

Biophilia and Fromm's Criticism of Religion

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I. Religion and Religious Experience According to Erich Fromm

When Fromm himself speaks of religion, he does not mean a certain teaching on, or a certain knowledge about death and life to come. Nor does he mean a knowledge or recognition of that which is on ultimate concern. Religion in Fromm's sense is much more an expression of the experience of that which is on ultimate concern. Religion, which searches for the living, and is indeed enlivening, biophilic religion – or rather, as Fromm calls it in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950a), "humanistic religion", - is only to be found in mysticism. For mysticism is concerned with that experience of oneness which only begins where man is free of all images of God, of all recognition of God, of all strivings toward God, of all knowledge about God. Or - as Meister Eckhart would say - where man has nothing, knows nothing, wants nothing.

Fromm's understanding of religion implies a comprehensive criticism of religion that is aimed, above all, at the established "revelation religions". For Fromm, humanistic and mystical religion is the negation of all religions which strive to comprehend God. The moment of experience is understood by Fromm to be the negation of every attempt to grab hold of God.

According to Fromm, the "experience of God" can only be spoken of as the experience of an unknown and unknowable element, of an "X" (cf. *You Shall Be as Gods* (1966a)), in which "X" means that during this experience one has nothing on one's hands, nothing in one's head, nothing in one's heart; that one does nothing, knows nothing, wants nothing. Religious experience is something uncontrollable which I experience as it comes to me, meets me, and transcends me.

The experience of God as an unknown - as an "X-experience" – is not metaphysical, but paradoxical: it is the experience of the ONE in accepting No-Thingness; the experience of Fullness in accepting Emptiness. Whoever thinks that he can grasp the ONE, the transcendent, the uncontrollable through conceptual comprehension of this.

A encounter with "X" has already substituted the knowledge and interpretation of experience for the experience itself.

Where religion tries to discover by which means, teachings, and concepts such religious experience may be arranged: it is already committing idolatry. The only favor which an institutionalized religion can perform for religious experience is religio-critical: to expose the idols, illusions and ideologies, to disillusion, to criticize. For that reason Fromm demanded, in *You Shall Be as Gods* (1966a), an idology, a science of idols.

Does Fromm come to such a view of religion and experience of God?

II. Fromm's Psychoanalytic Approach to Phenomenon of Religion

Contrary to Freud, for whom religion was an epiphenomenon, Fromm sees religion as an authentic human phenomenon. Religion is a possible answer to the psychic need for a "frame of orientation and an object of devotion", found in all humans. Contrary to Freud who saw the passionate psychic strivings of man as stemming from physical drives, Libido and Destrudo, for Fromm there are independent psychic drives - he refers to them as "needs" - which must be satisfied just as physiological needs for food, drink, movement, sleep, and sexual activity must be satisfied.

Whether the need for a frame of orientation and an object of devotion is satisfied by an institutionalized religion or by other important ideological, political and social entities is just as much a question of economic and social conditions (which have a great influence on the method of satisfying psychic needs) as is the question of which religion or general religious direction is favored.

The phenomenon of religion can be separated from neither the psychic structure - that is to say from the totality of the psychic powers and from their structuring - nor from the economic, social, political and cultural structure in which religion serves to satisfy the psychic need for a frame of orientation and object of devotion. Religion or politics, social change or the experience of God are only two different approaches to the same phenomenon: the fact that psychic needs are satisfied through the furthering of certain passionate strivings, according to the socio-economic environment.

The question of religion therefore cannot be separated from the question of which passionate strivings are furthered by a certain society and which are inhibited. Nor can it be separated from the question of which passionate strivings are desirable, indispensable to the smooth functioning of society, or conducive to the promotion of psychic growth and maturity.

By analyzing the therapeutic processes through which patients were healed, Fromm, as Freud before him, made the observation that it is not the adaptation to society's demands that heals, but rather a psychic process of maturation in the course of which repressed strivings are made accessible and become a part of the Ego. For Freud, such strivings were, according to his instinct-theoretical concept, the outcome of sexual drives.

Like Freud, Fromm also recognizes that the revelation of hidden, repressed strivings considered undesirable by society encourages psychic growth and that this integration process results in psychic healing. The reason for this growth and healing, however, is not that repressed sexuality is sublated, but rather that psychic powers are demonstrated to be one's own powers and that only those passionate strivings are encouraged which make possible a subject-oriented, in-

dependent relatedness to oneself and to the surrounding natural and human environment - a connection that grows out of one's own rational and loving powers.

The more man sees himself as author, actor, protagonist and subject of his life; the more he is, therefore, himself the one who with his own powers thinks, feels, and acts - the more he also develops his powers of reason and of love, powers through which he can be completely related to his world and to other human beings without losing himself.

The passionate forces of man become his own powers, forces whose subject is man, so that they have their sources in man himself, and if man is an authentic self, then man becomes capable of the highest brotherly love alongside the highest love of self. Then the individual finds himself again in his neighbor without putting his own integrity or that of his neighbor into question - this is what "love" means according to Fromm. And he is able to recognize reality in its total objectivity as a result of his subjectivity - this is what "reason" means according to Fromm.

With his approach Fromm comes to conclusion directly opposed to those by Freud. For Freud, brotherly love is possible only through renunciation of self love. For Fromm the one is not possible without the other. According to Freud, passionate strivings are always an expression of a deficiency. For Fromm, as long as they are only experienced as own forces, they are an expression of the fullness of life. The bottom line for Freud is: "homo homini lupus". But Fromm sees our fellow man not as danger and an inhibiting factor, but rather as the vehicle for loving relatedness and thus the facilitation of a fulfilled life in freedom.

III. Fromm's Biophilic Evaluation and Criticism of Religion.

It is actually true that spiritual well-being is determined by the development of human forces of reason and love, and if the question of the development of these forces is measured according to whether or not the passionate strivings promote this goal, the religious-critical biophilic conviction belongs to the repertoire of therapeutic experience.

During his lifetime Fromm tried in various ways to theoretically and conceptually explain this therapeutic experience by means of his characterology. His first attempt was with the term "spontaneity" (in *Escape from Freedom*, 1941a), in order to express that everything is dependent on this; that passionate strivings come "sua sponte", from one's own impetus. Then he spoke about "spontaneous activity" and about "productivity", in order to make it clear that strivings must be "productive", contrary to non-productive character orientations.

In the 60's Fromm documented the same phenomenon with the contrasting pair "biophilia - necrophilia", the pair which concerns us in this symposium. At the end of his life he spoke of "having" and "being", by which he was only emphasizing another aspect of the contrasting pair "productive-non-productive" that is to say "biophilic-necrophilic". Here as well we are dealing with the religiously critical, biophilic conviction that everything is dependent on whether man can live for himself with the help of his own forces of reason and love, which unlike all objects in the mode of having, which decrease with use - have the idiosyncrasy that they increase in proportion to their use.

Religion and religious experience are not immune to passionate strivings, but turn out to be determined according to the biophilic or necrophilic, productive or non-productive, being-oriented

or having-oriented quality of those strivings. Whether religion and religious experience contribute to man's salvation; whether they can make him whole again, is dependent on the quality of the strivings - which designate and motivate religious experience and actions as well.

The passionate strivings are of the biophilic type and aim at optimization of one's own powers of reason and love, the religious experience and practice have invigorating, healing effect. On the other hand, the promotion of religious experience and practice is accompanied by the promotion of all those passionate strivings that make man dependent, that alienate his and repress him, that render him submissive and impotent, then the psychic need may be satisfied, but the only forces to be simultaneously strengthened are those forces which alienate man from himself.

The decision about the salvation and damnation of mankind does not lie in a declaration of belief in an absolute truth, in God, in man, in the Revelation, in the Bible, or in the teaching of the church. The decision is much more dependent on the orientation of the passionate strivings which carry and determine religious phenomena as well. If, on the basis of his biophilic-oriented passionate strivings, man feels himself to be one with himself and the world, then religious practice is healing and has a biophilic effect because it allows its own forces of reason and love to grow.

IV~ Summary

Biophilic Religion as Practice of Reason and Love

For some, the definition of the "X-experience" as the experience of the ONE on the basis of one's own forces of reason and love may seem too empty; not transcending or transcendental enough. Don't reason and love always lead back to the unsuccessful, alienated, self-destructive human being himself? In conclusion, I'd like to outline both concepts once more in order to make their "religious" dimension clear.

Reason does not mean "know-how", nor does it mean intellectual comprehension of reality. Reason has nothing to do with "manipulative intelligence" or "instrumental reason". Reason can not be manufactured or created, regardless of how much knowledge or thought is employed.

Reason is rather the ability to experience oneness with outer and inner reality. Reason is not casual, but paradoxical. It is the ability to feel so at one with a cat, a rose, an object, that the reality perceived through reason is no longer something strange and different, but rather something that is MINE in the deepest sense and is at one with me.

The presence of such a reading capability can be seen in our ability to perceive reality as something of our own, as homeland and as something familiar, as something both living and enlivening (biophilic), as something immediate and current. The greater this reasoning capability, the slighter the fear of outer and inner reality, the smaller the gap between the outer and the inner world, between objectivity and subjectivity.

Likewise love cannot be manufactured or created. Love is neither loss of self nor selflessness, and is definitely not dependency, subordination, or being in the position of "owing" the person who loves first and who must therefore be regarded as the source of all love.

Love is something that comes to us, something encountered as a gift. But it is not that which we think of as "being loved". Love is the ability to be as one with all one's mental, emotional, and physical forces; and in this self-love to be simultaneously at one with humanity and with nature without giving up our "self" or causing others to relinquish their individuality in this process Love is the ability to experience that which is foreign to us and different to us, as our own; to discover that which is our own in that which is foreign and different; and the ability, having experienced that which is foreign as being familiar, to feel ourselves at one with that which is different.

The experience of oneness with that which is strange and different in ourselves and in others is experienced as an encounter with the transcendence, with that over which we have no control, with that which is presented to use but because this oneness is experienced through the practice of reason and love, it is always the experience of something foreign within that which is ours; it is the experience of something different as our own "different-ness"; and therefore it is, in the end, nothing that should be unfamiliar or strange to use In *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950a), Fromm paraphrased this experience with the concept of "higher self", and later with the concept of the ONE.

It is the experience of transcendence which is in question, but this transcendence is not something from the hereafter, something principally foreign to man, but rather something within the realm of human possibility - or as I like to put it, the X-experience is concerned with an experience of biophilic transcendence, moving toward the goal of humanly possible. That humans are often miles away from this goal does not contradict this conviction. However, it can also be demonstrated through that which has been presented here, that Fromm's view of biophilic religion as a criticism of every form of institutionalized religion can only be truly plausible to those who realize religious experience as the practice of reason and love. Only for those who practice reason and love will these forces be religious forces, that is to say healing and unifying powers, with which they can be one with themselves and with others.

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