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8. ERICH FROMM’S SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF RELIGION

Toward the X-Experience and the City of Being

INTRODUCTION

This essay explores Erich Fromm’s social-psychological theory of religion, as X-experience and longing for the City of Being, as being informed by the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Meister Eckhart as well as Georg W.F Hegel, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. Its religious attitude constituted the very dynamic of Fromm’s writings, as well as of those of the other critical theorists of society, e.g. Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Leo Loewenthal, Herbert Marcuse, etc., It united them. It could only be expressed in poetical symbols: the X-experience; or the longing for the imageless, nameless, notionless utterly Other than the horror and terror of nature and history; or the yearning for perfect justice and unconditional love: that the murderer may not triumph over the innocent victim, at least not ultimately. Man begins to become man only with the awakening of this longing for the entirely Other, or the X-experience. This religious attitude aims as ideology at the destruction of all idolatry. In the Near East

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1 Editors’ note-The author’s use of Fromm’s concept of “x-experience” comes from this passage in his work:

What we call the religious attitude is an x that is expressible only in poetic and visual symbols. This x experience has been articulated in various concepts which have varied in accordance with the social organization of a particular cultural period. In the Near East, x was expressed in the concept of a supreme tribal chief, or king, and thus „God” became the supreme concept of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which were rooted in the social structures of that area. In India, Buddhism could express x in different forms, so that no concept of God as a supreme ruler was necessary. (Fromm 1966, p. 226)

In the last passage To Have and To Be Fromm (1976) concludes by saying that:

Later Medieval culture flourished because people followed the vision of the City of God. Modern society flourished because people were energized by the vision of the growth of the Earthly City of Progress. In our century, however, this vision deteriorated to that of the Tower of Babel, which is now beginning to collapse and will ultimately bury everybody in its ruins. If the City of God and the Earthly City were thesis and antithesis, a new synthesis is the only alternative to chaos: the synthesis between the spiritual core of the Late Medieval world and the development of rational thought and science since the Renaissance. This synthesis is The City of Being. (p. 186)
the X-experience was articulated in the concept of a supreme tribal chief or king. Thus “God” became the supreme concept of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the Far East, Buddhism expressed the X-experience without the concept of God as a supreme ruler, or slave holder, or feudal lord, or owner of capital. In Modernity and Post-modernity, believers and non-believers can be united by their common experience of the supreme value of X, or total Otherness, and by their attempt to practice it in their lives, and by their consequent fight against idolatry in terms of a post-theistic humanistic socialism, or socialist humanism, which resists even the temptation to make man himself into an idol in any form or shape. Fromm’s religious attitude is ultimately directed toward the Post-Modern City of Being, in which the antithesis and antagonism, between the Medieval vision of the spiritual core of the City of God, on one hand, and the rational thought and science of the Modern, earthly City of Progress, on the other, will be dialectically synthesized in the supreme value of the X experience, and the longing for the totally Other than the finite world of appearances with all its murderous injustices in family, civil society, constitutional state, and most of all in history. i.e.international relations. Precisely this synthesis is the very heart of Fromm’s social-psychological theory of religion, or dialectical religiology.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

In the perspective of the comparative, dialectical religiology, Erich Fromm’s social-psychological theory of religion as X-experience and longing for the City of Being and the consequent attitude, can not be understood without the institutional context, from which it started in Frankfurt in the late 1920s and 1930s. The mediation of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and of Karl Marx’s historical materialism had a special institutional tradition in Frankfurt, Germany. The old Frankfurt Psychoanalytical Institute, which was founded in 1929, was from its start very much promoted by the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, the basis of the later Frankfurt School. From 1929 on, the Psychoanalytical Institute had guest status in the Institute for Social Research. Most seminars of the psychoanalysts of the Psychoanalytical Institute took place in the rooms of the Institute for Social Research, newly built on the Campus of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt. Max Horkheimer, who in 1930 became Director of the Institute for Social Research, was since 1927 a patient of the psychoanalyst Karl Landauer, the founder of the Psychoanalytical Institute, because Horkheimer was much too happy a man together with his British, Protestant wife Rose Riekhler, whom he called Maidon, and his life long friend Friedrich Pollock. In 1929, Landauer had founded the Psychoanalytical Institute together with Erich Fromm, his wife Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, and Heinrich Meng. At the occasion of the opening of the Psychoanalytical Institute, Fromm gave in February 1929 a lecture entitled “The Application of the Psychoanalysis to Sociology and Religiology.” Here Fromm tried to present a basic as well as far reaching starting point for the integration of Freudian