EMERGENCE AND THE DIVINE ORDER: What Lies at the Heart of Emergence
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Some time ago as I was driving home after the first Soularize Learning Party I attended, I found myself grappling with a theological difficulty presented there because of the popular "postmodern" position being taken up. This problem arose during a theological conversation in our learning party that suggested that truth was essentially unknowable. Too many factors seemed to be at play in order for any of us to take propositional truths seriously, it was said. The net effect was that the truths presented in Scripture or by the church were to be held tentatively at best. As I drove home I was thinking about the many complicating factors at work driving this position. To what degree are our positions formed by our community, and which community has the right "read" on the truth? Faith communities, traditions, history, personality – all of these structures create a sort of complicated web that seem to suggest that truth is unknowable. But what if truth is neither simplistic nor lost in complication? What if truth is found in complexity? What if it is the sort of complexity that follows simple rules but produces deep and geometric results?

This line of thought inevitably led me to Complex Adaptive Systems theory – CAS for short. Now with the term "Emergence" in vogue and with the emergent movement trying to discover just what it means to be emergent, it is helpful to consider the other side of the emergent question. How are these two thoughts connected? Emergence advocates the process of free discovery, of learning without arbitrary constraints towards the unfettered discovery of new ideas. But there is another perspective on emergence that would be helpful to the conversation. Emergence is also a dynamic characteristic of Complex Self-Adaptive Systems. CAS (Complex Adaptive Systems) theory is the other side of emergence. CAS theory lies behind virtually every expression of emergence, and CAS, which is a very recent and growing science, explains for us how simple rules produce complexity and how hierarchies of order emerge from what seems to be chaos.

One of the things we are learning from CAS is that the more simple the structure of the system - the more one dimensional it is - the shorter its lifespan and the less resilient it is. An example of this could be bioengineered corn. Without genetic diversity crops of corn are more susceptible to insects and disease. However, the more complex, ordered, and richly and hierarchically embedded the system, the more resilient it is. Such systems are also regenerative. A rich and healthy ecosystem is an example of a Complex Adaptive System. An example of a less complex and impaired system would be a linear, centrally organized, top down political system - like the old communist Soviet Union. This system collapsed and could not sustain itself because it lacked necessary complexity, free markets and regulated (as opposed to suppressed) autonomy.

If we look at the whole human being, we are just about the most complex system on the planet except for the planet itself. We are built of a Janus-faced hierarchy of systems and subsystems. We are models of complexity. While many Emergent folk take delight in the freedom of emergence - the spontaneity of it all and the freedom to experiment - we must realize that emergence always leads to organization and the more deeply and richly organized that system is, the healthier it is and the more easily it sustains regeneration. When considered in these terms, emergence may be as simple as a vapor - which is a much less complex system - or it may be as robust as a human being. The problem with emergence without an understanding of the need for complex order is that it will suffer the fate of all simple systems - its lifespan will be short. Without a vision of a more complex order it denies the necessity of order and in denying order it denies the goodness of the created order. In the

end it could be reduced to a form of Gnosticism, an early heresy. This is a heresy not because some in the church had power, it is a heresy because it denies the principle by which life is sustained. Heresies are heresies because they ultimately harm society, the church, and the soul. Gnosticism is a heresy because it denies the goodness of the complex order of the body, and thereby divorces the created order from spirit. The problem and the mystery has always been the transubstantiation of order, not freedom from order.

The real question for those who are studying CAS is why order should emerge from chaos at all. Why does creation organize itself into deep levels of order? Thomas Aquinas spoke of the Lex Aeternam, the Eternal Law. We could understand this as the explicate order, that order that lies outside the physics of matter. It is the very Kingdom of God impressing itself upon the chaos of what-is-not to bring it into form, shape and order. Creation is nothing other than the emergence of order from what is not order. The church is an expression of the order of the Kingdom of God. Yet the Church can only participate to greater or lesser degrees in the Eternal Order that is the Kingdom of God because of its earthly imperfection. It is when the church participates in those aspects of the divine order that have repeatedly been expressed throughout the ages and have evidenced resilience and regeneration that it is at its strongest. It is when the church lives out this divine order according to the Lex Naturalis, the natural law - within the principles of robust complexity - that it is most powerful and attractive.

What could this mean for the church in a postmodern world? What if the emphasis should be on order rather than emergence, complexity rather than randomness? If emergence is the result of the collapsing structure of modernism, then the transition we are experiencing is not one of mere emergence to something new, but one from something lacking the necessary complexity to survive. Where the Protestant church has hitched its wagon to modernity it has done so at the cost of its regenerative capacity. In short, it has exhausted itself. The program has terminated in upon itself. If this is the case, then only that part of the church that has hitched itself to modernity is in entropy. Modernity, with its cold rationalism, scientism, and reductionism lacked the necessary complexity to regenerate. Rather, it needed to be balanced out (following rules of complexity) with a sacramental worldview in which mystery, ritual, and belief support the more complex human person and experience.

Modernity therefore, has left us looking for a church that is complex rather than shallow, rich and deep, rather than flat and one dimensional. I want a church that expresses its theology with robust intelligence, not shallow propositions or open-to-interpretation half-truths. I want a church that meets the entire human person in all his or her complexity and not one that addresses human beings as if they were one dimensional wills or intellects alone. I want a church that is stronger by diversity according to it's kind, its order of genus, rather than a vaporous non-organization or one so open to diversity that it ceases to possess its distinguishing features. The church ceases to be the church when the principle of emergence-towards-order is replaced by open ended emergence towards no definable end. There is an eternal order emanating upon us from outside time and space and I believe it is discernable in history. Emergence has a design, an order – it is intelligible. This intelligent design is the act of putting in motion essence towards its intended being. Emergence is only meaningful when it moves towards its intended being.

So if only one part of the church is in entropy, that part that has hitched itself to modernity, what part is showing the signs of complexity, or balance? The return to orthodoxy, to a catholic expression of the faith, to signs, symbols, ritual and icons, evidence the aspects that were missing from modernism. The new direction then is not an emergence to something totally new, but from something deficient to a system that is more robust and complex. There are elements of the praxis and belief of the church that have never succumbed to modernism and perhaps it is toward these that the post-modern church must organize. Whenever the church loses the dynamic tension found in complexity it behaves like a weakened system and runs itself out. The challenge that faces us today is not the discovery of a new shape of the church but of a complex shape of the church that embraces the whole human person within the order of "that which has been believed always, everywhere, and by all". The challenge is not the discovery of yet another shallow structure, but of a complex structure that derives its

order and shape from the explicate order of the Kingdom of God.

The mystery is this: God's intention to bring everything in heaven and earth together under one head, Christ. Daniel gives us a vision of a mountain that fills the whole earth. It is like a program running to its intended end. It is the organization of the universe around a strange attractor until this present order yields its shape to the Kingdom of God – its ultimate end. It is Christ who leavens the whole loaf until the knowledge of the Lord fills the earth like the waters cover the sea. This order is not merely moral, it is not simply emotive, it is not simplistic and it is not complicated. This order is being worked out in complexity over time. It has never stopped working itself out, and it will reach its end in the City of God, the New Jerusalem that comes down from God out of Heaven.

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