

Toward a Theology of Emergence:

Reflections on Wolfgang Leidhold's *Genealogy of Experience*

[This is a paper I presented at the 2017 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco on a panel about Leidhold's book.]

I think Wolfgang Leidhold's *The Genealogy of Experience* is an extremely important book, with major implications for the ways we can think about a variety of matters. Leidhold says on the first page that his main thesis is a "paradigm shift," treating the structure of human experience as something that "is not a universal constant, but changes over time," and I think myself that what makes this book especially important is that it could bring with it a broader paradigm shift in a variety of fields of thought. Since I have a special interest in the history of religious thought, I intend to discuss what I think are some of the implications of Leidhold's book for theology and its relation to ideas of both religious and political authority.

But before proceeding to that, I would like to mention some of the themes of Leidhold's book that point toward these kinds of reflection. The over all theme of the book is the evolution of experience, which it traces through a sequence of what Leidhold calls "turns," from prehistoric times to the present. This evolution involves a long process in which higher levels of consciousness, intentionality, and capacities for self-reflection and decision gradually emerge. The book goes into detail about the evolution of the physiological basis for the possibilities of experience and of consciousness as focused awareness. An important implication of this, I think, is that the rise of consciousness within a universe of what is commonly thought of as inert matter can be best understood as the unfolding over time of a substratum of proto-awareness that is

universally present in matter but cannot become “consciousness” until some sort of physiological focusing mechanism evolves to make that possible. (Leidhold also touches on this in his discussion of the Stoic idea of *pneuma* as pervading all matter.) Homo sapiens is the product of ages of evolution of sensory mechanisms and the brain, but as Leidhold explains, the development of the full range of human capacities, which he traces from paleolithic times, requires not only these physical instruments but also training and practice in a fourfold sequence of incubation, articulation, method, and institution-building that constitute culture and society, and Leidhold traces the process of this through the art of paleolithic caves and the myths of mesolithic cosmological culture, the noetic culture of classical Greece, and the kinds of spiritual experience cultivated by Zarathustra, the prophets of Israel, Gautama Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus, among others.

One of the strengths of this analysis is that it deals effectively with the problem that interrupted Voegelin’s explorations when he took that long pause between the first three volumes of *Order and History* and the fourth, his realization that, as Leidhold says in his own book, “the genealogy of experience is not bound to a uniform path,” and “the chains of experience do not evolve the same way at all times and all places. ... The experiential history of humankind is not a single story, but many stories.”

At the heart of the stories Leidhold recounts is his understanding of the issue that earlier turned Voegelin from trying to write a history of ideas to a history of experiences and symbols. I was pleased, for example, to see the emphasis he places on the spiritual revolution that Zarathustra began on the basis of his experiential realization of what it means to be called to commit oneself to serve truth and justice and the way he tried to make this form of consciousness universally available, not simply an individual

realization of his own, by articulating his experience in his “liturgical hymns, the *Gathas*,” which Leidhold says “are the earliest testimony of a fully articulate reflective turn,” and providing for others a “vocabulary” to describe the differentiated mental structure that those who followed him could develop by practicing a discipline of self-awareness and fidelity. This incipient “pneumatic or spiritual turn” began a heritage that Leidhold traces through the Jewish Wisdom literature, with its emphasis on “spirit” as transcendent “love” that enters human life from beyond, to Jesus and the early Christians, who, combining “experiential re-orientation with meditative exercise” developed a method to enable others to join them in the experiential transformation they called “metanoia.”

Which brings me to some important implications I think the book can have for religious thought, in particular the way it can help to clarify and provide grounding for a parallel paradigm shift in theology and the resolution of a tension that has been present in Christian tradition since its early centuries as the Latin Christian tradition began to diverge from its earlier Jewish and Greek Patristic heritage. I referred earlier to the book’s treatment of evolution as a process of emergence and its touching on ideas about spirit as both transcendent and immanent, pervading all of matter but emerging gradually over the ages. In philosophical terms one might say that this suggests a “bottom-up” ontology of emergence that contrasts with the “top-down” Western medieval ontology that, as Leidhold puts it, “arranged all things in a hierarchy with Being at the top of a conceptual pyramid.” In theological terms, it suggests a “bottom-up” theory of divine incarnation as a universal process, as compared with the more familiar “top-down” one that treats “*the* Incarnation” as a unique event in which a pre-existent superhuman individual, the apex of the pyramid, manifested in a human body at one particular time.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's theology of incarnation, which treated creation, incarnation, and redemption as aspects of a single, continuous, and universal process, was of the "bottom-up" type, but as a Western Christian theologian he found himself forbidden to publish his thoughts on this during his lifetime, although his posthumous publications have won a wide audience.

In the Christian East, on the other hand, this pattern of thought has a long tradition. Gregory Palamas, for example, in the 14th century, wrote, "The essence [*ousia*] of God is everywhere, for, as it is said, 'the Spirit fills all things,' according to essence. And so, deification [*theosis*] likewise is everywhere." Maximus the Confessor before him wrote in the 7th century, "God the divine Logos wishes to effect the mystery of his incarnation always and in all things." And as far back as the 2nd century there is Irenaeus, for whom, as Jean Daniélou put it, Jesus was unique, not in a way that excluded divine incarnation as a universal process but because he was "God's one great success" in the process that was intended for the whole of creation. "The substratum of existence," says the contemporary Greek theologian John Zizioulas, "is not being but love [*agape*]." From this point of view, the process of creation and its true goal is the universal incarnation of divine love.

I could say a lot more about this, but I will just mention that although the divergence between the Christian East and the West began at least as early as the 4th century, its decisive institutional as well as intellectual breaking point took place during the reign of Charlemagne, when he changed the Nicene Creed in the West from the Eastern idea of the Spirit proceeding from the Father *to* the Son, who *receives* it and in whom it abides, to the idea that the Spirit proceeds from the Father "*and* the Son," who

generates its existence out of his own being and therefore stands with the Father at the top of a hierarchy that descends to the world through the Son's representative on earth, the emperor Charlemagne, and in subsequent centuries through all the others who claimed an equivalent power and authority, including the medieval papacy and the secular monarchs who claimed to rule by divine right. In the modern political world's struggle to free itself for a new conception of politics, says Leidhold, "The main thrust of secularization was directed against the political theology of the old regime."

I should add here that that both the "political theology of the old regime" and modern fundamentalism are connected with resistance against another important "turn" that Leidhold discusses, the shift from a "closed" to an "open" society based on the noetic turn's realization that knowing is an active process, continuously open to revision and further exploration. "The closed mode," he says, "is based on primary consensus, a consensus focused on ... a definitive doctrine or dogma wherein there is no room for open discussion and no possibility of alternative answers." An open mind and an open society, on the other hand, are "based on secondary consensus, a consensus pertaining to the modes and methods of debate and enquiry that may lead to knowledge." There are modern theologians, like Bernard Lonergan in his study of method in theology, who have been trying to ground religious thought in Leidhold's secondary consensus, but there also remain those who would try to bolster a primary consensus by silencing voices like those of Teilhard. The struggle to realize and fully integrate the crucial turns that Leidhold traces for us is ongoing.

So to conclude, I would like to suggest that the complex intellectual heritage we live within is a tangled one with manifold internal tensions that can only be resolved

through clarification and the kind of decision that emerges from real understanding. I think this book could act as a midwife to that kind of understanding.