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Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic by Whitney A. Bauman

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The God of the Gaps

***Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic* by WHITNEY A. BAUMAN**
Columbia University Press, 2014 \$34

Reviewed by **PAUL T. CORRIGAN**

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler writes, “*I am my relation to you*” (81). What she means is that we cannot account for ourselves without accounting for our connections to others. But since we can never fully know others, she argues, we can never fully know ourselves. So we must make do—and do good—with partial knowledge. Whitney A. Bauman forwards a closely related project. Both Butler and Bauman share a central deconstructive task of understanding individuals as embedded in contexts larger than themselves and of tracing out the ethical implications of that embeddedness and contextuality. As Bauman puts it, “we are contextual beings through and through” (60). While Butler works out her ethics in terms of psychoanalysis, Bauman works out his in terms of religion and science. This shift in terms allows Bauman an expanded vision. Whereas Butler shows us how we are our relation to other people, Bauman shows us how we are our relations to all earth others. He writes, “it is only through our interactions with human and earth others that we ourselves are formed” (60). For that reason, he urges, “the tools of queer theory, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and other critical theory need to be expanded beyond the human species boundary to include the rest of the becoming planetary community” (154).

Bauman begins to make his case in a quirky and particularly vivid way in the acknowledgements section of his book.

Where writers usually thank people who have helped make a book possible, Bauman thanks “the histories of thinking in many different cultures throughout the world,” “the elements of the 13.7-billion-year process of cosmic expansion and 4.5 billion years of geoevolution,” and the “human, animal, plant, mineral, machine, and the processes” that have made possible not only the book but also his “own subjective becoming” (vii). When we try to imagine ourselves as separate individuals—the Enlightenment idea of the self-contained, self-sufficient Self—we “background” literally countless “planetary others,” ignoring or denying everything that makes our lives possible and, thereby, distorting our view of both ourselves and the world (7, vii). As an alternative, Bauman asks us to understand ourselves as deeply embedded in the world and its processes. He asks us “to understand ourselves as natural-cultural, biohistorical, embodied thinking creatures” and “as part of a becoming process” (109). In other words, who we are is evolving and is made of meaning as well as matter, history as well as biology, culture as well as nature.

We can never fully know who we are because we are made up of many parts: many moving, interconnected, inexhaustible parts. All things are this way. Bauman writes, “I can never exhaust the knowledge of you, nor of a tree or a dog or an ocean or a galaxy” (117). So how can we act ethically? How can we choose one path as better than another when we do not have all the information? As his answer, Bauman calls for ways of seeing and being that are ethical not in spite of but in and through very partial knowledge. More specifically, he calls for “negative, apophatic, agnostic, hybrid, queer, multiperspectival, embodied, and planetary

meaning-making practices” (84). As the terms in this list make clear, we can draw on many traditions of critical theory for this work. We can also draw on many religious traditions. Bauman uses the term “apophatic” to refer to the “long histories of unknowing” found in “many different religious traditions and philosophies” (9). The apophatic names that religious sensibility which does not grasp after impossible certainty but rather sits with and embraces beloved uncertainty—or, to put it more fully, sits with and embraces *the* beloved in uncertainty. The religious connection between love and unknowing are vital to Bauman’s project. We live in a world we cannot pin down with our minds. But we can nonetheless seek to practice “a viable, agnostic, and planetary *agape* or divine love” (170).

In a key passage at the end of the book, worth quoting at length, Bauman weaves together science, religion, unknowability, and love:

Built into both science and religion is a sense of the unknown and ever changing process of becoming life [...] To love, then, is to embrace the evolving and necessary unknowability of all our thoughts, ethical justifications, imaginations, hopes, dreams, values, and knowledge. [...] The only certainty is that when certainty is imposed on the world love is impossible and violence is inevitable. Hence at the very center of the emergence of planetary identities is an embrace of the god of the gaps, the cloud of unknowing that is the source for the continuation of the becoming planetary community. (172)

In short, Bauman calls us to respond to the irreducible complexity of life with a sort of unknowing in which a sort of divine love both flourishes and leads to the flourishing of all.

What does this flourishing look like? Bauman cautions us not to answer this question *a priori*. Instead, he proposes, as the foremost ethical principle of the book, that we should seek to shape the world not according to “any sort of foundational understanding of what is natural” or “right” as determined by God, Nature, or Reason but rather according to what we find most “aesthetically, socially, and ecologically persuasive” (108). Bauman illustrates this principle by applying it to the choice we face between *economic globalization* and *environmental planetarity*, terms he adapts from Gayatri Spivak (116). If we follow economic globalization through to its end—more oil, more malls, more stuff—we will have a much hotter planet with much less diversity of life. But, Bauman insists, this future would be “just as natural or real as any alternative” (108). The planet would continue spinning. Life would continue evolving. But—and this is why Bauman still considers it unethical even if not unnatural—we would not like to live there. We might not even be able to. So “planetary boundaries” are not “ontological” but “aesthetic” (3). Bauman writes, “as human beings, we must begin to think about what types of futures we want to cocreate” (3). Environmental planetarity represents a far more compelling future.

When Bauman spells out the practical implications of his argument, he moves in an unexpected direction. Instead of calling for, say, an end to dependency on fossil fuels, he calls for universal healthcare, free higher education, and more opportunities for leisure (147-48). Though

ethical insofar as they relate to the quality of human life, one might wonder how these concerns are specifically environmental. Bauman's point is that when people are constantly treading water economically—working overtime just to stay clothed, fed, and insured and to try to get out of debt—they have little time or energy to consider the complexities of the world or solve complex problems. “Where,” Bauman asks, “is the space-time for new generations to think together imaginatively?” (145). His answer is that we need to create it. We need to resist the “‘who has time for that, we need answers mentality’” (144). We need to make time for reflection, meditation, discussion, reading, writing, and “creative/imaginative/existential thought” (144). Engaging the complexities of the world as it has become and the possibilities for its future becoming requires sustained thinking. So the first ethical act is to create the conditions necessary for subsequent ethical acts.

Readers of *Religion and Ecology* may face two difficulties with the book. The first has to do with the practical difficulty of reading the text. While Bauman has moments of great clarity and poignancy, longish stretches of the book are difficult to follow (at least they were for this reader). This difficulty does mirror and may be considered part of the larger difficulties with which Bauman exhorts us to engage. Indeed, he specifically notes that writing and reading “books such as this” should be an important part of the reflection we must undertake (144). But readers will have to decide for themselves whether the quality of the prose in this case is a benefit or an obstacle.

The second likely difficulty has to do with the religious sensibility Bauman forwards. The difficulty here involves

understanding what precisely Bauman's religious sensibility is and determining, personally, how to receive it. Bauman regularly describes his vision as both “agnostic” and “apophatic” (64-65). These words—although closely related in that they indicate “not knowing” and “unknowing,” respectively—make a curious pairing because agnosticism is widely considered a cousin of atheism and apophaticism is clearly associated with religion. However, it is clear that the religious sensibility of Bauman's text is not theistic. He proposes that words like “God” should be considered not as “ontological categories” but as “permeable, ethical categories that shape the world around us” (108). Traditionally understood, theism does just the opposite. At the same time, Bauman also insists strongly (“I cannot stress enough . . .”) that his stance is not atheistic either (78). He writes, “religions are real in the same way other things we cannot see are real: numbers, ideas, language, and imaginations” (9). However, notwithstanding his protests, this provocative stance is not incompatible with atheism. Occasionally, Bauman describes his position as polytheistic—but by that he does not mean believing in multiple gods so much as being “open to the contours and differences of human and earth others” (139). So, the question remains, what, precisely, is the role of the divine in this vision? How should we interpret the religious language used in the text? Literally? Metaphorically? Like the difficulty of the prose, this religious difficulty also makes its own point. By being difficult to pin down with respect to the religious, Bauman creates space for new understandings to develop. It remains up to readers just what to make of that space.

Religion and Ecology is a creative, penetrating, important book. Readers willing to wrestle with its difficulties may find it deeply meaningful. Bauman invites us to contemplate the complexity of the world, our evolving embeddedness in it, the limits of our knowledge, and the possibility of cocreating—through an agnostic, apophatic, agapic love—a meaningful, beautiful, ethical planetary future. May we take up that invitation.

Work Cited

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