

awareness of the mystery of existence may not necessarily mean the awareness of God. Nor does it by itself provide the proof for the existence of the realm of transcendence. It simply means that this experience is shared by man as man in his essential nature. It is in this context that one can truly appreciate such psychologists as Gordon Allport and Viktor Frankl. Allport thinks that modern psychology is in a dilemma, for it has trimmed down the image of man as a transcendent being. He suggests the need for the recovery of "the totality of man's psychic existence" which includes the sense of wonder and awe.<sup>9</sup> As a longtime prisoner in bestial concentration camps during World War II, Frankl found himself stripped to naked existence. Throughout his vivid descriptions of his life during those tormenting years, he confesses that he constantly found himself maintaining that in order for man to affirm his life to be meaningful, he must, first of all, come to terms with the transcendent source of the worth of life. "Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is," writes Frankl, "but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked."<sup>10</sup> It is

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<sup>9</sup>Gordon W. Allport, Becoming (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup>Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1963), p. 172.

also to be remembered that man's ontological aporia has been a dominant and consistent theme of modern literature. The best example may be Saul Bellow's novel, Herzog. It is the story of Moses Herzog, great sufferer, joker, moaner, and charmer, a man of our time. Seeing himself as a survivor, not only of his private disasters but also those of the age, he cannot keep from asking what he calls a "piercing" question. The question is this:

I look at myself and see chest, thighs, feet--a head. This strange organization, I know it will die. And inside--something, something, happiness. . . 'Thou movest me.' . . . Is it an idiot joy that makes this animal, the most peculiar animal of all, exclaim something?<sup>11</sup>

Fromm does not seem to be interested in this wonder of man. He does not conceive of the question of the origin of his life as mysterious at all. He simply regards man as the highest stage of natural evolution. Fromm's interest is totally in the ways in which man overcomes his necessary alination from nature, others, and himself. In short, Fromm's anthropology deals mainly with man's present and his immediate future. Man's past is important only to the extent that it enables us to understand why man has failed to be productive. All this can be further illustrated by Fromm's complete refusal to talk about the significance of the fact

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<sup>11</sup>Saul Bellow, Herzog (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1961), p. 340.

of death for human life. His only lengthy discussion of it is made in reference to "death instinct."<sup>12</sup> But one soon discovers that what Fromm speaks of here is extreme narcissism and symbiotic-incestuous fixation, and not at all about the impact which the fact of death creates upon human life. The underlying assumption behind all this is that death is antithetical to life but cannot be a human problem, because it is something over which man can have no control whatsoever. However, Fromm goes on to say that man's attitude toward death is a human problem, because he is directly responsible for it. We can choose either to accept death as an inescapable fact or to pretend as if it did not exist.

The mystery of life then is entirely foreign to the whole gamut of Fromm's thought. If there are some mysterious elements in life, they are not to be taken with utmost seriousness, for they are created by the lack of man's knowledge about himself and his world and therefore will disappear as man grows increasingly more mature. What Fromm ignores, however, is that it is impossible for us to stop asking the question about the why of physical death. We simply cannot make a neat distinction between death and our attitude toward death. For physical death compels us to see that we are in time, and this awareness further propels

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<sup>12</sup>HM, pp. 48-53.

us to wonder about the transcendent source of our existence. The question to be asked, therefore, is whether Fromm is justified in ignoring man's ontological aporia. This question becomes even more urgent in view of the fact that such distinguished psychologists as Gordon Allport and Viktor Frankl indirectly repudiate humanistic atheism precisely at this point. This inadequacy of Fromm's doctrine of man may be found in the fact that the paradoxical relationship between identity and community cannot do justice to the uniqueness of man. It does not adequately grasp man's ability to transcend himself and nature and to ask whence comes life. Niebuhr's concept of the essential nature of man proves itself to be more adequate than that of Fromm. In defining man as both limited and limitless, Niebuhr can address himself to man's ontological wonder. Man's existence is imbedded in nature, but, in his radical freedom, he transcends both nature and himself. He longs for the ultimate, though he himself cannot produce the ultimate. Thus, the principle of Niebuhr's doctrine of man is compatible with the ontological question which man as man cannot help raising.

Another way of defining common human experience in terms of the essential nature of man is to say that man is qualitatively different from all other forms of existence on earth. Indeed, this affirmation is crucial to both Fromm

and Niebuhr. And yet, in view of the fact that it is being challenged today with increasing vigor, it is Fromm who is, in the final analysis, incapable of meeting the challenge effectively. Mortimer Adler, in his recent book, The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes,<sup>13</sup> clearly demonstrates what impact the challenge of the naturalistic-materialist views of man create upon those doctrines of man that regard man absolutely unique.

Adler finds the locus of the uniqueness of man in his capacity for a propositional language or his ability to formulate conceptual thought. But he goes on to argue that this does not necessarily make man qualitatively different from other animals. Everything depends on whether the power of conceptual thought can be adequately explained by reference to neurological mechanism and processes or whether it involves some factor that cannot be made explainable by those avenues. Adler maintains that this fundamental question, though not answerable in the present stage of our scientific knowledge, may be resolved in the future by a special kind of robot. It may be possible for us to develop a robot that is capable of being taught to use a language and to use it to formulate conceptual thought. If, and only if, we can create a robot who can carry on conversation, can

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<sup>13</sup> Mortimer Adler, The Difference of Man and The Difference It Makes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967).

we conclude that there is no real difference in kind between man and other forms of life. No matter how farfetched this idea of the robot may seem to us today, Adler definitely wants to leave room for such a possibility in the future. This possibility compels us to raise certain shocking and troublesome questions.

What is wrong in principle with the Nazi policies toward Jews and Slavs if the facts are correctly described and if the only psychological differences between men and other animals are differences in degree? What is wrong in principle with the actions of the enslavers throughout human history who justified their ownership and use of men as chattel on the ground that the enslaved were inferiors (barbarians, gentiles, untouchables, "natural slaves, fit only for use")? What is wrong in principle with the policies of the American or South African segregationists if, as they claim, the Negro is markedly inferior to the white man, not much better than an animal and, perhaps, inferior to some?<sup>14</sup>

Can Fromm and Niebuhr successfully maintain the qualitative uniqueness of man in the face of the challenge of the naturalist-materialist views of man? In our estimation, Niebuhr is far more effective in meeting their challenge than Fromm. Fromm finds the uniqueness of man in reason, imagination, and self-awareness, in short, what man as man possesses in himself. But when the dignity of man is defined in this way, it is impossible to give the same kind of dignity to the mentally sick or to those who are not capable of

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 264.

creative imagination. It is difficult to see how Fromm can escape this inevitable conclusion. Since man's dignity is defined in terms of what he possesses in himself, those who do not have those characteristics that make man truly human will be in principle regarded less human than those who have. Niebuhr, on the other hand, sees the dignity of man as a gift from God. He defines it in terms of that which is not confined to man but transcends him. He finds man to be the most unique and special part of God's creation. God has revealed Himself to man in Christ to show His infinite love for him. In short, the uniqueness of man has its source not in man, but in a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Consequently, the idiot and the mentally ill person are just as precious in His sight as we are.

What is common human experience in the area of human sickness? It is two-fold: (1) man's awareness of his sickness and (2) the infinite complexities of the sickness. Since both Fromm and Niebuhr agree with each other on the fact that man is sick, the latter part of the two-fold experience must be analyzed. In fairness to Fromm, it must be underscored that the principle of his thought, the dialectical relationship between identity and community, takes into account certain complexities of the sickness, holding that both the individual and society are deeply involved in it. And yet, his understanding of the cause of human

sickness has a specific presupposition which must be laid bare since seldom does he specifically state it: the regressive potentialities of man will decrease at the same rate that the productive potentialities increase.

. . . in the inhibiting kind of authority, the element either of hatred or of irrational over-estimation and admiration of the authority will tend to increase. In the rational kind of authority, it will tend to decrease in direct proportion to the degree in which the person subjected to the authority becomes stronger and therefore more similar to the authority.<sup>15</sup>

This point is extremely important for understanding Fromm's concept of sin, because it makes him open to the belief in a spiral of advance with regard to man's moral life. The depth of the self is still healthy because the productive potentialities are regarded as primary and will inevitably realize themselves under normal circumstances. Thus, Fromm can say that man will become better and better if, and only if, he continues to develop his creative potentialities. As long as this is done, he does not have to worry about his negative potentialities, for they will eventually take care of themselves.

This view of Fromm cannot be justified by the common awareness of the complexities of the sickness of man. A highly rational man is not always an ethical person. Niebuhr's assertion that highly developed reason does not

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<sup>15</sup>EP, p. 166.



guarantee human morality can be empirically proven. A rational man always uses his reason to justify and protect his own self-interest. For example, he can make a seemingly sound case for school segregation by documenting the low educational standard of the Negro students, while he, consciously or unconsciously, refuses to see the truth of James Baldwin's indictment against white society: "white men crippled black men, and now they are blaming them for limping."<sup>16</sup> One can multiply similar illustrations ad infinitum. The point to be underscored here is that Fromm's assertion that man's negative potentialities will naturally decrease as his creative potentialities increase is totally foreign to the complex nature of the life of individual and collective man.

Niebuhr's position, on the other hand, seems much more compatible with common human experience than that of Fromm. It is largely Niebuhr's realistic treatment of the infinite impact of man's egocentrism upon the economic, political, and cultural aspects of human life that has been extremely influential on historians, political theorists, and practical statesmen who do not necessarily share his Christian faith. In fact, Niebuhr's realistic analysis of man's perennial tendency to justify his self-interest at the

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<sup>16</sup>This statement was made by Baldwin at a discussion held at Duke University in March, 1965.

expense of other lives has been so influential upon many non-believers as well that even the phrase, "atheists for Niebuhr," was coined.<sup>17</sup> Our conclusion from all this is that Niebuhr's insistence that sin becomes increasingly compounded as man transcends himself infinitely has profound realism which Fromm's optimism cannot even hope to match.

Common human experience with regard to the cure of human sickness is two-fold: (1) the cure must be directed to both the individual and collective man, and, at the same time, (2) one should not expect a kind of existence in which personal guilt and collective injustice are totally excluded. On the basis of the first category of the two-fold experience, Fromm's intention is an admirable one. Although he does not successfully clarify in what concrete ways man and society contribute to the restoration of each other's health, he seriously attempts to find a cure for society as well as for the individual. Fromm is an excellent social critic. He has attempted a full and serious analysis of our cultural and social crises. He reminds us with cogency and persuasion that man may be the slave even while he thinks he is the master. In a time when society is regarded as a workshop for the production of materials of consumption and

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<sup>17</sup>Morton White, Religion, Politics, and the Higher Learning (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 117 f.

destruction, and progress is measured by increases in the gross national product, Fromm insists that there is more to human life than simple materialism and conformity to the prevailing views that exist in society. In so doing, Fromm also reminds us that what is often regarded by Niebuhr as peripheral must be put in the forefront of our immediate concern. We are thinking primarily of two things: the importance of the individual's personal relationship to others and the dangerous character of indifference to others in our increasingly secularizing world. Fromm makes us realize that these things may be extremely important, indeed crucial, to the development of true humanity. He underscores the ideal of interpersonal relationship, the possibility of open and even warm relationships with companions at large in society with whom we have only public or casual relationships. He reminds us that we have a wider choice in public associations than of dealing with men justly. Indeed, such words as "friendship" and "casual warmth" may need to be revitalized in our modern world.<sup>18</sup> Also, Fromm calls our attention to the fact that apathy day in and day out may be a greater enemy today than the fanaticism that occasionally breaks out. This is particularly true in areas of human life where frustration is so oppressive that it is hard to

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<sup>18</sup>James Sellers, Theological Ethics (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966).

awaken people to action and to overcome hopelessness. The life in the ghetto and the life of extreme poverty and discrimination, no doubt, require justice for their transformation. But they also need self-respect and healthy interpersonal relationships for the establishment of meaningful life.

For Niebuhr, on the other hand, the cure for sin takes place primarily in society rather than in the individual. He speaks less about the importance of the individual's personal relationships to his immediate neighbors or about the frightening character of indifference and apathy with which man as an individual has to cope.<sup>19</sup> From this, the following conclusion can be drawn: Fromm's treatment of the cure for human sickness is a much more balanced one than that of Niebuhr in so far as the former seriously seeks to take into account the health of both the personal life of the individual and the complex nature of society.

The other aspect of man's two-fold experience is the awareness that human sickness is so complex and its scope so infinite as to discredit any possibility of its complete cure. The loss of confidence in human capacity for continuous improvement is a common human experience of modern men.

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<sup>19</sup>Roger L. Shinn, Man: The New Humanism (Vol. VI of New Directions in Theology Today, ed. William Hordern. 7 vols.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 160.

This is effectively characterized by George Bernard Shaw. Just after the turn of the century, he wrote "Major Barbara"<sup>20</sup> to demonstrate how inevitably an industrialized and capitalistic democracy would transform itself into a gentle, socialistic state, preserving all the virtues and abolishing all the evils that he knew. Little more than a decade later, however, he had to admit in "Imprisonment"<sup>21</sup> that the expected transformation was not taking place as he had anticipated. He openly declared his changed conviction that man must learn navigation or go on the rocks. Shaw's trust in man's capability became even more ambiguous a generation later. He felt that man was about to destroy himself and might be replaced by something else.<sup>22</sup> Obviously, Shaw's conclusion is an oversimplification of the modern situation. We know that we are capable of self-destruction, but, at the same time, this knowledge compels us to find ways to avoid it. What his experience teaches us, however, is that, in his analysis of how his mind has changed from clear optimism to more somber scepticism, he clearly articulates the ambiguous feelings of modern men about their future. We all know

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<sup>20</sup>George Bernard Shaw, "Major Barbara," Prefaces (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1934), pp. 115-137.

<sup>21</sup>George Bernard Shaw, "Imprisonment," Ibid., pp. 282-320.

<sup>22</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, The Measure of Man (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953), p. 31.

that something has to be done, but we also suspect that whatever the cure is, it will not emancipate us completely from the tragedies and ambiguities of our present life.

It is here that Fromm's concept of the good society appears to be unduly optimistic. For he is convinced that man can establish perfect harmony with nature, others, and himself in the realms of economics, politics, culture, and morality. To be sure, this harmony is not accomplished by natural evolution. It requires the herculean effort on the part of man. But there is no doubt in Fromm's mind, particularly when he discusses the nature of the good society, that man is capable of it, if and only if, he realizes his potentialities productively. This assertion, however, is questioned by common human experience. The self is far too complex and elusive to fit Fromm's optimism. Our common human experience confirms Niebuhr's position that our insecure selves will not be made harmonious by desiring harmony, no matter how strong our desire for it may be. Nor are our selves made secure by the admonition to love others, because that is precisely what they cannot do because of their excessive concern for themselves. Niebuhr takes the predicament of man far more seriously than Fromm ever does. He makes us realize that tragedies and ambiguities in human life are here to stay; therefore, our life becomes just and meaningful in our attempt to approximate the ideal in the dynamics of society.

However, there are a few points at which Niebuhr must be supplemented by Fromm. One of them concerns Niebuhr's refusal to suggest concrete plans for a just and open society. His definition of justice as the balance of power, for example, is ambiguous and imprecise. What does it mean in practical terms? On this question, Niebuhr remains silent.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, Niebuhr speaks in detail of humanity, tolerance, equality, and order in his discussion of the cure for sin in history. But the trouble with his analysis of them is that nowhere does he clarify what reference they have to concrete human situations. It is in this context that Fromm's attempt to give detailed plans for the good society deserves our appreciation. For it is imperative that we work out some sort of concrete, long-range plans as to how justice, equality, and openness should actually take place in our society both in the present and the future. Although man will eventually transcend any of those plans for his future, his radical freedom demands him to make them as well as to be sensitive to new situations that necessitate the reworking of those concrete plans. Even if we find the content of

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<sup>23</sup>Kenneth Thompson, for example, questions Niebuhr as follows: "Is it not true that norms like equality become in the political arena objects of endless contention, rationalization, and self-deception which have confounded the philosophers who strive to advance abstract political judgments?" (Thompson, "The Political Philosophy . . . ," op. cit., p. 173).

Fromm's plans too optimistic to cope with the dynamics and complexities of human life, surely his aim must be ours as well.

Furthermore, Niebuhr's concept of the balance of power is no longer as helpful as it was a few decades ago. It was significant at a time when the utopian tendencies of liberalism often ignored the complex realities of human life, when the world was threatened by the demonic fanaticism of Nazi and Stalinism, and when theology needed to know the importance of the effective use of power and produce far-reaching social consequences. But the present theological and political climate is different from that in which Niebuhr produced much of his creative thinking. Today it is primarily the defensive and arrogant character of a static and frightened establishment that lends much to the confusion of the world. It is due to this new situation that compels us to become aware of the conservative tendencies of Niebuhr's concept of the balance of power. We are required to re-examine Niebuhr's attitudes toward Marxism and to develop a new appreciation of Marxism as an instrument for social analysis and change.<sup>24</sup> Having glimpsed enormous possibilities

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<sup>24</sup>This point has been very effectively presented recently by Harvey Cox in his "Ernst Bloch and 'The Pull of the Future,'" New Theology No. 5, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, pp. 191-203 and Jan Milic Lochman, Church in a Marxist Society (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970).





for the effective humanization in Czechoslovakia, we have an extraordinary empirical basis upon which to question Niebuhr's blanket assessment of Stalinism as the inevitable consequence of Communism.

In fairness to Niebuhr, it is to be remembered that his thinking is far from being conservative and static, for he recognizes man's freedom as the power of infinite self-transcendence and understands full well the dynamic character of human life. The point we make here is that his definition of the balance of power as the effective check for man's collective evils can do full justice neither to his own theological position nor to our present political situation. It is in this context that the anthropology of Niebuhr needs a great deal of stimulation from a man like Fromm, who reminds us of immediate possibilities for a better world, the scope of which cannot be confined to the balance of power. In short, we need both Fromm's emphasis upon man's immediate possibilities for a better world and Niebuhr's insistence upon transcendent grace that keeps us from despair and cynicism when our own accomplishments do not get us to the Kingdom. Sustained by hope in both the world and God who transcends the world, we can keep alive the spirit of challenge and ultimate hope and love.



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**AN EXAMINATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF MAN  
OF ERICH FROMM AND REINHOLD NIEBUHR**

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**An Abstract of a Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
Union Theological Seminary  
Richmond, Virginia**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Theology**

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**by  
Yugo Suzuki  
May 1971**



Wolf, William John. "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man,"  
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## ABSTRACT

### I. The problem for investigation

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the doctrines of man of Erich Fromm and Reinhold Niebuhr in order to discover irreducible differences as well as similarities between a Christian and a humanist evaluation of man and of the human predicament; to ascertain if Fromm's humanist approach may contribute to the basic insights revealed by Niebuhr's doctrine of man; to discover what implicit or explicit critique Reinhold Niebuhr's doctrine of man makes upon Erich Fromm's concept of human nature.

### II. Methodology

In order to investigate the problem previously stated, at the outset, we shall discuss the background of each man.

As for Fromm, the following points will be discussed:

- (1) Fromm's basic philosophical position as that of the humanistic atheism of Feuerbach;
- (2) his appropriation of and reaction to Freud and Marx concerning the nature of man;
- (3) the influence of Zen Buddhism in his thinking;
- (4) his keen interest in the Old Testament concept of the Kingdom of God and social justice; and
- (5) his position in relation to such contemporary psychoanalysts as Adler, Horney, and Sullivan.

As for Niebuhr's background, our attention will be focused on the following points: (1) the Bible as the basis of his anthropology; (2) Niebuhr's theological concern for the proper estimate of man as having grown out of his reaction against liberalism; (3) Marxist influence in his thinking; and (4) his indebtedness to Kierkegaard, Pascal, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and to the Renaissance.

Our discussion of the background of Niebuhr and Fromm will be followed by a detailed examination of their doctrines of man in the following three areas: (1) the essential nature of man; (2) the sickness (sin) of man and its symptoms; (3) a proposed cure.

Having done this, we will then be ready to delineate irreducible differences as well as similarities of the two men and to examine what implicit or explicit critique the Christian concept of man, as interpreted by Reinhold Niebuhr, makes upon Erich Fromm's concept of human nature. This will be undertaken in the last chapter of the dissertation.

### III. A summary of the findings of the study

The findings of this dissertation can be summarized as follows: first, Niebuhr can criticize Fromm for the lack of inner coherence in his thought; second, Niebuhr can criticize Fromm on the basis of common human experience. The first criticism is integrally related to the second, for both question the adequacy of the principle of Fromm's





doctrine of man, that is, the paradoxical relationship between man and society. Fromm cannot maintain the principle consistently throughout his thought, because it is essentially inadequate for the true nature of man's self. This inadequacy is, in the final analysis, proven by common human experience. Fromm's principle is not validated by what man as man actually experiences in his daily life, whereas the principle of Niebuhr's anthropology as creatureliness and infinite self-transcendence can address itself successfully to common human experience. And yet, at the same time, Niebuhr's doctrine of man needs to be supplemented by Fromm in two points. First, Fromm's penetrating analysis of the need for friendship and human warmth in the realm of the individual is an essential corrective to Niebuhr, whose interest has largely been in the realm of social justice. Second, Niebuhr's broad treatment of the concrete cure for human sickness must go a step further to examine what concrete reference humility, tolerance, justice, and nonchalance of faith have to actual human situations. Niebuhr can learn a great deal from Fromm in terms of the intention, if not in terms of the content.



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