

## A 'WILD'<sup>1</sup> MYSTICISM? COURTSHIP OF THE PARTICULAR...

“When the meanings which regulate our lives do not make us more vividly and widely aware of hands and smiles and glancing eyes and wind and cloud and dust and flower, our meanings are not properly functioning”

(Henry Nelson Wieman)<sup>2</sup>

The year was 1931.

Not long home from post graduate studies in Germany at the University of Marburg with “the foremost theologian and mystic”<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Otto, and still shaping his version of ‘mystical naturalism’<sup>4</sup>, a young American empirical theologian, Bernard Eugene Meland, in his first teaching appointment penned an article called “*The Worship Mood*”.

In that article he wrote:

“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 realisation 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.”<sup>5</sup>

I have shared this quote on several occasions, both in spoken presentations and in various writings. And I do so because for me it is such an ideas-shattering suggestion.

Hopefully it can give a clue

as to what contemporary mystical naturalism might look and feel like.

So the question mark in the title is important: a query rather than a declaration.

As others have suggested the naturalist mystic “approaches life with the sensitivity of the poet.”<sup>6</sup>

To respond appreciatively to reality envisaged as a whole.

To feel at home in the universe.

Meland was highly critical of religion that fostered

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Wild’ is not meant in the colloquial sense of ‘out of control’ rather to refer to the natural, innate way the world was created: not controlled or tamed or domesticated... (Loorz, *Church*, 6)

<sup>2</sup> Wieman, *Religious*, 340.

<sup>3</sup> Inbody, *Constructive*, 15

<sup>4</sup> Meland saw his work as a continuation of his former professor’s work, Gerald Birney Smith

<sup>5</sup> Meland, “*Worship*”, 665. Also in *Modern*, 234

<sup>6</sup> Wieman & Meland, *American*, 292

“a sense of strangeness”<sup>7</sup> toward the natural world.

“As long as this emotional barrier persists, the religious man (sic) faces a serious dilemma, for until he does become emotionally oriented in the universe, his religion can never be genuinely integrated in the affairs of the natural world.”<sup>8</sup>

And that integration is shaped most creatively when we adopt a lifestyle that follows the advice of poets and mystics...

Pay attention!

Rejoice in it!

Care for it!

Cultivate a culture of reverence and gratitude!

For instance, paying attention, this particular observer shared her feelings on Autumn:

“the crowning glory of seasons... is the rainbow of dying leaves in autumn. Technicolor has nothing on biology in the fall.”<sup>9</sup>

oo0oo

So what of mysticism?

A blend of both supernaturalism and idealism, traditional mysticism supports the notion that knowledge of the divine

“comes to one who is properly attuned, in moments of heightened awareness”.<sup>10</sup>

While early western mysticism began to take shape around the third century it found a special expression in medieval times, onward,

with such persons as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1328) and Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), to name but a few.

The late County Clare Irish philosopher and poet, John O’Donohue (1956-2008) studied Meister Eckhart’s thought in a post-doctoral program, and suggests

that Eckhart’s ‘wild’ - his word - that Eckhart’s ‘wild’ God

“was that there is nothing closer to us than God. That is what made the Church suspicious of him—that he brought God too much down to earth...”<sup>11</sup>

And again:

“‘Wild’ is something you cannot tame—and I suppose one of the things institutional religion does is to have a few ‘official tamers’ on hand in case the divine thing wakens up in too wild a way.”<sup>12</sup>

O’Donohue claimed that Eckhart believed everything had its origin in the mind of God.

---

<sup>7</sup> Meland, “*Kinsmen*”, 443

<sup>8</sup> Meland, “*Kinsmen*”, 443

<sup>9</sup> Shaver, “*Awe*”, 1

<sup>10</sup> Meland, “*Mysticism Modern*”, 83

<sup>11</sup> O’Donohue, *Walking*, 31-32

<sup>12</sup> O’Donohue, *Walking*, 34

“...people, landscapes, oceans, stars, birds, stones, flowers-none of them are here by accident, but each of them was born within the mind of God... a very artistic notion of the divine imagination.”<sup>13</sup>

The reward for Eckhart’s ‘wild God’ belief was to be condemned as a heretic!  
Eckhart had transgressed the traditional monotheistic tradition of transcendence.

Vertical transcendence.

Hierarchical vertical transcendence.

“The direction is vertical; the ultimate and the absolute are at the top. Order triumphs over messiness, coherence negates confusion, beauty trumps ugliness, purpose defeats meaninglessness. As we ascend... so do we satisfy our hierarchical impulse to rise above what we were.”<sup>14</sup>

But there is another understanding of transcendence  
which Eckhart’s thought may well have been exploring...

At least I’d like to think he was giving it a gentle nudge!

Horizontal transcendence.

“[A]bout responding to the nature of nature with attunement and participation and delight.”<sup>15</sup>

In the horizontal mode, spiritual cultivation is a shared experience.  
Responding appropriately to our situation.

“Horizontal transcendence is not about hierarchy; it is about being part of the whole, being alive to all. It is infused with humility.”<sup>16</sup>

In the vertical mode, spiritual cultivation is solitary and unrooted.  
Responding is fitting into an ideal scheme.

All religious orientations offer a reward.

Vertical transcendence’s reward is hierarchical traditions unified with a purposeful Creator.

Horizontal transcendence’s reward is homecoming, an attunement with nature,  
and our delight in participating in the great unfolding.

Re-enchantment of the universe.

Quoting farmer and poet Wendell Berry, Victoria Looz of *Church of the Wild* writes:

“‘People exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love. To defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know.’ This is a courtship of the particular.”<sup>17</sup>

‘Courtship of the particular’...

What another interesting and poetic phrase.

---

<sup>13</sup> O’Donohue, *Walking*, 33

<sup>14</sup> Goodenough, “*Vertical*”, 24

<sup>15</sup> Goodenough, “*Vertical*”, 26

<sup>16</sup> Goodenough, “*Vertical*”, 30

<sup>17</sup> Looz, *Church*, 128

For me I place this alongside Rabbi Abraham Heschel's, comment  
that human beings are 'the cantors of the universe'...  
able to sing praise and thanks in the name of all the rest.

So, take a stone. A 'particular' stone.

Perhaps one from the oldest rocks in Western Australia, that are 4.3 billion years old.

Or a stone - a gift between a Gentoo penguin to another during 'courting',  
which acknowledges their monogamous relationship.

Or one from the island of Iona in western Scotland.

(Such as the ones I brought back from Iona<sup>18</sup> in 1990.)

Hurling through space in some asteroid belt when earth got in the way,

(as did the 60 meter wide asteroid or space rock which sailed past Earth unnoticed  
in July 2023.)

Here long before we were ever dreamed.

Holding out against transience.

Always faithfully there.

Perfectly silent.<sup>19</sup>

John O'Donohue again:

"These rocks remember and preserve in their clear interiority the primal silence from an  
aeon before life risked itself into texture, before individuality ever discovered its inner  
mirror".<sup>20</sup>

Courtship of the particular...

Pay attention!

Rejoice in it!

Care for it!

Cultivate a culture of reverence and gratitude!

oo0oo

Whether or not we believe that there is something more, that is, nature with or without g-o-d,  
nature is so significant that all our beliefs must be reformulated  
so as to take nature into account.

As such this will require us to abandon our primary understanding of Earth  
as a natural resource for unlimited human use

"to a primary understanding of Earth... as the source whence we were born, the  
nourishment that sustains us while we are living, our healing in moments of distress,  
and the way to our final destiny".<sup>21</sup>

Theistic persons traditionally offer reverence to a *supernatural* deity.

---

<sup>18</sup> Iona, on the Atlantic edge of British Isles, and the sixth-century birthplace of Scottish Christianity, is a place of international pilgrimage

<sup>19</sup> This section indebted to O'Donohue reflections, *Four Elements*

<sup>20</sup> O'Donohue, *Elements*, 148

<sup>21</sup> Berry, *Universe*, 168

Theistic naturalists conceive of g-o-d as the creative process within the universe.  
Non-theistic persons are called to revere the whole enterprise of planetary existence.  
Without reverence we will gradually descend into ecocide.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever else scientific thinking has contributed,  
it has certainly amplified the activity and scope of the natural world,  
away from the *supernatural* to the natural.

“Science is a flirt with the unknown... Yet, as it embraces the quest for knowledge, it lifts the human spirit and brings, through the joy of discovery, a touch of the magical in our lives.”<sup>23</sup>

Taking nature to heart, suggests philosopher Jerome Stone,  
“does not leave a person with any fewer spiritual benefits than taking to heart the teachings of *supernaturalist* traditions.”<sup>24</sup>

We don't need to look for *supernatural* revelation.  
We simply need to recognise the sacrality of everything around us.  
“Sacrality is a specific affirmation and appreciation of that which is fundamentally important in life, or that which is ultimately valued: relational nature.”<sup>25</sup>

To recognise... or as Celtic spirituality teacher John Philip Newell unfolds  
in his most recent book, *Sacred Earth Sacred Soul*, to ask:

“Why was there concern around the world during the Australian fires of 2019 when millions of creatures were dying in the blaze? Why did the #MeToo movement take off so quickly in recent years in which hundreds of thousands of women came forward to speak out against abuse? Why did the Black Lives Matter protests burst onto the international stage within days of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis? In each of these situations, deep down, we knew something sacred was at stake. And we woke up.”<sup>26</sup>

A ‘wild’ mysticism?

Practice noticing and listening!  
Inhale and absorb nature's elixir!  
Make nature central to any belief system  
Follow the rhythm of nature through the seasons  
Be open to journeying in trackless ‘heretical’ places.

A ‘wild’ mysticism!  
Hosannah! Not in the highest, but right here, right now, this.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> London, “Wonder...” Interview. Also Brussatt, *Interview*

<sup>23</sup> Gleiser. “Mystery”, 1

<sup>24</sup> Stone, *Sacred*, 116

<sup>25</sup> White, *Black*, 33

<sup>26</sup> Newell, *Sacred Earth*, 1-2

<sup>27</sup> Goodenough, *Sacred*, 212

## Bibliography

- Berry, T. **The Sacred Universe. Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century.** (ed) M. E. Tucker. New York. Columbia University Press, 2009
- Brussatt, F. "An Interview with Sam Keen". *Spirituality & Practice*, (Accessed 18/2/2020)
- Gleiser, M. "Embracing the Mystery". **Orbiter 13.8 Blog**. 19 March 2019. (Accessed 22/3/2019)
- Goodenough, U. **The Sacred Depths of Nature. How Life has Emerged and Evolved.** Second Edition. New York. Oxford University Press, 2023
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Vertical and Horizontal Transcendence" in **Zygon 36**, 1, (March 2001), 21 - 31
- Inbody, T. **The Constructive Theology of Bernard Meland. Postliberal Empirical Realism.** Georgia. Scholars Press, 1995
- London, S. "Renewing Our Sense of Wonder: An Interview with Sam Keen". scott.london. (This interview was adapted from the public radio series "**Insight & Outlook**." It was published in the October 1999 issue of **The Sun** magazine under the title "**On the Flying Trapeze: Sam Keen Ponders How to Be Free.**" (Accessed 2/2/2020)
- Loorz, V. **Church of the Wild. How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred.** Minneapolis, Broadleaf Books, 2021
- Meland, B. E. "Mysticism in Modern Terms" (1939) published in (ed) J. N. Gaston & W. C. Peden. **Bernard Eugene Meland's Unpublished Papers**, Newcastle upon Tyne. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 2013
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The Mystic Returns", **Journal of Religion 17**, 2, (1937), 146-160. (Accessed 18/7/2020)
- \_\_\_\_\_, **Modern Man's Worship. A Search for Reality in Religion.** New York. Harper & Brothers, 1934
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Kinsmen of the Wild. Religious Moods in Modern American Poetry". **The Sewanee Review 41**, (1933) 443-453. (Accessed 16/6/2020)
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The Worship Mood" in **Religious Education 26**, 8, (October 1931), 661-665
- Newell, J. P. **Sacred Earth Sacred Soul. A Celtic Guide to Listening to our Souls and Saving the World.** Dublin. William Collins, 2021
- O'Donohue, J. **Walking in Wonder. Eternal Wisdom for the Modern World.** In Conversation with John Quinn. New York. Convergent, 2015
- \_\_\_\_\_. **Four Elements. Reflections on Nature.** New York. Harmony Press, 2010
- Shaver, R. E. "In Awe of Dying Leaves", **Obiter 52**, 11 November 2019 (Accessed 22/11/2019)
- Stone, J. A. **Sacred Nature. The Environmental Potential of Religious Naturalism.** Abingdon. Routledge, 2017
- White, C. W. **Black Lives and Sacred Humanity. Toward an African American Religious Naturalism.** New York. Fordham University Press, 2016
- Wieman, H. N. **Religious Experience and Scientific Method.** New York. The Macmillan Co. 1926
- Wieman, H. N. & B. E Meland. **American Philosophies of Religion.** New York. Willets, Clark & Co. 1936
- Rex A E Hunt, a religious naturalist, social ecologist, and progressive liturgist, retired from ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia in July 2009. A shared leader in the 'progressive religion' movements in Australia and New Zealand, he now lives on the New South Wales Central Coast (Darkinjung Country). He has published eight books. His most recent published article is "In Celebration of a 'Wild' Faith: Jesus in the Australian Landscape" in **Interfaith Afterlives of Jesus. Jesus in Global Perspective 2**, (ed) Gregory C Jenks. Eugene. Wipf & Stock, 2023