Reviews

Edited by Richard L. Bushman

THE DIVINITY IN HUMANITY

Louis Midgley

You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition. By Erich Fromm. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966. 240 pp., $4.95. Louis Midgley is Associate Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University.

Erich Fromm has a large international reputation as a psychologist and social critic; his numerous writings treat various aspects of psychology (particularly psychotherapy), sociology, politics, philosophy, and religion. Some may feel that his wide ranging interests have made of him something of an intellectual carpetbagger and interloper. However, he always manages to uncover vital issues, which he tackles with passion, sensitivity, and insight. (*You Shall Be As Gods* is not his first book on religion; it is an elaboration of ideas found in a number of other places.[1])

Reviewing *You Shall Be As Gods* presents something of a problem. Should one call attention to items like Fromm's notorious lack of concern for evidence, to the curious way in which he maneuvers his way around, over, and through difficulties that might have blocked his path, to his unconcern about other work that often duplicates and transcends his own presumably new and radical contributions, to his failure to mention whole bodies of material that present views quite different from those he advances, such as the recent manuscript finds that reveal the theological involvements of Jewish sectaries? I have chosen to ignore all these matters and, instead, to examine the central themes of the book and thus to comment on issues of more genuine concern to the Mormons who have become acquainted with Fromm's writings.

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[1]See especially his *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), and other essays, for example, *The Dogma of Christ, and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963).

You Shall Be As Gods, though subtitled "a radical interpretation of the Old Testament and its tradition," is not really intended to be a serious piece of scholarship on the Old Testament. Instead, the book offers Fromm the opportunity of presenting his religious views to a new audience. He has simply cast his humanist religious commitments in the form of an "interpretation" of the Bible, which he has then supported by numerous quotations from that side of Jewish literature that seems to express similar sentiments. Though his views are sometimes novel, his point of view is quite typical of what he calls "the humanist wing of the Jewish tradition."

Though some may look upon Fromm as half Freud (because of his reputation as a "Freudian revisionist") and half fraud (for the same or perhaps different reasons), his religious humanism is clearly dependent upon another intellectual source as well – he is also half Marx. And it is this second element in Fromm's amalgam that is almost never noticed by his Mormon admirers. The Marx that influences Fromm is little known by Americans; he is the young Marx who, under the influences of Hegel and Feuerbach, is now thought to have been primarily interested in protesting against the dehumanizing forces in industrial capitalism – estrangement, alienation, and the transformation of man into a "thing." This Marx, partly the creation of Fromm, bears little resemblance to the later dogmatic Marx of "scientific socialism."[2]

Building on insights found in Marx's early work, Fromm would agree with B. H. Roberts that the Serpent was telling the truth – man can become as the Gods. His argument, however, differs radically from the Mormon doctrine in that he assumes that there is an "essential human nature" from which man is somehow alienated or estranged. This entails the belief that there is a single, common or universal essence of man. Man's essential nature is a kind of "cookie cutter," a Platonic form, from which the more or less human "cookies" get their degree of humanity. To become whole – Godlike – man must become actually what he is potentially (i.e., "naturally" or "essentially"). Mormon theology, on the other hand, clearly rejects the notion of a single, universal, common, essential human nature. Each man is a discrete event, a unique eternal reality, a self-existent being;[3] men are not contingent realities and therefore not halting approximations of an essential "humanness." The future condition of man, but not, of course, his reality, is contingent upon his choices and upon God's redemptive acts. Hence it is possible to speak of each man as potentially either demonic or divine. Man is free to put on or take off the role of a "natural man"; he may become a son of God through the atonement of Christ, or he may reject it and thereby get whatever injustice he deserves. Man as a species has no essential nature.

At a superficial level there may appear to be a kind of verbal similarity between certain features of the Mormon doctrine of man and some of the views advanced by Fromm. This can be seen in the main thesis of his book, which is expressed in the title. But his basic views, dependent as they are on

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[2]See Fromm's *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Ungar, 1961).

[3]See Truman Madsen's *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), for a general treatment of these ideas.

Hegelian and Marxist concepts (and ultimately expressing a kind of Platonism) are radically opposed to those of authentic Mormonism. A good deal of the current talk about "self-realization" (Maslow), "participation in the essential human nature" (Tillich), "becoming fully human" (Fromm), or "realizing man's humanity" (Fromm), has its roots in intellectual traditions entirely foreign to the Gospel. In addition, the views Fromm advances have come under heavy fire from sceptical philosophers, who have subjected his formulations to devastating criticisms. Those Mormons who are attracted to Fromm should look into linguistic analysis, which challenges the meaningfulness of many of his statements.[4]

The primary argument of *You Shall Be as Gods* is that the end product of the evolution of biblical and post-biblical Jewish thought about God provides an answer for the human predicament. Salvation is not to be found by "regressing to the *prehuman* state, but by the full development of [man's] specifically *human* qualities: love and reason. The worship of God is first of all the negation of idolatry." (Italics supplied.) He claims that the Hegelian-Marxian concept of alienation is grounded in the biblical concept of idolatry. "Idolatry is the worship of the alienated, limited qualities of man. The idolater, just as every alienated man, is the poorer the more richly he endows his idol."

> Man transfers his own passions and qualities to the idol. The more he impoverishes himself, the greater and stronger becomes the idol. The idol is the alienated form of man's experience of himself. In worshiping the idol, man worships himself. But this self is a partial, limited aspect of man: his intelligence, his physical strength, power, fame, and so on. By identifying himself with a partial aspect of himself, man limits himself to this aspect; he loses his totality as a human being and ceases to grow. He is dependent on the idol, since only in submission to the idol does he find the shadow, although not the substance, of himself.

Fromm often has advanced this same argument with one important change: the word *God* is usually substituted for the word idol.[5]

Man's estrangement from his essential nature is not to be overcome by submitting to some merely human projection like God that bears the infirmities of his alienation. In Fromm's view the genius of the biblical view of God is that it is self-negating. He describes an "evolutionary" process in which the obvious and familiar finite, personalistic, and anthropomorphic features of the biblical God are "progressively" overcome by the later adoption of mysticism, by a doctrine of the double truth (one level for the simple and a deeper one

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[4]See, e.g., Kai Nielsen, "On Taking Human Nature as the Basis of Morality," *Social Research*, 29 (1962), 170-6 (and 159). There are now two very excellent book length studies on Fromm's thought. See John H. Schaar, *Escape from Authority; The Perspectives of Erich Fromm* (New York: Basic Books, 1961); and J. Stanley Glen, *Erich Fromm: A Protestant Critique* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966). Mormons who have seen in Fromm some kind of secular expression of the Gospel might benefit from these studies.

[5]See, e.g., Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (London: Victor Gollanez, 1951), p. 57; Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), pp. 44f.; cf. his *Marx's Concept of Man*, pp. 41f.

for the wise), by negative theology (based on the position that one can only say what God is not, not what he is), by the biblical tendency to describe God in terms of actions rather than static states of being, and by the reluctance of Moses to name God. God thus "becomes the nameless God, the God about whom no attribute or essence can be predicated."

Fromm makes it clear that for him being nameless is the same as being nothing. What the biblical tradition is really trying to say is that there is no God. It is, of course, still possible and even in a sense proper to speak of God. " 'God' is one of many different poetic expressions of the highest value in humanism, not a reality in itself." The word "God" thus becomes what he calls an *x* that man should approximate in order to be fully man. God is a poetic expression for man's essential nature; God names the human form or "cooky cutter." Elsewhere he has maintained that "in humanistic religion God is the image of man's higher self, a symbol of what man potentially is or ought to become"; "God is a symbol of *man's own powers* which he tries to realize in his life. . . ."[6] (Fromm's italics). Since there is no God as an independent reality, man is God, that is, man's "essential nature" is what the word God points to. Man thus has the capacity to save himself, to become actually what he is essentially or potentially, without the assistance of a redeemer. This is what stands behind Fromm's use of the rubric "you shall be as Gods."

Although he mentions in passing the wanderer theme in Jewish thought, in his enchantment with man alienated from himself, Fromm does not notice that the early Jews and Christians when they spoke of themselves as wandering in a strange land were also expressing a very early and profound form of estrangement. Man certainly is estranged in this world; he does not belong to it but lives here as a kind of displaced person. Fromm similarly disregards the scriptural description of estrangement resulting from rebellion against God. Man, left mostly alone in a strange land, brings upon himself a spiritual death that estranges him from God.

Fromm is anxious to deny that man needs anything like God's loving, merciful forgiveness to heal his "sickness unto death." Thus he traces estrangement to man's alienation from his own essential nature and overlooks more authentic Jewish traditions of estrangement which imply a need for divine help. Fortunately, Mormons have stayed with the scriptures and avoided the misleading talk about "essences" or "natures" or "universals" that has gripped so much of Christian theology in its powerful Platonic hands ever since Christians first started hearing aught of Greek philosophy way back in ancient Alexandria.

Fromm's atheistic, mystical humanism is an impassioned cry of one who desperately wishes the best for man and who, at the same time, struggles to escape from God. He offers pious, sentimental, and often profound insights into the highest aspirations of man alone in this world, of man, to use the words of Herman Melville, "without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair." His hope is that mankind will somehow avoid self-destruc-

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[6]Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, pp. 56, 45.