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Introduction

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“Introduction” to *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture* by Erich Fromm, London 2004 (Routledge Classics).

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Erich Fromm (1900-1980) is known in the history of psychology as bridging the links between Marx and Freud, emerging as he did from the Frankfurt School of Social Theory and carrying his work into the social climate of North American and Mexican culture. His theoretical acumen enabled him to raise fundamental questions about the nature of being human and to locate such questions in the political and economic conditions of his time. With his critical analysis of the contemporary world and his far-reaching insights into the restrictive nature of modern living, he raised the uncomfortable issue of whether the social shaping of the human being did justice to the creative potential of human life. With his unsettling analysis of the conditions of Western society, he was a voice for humanity in a world driven by its own destructive and aggressive impulses. His social critique, not surprisingly, carried forward his childhood fascination with the eighth-century Jewish prophets, Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. These voices of justice continued in the work of Karl Marx and allowed Fromm to establish an effective social critique that still holds a prophetic force.

The bringing together of religion, politics and psychology is perhaps an extraordinary register of the complexity of the problems facing the contemporary world. Where disciplinary paradigms may wish to separate these fields of study, Fromm shows it is necessary to rebuild the fragmented knowledge of a consumer culture. Politics, religion and psychology inter-related and depend on each other and it is only a naive system of knowledge that tries to separate these realms for a commercial or institutional rationa-

le. Fromm recognised the problems of defining religion in his 1950 study *Psychoanalysis and Religion* and the inter-relation of different fields of study in this volume indicates his appreciation of this problem. There is a constant interaction between religious, social, psychological and political worlds, as they shape and reflect each other, and in many senses these categories collapse into each other. The problem in determining the reality of the psychological is that there is always something that exceeds the rational account and the very persistence of religion in an age of science shows that human beings constantly live with the perplexity of their own mysterious existence.

The Dogma of Christ is made up of eight essays from Fromm's work between 1930 and 1963, the largest and earliest of these – from which the volume intriguingly takes its name – reflects the critical and theoretical foundation through which Fromm links economics, politics and psychology inside the history of religious ideas. This enfolding of issues is Fromm's first sustained attempt to link Marx and Freud. While, as he indicates, this essay reflects a time when he was less critical of Freud's work, it shows the ground for his integrated project. *The Dogma of Christ* provides an insight into how Fromm developed the idea of 'social character' and how he identified social class as an important factor in differentiating religious attitudes. It was in the interests of method and argument that Fromm agreed to republish such an early piece and we are rewarded from this point of view, even if the historical material on the church in late antiquity can now be updated. However, Fromm's



study takes on renewed interest in the light of contemporary work in cultural theory and the examination of conceptions of the self in early Christian literature. Such re-examinations read history in terms of the regimes of power and recognise the importance of new ideas of the self produced in Christianity. As Judith Perkins in her study *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (Routledge, 1995: 11) has indicated, the “triumph of Christianity was, in part at least, a triumph of a particular representation of the self”. Fromm’s correlation of the production of dogma with the social structures of character is a critical direction that has yet to be fully appreciated. To locate the reified images and doctrines of Christianity inside the politics of knowledge is to transform theology and the study of religion. Fromm challenges Christian theologians to recognise “the psychic condition that roots them inwardly in an existing social situation” (10). It is such a uniting of the psyche, religious dogma and social structures that allows human beings to examine critically who they are within the limits of historical knowledge – something which is a hallmark of contemporary social theory.

The critical importance of Fromm’s study for the history of psychology is its attempt to challenge the binary construction of the individual and social. This tension resides at the heart of psychological theory from its inception. It is also something that registers how the human being exceeds the methods of natural science (130). Fromm marks out the basis of the “false distinction” between social and individual reality and it is this that underlines the continuing importance of Fromm’s work. The emergence of “critical psychology” since the crisis of social psychology in the 1970s and the introduction of post-structuralism and critical theory into psychology in the last 20 years assert the importance of the political understanding of psychological knowledge. Fromm is not just recalling the foundational problems of psychology, which we find in Wilhelm Wundt’s “Völkerpsychologie”, but heralding the work of French post-structuralist thinkers, such as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, who addressed the same problem in different a way, with the notion of ‘*assujettissement*’ (subjectification), examining how

the individual subject was constructed through social processes. Fromm is a “critical psychologist” before critical psychology and recognises the “limits” of psychology and its political context. As he writes in his essay ‘On the Limitations and Dangers of Psychology’ (1959), in this volume:

“Psychological knowledge (*Menschenkenntnis*) has assumed a particular function in capitalist society, a function and a meaning quite different from the meanings implied in ‘Know Thyself’”. (133)

Fromm’s recognition of the relationship between capitalism and psychology and the calls for a “negative psychology” to stand alongside a “negative theology” demonstrates how he attempts to preserve the mystery of being human from the reductive forces of the market (137).

To read Fromm’s social critique in the context of the 21st century is not just some historical recollection of a social-psychological political thinker, it is rather to recognise that his diagnosis of society holds an even greater importance and an alarming relevance. The new publication of the essays in the collection *The Dogma of Christ*, some 40 years from its original publication in 1963, carries an even greater poignancy and power after the domination of neo-liberal ideology. While some of Fromm’s questions still reflect the context of the Cold War and the sexual politics of liberal American in the 1960s, the broader issues still hold political and academic relevance. His work takes on even greater urgency after the machine of capitalism is given free reign in the era of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the United States and Britain. The psychological and political implications of reducing human beings to the market are already being recognised by Fromm. Grasping how the internal worlds of human beings are shaped by a social machine is the disturbing vision of Fromm’s work. Today such work challenges us to reconsider ethically the implications of global capitalism in determining our sense of self.

The strength of Fromm work is the way he recognises more than most the horrors of fascism, communism *and* capitalism. He realises that they all hold the dangers of creating human beings as “automatons” – machines in the services of ideological regimes. Fromm also uncom-



fortably shows that “democracy has become more and more influenced by the methods of manipulation which were first developed in market research and human relations” (134). Fromm rightly feared the slow invasion of market forces into every area of life and this insight takes on even more disturbing levels of truth today. He saw the way human beings were commodified and made into “things” in “managerial societies” (74). Something that takes on even more sinister levels of reductionism when “personnel departments” become “departments of human resources” in the institutions of the Western world. What Fromm saw in 1960s consumer culture has now become an ever-greater prison of human experience.

“Man (sic) has transformed *himself* (sic) into a commodity, and experiences his life as capital to be invested profitably; if he succeeds in this he is ‘successful’ and his life has meaning; if not, ‘he is a failure’.” (71)

The conformity of human values to the values of the market is, as Fromm realised, the destruction of ‘man’. In Fromm’s time it was boredom and meaninglessness that faced humanity now it is the ‘death of man’, not simply in the post-structuralist sense, but the reduction of humanity to consuming machines (74-75). The control of society through fear and social disconnection creates a world where to live life “intensely and with zest” (125) is terrifying for people who are anxious about being separated from the numbing machine of media intoxication and the religion of money. As Fromm hints, it is not fear of death but fear of life that is the cause of suffering, each individual seeking a tranquilliser for all the problems of life (120). In the attempt to bring the Western world back from its exploitation, authoritarianism, inequality and stinginess (122-123), Fromm draws on the rich traditions of social justice held within religion. He highlights the failure of Christianity to carry out its radical social gospel for the poor, as it became part of the social hierarchy and mechanisms of conformity - such that today Christians consume for Christ and hide from the poverty such practices create. It is the move from Christianity as a “religion of the oppressed to the religion of the rulers” (45). The abuses of capitalism also extended into the very heart of

dogma and religious symbols.

“We use symbols belonging to a genuinely religious tradition and transform them into formulas serving the purpose of alienated man. Religion has become an empty shell; it has been transformed into a self-help device for increasing one’s own powers for success. God becomes a partner in business.” (73)

This prognosis of religion in the age of capitalism becomes even more alarming with the rise of contemporary spirituality and its fusion with business and corporate society (see Carrette, J. and King, R. *Capitalist Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Routledge, 2004). Fromm’s early sense of how religion was subverted in the market was a profound realisation of how alienated human beings had become inside the economic control of late capitalism. However, Fromm did not reject the roots of social justice in the religious traditions and it is perhaps significant that this collection of work ends with a series of reflections on the eighth-century Jewish prophets and the appeal to a ‘Messianic time’ of a new harmony. What is important for Fromm is the understanding of the Messiah as a symbol of the *human* struggle for justice (144). Fromm searches for a social, psychological and political “at-one-ment” in line with the prophets.

For some, it may be remarkable that a social-psychological thinker turns to the history of religion, but such a move is not simply a recognition of the significance of religion and psychological studies, but an understanding of the importance of such religious traditions to provide an ethical context for human society. Fromm, of course, was not restricted to Western traditions and in other work – and in passing here - he explored the importance of Zen Buddhism. These adventures into religious traditions reflect the need to find ways of thinking about being human outside both capitalism and psychology. It is to recognise that these practices are, in part at least, oppressive to human flourishing. The need to move beyond these frames of reference is the desire to find ways of overcoming the constraints being offered in the automated worlds of the market. Capitalism and psycholo-



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gy work together to make human beings into machines. If, as Fromm suggests, the danger of the nineteenth-century is becoming slaves and the danger of the twentieth-century is becoming robots, the danger of twentieth-century is losing the critical capacity to see we are becoming economic cyborgs. Fromm's *The Dogma of Christ* will perhaps be a title ignored by the anti-religious psychologist and social theorist, but it is the message hidden behind its title that provides some of the sharpest critical insights into how the contemporary world of human destructive-

ness and violence can no longer separate religion, psychology and politics. Erich Fromm today is a prophetic voice crying in the wilderness of neo-liberal ideology. He is someone who is not afraid to demand a new politics of life, love and justice in the face of an entrenched and destructive psychological and economic control of society. By returning to his texts it is possible to rediscover and imagine new ways of being human outside the oppressive ideologies of our time.