



Can There Be Ethics without Religiousness?

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Transcript of the answer Erich Fromm gave to the lecture of Alfons Auer entitled „Gibt es eine Ethik ohne Religiosität?“, presented at a symposium on Erich Fromm’s 75th birthday on the topic „Möglichkeiten der Psychoanalyse: Rückblick und Ausblick“ on May 24-25, 1975 in the Kongreßzentrum of Locarno-Muralto, Switzerland. First published in: *Fromm-Forum*, (English edition) Tübingen, No. 3 / 1999 (ISSN 1437-1189), pp. 34-36.

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I am very pleased to be able to say a few words on the lecture of Professor Auer, because he is the ideal opponent in a discussion between Christian religiousness and radical humanism. I have read many of his works, having learnt a lot from them. He has very clearly defined the decisive points, the difference between theistic and non-theistic humanism and the very different argumentation of ethics so that there is no need to discuss the many misunderstandings and contrasts which are unnecessary because they are based on wrong theological traditions or wrong opinions, or are produced by fanaticism.

I would first like to comment on the question whether radical humanists when talking of religiousness are not taking the advantage of a mystical additional value of traditional religious assumptions. Well, I fully understand that this appears so from the point of view of Christian religiousness. But I believe that this reproach – if it is one – is not quite justified. The Christian religion has influenced European thinking for 2000 years. Basing on this fact, the representatives of non-theism have no word to express what they want, namely that what I have called X-experience. Furthermore, I am also not pleased either in using the word „religiousness“, as in fact it sounds so as if I would like here to bring in a bordering benefit of the Christian religion or of religion as a whole.

In fact there is neither in German nor in English a suitable word. „Spiritual“, „intellectual“, „psychic“ – these are all words having their own combinations. I would prefer to talk of „X-experience“, as I have done. Anyway we, the radical humanists, are in a dilemma here, which just arises from the fact that religion in the theistic sense has made such an impression for a long time on our words and language so that the words we have used – as you might say – have become tarnished.

The more important and most decisive question is the second question, which hits the core of the whole discussion between radical, non-theistic humanism and theistic humanism. I quote the decisive words: „For the concrete accomplishment of morality, however, rational argumentation does not seem to suffice. Inspiration is apparently necessary; this can come from someone who motivates the others through his creative



love. It could therefore be asked: Is radical humanism a sufficient basis for ethics?“

First of all it must be said that radical humanism is not simply a case of rational argumentation, on the contrary this rational argumentation is based on what the individual experiences. In the opinion of radical humanism the individual experiences in his relations with others maybe the experience of sacrifice and of a love for other human beings and by which a person devotes his life to others, without believing that he is giving up his own life. This phenomenon is not only a phenomenon of the Christian history of salvation. It is the phenomenon of the human history of salvation, the political history of salvation. Throughout the whole history of mankind up to the present day, there have always been individuals who have practised love in an absolute form, having impressed their contemporaries with it. This phenomenon has existed as long as mankind and will continue to do so. In the West Jesus was impressive to the inhabitants of those countries in which Christianity was preached. The same applies – just to name one very extraordinary person – to Buddha for the countries of the East. Buddha was a person, in whom total love and devotion for mankind and at the same time rational criticism on the human existence was so developed that he became the founder of something, for which we have no proper word. Buddha was not the founder of a religion, only later did his foundation develop into a religion with all its negative turns. There is no term for that what Buddha founded. One would only say that Buddha has created a philosophical system, which is indeed correct, but then on the other hand is not correct, as Buddha has created a philosophical system which touched a deep life experience, and at the same time it was a system of norms which taught man what to do to give him a sense in life.

It is just the example of Buddhism which shows how the motivation of ethical norms can be understood on a rational level, without just being a level of argumentation. Buddha has analysed the existence of man. He came to the result that this existence creates suffering, and he has recognised why it creates suffering: Greed leaves mankind constantly unfulfilled and robs his sense in life. The healing of this suffering lies in giving up greed, in giving up having (belongings/possessions), opening oneself completely, in love of man and in the deepest understanding of truth. Several elements of critical insight meet together here. Buddhism was in fact a product of enlightenment and was therefore fought tremendously as atheistic by the religions of that time. Buddha analysed, set up norms, but had at the same time because of his personality appealed to the practical knowledge and experience of man.

From my point of view, that means from the point of view of a radical humanist, I would partly say against the argumentation of Professor Auer that one can perhaps use more rational arguments than he has mentioned. From the analysis of human existence, which methodologically pursues the Buddhist thought, as well as from the biological conditions of human existence, the determinative dichotomies can be derived, the potentiality of decay, the need for a vision; it can be ascertained what its optimal growth allows; the fact can be undermined that if this growth does not take place, a human being then suffers and becomes evil; norms and principles can be determined which lead to the full integration and development of man, namely mainly love and critical reason. So really there is only a small difference (between his and my point of view).



As we are here concerned with a dispute about principles, I would like to say a few words as to what the main difference really is. For me, Christianity, just like traditional Judaism, is a historical conditioned expression of insight and of experience, which has gained a certain place in the history of mankind, when namely the individuation of human species made the vision of the ONE possible. I mean the vision of the ONE contrary to the multiplicity of facts and phenomena without, but also contrary to the multiplicity of strivings and tendencies within man.

The idea of the ONE has a story. In the Upanishads already, in the Indian way of thought, definitions are found in the Vedas in which the ONE is purely thought of as the ONE, often identified with the no-thing, as this ONE is a principle, but it is also not something. The ONE as a principle is found in philosophical thinking, also with Plotin in Neo-Platonism it is found in various forms. In one special form the principle of the ONE is expressed in theistic religions, which originated in the Near East, that means mainly in Palestine, first in Judaism, then followed by the Christian religion. Indeed the idea of the ONE could only be expressed distortedly in these religions and had to be expressed in the social categories of that period. The idea of king or of king of kings was the only thinkable way in the life East of the Mediterranean at that time, in which the idea of the ONE could be clothed. Nevertheless, already included as a decisive factor in the Old Testament's concept of God, and later of course in the New Testament also, was that this ONE is not something. This differentiates the ONE considerably from idols. The ONE is a principle which has no name which cannot be copied, whereas idols are things which are built up by man himself, which are made by man himself; idols are the work of the hands of man, to which he surrenders himself.

When then at the beginning, the definition of the ONE God could only be understood in a time dependent form, this definition has in fact gained its decisive meaning by its strict limitation against idols. In my opinion one can regard the history of western religions as an attempt to cleanse the concept of ONE more and more from its incidental historically dependent remnants, namely the conception of the king of kings. Especially in mysticism, in the Christian, Islamic and Jewish mysticism it can be shown how all such concepts of thought in which the concept of the ONE is veiled, are repressed in favour of a concept of the ONE than that of the No-thing. So, for example Master Eckhart dropped the concept of God just in his most daring explanations in which he was likely or apparently inspired to say things, which even for him were normally unthinkable. But sometimes he says the unthinkable and then he comes out with clearly formulated theses that that what is important is the Godhead. But, the godhead is just not the God who created, who rewards and punishes. The godhead is the ONE and it is also the No-thing: It becomes and it becomes not.

Therefore, for me the question of the concept of God does not amount to the same thing as the question of the atheism controversy. For me it is rather a historical question. The definition „God“, such as it has been developed by the Christian or Jewish religion, is for me a historically dependent form of the idea of the ONE which people – not from nature, but from a certain point in their development – can grasp as an inherent category in them, namely as a necessity to see the ONE, to concentrate on the ONE and thus to give their own life unity, of the relationship to themselves and also of the relationship to others.



With this view I think I do not borrow thoughts from religion. On the contrary, I believe that Christianity stands in the tradition of the idea of the ONE, that now radical humanists can certainly still understand such theistic distinction in the poetic sense of the idea of the ONE, which can be partly explained historically, but do not regard this as their own language any more.

I would now like to look into the question of authority. I agree completely with Professor Auer, that the message of Jesus was not authoritarian, but quite the opposite. It was, I would say, revolutionary, a message of freedom, and was everything else than a message of authority. The same applies for the message of the prophets, which also was not authoritarian, but a message of freedom. Meister Eckhart is one example of anti-authoritarian radicalism, which can be found in political works, even if only seldom. If you read Eckhart and Marx together, you will find many things in common, which only surprise those, who do not see the depth of the subtle history of ideas of the European development

The concept of God is not necessarily an authoritarian. If you maintain it or not, that is a different question. In the name of religion, the concept of God was used to support secular authority and was infected with elements of idolatry so that the concept of God was in fact used as a pillar of power, as a pillar of sovereignty, as a pillar of authority. As long as this happens, the radical humanist will not only have a kindly regard of the concept of God, but with much mistrust. He will even understand that there are many people who fight this concept, because they recognise that this concept is used in an authoritarian sense.

Certainly this is not the difference between Professor Auer and me. However, this point must be considered to understand why just the most progressive forces, who are penetrated the deepest by the ethics of the New Testament or the Old Testament and by the concept of the One and of the salvation of mankind, as Karl Marx for example is in his system, why they mistrusted the concept of God. Of course their mistrust was influenced by enlightenment, by the situation of thought, which had just rejected the authority of the state and of the Church. This point must be taken into consideration.

There is something in common (between theistic and non-theistic humanism): the common desire to fight against idolatry. When we think of idols today, we think of Baal and Astarte, and of the biblical idols which we read of in the Bible. But those who say they are idols, they pray to their own idols. These idols are the state, honour, nationalism, and also an idol has been made out of God, wherein there is certainly no difference between Professor Auer and me. This serving of idolatry must be fought by both the Christian and the non-theistic radical humanism. I believe the main question which mankind is faced with today, is not so much the question of God, but the question of enlightening as to what idols represent today, as well as the fight against those idols which today threaten mankind.