
Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017) and a Christian Social Critique¹

David Lyon

Professor of Sociology & Law, Queen's University, Canada

lyond@queensu.ca

Zygmunt Bauman wrote consistently with the hope that people would 'see things through the eyes of society's weakest members' and thus recognize how far what we think of as 'good, civilized, advanced and free' societies fall short. He lamented the weakening of social bonds, especially under the impact of consumerism, and his constant quest was for solid, lasting human sociality. But he also insisted that we should live in hope of what we cannot yet see. Indeed, he often quoted the Apostle Paul's words, 'Who hopes for what he can already see?' No wonder so many Christians, among many others, would read him and quote his voluminous writings!

On January 9, 2017, this dear friend and long-time colleague died at the ripe age of 91. I last visited him at his home in Leeds a few months earlier and he was as welcoming, hospitable and as kind as ever to me and my wife, Sue. We discussed various matters of mutual interest and he showed me the manuscript of his latest book, that turned out to be his last, *Retrotopia* (2017) on the rise of right wing populist groups. Since we first met, in the late 1970s, it had been this way. He treated me generously, despite the age difference (I am not yet 70) and the fact that he had a global reputation for his scholarship and his willingness to speak out on matters of social justice and cultural critique.

The fact is, however, we did not share our lives at the very deepest level, that is, in faith commitments. We discussed this, too, and even let others see what sorts of disagreements we had, in the pages of our conversation on *Liquid Surveillance* (2012). I tried hard to push and provoke him to say more but the rift remained. However, this in no way changed my views of his magnificent achievement in many important books and nor did it revise my view that his work offers some profound challenges to those who try to follow Jesus of Nazareth. He had an uncanny way of exposing social, political, economic, and cultural realities in ways that resonate with Christian social critique.

Others have noted this, too. People like Michael Schluter of the Relationships Foundation in the UK quoted Bauman (who also quoted Schluter). Bloggers such as Simple Free Church quote Bauman – for example on *The Art of Life* (2008) where he demonstrates that the frenzy of acquisition in consumer society is not paralleled by an increase of happiness. Others such as Pete Ward have embraced Bauman's concepts for their own analysis, in this case in *Liquid Church*. Yet others, such as Mars Hill Audio in the US, interviewed Bauman as someone who could speak effectively to today's world on the loss of social permanence and solidity in conditions of 'liquid modernity.'

The three aspects of Bauman's work

that I mentioned above can be seen in all his writing: one, seeing society from the viewpoint of the weakest; two, striving to strengthen social relationships, and three, actively hoping for what we do not yet see. He himself had a personal sense of the significance of these as well as the capacity to express them passionately in his many (60!) books.

Photos of Bauman often depict the wizened, white-haired man, his face partially clouded by smoke from his pipe and with shelves – or piles! – of books and papers in the background. The academic stereotype! But he himself was an outcast, a Polish fugitive first in the Soviet Union (1939) and later kicked out of Poland again in an anti-Semitic move by the Communists. He knew what it was to be a vulnerable outsider. He also lived his love for others. He was married for 62 years before Janina – his partner and ‘muse’ – died, and he was affectionately supportive to many. His emails to me often began, ‘My dearest David’ and ended with ‘love, z.’ Lastly, his form of socialism was inflected by Marxism, but he eschewed all forms of control by the state. He saw socialism as an ‘active utopia’; a means of expressing hope for alternatives to oppression and the reproduction of disadvantage.

The three themes that I highlight here appear in all Bauman’s writing. His greatest book, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), went beyond Hannah Arendt’s arguments to show that the death camps were no cultural blip, a horrific detour from Western civilization, but an *expression* of the rationality of the modern world. People could be reduced to ‘vermin’ and treated thus *within* the cultured literary, musical, and artistic world of Germany. But he also reacted negatively to the Israeli treatment of Palestinians

after 1948. The latter, too, were vulnerable and dehumanized. Bauman went on to pen some of the most searing critiques of consumerism – for example, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor* (1998) – that once again showed how the shiny exterior of late capitalist economies hid a tragic reality of degradation and poverty for those systematically excluded from their benefits.

Such concerns echo biblical social critique from the Hebrew prophets through to Jesus himself. Why did Sodom perish, for instance? ‘She lived with her daughters in the lap of luxury – proud, gluttonous, and lazy. They ignored the oppressed and the poor. They put on airs and lived obscene lives’ (Ezek 16: 49-50, *The Message*). When Jesus announced his mission in Nazareth, he quoted Isaiah 61:1-2:

‘God’s Spirit is on me;
he’s chosen me to preach the Message
of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to
prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, “This is God’s year to act!”’

In this statement, that Jesus applied to himself, ‘God’s year’ is the year of Jubilee, of freeing of slaves, releasing of land and generally putting wrongs right. In Matthew 25:40 Jesus indicates that Christians will be assessed by their care for ‘the least of these,’ meaning the poor and the marginalized, the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, and imprisoned. Which is exactly in line with the rest of the Bible.

Secondly, Bauman cared about the quality of social relationships. The whole thesis about ‘liquidity’ was intended to show that in today’s globalized, consumer-oriented world long-term stable rela-

tionships become more and more difficult to maintain. In the twenty-first century he produced at least nine books exploring this, including one co-written with me. The thread running through all of them is the steady disappearance of the solid structures and social institutions that once offered firm foundations for orderly and peaceful modern societies, and the consequences of this on both a large and a small scale. The overriding duty of care for others preoccupied him in both his most philosophical moments – he was already writing about this in relation to Emmanuel Levinas' work in the early 1990s – and in his empathy with those who suffer from corroded and broken relationships.

Those who find life in today's historic Christianity know all too well that next to loving God, loving our neighbours as ourselves is basic. And Jesus' definition of our 'neighbour' is not merely someone in our 'neighbourhood' but someone who may be quite different from us, perhaps from a despised or hostile group – like the Samaritan in the famous story – or a refugee. In *Strangers at our Door* (2016) Bauman explained the roots of this 'crisis of humanity' that makes millions into the 'other' without compassion or remorse. And in *Liquid Love* (2003) Bauman observes that 'Loving your neighbour may require a leap of faith; the result, though, is the birth-act of humanity.'

Lastly, Bauman's life was one of hope. Admittedly, there were times when I wondered if hope was waning but overall, I believe that Bauman continued to see hope as something basic to human life. In

Socialism: The Active Utopia (1976) he said that 'Hope is the missing link between practical and theoretical interests because it is intrinsically critical of the reality in which it is rooted.' Without hope, Bauman insisted, human life itself was in doubt. And his last words in the 1976 book were the quotation from Paul about 'hope that is seen is not hope.' In other words, hope would not be fully realized while the conditions of possibility were still incomplete. For Bauman, another world was always possible. Not a fictional world of dreams but a better future worth working towards.

Surely, this too echoes loudly some central themes of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures? After all, the key passage in which Paul speaks so persuasively of hope in Romans 8 where the patient wait for the fullness of the new creation is described – as a mother waiting for her child to be born. The pangs of pain and struggle are endured in the present because they will be followed by the completion of the work of God-in-Christ, begun in the mists of history, confirmed by the cross and resurrection and hoped for by millions ever since. It saddens me that Zygmunt Bauman could never move beyond his – justified – dissatisfactions with organized religion to see how this story connects so powerfully with the analyses he bequeathed to us. But that is not a reason for us to fail to make just those connections with his work. I thank God for his insights on these and many other matters that I have no space to comment on here.

Notes

1. [Editorial note] Zygmunt Bauman was Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Leeds (UK), whereas David Lyon is Director for Surveillance Studies Centre, Queen's Research Chair in Surveillance Studies, and Professor of Sociology & Law at Queen's University, Canada (see <http://www.sscqueens.org/people/david-lyon>). Lyon and Bauman co-authored *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).