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## The Jewishness of Erich Fromm

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**Copyright** © 1999 and 2011 by Dr. Svante *Lundgren*, Korsbergsstigen 7, SF-21610 Kirjala / Finland; E-Mail: svlundgr[at-symbol]abo.fi. - Svante Lundgren is the author of *Fight Against Idols. Erich Fromm on Religion, Judaism and the Bible*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998.

Erich Fromm was a famous psychoanalyst, social critic and author of bestsellers like *Escape from Freedom*, *The Art of Loving* and *To Have Or to Be?* But he was also a religious atheist and a Jew with a thorough knowledge of Judaism. His views on religion and belief are not so well known as his psychological and sociological theories, but they certainly deserve to be known.

Erich Fromm was born in 1900 in Frankfurt into an orthodox Jewish family. As a child he received both a secular and a religious education and he was engaged in many Jewish and Zionist activities. In 1922 he wrote his doctoral dissertation about how the Torah was interpreted by the Karaites, the Reform Jews and the Chassidim, clearly showing his sympathies for the Chassidic movement. He was one of the founders of the Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus in Frankfurt, which has also been called „die andere Frankfurter Schule“. But in the mid-20's he ceased to be a believing and practising Jew. Why? The reason was a woman.

Frieda Reichmann was a Jewish psychoanalyst who came to Heidelberg and opened a psychoanalytical sanatorium in which Jewish traditions were strictly upheld. Fromm got in contact with her, started analysis, and in 1926 he married the 10 years older Reichmann. During the analysis Fromm discovered that his religious faith was an illusion: he believed because he wanted to believe. But the cruel fact is that man is alone, he's got to manage on his own,

he must trust in his own capacity not in the guidance of an imaginary heavenly father. So both Fromm and his wife gave up traditional Judaism. A few years later they separated. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann later moved to the USA, where she became a famous analyst. She is beautifully depicted in Hannah Green's well-known novel „I Never Promised You a Rose-garden“, in which she is called Dr. Fried.

Fromm now went through a training as psychoanalyst, and in 1930 he was engaged by the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt. In 1934 he was forced to emigrate to the USA, where he later became a famous scholar and writer. But his interest in religion never died. And he never denied the fact that he was influenced for life by his Talmud studies in his childhood. Let me mention only one example of this. Fromm was a democratic socialist opposed to both capitalism and communism. He has himself declared that his socialist conviction was a direct result of his childhood experiences. Living as an orthodox Jew at the beginning of this century was in a way like living in medieval pre-capitalist times when making money was something very alien. Fromm has told a wonderful story about this anti-capitalist spirit of his childhood world. His great-grandfather was a famous Talmudist in 19th century Germany. He earned his living by keeping a small shop. There he spent his days studying the Talmud. Every time a customer came into his shop he asked : „Isn't there another shop you could go to?"



Making money was not important, studying the holy writings was.

In most of his books and articles Fromm has touched upon religious themes. But he has also written two books that exclusively deal with religion. „Psychoanalysis and Religion” appeared in 1950 and it contains some university lectures on this topic. In 1966 Fromm published a fascinating study on the Old Testament named *You shall be as gods*. According to my „alttestamentler” friends it has left no traces in the history of Old Testament studies, a fact that tells more about the prejudices of exegetes than about the qualities of Fromm’s book.

Fromm’s most famous point of view on religion is his distinction between authoritarian and humanistic religion. Within authoritarian religion man is totally dependent on an outer force, he must surrender and obey. The cardinal example of an authoritarian religion is Calvinism, in which even the eternal fate of man is arbitrarily decided by an omnipotent God. Humanistic religion, on the other hand, is centered upon man and his possibilities. Virtues in humanistic religion are strength and self-realization, in authoritarian religion powerlessness and subservience. The prevailing mood in humanistic religion is that of joy, in authoritarian religion that of sorrow and guilt. While humanistic religion is characterized by humility, authoritarian religion is characterized by self-humiliation. In authoritarian religion man humiliates himself by projecting everything good on God and feels evil himself, a total sinner.

According to Fromm, in almost all existing religions there are both authoritarian and humanistic traits. So also within Judaism. Traditional Judaism is very much concerned with laws and regulations, with obeying and submission. But throughout the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition there is also a stream of humanism. Fromm connects the authoritarian tendency in Judaism with the nationalistic, in the Old Testament expressed as primitive clanishness, in the 20th century as aggressive Zionism. Fromm detects the humanistic tendency throughout the Old Testament, but it reaches its climax with the prophets and especially in their universalistic vision of world peace, the so called messianic age. Fromm’s own religious

opinion can be described as atheistic mysticism. He saw Buddhism as the world religion that was closest to his own belief and his favourite author - beside Karl Marx - was Meister Eckhart, a medieval Christian mystic. Fromm was an atheist because he denied the existence of a transcendent God, but he was religious because he thought that the experience expressed in religious language was a true experience that every man should strive for. Fromm loved using the Zen Buddhist metaphor of the finger that points to the moon. The moon is the representation of the supreme value and the supreme goal of man, by Fromm sometimes called „x”, sometimes „the ONE”. The finger is the conceptualization of this. Some call it God, others Brahman, Tao or Nirvana. The conceptualizations are not important. What is important is to experience this reality, to develop the human powers of reason and love, to transcend the narrowness of one’s ego, to affirm life and all that is alive. The problem with institutionalized religion is its concentration on the conceptualization, on the finger instead of the moon. Fromm therefore felt affinity with the most un-institutionalized form of religion, mysticism. Fromm’s interpretation of the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition is fascinating and challenging. It has gained both praise and severe criticism. Here I choose to deal with only one theme from this interpretation, but maybe the most important one, i.e. Fromm’s concept of idolatry. According to Fromm, the „war against idolatry is the main religious theme that runs through the Old Testament from the Pentateuch to Isaiah and Jeremiah”. The point of the anti-idolatrous teaching is not that one should worship only one God and not many. The difference between the worship of God and idolatry is that God is a living God, while the idols are dead things made by man. From this starting-point Fromm continues and connects idolatry with the psychological concepts of narcissism, alienation and necrophilia. To worship idols is to worship a product of one’s own hands but in an alienated way. It is also a form of necrophilia because it is the worship of something dead. The prophets therefore considered idolatry as a form of self-castigation and self-humiliation, whereas the worship of God is



a form of self-liberation.

Fromm claimed that the Jewish tradition saw the denial of idolatry as more important than the worship of God. He quoted the Talmud which states, „Whoever denies idolatry is as if he fulfilled the whole Torah”. (Hullin 5a) And he brings up the Talmudic concept of the Noachites, righteous gentiles who will have a portion in the world to come if they obey seven commandments. Of these commandments only two are religious; those condemning blasphemy and idolatry. Fromm’s conclusion is: „Mankind, for its salvation, does not need to worship God. All it needs is not to blaspheme God and not to worship idols.”

In the modern world the idols are not Baal or Astarte. Today’s idols are money, career, nation, flag or any kind of ideology. Fromm saw nazism and stalinism as grotesque examples of how a leader or a party, a nation or a class can become idols for millions of people. But also in the democratic West idols like money and career are popular. Fromm often claimed that the so called Christian West has only a Christian surface, but at heart people are still idolaters. But Fromm also claimed that God can become an idol if God is conceived in an authoritarian way. What abhorred Fromm most was the American mixture of capitalism and Christianity, where God is „transformed into a remote General Director of Universe, Inc.” and religion is sold with the methods and appeals that are used to sell soap. Fromm’s comment: „I think many people, if they were honest with their concept of heaven, would imagine heaven to

be a tremendous department store in which they could buy something new every day and perhaps a little more than their neighbors.”

It is interesting to note that an orthodox Jew who wrote a review of Fromm’s book on the Old Testament, while rejecting Fromm’s interpretation, still writes that Fromm’s discussion of idolatry is the best description in English of the Jewish notion of idolatry.

Erich Fromm was a Jew. He was not a believing Jew, but a pious Jew. In the Jewish tradition, which he knew so well, he saw a quest for truth and an affirmation of life that became the guiding stars for his own life. In the concept of the messianic age he saw a universalistic vision that inspired him to fight for nuclear disarmament and world peace. In the prophetic fight against idolatry he saw a prototype for the continuing struggle to overcome narcissism, to be liberated from alienation and to affirm all that is alive as against the worship of the mechanical and dead.

A few years before his death in 1980 Fromm wrote in a letter to his childhood friend Ernst Simon: „If you say I have turned away from the Jewish tradition, this is true and not true, depending what is meant by the sentence. If you say I have turned away from the life of a practicing Jew which I led until the end of my twenties, you are of course perfectly right, but my interest in and love for the Jewish tradition has never died and nobody can talk to me for any length of time who will not hear a Talmudic or Hasidic story.”