2012-08-21

The Missing Face of Ecology in Pauline Theology: Conservation of Mass-Energy in Reconfiguring Immortality as Everlastingness

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3941
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The Missing Face of Ecology in Pauline Theology:
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Immortality as Everlastingness

Nicole Roskos

The early Judaic affirmation of generation(s) and earthly incorporation, a value of ecological potential, is undermined by the resurrection theology of Paul. The author argues that, when the first law of thermodynamics is taken into consideration, a reconstruction of a more ecologically responsible conception of immortality emerges.

His disciples said to him, “When will the kingdom come?” [Jesus said] “It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying ‘here it is’ or ‘there it is.’ Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.”

—The Gospel of Thomas 138

His disciples said to him, “When will the repose of the dead come about, and when will the new world come?” He said to them, “What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.”

—The Gospel of Thomas 51

On Earth, death is essential to the regeneration of life. Decaying matter is composed of nutrients “regenerated into forms that can be reused by plants, by the activities of the countless worms, snails, insects, mites, bacteria, and fungi that consume detritus (dead material)...as food.” While the notion of reincorporation into the earth is identifiable in the early Judaic tradition of “dust to dust.” Pauline theology tells a different story:

What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable....For the perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality....Death will be swallowed up in victory.

This essay will explore these opposing views of death and the renewal of life in early Judaic thought. Pauline theology, and their respective ecological and cosmological implications. The objective is twofold: 1) to describe the early Judaic blessing of earthly generation(s) and its struggle in the first century C.E. with an ecologically resistant, Pauline ideal of immortality; and, 2) in affirmation of ecological generation(s), to use the law of conservation of mass-energy as a tool for reconsidering the Pauline Spirit in an everlasting universe.

Genesis

To understand how death is constructed in early Judaic cosmology, the descriptions of creation in the book of Genesis are important.

Birth from the earth:

“Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it” (1:11).

Birth from its waters:

“Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky....God blessed them saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and...
fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth” (1:20, 22). Human-kind too are encouraged to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28). And all of “[t]hese are the generations of the heavens and the earth...” (2:4).

In considering generation(s) as a predominant theme of Genesis there is an initial implication of sustenance: “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of the earth” (1:29). Not just to humankind, but “to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air...everything that has the breath of life. I have given every green plant for food” (1:30). Earthly sustenance has death built into its logic; essentially, these plants die when consumed. But in sustaining new life, could plant death simply imply a transformation of energy? A dying plant ultimately relinquishes its identity as a plant, whereas the elements of its body live on and are transformed through the food chain.

However death is defined, then, either as the loss of an individual life or as incorporation into new life, the book of Genesis affirms a fundamental tenet of contemporary ecology—the food web. Producers such as plants transform sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide into glucose and oxygen. Consumers ingest these plants or other consumers, while decomposers (bacteria and fungi) feed off of all dead matter, breaking it down into those nutrients essential to a plant’s survival.6

“Plants yielding seed of every kind” (1:12) initially has the message of generation(s) woven into it. The seeds signify death when they signify life. “It is the power of fertility that makes the continuance of the species possible,”7 the continuance of all species. Genesis 1:11 repeatedly emphasizes the generational capacity of birth: “Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind that bear fruit with the seed in it.” Death is encoded in the generation of both plant and animal bodies. Thus, the theme of generation(s) in Genesis affirms the life-death cycle, making this text a powerful source of ecological wisdom. In Earth’s ecosystems, generation marks both the flow of energy from producers through decomposers and the flow of energy through reproduction from one generation to the next.8

Death is forever inscribed in the story of Genesis when the generations are said to return to the earth from which they emerge (3:19). Earth is the root of generation and the body of incorporation. All life is born of earth, consumes or is consumed, and returns to the earth in death. This connection to the earth is an essential component of the generational theme. For humanity, earthly contiguity is emphasized in the ha-adama/ha-adam (earth/earthling) wordplay:

[T]hen Yahweh God formed the earth creature [ha-adam] of dust from the earth [ha-adamar] (2:7).9

Lyn Bechtel calls the relationship in Genesis between earth and earthling a “differentiated unity”:

The human’s original unity with the ground establishes an intimate relatedness that is always retained (as an adult, the human’s primary role will be to cultivate the ground to produce food, 2:5; 3:23).... Unity and separation are an essential dynamic that continues throughout life, beginning in the separation of life (birth) and ending in the return to unity with the ground in death (3:19).10

“Dust to dust” reunion with earth is indirectly emphasized in Genesis when any attempt to live forever is banned in the forbidden tree of life (3:22).

The sin/fall interpretation

To this point, this discussion of Genesis has purposefully ignored the sin/fall interpretation. The reading of the story of Eden as “the Fall” seems to have been constructed through a Hellenistic lens that favored immortality. The concept of resurrection, stemming from Zoroastrian religion, emerged in Jewish apocalypticism, which in turn was influenced by “the Hellenistic milieu” of life-
after-death traditions.\textsuperscript{11} Emphasis on heaven as the site of immortality, or “astral immortality,”\textsuperscript{12} established an apparent dualism that favored an immortal heaven over a mortal earth.

The sin/fall interpretation stands in contrast to the early Judaic view of death as integral to life, of earth as the source and destination of bodies. Its ideals of immortality render death a punishment, ultimately negating the very meaning, in Genesis, of generational earth. The sin/fall interpretation demonstrates little if any viability in the text of Genesis and subsequent Judaic scripture. Scholars have questioned the stark absence of any ‘sin,’ ‘Fall,’ or ‘punishment’ references to the Eden story throughout the whole of the Hebrew Bible, “despite the plentiful opportunities—particularly in the prophets.”\textsuperscript{13} Some hints of the beginnings of a sin/fall type of interpretation emerge much later, from the third century B.C.E., in Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Ben Sira.\textsuperscript{14} The “ideas of a ‘Fall’ came into the Christian world through Orphic thought…found in the Phaedrus, where Plato describes heavy...

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only perfections shedding their wings and falling to the earth to be implanted and born as humans.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, Carol Meyers concludes that “it is more appropriate to drop the term ‘Fall’ from any reference to the story in its Hebraic context.”\textsuperscript{16} Immortality: Christian theology eats of the tree of life

The story of Eden assumes a radically different form in early Christianity. The works attributed to Paul clearly and firmly establish a system of death versus immortality in his interpretation of Adam. Paul constructs a “divided self”\textsuperscript{17} along the lines of a Christ/Adam dualism, analogous to life/death.

For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ….The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

(1 Cor 15:22-26)

According to Paul, the transgression of Adam causes death. In turn, Christ’s death and resurrection essentially breaks the ha-adam/ha-adama continuum. Paul’s Christ frames the familiar conception that humans may be liberated from “bondage to decay” (Rom 8:19-23) into a heavenly eternal life. But Paul tells us:

[I]t is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual.
The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.

(1 Cor 15:46-47, emphasis added)

And so it is with the resurrection of the dead that the ecologically impossible happens: the immortalization of bodies. “The dead will be raised imperishable” until “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:50-54). Having reinterpreted Genesis, Paul effectively “eats” of the Tree of Life.

Why was immortality so important to Paul? Why this urgency to be freed from the “bondage to decay?” Paul reads Adam’s sin as an initiation of death; the fleshly side of the self harbored a state of both sin and mortality. In contrast, Christ symbolizes the aspect of the self that participates in the spiritual life with an ability to do good, to the point of being liberated from sin and death. By equating sin with death, Paul finds the goodness of Christ, not simply in living the virtuous life, but also in the belief that he was
resurrected after his death. Thus, salvation has come to mean goodness in this world, and goodness has come to mean immortal life.19

Does Paul not encourage a generational message in the recycling of physical bodies through the resurrection? In reference to 1 Cor 15:38-58, Joel Green is one of many scholars who have noticed in Pauline theology a "profound continuity between present life in this world and life everlasting with God." 19 For instance, Paul symbolizes the logic of resurrection through a simple observation of nature: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies" (vs 36). Paul’s message takes a turn against nature, however, upon the introduction of his preference of the spiritual body of heaven over and against the physical body of earth. His discrimination against the earthly or physical becomes clear as he declares that "what is sown is perishable" (vs 42) and in a state of "dishonor" and "weakness" (vs 43); these "sown" aspects are to be ultimately escaped in the resurrection. Eventually, this spiritual or heavenly body will be victorious, as "the dead will be raised imperishable" (vs 52).

Distinct from the preresurrected, the resurrected body is again described by Paul, ironically using nature as an analogy: "like a flower compared to its seed" (1 Cor 15:36-38). An attempt to comprehend the kind of body resurrected was obviously important in Paul’s context. In his book The Corinthian Body, Dale Martin speculates that, despite evidence that many Jews and Christians at the time equated resurrection of the body with resurrection of the corpse, Paul rejected the resurrection of flesh and blood.

What kind of body is to be resurrected for Paul? His response to this question evokes a hierarchical view of Creation. Those of the flesh (sarx), i.e., humans, beasts, birds, and fish—terrestrial bodies—are posited as being lesser than the celestial bodies (soma) (1 Cor 15:39-40). Martin claims that Paul’s designation of terrestrial bodies as initially sarx and the celestial as soma caters to a physiological hierarchy, favoring the celestial over the terrestrial. "The switch in terminology is the first clue as to how important a physiological hierarchy is for Paul’s own conception of the resurrected body." The resurrection "will partake of a nature similar to that of heavenly bodies and will be as much higher than the current earthly body in the physiological hierarchy as the heavenly bodies are in comparison to earthly bodies."20

Martin emphasizes that those translations which posit a "physical body" against a "spiritual body" are faulty, because audiences are blinded by a Cartesian material/immaterial dualism. Quite contrary to Paul’s intentions. Martin suggests the two bodies would be better translated as pneumatic body/psychic body (soma pneumatikon/ soma psychikon). He argues that to be true to the context both kinds of bodies must be considered to be material, composed of different substances. The resurrected, "pneumatic," body was believed to have a higher nature, since pneuma was airy and illuminous and therefore finer in substance than the denser, decay-prone psychic body.21 Martin explains:

Paul’s message takes a turn against nature, however, upon the introduction of his preference of the spiritual body of heaven over and against the physical body of earth.
According to Paul, the resurrected body is stripped of flesh, blood, and soul (psyche); it has nothing of the earth in it at all, being composed entirely of the celestial substance of pneuma...and hence the possibility for immortality.22

Conserving generation(s) and the conservation of mass-energy

As previously argued, the book of Genesis harbors an ecological message of generation: organic creation, reproduction, and reincorporation into earth through death. John Cobb explained the contemporary problem of human generation(s) by claiming simply that humans have already fulfilled the commandment to be fruitful and multiply.23 Human overpopulation threatens all generations of life. It is also “consuming resources faster than new resources are being regenerated by the biosphere, all the while pouring forth so much waste that the quality of the environment in most regions of the earth is deteriorating at an alarming rate.” 24 In this sense, extinctions born of human over-exploitation blaspheme the name of Genesis, ending generation(s).

As examined above, Pauline understanding of the resurrection appears to obscure the early Judaic message proclaiming “dust to dust.” Immortality, for Paul, prescribes salvation from and not for earthly generation(s), thereby breaking the connection between earth and earthling. Moreover, through later Christian acceptance and appropriation of Pauline theology, this model of immortality has produced practices that abandon the stewardship of the generation(s) of earth, in favor of a stewardship of souls.

How might one conceive of life after death without ending ecological generation(s)? The following reconstructive exercise attempts to answer this question through an exploration of a “spiritual materialism,” one that values heaven-earth, life-death, and earth-earthling connections of Genesis as “differentiated unities.” 25 over such Pauline dualist hierarchies as heaven/earth, spiritual/physical, and life/death. This reconceptualization of cosmology will not simply dismiss Pauline heritage. In fact, it finds great inspiration and momentum through Paul’s own vision of cosmic reconciliation, while simultaneously criticizing the Pauline hierarchical valuation of immortal heaven over mortal earth.

First, an abbreviated look at physics will establish the ground for this conception of the universe. The law of conservation of mass-energy postulates that mass equals energy; that this mass-energy can neither be created nor destroyed but simply transformed from one entity into another.26 For instance, ecology examines how “the cycling of elements has assumed equal standing with the flow of energy.” 27

The law of conservation of mass-energy provides the basis for reconstructing immortality as the everlastingness of the universe. The persistent quantity of matter-energy not

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only inspires a particular ecological and cosmological awareness of our manipulation of matter (e.g., the burden of landfills and radioactive dumps upon future generations), but it also provides fuel for understanding death. In light of how both ecology and Genesis appear to affirm reincorporation of the body through death, notions of

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generation(s) may truly be relevant to Christian interpretations of immortality.

Perhaps the desire for life after death stems from a human need to seek a meaningful existence beyond death. As the body decomposes, a familiar question arises: what happens to the “soul”? Studies in neuroscience and genetics have confirmed the physiological sources of human behavior; as a matter of reaction, there has been a movement to propose a conception of the soul according to a non-reductive physicalist position. In *Whatever Happened to the Soul: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, the soul is defined in various ways, from the individual perspective in relationship and the conscious mind to the emotional, psychological, and/or rational aspects of a person that facilitate experiences of love, transcendence, and morality. While the non-reductive physicalist position roots these aspects in physiological processes, they must not be merely reduced to scientific explanation.

In accordance with the non-reductive physicalist definitions of soul, the original question now may be reconsidered: what happens to the soul after death? If the soul/self is simply reabsorbed into the ecosystem, would popular culture not consider this a great loss? The law of conservation of mass-energy declares the soul/self not destroyed but converted into another form of energy. Accordingly, an organism’s lifetime depth of knowledge and/or experience is lost, then, to what physicists call a “heat death.” What moral inspiration can be derived from such a death? Is there any hope in the meaningfulness of life without an individual resurrection?

**Cosmic Christ**

For Paul, the resurrection of the body is not one of individual human resurrection. Martin claims that in Paul’s view, every Christian body consists of two natures: the Adamic body (earthly psychic body of flesh and blood) and the body of Christ (pneumatic body from heaven). During earthly life humans share bodily continuity with both natures—sark and pneuma. As sark can pollute the pneumatic body, the pneuma cleanses the body of death and/or sin. In its context, Martin suggests that the “salvation of the spirit” might be otherwise conceived as the “health of the pneuma.” Paul’s pneumatic resurrection body is a light, airy, luminous substance that can exist in earthly bodies, though its destination and source is heaven. This bodily continuity that humans share with the cosmos in Pauline physiology enables further speculation on the significance of bodily resurrection, not as individual, but as cosmic redemption.

Pauline resurrection theology calls for a cosmic redemption based upon the unity of all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:10), where God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:28). Through Christ all things were created, and in Christ all things hold together and are ultimately reconciled “whether on earth or in heaven” (Colossians 1:14-20). Although this vision does justice to the contemporary ecological and cosmological view of a unified universe that is deeply interconnected, Paul’s cosmic redemption clearly strays from this ecological course in the hope for a deathless creation:

> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God: for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God—the redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:19-22)

What does this redemption mean in light of Martin’s argument about the pneumatic body? If Paul’s resurrected body was indeed meant to be a pneumatic body, then his view of incorruptibility and the reconciliation of creation must be understood as being based upon an idea of celestial materiality. In other words, his interpretation of the resurrection will not involve life as we know it on earth: no crawling, walking, or slithering bodies.
no waterfalls, trees, mud, or birds. To the contrary, is his vision not that cosmic reconciliation will transform us all into stars?

Consider the possibility that the pneumatic nature of the resurrection is not of individuals such as ourselves, but rather a reincorporation into the pneumatic body of the celestial. Pneuma, for the Greeks, might signify breath or air, as well as the illumination of the stars. From contemporary cosmology, we know ourselves and the earth to be made of star dust destined for a celestial reunion. In light of Dale Martin's argument that the Pauline resurrection involves a celestial body, Paul's view can be seen as not so removed from some general assumptions of today's cosmology.

Recall the big bang theory of an increasingly expanding and cooling universe: generations of proto-galaxies emerged from the hydrogen and helium gas under the collapsing pull of gravity. The matter of the galaxies collapsed into stars, some of which exploded as supernovas, turning into black holes or dense neutron stars. These explosions flung out heavier elements, which became part of the material for the next generation of stars. Our sun, a second- or third-generation star, was formed from a cloud of rotating gas debris of earlier supernovas. Cosmologist Stephen Hawking explains how the universe came into being:

Most of the gas in that cloud went to form the sun or got blown away, but a small amount of the heavier elements collected together to form the bodies that now orbit the sun as planets like the earth.33

Earth is also destined for the stars. It may be reincorporated into the celestial either by the explosion of a nearby star or by the eventual swelling of our own star, the sun.34

Might Paul's pneumatic body be likened to the star energy that gave birth to Earth and to which Earth is destined? Undoubtedly, Paul's conception of the cosmos was radically different from today's cosmology. His devaluation of the mortal life of terrestrial bodies contrasts with our understanding of the precious conditions under which biological life can develop. If indeed Martin is correct in suggesting that Paul considered immortal life of the pneuma as also entailing rational, cognitive, or perceptive aspects of life, then Pauline ascription of immortality to celestial bodies is scientifically implausible.35

Paul's breathing light of pneuma, if likened to the star matter composing Earth, can indeed evolve into and exist within life systems. However, nothing approaching human life could survive under the extreme conditions of stars. Additionally, stars themselves are not immortal but follow the generational pattern of creation. Individual death is not excluded even from the heavens. Once born, all stars will eventually die.

What if the pneumatic body was likened to the clouds of dust and particles moving in and out of stars and galaxies? Might, then, this everlasting matter-energy in the universe be of an immortal and incorruptible nature, in the sense that it can never be lost or destroyed, only transformed? The notion of an eternal universe has been appealing to scientists and theologians alike, but the possibility has been put on the back burner by most scientists, due to the entropic principles of the second law of thermodynamics. Paul Davies describes its effects on the cosmos:

Everywhere we look, in every corner of the cosmos, entropy is rising irreversibly... The universe seems destined to continue crumbling, running down towards a state of thermodynamic equilibrium and maximum disorder, after which nothing further of interest will happen. Physicists call this depressing prospect 'the heat death.'36

Although matter-energy in an expanding universe is never lost, it is unforeseeable that the formation of new stars or galaxies, not to mention life, could occur under such extreme conditions. As the universe itself experienced a birth, like the human it will also experience death.37 While the energy of the universe will never disappear (in this sense truly everlasting), eventually it will no longer be capable of beaming with life, galaxies, and stars, as it does now.
While this view of a dying universe is bleak, the current limitations of knowledge must be considered. Although the understanding of entropy creates this depressing apocalyptic view of the cosmic future, this same rise of entropy has given birth to the complex universe we know today. Ilya Prigogine describes the entropic creation of the cosmos:

The universe starts with a burst of entropy (chaos) which leaves matter in an organized state. And, after this, the matter is slowly dissipating and creating in this dissipation, as a by-product, cosmological structures, life, and finally, ourselves. You see, there is so much entropy dissipated that you can use it to build something.” 38

That the same principle responsible for the organization of the universe is responsible for its demise suggests that despair is perhaps not warranted. And so, as life is dependent upon the cosmic and earthly generational processes, indebted to them for existence, should not trust be placed in the spirit of this cosmic miracle by resigning to it at death, and understanding that this dissolution is part of the “bottomless mystery that can never be reducible to current scientific hypotheses?” 39 Human construction and perception indeed has its limits. Even as the understanding of the meaning and workings of creation deepens, no one can boast of certitude about the meaning, source, and destination of all that exists.

Many find hope in scientific speculation about the possibilities for the cosmos. The notion of the everlastingness of generation(s) may be hopeful in light of the “many-universes” theories arising from quantum cosmology. For instance, theories of mother and child universes allow for an infinite number of generations of universes. These provide hope for the continued self-organization of life despite an eventual heat death of our universe. These theories are based on “random fluctuations” of quantum physics where on “an ultramicroscopic scale, ...all manner of bumps, wormholes, and bridges should be forming and collapsing throughout space-time.” In this view, our universe began as “an outgrowth of some larger system, which then detached itself to become an independent entity.” 40 Davies continues:

The “mother” universe which spawned ours is also continuously inflating at a fantastic rate and spewing out baby universes for all its worth. If this state of affairs is correct, it implies that “our” universe is only part of an infinite assemblage of universes, although it is self-contained now.... An interesting question is whether our universe is also capable of being mother, and producing child universes,... 41

A many-universes theory proposed by Lee Smolin describes the existence of stars as “an essential prerequisite for the formation of life,” and says that “the same conditions that encourage life also encourage the birth of other life-giving universes.” 42

As examined above, Paul’s celestial resurrection parallels contemporary cosmology. As stars facilitate conditions for life, “the pneumatic body” is also responsible for life. Might the pneuma be somehow immortalized through its perpetual existence in our universe, or in its transformation from one universe to another? However, Paul’s belief that immortality necessarily excludes death still remains untenable for this theory. Even with the prospect of many universes, as far as can be told, each universe would still operate with entropy and death as integral to the renewal of life.

**Cosmic Christ and ecological ethics**

Might Paul’s “cosmic Christ” be transformable into an advocate for an environmental ethic? James Nash, in his book, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility,* writes that Christian belief in cosmic reconciliation proves that the Creator values the whole of nature, and thus that Christians must imitate a God who cares for and has mercy on all creatures. 44 Nash believes the Spirit is leading us to manifest the New Creation. Thus, God’s objective becomes our responsibility. We must pre-
pare for God’s final re-creation by participat-
ing in it, by caring for and loving nature. In contrast to this love for nature, Nash echoes Paul’s reduction of death to evil. He explains:

"Mortality is the ultimate problem of morality when God is perceived as beneficent, and death is interpreted as conclusive....[A]rguments from biological necessity—death as a function of the limitation of resources and the condition of new life—do not resolve the problem. They fail to do justice to a fundamental query: Why did a good God create a biosphere in which the evil of death is necessary to avoid a greater evil of biological unsustainability?"

Nash’s belief that death is evil seems to be in reaction to death as “conclusive.” He claims that a “good” God of love, justice, and reconciliation would not “finally break all relationships.” It would be ironic, he says, to be told to love one another by a God that would “snap forever all ties.”

The book of Genesis best demonstrates the covenant of generation(s) as a link between birth and death through ‘earth’ in the ha-adam/ha-adama wordplay. If this generational covenant is considered alongside the law of conservation of mass-energy, then might the everlastingness of the universe provide a meaning for death? We inherit this earth through countless hands, paws, and roots. The land is ancestry, composed of the generations of life.

In this view, humanity is not responsible for biological mortality. We are, however, responsible for morality, the choice of good or evil, well-being or exploitation. We have not only been blessed with the wisdom and bodies of our ancestors, but Paul’s notion of inherited sin is indeed a way of reckoning and transforming our “heritage of injustice.” Paul’s conception of inherited sin is valuable in this way. It also allows us to question the eco-injustice of his celestial immortality ideal that depreciates terrestrial nature. After the recognition of redeemable conceptions passed down from Paul (cosmic reconciliation, inherited sin), the “quasi-Gnostic cosmology” of Pauline resurrection theology needs to be reconsidered. Rosemary Radford Ruether does not reserve judgment on this point. She states:

The reconstruction of the ethical tradition must begin by a clear separation of the questions of finitude from those of sin. Finitude is not our fault; nor is escape from it within our capacities. Mature spirituality frees up from ego clinging for acceptance of the life processes of which we are inescapably a part.

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Although death involves the end of our more individualized soul-selves, it simultaneously affirms the physical unity of a cosmos that transforms its body/bodies over time.

If this participation in cosmic reconciliation involves eradicating death in nature, as Nash’s proposal implies, then this type of stewardship is not ecologically viable. Not only is deathless life unsustainable, for we would have to stop eating, but our own cellular reproduction relies on constant renewal, involving the replacement of dead cells with new ones. It must be emphasized that many environmental problems stem from our resistance to death, including our refusal to use biodegradable materials, to allow dead trees and leaves to replenish the soil, or even to allow our own bodies to decay without toxically embalming them and burying them in sealed coffins.

Nash rightfully finds hope for the earth in cosmic reconciliation. Paul’s vision of the cosmic Christ affirms a divine body unifying the cosmos in creation and re-creation. However, in support of Earth and thereby in contrast to Paul, I believe cosmic reconciliation must extend beyond Greco-Roman ideals of astral immortality that discriminate against the terrestrial, to a cosmic salvation that encourages a diverse magnitude of terrestrial life. The resurrection Spirit must not be reduced to the celestial: pneumatic breath and light must renew earthly life as well.

As mentioned earlier, death points to the importance of the present, to the significance of moral action physically extending indefinitely. Through the law of conservation of mass-energy, everything we do to affect or change the world stands to participate in future generation(s). Moral responsibility is not about individual immortality and reserving a seat in heaven; it is about caring for and loving the born and unborn generations, about “the health of the pneuma” that will be passed on to them. The everlasting universe, embodied with past generations, is the ground of the present. Simultaneously, our lives, actions, and bodily inscriptions construct and become a part of the bodies of future generation(s).

Conclusion

Ecology teaches us that death is essential to the generation(s) of life. In contrast, Pauline theology echoes a definitive perception that “[d]eath will be swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:42-54). Paul’s ecology may yet prove viable, though not without challenging his foundational beliefs. Dead bodies are in fact “swallowed up” in “the victory” of worms, bacteria, fungi, and the earth. Pauline theology may escape a dismissal of generation(s) if the body that attains imperishability is understood to be that which is resurrected in the lives of its consumers, or as the body of energy in an everlasting universe. In this sense, the matter of generation(s) remains part of an everlasting process, an exchange of energy in an open portal of movement between all bodies of heaven, earth, and universes.

Perhaps the restricted tree of life in Genesis justly warns against a human desire to cling to an everlasting self. Notions of an individualized immortality dangerously exclude generation(s), whether through technologies that resist decomposition, beliefs that reject Earth in favor of heaven, or anthropocentrism that exalts industrial endeavors at the expense of natural ecosystems. Protecting both the tree of life and Earth from human attempts at immortality ultimately blesses all generation(s) of heaven and earth. It celebrates an everlasting universe.

Paul lends us a meaningful vision: “God was pleased to reconcile all things to the divine self, whether on earth or in heaven...” (Col 1:20). The resurrection is not about the individual, but about the whole. As the Gospel of Thomas proclaims:

Jesus said, “It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.” (77) 50
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5. 1 Corinthians 15:42-54.
6. Miller, p. 29.
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This essay was awarded a Second Prize.