



The Jewish Roots of Erich Fromm's Humanistic Thinking

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I. Introduction

Erich Pinchas Fromm originated from a family tree of Jewish Scribes on both his father's and mother's side of the family. He was born as an only child in Frankfurt am Main on 23rd March 1900 by his parents Naphtali and Rosa Fromm. His father was a fruit and berry-wine dealer; and Erich attended the non-Jewish Wöhler School in Frankfurt. Yet the family life bore the mark of a conservative Jewish experience.

Erich Fromm received his first lesson in the Talmud from his great-uncle on his mother's side of the family. His uncle, Ludwig Krause, came from the Posen School of the Talmud and spent the last years of his life with the Fromms at Liebigstr. 27 in Frankfurt. For a long time Erich Fromm wanted to become a scholar of the Talmud and go to Posen. In this respect his great-grandfather served him as a good example - he was the Raw of Würzburg, the leader of the Jewish Orthodoxy in southern Germany. His grandfather was a rabbi in Bad Homburg, and later on the rabbi of baron Willi Carl von Rothschildt in Frankfurt.

At about the age of 16 he attached himself to a circle of young people at the synagogue in Börneplatz, Frankfurt. The conservative rabbi of the synagogue was Nehemia Nobel. For a certain period of time Fromm attended a Zionist youth group. The acquaintance with Ernst Simon and Leo Löwenthal was initiated in this group by rabbi No-

bel. However, after his 'A'-levels in 1918 he did not go to Posen as planned, but instead he studied law for a period of two semesters in Frankfurt. Then in the summer semester of 1919 he began to read Sociology, Psychology and Philosophy in Heidelberg. In addition to his university tutor, Alfred Weber, he got to know the living Salman Baruch Rabinkow as his private tutor in Heidelberg. He was a Chabad-Hasidist and a Socialist. Fromm studied nearly every day with him between the years 1920 and 1925.

All his teachers and ancestors came from a conservative Jewish Orthodox circle - or better said an „orthopractice“, because it was typical of them all to practise an integrally „lived-out“ religiousness. This however, could only be secured by means of a „conservative“ delimitation (in the good sense of the word). The demarcation of the usual reform-Judaism of the time and the attempts of the Jews to assimilate with the liberal Christian citizenship was the special characteristic of the Jewish Orthodoxy existing in his parents house and even practised by Erich Fromm himself for 25 years.

Erich Fromm had a „network of roots“ consisting of his parents house, the tradition out of which he came, the „mind“ with which he grew up and his religious and spiritual tutors. From within this network I would like to take a closer look at a few of his roots, which I believe have been especially effective in influencing his life-tree and life's work.

These roots concern his connection to rabbi



Nobel and to the Free Jewish Lehrhaus in Frankfurt, and just as important to rabbi Rabinkow and Alfred Weber's pupils, as are reflected in Erich Fromm's dissertation.

II. The Influence of Rabbi Nobel and His Circle on Erich Fromm

Erich Fromm never wrote expressively about the influence Nobel had on him, although he was still crazy (like no other) about Nobel's gift of being a preacher and mystic, right into his old age. Apart from the special fascination shining out of this man, it was the specific spiritual and intellectual world which made him open both to Nobel and to his circle.

Nobel characterized Franz Rosenzweig, whom he gained for leadership in the Free Jewish Lehrhaus, as „an inspired preacher. He speaks freely, sovereignly and straight forward; even without a little anointing. He is also simple when he becomes inflamed with passion ... I have not yet heard anything like it. A free head, Cohenian Schooling, an emotion for the formation words ... I am still crazy about him ... (F. Rosenzweig, p. 627).

That typical of Nobel became even clearer in another one of Rosenzweig's expressive opinions: - „It can't be described ... That it had to happen to me - the very person who hates and despises all kinds of sermons - that I now go to the service because of the sermon, and that it had to happen in a conservative service and from a Zionist and mystic and idealist ... It is really the downpour of the Spirit. (ibid., p. 726)

Nobel was saturated with Jewish mysticism and lived a conservative, religious manner of life, and yet at the same time he was a humanist and a philosopher of the Enlightenment with respect to Goethe and Kant. The thoughts of Cohen's late work „The Religion of Reason from the Sources of Judaism“ eventually became his own way of thinking, and it was in this point that he began to exercise a vigorous influence upon Fromm.

Whatever Fromm portrayed and accepted as lovable characteristics of the Jewish religion were, in his later years of life, nearly all interpretations of the Jewish tradition formulated by Cohen in his later work. Hermann Cohen himself embodied a Judaism which served Fromm as a guide, and which was transmitted to him by Nobel. During the years 1873-1912 he was a professor of Philosophy in Marburg. At this point in time he was the only Jewish Professor in Prussia. Although he didn't have a direct relation to a Jewish community, he still identified himself with the humane thinking of religious Judaism. He didn't even have a positive attitude about living faithful to the law of the Jewish tradition, because in it he discovered the enlightened humanistic thoughts and the universal and messianic ideals of mankind. Cohen, who always used to go to Nobel in the synagogue at Börneplatz, died in 1918. Nobel's circle, however, did not diminish as a consequence.

The encounter with Cohen's thoughts and philosophy probably also stood in the background for the initiative, which was a great cultural moment. Georg Salzberger (1882-1975), a liberal rabbi from Frankfurt in contact with Fromm, had the idea of setting up a kind of Jewish education for adults. He remembers (G. Salzberger, 1974): „I consulted my young friend Erich Fromm..., who, although originating from an orthodox household, shared my interests, as do other people who are like-minded. Based upon this we founded the 'assembly' towards the end of 1919, or as it was later called the „Society for Jewish National Education“ in Frankfurt am Main.

Even the idea of calling Rosenzweig leads back to Salzberger and Fromm. By calling Rosenzweig, however, the „Free Jewish Lehrhaus“ could be established on 17th October 1920 next to and in connection with the „Society for Jewish National Education.“ It became significant far beyond Frankfurt and throughout the years all due to Fromm's university lecturers.

Not only did the university lecturers rabbi Nobel, Richard Koch, Georg Salzberger, Ernst Simon



and Eduard Strauß meet in this „kind of Jewish education for adults“ understood „as a secularized form of the Jewish Talmud doctrine“ (Löwenthal, p.20), but also Siegfried Kracauer, Martin Buber (as from 1922), Samuel Josef Agnon and Rudolf Hallo met too.

In 1923 Erich Fromm offered a seminar in Karaite. In the same year a summer-holiday course took place, wherein Ernst Simon offered an introductory course in Raschi (Salomo ben Isaak 1040-1105) for a period of one week. Erich Fromm took an advanced course in Raschis commentary on Exodus, and Gershom Scholem dealt with the book of Daniel and interpreted the Sohar. In the following winter Erich Fromm's Talmud tutor also taught in Heidelberg, Salman Baruch Rabinkow taught at the Lehrhaus, and Leo Baeck spoke in a public lecture about the love of God and service. In his seventh academic year (1925/6) Leo Löwenthal was among the university lectures giving lectures on Jewish history.

The list of names certainly doesn't imply that Erich Fromm had such a close relationship to everyone as he did to his friends Leo Löwenthal and Ernst Simon, or to his tutors Nehemia Nobel and Salman Baruch Rabinkow. His contact to Martin Buber was somewhat quite sporadic, and since Fromm had already got access into Hasidism through his modest and convincing tutor Rabinkow, Buber didn't especially attract Fromm. Even his encounters with Gerschom Scholem didn't lead to a friendship. On the contrary - Scholem didn't trust Fromm due to his turn to psychoanalysis in 1924 and his renunciation of the religious practice of orthodox Judaism. Furthermore, Scholem instigated the nonsensical rumour that Fromm had become a Trotskyite (cf. Scholem, p. 197f.).

What actually happened to Fromm in Heidelberg is the following: he turned away from the practised conservative Judaism to a kind of non-theistic Humanism; he turned away from Jewish psychology to a psycho-analytical kind of psychology; he turned away from the central idea of the Lehrhaus to that of the Enlightenment with its ra-

tionalism and emotion: even this can only be properly understood in view of his home background with its specific Jewish tradition.

III. The Influence of Rabbi Rabinkow and Alfred Weber

Both Fromm's ancestors as well as his religious teachers professed their orthodox manner of life within conservative Judaism. What is meant by „conservative“ here with respect to their manner of life is not the direct result of a reactionary or authoritarian interest. It is rather directed against liberal Reform-Judaism, which wants to fit into civil and capitalistic society, and in this connection gives up the integral manner of life as characterized by a definite religious ethos.

The manner of life moulded by this integrally religious ethos aims at an experience of identity, wherein the identity is not produced by means of adapting to what is considered „average“ and „normal“, but by means of a delimitation by the majority, by man, by the „healthy human mind“ of the Zeitgeist. Assimilation into social assertion doesn't guarantee an experience of one's self and identity, but it does guarantee a manner of life wherein one and the same attitude is expressed throughout - that is to say, in the traditional religious ethos.

Because the one and the same ethos holds out in all manifestations of life - in one's thinking, feeling, one's way to deal with things, in all relationships, in the human and natural environment, in the economical, social, cultural and political realms - a competition between the different kinds of ethos forms in the one and the same person and among the members of a religious community doesn't take place.

The formation of unifying the entire manner of life according to the orthodox religious ethical forms offers the best guarantee for experiencing the identity of an individual and of the community as a whole. The defence of ethos forms, however, is also just as constitutive as they are practised by the



liberal citizenship and by the trading company. Thus for the conservative orthodox Judaism into which Fromm grew up the experience that „that which is yours can only be secured by being integrally practised as a religious ethos and delimited from other social ethos forms,“ is distinguishing.

It was within this peculiarity of „mind“, reflected in the leading cognitive interest, that Fromm grew up and with this mind he became a psychoanalyst for life: Fromm always questions things as though he is confronting a social majority, delimiting himself from them and thus being existentially impressed and concerned about the relationship of the individual to society. Fromm is always on the other side of the fence, on the side of the minority in the individual compound with the other dissidents so that he can direct his entire attention towards that being professed by the majority and in conflict.

In his dissertation (supervised by sociologist Alfred Weber) the 22 year old Fromm academically thematized the logic of a religious experience. In three historical appearances of Diaspora Judaism he examined the function of the Jewish law for the solidarity of special Jewish communities. Out of sociological greatness, Diaspora Judaism was distinguished by the fact that it still continued its existence as a united and continuous group with respect to blood and fate in spite of its loss of state, territory and its own profane language, and even without formed churches. The „social lute“ - as Fromm later called it - was the „saturation of the Jewish social body“ with the Jewish law. It was in this way that Diaspora Judaism „could continue to live in the midst of other nations being within and yet outside of their world“ (E. Fromm, 1922a, p. 10).

Fromm's leading cognitive interest is primarily socio-psychological even at the time of his dissertation, although he didn't have any psycho-logical instrument at that time with which he could grasp the function of the practised ethos forms from the unconscious for the solidarity of the Jewish community. What he says here about the function of the

Jewish law (in the sense of the practised religious ethos forms), he says later on about the „libidinous structure or organization of social great powers“, i.e. - according to the task of the libido theory - from the function of the „social character“.

This guarantees a continuity and an inner coherence of the manifestations of the life of social groupings, and forms „lute“ which holds the people of a certain class or group together. This is because these people of the group hold on to the general ethos forms and turn them into a manner of life, thus causing the group members to think, feel and deal with things in the same way.

Already at the time of his dissertation Fromm realized that where a group forms its manner of life in these areas it furthers and stabilizes traditional ethos forms in changed circumstances. The term „manner of life“ includes the things such as the way of production, organization of work, forms of socialization and examples of reference in cultural, political, ethical, and religious. etc. acts. In this way the social solidarity of the group is also guaranteed.

It was only with the aid of Freud's psychoanalysis that Fromm could see ethos forms being conceived as psychic structures, which represent the one autonomous, dynamic power. However, he did recognize the interaction between the manner of life and the ethos forms and in the same way the significance of the practised law as a connecting link between the correlation of the „soul“ and the „social process“ (cf. E. Fromm 1922a, p. 16)

In his dissertation Fromm examined the significance the Jewish law had on the reception of the specific Jewish manner of life in three appearances of Diaspora Judaism. Whilst the economic changes in the Jewish society in Babylon lead to the formation of the sect called the Karaites during the eighth century (apart from that the Jewish historical body remained intact), during the 18th and 19th centuries in the reform movement of European Judaism one of those kinds of inclusive reforms of the law took place stating that „with the victory of the civil-capitalistic culture the historical body was also decisively changed“. It could only be seen in Hasidism



that „the Jewish historical body had really preserved its own life so well, that in the 18th century a social and cultural movement could be produced which was the full issue of the cultural and social cosmos of Judaism, in an absolutely strange historical body which had taken over the elements of civilization all by itself.“ (1922a, p. 12)

It almost goes without saying that Fromm's sympathy laid with Hasidism - not only because he once again came face to face with the delimitation as practiced by his conservative Jewish ancestors, but also because his Heidelberg Talmud tutor, Salman Baruch Rabinkow, set an example of the manner of life and the religious ethos of Hasidism. It was also Rabinkow who instigated Fromm's interest in questioning the „quality“ of the religionists.

Had Fromm already have fundamentally recognized the socio-psychological function of the religious ethos forms in his dissertation, the question (which at the same time touched Fromm's own orthodox manner of life) was still not answered: „Which „preserved“ ethos forms concern the conservative Jewish teachers, and against what is it worthwhile delimiting oneself in order to secure one's own religious identity? What does the „religiousness“ of the religious ethos consist of? And what actually guarantees the experience of one's self: religiousness, or the fact of the integrally practised ethos, or a definite integrally lived ethos, which can therefore be called „religious“ because it permits man to experience the human and natural environment involved in it?

There was of course no doubt about it for the all-round „pious“ apostrophized graduate Fromm, that one can experience one's identity, and that this has been made possible through the religiousness of the ethos forms of the Jewish law. And still it's striking that Nehemia Nobel - Fromm's conservative rabbi and teacher in Frankfurt - was an admirer of Goethe's idea of humanitarism, and was himself Hermann Cohen's pupil. Fromm, however, was even more influenced by his second Talmud teacher - Salman Baruch Rabinkow - and his humanistic interpretation of the Jewish law.

In Rabinkow's article entitled, „The Individual and Society in Judaism,“ the humanistic interpretation of Jewish tradition is constantly encountered. In Rabinkow's view the autonomy of man is deeply rooted in Judaism. „Everyone,“ he writes (Rabinkow, p. 808f.), „is entitled and obliged to say: „The world has been created for me“ (Sanhedrin, Mishna, Chp.4), for every human being is an end in himself and is, so to speak, burdened with the responsibility for the whole of creation.“

In view of an single sin, it holds good for man that „his redemption can not be produced by an outward power, but only by means of the power which dwells in man as an autonomous being, to rise up above himself“ (l.c., p. 81).

Towards the end of the article Rabinkow forms his humanistic interpretation of Judaism in a quote to express the kernel of his „confession of faith“: „For it is the most definite conviction of a Judaist what character he may betray: Life is worth living and everyone is good enough to fully satisfy the position intended for him in the continuous chain of the life process.“ 'If I am not responsible for myself, who is? But, if I am just for myself - what good is that?' (Hillel)“ (Rabinkow, 1929, p. 823)

What Rabinkow states about a Judaist is what Fromm later on in life tried to verify with the help of his psycho-analytical and socio-psychoanalytical investigations. The options, however, such as seeing man in his ability for biophilia, love, autonomous, productive orientation, humanity, freedom, self-perfection on the basis of his individuality, love of his neighbour on the basis of his love of self, - these anthropological options were taken over by Fromm from Rabinkow's humanistic view of Judaism, and are not - as his later colleagues Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno allege - an expression of a relapse in idealistic thinking.

The question - „Under what conditions do the named abilities arise and develop, and under what conditions are the humanistic options plausible?“ - has been answered by both Rabinkow and Fromm in the same way: i.e. only in a manner of life in all



realms and manifestations of life: in economical operation, forms of socialization and concepts of value - materially, psychologically and spiritually - being impressed by one and the same humanistic orientation, and therefore forming a coherent unity in itself. Human abilities develop, and the anthropological options „according to sense“ i.e. in their rationality, become apparent.

Rabinkow sees this coherent manner of life realized in the Jewish life-community as long as it is held together and saturated with the „principle of the covenant with God“, demarcating itself from other human communities. Likewise to Fromm, the condition of possibility for the development of man's own psychic powers and for the plausibility of humanistic options, is a defining humanistic orientation for one's entire manner of life. The guarantor for such a humanistic manner of life for Fromm is not the institutionalized „principle of the covenant with God“ in the „Law“ of the Jewish special community which penetrates through all areas of life, but the productive, biophilic character of man orientated towards his being, which just as the „spirit of religion“ has to delimit the entire manner of life: definitely the economical, social, cultural, political, spiritual and psychic structures, and like the Jewish special community, it has to delimit itself from the non-productive, necrophilic character of the capitalistic manner of life oriented towards wealth.

It is also worthwhile mentioning here that only on the basis of practice, which denies and repeals other ways of existence, can one's identity be experienced in oneness with oneself and with the natural and human environment. In the Frommian alternatives of productive or non-productive, biophilic or necrophilic, having things or existence, that experience which Rabinkow and Fromm experienced together at the time of their religious manner of life is reflected here. They dissociated themselves from the Zeitgeist in order to make an „autonomous individuality“ (Rabinkow) possible - i.e. - the development of the „psychic powers of the productive aspects of sense, love and work“ (Fromm). In

this kind of practice, humanistic options no longer need any explicit proof.

For Fromm the religious ethos is no longer a Jewish peculiarity of a conservative orthodox experience. It is the ethos of productivity, biophilia and existence, which is consequently called „religious,“ because it permits man to experience himself integrally.

In view of this background it has become more clear what Fromm was later on trying to do with his humanistically orientated doctrine about one's „character.“ By turning into the psychological realm, Fromm turned a specific Jewish manner of life into something anthropological and translated it into something empirical. In so doing, he identified the determinants of a religious manner of life. At the same time he made the humane contents of a practised religiousness in a delimited living community universal and communicable for all people who are orientated towards Humanism.

The search for a psychology which tries to do justice to the socialized and unconscious man, led Fromm at the same time into analytical socio-psychology and towards Karl Marx' thoughts as they were prescribed in the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. The historical background of Fromm's participation in the so-called Frankfurt School was „religious“.

The Frommian „further development“ of the Rabinkowian insights and experiences laied entirely on the lines of Rabinkow's humanistic interpretation of Judaism. Rabinkow was the last of Fromm's Talmud tutors. His universalistic and humanistic interpretation of Judaism essentially contributed to the fact that Fromm took the step out of orthodox Judaism and declared himself for non-theistic Humanism. This personal step was induced by Fromm's own psycho-analytical experiences. He himself certainly perceived his turn away from „religious psychology“ to „psycho-analytical psychology“ as a breach with his traditional religious manner of life and as a completely new and different experience of identity. And yet the common grounds of both the psychic conditions and psy-



chologies are immense: It is no longer the law as an expression of a religious ethos, but the character having an integral and unique function. It is no longer the religious ethos forms in demarcation to the ethos forms of capitalistic society, but the productive, as an alternative to the non-productive, orientations concerning one's character.

Freud's discovery of the academic access to and the existential experience of the unconscious by means of his own psycho-analysis made his anthropological interests possible. This caused his religious interest to become a socio-psychological one. The common denominator of both the psychic conditions and the psychologies, however, is the fundamental humanistic experience. The conservative, religious ethos of Fromm's ancestors and tutors made a productive, biophilic experience of one's identity possible, thus displaying the humane powers of man over the religious ethos forms. Therefore, the religious ethos could be interpreted as humanistic.

IV. Conclusion

In spite of all anthropological turning-points Fromm's academic knowledge still remained directed by a humanistic interest in knowledge, and, like in the religious Humanism of his ancestors, it remained a knowledge directed towards the development of Humanists. The Frommian socio-psychology is also used analytically and anthropologically in humanistic socio-psychology, which keeps the standard of the religious experience without requiring another God or an institutionalized religion secured by theology and the church.

In order to adequately illustrate this development in the life and thinking of Fromm, we have to change our metaphor concerning the roots of Fromm's life-tree and lifework. The Jewish teachers, experiences and traditions are actually not roots, but seeds, containing the genetic code for the further development and form of man and his way of thinking. Therefore, we had to talk about the Jewish „seeds“ with respect to Erich Fromm's humanis-

tic thinking.

The same paradoxical logic which counts for seeds is valid for all living things. Only when they die to they get transformed and new life is produced from within them.

The grains themselves die - and only then do the seeds begin to live under a new identity. And yet they realize nothing less than the destiny of the genetic code of the seed. The Jewish „seed“ for Fromm's humanistic thinking has been germinated in his secular socio-psychological discoveries. The genetic code, therefore, - the humane and biophilic pre-experiences of the religious manner of life - found Fromm's destiny in his secular and scientifically grounded Humanism, in a biophilic personality, and at the same time a new irreversible identity. Fromm is no longer a Jew, because he germinated his Jewish „seeds“.

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