

Introduction to Progoff

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Transcription of the spoken lecture

I am giving you the first of three introductory looks at the proposed fall seminar with Ira Progoff. I wanted to begin now because I want to give you a bit of my rather slight understanding of Progoff and also to let you know why I was interested in Progoff in the beginning and why I believe that to bring the Journal Workshop to this community is the kind of thing that I would like Christ Community Church to do as a service to the broader community. I am going to try to stick somewhat to my area and not get into an area which is not at all my own, namely, the whole field of psychology and specifically depth psychology, because I know very little about it. But I see in the work of Progoff, in the knowledge I've had of it and of the persons with whom I've spoken, the kind of resource that would be valuable for persons, for many kinds of persons, a broad spectrum of persons, and therefore I have been rather excited about the possibility of getting him here.

Getting him here is no small feat, and I guess he does only 4 or 5 Journal Workshops a year across the country. But, wonder of wonders, the man himself has agreed to come here this fall. I think to have the presence of someone like Ira Progoff in itself is significant and very meaningful.

I have divided up what I want to say to you tonight into a few sections. The first thing I want to say is just a word about who I am, because some of you are from Christ Community, and some of you are from parts beyond. I want to say that I understand myself and I understand Christ Community as a kind of purveyor of this experience. Probably after tonight these kinds of things won't need to be said, but I want to say them at the outset. I want you to know that I am, first of all, a Christian person. My faith is in Jesus Christ, and I have found God through Christ and the grace of God experienced in Jesus Christ. I'm just a simple believer.

Beyond that, my vocation, my profession, is that of a theologian and a pastor. I didn't know whether to put pastor first or theologian first, but I learned a little about my self-understanding because I put theologian first. And that means that I am a Christian who, in his vocational and professional life, is constantly trying to understand Christian faith and tradition and Christian existence in the larger context of the human experience. I'm always trying to do that. I am a pastor; I

have pastoral responsibilities for this community of faith, but I think this community of faith, as we have postured ourselves, is concerned about the larger community, the total community beyond our bounds. And so, that's who I am.

You have to know that I am a bridge person, or a boundary person. I always live "on the edge." I live on the edge of the Church. I almost can't stand to live in the Church. It's restricting; I get disappointed with it; I get frustrated with it. What little hair I have left I could tear out at the behavior of the Church, which, I think, in its institutional form has become rather rigid, has become very defensive, and has lost the sense of movement with which, of course, it began in the aftermath of Jesus Christ. It has become an institution with a lot of vested interest and a lot of structure and harness and all that kind of "stuff" to preserve. I think most of its posture is characterized by defensiveness and conserving and preserving, rather than stretching and probing and pushing. So I always live with uneasy relationship with the Church. I am a boundary person or a bridge person, and, as I understand myself, *I feel it my calling to try to understand the whole spectrum of human knowledge in the light of the Gospel*, and the larger Christian tradition, but then to attempt to translate that Gospel in the light of that context. So, it's always a two-way back and forth with me.

I believe that in the scriptures I have a history of Israel and the event of Jesus Christ which is a given for me. But then the other pole is the present horizon, the world in which we live. It seems to me that the task of the theologian is to constantly be living between those two poles: trying to understand that which is given in the revelation in Israel and in Jesus; and to understand as much as possible the larger cultural context with its various human disciplines; and then seeking from that understanding of the larger culture to have questions addressed to the Gospel, which I believe bring new insights out of the Gospel; but also bringing the Gospel to bear on our culture so that culture is not absolute but is always under judgment of the Gospel. So, one must live in that kind of tension.

I think the *systematic theologian* has the largest task of any thinker, frankly. We live in a world of great specialization. More and more people know more and more about less and less. And we know that the academic world is characterized by a lack of communication, a breakdown of communication and deep specialization where there is no longer the ability to communicate across disciplines. But the theologian is the one who claims to speak of God and, if God is the source and the ground of truth, then to speak of God is to speak of that whole spectrum, and therefore to be responsible to provide that umbrella that can bring some kind of unity and coherence to the respective human disciplines.

Now, that's how I understand what I'm about and I love it and am fascinated by it, and I think that it is important to me as a rooted and committed Christian to be in that kind of dialogue and conversation with the broader spectrum of human learning. And then, let me say a word about this particular community of faith. One of the models by which we have shaped ourselves over the past couple of

decades – one which I enunciated back in 1971, which had come to me in my own studies and kind of existential quest – was that this community should always seek to *combine intellectual integrity with evangelical passion*. The uniting of head and heart. Intellectual integrity, searching honestly for truth, wherever that may lead, in the confidence that the source of truth is in God and that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is an expression of that ultimate truth, and that therefore any genuine quest for truth cannot be something that will lead away from but, rather, to God, to the extent that it is an authentic quest. But also with evangelical passion, for we are not finally on a head trip, but we are engaged in seeking to bring good news to persons. And *we are about human transformation here*. We are about the transformation of the human person, which is more than communicating a system of doctrines or structure of belief. That is a means; that's all part of the mix. But, what we really are concerned to do is to see a human person transformed, moving toward wholeness.

The best model that I can give you for that which we have had some experience with here, is *the AA model*, where various steps are set forth which are simply a borrowing of the Gospel without the names attached, but which lead to the transformation of persons. And I believe that what we see in the movement of AA is really what should be happening and happens all too little in the Christian Church. Through that genuine encounter, that community of support, that total acceptance and openness, which allows genuine confession and self-exposure in a healing environment, there does occur the transformation and the healing of the person. And the healing of the person is to say about the individual what we hope for the larger picture, and that is *the humanization of society*. Now, that may sound very humanistic. But, I happen to think that God is about a very humanistic thing. I think that God is about gracing persons in order to release their full potential and to recreate them into the image of Jesus Christ who, I believe, is the human person par excellence, and that the Kingdom of God is the rule of God or the reign of God and, where the reign of God is recognized, there will be a very human society. So, I could speak about the Kingdom of God, but just to keep it kind of down to earth, let me say once again, *the transformation of the person and the humanization of society - that, I think, is what we must be about*.

And of course, our resources are dynamic; our power, our vision comes out of our understanding of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, and we do believe, as Scott Peck says in *The Road Less Traveled*, that *this is a graced universe, and that there is a grace operative in the world at large which is a healing and positive movement of God toward this world and toward persons*.

So, that's kind of in a nutshell the way we operate here. That's what this community of faith, this particular congregation, is all about. To the extent that people have come and the church has prospered, to that extent, anybody that has come in has kind of bought that vision, and I suppose that I'm guilty of shaping it

in large measure, but that always happens when you get to stand up front once a week, front and center.

So, we are a Christian congregation, and yet we see, I believe, a broader world out there. We are not content to live a kind of parochial life of a Christian congregation, within a Christian tradition, but would seek to understand ourselves and to relate in a positive way to the broader cultural spectrum, and to the world of spirit in whatever form that manifests itself.

I happen to believe that we are on the threshold of a new inter-dialogue among the religions, and I think it is inevitable. The earth has shrunk to the size of a grapefruit, and we really are members of a global community. It is no longer such that we have a largely Protestant religion in America, and that you go East to find Buddhism, and you go to the Middle East to find Islam or whatever. It's all over. The crosscurrents of religious expression are everywhere, whether you go to Ann Arbor or Chicago or New York, Los Angeles, you can find it all. Not only can you find it all, but also you can find all kinds of offbeat brands more and more. The religious resurgence in our day is one of the remarkable phenomena of this last quarter of the 20th century. It seems to be incumbent upon us to be in dialogue with that larger religious scene.

I brought along this little study of Martin Buber, the great Jewish thinker. Martin Buber is very deeply knowledgeable of Christian faith, thinks very highly of Jesus, does not understand Jesus as I understand him, but nonetheless really sees a kind of movement of Messianism as he, as a Jew, understands it coming to expression in Jesus. But he says, speaking to Christians,

It behooves both you and us to hold inviolably fast to our own true faith, that is, to our own deepest relationship to truth. It behooves both of us to show a religious respect for the true faith of the other. That is not what is called tolerance. Our task is not to tolerate each other's waywardness, but to acknowledge the real relationship in which both stand to the truth. Whenever we both, Christian and Jew, care more for God Himself than for images of God, we are united in the feeling that our Father's house is differently constructed than our human models take it to be.

Now that is a much broader understanding than has been true of Orthodox Christianity, which would see other religions as expressions of error. It is the understanding of my mentor, Hendrikus Berkhof, who says that, since the split of the Jewish and the Christian religions, God has had two peoples, and Berkhof bases that on his own biblical understanding of the irrevocable covenant that God has entered into with the Jewish people. That question is debated among Christian theologians and there is difference of opinion on it.

The point is I think we need to be deeply rooted. Let me say, personally (I don't want to take you in on this), *I* need to be deeply rooted in my tradition. I need to be deeply rooted, deeply committed, and I must bring to the discussion my

deepest and best understanding of Christian faith, and not try to just jot that down and remove the sharp contours of that in order to make it fit, but only as I do that as genuinely as I can can I engage in genuine dialogue with someone like a Martin Buber who will be genuinely Jewish.

Harvey Cox is a theologian who has written a number of books, one of which is *Many Mansions*. He's been involved in much of this dialogue among the religions and it's his feeling that what we need in this inter-religious dialogue is not so much seeking to find the lowest common denominator, as bringing into the discussion the sharpest focus of each understanding, so that there can be genuine meeting and encounter.

Well, let me say that that kind of dialogue I affirm. I'm not afraid of it. I don't think that our faith is so fragile that we will be tainted. I don't think that. I used to think that I had to protect my people. I used to think that one of my tasks as a pastor was to protect my people from error. Now I find that my people are well able to handle themselves in such areas, and that more often I don't generally really have to protect them. More often, I have to push them. I don't know if it's true in most congregations, but it's true in this congregation that I'm always pushing. I'm always trying to push people into risking and into scary places, because I believe that is faith-building. I don't think that you need to be sheltered. And, as a matter of fact, I wonder how long in the world in which we live anybody can be sheltered anymore. I think it could be less and less possible. All right. That's a little bit about the posture with which we approach this thing.

Let me say a word about *what I see in the horizon of our world*. You maybe didn't ask for all of this, but give me an inch and I'll take an hour. I think we're in a very interesting period in the world's history. I think that the period in which we find ourselves is toward the end of a period of tremendous revolution and transformation in human understanding. And I think that we have moved out of the settled past of maybe eighteen centuries of unquestioned tradition. And we are at the end of a couple of centuries of thrashing about, experimentation, of overthrowing old forms and shaking foundations, but we are not yet at a time in which new contours are clearly set.

Just, for example, the social-political context. If you would read Hans Küng's *Does God Exist?*, you would find him tracing the roots of modern atheism. He would take you back to the Socialist Revolution in Russia, for example. But, behind that, you would go to the philosophical writings of the German philosopher, a Protestant pastor's son, Ludwig Feuerbach, who was the first to speak of religion as a human product, that religion arises out of the human person, and that God is the projection of our needs. We have these needs; we create God; we project God onto the screen of reality; we bow down and worship. The God we worship is the God we need. We created God. Religion is a human business.

It was on the heels of Feuerbach that you have Karl Marx in the social-economic realm. You have Sigmund Freud in the psychoanalytical field, and you have finally Nietzsche with his nihilism, where he came to the conviction that nothing is nothing and that there is ultimately nothingness, the abyss. I do think that nihilism is really the logical conclusion of atheism. If God is not, then finally nothing is. And you can turn everything upside down and **there's no reason for saying that good is evil or evil is good. You have no norms.** It's over. But, if you see that development, you will also see that those people were dealing with very real issues in history and society which were manifesting themselves, and the reaction of the Church was, again, one of fear and defensiveness and refusal to engage in genuine dialogue with the realities of history that were right there.

The Marxist theory was constructed on the background of a class society in Europe and the church leadership was very insensitive and not at all in genuine dialogue. If you take the actual political-social revolution, the Russian Revolution particularly, you see that it took on this atheistic form because the Church and the State were joined together; throne and altar were one. To throw over the government, to throw over the political and economic system was also to throw over the Church, because the two were joined where the Church ought never to be joined. Then the whole social revolution that took place took an atheistic bent, not because the economic theory demanded it, but because the social situation meant that those two were wedded and when one went, the other went. And if you come down to our present day and you see how that revolution has kind of spent itself, it has not brought in Utopia. In fact, Gorbachev would tell us that the whole thing is a failure and we can well pray that Gorbachev is successful in what he is about because he has by economic necessity been forced to see that it is either change and transform that old giant, or it's not viable.

I think that you put all those things together and it is not just business as usual, but there are some very long-term movements and forces and tides within history which have created a kind of openness and possibility today, which just haven't been here in a long time. I think that this is a rather interesting time and it has peril and it has opportunity. And it's not just some result of an immediate situation, but I think the gathering of long-term things that have been going on for a couple of hundred years. The Enlightenment on the European continent, the Age of Reason which was the continuation of the Renaissance (the Reformation period was kind of an interruption of that flow), but the whole coming to the devotion of the human person, of the human mind, of reason, and of throwing off of authorities of all sorts: Church, Bible, whatever. The authoritarian day is past. We haven't learned that much in the Church yet. But Authoritarianism is over. In the world at large I really believe Authoritarianism is over. So that is the social-political context.

Take *the scientific world*. If you read Steven Hawking, this brilliant English Quantum physicist, in *A Brief History of Time and Space*, you find that we live

on what is the threshold of that discovery of what they call the Theory of Everything, the theory for which Einstein was questing – that little formula that would reveal the ultimate core of reality and develop it. In the *Christian Science Monitor* of some time ago there was a series, *Making the Quantum Leap: A Five-Part Series*, a fantastic series written in newspaper format, Christian Science newspaper format, so it's still a little hefty. But even I can almost understand some of it and it is amazing. I, in my next incarnation, hope to be either a conductor of a symphony or a physicist. I've always been fascinated by the close tie between physics and theology. Now, I regret to say that generally the breakthroughs in physics have been registered in theology rather than the other way. I'd like to get that reversed some day, but that probably won't ever happen.

But Newton was a Christian thinker, a physicist. And he did his best to maintain his Christian faith alongside his understanding of the physical universe. But his system, his understanding of the cosmos actually left no room for God. No, Sir Isaac never gave up on God, and I'm sure that God never gave up on Sir Isaac. But, as a matter of fact, the ordered universe of Newtonian physics had no room for God; it had no room for prayer; it had no room for miracle or any of that. Now, the amazing thing is that Newtonian physics has been blown sky high.

And Quantum Physics, the understanding of the structure of reality, whether in its cosmological expanse or in the understanding of the tiniest little molecule and atom, neuron and electron, speaks of eruption, of the eruption of the new, the possibility of randomness. It's an open ball game. Einstein hated it. Einstein hated it! He fought the Quantum Physicist Neils Bohr. Einstein said, "God doesn't play dice with the universe." He didn't want any randomness. But, nonetheless, that's where we are today, and it's impressive when you do see a person on the moon or when a satellite brings a picture from around the world, or your computer chip does everything you ever wanted done.

The world of *religion, the resurgence of fundamentalism in various forms*. I read a statement by Charles Colson the other day. In his new book, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, he says, "Not since the Crusades have religious passions and prejudices posed such a worldwide threat." That's the world we live in today. I think he's right. Not since the Crusades. If not through a religious zealot or confused idealist whose finger is on the nuclear trigger, then certainly by destroying the tolerance and trust essential for maintaining peace and concord among people.

Martin Marty, in a discussion of the aggressiveness and the orneriness of religion in the world in its manifestation, raised the question, "Is it not possible to be both civil and committed?" Is it not possible to be both civil and committed? Now, you see, that is kind of a trick, to be both civil and committed. But too often commitment has resulted in fanaticism and has wrought all kinds of havoc in the history of the world. And too often civility has been the result of lack of any real commitment or passion. To hold those two together is so important.

Well, that's the world we live in and it is a wonderful fascinating world in which to be alive. I think that it is a world that has openings for those of us who are concerned about spiritual reality and human transformation like never before.

Now, let me get more specific with Progoff. Why? What has all this to do with Ira Progoff? Well, I don't know a great deal about Ira Progoff. But I have heard him on tape, I've read some of his works and I was first put on to him by a couple of very respected friends in ministry some years ago, and I know that he has had wide acceptance in the Catholic church, more so than in the Protestant Church. But a couple of my friends in the Reformed Church have been part of some of his activity and have spoken very highly of him.

Ira Progoff is of Jewish origin. He is perhaps best characterized as a Judeo-Christian-Buddho spiritual sage. He has milked all of these traditions for insights, which he has put together with his understanding of depth psychology. Now, I really am not going to say very much about depth psychology because, well, I'm going to say everything I know, but that's not very much. I know that Progoff – having been a student of Carl Jung, Jung having been a student of Freud but breaking away from Freud – is one who created in his understanding room again for God, but not a God "out there," which incidentally isn't even in vogue in the best theology today, but a God in the depths of the unconscious where there is a kind of meeting of all kinds of consciousness down in some deep reservoir in the depth of reality.

A depth psychologist believes that the consciousness of the person is the tip of the iceberg. And I think that that has been rather well documented in terms of the tremendous structure of the unconscious. And I think images do evolve out of an unconscious depth. But I don't know much about that. Anyway, that is Progoff's orientation. He is a spiritual person. He's a deeply spiritual person. He's a mystical person, in the line of the mystics, I would say. If you want to label him in terms of Protestant or Jewish theology, he's probably closest to Paul Tillich, a Christian theologian now dead, and to Martin Buber, whose famous *I and Thou* book has made such a great impact in our century.

How Progoff speaks of religion – as I utilize Progoff's understanding of religion – it is a *functional understanding of religion*. He is dealing with the function that religion performs in human life and human society. It is more a question of functionality than it is a question of truth. Progoff would not want to referee between the truth claims of Eastern religions or Judaism or Islam or Christianity. But, he would see in them all a kind of commonality of function, and I believe that it is perfectly legitimate to look at it that way. Now, that's not all I'm concerned about, because finally I think that the truth question will obtrude itself. It certainly will for me. And I am always struggling with the truth question in Christian faith, in religious expression. But, nonetheless, there can be a very positive and helpful understanding of the place of religion in the function it

performs in the person and in society as a whole. And when Progoff speaks about religion and the religions, he is speaking functionally.

He would see its function as enabling persons to position themselves in relationship to the transpersonal reality in order that they may experience guidance and structuring for their outer life. Religion ought to help me to position myself over against reality that is beyond myself in order that in my everyday life and living I may have guidance, orientation, to be at home with myself and at home with the world. Now, if religion does that for a person, it has done a great, great deal. Progoff would see the various religions as particular forms and structures, all of which are performing that kind of common function: to enable me to live as a human being, with other human beings, to enable me to live as a person over against transpersonal reality.

Sometimes when he speaks, I think of the AA program where you have a Higher Power. I have encountered, from time to time, a few Christian people who have been uneasy with that, as though to speak of the Higher Power is to deny either the uniqueness of Jesus Christ or the God we see in Jesus Christ. Now, it doesn't bother me at all. I had an old gentleman in here one day coming off the AA program and, so help me, a man in his 60s who had absolutely no conception of God. I had a yellow pad like this and I had a pen, you know, and I'm generally nervous and I was making signs and I was trying to kind of speak about God and him down here and I put a big cross between as kind of a bridge and I made this silly diagram and we talked together and he said, "Somebody said, well, the Higher Power: just visualize a telephone pole." Well, I made this little thing and we talked some more and when it was all over I was quite moved as he said to me, rather moved himself, "May I take that with me?" And I thought to myself, what hunger. You can call that God or you can put whatever face you want to on it and I don't think Progoff will argue with you. He will say, "Is it helping you to live well?"

Now, I do think it is valid for us to take whatever resources we have to help people to live well. So, Progoff is kind of a mystic who believes that there is a huge cosmic process that has been about, which is evolving. He reminds me somewhat of the French Catholic thinker, Teilhard de Chardin, whose works, of course, the Vatican banned, but then the best things that come from Catholics get banned for a while. But, de Chardin is an original thinker who sees kind of the Omega point off there and he sees this whole cosmic process evolving toward that point. And Progoff believes that it is in the likes of us, in our individual spirits, that Spirit comes to expression, and that Reality enters the world – it emerges, as it were, out of the depths – through the individual spirit of a person. *His concern is that we enable persons to become, to be the bearers of Spirit and the expression of Spirit, and that, as Spirit is able to flow through our spirit and come to some kind of tangible form, Reality actually enlarges itself and the whole process continues to go on.*

He sees a crisis in the present time because he believes that traditional patterns, beliefs, doctrines and rituals have lost their grip on people, or people have lost their grip on traditional symbols and forms. Symbols and forms, be they doctrinal formulation, sacramental acts, or whatever, can function to put us in touch with the transpersonal as long as we believe in them. When we don't believe in them, they can't do it for us anymore. Now, when you stand in Western Michigan with all of our churches and with a large Christian community and in a rather conservative part of the world, it may sound a bit apocalyptic to speak about secular culture and about people uprooted, cut off from their roots. But, we have to keep reminding ourselves that this is not all there is, and when he speaks perhaps with more of a world purview and he speaks out of the context of New York City and Los Angeles, he probably feels that and senses that more than we do. Nonetheless, we have to recognize that the world as a whole is not becoming – now speaking as a Christian and an advocate of the Christian Gospel – the world as a whole is not becoming more, but is becoming less Christian. We are becoming a minority. And it is a fact that those traditional patterns and beliefs and rituals have for large portions of the world population lost their power. But, the need still remains for that which will put the individual and the larger society in touch with the transperson, or with God, if you will. And so, the need in our day is to find the way in which that can happen.

Now, being a depth psychologist, Progoff believes that we will find that truth by going into the depth dimension, and that God (I'll say God), is perceived, the *knowledge of God is accessible, not through rational formulation, but through intuitive perception, that it comes not by rational instruction which has been the hallmark of Reformed tradition, but that it comes through apprehension, through images, and symbols, that it erupts*, that it is not mastered rationally and discovered.

Now, you know, I have to say, just coming as I have through the season of Epiphany, I have found myself wrestling with that question week after week. When you really get some insight, when you really have a "high" experience, when you really capture something, when there's been a breakthrough for you, how do you express it? Isn't it, "Suddenly it dawned upon me?" Isn't it often after a churning and wrestling and in a moment of insight, and doesn't it often come to us whole? As I was wrestling with this whole matter of how God reveals God's self, I was so aware of the fact that it is one thing to say that the light's on; it's another thing to say, "I see the light." So that we can talk all we want to in theological and doctrinal terms about the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, about the light shining and all that, but when Progoff speaks about going into the depth dimension, I have to say that there is something to the fact that God's unveiling of God's self will happen within us. *It must finally be a subjective apprehension, no matter how much we may clamor for the fact that it is objective and real.* You know, we often equate objectivity with the real. Oh yes, it's certainly real. But until I believe it, until it grasps me and I say, "Wow," it has not really come full cycle.

And so, Progoff's point for a community such as ours – this is what he would think:

In a crisis of a culture that has lost its moorings, whose symbols have largely become empty symbols, he would say, *first of all, the church should give social support to the person, enabling that person to work on his or her own inner life.* If in our day our young people are being told, "Just say no," Progoff says to the Church, "Just say yes." When there's someone, some funny person in the congregation, a little odd, a little strange, doesn't fit the stereotype, talks about the inner journey, why he says, "Just say yes." Encourage them. Be a place that encourages people to get on with that work on the inner life.

He says, *secondly, let the Church be the social institution and the culture where work on the inner life can take place.* And I like the word he uses here: "Let the church be a sanctuary where that can happen." You know, we really ought to be about that, and we really ought to get on with it. I think about that every Sunday when I see the large assemblage of people, and then I realize how superficial is my little touch. When they leave for the rest of the week, what's happening? Are we as a community creating a sanctuary where people can do more than come in on Sunday morning and at worst complete the Sunday obligation, at best get a little Sunday morning high, and hopefully in it all, worship God?

Thirdly, he says, let the Church provide the means and the program whereby this can be encouraged. And I guess that bringing a seminar like this here would be a tangible, concrete means by which to expose and offer to people ways in which to do that.

He remarks about the fact that youth, many of the younger generation, have taken over Eastern religions lock, stock and barrel. You know, it's faddish, it's trendy, and those waves happen. It does indicate, however, a real spiritual hunger and a search and a quest. And he also says, "Look, our generation cannot really successfully just go back lock, stock and barrel and pick this thing up. I mean, the new and the different is fascinating, and we understand all that dynamic, but he says it's not for them to go back and get ancient Buddhist meditation techniques, but the *challenge to us is to find the ways in which they can be put in touch with God, with the transpersonal reality, in the garments of the 20th century.* Find the methodology. Find the modes, the means by which this can happen, which I think is the same kind of thing which I said earlier tonight when I said I felt it was incumbent upon me to translate the Gospel into today's idiom, because that needs constant translation so that it always comes to expression in the conceptuality and the language of the particular context in which it is being proclaimed. Otherwise, it is simply the reiteration of formulas out of the past and that's fundamentalism – just the literal reiteration of formulas out of the past is

fundamentalism. You don't think about that. You just give obeisance to formulas, slogans, models, and then you're not really in touch.

So, in his book *The Dynamics of Hope*, Progoff deals at quite some length with the experience of Tolstoy who went through a period of tremendous anguish in his life after being very successful. He was on top of the world socially, culturally, a great literary success, and he came to a time of a sense of the meaninglessness of it all. And he tells in some detail Tolstoy's experience and he speaks in *The Dynamics of Hope*, of the Utopian person, and that is the person who has this kind of prophetic sense, who is willing to anguish and struggle, but always in hope, and out of the anguish and the struggle eventuates the new realm of experience and insight, which is the prelude to another struggle and anguish, which eventuates in a new breakthrough, because he sees our human experience as being an ongoing pilgrimage and process and, for creativity to be released, there is a need for this constant movement between the struggle and anxiety and always, however, with the hope undergirding it and breaking through to a new plateau and a new discovery. Let me just read a couple of paragraphs.

"I began to understand," Tolstoy reports, "that in the answers given by faith was to be found the deepest source of human wisdom. That I had no reasonable right to reject them on the ground of reason, and that these principle answers alone solve the problems of life. I understood them, but that did not make it any easier for me." The fact, in other words, that his reason was now giving assent to an act of faith of some sort, did not bring such an act of faith any closer. It did not even make it any more possible. All that this new intellectual realization achieved, in fact, was to intensify the internal pressure and to build up an even greater tension around the vacuum of meaning which he felt in himself. How could he find a faith that he would not merely be in favor of believing? But one that he would actually be able to feel as a reality? It would be good if he could accept some structured body of doctrine that had been worked out in generations past by an established church. That would not be a fact for him. He would not feel the reality of such a faith. And so, no matter how much he might try to convince himself rationally that he ought to place his faith there, the persistent question about the validity of life would not be silenced.

But, he goes on and he struggles and then he tells about the dream that Tolstoy had and the peace and the resolution that he came to. I'm not going to do more with that, but this is a very fine introduction to Progoff's understanding of the *journey of the individual*, and it is his conviction that *it is necessary for an individual to feel his life story and to be able to have a sense of continuity through the various stages and that in the creative unfoldment of a life there will be those periods of dark and light.*

I was thinking about his understanding of the human experience in contrast to, for example, someone within the Reformed Church. I shouldn't even say that

because it's not Reformed, but there is this friend of mine who I know rather well and who probably most of you would know, as well, Bob Schuller and the Hour of Power. Bob Schuller with his possibility thinking, which was built on Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, has done a tremendous amount for many, many people. He has recognized the importance of self-esteem and he has brought a positive and hopeful accent, and many people who didn't believe that they had it in them have found that, after all, they had it in them. My problem with Schuller is that I feel that sometimes he almost becomes shrill and I want to say to him sometimes that success isn't always the consequence of faithfulness or responsibility or effort, and so I always felt that there was something lacking. There was a depth dimension in the Gospel, if you will, that I felt never came to expression with Bob Schuller's formulations. I thought to myself, interestingly, how much closer Progoff is to an understanding of human personality and the experience of darkness and light, of guilt and forgiveness, of bondage and freedom. And then, really, not just a once for all thing, although we believe in a great once for all transformation, but as the ongoing unfoldment of life, this constant swinging between the poles.

I can understand that in terms of my understanding – my biblical orientation. Walter Brueggemann in an excellent study of the Psalms speaks about how you can categorize the Psalms as *Psalms of Orientation* where creation is good, God's in his heaven, all's right with the world, everything's ducky; *Psalms of Disorientation*, where nothing is right and everything's unraveling; and then there are *Psalms of New Orientation*. Brueggemann's point is that life is not often lived in only orientation or disorientation. Life is generally lived moving from orientation, disorientation and new orientation, and out of the study of the Psalms you have that same kind of expression. Our life is a dynamic movement, and we do move through periods of openness, joy and light; we do move through valleys and through arid periods and dry periods; and it seems to me that is more true to human experience as I understand it than in some of the pop psychology and what I think is kind of a vulgarized psychology taken over by some of the religious stuff that is on the market.

Finally, in his book *The Symbolic and the Real*, Progoff has, toward the end of the book, that which really spoke to me and what turned me on in the first place to his thinking and his whole approach to things. Let me just read you a couple of paragraphs here. His point, again – I said this earlier and I'm going to say this once again – his point is that to be in touch with reality or to be in touch with God is not the consequence of coming to the end of a well-constructed syllogism. It is the intuition that comes with the apprehension of symbol and image; it is a moment of illumination; it's revelation. So he says:

As the symbol unfolds, reality enters the world and becomes *present*. A new atmosphere is established, and this is much more than a new climate of thought. It is reality increasing its presence among humankind by means of symbolic events that are enacted upon the depth dimension of

the psyche. In another style of language, this type of event is often described as a breakthrough of *spirit*, into human experience. It has, indeed, all of the traditional attributes of *spirit*, for it possesses power and meaning and the healing quality of inward peace. It expresses itself, however, not in the fixed forms of dogma, but in the living fluidity of symbolic acts. (p. 214)

And then he speaks about revelation in the Old Testament:

One context in which this new perspective is especially important is our attitude toward the Bible. In the biblical tradition there has been the view that when the Old Testament was finished and was certified in its standard version, that was the end of God's appearance to man. After that, man was not to expect a breakthrough of spirit in the world. At least not until the coming of the Messiah. All that was required of people then was that they keep the formulas and the stories so that they would keep alive the remembrance of the great moments of contact with the Divine which had taken place in history and were now restricted to the past. The traditional understanding was that since the voice of God stopped speaking when the Old Testament was closed, it would be best if people stopped listening for the voice of God in the world and concentrated on fulfilling the commandments.

When the experiences recorded in the New Testament transpired, this view was reconsidered and was opened anew. Then it was felt that God had indeed made a new entry into the world. Necessarily so, since He had needed to make a new covenant between Himself and man. With the ending of the experiences in the New Testament, however, the same tendency to restrain the human spirit and enclose it in fixed molds recurred. Again, it was believed that the spirit of God would no longer enter the world in a prophetic breakthrough. It would not because it was no longer felt to be necessary. The Truth had been given. After that it would be sufficient if people would imitate Christ and concentrate on entering the dimension of the sacred by repeating the festive formulas accrued by ecclesiastical authorities. (pp. 222-223)

And then he says,

One of the very greatest and most basic difficulties of Western history is expressed in this fact that we have drawn from our traditions of belief that major openings of the Spirit are not possible any longer because they stopped when the Bible was officially sealed. We need to become capable of reopening the Bible as a living contact side by side with other styles of experience and sources of the spirit in the modern psyche. The two testaments which comprise the Bible are openings. They surely were not intended to be closings in man's relation to the infinite. (p. 224)

I think he's right. I think a great problem with the Church is the fact that, in order to manage the revelation given, it was historically necessary to close the canon. It was a historical necessity. But then, to refuse to understand that the Spirit of God continues to speak was to allow the Church to become rigid and to allow a conception of orthodoxy. And I must say to you, this is my confession, one that I close with, that to me the idea of orthodoxy is an arrogant presumption. That's probably why I'm a heretic.

Now, I think from my perspective, my understanding of things, there's richness here and that it is a great resource. I will be participating with my own labels, with the God reflected in the face of Jesus. I will understand this in terms of my own theological understanding. But I see the possibility of a very fruitful instrument here which again I think holds great promise for the healing of persons and, through the healing of persons, the humanization of society, which I think is what we're all about.

Now, I think I've talked sufficiently long so that you should be sufficiently tired, so you probably wouldn't even want to raise a question. But, if you would, I would be happy to take it.

Frank: I agree you're a heretic. I think you're making heretics out of all of us, but I think I'm beginning to enjoy it. When you sent that first letter about Ira Progoff I immediately rose up in my traditional background and sent you a letter back saying you probably were off base, and that we couldn't tolerate this new kind of thinking. But, I guess it just exemplifies the fact that most of us are completely uneducated. For forty years I have been studying anatomy and physiology and biochemistry and medicine, pharmacology, thinking that all of medical science depended on how much I — I suddenly realize how much an uneducated nincompoop I am and I sure appreciate your bringing these things into the open so that we could all learn from them and get carried along with your enthusiasm.

RAR: Well, thank you, Frank. I want to say that the questions, the concerns you raised were very legitimate concerns. Frank. I was really comforted to find explicitly Progoff recognizing the dangers of that kind of trendy movement, of the sensitivity movements and groups, and those things of the 60s or 70s where people were undressed and then left defenseless, and he definitely set himself over against that kind of thing. And the legitimacy of his Journal Workshop has been tested. He's kind of a quiet person; he shuns the idea of guru. Doesn't even want to be called a sage. He's a very humble pilgrim who is sort of feeling his way along. But, your concerns were very, very well taken, and I was almost positive immediately that that's not where he was, but I was happy to find it confirmed, that he also distanced himself from that kind of thing. So, I appreciate the concerns you raised.

I read today the *Seminary Times* of last fall, a book by James Ashbrook, whom I do not know. He's a seminary professor. He was at Colgate Rochester; he's moved since then. *Making Sense of God*. And it is a book entitled *Brain and Belief* where

for a couple decades he has done serious research on the brain, as a theologian, trying to find the relationship of the function of the brain to spiritual perception. It is an absolutely fascinating article. And there is a rather serious critique of it, as well, in which, you know, it's such a pioneering kind of thing that the guy says, "I don't know how to critique it." But it's just fascinating. In fact, I'm going to give it to you to take home with you and you can tell me about it when I get back from vacation. But you know there are such interesting things happening today and there is an openness today. I think across the board: to structure of reality, to what we mean when we say God, and I do think that it is an exciting time in which to be alive. It's a perilous time, too, because people are also falling for all kinds of... someone accused me of being New Age. Now, I've never read anything New Age. I don't know what New Age is. But, I know this - that anytime that there is a genuine breakthrough and movement, there are going to be all kinds of counterfeits and all kinds of peripheral things going on and there will be faddy, trendy things. That's true. But, nonetheless, that shouldn't scare us.

Ira Progoff. *The Dynamics of Hope: Perspectives of Process in Anxiety and Creativity, Imagery and Dreams*. Dialogue House Library, 1985.

Ira Progoff. *The Symbolic and the Real: A New Psychological Approach To The Fuller Experience of Personal Existence*. Peter Smith Publisher, Inc., 1983.