

COMMENTS ON THE FROMM MANUSCRIPT

-- Thomas Merton

In making my contribution to this discussion which appears to me both urgent and intelligent, I shall have to resort to metaphorical language because I want, in a few lines, to point towards dimensions that transcend psychology. I fully agree with Eric Fromm's analysis, but I would like to try to carry it further, in my own field.

The Christian concept of man, a concept which is held in common by all the religions which can be called "higher" or "mystical," is one which sees man as a spiritual, or self transcending being. That is to say that man, unlike other animals, does not find his fulfillment or self realization merely on the level of his own nature. Even the most satisfactory exercise of those biological functions which preserve and propagate the life of the species is not enough to fulfill man's inner capacities, even when this exercise is also psychologically mature and rewarding. As long as man acts only as a member of the human species, within his limits as an individual subservient to the inescapable finalities of his common "nature," he is still subject to the deepest and most radical form of spiritual alienation. He is not fully "free" because he is not able to transcend his specific individuality and function on the level of a spiritual person with all the perfection and autonomy implied by that concept.

In other words, it seems to me that we must remember the need to explore the full spiritual depths of such concepts as "life" and "love of life," "freedom" and so on. This will necessarily imply at the same time a deepening and in some way an apparent complicating of ~~the~~ notion of man's alienation. I fully accept Fromm's analysis of



alienation as it is hinted at here and developed more fully in his other books. But I think the concept needs a great deal of further exploration, beyond the limits of sociology and psychology, even of depth psychology.

I think it has too often been forgotten that there are two aspects of that vast, mysterious area of our being which we call the unconscious. There is the psychosomatic area which is so to speak rooted in man's biological substratum, but there is an infinitely more spiritual and metaphysical substratum in man's being, which the Rhenish mystics called the "ground" or "base" of the soul, and when the Zen Masters continually point to, but which they refuse to describe except by incomprehensible and paradoxical terms like "your original face before you were born." So, to put my point briefly, I would like to suggest the over-whelming and almost totally neglected importance of exploring this spiritual unconscious of man. There is no real love of life unless it is oriented to the discovery of one's true, spiritual self, beyond and above the level of mere empirical individuality, with its superficial enjoyments and fears.

In fact, I would like to suggest what would seem to me to be perhaps the most fruitful avenue of approach, at least for one in my own field: namely, the clear recognition of the ambiguities and ambivalences generated by false personalism. I refer to the fateful error of reducing the "person" or "spirit" to the individual and empirical ego, the "self-as-object," the self which we observe as it goes about its biological business, the machine which we regulate and tune up and feed with all kinds of stimulants and sedatives, constantly trying to make it run more and more smoothly, to fit the patterns prescribed by the salesman of pleasure-giving and anxiety-allaying commodities.

A medieval writer of great finesse, Guigo the Carthusian, points out the state of idolatry and alienation of a man who is in all things



"subject to what he himself destroys"--that is to the pleasures and gratifications which the transient and exterior self takes in evanescent things. One might say that this leads us to the crux of the problem: the hope of finding life and joy in the mere processes of natural existence leads to the contradiction which tries to construct and create in acts which have at least an implicitly destructive character. The self-affirmation that springs from "using up" something or someone else in the favor of one's own pitiable transiency, leads eventually to the outright destruction of others in open despair at our own evanescence.

So Guigo says: "He who loves nothing destructible has no place in himself where he can be wounded by the man of power and he becomes inviolable, since he loves inviolable values as they ought to be loved." One might add that such a one has no need and no incentive to defend himself violently or to destroy. He does not despise or hate evanescent things. He simply hears them as "syllables which God utters at their proper time" and passes on.

When our empirical ego is taken, without further qualification, as the true "person," the true "self," as the being who is the genuine subject of life, freedom, joy, and fulfillment, or indeed of religious salvation, then we arrive at the most tragic frustrations and errors, because this implies a radical alienation of our true being. While recognizing the great importance of depth psychology (we cannot get along without it today!) I would like to say--and I am sure all analysts worthy of their salt will agree--that considerable mystification is involved in the complacent and beatific sort of counselling that aims only to remove "guilt feelings" and adjust the empirical self to a society of which Fromm has, here and elsewhere, questioned the basic sanity. We ought to feel guilty and we ought to experience anguish in the fabulous irresponsibilities and panics we are generating every



week of the Cold War. The trouble is rather our moral obtuseness and our spiritual insensibility to fundamental human values.

It would seem that we ought to pay a great deal more attention than we do to the traditional spiritual and contemplative wisdoms which prescribe disciplines (in the deepest sense of "discipleships") to help man transcend his empirical self and find his "true self" in an emptiness that is completely "awake" because completely free of useless reflection. This is a realm of paradox and risk, because there are false and unsatisfactory spiritualities which do not go far enough, which indulge in Platonic oversimplifications, which objectify that which can only be grasped as subject, and even then is lost as soon as it is "grasped." Some spiritualities generate divisive contempt which flower in destructiveness. In other words there is great danger in facile and thoughtless verbalizations of spiritual reality. All true spiritual disciplines recognize the peril of idolatry in the irresponsible fabrication of pseudo-spiritual concepts which serve only to delude man and to subject him once again to a deeper captivity just when he seems on the point of tasting the true bliss and the perfect poverty of liberation. The supreme risk in this quest for liberation resides in the paradox of transcendence itself. For the Transcendent is also at the same time Immanent, and the mystery is that while man's spiritual liberation consists in a self renunciation and self recovery "beyond himself," it is also at the same time a fantastic awakening to the truth and transcendent value of one's ordinary self. I know that this apparent contradiction is thoroughly outrageous and I have perhaps no real excuse for introducing it in so short a piece of writing, except that even the longest and most complex explanation would not serve to clear it up. All I can say is that for those who are interested, there are documents of all kinds which say that the highest and most "biophilic" expression of man's extraordinary

capacities is precisely in this "ecstasis" in which the person is at once totally empty (of separateness and material individuation) and totally full, realizing himself in unity not only with all being(s) but with the very source and finality of Being. It is the paradox of D. T. Suzuki's formula that zero equals infinity, or the todo y nada of St. John of the Cross. Hence I want to say that the highest form of life is this "spiritual life" in which the infinitely "fontal" (source-like) creativity of our being in Being is somehow attained, and becomes in its turn a source of action and creativity in the world around us. The common jargon of religions tends to speak of this sometimes as "contemplation," sometimes as "liberation," sometimes as "salvation," sometimes as "divinization." The words are not indifferent, because they do have definite implications, some of which can easily be unfortunate.

Now I think the point is this: where Fromm speaks of abundance as against scarcity, saying abundance is a possible support for a biophilic orientation, I think there are unresolved ambiguities left lying around, and they have explosive possibilities. I agree by all means that it is necessary to make wise use of all the techniques which man now has at his disposal to eliminate want, misery and injustice from the face of the earth. But our conquest of matter is illusory if it is at the same time only a more radical and more total subjection of ourselves to matter. When we had to struggle against a hostile nature, the challenge enabled us to preserve intact a life-giving and central integrity. Now that matter has yielded to us, we have also yielded ourselves to it so that we no longer expect life and joy from our own spiritual "center" but from things which are outside us and alien to us. I think we have to recognize the hollowness (Fromm himself certainly does) of the kind of material and depersonalized abundance which we presently enjoy in the



United States. Not only does this tend to stifle and corrupt the real spiritual depths of man's being, not only does it imprison him in every possible kind of spiritual delusion, but I think the very frustrations and self contradictions of materialistic affluence, coupled with frantic and useless activism, do much to explain the death-wish of our warfare, economy and culture.

We live in a society that tries to keep us dazzled with baubles in a bright cloud of lively and joy-loving slogans. Yet nothing is more empty and more dead, nothing is more insultingly insincere and destructive than the vapid grins on the billboards and the moron beatitude in the magazines which assure us that we are all in bliss right now. I know of course that we are fools, but I do not think any of us are fools enough to believe that we are now in heaven, even though the Russians are breaking their necks in order to become as rich as we are. I think the constant realization that we are exhausting our vital spiritual energy in a waste of shame, the inescapable disgust at the idolatrous mendacity of our commercial milieu (or the various other apocalyptic whoredoms that abound elsewhere on the face of the earth) is one of the main sources of our universal desperation. Other writers have analyzed this with great finesse, and indeed since the phenomenon is more subtle and more sophisticated in Europe than in America, I can only refer to those who have done such a good job on it over there. Gabriel Marcel is, I think, a case in point. Better still, perhaps, the less well known and more explosive Leon Bloy, who saw the whole thing with a devastatingly prophetic clarity some fifty years ago.

I might doubtless be expected to conclude with gestures of congratulation in the direction of popular religion. I am afraid this is impossible. Popular religion has to a great extent betrayed man's inner spirit and turned him over, like Samson, with his hair cut off and his eyes dug



out, to turn the mill of a self frustrating and self destroying culture. The cliches of popular religion have in many cases become every bit as hollow and as false as those of soap salesmen, and far more dangerously deceptive because one cannot so easily verify the claims made about the product. The sin of religiosity is that it has turned God, peace, happiness, salvation and all that man desires into products to be marketed in a speciously attractive package deal. In this, I think, the fault lies not with the sincerity of preachers and religious writers, but with the worn out presuppositions with which they are content to operate. The religious mind today is seldom pertinent or prophetically critical. We enjoy our routine and parochial indignations, but I wonder if we have not settled down too comfortably to accept the greater prevarications that the Gospels or the Prophets would have us reject with all the strength of our being. I am afraid the common combination of organizational jollity, moral legalism and nuclear crusading will not pass muster as serious religion. It certainly has little to do with "spiritual life." Needless to say, this is more generally understood by churchmen than those who resent religious institutions are perhaps likely to realize. There is no question that Pope John XXIII, in his efforts to foster a general spiritual renewal of the Catholic Church by the Second Vatican Council, has been aware of where the trouble lay. But even then, I think that the most profoundly and properly spiritual issues still lie too deep for common observation and interest, and are certainly far too mysterious to be captured in the concise and technical terminology of an ecumenical council.

Still I would like to conclude on a note of hope. It is precisely because I believe, with Abraham Heschel and a cloud of witnesses before him, that "man is not alone," that I find hope even in this most desperate situation. Man does not have to transcend himself in the sense of



pulling himself up by his own bootstraps. He has, rather, to respond to the mysterious grace of a Spirit which is at once infinitely greater than his own and yet which, at the same time, offers itself as the total plenitude of all Gifts, to be in all reality his "own spirit."

Returning to Guigo the Carthusian: our response to the Spirit of life is itself a living and dynamic progress, a continual attunement to all the "syllables of the great song." Our violence and destructiveness come from the fact that we cling madly to a single syllable, and thus wish the whole song to stop dead while we enjoy what we imagine is final and absolute. But the "most wise Singer" is not singing for ourselves alone and we must accept the fact that some of His notes and words are for others and seemingly "against us." We must not react destructively against the notes we do not like. We must learn to respond not to this or that syllable, but to the whole song.

However, the response is not automatic. It demands a great purity of devotion to trust and to life. The delusions of a fat society glutted with the profits begotten by its own death wish, hardly dispose us to respond to the Creator Spiritus, the Cantor sapientissimus, without a fundamental reorientation of our thought and life. All have the duty to contribute whatever they can to this reorientation. I do not think the word reorientation is strong enough. What is required is a spiritual upheaval such as we seldom see recorded in history. But such things have happened, and let us hope we have not gone so far that they will not happen again.

* * *