

**Author Whitney Bauman Responds to His Reviewers**

*Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius*  
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The strange thing about writing a book is that before it is published you can't wait to get it done and then after it is published you live in fear of how you will be interpreted, if at all. Feeling like an intellectual imposter is just part and parcel to the process and one should have these sorts of worries. Hoping that you were able to communicate your meaning is another worry. And, hoping that anyone will read your book (especially an expensive hardback) is an even greater worry. Luckily, I have had two reviews by well-respected thinkers to date. And, these reviewers represent the scope of the types of people I had hoped would read the book: one a theologian and the other an environmental philosopher. Social networking, blogs, and our 24-hour online capabilities now bring whole new meanings to "living texts," and in that spirit, I want to take this opportunity to keep this text alive by thanking both reviewers and clearing up some of what I clearly miscommunicated in the published version of the book. Though only one of those reviews is published here, I thank the *Journal of Postcolonial Networks* for providing this medium that allows me to respond to both!

First I will respond to the review by Christopher Southgate in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 24.2 (2011): 242-244. For the sake of full disclosure, Christopher is a colleague and friend through many years of working in the area of "religion and science." So, I was thrilled that he agreed to review my book. Having said that, we do have our theological differences and I know that he will take my pushback in the best of light. Though Southgate represents the theological side of the audience I was hoping to address, my words were written for those who no longer

find classical theism plausible, yet cannot escape and intellectually acknowledge the work that theological thinking does. The crux of our theological disagreement might be here:

This in the end is the key fault-line between the type of theology Bauman seeks to do and a more traditional version. Monotheism, *creatio ex nihilo*, and indeed a form of human exceptionalism, may be philosophically and ethically problematic, and open to all manner of abuse, yet if careful critical appropriation of the classic resources of theology leads Christians to consider that these positions are our best guess at the way things really are, then Christians cannot turn their back on them, even if it is more pluralistically correct to do so (244).

What I am after is more than mere pluralism for the sake of being politically correct, but rather a way of understanding self and other that is dialogical, open, and non-absolute. His quote actually represents the crux of why I think a “viable agnostic theology” is important for opening onto the multiple voices of the planet (both human and non). In essence, he is saying despite *all other evidence* to the contrary “the classic resource of theology leads Christians to consider that these positions are our best guess at the way things really are” (244). This is an example of the type of *ex nihilo* thinking that leads to monological relations with others, and one of the primary reasons I argue that we ought to re-think foundational theological assumptions.

Whereas Southgate is a friend with theological differences, Deane Curtin is an environmental philosopher whose thinking I find kindred, yet we have never met. I appreciate, again, the time Curtin took to review the book and wish to clear up a few miscommunications here in the spirit of dialogue. First, he writes, “Whitney Bauman’s primary claim is audacious: the Christian theology of *creatio ex nihilo* (God has the power to create something out of nothing), is the historical cause of the colonial doctrine of *terra nullius*.” This is simply a misreading of my text. I took great care to use words such as “might provide theological justification for” in order to show that I am not here talking about efficient causality. What I suggest rather is that thinkers such as Columbus and Locke might have a theological support

system for thinking in ex-nihelic ways that then support their understandings of “discovery” and “property,” respectively. This, then, ties into another point of clarification: why theology *still* matters.

Curtin writes, “Given Bauman’s historicist arguments, the ex nihelic configuration of Christian power surely will remain the dominant voice for some time. Would it not be better to quit using Christian symbols, at least for the time being? Isn’t our moral responsibility to simply stop using these symbols?” It is precisely because western understandings of “discovery” and “property” are underwritten by theological assumptions that we must continue to wrestle with them! Though the theological side may have lost meaning for many, private property is being exported around the globe in the process of what Derrida refers to as “globalatinization” (noting that globalization is not an equal sharing of resources by all cultures and places but that it is largely a monological process of proliferating *a* way of being and thinking across the entire globe). Having a moratorium on theological thinking is, I argue, akin to sticking our heads in the sand at best. At worst it seals us off from living symbols that have adverse materializations in the world today, which brings me to the third clarification.

When Curtin writes, “The post-modern side of Bauman’s positive project subscribes to the, by now familiar, view that language creates ‘worlds’,” he simply misses the philosophical channel that I am navigating between foundationalism and constructivism. Both, as I argue in the text, are modes of ex nihelic thinking. Rather, I am arguing along with thinkers such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour that worlds are co-created constructions of nature-cultures. One side of the equation does not create the other *ex nihilo*. In this sense, theology itself truly is one (of many) planetary co-creations: it emerges out of a bio-historical evolutionary trajectory. These trajectories are not merely constructed by language.

Finally, his charge that I focus too much on Christianity is well taken. In my defense, I was trying to deconstruct a specific way of thinking “from within,” so that this way of thinking would open onto multiple planetary others (human and non). Perhaps engaging with one religious voice (though using many non-traditional theological voices: Columbus, Locke, etc.) is not the best way to proceed. Point well taken and something I should have considered more thoughtfully. In closing, his critique that the environmental issues are “too urgent” for such an academic book, that there are little ethics in the book, and that I hoist a gap between theory and praxis also miss the mark. The book, rather, argues that theory and praxis are as intertwined as nature-culture, bio-history, idea-matter. This particular book is written to help provide a space necessary for a type of meta-ethical thinking that is lost when we focus everything in on particular and specific issues. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that the rush to praxis, specifics, and even place-based thinking might even be environmentally detrimental. The “too urgent” language of environmental apocalypticism often forces us into making decisions whose consequences have not been thoroughly considered, and even into an ex nihilo projection onto which we can project our environmental utopic solutions. It is my genuine hope that this book will open up spaces of critical reflection on this type of thinking, and it is my belief that such critical reflection deserves room in order to co-create thriving, future, planetary communities.