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The Philosophers' Paul for Earthlings: Stanislas Breton and the Ecological Significance of the Way of the Cross.

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ECOTHEO REVIEW

Fall 2017

Cover image: Ivan David Ng, *When Self-Knowledge Goes Over the Waterfall*, site-specific ephemeral sculpture in Yosemite, documented and existing as an archival digital print, 76cm x 50cm, 2015

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Jason Myers

In the ignominious and dispiriting year of American public life that was 2016, which culminated in the election of a president so egregiously unqualified for the office in both temperament and experience, a man whose only appreciation for art appears to be large portraits of himself, whose only sense of faith rests in a cynical appeal to white evangelicals, whose only regard for nature is that his golf courses go there, two events highlighted our collective relationship with land. One was the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, and the other was the sustained nonviolent resistance of the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota - which you can read more about in this issue's From the Fold, a riveting firsthand account of Emilie Bouvier's time at the Oceti Sakowin camp at Standing Rock.

These events provide us with two distinct ways of imagining and interpreting common life, that is, life shared with others on the basis of geographic proximity, national identity, and other binding qualities. The Malheur side might be distilled to the message: you get yours, I'll get mine. Many believe such an attitude rhymes with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The toxic irony of the violent seizure, led by Ammon Bundy, of government lands, cloaked in the logic that they were restoring ownership of said lands 'to the people,' is that federally protected and administered lands, by their very nature, belong to every American citizen, in a shared trust. The Standing Rock side, meanwhile, revealed a communitarian spirit, which holds that what is good for another is good for all, and conversely what is harmful to another is harmful to all. Spoiled ecosystems and endangered species are not local problems, but concerns that deserve general attention and general support.

Poetry, along with the other arts, has the ability and responsibility to bring our attention to images, moments, and movements that remind us of our creatureliness. However creative the poet, she is part of something more vast and more mysterious than her best poem. The poems in this issue stand, I think, on the side of Standing Rock. They recognize that the individual voice of the poet is powerful precisely because it belongs not merely to the poet, but to Poetry. And poetry belongs to the people, of whom Shao Wei sings 'A million residents needed to be relocated' in her poem "Songs of Displacement." Courtney Cook charts a different kind of displacement in her poems which ask us to look at lynchings that took place in the Jim Crow south. The more recent lynchings of Philando Castile and Eric Garner, to name just two of too many, lend her poems an unfortunate timeliness. By inhabiting the points of view of children witnessing these horrific acts she compels us to wonder what today's children make of systemic injustice for women, people of color, and Mother Earth. 'When you break the world,' Richard Jackson laments in his poem "Micah's Prophecy," 'it doesn't just get fixed.' This may come as particularly difficult news for Trump supporters who believe prayer can stand in for disastrous policy.

Adrienne Rich once refused a National Medal of the Arts from President Bill Clinton, stating "Art means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of the power which holds it hostage." If she thought that president's politics were cynical and degrading, it is difficult to imagine what words she might have for the current administration. In times of confusion and despair, literature and art can be both solace and spur. I recently finished reading Helen Macdonald's H is for Hawk, a brilliant and poignant elegy for our current ecological and human disarray. She writes, "People do not live very long or look very hard; we are very bad at scale. The things that live in the soil are too small to care about, climate change too large to imagine. We are bad at time, too. We cannot remember what lived here before we did, we cannot love what is not. Nor can we imagine what will be different when we are dead. We live out our threescore and ten and tie our knots in lines only to ourselves. We take solace in pictures, and we wipe the hills of history. History, and life, too." I take Macdonald's point, and I also hope that what you'll find in this issue of The EcoTheo Review is more than illusory solace. Our souls need the replenishing beauty of images, whether that beauty is stark and disquieting such as Giada Crispiel portrays in "Back Into Nature, 'Hurricane Sandy,'" or whimsical, magnificent, as in Ivan Ng's digital prints. Our minds long for words to quicken and astonish us, as Gail Tyson's do in her evocative meditation, "Like Water Lapping Shore" and Christopher Rutenber's do in his lyrical dystopian story, "The Replicas." May the following pages lead you to a deeper relationship with your community, your place, and your Creator.

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THE PHILOSOPHERS' PAUL FOR EARTHLINGS: STANISLAS BRETON AND THE ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Justin Klassen

Christian eco-theology, a maturing subfield in the area of religion and ecology,[1] was born as a response to the historian Lynn White, Jr.'s suggestion that "we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."[2] Whether this claim is in fact axiomatic for Christianity is certainly debatable; nonetheless, many eco-theologians today agree that White was onto something. "For the past five hundred years," Elizabeth Johnson writes, "the religious value of the earth has not been a subject of theology, preaching, or religious education."[3] For Johnson as for others, this is due in part to modern Christianity's emphasis on individual salvation. In the wake of the Reformation's solas, she explains, "individual human consciousness… becomes the place of encounter with God,"[4] while the religious significance of God's presence in creation diminishes.[5] Thomas Berry suggests that this separation in the modern Christian imagination between God's action as redeemer and God's action as creator has made Christians "hesitant to enter profoundly into the inner reality of the created world in terms of affective intimacy."[6] From Berry's perspective, the problem is that Christians have lost any sense of connection between their salvation story and the story of created nature. He suggests that for most Christians today, "the universe itself has no story except that of its original formation. Afterwards it is a fixed stage upon which the human-divine drama is enacted."[7] Rosemary Radford Ruether assesses the separation of the human story from that of the rest of creation as a kind of "false escapism,"[8] whereby God's promise of life beyond the grave ceases to be a healing balm for our fear of death, and becomes instead a means of evading our kinship with other creatures.

In order to address the alienating features of modern Christian faith, eco-theologians mine the tradition and the scriptures for integrating emphases. Berry indicates that the writings of Paul may offer a corrective to the modern tendency to separate redemption from creation.[9] Yet modern theological appeals to the Pauline corpus have tended to highlight the paradoxical character of gospel truth, even its constitutive separateness from the world as we experience it with our senses. Karl Barth's The Epistle to the Romans, for example, stresses the "interruptive" character of the Pauline message. In the Christ of Romans, Barth argues, "two worlds meet and go apart."[10] For Barth's Paul, then, divine truth may be apprehended only in "the affirmation of the divine 'No' in Christ, of the shattering halt in the presence of God."[11] Such a description of gospel truth, as fundamentally alien to ordinary experience, seems to invalidate quotidian perceptions of God as the breath of life in creation.

It might seem promising, therefore, that the Pauline legacy has been appropriated in new ways of late, in particular by philosophers and political theorists who have little interest in Paul's theism, and thus no investment in Barth's account of "two worlds."[12] Alain Badiou, whose Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism has become a landmark work in this area, claims that he cares "nothing for the Good News [Paul] declares, or the cult dedicated to him,"[13] even as he reads Paul with obvious sympathy. One might expect that Badiou's unabashedly atheistic use of Paul would offer a corrective to modern Christian readings that tend toward the dualistic escapist route, or toward "the denial of one's own finitude,"[14] as Ruether puts it. Thus far, however, such expectations have been disappointed. Philosophical uses of Paul like Badiou's may indeed avoid any sort of theological dualism, but they tend to replace it with a dualism of the human subject and the physical world, not least because

1 See Willis Jenkins, "Religion and Ecology: A Review Essay on the Field," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77:1 (2009): 187 – 197.
2 Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155:3767 (1967): 1207.
3 Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 4.
4 Ibid., 9. Sallie McFague makes a similar claim in *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 68.
5 This shift is by no means a necessary feature of Protestant theology. As Johnson notes elsewhere, Martin Luther was compellingly enthralled by God's abiding presence to the creature. See Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 122.
6 Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 38.
7 Ibid., 85. Willis Jenkins, in his recent book, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), argues that eco-theology's emphasis on worldviews or stories overestimates their practical influence on human behavior. Nonetheless, story talk remains central in contemporary eco-theology.
8 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel & Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 106.
9 Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, 39.
10 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 29.
11 Ibid., 39.
12 See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
13 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 1.
14 Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology," 105.

of their dismissal of the normativity of the cross.

In what remains of this essay I will investigate this tension between eco-theology and the philosophers' Paul, and propose a way of integrating their disparate concerns. I will begin by exploring theological diagnoses of modern Christianity's alienation from nonhuman nature, paying particular attention to the ecological destructiveness of death denial. I will then elaborate on the incongruence between the philosophers' Paul and the eco-theological project, especially with respect to the residual "escapism" in materialist readings of Paul. Finally, I will offer another angle on the relationship between Pauline subjectivity and material creation, with assistance from Stanislas Breton.[15] Breton, the late French Catholic philosopher, is cited by Badiou as an important influence on his own interpretation of Paul.[16] But as I will demonstrate, Breton's philosophical reading of Paul is more amenable to the goals of eco-theology, because Breton makes the cross central to his account of subjective authenticity in Paul. Specifically, Breton suggests that Pauline subjectivity requires us to transcend our habitual hostility to our earthliness, by embracing the way of the cross and of all flesh. In this respect, Breton offers a corrective to philosophical interpretations of Paul that, despite their espoused materialism, still dream of escaping from the weightiness of the physical world. In so doing, Breton brings the philosophers' Paul into conversation with a thriving new area of theological investigation.

ECO-THEOLOGY AND THE FEAR OF DEATH

One day in 1958, the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton had an epiphany while he walked the busy streets of downtown Louisville. Merton suddenly realized that he loved everyone around him, despite not knowing them and despite the diversity of their worldly vocations. He saw Christ shining through each person, and knew this to be their deepest truth. "It was like waking from a dream of separateness," he would later write, "of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness."[17] Eco-theologians highlight something similar taking place in our day: a collective awakening from the human "dream of separateness" from other creatures. Thomas Berry says young people are becoming aware of the "soul hunger"[18] brought on by human selfishness, while Elizabeth Johnson notes a range of specific human projects that reveal an emerging realization of the intrinsic value of other-than-human creatures.[19] Part of eco-theology's task is to make this collective awakening to kinship explicit and articulable.

To acknowledge kinship with beings from whom we have habitually separated ourselves presents a significant hurdle, since a key trait we share with our fellow creatures is our mortality. Christians should find this hurdle familiar, of course; resisting the fear of death has always been a central Christian imperative. Jesus commands his followers not to worry about tomorrow (Matt. 6:34), insists that all human endeavors fall under the shadow of death (Luke 12:20), and offers peace precisely in the midst of facing his own mortality (John 14:27). And yet, because the church also proclaims Jesus' resurrection, Christians have often been tempted to think that the "peace" of Christ allows them to bypass any real reckoning with mortality or limits. Thus Kierkegaard, following Luther, felt compelled to remind his readers again and again that true proximity to the Word of God in Christ is proximity to Christ in his abasement.[20] Here Kierkegaard intimates Paul's suggestion that the promise of everlasting life leads through a requisite identification with Jesus in his mortality (1 Cor. 2:2). Eco-theology offers a similar reminder, in that it reads human destructiveness toward the rest of creation as an expression of our unresolved fear of mortality, which can persist even in confident appeals to the resurrection.

Ecofeminist theologians are particularly incisive on this point. Ruether, for example, highlights the connection between the soul-body dualism present in some Christian accounts of salvation and the patriarchal agenda of imposing the rule of disembodied reason over nature and women. Both ideologies reflect a desire "to conquer and flee from one's own denied finitude,"[21] a desire justified by the fantasy that human beings' distinctness from other creatures constitutes a "separable ontological substance."[22] Jesus teaches Christians to embrace their embodiment and the kinship with nonhuman creatures that it manifests. But patriarchal, anti-nature theology continually misses this point. Ecofeminist theologians therefore propose a somewhat startling shift in the mainstream Christian view of brokenness and redemptive healing, which aims to disrupt the "dream of separateness" underlying escapist visions of salvation. In harmony with other ecofeminist voices,[23] Ruether suggests that sin does not lie in the fall into mortality; instead, as she puts it, the primal sin "lies in the effort to escape from mortality, finitude, and vulnerability."[24] If at first this seems to contradict biblical descriptions of the wages of

15 Stanislas Breton, *A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul*, trans. Joseph N. Ballan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
16 See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 3.
17 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 156.
18 Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, 49.
19 Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 281 – 2.

20 See, for example, Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): "To be able to grasp immediately at the loftiness, one must be considerably warped and spoiled over many years by having carelessly learned by rote the whole story of his abasement, suffering, and death, without having any sense of being halted by it" (177).
21 Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology," 105.
22 Ibid., 104.
23 See especially Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002); and *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).
24 Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology," 105.

sin (Rom. 6:23), Ruether would have us recall Jesus' condemnation of fear and self-assertion in the face of death. The Peter of Matthew 16, who cannot imagine serving any Lord who is subject to death, is one of the escapists Ruether is talking about; while Jesus, by rebuking Peter, reveals the possibility of reconciling "divine things" with creaturely limits (Matt. 16:23).

The issue that eco-theology and ecofeminism hereby bring to the fore is not that fear of death is contrary to Christian faith. That is nothing new. The novel suggestion is that the kind of fear that is contrary to Christian faith and life is manifested in the destructive ways we treat the earth. When we construe salvation as a "ticket out of here," we reject the goodness of what God has made and give ourselves license to act without regard for its intrinsic value.

While the mainstream of modern Christian theology has tended to focus on the eternal consequences of sin, Pope Francis's recent encyclical letter indicates that eco-theological concerns are making inroads here. "The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin," Francis writes in Laudato Si', "is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air, and in all forms of life."[25] For Francis, the disorder of sin, evident in our destructiveness toward the earth, is rooted in the fact that "we have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth."[26] Thus, for eco-theology and increasingly for the mainstream theological tradition, there is a growing awareness that sin, the human usurpation of God's righteousness, is not simply a forensic category which God corrects via Christ's moral perfection, but a nihilistic disposition toward God's work as creator, which God wills to heal. It is a refusal to accept that we are dust, and that to dust we shall return.

The material consequences of death denial are receiving increased levels of attention in popular discourse as well.[27] In "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene," an essay published in The New York Times' philosophy forum, the writer Roy Scranton reflects on the destructive outcomes of our rebellion against vulnerability and mortality:

> Across the world today, our actions testify to our belief that we can go on like this forever, burning oil, poisoning the seas, killing off other species, pumping carbon into the air, ignoring the ominous silence of our coal mine canaries in favor of the unending robotic tweets of our digital imaginarium.[28]

In Scranton's view, the problem that faces us in the Anthropocene, this new epoch defined by human power as a geological force, is not primarily that of learning how to have a less destructive impact on the planet. The deeper problem is philosophical. It calls for a bracing realism about our mortality. "The sooner we realize there's nothing we can do to save ourselves," Scranton writes, "the sooner we can get down to the hard work of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality."[29] Eco-theology reaches a similar conclusion, while also articulating how our culture's collective denial of death is tantamount to sin. In the face of our mortality, there is consolation in Paul's affirmation of the resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15); the challenge is to seize this consolation not as a means of evading our fear, but as a salve for it.

ESCAPISM IN THE PHILOSOPHERS' PAUL

As we can see, then, contemporary eco-theology targets accounts of faith that alienate human beings from the rest of creation as a religiously meaningful context. One might expect that a materialist appeal to the Pauline legacy would help theologians recognize earth-focused emphases that dualistic theologies have habitually ignored. Let us now consider some of the features of recent philosophical appropriations of Paulinism, and explore why this expectation has not been met.

Contemporary philosophical treatments of Paul tend to emphasize radical subjective freedom, and specifically the human subject's independence of preexisting contexts of meaning. For example, in Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, Alain Badiou calls Paul "a poet-thinker of the event,"[30] whose chief virtue is his militant opposition to "discourses of mastery." According to Badiou's reading, Jewish discourse interprets events according to the logic of the sign, and Greek discourse according to that of the cosmic totality (1 Cor. 1:22).[31] Under the domain of such discourses, human experience is valid only insofar as it registers within the master logic, which for Badiou is a reductive and even oppressive condition. By contrast, Paul declares his own identity, his subjectivity, on the basis of an event that is wholly interruptive, of his own life and of prevailing discourses of meaning. Paul declines "all authority other than that of the Voice that personally summoned him to his becoming-subject."[32] Paul's discourse, in other words, "is one of pure fidelity to the possibility opened by the event."[33] Paul's notion of subjective authenticity can therefore be characterized as filiation, whereby slaves of pre-existing discourses are transformed into authorized sons and daughters of life,

25 Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, Vatican Website, May 24, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, sec. 2.

26 Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 2.

27 Two examples: Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), and Ezekiel J. Emanuel, "Why I Hope to Die at 75," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2014, 74 – 81.

28 Roy Scranton, "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene," available here: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/. Accessed July 12, 2016.

29 Ibid.

30 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 2.

31 Ibid., 41.

32 Ibid., 18. Cf. Gal. 1:11 – 12. One can certainly hear echoes here of Karl Barth's account of Paul's eccentric subjectivity: "However great and important a man Paul may have been," Barth writes, "the essential theme of his mission is not within him but above him—unapproachably distant and unutterably strange" (Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 27).

33 Ibid., 45. See also 1 Cor. 1:17 – 29.

free from "the pretension of those who, in the name of what they were and saw, believe themselves to be guarantors of truth."[34] On Badiou's interpretation, the Christ event shatters all obstacles to filiation precisely because Paul insists that it is not the prescribed outcome of any discourse of mastery.

For Alain Badiou, then, Paul's abiding importance stems from the fact that he articulates how properly human subjectivity "must proceed from the event as such, which is a-cosmic and illegal, refusing integration into any totality and signaling nothing."[35] While this Pauline process of filiation is clearly individuating, in the sense that it separates the subject's identity from any supposed "guarantors of truth," Badiou would have us read the Pauline project also as militant against abstraction, and therefore against the alienation of the subject from the material site of truth. Discourses of mastery claim to possess knowledge of the world in advance of attending to its concreteness. The Christ event for Paul does something else—it sets the subject free from a priori measures of truth, affirming the validity of the subject's experience without appealing to any such guarantors of meaning. Significantly, however, Badiou also implies that one's material context cannot be meaningful in and of itself. That is, Badiou celebrates not only subjective liberation from abstract discourses, but also the subject's transcendence of "the human animal that underlies him."[36] Such language reveals an important feature and a significant limitation of Badiou's ostensible Paulinism: it does not simply dismantle reductive contexts of meaning, but the very notion of a meaningful context as such.

Jens Zimmermann offers a clarifying perspective on this apparent irony. He argues that contemporary philosophical readings of Paul, including those of Badiou, Agamben, and Žižek, are heirs to a tradition of Continental philosophy that is characterized by "a quest for transcendence…hampered by a modernist framework that is unable to engage the incarnational and participatory concepts that are vital to Paul's theology."[37] As a result, Zimmermann suggests, "philosophical readings of Paul are generally marked by the inability to correlate immanence and transcendence."[38] Paul himself correlates immanence and transcendence via his affirmations of incarnation and participation (e.g., Phil. 2:1 – 18). By contrast, Badiou emphasizes the subject's transcendence of preexisting contexts of meaning in such a stark fashion that a key feature of incarnate life—mortality—must be elided. "Suffering plays no role in Paul's apologetic," Badiou writes, "not even in the case of Christ's death."[39] This suggestion supposedly detaches Paul's fidelity to the Christ event from any dialectical "logic" of death and resurrection, which would be akin to another "master discourse."[40] And yet by "saving" Paul from the implication that the Christ event occurs as the prescribed outcome of a dialectical logic, Badiou also hereby dismisses Paul's correlation of the transcendence of grace and the immanence of creaturely limits. "Let us propose the formula: in Paul, there is certainly the Cross, but no path of the Cross,"[41] Badiou writes. This formula means that there is in Badiou's Paul no correlation between the subject's transcendence of discourses of mastery and the immanent, material context of creaturely life. In other words, Badiou's is a reading in which the death of Jesus "sets up an immanentization of the spirit,"[42] as he puts it, but also in which the immanent is vacated of any specific features. Thus in Badiou's interpretation of Paul we see a kind of secular dualism at work, a dismissal of Paul's theism but also an inability to reconcile subjective authenticity (fidelity to the event as such) with creaturely limits (embodiment, interdependence, mortality).

What would it look like for a philosophical reading of Paul to attend more carefully to the correlation of immanence and transcendence, via Paul's incarnational framework? What would it look like for a philosopher to take seriously the way of the cross?

STANISLAS BRETON AND THE PURPOSE OF PAULINE NEGATION

In his 1988 book, Saint Paul (translated in 2011 as A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul), Stanislas Breton insists that in the Pauline texts, "salvation and the slavery from which Christ has freed us affect man and cosmos simultaneously."[43] At the same time, he offers this word of caution: "It would certainly be anachronistic to justify the ecological concerns of our contemporaries with a Pauline theology."[44] While it is true that Paul cannot have imagined the ecological consciousness informed by contemporary scientific cosmology, I would nonetheless urge readers of Breton's book to throw this caution to the wind. Breton's interpretation of Paul offers much support for the contemporary eco-theological project. Breton himself insists that in Paul the "unbreakable link" between human beings and the rest of creation "lets us explain that the human condition, because it is not foreign to the condition of the universe, can spread its light and its shadow over all the beings that thus share the vicissitudes of a common history."[45] Here the Pauline subject is inescapably enmeshed in "the condition of the universe," sharing a common history with all creation.

34 Ibid., 44.
35 Ibid., 42.
36 Ibid., 12.
37 Jens Zimmermann, "Hermeneutics of Unbelief: Philosophical Readings of Paul," in *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision*, ed. Douglas Harink (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 232.
38 Ibid., 234.
39 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 66.

40 Ibid., 65.
41 Ibid., 67.
42 Ibid., 69. Original emphasis.
43 Stanislas Breton, *A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul*, trans. Joseph N. Ballan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 115. Emphasis added. Originally published as *Saint Paul* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).
44 Ibid., 119.
45 Ibid., 119.

Indeed, one of the most significant contributions of this volume is that it illuminates the human being's interrelatedness with the cosmos, thus offering a possible bridge between recent philosophical interest in Paul and emergent concerns in eco-theology.

It is not difficult to see why contemporary eco-theologians, dedicated to critiquing the alienating tendencies of some modern variants of Christian faith, have made little if any use of Badiou's sort of Pauline "materialism." And it is true that Breton, like Badiou, is enthusiastic about Paul's articulation of an interruptive sort of human subjectivity. In fact it is immediately evident upon reading A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul that Badiou's idea of Pauline subjectivity as freedom from "discourses of mastery" owes a lot to "Breton's robust little book."[46] For Breton, Paul's own identity, his "I am," explicitly defies "'human tradition' incompatible with Christian novelty."[47] Identification with human tradition is problematic because it offers "the comfortable laziness of false security (cf. Col. 2:8 – 23; Gal 5:1ff)."[48] Breton thus describes Paul's subjectivity as "an ego of transcendence and of separation."[49] How is this not already the escapist selfhood of the patriarchal tradition of theology, hostile to our demonstrable, elemental relatedness to the cosmos? How can an "ego of transcendence and of separation" suggest anything other than the modern Christian fantasy of escape from the flesh?

In Breton, the vital relationship between the "transcendence" of the Pauline subject and his or her inescapable material context registers more clearly than in Badiou, primarily because Breton contextualizes Paul historically in a way Badiou does not. One of the central aims of Breton's book is to show how Paul develops an anticipatory rejection of interpretations of Christ that would tend toward dualism. This means that Breton is careful to read Paul's emphasis on the transcendence of Christian identity, in virtue of the subject's nakedness of any "human traditions," in tandem with Paul's affirmation of history. Paul "could not accept the Manichean antithesis made possible by his writings," Breton writes, since "God does not repent of the gifts God has given."[50] Compare this with Badiou's claim that "for Paul, the emergence of the instance of the son is essentially tied to the conviction that 'Christian discourse' is absolutely new."[51] One cannot help but recognize that Breton's greater sympathy for the good news Paul declares—i.e., Breton's own theism—prohibits him from making a duality out of concrete history and subjective freedom. For Breton, as for Paul, Israel's history with God has abiding significance; the Christ event, even in its novelty, must be read in light of this history.

46 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 3.

47 Breton, *A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul*, 44.

48 Ibid., 44. As Breton explains in his preface, "In a work intended for philosophers, less concerned with the authenticity of a signature than with the authenticity of a thought, I permit myself access to all the letters of Saint Paul [as defined by the canon]" (35).

49 Ibid., 45.

50 Ibid., 48.

51 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 43. Original emphasis.

For Badiou, the Christ event's independence of any possible anticipatory historical series is precisely what allows it to signify true subjective freedom. Breton, by contrast, takes seriously Paul's allegorical contextualization of the Christ event. He even seems to anticipate a challenge from Badiou when he asks of Paul's reading of history, "Does not allegory, taken as a hermeneutics of retrospection, run the risk of dissolving the new in a prefiguration that redoubles it under the species of a possibility or a virtuality of preexistence?"[52] In other words, doesn't Paul's effort to situate the Christ event in a broader history run the risk of reducing its interruptive character, and by extension, its liberating power? Does it not make the Christ event subject to the determinations of what Badiou will later call a "discourse of mastery"? For Breton, the assumption behind this question is problematic insofar as it insists on an equivalence between temporal continuity as such and the function of a historical master narrative. Breton emphasizes that for Paul, concrete history is neither as discontinuous as a postmodern view would wager, nor as deterministically causal as a dogmatic historical master narrative would insist. Instead, for Paul, "Novelty must…bring together the continuity of history and the discontinuity of change, if temporality is not to dissipate in a scattering of instants or in the fulguration of lightning flashes."[53] According to Breton, then, the Christ event interrupts "the security of the already-acquired, the gravity of a tradition become substance,"[54] but it does not thereby shatter temporal continuity as such. It disturbs the gravity of a tradition become substance, not in order to leave the subject's relation to history in shards, but to open her up to the future as fecundity rather than necessity.

Breton continues his defense of Paul's attachment to concrete history, even if not to ossified tradition, in his discussion of Pauline negation, particularly the "as if not" statements of 1 Corinthians 7:29 – 31. These statements would appear to support the Marcionite claim that Paul dismisses historical continuity via a further dismissal of the objective and the concrete. Again though, Breton raises this possibility in order to reject it firmly. He takes the reader to the extremes of Pauline negation, and then shows how such negation leads to a deeper affirmation of the physical world's goodness, rather than toward nihilism. Paul emphasizes mortification, certainly, but he is also "careful to avoid sectarian opinions that would project onto the divine beauty of things the maleficent shadow of a generalized necrophilia."[55] In a similar vein, Breton explains that kenosis or self-emptying in Paul "has little in common with a morose taste for pure absence. The void or 'hollowing-out' only 'mortifies' so

52 Breton, *A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul*, 72.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 84.

55 Ibid., 152.

that the individual empirical sphere might be opened to a broader horizon."[56] In Breton's Paul, "the divine beauty of things," and particularly of "the empirical sphere," is retained and even more deeply affirmed by the mortifying interruption of the Christ event. Indeed, it is for the sake of this reaffirmation that the interruption is offered. The hollowing out of the worldly in Paul (1 Cor. 7; Phil. 2) returns the subject to his or her senses even as it accomplishes the transcendence of human tradition.

THE PATH OF THE CROSS AND THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

As a consequence of his effort to show that the transformative freedom of Pauline subjectivity does not imply dislocation from history or from the empirical sphere, Breton compels his reader to consider the relationship between subjective authenticity and one's material context. In fact, he even implies that subjective authenticity in the Pauline texts is inseparable from the activation of one's relationship to cosmic history. Let me explain this briefly.

It is clear to Breton that in Paul, "Christ gathers together in order to make the visible and invisible things 'subsist' in his own substance, giving them the solidity of their own substance and the link of their solidarity with each other."[57] Accordingly, the church itself can only be understood, even in the distinctness of its vocation, in light of this more basic possibility of subsistence in the cosmos. The incarnate Christ gives form to the church (1 Cor. 12:12), but we misunderstand this form if we do not relate it to Christ's substantiating role in the cosmos as such. Breton explains that "just as the Church is the body of Christ, insofar as he is its primary principle of command, the cosmos is the body of Christ insofar as he holds primacy as its generative image."[58] He continues, arguing that "in both cases it is a matter of a universe that evokes, by the richness of its interdependent differences, the ancient thought of a 'great organism.'"[59] Thus, to talk about the church is to talk about a history with God that is unavoidably related to the history or process of the cosmos. For Breton this cannot but mean that we affect the world with our "own historical fate, whether that fate be one of misery or of grandeur."[60] We are constitutively bound up with our fellow creatures. Our destiny is not properly sought in separation from our creaturely context; nor are our failures of authenticity without bearing on the "great organism."

What is "misery" and what is "grandeur," in the Pauline imagination? We know that specifically human misery or subjective erasure consists in identification with "a tradition become substance," which involves abstraction from the fecundity and openness of genuine temporality. To be miserable, for Breton's Paul, may be the same thing as being "comfortable" and "lazy," but in a more technical sense it is to be without hope, which requires a future of possibility. In Breton's view, hope is not a merely human attitude but a cosmic impulse or energy. "We might say that [hope] 'imbibes' the essence of things and prevents them from being shut up within the borders of a defined nature."[61] If it is the case, as Breton says, that "any possible advance that humanity makes, or inversely any possible decline, will also show up, whether positively or negatively, in the fate of nature,"[62] then we must ask how a possible "advance" in hope relates the human subject to the desire for freedom embedded in the world, "from the highest point to the lowest on the ontological ladder."[63] In other words, how does the salvation offered in Christ correlate with the wellbeing of creation itself as a "great organism"?

For Breton, advancing in the freedom that is "the essence of the world"[64] involves overcoming our fear of death. We cannot embrace a future that opens beyond "the borders of a defined nature" if we are protective of the present at all costs. Thus it is fear of self-mortification that disables the human being from harmonizing with the openness to the future that characterizes a cosmos held together in Christ. Breton clarifies this point in his discussion of Christ's suffering cosmic lordship:

> In his dual nature, the mediator in question transgresses and shares the cosmic and the human vicissitudes of universal becoming. For this reason, while remaining the 'firstborn of all creation,' he cannot escape the 'kingdom of the dead'… But…the image of the invisible God in him is stronger than death. Indeed, from this image there emanates a power that pulls Christ away from another power. Immersion and emergence fulfill each other.[65]

"Immersion and emergence fulfill each other." Here we see that for Breton, there must be a "path of the cross." There is no path of the cross in Badiou because for him the cross is merely the fate set out by discourses of mastery. According to Badiou, Christ died "simply in order to attest that it well and truly is a man who, capable of inventing death, is also capable of inventing life."[66] On Badiou's account, then, the subjective liberation proclaimed by the resurrection, the filiation that transforms slaves into sons, is not contingent upon the kind of "immersion" Breton highlights. But for Breton himself, there is no possible liberation from discourses of mastery, from "traditions become substance," apart from a recognition of how such traditions alienate the human being from creation more broadly. Thus, in Breton's interpretation of the Pauline corpus, the reconciler reconciles the slaves of sin to the cosmos of which he is the "generative image" by turning those slaves toward their own immersion in death, which is to say, toward an embrace of their true

56 Ibid., 153.
57 Ibid., 107.
58 Ibid., 109.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 119.
61 Ibid., 120.
62 Ibid., 121.
63 Ibid., 117.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 110. Emphasis added.
66 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 69.

creaturely limits. To be able to harmonize with the "great organism" of the universe requires being stripped of one's fantasy of permanence, of the false security of a tradition become substance. One thinks here of Walter Brueggemann's claim that "hope is subversive, for it limits the grandiose pretension of the present, daring to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is now called into question."[67] Or, in Breton's Pauline sense, hope is subversive because it demands the subject's immersion in death; and it is transformative because it reconciles that immersed subject to the emergence of which Christ is the agent, in the cosmic context of salvation history.

CONCLUSION

In the end, Breton leaves us with a phrase Paul attributes to Jesus in Acts 20: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." As Breton reads it, Paul "confided these words as a memorial that would express in the simplest terms, to each of them, the secret of the cross and of creation itself, as Paul understood and practiced it."[68] Breton is careful to remind us that this is no "necrophilia" in Paul, since the subject's mortification occurs "so that the individual empirical sphere might be opened to a broader horizon."[69] But ultimately one gets the sense that necrophobia is the greater danger for Breton's Paul, given that the true breadth of the empirical horizon of creaturehood is only available to those whose hope is truly hope, whose outlook on the future has been transformed by being mortified of the deathly fear of death.

And thus Breton brings Paul into the realm of contemporary eco-theology, according to which the primal sin "lies in the effort to escape from mortality, finitude, and vulnerability."[70] For what is Ruether's claim if not something that aligns with Breton's gloss on the redemptive action of God in Christ for Paul, wherein "immersion and emergence fulfill each other"? Breton also brings us back to Roy Scranton and to the question that faces us with increasing urgency today: how can we learn how to die? As we continue developing technologies that delay the moment of our deaths on clocks and calendars, we feel a related alienation from the material world and from our own moral agency. Thus it dawns on us that embracing our inevitable mortality is not a despairing turn from the concrete goodness of life, but an opening to it, for the first time. As we learn that embracing our mortality harmonizes with the process we readily recognize in nature as the ceding of present life to the future, Paul's secret, that it is better to give than to receive, takes on a material poignancy that returns to us our proper yearning and hope.

67 Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 65.
68 Breton, *A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul*, 153. Emphasis added.
69 Ibid., 153.
70 Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology," 105.