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An Attempt at the Reconstruction and Interpretation of Erich Fromm's Philosophy of Religion

THESES OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Erich Fromm is one of the most influential humanist thinkers of the 20th century, whose oeuvre intersects psychoanalysis, social psychology, and philosophical anthropology. Although his works are widely recognized and read globally—including in Hungary—a fundamental dimension of Fromm's thought, namely his philosophy of religion, has remained largely marginalized within domestic reception, or has only been interpreted tangentially within the context of other disciplines.

The primary objective of the present dissertation is the systematic reconstruction and critical interpretation of Erich Fromm's philosophy of religion through a perspective hitherto absent from Hungarian academic literature: the framework of Roman Catholic theology.

Fromm's conceptualization of religion does not constitute an isolated chapter of his oeuvre; rather, it forms its structural core. His established typology—which draws a sharp distinction between an oppressive *authoritarian* religiosity predicated on guilt and submission, and a *humanistic* religiosity oriented towards freedom, love, and the realization of human potential—poses a direct challenge to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although Fromm's radical humanism rejects the concept of a transcendent, personal God and treats religious discourse as purely immanent, existential metaphors, the issues he raises (alienation, modern manifestations of idolatry, the dichotomy of having and being) possess profound evangelical roots.

The relevance and novelty of this research are underpinned by two primary factors: Firstly, the dissertation fills a significant gap in the literature, as no monographic or theologically rigorous work has yet been published in the Hungarian language that explicitly undertakes a coherent reconstruction of Fromm's religious-philosophical system.

Secondly, I consider dialogue with theology to be of paramount importance, as Roman Catholic theology—particularly in light of post-Vatican II reflections and personalist theological anthropology—is well-equipped to engage the Frommian oeuvre in a substantive, critical dialogue rather than resorting to mere apologetic rejection.

The dissertation seeks not only to unearth Fromm's implicit and explicit critique of religion but also to illuminate the latent spiritual and ethical core that renders him one of the foremost chroniclers of authentic faith and existence for the postmodern, secularized individual. Ultimately, the dissertation aims to demonstrate that the lines of tension between Roman Catholic theology and Fromm's humanism are not necessarily mutually exclusive; rather, in numerous instances, they fruitfully complement and refine one another.

II. STATUS QUAESTIONIS:

The international and domestic academic literature, the reception of Erich Fromm's oeuvre presents a highly distinct and uneven picture. Although Fromm is one of the most widely read social critics and psychoanalysts of the 20th century, the strictly philosophical and theological dimensions of his theory have frequently been relegated to the background behind sociological, characterological, and political science interpretations. The present dissertation aims to address this methodological and substantive deficit through the systematic reconstruction of Frommian philosophy of religion.

2.1. Major Currents in International Fromm Research

The international reception of Fromm—coordinated by the International Erich Fromm Society (Internationale Erich-Fromm-Gesellschaft)—is fundamentally organized around three major geographical and cultural centers, which approach the oeuvre with differing emphases:

In the German-speaking world, owing to the work of his former student and colleague Rainer Funk and the Erich Fromm Archive in Tübingen, German research demonstrates the greatest ambition for source criticism and systematization. Here, Fromm's humanistic critique of religion is primarily examined in conjunction with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Jewish messianism (Hermann Cohen, Scholem), as well as master-disciple relational structures (particularly the Hasidic tradition and the mysticism of Meister Eckhart).

During the North American reception in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, Fromm's work was integrated early on into the currents of neo-Freudian psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology. Religious aspects are approached here predominantly from the perspective

of clinical psychology and pastoral psychology, examining the therapeutic and mental hygiene relevance of demarcating Frommian "authoritarian" and "humanistic" religiosity. Finally, the Asian Fromm renaissance merits mention: one of the most dynamic research trajectories of recent decades is associated with China. Contemporary Chinese Marxist and humanist philosophical circles utilize Fromm's theory of alienation and the social critique of the Frankfurt School to analyze the challenges posed by modernization, consumer society, and technocracy. Within this discourse, Fromm's conception of religion—particularly his affinity for Zen Buddhism—emerges as a bridge between Eastern and Western thought.

Internationally, however, approaches that explicitly examine Frommian humanism employing the methodology of systematic philosophy of religion, within the coherent tension of the concepts of transcendence and immanence, remain scarce.

2.2 The History of Reception in Hungary and the Research Gap

Within Hungarian academic discourse, the reception of Erich Fromm is divided into distinctly separable periods that faithfully reflect the prevailing ideological and academic context of their respective times.

The sociological dominance dates back to the mid-1980s and 1990s, when systematic Fromm research in Hungary reached its zenith during the final two decades of the previous century. During this period, Fromm was introduced primarily as a social psychologist and a representative of critical social theory. The domestic sociological discourse (which witnessed the translation of foundational works such as *Escape from Freedom* or *The Sane Society*) focused on the analysis of social character, alienation, and authoritarian structures. His works concerning the theory of religion (*Psychoanalysis and Religion*, *Die Entwicklung des Christudogmas*) served largely as ideological or purely socio-religious illustrations at the time, without their intrinsic philosophical or theological significance being acknowledged.

The nascent stages of theological approaches emerged during the late 1990s, when, amidst the intellectual pluralism following the regime change, the first reflections situating Fromm's anthropology and critique of religion within a theological context appeared. These initial endeavors—often taking the form of essays or specific dissertation

subchapters—recognized that the Frommian "art of loving" and prophetic messianism also possess transcendent roots.

2.3. The Novelty of the Research

The scientific gap emerging from the examination of the *status questionis* marks the starting point of the present dissertation. In Hungarian academic literature, no monographic, systematically rigorous work has been published to date that reconstructs Erich Fromm's interpretation of religion within the horizon of modern philosophy of religion and theology (with a specific focus on Hungarian Catholic theological thought). The novelty of this dissertation lies in the fact that it does not merely describe Frommian categories, but demonstrates the internal coherence latent within his oeuvre: namely, that for Fromm, religiosity is not a peripheral psychological phenomenon, but an unavoidable response to the human existential crisis, without the structural analysis of which the entire social-psychological body of work remains fragmented.

III. ORIGINALITY AND METHODOLOGY OF THE DISSERTATION

The primary originality and scholarly novelty of this dissertation lie in the fact that it conducts a systematic reconstruction of Erich Fromm's philosophy of religion from a perspective hitherto entirely absent from domestic literature: that of the critical horizon of Roman Catholic theology and anthropology. While the psychological and sociological aspects of Fromm's oeuvre have been widely researched, the uniqueness of this work lies in its monographic, theological exploration of his implicit and explicit religious theories, his Christological and ecclesiological reductions, as well as his intellectual dialogue with Thomas Merton.

The methodology applied throughout the research is fundamentally interdisciplinary, organically combining textual analysis based on source criticism, deconstruction of the history of dogma, and the comparative method of phenomenology of religion. Within the framework of hermeneutical and source-critical approaches, Fromm's texts—with particular regard to his early writings on the history of dogma and his later philosophical writings—undergo rigorous contextual analysis, paying special attention to the layers of historical influence pertaining to Hasidic mysticism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Marxist theory of alienation. This is complemented by theological and dogmatic-historical

critique, which measures Fromm's typology of religion, Christology, and biblical exegesis against classical Catholic teaching and post-Vatican II theological anthropology. Finally, the dissertation employs the method of comparative analysis in its examination of the correspondence with the Trappist monk Thomas Merton—which has remained unexplored in domestic research—and the "X-experience" developed along the lines of Eastern Zen Buddhism, which also enables the methodological identification of the common intersection points between secular radical humanism and Catholic contemplative spirituality.

IV. CONTENT OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation covers the subject matter of the following highlighted chapters.

1.) Biography of Erich Fromm

The opening chapter is not merely a dry, chronological biography, but a systematic exploration of Fromm's intellectual coordinates and theoretical roots, which establishes the foundation for subsequent philosophical-religious deductions. His formative years were crucial, as his early background in traditional Judaism and his early encounters with Hasidic mysticism and Talmudic thought (through teachers such as Nehemia Nobel or Salman Baruch Rabinkow) were of particular significance. The initial section of the chapter demonstrates how his university years in Heidelberg and Frankfurt, along with his sociological and psychoanalytic studies, transformed this theological sensitivity into secular humanism. In addition to his research at the Frankfurt School, his flight from National Socialism, his emigration to the United States, and his later creative years in Mexico and Switzerland were defining periods. The mature Fromm engaged in very active political involvement, particularly in the struggle against nuclear armament and within socialist humanist movements. It was during this time that his social commitment truly manifested. In the first phase of the dissertation, I considered it important to provide a brief overview of the most significant foundational works (*Escape from Freedom*, *Man for Himself*, *The Art of Loving*, *To Have or to Be?*) and their international and domestic reception, pointing out the gap that the present dissertation intends to fill: the exposition of a religious-philosophical perspective in place of purely psychological or sociological readings.

2.) Freud, Marx, and the Frankfurt School

The second chapter reconstructs the intellectual milieu in which Fromm attempted, with the aid of social psychology and critical theory, to synthesize the most significant currents of 19th and 20th-century atheism and critique of religion. Its antecedent is 20th-century atheism, when the contextualization of post-Enlightenment radical critique of religion occurred, which underpinned the loss of transcendence in modernity. I also considered it important to present the relationship between Marx and Fromm, to which a separate subchapter is dedicated: the analysis of Karl Marx's theory of religion and alienation. Here, I established the Frommian reflection on Marx (highlighting a humanist reading of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*), according to which Marxist materialism is a secularized form of prophetic messianism. With the aid of Marxism, Fromm critiques institutionalized religion, which functions as an opiate.

3.) Fromm's Philosophy of Religion

The following chapter constitutes the largest part of the dissertation's theoretical backbone, mapping out Fromm's specific concept of religion, its stages of development, and its reduction in the history of dogma. Beyond the methodology, the first section highlights an important element of the Fromm-Maslow parallel: after presenting Fromm's scientific psychoanalytic method, it examines its intersection with Abraham Maslow's humanistic psychology. The chapter analyzes Maslow's "peak experience" as a psychological analogy to the Frommian mystical experience without transcendence, the "X-experience." Subsequently, attention turns to Fromm's radical and utopian humanism. This is where his conviction that man is the sole and ultimate end for himself, and that any system that subordinates this is to be considered destructive, is interpreted.

The subsequent sections of the dissertation address the interpretation of the concept of religion and the presentation of early dogmatic-historical ideas: the distinction between Fromm's normative and functional concepts of religion is observable. The chapter analyzes in detail his early writings, *Das jüdische Gesetz* and *Der Sabbat*, then proceeds to the pivotal work, *The Dogma of Christ*. Here, it is demonstrated how Fromm applies a social-psychological reduction: he interprets adoptionist Christology as the revolutionary desire of the early, oppressed Christians, while he interprets the dogma of consubstantiality as the reassuring ideology of a Church that has become an authority reconciling with the

ruling class and imperial power. This is followed by the "Copernican revolution," when the definition of religion changes and is described as a fundamental human need for a framework of orientation and devotion. Fromm further dismantles the phenomenon of religion into progressive (forward-looking, liberating) and regressive (pulling back into the womb or tribal dependence), theistic and non-theistic, and finally, matriarchal and patriarchal features. Relying on the theory of Johann Jakob Bachofen, Fromm demonstrates the tension between the matriarchal stage (unconditional maternal love, equality, compassion) and the patriarchal stage (conditional paternal love, law, hierarchy, obedience) in the history of religion. Through this lens, Fromm's harsh critique of the Church is analyzed: he identifies the Calvinist dogma of predestination and its anthropology as the purest form of patriarchal-authoritarian religion that tramples human dignity, while simultaneously re-evaluating the theological concept of Catholic good works and merit.

4.) Authoritarian and Humanistic Religions

The fourth chapter analyzes the typological bifurcation of Fromm's philosophy of religion, which counts as its greatest novelty, colliding it with external philosophical critiques. Great emphasis is placed here on the anatomy of authoritarian religion and authority: the chapter deconstructs the Frommian concept of authority, further distinguishing between external and internal, anonymous (e.g., exercised by the market or public opinion), as well as rational (based on competence) and irrational (based on force and fear) authority. From this, he derives irrational faith, which is nothing other than submission to a higher power originating from weakness. Alongside religion based on authority, we also see an analysis of humanistic religion, which presents it as a system that serves the development of man's own strength and reason, where God is a symbol of human ideals (truth, love), and where faith is rational: a firm conviction in our own productive capacities. Finally, the chapter points to the critique of philosopher Walter Kaufmann, asserting that Fromm's typology is overly schematic and unjust toward historical religions (and thus toward Catholicism or Old Testament Judaism), as they simultaneously carry authoritarian and humanistic traits. In conclusion, the chapter presents the immanent limits and psychologizing reduction of Fromm's phenomenology of religion.

5.) The Radical View of the Old Testament

The core of Fromm's biblical image of man rests upon a radical calling to freedom and choice. Proceeding further into his biblical anthropology, one finds a formative interpretation of the cosmogony of the creation story: in Fromm's reading, the Fall is not the ontological corruption of man, but the beginning of freedom and human history—disobedience as an act of emancipation.

The chapter traces the developmental stages of the Old Testament image of God according to Fromm's interpretation: from the early, absolute ruling despot, through the covenantal God who makes a pact with Noah and Abraham and binds Himself to the law, to the entirely nameless, "un-idolizable" God. A separate analysis is devoted to the linguistic-philosophical examination of the Name of God (Exodus 3:14: *Ehje h aser ehje h* – "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be") in comparison with the Greek (essential, static) and the Hebrew (dynamic, historical) concepts of God.

6.) Erich Fromm and Idolatry

The sixth chapter presents Fromm's theory of idolatry and places it in parallel with classical theology and modern social psychology. In the first section, following the line of Freudian thought, incestuous attachment and theological foundations are introduced: Fromm identifies incestuous, regressive attachment to Mother Earth, blood, and soil as the hotbed of idolatry. Initially, we outline the classical Catholic theological concept of biblical idolatry, where the idol is interpreted as the elevation of a creature to the place of God. This is followed by Fromm's brilliant insight that, based on Marx's thought, the essence of idolatry is *alienation*: man projects his own inner powers (love, reason) onto an external object (whether it be a graven god, the state, money, or technology), and then bows down before his own creation, emptying himself. The chapter connects this idea with Fromm's later ethical dualism: the worship of dead things (necrophilia) and the love of living, growing reality (biophilia).

7.) Fromm and Zen Buddhism

Leaving the biblical tradition behind, the expansion of his intellectual horizon turns toward Eastern spirituality, which provided a key to transcending Western logocentrism. Fromm discovered the non-theistic in the tenets of Zen Buddhism, shifting from orthodoxy to orthopraxis. The crisis of Aristotelian logic and the encounter with Zen can be considered

an exciting investigation: in this chapter, we learn about the main stations of Fromm's thought, where he reveals the limitations of Aristotelian binary logic (yes/no, true/false) in describing religious experience. Furthermore, the focus turns to *satori*, paradoxical logic, and the "X-experience": the analysis of *satori* (enlightenment) and Eastern paradoxical logic (where apparent contradictions dissolve into a higher unity) reveals that Zen helps break through the "triple filter" (language, logic, social taboos) forced upon us by language and society, enabling pure, direct existence for the individual. At the end of the chapter, he articulates an experience similar to the "peak experience," the "X-experience," which is a spiritual experience without dogmas, rituals, or a personal God—essentially the pinnacle of humanistic religiosity.

8.) Encounter with Thomas Merton

The most empirical, correspondence-historical, and comparative chapter of the dissertation is the eighth chapter, which demonstrates the deep spiritual alliance and shared thinking of an atheistic humanist psychoanalyst and a Catholic contemplative monk. The chapter presents the friendship and correspondence of the two thinkers, specifically the contextualization of the intensive exchange of letters between the Trappist monk Thomas Merton and Fromm during the 1950s and 60s. Unfortunately, the legal background of the correspondence did not permit the presentation of the texts themselves, so we have endeavored to present the topics we deemed important:

9.) Theological Critique of Fromm from a Christian Perspective

We have arrived at the synthesizing and conclusive chapter of the dissertation, in which Roman Catholic theology assesses the entirety of Fromm's philosophy of religion, highlighting both the values and the untenable reductions of his system. Upon examining Fromm's oeuvre, we have concluded that a crisis of the concept of religion and the trap of immanence can be observed. Fromm's non-transcendent, impersonal concept of God must be addressed with critical reflection, as from a theological perspective, he commits an error by necessarily viewing the personality of God as authoritarian and oppressive. In contrast, Catholic theology demonstrates the internal, relational personality of the Trinity, where the God-human relationship is not oppression, but the highest source of love and freedom. The theological correction of authoritarian and humanistic principles shows that Fromm's typology is artificial: in the Catholic Church, authority is not irrational oppression, but the

defense of revealed truth and the believer's freedom. In this regard, Fromm's "humanism" without God can ultimately end in the self-idolatry of man (anthropocentrism). Furthermore, it was necessary to critique Fromm's Christology, which contains a specific refutation of his social-psychological Christology. Jesus Christ is not a myth of a revolutionary social movement or a product of an adoptionist idea, but the Incarnate Word of God. Through Fromm's historical-critical reduction, he misses the ontological reality and salvific significance of the Easter event (the Resurrection). Introducing his anthropology, we encounter a logical contradiction when his concept of the productive character and self-realization is contrasted with Christian theological anthropology and the sanctification understood in a Christian sense. While for Fromm, man perfects himself by his own power, according to Catholic theology, the complete unfolding of man can only be realized through grace, in communion with God (*theosis*/deification). Finally, during a Catholic reading of the "X-experience," it becomes clear that the "X-experience" (mysticism without dogma) is in reality an implicit experience of creatureliness, which, however, according to theology, cannot remain in the immanence of the impersonal, but necessarily finds its ultimate fulfillment in the encounter with the personal Creator (*communio*).

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the results achieved during the research, the reconstruction of Erich Fromm's philosophy of religion from a Roman Catholic theological perspective represents a complex, tension-filled dialogue that constitutes a novel contribution to contemporary philosophical-religious discourse. Fromm's radical, non-theistic humanism and the "X-experience" concept unfolding in his later work create an immanent spiritual model that, despite the rejection of transcendence, shows structural similarities to Christian mysticism. At the same time, the critical analysis of the dissertation pointed out the methodological and dogmatic-historical reductions with which Fromm narrows the development of the Christ-dogma or the mechanisms of ecclesiastical authority to purely social-psychological and class-interest-based processes. The examination of his radical critique of the Church concerning Calvinist predestination and his "ideology" deconstructing the alienated idolatry of the modern age proves that deeply evangelical ethical intuitions lie beneath the formal oppositions. This hidden spiritual alliance is most clearly proven by the

monographic exploration of his correspondence with the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, which can serve as a template for a fruitful dialogue between the secular world and the Church. As a final conclusion, the dissertation has demonstrated that Fromm's oeuvre is not an ideological threat to be rejected by Catholic theology and anthropology, but a productive, critical mirror that can serve as a purifier for the authenticity of faith and religious practice for the postmodern individual.

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