Controversies in Early Religious Naturalism

Jerome A. Stone

Within the last several decades religious naturalism has become an increasingly important theological perspective, and it is therefore instructive to examine the major disagreements among its early proponents. From the 1920s to the 1950s there were a number of published exchanges between exponents of religious naturalism. These exchanges represent important differences which continue to shape discussion. Some readers who admire harmony may see these points of disagreement as questions which should be resolved. Others, including myself, view these as continuing issues, grappling with which can be sources of continuing creativity.

Let me propose a quick definition. Naturalism is a set of beliefs and attitudes that focuses on this world. It involves the assertion that there seems to be no ontologically distinct and superior realm (such as God, soul, or heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world. While this world does not provide by itself all of the meaning that we would like, it provides enough meaning for us to cope. Religious naturalism is the type of naturalism which affirms that there are some events or processes in the world that elicit responses that can appropriately be called religious.

The major topics and writers to be treated here are: the meaning of naturalism (Santayana and Dewey), the relationship between human good and the object of religious orientation (Bernhardt and Wieman), the unity of the object of religious orientation (Dewey and Wieman), the theistic question within naturalism (naturalistic theists and religious humanists), and the nature of empirical inquiry (Wieman and Meland).

1. The Meaning of Naturalism

In 1925 George Santayana reviewed Dewey's *Experience and Nature* in the *Journal of Philosophy*. Dewey replied early in 1927 (Santayana 1925, 367-84; Dewey 1984, 73-81; Shaw 1995, 74-77). For Santayana, naturalism asserts that all causes and conditions are material. Nature, for Santayana, is the great background of human life, and we should not view it as it appears from the perspective of the human foreground. He saw Dewey as the latest way of making the human foreground to be dominant, whereby nature has only the values it receives from human valuation. To humanize nature as Dewey has done is to misunderstand it. Values do not disclose nature, but rather reveal human interests. A genuine naturalism must not adopt a privileged viewpoint. Dewey's naturalism is "half-hearted and short-winded. It is a spurious kind of naturalism" (Santayana 1925, 375).

Dewey continued the banter, replying that Santayana's naturalism was "broken-backed," that is, disrupts the continuity of experience by a bifurcation between nature and humanity (Dewey 1984, 74). (Actually Santayana's bifurcation was not between nature and humanity, but between the real and the ideal or, in his later writings, between matter and spirit.)

Three separate issues appear to be involved here. One is the relation of human ideals to material conditions. Is there a bifurcation between ideals and material conditions, as Santayana maintained, or is there a basic continuity between them, as Dewey held. Later discussion among naturalists has tended to agree with Dewey. A second is the issue of the foreground. Santayana maintained that Dewey focused on the human enterprise, ignoring the immense background of the natural world. Dewey held that he was not denying the reality of this background, but rather focusing attention on the problems of humanity without denying this background (Dewey 1984, 76). At this point it must be noted that there continues a strong interest among many naturalists in the nonhuman world. This problem of the foreground and background is related to another issue, not made explicit in this exchange. This question is whether the religious orientation is primarily a matter of dedication and striving and whether the object of the religious orientation should be conceived of in those terms. For Dewey, in *A Common Faith,* religion has a moral cast (Dewey 1934), while Santayana could appreciate a wide range of religious responses, as is borne out not only in his "Reason in Religion" (Santayana 1922, chap. 3), but also in his little jewel on Spinoza (Santayana 1936).

2. The Moral Determinacy of God

A second exchange took place in the *Journal of Religion* in 1943 and 1944 between Henry Nelson Wieman and William Bernhardt of Iliff Seminary in Denver. (See Bernhardt 1942, 1959a, 1959b; Wieman 1943a, 1943b, 1944; see also Shaw 1995, chap. 5.) Marvin Shaw, in *Nature's Grace*, points out that this exchange grew out of correspondence between Bernhardt and Wieman. Shaw suggests that three questions were involved in these exchanges: is God to be understood primarily as the source of value for humans or as the creative power at work in the entire universe, is God immanent or transcendent, and is God perceived or inferred (Shaw 1995, 88).

Wieman's best-known book refers to God through its title as *The Source of Human Good* (Wieman 1946). Bernhardt calls this an "Agathonic" view of God (from the Greek *agathos* or "good"). He contrasts it with his own "Dynamic" or "Pure Realism" view of God, so called because *dynamis* or "power," not goodness, is the chief category for understanding God. This debate is cast in terms of what Shaw calls "naturalistic theism," that is, assuming the appropriateness of God-language, the debate concerns the nature of God. In more recent discussions, this debate is not limited to those who use theistic language. Whether the writer refers to God, Nature, or experiences of the sacred, this debate is still very much with us. Charles Milligan, William Dean, Donald Crosby, and Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme would line up with Bernhardt, although not necessarily using the term "God." Charley Hardwick, and myself (until recently), would agree with Wieman, again not necessarily using theistic language. Sharon Welch has changed her position on this issue, while Karl Peters and Gordon Kaufman have managed to produce a nuanced and balanced view.

The second question Shaw finds in the exchange between Bernhardt and Wieman is whether the divine is immanent within or transcendent over nature. It seems as if this question is settled in favor of immanence for religious naturalists. However, the present writer finds that the concepts of "relative" or "situational and continuing transcendence" point to important questions as we seek to understand our experiences

of the sacred within a naturalistic framework. These are issues which I have sought to explore in my writings on “the minimalist model of transcendence.” (See Stone 1992, Chap. 1.)

The third question in the Bernhardt-Wieman exchange, whether God is inferred or perceived, may seem like scholastic triviality. Actually, from within a naturalistic orientation, it points to an important issue.

For Bernhardt, God is the object of inference (at least in philosophy of religion). For Wieman, God is perceived, but he labored long in refining his definition which relates the term “God” to perception. This is part of his empirical methodology. If God is defined as the process of integration within human life or as the creative good, then we know what to look for as we perceive. (See *inter alia*, Wieman 1987, 34.)

My suggestion is that the religious life involves a transaction with or orientation toward events or aspects of the world which can be called “sacred” and for which I use the theoretical term “relative transcendence.” These aspects or occasions are perceived, but more important, they are *appreciated.* Perception and evaluation are seldom separated, certainly not within the religious transaction. The use of the term “appreciation” also helps point out that agreement in appreciation is possible, but not necessary, thus avoiding the necessity of agreement among trained observers which is desired in empirical inquiry. Furthermore, it is granted that a tradition, religious or otherwise, may shape appreciation, but to be shaped is not the same as to be determined. The fact that my own appreciation has been shaped by the various faith traditions in which I share or study, by Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Delores LaChapelle as well as by Dewey, Ames, Wieman, and Meland, does not mean that I appreciate only what I have been trained to do. Influence and training are not the same as bias or distortion (Stone 1992, 122).

3. The Unity of God

In an exchange between John Dewey and Henry Nelson Wieman in *The Christian Century* in 1933 and 1934, the ideas of both thinkers were clarified (Dewey 1933a, 1933b; Wieman 1933. Dewey’s *A Common Faith,* which appeared in 1934, was based on the Terry Lectures at Yale given in the same year). Dewey stressed the plurality of the “factors in experience that generate and support our idea of the good as an end to be striven for” while Wieman stressed their unity.

In *The Christian Century,* Dewey asserted:

> There are in existence conditions and forces which, apart from human desire and intent, bring about enjoyed and enjoyable goods….Does this admitted fact throw any light whatsoever upon the *unity and singleness* of the forces and factors which make for good? (Dewey 1933a)

The word “God” is:

> ...used simply to designate a multitude of factors and forces which are brought together simply with respect to their coincidence in producing one undesigned effect—the furtherance of good in human life (Dewey 1933a).

This is a rejection of Wieman's conception of God, understood by Dewey to be the "hypostatization" of the "experience of things, persons, causes, found to be good and worth cherishing, into a single objective existence, *a* God."

Furthermore, while some people get an added ecstasy from the concentration of emotion which this unification can bring, this emotion gives no added validity to the idea of God as a unified being. Indeed, a life lived without this concept is not only legitimate, but may even be saner for many people:

> Those who choose distribution of objects of devotion, service and affection rather than hypostatic concentration are…within their intellectual and moral rights….For the great majority of persons this is much the saner course to follow (Dewey 1933a, 196).

In a further contribution to the exchange Dewey reiterated his point. Dewey points out that in *A Common Faith* he had referred to "many natural forces and conditions which generate and sustain our ideal end." The "unification" of these forces and conditions in the concept of God "is the work of human imagination and will" (Dewey 1934b, 1551).

Wieman emphasized the unity of these forces. This is still within the naturalistic outlook, since God as the unity of these forces is conceived of as within the totality of natural forces. At times Wieman's language stressed this unity. In *The Issues of Life,* published a few years before this exchange with Dewey, he wrote that God "is that *one particular* order of nature, both existent and possible, which includes and mediates the greatest value that is to be achieved" (Wieman 1930, 130, italics mine). In *The Source of Human Good*, his most famous work, he refers to "a single, total event continuously recurrent in human existence" (Wieman 1946, 66). At other times he suggests that this is a complex unity. Bernard Loomer's image of a "web" might suggest the type of unity Wieman is aiming at (Loomer 1987, 31-42). "Now then, is that wealth of reality we call God one or many? It is both. From the standpoint of practical efficiency and scientific analysis, it is many. From the standpoint of loving devotion it is one. The same is true of Mr. Jones or my home or anything else" (Wieman 1933, 727). However, the important aspect is the unity. "It is the oneness, not the manyness, of God that is most important. This is so because it is the unity, the organic connectedness, of the conditions which constitute the good" (Wieman 1933*,* 727).

Dewey made clear that these natural conditions and forces are not objects of love or adoration:

> The important thing is the fact that certain objective forces, of a great variety of kinds, actually promote human wellbeing, that the efficacy of these forces is increased by human attention to and care for the working of these forces….That which makes for good (singular or collective) demands care, attention, watchfulness….But there is nothing…to demand love and adoration (Dewey 1933b, 395).

The task that Dewey leaves the contemporary religious naturalist is to clarify what is to go in the place of love and adoration, which seem to require a personal object and a submissive attitude. For example, some current religious naturalists speak of a sense of mystery, awe, or wonder. Also, the issue of the unity or plurality of the object of the religious orientation needs to be addressed.

4. The Legitimacy of the Term "God"

Another question at issue in earlier religious naturalism was the debate between religious humanists and what we may call naturalistic theists concerning the legitimacy of belief in God within a naturalistic framework. Seven names should be mentioned as at least apparent naturalists who continued to use theistic language: George Burman Foster, Shailer Mathews, Frederick May Eliot, William Bernhardt, Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Loomer, and Ralph Wendell Burhoe.

Although G. B. Foster spoke of the death of the supernatural God, at least in his 1909 publication *The Function of Religion in Man's Struggle for Existence*, he continued to use the term God. One of his key statements is that "the word God is a symbol to designate the universe in its ideal-achieving capacity" (Foster 1909, 109; Peden & Stone 1996, 1:52. For a discussion of Foster's interpreters, see my "The Line between Religious Naturalism and Humanism: G. B. Foster and A. E. Haydon," Stone 1999). His other key statement is that just as we have developed an immanent notion of the soul or mind, so too we can and should develop an analogous immanent notion of God (Foster 1909, 20-22; Peden & Stone 1996, 1:45-46).

Shailer Mathews, dean of the Divinity School at Chicago, thought theism was an important alternative to humanism. He always thought of himself as standing within the Christian tradition, however much revision it needed. I have always read his definition of God in his later writings as belonging within the naturalistic framework. One version in *Is God Emeritus?* reads: "While the term *God* was assumed to imply a personal existence, *it was in reality an anthropomorphic conception of those personality-producing activities of the universe with which humanity is organically united"* (Mathews 1940,34, italics in original; see Mathews 1931). In reading the last essay in his earlier *Contributions of Science to Religion,* there seems to be some ambiguity concerning his naturalism which was later resolved (Mathews 1924). I suggest this was a transitional writing.

A figure who, in my judgment, was a theistic naturalist was Frederick May Eliot, Unitarian pastor in St. Paul and later president of the American Unitarian Association, 1937-58. In *Toward Belief in God* Eliot equated his belief in God with "belief in the reality and significance of three great experiences," the moral imperative, a rational order behind the mystery and darkness of life, and the "insight which tells me that I am not an accidental collocation of atoms but that I am a child of the universe and heir to all its glories" (Eliot 1928, 93-94).

There is an important difference between the philosophy of language of the Unitarian humanist John Dietrich and Eliot. Dietrich wished to drop God-language as being more honest than the liberal's equivocation. For Eliot, religion is found in depths which lie too deep for words, but gestures, including gestures in words, can give expression to them.

When it comes to the term “God,” Eliot is quite deliberate. The word “God” is “the simplest and the most familiar of all the symbolic forms by which belief in the purposefulness of the universe can be expressed” (Eliot 1928, 107).Eliot grants that some people are unwilling to use the term “because it has meant such very different things to different people, and they are afraid of being constantly misunderstood.” Remember that John Dietrich was preaching across the river in Minneapolis. Eliot thinks the advantages of using the term outweigh the difficulties.

“When I use the word ‘God,’” writes Eliot, “I am using a symbol for the reality that I believe exists behind the deepest convictions of my own mind and heart,” convictions which he has described in terms “the moral law, the rational nature of the universe, the kinship of my life with the universe, and the element of purposefulness.” Furthermore, his conviction is that there is a reality behind these experiences and the term “God” can be used to summarize and symbolize the reality of these convictions and “their authority over my life” (Eliot 1928, 107-08).

Eliot grants that it is possible to find some better word than “God,” such as Julian Huxley’s phrase “sacred reality.” However, there are practical difficulties:

> It is obviously cumbersome, and unfamiliar, and awkward. Furthermore, it lacks the connotations which grow up about a word through long use in certain definite circumstances, and for this reason it lacks the emotional quality which a religious symbol needs (Eliot 1928, 109-10).

Henry Nelson Wieman was probably the most influential theistic naturalist. He was brought to the Divinity School at Chicago to counter the influence of the humanist A. Eustace Haydon. It is quite clear that Wieman, although a religious naturalist, clearly utilized the concept of God, at least until he left the Divinity School. (See Wieman 1930, chap. 6; Daniel Day Williams, “Wieman as a Christian Theologian,” Sec. 2 in Bretall 1963.)

Bernard Loomer identified God with the “concrete, interconnected totality” of the world as a whole. He explicitly asks: “Why deify this interconnected web of existence by calling it ‘God’? Why not simply refer to the world and to the processes of life?” Especially since “God is not an enduring concrete individual with a sustained subjective life, what is gained by this perhaps confusing, semantic identification?” His answer is reminiscent of Eliot.

> In our tradition the term ‘God’ is the symbol of ultimate values and meanings in all their dimensions. It connotes an absolute claim on our loyalty. It bespeaks a primacy of trust, and a priority within the ordering of our commitments. It points the direction of a greatness of fulfillment. It signifies a richness of resources for the living of life at its depths (Loomer 1987).

Ralph Wendell Burhoe was another theistic naturalist. For Burhoe, God was equivalent to the process of evolution, biological and cultural. The process whereby new species and individuals and new cultural forms were developed was seen as the creativity of God in traditional religious language. Somewhat like Bernhardt, the process

whereby species, individuals, and cultural forms were destroyed was seen as the judgment of God in traditional religious language (Burhoe 1981, 73).

The issue as to whether to use the term "God" within a naturalistic framework continues today. Donald Crosby and Karl Peters, for example, stand at opposite sides of this issue. It is significant that Peters draws explicitly upon the resources of both Wieman and Burhoe (Peters 2002, 3-4). For my own comments on the term, see *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence,* 18-21 (Stone 1992). I draw on Loomer, but with a greater reticence to use theistic language.

On the topic of God I find that religious naturalists tend to fall into four groups: (1) those who **t**hink of God as the totality of the universe considered religiously, (2) those who conceive of God as the creative process within the universe, (3) those who think of God as the sum of human ideals, and (4) those who do not speak of God yet still can be called religious. In the first belong Spinoza, Samuel Alexander, George Burman Foster, Frederick May Eliot, and Bernard Loomer. In the second group belong, among others, Shailer Mathews, Henry Nelson Wieman, Ralph Wendell Burhoe, Karl Peters, and also, I would claim, William Dean. Some humanists fall into the third group. The fourth includes Usrula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, Willem Drees, and myself. The first two groups might be called naturalistic theists, following Marvin Shaw's description of the Chicago naturalists and Karl Peters's self-designation (Shaw 1995, 13-31; Peters 2002, vii).

5. The Nature of Empirical Inquiry

The final controversy within early religious naturalism which we wish to examine concerns the nature of empirical inquiry in religion. The key figures are Wieman and Bernard Meland. Wieman had been Meland's much-respected teacher at Chicago in the late 1920s. Wieman made a powerful impression on several people (Meland 1962, 109-11). He came bringing a sense of the reality and objectivity of God in naturalistic terms but with a sense that God is more than our conceptions of God. Some of the faculty, especially Shailer Mathews, had been inclined toward a "conceptual theism" in which God is our conception of the personality-producing forces in the universe, and Wieman's thought challenged the incipient subjectivity of this. (Actually I have always thought that this charge of subjectivity is overblown. I always felt that Mathews stressed the word "of.") Further, with the Whiteheadean categories of his early days, Wieman brought a metaphysical dimension to the discussion at the Divinity School, which had been dominated by the sociohistorical approach of Mathews, G. B. Smith, and Shirley Jackson Case. The irony is that this metaphysical emphasis was later forsaken by Wieman, but taken up at Chicago by Hartshorne, Loomer, and, to some extent, by Daniel Day Williams.

When Meland started teaching he and Wieman worked together, on *American Philosophies of Religion.* Within a common commitment to what they termed empirical religious naturalism, they began to discover their differences. As Meland put it, they agreed to go their separate ways, Wieman to develop a science of religion focusing on the manageable aspects of experience, Meland on the unmanageable. Meland wrote a number of papers and pages on Wieman, becoming a friendly critic of Wieman's attempt to articulate the depths of faith within a precise and objective language.

Wieman and Meland were colleagues briefly at Chicago in the 1940s. After that, Meland continued to teach Wieman to his students, although Wieman's last books did not loom large in Meland's scholarship. Meland's criticism of Wieman was largely a one-way street.

For Wieman, everyday and scientific empirical inquiry are the standard for religious inquiry. There is only one method of separating truth from falsehood, and religious inquiry is a subset of this method. He distinguishes four phases of empirical inquiry: (1) the emergence of a hypothesis, (2) the specification of this insight in precise and unambiguous language, (3) the elaboration of observable consequences through tracing the logical implications of the hypothesis, and (4) testing the hypothesis through the observation (or lack) of the predicted consequences. Note the significance of specification for prediction and testing. "Seeking to specify as accurately as possible is what we understand science to be" (Wieman 1987*,* 34).

On this model of empirical inquiry, once the hypothesis and the observable consequences have been specified, there should be agreement among competent observers. Wieman cites as an instance of the lack of agreement among observers the biblical interpretation of Carnell, Tillich, Barth, and Bultmann. One might expect that Wieman might welcome this as an opportunity for creative interchange. But there is no creative interchange because, according to Wieman, "there is no agreement on the principles of inquiry nor on what to seek when they seek Christ" (Wieman 1987**,** 61). It is clear that Wieman demands definitional agreement on the specifics of what is to be observed and observational agreement on what is observed. (For my critique of the naivete of this type of demand, see Stone 1992, 151-53.)

Meland has an alternative to Wieman's notion of empirical inquiry. Meland calls his approach, following William James, "radical empiricism." A good way to begin to understand this is to examine his concept of appreciative awareness. By this phrase he is trying to denote a way of apprehending fuller aspects of experience than is usually available to our thinking. This way is:

> holistic and appreciative, aiming at opening one's conscious awareness to the full impact of the concrete occurrence. It is very much like allowing one's visual powers to accommodate themselves to the enveloping darkness until, in their more receptive response…one begins to see into the darkness and to detect in it the subtleties of relationships and tendencies which has eluded one (Meland 1969, 292).

Rational thought, with its drive toward clarity and precision, is often held up as the ideal of thinking. Meland, however, points out that much of the world is too complex to fit into our clear and distinct ideas. He does not deny the idea of clarity and precision, but wishes to point to the aspects of experience that overflow their boundaries. A radical empiricism recognizes these complexities instead of restricting its view of the world to a truncated version, manageable but lacking in concrete fullness.

Appreciative awareness is what Meland calls this discernment of the penumbra of complexity and concreteness surrounding the area of luminous clarity. This awareness is not a special faculty. It is the attempt to be more fully aware. It uses emotion, not to lose objectivity, but to perceive more fully, as in the empathetic

understanding of a person or culture. The insights thus gained must often be communicated in poetry, images, metaphors, and myth rather than in analytic language.

We must be careful to avoid obscurantism here. Meland insists that appreciative awareness needs to be trained, disciplined, and criticized.

Appreciative awareness or sensitive discernment allows us to avoid the dichotomy between the rational and the moral approaches to religion, both of which, in Meland's view, suffer from the attempt to reduce reality to its manageable aspects. Meland's critique of the history of liberal theology is a development of this insight. Here Meland follows Schleiermacher's concern to move beyond the reduction of religion to its rational (orthodoxy and Hegel) and moral (Kant) dimensions. The question today is whether this move can be made within the limits of a naturalistic outlook. I believe that it can.

Appreciative awareness includes a sensitivity to past evaluations and sensitivities in one's culture. Meland calls the network of these valuations a communal structure of experience. At this point, religious naturalism needs to learn to have an appreciative appropriation of the religious heritage of humanity, especially the tradition of one's own community. Santayana, Haydon, and Meland began this task, which is why their thinking is so much richer than that of, say, Dietrich or Wieman. Dean, Kaufman, and others continue this task to this day. Chapter Four of my own *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*, "A Generous Empiricism," is an attempt to develop Meland's radical empiricism (Stone 1992, 111-68, especially 111-14. For my criticism of Wieman's lack of historical awareness, see 151-55).

As noted at the outset, these issues continue to shape the discussion among contemporary religious naturalists who bring new and creative insights to bear on them. As a theological perspective religious naturalism is still young, and there is a great deal yet to be said and written about it, but it is clearly speaking with power and relevance to the current religious situation.

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