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The Religious Understanding of Erich Fromm

Jan Dietrich

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Whereas within theology and in the consequence of it, the phenomenon of *religion* is frequently defined substantially – either as relation of man with God or the „Holy“ – Fromm gives a functionalistic definition of religion.¹ The basis of this definition is its anthropological theory of needs: Man has developed a self-consciousness in the course of his history, he sees himself as an individuum, as part of nature, and at the same time independent from it. Out of this dichotomy of attachment and isolation results, among others, the psychic need of man for a frame of orientation and an object of devotion. This object of devotion does not need to be a thing – it is rather that whereto man directs his psychic strivings within his framework of relations. Religion thus grows from this need, replies to it, and therefore belongs to the natural predisposition of man: Religion is every system of thinking of a community, which offers a framework of orientation and an object of dedication to the individuum within this community.² This definition is widely taken, Fromm therefore can also understand those phenomena which in

everyday language one would hardly call religions – like for example Fascism or Stalinism – exactly because of the fact that also these systems appeal to the same human need, which is satisfied by traditional religions in other societies.

Very similarly, Fromm does not want to regard *faith* first according to its content either, but as a human basic attitude – spoken in psychoanalytic terms: as a fundamental character trait – towards oneself, other men, and the world. His interest in faith, as well as in religion, is a psychological one. The question is: How does faith have an effect on man and his mental health, does it support man in developing his personality, or does it paralyse him? In relation to this question, Fromm carries, totally in the spirit of Enlightenment and religious criticism, an ethical standard to religion, differentiates in ideal-typical terms between an authoritarian faith, which consists of the submission to a foreign power, and consequently paralyzes human forces, and a humanistic faith, which supports the development of reason and love. *Ethical norms* are not regarded here as fixed by God or as founded – as frequently in theology – by God in their reason of being, but are to be gathered by anthropological research out of the nature of man. Fromm thus puts himself in the tradition of a secular idea of natural law based on ratio.

Fromm thinks to find elements of authoritarian and humanistic faith throughout all religions. He recognizes forms of humanistic faith – by which he himself was influenced – at the *Old*

¹ The question of a substantial or functionalistic definition of religion has been controversially discussed in religious science up to today. Particularly *E. Durkheim*, *B. Malinowski*, *M. Weber*, *P. Berger* and *T. Luckmann* represent a functionalistic theory. But also the great religious critics *L. Feuerbach*, *K. Marx* and *S. Freud* are to be stated here, as well as the systems-theoretical works of *N. Luhmann*.

² See *E. Fromm*, *Psychoanalyse und Religion* (Psychoanalysis and Religion), in: *GA Vol. 6*, 1980, 227-292, here: 241.



Testament prophets, who had the courage of disobedience and criticized idolatry, where man worships the product of his own hands, as alienation of man from his own powers; in addition, in *negative theology*, which under the central premiss of God's unity negates all positive statements about God, and declares that we can only know about God what he is not.³ All positive statements about God are exclusively understood as statements about God's effects in the world. Thus, they are at the same time an example for human action, and call back to himself man, who has been alienated from himself, and who in the positive, anthropomorphous statements about God transfers his own abilities and possibilities to God. *Mysticism* can also achieve this, as the mystic tries to separate from all dependencies towards the world and himself, and either to unite with God, or – like in Buddhism – to dissolve all being into nothingness. Fromm thus was deeply impressed by elements of Western mysticism – especially by *Master Eckhart* – and by elements of Zen Buddhism, and he himself has exercised meditation every day. Negative theology and mysticism can, thought on consequently, lead to a *non-theism*, which has given up the idea of a personal image of God, and often explains the transcendental immanently, as nature or love. (Here, as far as

³ Fromm refers especially to the great Jewish religious philosopher *Moses Maimonides*, who has formulated the concept of negative attributes in Islamic and Jewish tradition in the most radical way, and to his interpretation by the Jewish Neo-Kantian *Hermann Cohen*.

Fromm is concerned, particularly *B. Spinoza's* Pantheism and *H. Cohen's* ethical concept of God are to be stated. Fromm also calls non-theistic the different developments of Buddhism, Taoism, and Konfuzianism.)

When Fromm uses the term „God“ in his examination of Theism, he understands it exclusively as a symbol for man's own abilities and possibilities. As, however, in our Western cultural area, the terms „God“, „religion“ and „religious“ are monopolized by the personal image of God, Fromm instead of „religious“ partly speaks of *X-experience*, in order to understand better the substract of experience, which is based on religious expressions and ideas. He can equate humanistic religiousness and X-experience here. X-experience then involves the experience of life as a problem, which raises the question for the meaning of life; a hierarchy of values, of which the highest value is the development of man's own powers; a procedure which understands man as the end, and never as means; an openness towards the world, and the overcoming of one's own narcissism. (See E. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods. A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition*, in: GA Vol. 6, 1980, 83-226, here: 118f.) The fight against idolatry as man's alienation from himself is always decisive for Fromm. This matter is also a topic for many Christians, and especially one for Alfons Auer. It is the common basis of Christian and radical Humanism. The crucial difference lies in the question whether such Humanistic ethics finds the reason for its being in God or in man.