

Fromm gives us a doctrine of man which includes classical Christian as well as old and new existentialist ideas.

In: Pastoral Psychology 6 (1955) 13-16

13

## Erich Fromm's The Sane Society\*

PAUL TILLICH

University Professor  
Harvard Divinity School

**T**HIS BOOK is a continuation of *Escape from Freedom*, written over 15 years ago." With these words of the foreword the author puts his book into the framework, within which every reviewer should see it. It is, like *Escape from Freedom*, a combination of psychoanalysis and socio-analysis, but it transcends the mere analysis by developing an image of a future society in which the health of the whole supports the health of every individual and conversely; "*Mens sana in societata sana*," as one could say.

The larger part of the book gives a description of what Fromm calls the "alienation" of man in the twentieth-century Democracy. The description of this alienation is carried through with passion and a profound insight. One is fascinated page after page by the incisiveness of the analysis, the concreteness of the presentation, and the beauty of the style. What Fromm wants to give and certainly does is a "pathology of normalcy." When he asks "are we sane?" and answers in the negative, the "we" in this question is the Western society in its normal way of life. We are unhealthy because we are alienated from the true human nature, its characteristics and laws. A study of the nature of man and his

\*This book is the current Pastoral Psychology Book Club Selection.

needs, following from it, is, consequently, the first task which the diagnosis of the social pathology of our time has to perform.

Fromm gives us a doctrine of man which includes classical Christian as well as old and new existentialist ideas: "Man is the only animal who finds his own existence a problem which he has to solve" . . . "Reason, man's blessing is also his curse" . . . "He has fallen out of nature, as it were, and is still in it; he is partly divine, partly animal; partly infinite, partly finite." A "humanist psychoanalysis," based on a "normative humanism" uses this understanding of the human condition as its main key. All human needs, conflicts, diseases and potentialities for fulfilment are rooted in these conditions of his existence. Religions are attempts to answer the problem of the human situation. In the sense of this definition all cultures are religious.

**A**T THIS point I cannot help expressing my agreement with Fromm's doctrine of man, both as a theologian and an ontologist. It is a remarkable fact that several ways of inquiry which a few decades ago seemed to diverge totally now are con-

verging, though without yet having reached the point of reunion. Therefore I want to ask a question about the meaning of Fromm's term "alienation," especially because my own theological thought centers partly around the synonymous concept "estrangement." It seems to me that there is a difference between Christian theology and humanist psychology in this respect in spite of the use of synonymous terms. Alienation, for Fromm, is a necessity of man's development and therefore something which can be overcome in the process of this development. In the "sane society" alienation is conquered. Theology would call the anticipation of such a society within history utopian, and it would include Fromm's description of the "sane society" under this judgment. For theology, estrangement is the characteristic of man's predicament in time and space. Every conquest of it is fragmentary and ambiguous: life, by its very nature, unites creative and destructive elements. I do not find a systematic answer to this question in Fromm's vision of the "sane society."

Out of the tremendous material used by Fromm for the description of alienation, only a few points can be mentioned. The first of them is based on Fromm's doctrine of love. His contribution to our understanding of love has been one of his greatest achievements. In the present book he defines love as the "union with somebody, or something, *outside oneself*, under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one's own self." If this is the meaning of love—which I believe it is—how can one then speak of "the love for oneself"? Is it not better to drop the ambiguous term "self-love" completely and replace it by "selfishness" if it is meant in a negative sense, and by natural "self-affir-

mation" and paradoxical "self-acceptance" if it is meant in a positive sense? Fromm's definition of love points in this direction (which would be a real gift to our preachers).

Most interesting is the chapter on the "incestuous" bondage of man to his mother. First of all, Fromm denies that this bondage is sexual in principle (though it can become so accidentally), thus rejecting Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex. He elaborates Freud's patriarchal attitude and comes to the conclusion that Freud "degrades the mother into the object of sexual lust. The goddess is transformed into the prostitute, the father elevated to the central figure of the universe." In a footnote he adds: "On this elimination of the mother figure, Freud does for psychology what Luther did for religion. Properly speaking, Freud is the psychologist of Protestantism." For Protestant ministers and theologians this is certainly a statement to think about.

**B**EFORE going into his longest chapter, "Man in Capitalistic Society," Fromm gives a definition of mental health: It is the ability to love and to create, the liberation from the ties to clan and soil, the development of objectivity and reason. By these criteria modern capitalistic society is judged. It is an alienated society (aliené in French means psychotic). In it man "is owned by his own creation and has lost ownership of himself." . . . Fromm identifies this situation with what traditionally was called idolatry. "In idolatry man bows down and submits to the projection of one partial quality of himself. He does not experience himself as the center from which living acts of love and reason radiate."

This leads to a criticism of mono-

theism, especially in its Protestant form: "Man projects his power of love and reason unto God"—and tries to get them back from God. In this statement the contrast to almost any form of theology is obvious. One must ask whether man's power of love and reason is *his* in an ultimate sense. Fromm himself speaks of man's finitude and alienation. Both of these characteristics of human existence necessarily drive to the question of the infinite source of love and reason and of the power of reunion of the alienated. This is an inescapable question, based on real experience, and not an idolatrous projection.

Especially interesting is Fromm's description of the alienated process of consumption in capitalistic society. He points to the compulsive character of buying and consuming, to the fact that even man's desires are conditioned by industry and advertising, to the way in which the photographic camera has replaced the immediate seeing of reality. Man in capitalistic society has lost his self. This would lead to insanity if man had not acquired a secondary sense of self. "He does that by experiencing himself as being approved of, worthwhile, successful, useful—briefly, as a salable commodity." Therefore the main question he asks himself is whether he is a "failure" or a "success." Out of the necessity to replace his genuine self by the approval of society follows his subjection to the anonymous authority of the public opinion and to the mechanisms which create conformity. One of these mechanisms is the education to adjustment, another, the lack of privacy, another the suppression of the desire to be different, again another, the repetitious influences of newspaper, radio, and television. And even psychiatrists, psychologists and psychoanalysts are

in danger of becoming "priests of the new religion of: fun, consumption and selflessness," "spokesmen for the alienated personality."

RELIGION also is brought under a severe criticism, especially the revivalist movements of our days. "The religious 'renaissance' which we witness in these days is perhaps the worst blow monotheism has yet received. Is there any greater sacrilege than to speak of the 'Man upstairs,' to teach to pray in order to make God your partner in business, to 'sell' religion with the methods and appeals to sell soap?" (As a footnote I may say that there is more to the religious movements than a distorted revivalism, that there is also in them a serious desire to get an answer to the question of human existence.)

Overlooking the whole range of his criticism of Western society (which contains many more very important points than those mentioned above), Fromm says: "Our description of the alienated character of contemporary man is somewhat one-sided." He realizes that there is still a humanist tradition alive. And, obviously, without such a tradition neither his own criticism of the alienated society nor his hope that this criticism will find response, would have been possible. But I believe that this fact should have been elaborated much more forcefully. Life in all periods is ambiguous, and there is no period in which the negative is absolutely predominant, nor will there be a period in which the positive is absolutely predominant.

After having discussed "various other diagnoses" of our time, some of them very similar to Fromm's own diagnosis, and "various answers," accepted in part and rejected as a whole, Fromm turns to the last, constructive

section of his book, called: "Roads to Sanity." One must agree with the general principle that healing in *one* realm (spiritual, political, economic, etc.) is not healing at all but leads to catastrophic failures. Spiritual without economic healing is as wrong as the opposite; psychological conquest of alienation without political restitution is as impossible as political healing without psychological healing, etc. Consequently Fromm develops a program of transformation of the Western society in all realms of life. He starts with the economic transformation, recommending a "communitarian socialism" in which through interest and participation the alienation of the worker from his work is overcome. It follows the section on political transformation, recommending a democracy built on small, face-to-face groups. In the section on cultural transformation he recommends "collective art," "meaning the same as ritual; it means to respond to the world with our senses in a meaningful, skilled, productive, active, shared way."

WITH RESPECT to religion, Fromm expects the disappearance of doctrinal statements about God, including the theistic concepts, the union of the great religions of East and West on the basis of love and reason. (A writer of the prominence of Fromm should not use the ugly word

"religionist" which makes religion the matter of a private business.) Fromm considers his "humanistic communitarianism" as the only alternative to the danger of "robotism," of man being transformed into a part of the universal machine of production and consumption. "In the 19th century the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century the problem is that man is dead."

Naturally one will ask: Is there not a connection between the two problems? Is not the self-loss of man in the present society a consequence of the loss of God in the preceding period? Is true humanism possible without a consciousness of something that transcends man? Fromm knows the ethical transcendence as expressed in the laws of love and justice. The theologian must ask: How can man's alienation be overcome except by a power which transcends the law and gives what the law demands in vain? How can alienated man overcome alienation by himself? How can the "dead" man of the 20th century revive himself? Without an answer to these questions Fromm's description of communitarian humanism sounds utopian, and the chapter, "Roads to Sanity" shows goals but not ways. This is the limitation of an otherwise great book; the fruit of all the past endeavors of the author.

#### The Ministry's Responsibility

We are faced with a decline in human values, morals and mores that has kept inverse pace with advance on all other fronts. We wage more competent warfare than any other society the earth has nurtured. We know more about the mind and the body than any other race of men. We understand the effects of diet and heredity. We understand in high degree how to make ourselves comfortable in the physical world. We can entertain ourselves with frenetic application . . . Scholars deplore our cultural and social science lag. A promising line of endeavor for mitigating this lag has been identified in the form of human engineering and group dynamics. The ministry has a responsibility to heed and examine these findings.—JOHN WITHALL and MINA PRESS BROWN, "The Potential of Group Process for the Church," in "Religious Education."