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editorial

Erich Fromm and Pastoral Psychology

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REARED in a German family with a genuine concern for its Jewish religious heritage, Erich Fromm also gave attention to religion during the course of his humanistic and social science studies in the German universities. Awarded the Doctor of Philosophy degree in social psychology at the age of twenty-two, he then entered training as a psychoanalyst. Until the advent of Hitler; he combined the practice of psychoanalysis with social psychological studies, and was associated with the German Institute of Social Research, which first fled to Paris and then to New York. Since his arrival in the U. S. A. about twenty years ago, he has continued these two interests. Indeed, it is the fashion in which he has related them that makes his contribution so significant.

Over and above the therapeutic contribution of psychoanalysis, its great contribution to culture, Fromm believes, is to recall modern man to a sense of the humanistic heritage he has in Western civilization. The unique fact about psychoanalysis, one might say, is that it has found unparalleled tools for probing the evil in man; yet the further this is explored, the more clear it becomes that there is something else beneath the evil. Far from becoming discouraged about man's potentialities through the revelations of rationalization, repression, and all the other automatic psychic defense mechanisms that man uses, Fromm has said repeatedly that it is the positive core trying to move toward fulfillment that impresses him.

Fromm regards his psychological thought as rooted in Freud, but as differing in one important regard. The difference might be put in this way, that, according to Fromm, Freud always observed correctly but sometimes put the cart before the horse in his interpretations. For instance, Freud was right in relating basic types of character (e.g., the miserly) to ways of training in early childhood (e.g., toilet training). He was wrong, however, in making the character flow from something like toilet training; for the interpersonal forces handling the toilet training also shaped the character. Thus, Fromm's theory of character and of personality development is more symbolic and less literal than Freud's. This motif runs throughout Fromm's psychological thought.

In terms of social theory, Fromm's devil is "authoritarianism." He is in no way against what he calls "rational authority" (based on demonstrable competence). But the over-arching social ills of our time spring from a flight to "irrational authority" in order to "escape from freedom." One of Fromm's most substantial contributions has been in demonstrating the processes by which men have submitted to such irrational authority as a dictator. Men who accept the fact of

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their freedom, instead of fleeing in panic before the responsibility it brings with it, will set about reconstructing themselves and their society without minimizing the evil and destructive forces, within and without, that constantly threaten them. Fromm may indeed have a large social and personal vision, but it is not seen through rose-colored glasses.

Fromm's over-all concern is with ethics in the sense of man's search for the good. No primitivist, he nevertheless believes that Western man knows less about what is good for him than about anything else. True self-interest, he contends, far from being obvious or well understood, is man's most difficult quest, and is to be sharply distinguished from selfishness. Modern Western history, he believes, has confused these two; so that man's real good, as seen in the whole humanistic heritage of the West, has been almost completely obscured. In the U. S. A., unlike some other nations, we have had little open authoritarianism, but we are in grave danger of falling into an "anonymous authoritarianism" involving everything from politics to bobby sox. Whenever men fail to inquire about the nature of their real good (and, instead, believe they already know it because authority has laid something out for them represented as good), a civilization is threatened.

In all his thought, psychological, social, and ethical, it is clear that Fromm is steadily wrestling with issues that Christianity has always regarded as basic. His uniqueness lies in his bringing the depth insights of psychoanaylsis to bear upon these issues. At a minimum, his contribution to Christian thought in general and pastoral psychology in particular, is in his exposure of various idolatries. Tillich has paid special tribute to Fromm at this point.

Fromm's religious contribution, however, is also positive in character. Psychoanalysis, far from demonstrating that the basis of the religious quest is something immature to be outgrown, instead suggests that it is basic to man as human being, that it is precisely the ability to ask seriously the questions about his fundamental nature, his origin, his destiny, and his good, that make him human. Thus, one might say, Fromm contributes, in terms uniquely relevant for our day, something positive about the legitimacy and indeed the indispensable nature of the religious quest.

But the religious quest, he adds, has also been distorted. Mostly it has become "authoritarian." Fromm has no objection to a God who is, for instance, the ground of being; but this he regards as quite different from the God of the Western historic religions, whom he sees as capricious and tyrannical. Even here, where Fromm seems most obviously at war with our religious tradition, we do well to read him carefully; for his demand is for purification, for removal of the idolatrous conceptions and loyalties that spring up in every age.

Even though he invariably deals with issues of great depth, Fromm is always clear and forceful in his writing. We commend his works to our pastoral readers—not, to be sure, to be read uncritically, for they require important theological criticism. But even where we can not follow him, he will prove a goad to sharpen and purify our own thought at points where that is likely to be needed.

We welcome Fromm's new book and the review of it in this issue by Paul Tillich.

—SEWARD HILTNER

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