to Weil in his books, including several in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where he expresses his “sympathy for” her and her desire “not to be in the middle of the Catholically approved and well-censored page, but only on the margin...as question marks: questioning not Christ, but Christians” (Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 40).

²⁵ Fromm, Letter to Merton, October 1955.

²⁶ Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, Ed. and Trans. Sian Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), p. 163.

²⁷ Including Fromm’s “Afterword” to George Orwell’s *1984; The Dogma of Christ: And Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1963), p. 188; *War Within Man* p. 9. For other references to Simone Weil in Fromm’s writings, cf. *The Art of Loving*, *The Nature of Man*, and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*.

²⁸ Fromm, *War Within Man*, p. 10.

²² Fromm, *War Within Man*, p. 55.

²³ Fromm, Letter to Merton, October 1954.



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what is living and uncontrollable into something dead and controllable. “Idolatry,” in all its manifestations—whether it is an idolatry of language, of wealth, of the past, of a nation, or even of ideas about God—functions similarly to necrophilia, glorifying what is dead and unchanging over what is living and changing. Throughout his career, Fromm sought to promote a future-oriented hope for the messianic age, in opposition to those who, like the reactionary proponents of Bachofen, sought to regress to some lost paradise, or to dwell sentimentally upon memories of the (dead and completed) past. Fromm would find many allies in his struggle against necrophilia and idolatry, theologians like Merton among them. But, just

as Fromm found that his messianic hope for the future was still relevant in the United States in the Cold War as it had been in Germany under the Nazis, we will likely find that in present-day society Fromm’s openness to the future, to change, to hope, and to life, and his opposition to the love of what is fixed, dead, and controllable, are no less relevant today than they were in the 1960s.

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