

## Thoughts on Change, Progress, Ministry, and the Kingdom of God: A Reflection Paper for the Clergy Voyagers online meeting August 2020

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“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”<sup>i</sup> This is a saying of common wisdom.

Clergy often comment on what little change they see over the course of their ministry. This may be in the lives of individual parishioners or in the society in general. The Voyagers, as a study group of practicing clergy, teachers, and coaches, are in a position to see this and reflect on it from the perspectives of Bowen theory, theology, and related disciplines.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman, who brought Bowen theory to the clergy, observed that he was performing the weddings of the children of congregants whom he had married years before. He was struck by the lack of change over a generation of ministry. In government, psychotherapy, and religion all the problems were the same as when he began.<sup>ii</sup>

Murray Bowen in describing the cornerstone of his theory allowed that you might learn to function a bit better, but that your basic level of differentiation was pretty much fixed by early adulthood. Improved functioning in one person, might be reciprocated in decreased functioning in their spouse. A couple may be freed of symptoms in their marriage, only to have their child become symptomatic. It seems cold comfort to function better yourself at another's expense. Are we just rearranging the symptoms? “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

Murray Bowen also saw what he described as societal regression. He saw American society in decline as early as the late 1940's after WW II. He saw this decline as accelerating through the 1960's.<sup>iii</sup> A global view might have included seeing a progression in other societies who had lost in WW II. Perhaps it was a global reciprocity with regression in the victors, and progression among who lost. Murray Bowen changed the concept to “Emotional Process in Society”. It was a more neutral name than speaking of regression or progression. In either case it may not be fundamental change, but rather a response to the circumstances in the relationships.

Thomas Cahill, in his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, documents a shift from a cyclical view of history to a more linear view.<sup>iv</sup> Classic ideas saw humanity in a cycle that could not be escaped except through some gnostic passage into the eternal realm of perfection. Life was “one thing after another” and “what goes around comes around”. The Jews had ideas of a past and a future, and a divine calling to faithfulness. This was a departure from the classical view, and in the western world the Jewish view has prevailed to this day.

It was not much of a shift to take this linear view of history and turn it into a view of linear progress. There is much popular belief in a mythic linear view of progress. The march of technology has reinforced that view. Many people expect all areas of life to be undergoing a slow progression toward increased technical capability, a more just society, improved human relations, and peace among nations. It may happen with some bumps, but the belief, or expectation, is in overall progress. This belief in progress may now be breaking down (especially among young people), but for many it can be the background orientation. Young people are facing fewer opportunities than their parents, however the belief in progress

describes, even for the young, how things *ought* to be. Things should be getting better, or at least “I should be making more money.”

Is this view realistic? Is the alternative despair?

This popular view has been reinforced by movements in philosophy and the sciences. While some philosophies have been ones of utter despair, others have reinforced the myth of progress.

Many variants of the theory of evolution are ones of constant progress. Orthogenesis (progress in a straight line) was one such variant that continues in the popular mind. We have all seen the drawings of apes growing straighter and taller until they look just like us. These ideas of evolution toward an end are being discredited in scientific circles but persist in the popular mind.<sup>v</sup> It seems to some in the sciences that the philosophy came first and the science second. Theories of evolution must include dead ends, regressions to earlier simple forms, as well as movement into complexity.<sup>vi</sup>

The study of Bowen theory has been initially depressing to some in that the futility of most efforts at “self-improvement” become evident. A simple act of will or a profound insight does not “up” your basic differentiation of self. There is no “quick fix” as Edwin Friedman observed. A long road toward maturity and responsibility is prescribed, and you might change a little bit. It might make all the difference, but you might just change a little bit. It can seem glacial if you think of it as progress.

A person, a family, or a society may function very well for a period, or it may move into poor functioning. The time periods may be so long that change is hardly perceptible. Alternatively, things may be changing quickly. In either case, the idea of long-term permanent progress comes into question as the emotional processes are projected through the generations.

How is a Christian to address this? The faith speaks of forgiveness, redemption, and sanctification. Shouldn't it lead to progress? Perhaps not. I offer my own theological response to reframe the ideas of progress and change into ones of transformation and resurrection.

St. Augustine in addressing a young man in distress at the end of the Roman Empire wrote letters which formed the core of his thesis, *The City of God*. In his view it was not the end of the world, but merely the end of the Empire. It was not the end of life, but just the end of life as you know it. He argues that we are called to build up the “city of God” even as the “city of man” is breaking down. No illusion of progress there! The kingdom of God, in his view, is always breaking in and transforming the moment so that God's reign is constantly coming into view. The Kingdom of God has come near you. All is changed even when it might appear that nothing has changed. Such is building the city of God.

This vision is in the Epistle to the Romans. “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (Romans 8:37)<sup>vii</sup> Paul argues that all ill can come our way, yet it will not prevail.

I think it is a vision of God's reign that brings us to see victory in crucifixion. In the middle of the unchanging mess the inbreaking kingdom brings resurrected life and not death. The idea of progress is inadequate to this reality. This is theological. This is acting on a belief. In Bowen terms, it is acting out of principle: a persistent belief that God has the “last word” which has power to transform the present moment. As in the parable of the Weeds and the Wheat

(Matthew 13:24-30) it is for God to sort it all out in the end. "Let both of them grow together until the harvest."

For me this is a profound message for ministry that can enable persistence even in the face of mounting evidence of defeat. We may become humanly discouraged. Yet, even in apparent defeat the kingdom of God is breaking in, and even *in this world* setting things aright. Crucifixion becomes resurrection. Transformation, not progress. Resurrection born out of death. Progress does not describe it. Grace and transformation can come to any moment, often in unexpected ways that may or may not reflect any perceptible change or progress. Bowen therapists can see something of this as more "self" emerges in a client while they stay outside of the emotional process. A Bowen therapist cannot be invested in the "progress" of a client, but often witnesses "self" being born.

Even with such a transforming vision, we, as ministers of the Gospel, can feel inadequate to bring God's transforming word to the moment. Somehow our faith is inadequate. I am reminded of the words of Richard Norris in *Understanding the Faith of the Church*. We are not to have faith in the strength, warmth, or depth of our *faith*, but rather to have faith in God.<sup>viii</sup> God meets us in our weakness and calls us into life.

So, nothing may change, but in each moment the kingdom of God comes near – which changes everything.

In my own Anglican tradition, theological positions are rarely fully systematic and complete. It is sufficient to think in ways that are not contrary to reason and are woven into a cord along with scripture and tradition. Then this takes shape in worship and practice.<sup>ix</sup> In teaching us to be humble about our own thoughts, Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, described theological thinking as a way to keep us *near* the truth.

Hoping to move nearer to truth, this paper is offered as an invitation for dialogue on the questions of change, progress, and ministry.

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<sup>i</sup> Wikipedia "The More Things Change, The More They Remain The Same." The phrase was coined by French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, "plus ça **change**, plus c'est la même chose.

<sup>ii</sup> This was an observation of Rabbi Edwin Friedman that he referred to often in his presentations.

<sup>iii</sup> Bowen, Murray, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, p.276 (Jason Aronson, 1985)

<sup>iv</sup> Cahill, Thomas. *The Gifts of the Jews*, Hinges of History Series, (Anchor Books, 1998)

<sup>v</sup> Wikipedia: Orthogenesis excerpt:

For these and other reasons, belief in evolutionary progress has remained "a persistent [heresy](#)",<sup>[47]</sup> among evolutionary biologists including [E. O. Wilson](#)<sup>[76]</sup> and [Simon Conway Morris](#), although often denied or veiled. The philosopher of biology [Michael Ruse](#) wrote that "some of the most significant of today's evolutionists are progressionists, and that because of this we find (absolute) progressionism alive and well in their work."<sup>[77]</sup> He argued that progressionism has harmed the status of [evolutionary biology](#) as a mature, professional science.<sup>[78]</sup> Presentations of evolution remain characteristically progressionist, with humans at the top of the "Tower of Time" in the [Smithsonian Institution](#) in [Washington D.C.](#), while [Scientific American](#) magazine could illustrate the history of life leading progressively from mammals to dinosaurs to primates and finally man. Ruse noted that at the

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popular level, progress and evolution are simply synonyms, as they were in the nineteenth century, though confidence in the value of cultural and technological progress has declined.<sup>[4]</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> See Gregersen, Niels Henrik, *The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World*, (Dialog: A Journal of Theology, Vol. 40, No. 3, Fall 2001, p. 192. Gregersen asks, "...how can the Christian belief in the mercy of God be consonant with the ruthlessness of the evolutionary processes?"

<sup>vii</sup>Romans 8:31-39 <sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

<sup>viii</sup> Norris, Richard A. *Understanding the Faith of the Church*, The Church Teaching Series vol. 4, (The Seabury Press, NY, NY. 1979) Paraphrased. Richard Norris was my academic advisor at the General Theological Seminary, NYC.

<sup>ix</sup> Hooker, Richard. *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie*, (1594)