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Reflections on Erich Fromm's Position on Religion in Light of Hermann Cohen

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This paper¹ presents Fromm's (1900–1980) approach to religion and religiosity, in light of Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) thought. Despite differences in their thought, Cohen and Fromm share some things in common. Their critique of culture is based on a unique definition of *das Individuum*, the human condition. They demonstrate a cautious approach to modernity and progress. On the one hand, they respond to the religious crisis in light of the secularization processes of the modern era, and on the other hand they respond to the incompetence of philosophy alone or Freudian psychology, in the case of Fromm to address the existential and ethical problems that arose alongside modernity (see Funk 1982, p. 13. Fromm develops his neo-Freudian method eclectically from a meeting with philosophical and religious sources – see Fromm 1950a, 1960a, 1961b, 1966a.) This paper discusses Cohen's position on the relationships between religion and philosophy and focuses on his use of the term *correlation*, which is central to understanding Messianism in Cohen's thought. I will examine the assumption that Cohen's *correlation* influenced Fromm's social character theory and especially Fromm's focus on *relatedness* as a basic psychological need. In *Man for Himself* (1947a, pp. 96 f.) Fromm writes:

»Human existence is characterized by the fact that man is alone and separated from the world; not being able to stand the separation, he is impelled to seek for relatedness and oneness [...] It is the paradox of human existence that man must simultaneously seek for closeness and for independence; for oneness with others and at the same time for the preservation of his uniqueness and particularity.«

Biographical considerations

Cohen's influence on Fromm is known in the research literature, particularly with his under-

¹ This article is based on an earlier and more extensive version: see Ronen Pinkas, »Correlation and Orientation: Erich Fromm's Position on Religion in Light of Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig.« *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 85 (2018): VII-XXXV. – I would like to thank Dr. Rainer Funk and Mr. Klaus Widerström from the Erich Fromm Institute in Tübingen. During February-March 2017, I spent many days at the research center and received a warm welcome and unlimited access to the research materials and archives.



standing of Judaism as »moral monotheism« and its social-universal messianic idea (Lundgren 1998, p. 102). Fromm encountered Cohen's ideas at the beginning of his intellectual career when he was a member of the students' circle of Rabbi Nehemia Nobel (1871–1922) during the years 1916–1921. Nobel was nominated Rabbi in Berlin (1895) and later on he studied Philosophy from Cohen in Marburg during the year 1900. Cohen used to go to Talmud lessons at Nobel's synagogue, Börneplatz in Frankfurt. Nobel adopted Cohen's understanding of Judaism. *The Religion of Reason* eventually became Nobel's own way of thinking (Funk 1988, p. 2). Fromm announced Cohen's influence on him in his earlier writings, in his dissertation in 1922 (Fromm 1989b, p. 18; cf. Lundgren 1998, p. 101) as well as in his later works (Fromm 1956a, p. 48; 1976a, p. 126). In *You Shall Be as Gods* (1966a, p. 13) he writes: »I was also encouraged to write this book by the example of the great Kantian Hermann Cohen [...] my little work cannot compare with his great opus«. In *On Being Human* (1992b, p. 143) he calls Cohen »the last great Jewish philosopher [that...] has very explicitly made the connection between Messianism and socialism.« Cohen's influence on Fromm is significant not only on Fromm's conception of religion and position on Judaism², but also on his thought in general. Cohen's presentation of Judaism as an ethical monotheism that has brought to humanity the single God (the »Urbild«, archetype of morality), and the social messianic vision of the unity of humanity as described by the prophets, is presented in Fromm's works and resonates in his discussions of Christianity, idolatry and criticism of society. It is also expressed in his political views and in his attitude towards the state of Israel.³

Fromm's definition of Religion

In 1927 Sigmund Freud published *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, which is Freud's most explicit apologetic campaign against religion. (For a broad discussion of Freud's perception of Religion see Pinkas 2014, pp. 195–212.) According to Freud, the origin of religion is men's helplessness in confronting the forces of nature outside and the instinctive forces within himself (Fromm 1950a, pp. 10 f.; Freud 1928, pp. 31 f.). His criticism is general, presenting religious ideas and religious faith (especially - *credo quia absurdum*) as contradicting reason and as threats to intelligence (Freud 1928, pp. 43 f.). It is important to note that Freud's attitude towards religion and spirituality in general is complex and not one-dimensional.⁴ Fromm's definition of religion changed during his life. In his earlier period and mostly in *Die Entwicklung des Christudogmas* (1930a), Fromm sees religion as both a neurosis and an illusion because it offers fantasy satis-

² Cohen's influence on all the Jewish thinkers who followed him is enormous. Presumably, almost every Jewish philosophy that Fromm encountered in his life include some reference to Cohen's approach; Rosenzweig, Buber, Ernst Simon, Isaac Guttman, Walter Benjamin, Abraham Joshua Heschel and others.

³ On the basis of his Messianic approach, Cohen openly opposed modern Zionism. He demands from Judaism to remain a »national individuality«, but he explicitly claims that this does not stand for a state. He writes (1995, p. 254): »The universality of Messianism is the consequence of anomaly between state and people in the history of Israel.« Fromm's approach to Zionism combines elements from Cohen's universalistic Messianism and expansion of Freud's oedipal complex to the realm of society. For Fromm every nationalism and patriotism in particular is a symptom of incestuous ties.

⁴ One can find in Freud's writings an affinity to spirituality and this spirituality can be interpreted as a religious one, as presented in several studies. There are contemporary studies dealing with the mystical aspect of psychoanalysis – see Eigen 2012; 2014; Barnes 2015; Golan 2017. On the relationship between religious life and psychoanalysis see the works of Spero, for instance Spero 2004.



faction of needs that cannot find real satisfaction (Lundgren 1998, pp. 17 f.).⁵ Fromm analyzes dogma in Christianity, in which dogma is considered as a collective compulsive thinking and a way of symbolic gratification (Fromm 1963a [1930], p. 88).⁶ Twenty years later, in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950a, pp. 21 f.), Fromm expands his definition of religion: »any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion.«⁷ Freud in *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (1928, p. 91) is asking how long will the religious phenomenon continue in humanity and when will religion complete its task and disappear in the course of social progress.⁸ Fromm's definition on the other hand, confirms that religion is an expression of man's real existential needs, an »intrinsic part of human existence« (Fromm 1950a, p. 24). For Fromm, »The question is not religion or not but which kind of religion, whether it is one furthering man's development, the unfolding of his specifically human powers, or one paralyzing them« (ibid., p. 28). In regard to Freud's *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* it is interesting to mention two things: first, Fromm's position is that religion will always be an imminent part of humanity and will not be replaced by cultural progress and science.⁹ Second, as I will discuss later, Fromm is not following Freud's method of analyzing the sources of religion.¹⁰ I will argue that he is much closer to Cohen's approach.

Fromm's general definition of religion, on the one hand might diminish the role of tradition within religion and cast off some of its important meanings.¹¹ On the other hand, it expands the various human phenomena that should be considered within the framework of religion and religiosity (Fromm 1950a, pp. 94–99; 1955a, p. 171). His broad definition enables him to interpret cultural phenomena as religious (or idolatrous), such as the collective behavior in the economic market, and political phenomena like Fascism and Nazism. Fromm offers different types of religions (various formulations of the term appear in his writings: secret religion, official religion, religion of love, religion of power, industrial religion, cybernetic religion and pa-

⁵ It is worth mentioning that in those two works, it is hard to find an explicit critique on Judaism. Therefore, Lundgren's assumption that there are differences between the young and the mature Fromm in his approach to religion is accurate, but only as long as we do not consider Fromm's approach to Judaism. In my opinion, Fromm's empathic approach to the Jewish literature (but not to the practical aspects which hedropped already when he was 20 years old) is notably consistent throughout his life.

⁶ At this work Fromm analysis shows similarities to Freud's *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (1928). Compare also Jung's approach to the religious dogma (Jung 1966, p. 57).

⁷ Cf. also Fromm 1976a, p. 110. According to Fromm, there are five basic needs common to all men. These are the need for relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, sense of identity, and the need for a frame of orientation and an object of devotion.

⁸ Three years later Freud published his *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930). In this book Freud is less optimistic about the future of modern culture. He argues that every culture necessarily creates neurotic distress, and even the enlightened European culture with its scientific and technological achievements, still makes it difficult for a person to find happiness.

⁹ The second claim can meet Cohen as well, but while Fromm believes that an advanced future-religion will be a *humanistic one* and will not have to use religious/theological terminology, the thought of Cohen inherently combines a religious terminology.

¹⁰ Freud's Darwinian method for analyzing the sources of religion is mainly expressed in *Totem und Taboo* (Freud 1913).

¹¹ We can ask: What is the »holy« aspect of religion in this definition? Is there any importance to the particular aspects of the historical-religion? What is the importance of the paradox that appears from the contradictions between the particular and the universal aspects of a specific religion?



gan religion) based on the distinction between a progressive and regressive religion and between an authoritarian religious position and a humanistic one (Fromm 1950a, pp. 35–37). His definition indicates that there is no need to be »religious« in order to experience some kind of religiosity, and on the other hand, a person might be nonreligious, although considering himself as belonging to a specific religion. He writes: »If, for instance, a man worships power while professing a religion of love, the religion of power is his secret religion, while his so-called official religion, for example Christianity, is only an ideology.« (Fromm 1976a, p. 111; cf. also Fromm 1973a, p. 9, where Fromm writes that man's passions are his religion.)

In the eyes of a secular reader, Fromm claims the religious phenomena as reality itself: each individual should honestly and sincerely examine his frame of orientation and object of devotion that shapes and directs his reality. At the same time, in the eyes of a religious reader, this can be understood as a warning of the risk of religious hypocrisy.¹² His definition of a humanistic religiosity involves searching consciously for answers for existential questions and seeing those questions (following Paul Tillich) as a matter of »ultimate concern« (Fromm 1960a, p. 40). Following this, it is clear why idolatry is so present in Fromm's thought. Frame of orientation and an object of devotion can appear in many different forms, and as long as they are not promoting a productive orientation they can be perceived as idolatry.

Cohen: methodological considerations

It was in 1915 when Cohen expanded his system of philosophy, giving religion a special place (Eigenart) alongside logic, ethics and aesthetics as a fourth exclusive field, which can offer a comprehensive account of reality (this notion started with Cohen in 1915). In 1918 he wrote: »The religion of reason turns religion into a general function of human consciousness [...] all people [...] have their share in religion« (Cohen 1995, p. 7). Meaning, religion and the religious phenomena are essential to human existence, and should not be reduced as a particular aspect of one of the other three fields. Cohen, in his *Religion of Reason*, was aware of contemporary approaches to the study of the religion.¹³ Five years after Freud's *Totem und Tabu* (1913) Cohen claims that naturalistic, anthropological, ethnological or national-historical approaches can not exhaust the discussion on religion. Responding indirectly to Freud and the references of his research on the sources of religion (Herbert Spencer, James Frazer, Robertson Smith, Edward B. Tylor),¹⁴ Cohen (1915, p. 263) writes: »The Darwinian theory cannot be the teleology of the human race because the ethical sense of mankind requires its own teleology.« And

¹² The idea of »Religious hypocrisy« appears in the writings of the prophets. E.g. Amos 5, 21–25; Isaiah 1, 10–15; Micha 6, 1–8, which are blaming the upper strata and the people of Israel in general, for performing religious rituals to cover their immoral behavior. Cohen offers a broad discussion on this topic. E.g. He writes: »Amos fights against this [...] one's appeal to God should be not to power but to the moral forces [...] Religion cannot be the worship of power.« (Cohen 1995, p. 246.)

¹³ Cohen was writing in an age in which empirical studies of brain function eclipsed intellectual inquiries into the nature of thought, and in many philosophy departments experimental psychology displaced traditional philosophy. Cohen's critical idealism was meant to oppose this positivistic tendency; he rejected any attempt to reduce questions concerning logic and thought to questions of psychology. See Hollander 2012, p. 86.

¹⁴ Freud combined the anthropological hypotheses about primitive tribes and his own clinical findings mainly on phobias of neurotic children, and used the Oedipus complex as a reasonable solution to present his historical reconstruction of the sources of religion.



he states (*ibid.*, p. 9): »one has preferred, however, to follow the tracks of religion among the savages of America, rather than in Plato, Aeschylus and Pindar. The connections of religion with philosophy are set as a task by the watchword of reason.«

Cohen's approach to religion on the basis of his neo-Kantian philosophy is in opposition not only to the social sciences of the early 20th Century concerning sources of religion,¹⁵ but also the psychological and phenomenological-research trend, which emphasized the common aspects of religions on the basis of the characterization of mythological symbols or narratives (Jung, Otto Rank and others), or on religious feeling: e.g »guilt« according to Freud, the »mystical sentiment« according to William James (1902), or the idea of »holy« according to Rudolf Otto (1917). For Cohen, all those approaches miss something crucial that is found in religion: the moral guidance which religion brings with its »Gottesidee,« a God that is beyond the perceived reality, and stands in contrast to the materialism of natural sciences and history, and with the messianic idea in which religion directs humanity to the realization of morality. The idealistic philosophy (specifically of Kant and including his own system of philosophy) is regarded by Cohen as a method capable of dealing with the shortcomings of humanistic philosophy. He saw Spinoza and Hegel's epistemology as the source from which the immoral humanist methods of Marx and Nietzsche evolved. In Cohen's eyes the declaration »God is dead« means the rejection of a universal »Urbild« archetype for morality and the denial of the universal messianic hope for its fulfillment. (See Fromm 1955a, p. 352: »In the nineteenth century the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century the problem is that *man is dead.*«)

Fromm's approach to the relationship between idealism and humanism and his understanding of Spinoza and Marx are evidently very different from Cohen. (In Fromm's approach, Marx's humanistic socialism can be perceived, to some extent, as a secular version of Cohen's Messianism while not fundamentally contradicting it). Fromm sees Spinoza's thought as an example of religious humanism. Cohen on the other hand is explicitly rejecting Spinoza's (deterministic) pantheism and even excusing him as a reason for modern anti-Semitism (see Cohen 1915a; Nauen 1979).

Like Cohen and numerous 20th century Jewish intellectuals in Germany, Fromm maintains that Western culture originated from two elements: Jewish culture and Greek culture (Fromm 1955a, p. 54). He sees Judaism as a representation of moral monotheism. Defining his own position as »nontheistic mysticism« clearly shifts from Cohen's theistic position, though Cohen's religious concept of autonomy is not so far from Fromm's antiauthoritarian humanistic spirit. For Cohen, if there is content to *revelation* then it must be the autonomy of the moral will. He expresses this unique combination of ethics and religious revelation: »Sinai in the heart of man« (Cohen 1995, p. 84)¹⁶, meaning that God's command is not in contradiction to the principle of autonomy (Cohen 1995, p. 202, 324). For him the universality of morality is a principle that finds its origin in monotheism. From the idea of one God of the creation derives the unity of the human race with one unique morality. »The unity of man is the eternal value of the hu-

¹⁵ Cohen's last two major works on religion begin with attacks on the history of religion. This discipline, which appears to aim at a monopoly of research on religion, in Cohen's view, was invalidated by a fundamental methodological defect: It claimed to understand religion by means of a merely inductive method. See Poma 2006, pp. 116–121.

¹⁶ Fromm can accept this idea but for him this demonstrates that ethics is based on *man's nature*.



man race. Messianism is the straightforward consequence of monotheism.« (Ibid., p. 255.)

Fromm follows Cohen with the idea that God can be understood as a symbol of what man potentially ought to become (e.g. Fromm 1950a, p. 49). Following Maimonides' negative theology,¹⁷ Fromm concludes that the acknowledgment of God is fundamentally the negation of idols (Fromm 1966a, p. 42).¹⁸ Monotheism according to Fromm is the union of humanity on the basis of the fight against idols and idolatry. The uncompromising call for humanity to unite under the fight against idolatry appears explicitly in Cohen's thought (1995, p. 53). In my opinion, Fromm overlooked »creator« as an important attribute that Maimonides applied to God, and this appears in his definition of the term *ethics*. For Cohen, ethics can be defined only on the basis of the concept of God. For Fromm, ethics means humanism. Despite his dismissal of the evolutionist-naturalist approaches to understand the sources of religion (and ethics), he has no need to give any other explanation for the origin of reason. As Schweitzer states: »Rational thinking which is free from assumption ends in mysticism« (Fromm 1950a, p. 93). This might imply that Cohen's »reasonism« (which is free from assumptions about God) is equal to Fromm's mysticism (which is free from assumptions on the origin of reason and the assumptions for »spirituality«).

Cohen believed that the mutuality between philosophical and religious sources is the new possibility of achieving a moral humanity. *Religion of Reason* (Cohen 1995, p. 23) offers new »objective insights« which are derived from its own principles of the concept of God and the concept of man, which remained close to the method of ethics without contradicting it. For Fromm, like Cohen, there is connection between religion and ethics. Methodically, Fromm (1947a, chapt. 1) saw the need of joining psychoanalysis and ethics. He writes: »I believe that the difference between the religious and the ethical is to a large extent only an epistemological one, though not entirely so.« (Fromm 1950a, p. 93.) This can mean that Fromm's »mysticism« is found in the tradition of ethics and religion. Like Cohen Fromm expands the scientific discipline using the spiritual-ethical values found outside the discipline itself. For Cohen it's a »neo-Kantian Judaism,« and Fromm states: »Greek wisdom and Hebrew ethics are the spiritual god-fathers of this scientific-therapeutic approach to man.« (Fromm 1960a, p. 7; cf. Lundgren 1998, p. 122; Wells 1963.)

Cohen and the limits of ethics

»You shall love your neighbor as yourself« (Lev. 19, 18). R. Akiba named this command the fundamental law of the Torah, and the great Hillel, when asked by a pagan to explain to him the Torah in the time in which he could stand on one foot said, »Do not do unto others what you would not want to be done unto you. This is the essence, and the rest is commentary; go and learn« – Shabbat 31a (quoted in Fromm 1966a, p. 182).

¹⁷ Cf. Fromm 1950a, pp. 113 f.: »Centering the religious discussion on the acceptance or denial of the symbol God blocks the understanding of the religious problem as a human problem and prevents the development of that human attitude which can be called religious in a humanistic sense.«

¹⁸ Fromm 1966a, p. 67, Fromm presents the idea that in the Jewish tradition, the notion of knowing God and being like God means to imitate God's actions and not to know or speculate about God's essence. Fromm quotes Cohen: »The place of being is taken by action; the place of causality is taken by purpose.«



It is interesting to mention that the English translation that Fromm brought, »Do not do unto others,« is in a plural form, even though the original Aramaic and its ancient Hebrew translation are in a singular form »other.« In light of Lundgren's (1998, p. 103) claim:

»Cohen's insistence that one discovers the human being in the stranger, and that by having compassion for the stranger man develops his capacity to love, found full agreement with Fromm.«

It is surprising that Fromm was not sensitive to this tiny detail, a detail that for Cohen is enormous. Fromm agrees with Cohen, that love of the other means an active ethical approach: compassion. Furthermore, he writes: »By having compassion for the helpless one, man begins to develop love for his brother« (Fromm 1956a, p. 48; cf. Fromm 1964a, p. 89). And yet, we shall see this tiny difference: plural and singular are crucial for Cohen.

In his introduction to *Religion of Reason* Cohen (1995, p. 16) writes: »The Thou introduces a new problem into the concept of man.« For Cohen *Religion of Reason* contributes something crucial that is lacking in ethics (as well as in mythological, mystical and pantheist approaches), the discovery of man as fellowman. In ethics, he writes: »the I of man becomes the I of humanity [...] ethics can give recognition to man only as a member of humanity« (ibid., p. 13). The goal of ethics, therefore is totality (Allheit), in which each person represents the whole of humanity, but is not perceived as a unique individual. In other words, ethics indeed identifies man as a goal and not as means, but this recognition stays abstract and is lacking intimacy and the true commitment that derives from it. The human relationships in ethics are based on the ethical law (e.g. Kant's categorical imperative – Kant 1870, p. 44) and respect to the constitutional system. Within religion however, on the one hand the concept of one God, like in ethics, is expanding the frame of human relationships to all humanity. All are created, and all are equal, but the demand: »Love the other (the neighbor, your fellow) as you love yourself: I am the Lord« (Leviticus 19, 18), is a concrete demand of acknowledging the uniqueness of the individual in front of you and not only as a part of *the all* (Mehrheit). This ontological acknowledgment involves the change from the Nebenmensch (next man) to a Mitmensch (fellowman). Cohen (1995, p. 142) writes: »It is even a question, as yet not asked, whether I myself already do exist before the fellowman is discovered.«¹⁹

In my opinion, Fromm does not fully recognize Cohen's critique of the totality (Allheit) in ethics,²⁰ on its general perspective where the individual is not revealed as a fellowman. Yet it can be found to some extent in his social critique. In *The Sane Society* (1955a, p. 232), he writes: »Faith in mankind without faith in man is either insincere or, if sincere, it leads to the very results which we see in the tragic history of Inquisition, Robespierre's terror and Lenin's dictator-

¹⁹ Cohen's influence on the dialogical philosophy, later to come with Rosenzweig and especially with Buber's »Ich und Du« (1923), was enormous. Yet, for Cohen, the individual is the object of compassion and not a starting point or a source for existential knowledge. The individual always has a special value but not as an origin for metaphysical intuition. Sciences have the knowledge, ethical philosophy involves the idea of God, and the religious person has »correlation« and prayer.

²⁰ Cohen's criticism of the Allheit in ethics resonates in Rosenzweig's criticism of mysticism (2005, p. 223), but with a major difference: In ethics one is motivated by the moral duty presented by the law, and in mystics one is motivated merely by feelings of love to God and remains closed to the world. Rosenzweig's approach is closer to Fromm's discussion on narcissistic mystical experience. See Fromm 1990a, p. 79.



ship.« (Cf. also Fromm's (1947a, p. 217) statement: »he [Kant] denies the individual's right to rebel.«) In his discussion of how to overcome alienation lies a concern with social matters becoming personal ones. There are also his remarks that relations to the fellow man should not be separated from the relationships in the private sphere. (Fromm 1955a, p. 276; cf. Funk 1982, p. 79.) Fromm's concept of man emphasizes the need to affectively relate to others (Fromm 1977g).

Correlation

»The apex of monotheism is Messianism, but its centre of gravity lies in the relation between God and the individual.« (Cohen 1995, pp. 22 f.) For Cohen (ibid., p. 114), the fundamental equation of religion is *correlation*. Correlation is a key term in his definition of religion and a fundamental concept in his messianic vision. Cohen's prominent student, Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), claims that by using this term, Cohen translates theology into a philosophical language. (Rosenzweig 1984, pp. 214 f. and 225–227. – For example, Rosenzweig claims that Cohen's *correlation* actually refers to »Bund,« the covenant between man and God, and therefore to *revelation*.) This assertion is interesting because it may imply first, that Rosenzweig in his own philosophical system, is not intending to translate (or conceal or abandon) the theological terms into philosophical language. (He didn't. For him the theological language is indistinguishable from reality itself).²¹ Secondly, it emphasizes the notion that Cohen conceptually expands philosophy through religion. Religion proposes a notion of God that acknowledges and responds to the inability of ethics to respond to the need of the moral aspiring individual. In his approach the moral law in religion is not only based on the principle of autonomy (like in Kantian ethics) but can concretely direct the individual in his life. As Cohen (1995, p. 116) puts it: »my own God is the God of religion.« In correlation he writes: »A reciprocal relation exists between man and God.«²² The logic of correlation is the existence of two terms in relation without merging. In correlation between God and the individual, they must be thought of as together and yet distinct, each one preserving his own uniqueness (Cohen 1915, p. 32). This idea received much attention in modern Jewish thought, as a key to acknowledge the *Ich und du* relationships by Buber, in Heschel's *God in search of man* and in the ethics of the transcendent *other* in Levinas. It can be seen as well in Fromm's thought as I already discussed. Cohen believes that Jewish monotheism, viewed through the lens of correlation, contains a great potential for liberation. This liberation is not an eschatological redemption, but rather a political liberation from suffering as a social phenomenon; it is a human responsibility (Namli 2014, p. 133). According to Cohen (1995, p. 114), the correlation with man (the *Nebenmensch* to a *Mitmensch*) must precede the correlation with God. »The relations between man and man form the lower or rather the inner correlation within the correlation of God and man.« (Ibid., p. 132.)

Sin and atonement are at the heart of *correlation* in religion. The idea of correlation implies

²¹ In 1925 Rosenzweig (1999, p. 89) writes: »The theological problems are to be translated into the human, and the human driven forward until they reach the theological.«

²² Cohen 1995, p. 86. This idea of correlation appears already in his *Der Begriff der Religion* (Cohen 1915, p. 134): »Die Mystik hat es schon richtig gefühlt, daß auch Gott nach der Kreatur schreit, ebenso, wie diese nach ihm.« In English: »Mysticism was already right with the feeling that also God has yearning to man, as much as the latter has yearning to him.«



the human capacity to discriminate between good and bad and between well-being (of the unlawful) and truthfulness. In Cohen's (1995, p. 133) words, »The distinction between good and bad comes to nothing if it coincides with the distinction of well-being and ill.« To discriminate between good and bad means for Cohen to recognize the suffering of the poor (or weak) as a sin calling for atonement. According to Cohen (ibid., pp. 136–138): »Only social suffering is spiritual suffering; [...] suffering is a social state of distress of the human race.« Cohen claims that this kind of suffering is a religious problem (not a metaphysical or an existential one) that is handled by the commandments to love the »ger.«²³ For Cohen, the command to love is grounded in the correlation of man and God, and it is in accordance with the two basic principles of Kantian ethics: universality and autonomy. This stands as the basis of his understanding of the prophets' social Messianism as an ethical infinite task. »The most important content of the correlation of God and man« writes Cohen (1995, p. 213): »It is the essence of God to forgive the sin of man.« »The entire monotheistic worship is based on forgiveness of sin« (ibid., p. 209). The accomplishment of the messianic task in an individual life depends on the performance of moral actions. Since the moral task is infinite, so are the possibilities of sin, but man can be reborn. Turning away from sin is possible: »the sinful individual becomes the free I« (ibid., p. 193). For Cohen it is not only that »each sin is a step on the way« (ibid., p. 206) but furthermore that »without finding one's way through all of human frailty, man cannot find his way to God.«²⁴ The situation of man is defined according to his weaknesses. »I remain man, and therefore I remain a sinner. I therefore am in a constant need for God« (Cohen 1995, p. 212). Cohen often quotes the command: »get yourself a new heart and a new spirit« (Ezekiel 19, 31), meaning that evil is not characteristic. A return to the right way is always possible.

Fromm's discussion on sin and repentance is similar to Cohen's; however, Fromm (1966a, p. 169) focuses on »freedom of will« and the possibility to return to God's ways, meaning a release from idolatry (in its different forms). Cohen on the other hand places much significance on the construction of man within the correlation with the eternal forgiving God. This notion can be understood as a shift from the negative theology in favor of positive anthropology (Funk 1982, p. 187 fn.). The correlation is a relation of »closeness and distance« from God and involves praying.²⁵ Prayer is longing. Expressed in the prayer is a quest for God and (Psalms 74, 28) »the nearness to God« (Cohen 1995, p. 374). For that reason, Cohen's messianic vision can not be fully translated to a humanistic secular messianic vision.²⁶

²³ Ibid., pp. 127 f. – »Ger« means stranger, and is functioning as a symbol for the weaker sector of society: the poor, the widow and the orphan, and eventually the national enemy, the Egyptian and the Edomite (see Braune 2014, pp. 63–67).

²⁴ This idea has been recognized by Fromm 1950a, p. 89; »The reaction to the awareness of guilt is not self-hate but an active stimulation to do better.«

²⁵ For Cohen, prayer is the »psychological form of the religious factor« necessary for the completion of ethics. He writes: »For all spiritual, for all moral action, the mind needs to withdraw into itself [...] the soul psychologically is in need of withdrawal into itself, into its most inner depth, if it is to rise to the dialogue with the godhead. Prayer must be such a dialogue.« (Cohen 1995, pp. 372 f.) This perspective on prayer can be compared with Fromm's view on meditation. The difference is that for Cohen meditation means a preparation for praying, and for Fromm the »dialogue with God« can be understood as a state of meditation.

²⁶ In regard to Messianism one major difference between Cohen and Fromm should be noted. Like Cohen, Fromm's dissuasions on Messianism involve many quotations of the prophets, but unlike Cohen, Fromm has no need to solve the paradox between the particular and the universal aspects within Judaism. Cohen gives an explanation to the



For Fromm, being in touch with the deepest sources within the self means being in touch with all humanity (e.g. Fromm 1960a, p. 119). For Cohen, in light of correlation, every ethical deed is getting closer to God, and treating the other unjustly, is a break from the correlation with God. This means active mutuality between the single God of forgiveness and the moral aspiration of the »sinful« individual, where both sides aspire to each other and depend on each other: correlation is mutual dependency (Palmer 2004, p. 61).²⁷ The dependence of God on man and vice versa, is obviously a radical claim to a religious ear, and in my opinion, has implications on the social world. It can be seen as fundamental reciprocity between the source of authority and its delegated subject: on the one hand, questioning an authoritarian hierarchy, and on the other, disavowing the power and the additional honor that is bureaucratically obtained by means of social nomination. The correlation finds interesting expression in Fromm's paradoxical demand from the therapist:

»The analyst must become the patient, yet he must be himself; he must forget that he is the doctor, yet he must remain aware of it. Only when he accepts this paradox, can he give ›interpretations‹ which carry authority because they are rooted in his own experience. The analyst analyzes the patient, but the patient also analyzes the analyst, because the analyst, by sharing the unconscious of his patient, cannot help clarifying his own unconscious.« (Fromm 1960a, p. 112.)

In *You Shall be as Gods*, Fromm quotes Cohen (1995, p. 94) pointing out, that the qualities of God enumerated in Exodus (34, 6–7), love and justice, have been transformed into norms of human action. Applying those qualities to God, together with the demand to follow God's ways, means, in Fromm's words: »Obedience to God is also the negation of submission to man« and to the idea that »God's authority thus guarantees man's independence from human authority« (Fromm 1966a, p. 73 and 75; cf. 1950a, p. 49.) A true Cohenian correlation, in Fromm's humanistic approach, means being close to oneself and therefore sincere and capable of approaching the world freely with love and reason. On the other hand, closeness of the self, apathy and alienation are idolatry.

As Funk (1982, pp. 167 f.) noted, unlike Cohen, Fromm »wishes to preserve man and assure his future by negating the »idea« of God [according to the logic of negative theology] for the sake of humanism.« It is interesting to note that Fromm in his writing is referring to the term *likeness of God* more frequently than Cohen. For Cohen this term appears as an example for the biblical rejection of mythology (Cohen 1994, pp. 85 f.), whereas Fromm uses this term with a classical Cohenian messianic meaning, as an argument for the possible evolution of man. He

particular aspects like Jewish laws, prayer, Shabbat and Yom-Kippur (day of atonement) which comprise both properties, and therefore promotes the contrast between the people of Israel and the messianic humanity. Cohen (1995, p. 254) claims: »This antinomy is the point of gravity of the development of Jewish history; every form of inner inhibition comes from it, but it also sets into continuous motion all development. For the furtherance of monotheism, we must remain a national individuality, because monotheism has stamped upon us an historical singularity.« – In my opinion, Fromm adopted Cohen's view of messianic Judaism, even its political implications, but has not developed this important tension beyond its biblical-historical perspective.

²⁷ Fromm was aware of the idea of mutual dependence but did not develop it as Cohen did. He writes: »The mystics have been deeply imbued with the experience of man's strength, his likeness to God, and with the idea that *God needs man as much as man needs God*. [...] God is not a symbol of power over man but of man's own powers« (Fromm 1950a, p. 49).



writes (1966a, p. 70): »Man is seen as being created in God’s likeness, with a capacity for an evolution of which the limits are not set.«²⁸ In *The Sane Society* (1955a, p. 51) Fromm writes:

»He [God] represents the unifying principle behind the manifoldness of phenomena. Man is created in the likeness of God; hence all men are equal—equal in their common spiritual qualities, in their common reason, and in their capacity for brotherly love.«

And in *Beyond the Chains of Illusions* (1962a, p. 21) he states: »This [equal of men by the likeness of God] is the premise for the prophetic picture of the messianic time, the peaceful unity of all mankind.«²⁹

Cohen and Fromm expect modern man to have an active intellectual and spiritual life. They are aware of the tension between the isolated individual and the necessity of the individual to have social connection in order to live life fully. We have seen before, that for Cohen, idolatry appears in any situation where there is not true correlation with God and when the correlation is not based on moral-reason. Cohen’s infinite moral task requires an infinite atonement.³⁰ He argues that the individual’s confession in community that takes place on the day of atonement is »the symbol for the redemption of mankind.« For Cohen, idolatry, which is a false correlation and therefore the non-possibility of true atonement (and a change of the self) remains mostly in the religious sphere. Fromm and Cohen see the fight against idols as a universal non-compromising one (based on the universal Laws of Noah). While Cohen emphasizes the importance of being in a community that is in a dialogue with God, we can presumably see Fromm’s humanistic psychoanalysis as a form of a new religion to come. In *The Sane Society*, Fromm argues about the need for a »spiritual transformation of society.« »We can unite in firm negation of idolatry; [...] it is not too far-fetched to believe that a new religion will develop within the next few hundred years« (Fromm 1955a, p. 343).

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²⁸ This evolution according to Fromm includes the independence from incestuous ties – the shackles that bind man to the past, to nature, to the clan and, in general, to idols.

²⁹ Cf. also Fromm 1962, pp. 44 f., 129. For more uses of Fromm’s »likeness of God« see Fromm 1955a, p. 49, 171; 1947a, p. 338 and 406; 1956a, p. 14; 1966a, pp. 64 f., 70.

³⁰ For Cohen, the ancient Greek culture is considered to be a pagan one, because it’s lacking this future *universal* vision of world peace. In contrast to the prophets, the Greeks didn’t believe that it is possible to completely eliminate evil (e.g. Cohen 1995, p. 437).



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