



Editorial

At Home in the Universe: Mystical Naturalism or Religious Humanism?

Rex A. E. Hunt, Retired Minister, Uniting Church in Australia, Empire Bay, New South Wales, Australia, rexae74@gmail.com

This Editorial essay surveys twentieth- and twenty-first-century debates among liberal theologians and religious humanists over what it means to be “at home” in the universe in explicitly naturalistic terms. It traces the emergence of naturalistic theism and mystical naturalism at the University of Chicago Divinity School as mediating positions between classical supernatural theism and anti-theistic religious humanism, highlighting figures such as Gerald Birney Smith and Bernard E. Meland. The essay contrasts religious humanism’s tendency toward what Meland calls “anthro-inflation”—the exaltation of a human-centered order—with mystical naturalism’s emphasis on human earth-rootedness, cosmic belonging, and appreciative, firsthand religious experience. It then engages later humanist voices, especially Kenneth L. Patton and David E. Bumbaugh, who develop poetic, naturalistic, and cosmological languages of reverence while rejecting supernaturalism, and at times the term “God” itself. Finally, the essay reconstructs Meland’s naturalistic theism as devotion to a “Creative Order” within nature that sustains and fulfills life, arguing for a mystical, poetic, and empirically informed religious naturalism as an alternative to both traditional theism and reductive humanism.



Within some sections of the American theological academy during the 1930s and 1940s, controversy raged between classical “*supernatural*” theism and religious humanism. Thus it was that naturalistic theism arose as an attempted mediating position beyond both. Professor of Religious Studies Marvin C. Shaw (1995, 17) puts it succinctly: “Naturalistic theism arose within the controversy as an attempt to move beyond humanism while accepting its naturalistic assumptions . . . a mediating position between classical theism and religious humanism.”

Classical theism is clearly otherworldly in its founding thesis. Its distinctive traits include a rigidity of tradition, the revelation of biblical truth—“the true God is revealed in history rather than in nature”—a magnification of belief, and the incomparable superiority of the traditional *supernatural* over the *secular* natural. By the mid-1920s to early 1930s, traditional supernaturalism was “modified” by what became known as neo-supernaturalism (or neo-orthodoxy), led by Swiss theologian Karl Barth in Europe and, to a lesser extent, the early career Paul Tillich. After his move to America, it was said Tillich developed a point of view of his own: “If we put the difference between Barth and Tillich in a single statement it would be this: Barth says that God condemns the natural life of man as evil; Tillich says the natural life of man becomes evil only when it claims self-sufficiency or is conducted as though it were self-sufficient” (Wieman and Meland 1936, 89).

However, there were other movements afoot as well. By the mid-1930s, especially at the University of Chicago Divinity School, the development of a theistic interpretation of the universe along empirical and naturalistic lines was taking several forms. Those developments pointed in the directions of (1) humanistic theism (Edward Scribner Ames, John Dewey), (2) conceptual theism (Shailer Matters), (3) cosmic theism (Alfred N. Whitehead), (4) naturalistic theism (Henry Nelson Wieman), and (5) mystical naturalism (Gerald Birney Smith, Bernard E. Meland).

The debates continued through the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries with the likes of the poet, artist, and respected “liberal/humanist” Kenneth L. Patton along with the Unitarian Universalist professor David E. Bumbaugh, and into the present day with religious naturalists Jerome A. Stone and Karl E. Peters, plus a renewed call by progressive Westar Institute¹ scholar David Galston (2025, 149) for “religion” to find the road back to “humanism”: “[T]hat religion needs to end its critique of humanism should it wish to avoid being irrelevant for humans.”

This essay offers a brief survey of just some of the theological debate at the University of Chicago Divinity School around religious humanism and mystical naturalism, coupled with an invitation for others to similarly explore.

The differences between religious humanism and naturalistic theism/mystical naturalism are not always clear-cut. Some of the early religious humanism arguments to point out the “untenableness of conventional Christian beliefs and the supernatural world-view underlying them” can be seen in the writings of the primary author of the *Humanist Manifesto I*, Canadian Roy W. Sellars² (1933): “The humanist’s religion is the religion of one who says yes to life here and now, of one who is self-reliant and fearless, intelligent and creative. It is a religion of the will to power . . . It is a religion of courage and purpose and transforming energy . . . Upon this I think all naturalists are agreed, that between naturalism and theism it is a case of either-or.”³

Likewise, fellow Canadian and historian of religion A. Eustace Haydon argued that anti-theistic religious humanism blends humanist values with religious beliefs. It focuses on human dignity, ethics, and social responsibility. It holds that humans could achieve fulfilment and meaning through both spiritual and rational pursuits. The human venture alone is one’s venture toward the higher life, the maker of one’s destiny, and “the enfolding social environment [is] the more important phase of cosmic structure” (quoted in Wieman and Meland 1936, 265). Standing firm for an outright humanistic interpretation of religion, Haydon (quoted in Wieman and Meland [1936, 265]) claimed there is no justification for using the word “God”: “The human races have been so thoroughly adjusted to the nature of which they are a part, that man may justly claim to be the form of life more capable, not only of survival, but of mastery on the planet . . . He is indeed the planet itself, come to consciousness and capacity for intelligent self-direction.”

Enter “pioneer way-shower” Gerald Birney Smith. Smith joined the Chicago faculty in 1900 and became well known for naming the issue: the problems of religious thinking should be stated in terms of human adjustment to environment rather than in terms of a doctrine or theistic control. But what kind of adjustment is possible? Some twenty-five years later, he would write: “The character of God will be found in the experienced reciprocity between man and his environment, rather than in the realm of metaphysical causation. The modern trend in theology is decidedly in the direction of exploring mysticism rather than in a dependence on philosophy” (Smith 1925).

In similar vein, constructivist theologian Bernard Meland⁴ explained that mystical naturalism is rooted in the realization “that man is a child of the earth, a genuine product of the natural order” and therefore “intimately akin to its life.” An at-homeness in the universe, “not as plunderers and exploiters of nature’s resources,” he was to say some years later, “but as creatures of earth, born of its processes, nurtured and sustained by the subtle and intricate inter-change as humanly evolved organisms within this enveloping atmosphere” (Meland 1974, 135). Or, to put it even more directly, reflecting a hint of twenty-first century scientific thinking fourteen billion years after the beginning: the universe is in

every one of us. Every cell and every bodily organ has a multimillion-year past. Humans are made of the rarest material in the universe—stardust, with just a touch of hydrogen! Nature is not a place to visit, it is home! It is our source! The conviction that “the earth is actually and literally the mother of us all” is the beginning of a mystical naturalism (Meland 1934, 142).

Meland (1937, 157) was always assertive: mysticism was not an abandonment of reason “but a new integration of emotion and reason . . . and not in any evangelical urge.” According to Meland, the insights of the mystic are “the insights that come with the approach of openness Meland (1931, 665) and wide receptivity” (Wieman and Meland 1936, 293). In what I consider to be his most important statement on mystical naturalism, argued in both an article and in his first book, *Modern Man's Worship*, Meland (1934, 234) writes: “Have you ever communed in the first person with this total wealth of living life about you? Have you ever stood with awe and wonder before the unbounded totality of all reality—this ongoing process we call the universe, feeling your own intimacy with all its life, thrilling with the realization of the magnitude of that relationship, relating you to all the world's life, past, present and future? If you have, you have experienced first hand religion.” Not merely a metaphysical but a religious at-homeness “rooted in a biological and psychological at-oneness with its life!” (Meland 134, 146). Of the book's purpose, Meland ([1939] 2013, 86–87) claimed: “I tried to defend the thesis that religion in its basic form is an appreciative reaction, or an anesthetic (sic) response to the cosmic reality.” While again: “It means understanding this human response to life's meanings which the genuinely poetic and aesthetic person reveal with a view to discerning just what that kind of human response can convey of these deeper meanings that lie about us in everyday living like a haze, or a mist, confounding our vision because we do not have eyes to see what is so full of radiance and wonder” (Meland 2013, 51). Meland confronted the difference between mystical naturalism and religious humanism directly in 1935 when he published an article in the *The New Humanist* journal aptly titled “Mystical Naturalism and Religious Humanism.” The impetus for Meland's article was a reviewer's comments on his 1934 book wherein the reviewer suggested Meland was a “blood brother to the humanist” (Backus quoted in Meland 1935, 72).

Meland seems to have accepted the comparison but only “as a thorough going naturalist”; however, he was also keen to bring into focus “some important distinctions.” As to the journal article, whether Meland knew beforehand or not, a respondent's short comments—at the invitation of the editors—were attached. That respondent was noted philosophical naturalist and education reformer John Dewey.

While the gendered pronouns throughout the article grate somewhat now—and I have quoted them as used to remain faithful to the original—the thesis of Meland's article is clear: while both mystical naturalism and religious humanism

share the same “natural basis of man’s life”—indeed they are “cardinal tenets”—the difference between them is in each other’s response “to this realization that man is earthborn.” Meland (1935, 72) explains: “The Religious Humanist is impelled to exalt man, this ‘planet come to consciousness’ and to extend his cause throughout the natural domain. And as a result he is inclined to negate the significance of the wider-than-human aspects. The Mystical Naturalist, on the other hand, feels inspired to turn to these natural sources of man’s life with new devotion, and to discover, if possible, what actually sustains and promotes men and his kinsmen of the wild.” Meland (1935, 72) calls the religious humanist’s exaltation of the human “anthro-inflation,” a human-centered order of existence, that in the long run “will tend toward a spiritual decadence in man,” evoking a “kind of arrogance and self-sufficiency which can only eventuate in ego inflation.” “Man *is* earth-rooted, and has always been so,” but mystical naturalism promotes “a profound expression of praise and gratitude toward the Sources of being,” which are deeply organic and find “a spiritualizing motivation in the sense of belonging to a vast, cosmic neighbourhood, in which many forms of life seek fulfilment” (Meland 1935, 73–74). A “new” theism.

Such claims again echo the thoughts of Smith (1925, 368), who wrote ten years earlier: “It is my conviction that . . . the majority of persons will continue to feel that man belongs to the cosmic order in his spiritual as well as his physical existence.” And on the question of God, he wrote: “The character of God will be found in the experienced reciprocity between man and his environment, rather than in the realm of metaphysical causation. The modern trend in theology is decidedly in the direction of exploring mysticism rather than in a dependence on philosophy” (Smith 1925, 373).

For Meland, the heart of religion was an “appreciative response.” A response impelled from “a brush against the frontiers of reality” (Meland 1934, 26). A firsthand creature-feeling “to stir us with wonder, awe, and profound appreciation” (Meland 1934, 26). Thus, he boldly asks: What turns dogma, morals, and ritual into a religious response . . . a more venturesome religious spirit? “Religion is the reality entering . . . religion belongs with the arts, poetry, and friendship. Like the language of art, poetry, and friendship, the language of religion is suggestive, not descriptive or definitive. Its terms are employed not to describe the object of reference, but to vivify its total significance and to enhance emotional feeling for it” (Meland 1934, 185, 186).

Enter John Dewey. His contribution to the article is brief, less than a page in length and almost just a collection of throwaway lines. Immediately he agrees with Meland’s argument that humankind cannot be separated from nature and that such connection “must be fully reckoned with in the development of religious humanism” (Dewey 1935, 74). But he continues: “I do not think that any humanist would deny this, as though it may be that some humanists are inclined to minimize the natural basis of human life in comparison with

what is contributed by the distinctively human factor . . . Such differences as I have with Mr. Meland concerns his emphasis upon Mystical Naturalism as a necessary factor in Religious Humanism” (Dewey 1935, 74). Dewey then challenges Meland’s claim of any danger associated with “anthro-inflation.” “The question is,” Dewey (1935, 74, 75) argues, “whether mysticism is the only or, indeed, the proper and effective alternative and safeguard to and against such inflation . . . that it is primary . . . that it is universal, and therefore a necessary and imperative part of religious humanism.” Perhaps of related interest, Dewey (quoted in Wieman and Meland [1936, 281]) had been similarly forthright in earlier writings: “A humanist religion, if it excludes our relation to nature, is pale and thin, as it is presumptuous when it takes humanity as an object of worship . . . Nature’s place in man is no less significant than man’s place in nature. Man in nature is man subjected; nature in man recognized and used, is intelligence and art.”

To further explore the question of this essay, it may be helpful to briefly engage with two other religious humanists: Kenneth L. Patton and David E. Bumbaugh.

Patton, identified as one of the major poets and a prophet of contemporary liberal religion, was a voice for a poetic, naturalistic humanism at a time when most humanists were defining a religion of reason. For fifteen years, he was the minister of the experimental Universalist⁵ Charles Street Meeting House in Boston.⁶ He is also well known within such circles for his hymn:

*We are the earth upright and proud;
in us the earth is knowing.
Its winds are music in our mouths,
In us its rivers flowing.
The sun is our hearth-fire;
warm with the earth’s desire,
And with its purpose strong,
We sing earth’s pilgrim song;
in us the earth is growing.⁷*

In this hymn, Patton uses “we” to designate all of the world’s religions and cultures, and all humans. Colleague Bumbaugh, who will be introduced a little later, attempted to sum up Patton’s work, writing: “It was he who taught a monotone rationalism how to sing; it was he who taught a stumble-footed humanism how to dance; it was he who cried “Look!” and taught our eyes to see the glory in the ordinary.”⁸ Patton developed a poetic naturalistic mysticism around the themes of being at home in the universe coupled with a sense of mystery—both reminiscent of Meland. Seventy years ago, and many articles and addresses later, Patton penned a collection of essays entitled *Man’s Hidden Search*.

In familiar poetic language, he writes of humanism as “being-at-home” in the universe: “The person who has accomplished his at-homeness in the universe carries his being-at-home within him . . . The forests are as intimate to him as the wall-papered rooms of the house of his childhood. The wind comforts him . . . the sunlight is like his best friend’s recognizing laughter. A caterpillar crawling on the back of his hand is as rich and welcoming as his brother’s arm thrown across his shoulders . . . our bodies are native to the soil and the sea” (Patton 1954, 54, 55). While again: “When this occurs to men’s ideas and feelings about the earth, it accompanies and predicts a complementary change in man’s feeling about himself. When his earth becomes a part of the universe, man too becomes at home in the wider universe of which his planet is so humble a part . . . He is exhilarate. He breathes the wide interstellar spaces. . . . For this is the final wisdom of making ourselves at home” (Patton 1954, 63–64).

Coupled with this at-home sense, Patton (1954, 84, 93, 95) includes the sense of mystery: “[I]f we are properly sensitive and attuned to the flow and unity of the world the nettles of mystery will sting us in everything we touch . . . Do not look for a mystery extraordinary. Every awareness is the experience of mystery if we have become sensitive to it . . . If there is any rating of human experiences one above another in regard to worthfulness, that which we call mystical refers to a superiority in qualitative intensity and meaningfulness.” Such attention—Patton was to later call it “plentitude of being”—was necessary for humans to realize they had to move from being centered in the self, the family, and the country to also embracing a wider relationship with the world: the cosmic, the personal, the social. “Above all,” he writes in his 1965 Berry Street Essay, “one’s religion must offer the motivation to his own growth, achievement and becoming that he may avail himself to the fullness of reality, both known and unknown. This can become the ultimate goal of liberal religion” (Patton 1965, 2).

Bumbaugh, a humanist Unitarian Universalist minister and former professor of ministry at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago who strongly rejects the use of the term “God”—the term being so dangerous it is beyond rehabilitation, has been a persistent voice for a humanist language of reverence. Calling on the religious vision of the first *Humanist Manifesto*—“the Manifesto did not seek to abolish religion but rather to set out some imperatives by which to structure and revitalize religion”—he claims it also gave a language of reverence because “it provides a story rooted not in the history of a single tribe or a particular people, but a history rooted in the sum of our knowledge of the universe itself. It gave us a doctrine of incarnation which suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living

thing” (Bumbaugh 2003). According to Bumbaugh, a theology of reverence for humanists begins with an understanding of this story as a religious story:

- when it calls us out of our little selves
- when it whispers of a larger meaning to our existence
- when it implies a broader ethic for our lives
- when it invites us to awe.

A vision of reality that contains within it the sources of a moral, ethical, transcendent self-understanding, all centered within the ongoing scientific enterprise, the enlarging exploration of the universe, and humanity’s place in the universe. A religious story that invites us to awe and demands a vocabulary of reverence. “We are children of, expressions of a universe that is not only ‘stranger than we know, but stranger than we can know.’ It is incumbent upon us to challenge the parochial and limited claims of traditional religions with the enlarging and enriching and reverent story that is our story and their story: the Universe Story” (Bumbaugh 2003). While again: “We are called to define the *religious* and *spiritual* dimensions of the ecological crisis confronting the world and to preach the gospel of a world in which each is part of all and every one is sacred, and every place is holy ground” (Bumbaugh 1994, 38).

Despite the tendency by some preachers to claim otherwise, the religious humanism of both Patton and Bumbaugh is not anti-religion. However, they are anti-traditional and anti-supernaturalist religion. But the question remains: Does such humanistic religion meet Meland’s “anthro-inflation”—exalt a human-centered order of existence without necessarily tending towards a “spiritual decadence in man?” Theologian Tyron Inbody (1995, 48) states that both perspectives see humanity as a child of the Earth, a product of the natural order: “They differ, however, in their response to their recognition that humanity is earthbound.” Religious humanism promotes a human-centered order of existence. An “inflated” humanity! Mystical naturalism—“like the opening bud before the sun, [life] has outreach and expansiveness . . . with which brings fulfilment of life” (Meland 1937, 158)—promotes a sense of belonging to a vast, cosmic neighborhood 13.8 billion years in the making, shrapnel of a dead star, to reach this moment in time in which many forms of life seek fulfilment.

Perhaps simplified: Earth is *for* humankind versus an *expression* of Earth’s creativity. Or, as Meland (1934, 147) writes in *Modern Man’s Worship*, which most likely was the cause of the religious humanist’s objections in the first place, “Humanism has brought men to the halfway station. The Humanist has sloughed off his supernatural garb, but has not yet mustered up confidence enough to jump all the way into the cosmic sea . . . The super structure has

gone, but the age-old human hopes linger, either as haunting memories or as tenuous ideals, heroically defying truculent forces that threaten their undoing.” But there is an added component within Meland’s mystical naturalism absent from the religious humanists. The God concept, be it “a theistic interpretation of the universe along the empirical and naturalistic lines” (Meland 1931, 197–208). It is clear Meland rejects all traditional categories of deity. And while he never offers a clearly formulated or systematic concept of God—“the limitations of the human structure make any clarity and certainty about the ultimate mystery of existence impossible” (Inbody 1995, 176)—he does argue that “God” is an imaginative construct, a collective term, and is primarily a religious or contemplative concept valuable in worship rather than for “use in theoretical reflection that uses carefully crafted rational and instrumental terminology designed for understanding, explanation, and practical adjustments” (Stone 2017, 92).

Unpacking this a bit, in his essay on “Empirical Theists” in *American Philosophies of Religion*, Meland offers four hypotheses to which mystical naturalism (as originally shaped by his mentor Smith) seems to lead as it relates to the God concept—what he calls Creative Order:

1. That humankind may feel at home in the universe; there is more than mystical kinship with nature that leads to this affirmation.
2. The realization that humankind through the ages has been sustained and brought to a higher degree of fulfillment points to a Creative Order in the universe, “a community of activities, a sustaining process” that promotes human life.
3. This Creative Order, what the mystical naturalist calls “God,” may be progressively better known; a cooperative inquiry into the operations of this sustaining reality, the sensitive nature within nature as a mode of being attentive and caring, is a form of ultimate efficacy.
4. That religion be conceived as “adjustment and devotion to this Creative Order that sustains human life and brings it to high fulfillment . . . this Creative Order which is God” (Wieman and Meland 1936, 291–95).

“Mystical naturalism,” Meland concludes, “seeks the maximum fulfillment of human life through intelligent devotion to the Creative Order at every level of its operations” (Wieman and Meland 1936, 295). His Creative Order stands in contrast to the neo-orthodoxy of the Barthians, anthropocentrism, and personalism, and while it may veer towards it, it is not the full-blown pantheism of Bernard E. Loomer or the rationalism of Alfred N. Whitehead’s “organic” process thought. “Meland’s concept of God is a form of naturalistic theism,” writes Inbody (1995, 197–98) again, “the sensitive nature within nature. God is not nature as such or an essential structure of nature, but the sensitivity

working toward a more subtle and complex range of meanings within nature. It is this alone, ambiguous as it is within the complexities of the creative passage, that is adequate for religious devotion.”

Perhaps by way of putting some icing on the cake,” contemporary postmodern philosopher John D. Caputo (2023, 59), in his “What to Believe?” series of lectures, suggests:

The first order of business is to shake the supernatural attitude, to suspend it, because it is the source of the trouble with religion and theology. This is easier said than done because it has deep roots in an ancient psycho cosmology . . . But, if we can put it out of action, we will see what is really going on in religion, without the illusion, without the mystification, without the mythologization. And then we will be able to get to what we really believe, what is the radical theological point, which is . . . the mystical sense of life.

And a few pages further on: “This requires . . . an ear sensitive to what is sounding from the depth . . . the distinction between the poetic and the prosaic . . . a poetics, a theopoetics, which resonates with the depths, pre-consciously, pre-conceptually, pre-prepositionally in song and story and symbols, not in syllogisms” (Caputo 2023, 73–74).

I reckon the 1934 mystical naturalism of Bernard Eugene Meland would welcome a conversation!

Notes

- ¹ Westar Institute is a member-supported nonprofit research and education organization, founded in 1986, that bridges the gap between scholarship about religion and the perception of religion in popular culture.
- ² Sellars had a brief stint at the University of Chicago in the summer of 1906.
- ³ Sellars, quoted in Wieman and Meland (1936, 264).
- ⁴ “The most singular influence on Meland during his graduate years [at Chicago] was Smith” (Inbody 1995, 14).
- ⁵ The Universalists and Unitarians were still courting at this time!
- ⁶ Patton redefined the meaning of the word Universalism by bringing the arts of all religions and cultures into “a religion for one world.”
- ⁷ © Kenneth L. Patton 1980. #303.Verse 1. *Singing the Living Tradition*.
- ⁸ Quoted from “Biographical Information,” *Harvard Square Library*. (Accessed September 5, 2025.)

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