

## Humanist's vision

Erich Fromm *To Have or to Be?* (Jonathan Cape, £4.95), reviewed by the Rev Dr William Strawson.

Anyone who thinks humanism can be easily countered by a few garbled "proofs" of the existence of God should read this book. Fromm is not much bothered whether there is a god or not (he assumes there isn't). What bothers him is that humanity is in danger because of man's increasing insistence that life consists of having things, not in being something.

There are two dangers in this lust for things. It uses up limited resources at an alarming rate, so that within the foreseeable future planet earth will be a desert without habitation. And, more seriously than that, the "having mode" positively inhibits the "being mode." Man's restless dissatisfaction arises from his mistaken assumption that the more he has, the more he is. On the contrary, says Fromm, the more he has the less he is.

So the dream of inevitable progress has failed. Humanism is no longer optimistic about the future. Technology has diverted us from the truth of being. Master Eckhart, Old Testament, New Testament, Spinoza and Marx all support the thesis that to be, which is man's true destiny, the uniquely human possibility, is thwarted and blocked by his insatiable desire to have. Sin is not disobedience, which occurs in a context of having what one should not have; sin is separateness, a denial of being in relation; the cure for disobedience is forgiveness; separateness requires healing. Thus having or being determines the doctrine of atonement.

If you think Christianity has always said that covetousness is one of man's greatest sins, and greed destroys human relationships, you are right. But be careful not to conclude that at last Fromm has come round to

the Christian position. He is more sympathetic to religion than many humanists, but he appears to have no hope that religion can effect the change of heart needed if mankind is to escape from the having mode to the being mode. And one must admit that although Christianity makes the right noises and propagates a theory of being which ought to put us on the right road, there is not much indication that western technology is seriously questioned by Christian ideas. We lay waste our days, getting and spending. We are still mesmerised by GNP, human fulfilment (ie cars, freezers, music centres and all the paraphernalia of mass production), and freedom (that is, to do what we like with what we have).

Of course Fromm can be faulted. His naive solution to the problem of changing human hearts is a Marx like revolution. But as he admits, communism is just as much in the having mode as capitalism, so what good is that? The fatal weakness of humanism is that it has no belief in extra-human resources to free us from our obsession with possessions. But does our faith in God enable us to opt out of the contemporary assessment of the importance of things?

Fromm leaves unsolved the bigger problem of the relation between having and being. Granted that we are not simply what we have. But are we anything if we have nothing? Are not possessions a necessary expression of personal being? We have to learn to possess without being possessed. The inadequacy of Fromm's solution must not blind us to the urgent reality of his analysis.

