

A WILD MYSTICISM?

Rex A. E. Hunt

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!*¹

“There can be no separation between natural and religious mysticism. The experience of nature and human nature is religious experience.”²

The year was 1931. Not long home from postgraduate studies in Germany at the University of Marburg with “the foremost theologian and mystic”³ Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) and still shaping his version of “mystical naturalism,”⁴ a young American theologian, Bernard Eugene Meland (1899–1993), 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.⁵

I have shared this quote on several occasions, both in oral presentations and in various writings. I have done so taking my lead from Indigenous author Bruce Pascoe who claimed sometimes you need to “repeat something a hundred times before a bell rings in the colony.”⁶ And I have also done so because for me it was such an ideas-shattering suggestion beyond anything I had heard during my official theological studies so many years ago. I hope it can give a clue as to what contemporary mystical naturalism might look and feel like. Not in the occult, misty sense, but in the sense that it claims the roots of human life go into the universe itself “and that in all that we are—biological organisms, mental attainments, and social institutions—we are true children of the earth.”⁷

The question mark in my title is important: a query rather than a declaration. Sharing this journey of query are glimpses from the compelling thoughts of Bernard Meland coupled with the Celtic wisdom of the Irish philosopher and poet John O’Donohue (1956–2008), both from the more progressive/liberal understanding of Christianity. However, my journey companions will also have a fellow traveler on a side road, Kenneth L. Patton (1911–1994).

Patton, a poet, artist, and respected liberal/humanist, was the former minister of the experimental Universalist Charles Street Meeting House in Boston (USA) from 1949 to the mid-1960s.⁸ He developed a poetic naturalistic mysticism around the themes of “being at home in the universe”—probably sharing with Meland an influence shaped from their times at the University of Chicago—coupled with the “sense of mystery.”

While there are differences between Meland and O’Donohue, there are also some significant similarities.

- Both did postgraduate studies in Germany either with or on a mystic: Meland at Marburg, O’Donohue at Tubingen.
- Both have an urgent sensitivity toward humanity and our place in nature, expressed in the language of “appreciative awareness” or “sensitive awareness.”
- Both were creatively out of step with the dominant theology of their day, which caused ecclesiastical superiors to become suspicious of them.
- Both approached life with a well-informed, deeply rooted aesthetic, characterised by the “sensitivity of the poet.”⁹ To respond appreciatively to reality, to what that awareness gives. To feel at home in the universe.

“Mysticism is not an abandonment of reason,” suggested Meland, “but a new integration of emotion and reason . . . and not in any evangelical urge.”¹⁰ He was highly critical of supernatural religion that fostered a sense of strangeness toward the natural world.¹¹ Similarly, but drawing inspiration from Ireland’s rich spiritual heritage of Celtic thought and imagination, O’Donohue’s passionate concerns were wonder, imagination, and possibility. In his second book, *Eternal Echoes*, he writes:

Wonder enlarges the heart. When you wonder, you are drawn out of yourself. The cage of the ego and the railtracks of purpose no longer hold you prisoner. Wonder creates a lyrical space where thought and feeling take leave of their repetitive patterns, to regain their original impulse of reverence before the mystery of what is. Such a tiny word, yet *is* confers the highest dignity and mystery. . . . To say something *is* means that it has real presence, it is not a fantasy nor a mere notion.¹²

Is. A puff of experience at a moment in time. That wonder, integration, and sensitivity is shaped most creatively when we adopt a lifestyle that follows the advice of poets and mystics. Thus my practical thesis toward a “wild”¹³ natural mysticism:

- Pay attention.
- Rejoice in it.
- Care for it.
- Cultivate a culture of reverence and gratitude.

“Mysticism is the means whereby men outreach themselves, extend themselves beyond previous confines, stretch the tent of their comprehension and observation to cover a larger plot of the universe.”¹⁴

Meister Eckhart’s “Wild” God

So what of mysticism? Saturated with 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.”¹⁵ Early Western mysticism began to take shape around the third century and it found a special expression in medieval times with such persons as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Meister Johannes Eckhart (c.1260–1328), Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), and Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), to name but a few.

At the suggestion of his PhD supervisor, John O’Donohue studied the writings of Meister Eckhart, a German Catholic theologian, philosopher, and mystic. O’Donohue suggested that Eckhart’s idea of God was “that there is nothing closer to us than God. That is what made the Church suspicious of him—that Eckhart brought God too much down to earth.”¹⁶ He explains further that the God Eckhart believed in was “an incredibly ‘wild’ kind of God!”¹⁷

“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. . . . Eckhart is “wilder” in his thinking about God than even the best atheists. . . . God is that wilderness in which everyone is alone.¹⁸

Eckhart’s ideas became a primary and profound influence on O’Donohue in those postdoctoral years. He claimed that Eckhart believed everything had its origin in the mind of God. “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.”¹⁹

The reward for Eckhart’s theology of a “wild God” was to be tried before the Inquisition and condemned as a heretic. Eckhart had transgressed the traditional monotheistic

tradition of transcendence or, to be more precise, vertical transcendence.

Transcendence: Vertical and Horizontal

Hierarchical vertical transcendence is one of the core themes of monotheistic religion.

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.²⁰

In the vertical mode, spiritual cultivation is solitary and unrooted. One’s response is made by fitting into an ideal scheme that has everything to do with “order, coherence, beauty, and purpose. . . . Gods are revealed to us who design, who have a plan, who radiate beauty and truth.”²¹ But Meland, and perhaps O’Donohue, appears to have recognized another understanding of transcendence. It is called horizontal transcendence, which can be described as being “about responding to the nature of nature with attunement and participation and delight.”²² The “delight” is with the particular: “the ladybug crawling on the rock, the fuzzy moss, the sickly dune grass, the mucky mud by the river.”²³ For we are always “situated beings,” in a particular location as there is no world posited apart from the

historically ongoing one within which we find ourselves. Horizontal transcendence “is not about hierarchy; it is about being part of the whole, being alive to all. It is infused with humility.”²⁴ Life becomes suddenly and marvelously abundant.

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.

The task of interpreting the spiritual life in terms of the natural order of existence remains a compelling problem. So long as we conceive it as a negation of supernatural tenets, we shall be hampered in our efforts. The most profitable course would be to let go of the supernatural in such a way that we shall be able to embrace its contentions naturalistically.²⁵

Courtship of the Particular

Victoria Loorz, author 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.²⁶

“Courtship of the particular” is another interesting and poetic phrase. I would place it 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.²⁷

So take a stone. A *particular* stone.

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

Or a stone, the gift between a Gentoo penguin to another during “courting.”

Or one from the island of Iona²⁸ in the Inner Hebrides of western Scotland, from the beach at St. Columba’s Bay.

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

Here long before we were ever dreamed.

Holding out against transience.

Always faithfully there.

Perfectly silent.²⁹

“Some of the oldest rocks in the world are on the western side of the island of Iona,” writes John O’Donohue in his reflection “Stone and Fire.” “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.”³⁰

At-Homeness in the Universe

Like the trees in the forests and the cattle upon a thousand hills, man has creature relations with the environment. As a physical [and social] organism, he is assured support in his ventures. And since existence is a basic factor in the actualising of human values, this organic at-homeness in our environment is a matter of great importance.³¹

“At-homeness in the universe,” said Meland back then, ahead of his time. Forty-five years later he added a cautionary lament. At-homeness entails that we understand ourselves

not as plunderers and exploiters of nature’s resources, but as creatures of earth, born of its processes, nurtured and sustained by the subtle and intricate interchange as humanly evolved organisms within this enveloping atmosphere. . . . I cringed at the thought of the Christian legacy setting its seal of approval upon it, either through glib, biblical utterances, or through intricate arguments offered by theologians whose views of man and creation hardly entitled them to be called a child of earth. And I hoped that God might find their views offensive, too.³²

Nature is so significant now in the twenty-first century that all our beliefs must be reformulated so as to take nature into account. This will require us to abandon our primary understanding of Earth as a natural resource for unlimited human use and to cultivate “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.”³³

Theistic persons traditionally offer reverence to a *supernatural* deity. 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, for without reverence we will gradually descend into ecocide.³⁴

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. 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.”³⁵

We don’t need to look for rarefied supernatural revelation. We simply need to recognise the sacrality of everything around us. And that recognition needs the language of reverence that conveys the depth, richness, and complexity of our natural world and that voices a call for faithfulness to the richness of that lived experience instead of abstractions about nature.³⁶

There is only one world, that of nature, in which all things belong. . . . The mystery is not *in* the flower; the flower *is* the mystery. All things are the mystery. They are. That is all.³⁷

Thus the most imperative undertaking in life, call it one’s religion or philosophy of life, is the endeavour to adapt oneself courageously to the facts of existence and thus prepare to live the life of integrity.³⁸

The Mysticism of Natural Experience

A *wild* mysticism? My query raises its head again. Not in the occult, misty sense, but in the sense that it claims the roots of human life go into the universe itself.

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.

We are the earth speaking to the earth. Because we can only grow into an authentic life with integrity by being immersed in the natural world out of which we were “begotten” in the first place as earthlings “and not merely ensouled beings awaiting our fuller realisation in a life hereafter.”³⁹

If we are to find the mysticism of natural experience we must attend to nature in its particularity.

A mossy stone pitted by wind and rain.

A tree alive in its soil.

A ladybug on an autumn leaf.

Life becomes loveless and drab when shorn of its stars and hyacinths.

Being at home in the universe, soaking in the brilliant flourishing around oneself, both intellectually and emotionally, is a precondition not merely for survival but for the articulation and development of our deeper selves, as earthlings.

In Conclusion

So some last words at the start of a new beginning already begun: a wild mystical naturalism.

The conviction that “the earth is actually and literally the mother of us all” is the beginning of a mystical naturalism and the basis for a new theistic worship.⁴⁰

I would love to live
Like a river flows
Carried by the surprise
Of its own unfolding.⁴¹

There is more to be found in working the earth in a garden than in opening a can of peas. If one is to find the mysticism of natural experience he must avail himself of nature. We are all children of earth, and there is a depth in us that is enriched and impregnated only through the soil.⁴² 

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Endnotes

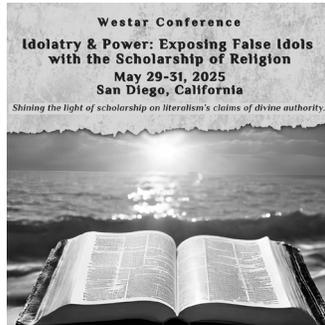
1. Nursery Rhyme “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” is based on a nineteenth-century English poem “The Star,” written by Jane Taylor.
2. Patton, *Hidden Search*, 117.
3. Inbody, *Constructive Theology*, 15.
4. Meland saw his work as a continuation of the work of Gerald Birney Smith, his mentor and former professor.
5. Meland, “The Worship Mood,” 665. Also in *Mysticism*, 234.
6. See B. Pascoe (with Lyn Harwood), *Black Duck: A Year at Yumburra* (Thames & Hudson, 2024).
7. Inbody, *Constructive Theology*, 48.
8. Patton’s fifteen-year ministry redefined the meaning of the word *Universalism* by bringing the arts of all religions and cultures into “a religion for one world.”
9. Wieman & Meland, *American Philosophies*, 292.
10. Meland, “Mystic,” 157.
11. Meland, “Kinsmen of the Wild,” 443.
12. O’Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, 201.
13. *Wild* is not meant in the colloquial sense of “out of control” but rather to refer to the natural, innate way the world was created: not controlled or tamed or domesticated (Loorz, *Church*, 6).
14. Patton, *Hidden Search*, 98.
15. Meland, “Mysticism in Modern Terms,” 83.
16. O’Donohue, *Walking in Wonder*, 31–32.
17. O’Donohue, *Walking in Wonder*, 33.
18. O’Donohue, *Walking in Wonder*, 34.
19. O’Donohue, *Walking in Wonder*, 33.
20. Goodenough, “Vertical,” 24.
21. Goodenough, “Vertical,” 23.
22. Goodenough, “Vertical,” 26.
23. Goodenough, “Vertical,” 26.
24. Goodenough, “Vertical,” 30.
25. Meland, “Religion,” 69.
26. Loorz, *Church of the Wild*, 128.
27. See <https://www.hebrewcollege.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Heschel-The-Vocation-of-the-Cantor.pdf>.
28. Iona, on the Atlantic edge of British Isles, and the sixth-century birthplace of Scottish Christianity, is a place of international pilgrimage.
29. This section is indebted to O’Donohue’s reflections in *Four Elements*.
30. O’Donohue, *Four Elements*, 148.
31. Meland, *Modern Man’s Worship*, 151.
32. Meland, “Grace,” 135.
33. Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 168.
34. London, “Renewing Our Sense of Wonder.” Also Brussatt, “Interview.”
35. Stone, *Sacred Nature*, 116.
36. Inbody, *Constructive Theology*, 233.

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Upcoming Conference

May 29-31 in San Diego! Idolatry & Power: Exposing False Idols with the Scholarship of Religion

Exciting things are on the horizon! Westar's in-person conference (with a virtual option) is set to take place in the vibrant city of San Diego, California. Join us for thought-provoking sessions, engaging discussions, and the chance to connect with fellow scholars and learners. And yes, it's going to be fun! You won't want to miss the *Cheeses of Nazareth* wine & cheese reception or the *Scholars in the Fishbowl* event, which was a big hit last year. We'll hear from the Christianity Seminar and get a sneak peek at two new Seminars. Featured keynote speakers **Drs. Rita Nakashima Brock** and **Gary Dorrien** will center the gathering. Together, we'll uncover ancient wisdom, expose modern idols, and explore how idolatry and power continue to shape our world—and what we can do about it. To view the schedule and register, visit: <https://www.westarinstitute.org/event/westar-conference-2025>. Questions? Please email Maria at mfinlinson@westarinstitute.org.



Heartfelt Thanks to Fundraising Consultant and Member Janet Bartlett

We extend our sincere gratitude to Janet, who has been an invaluable fundraising consultant for Westar. While she is moving on from her consulting role, Janet shares that her membership with Westar continues, allowing her to “enjoy and appreciate the wealth of programs and information that is consistently offered by Westar.” Thank you, Janet, for your dedication and support—you will always be part of the Westar community!

Westar Institute Moves Office to California

We're excited to announce that Westar Institute has relocated to California! This move brings new opportunities and requires adjustments to the structure of our board to ensure compliance with California nonprofit laws. We appreciate your understanding and support during this transition. Stay tuned for more updates as we continue to evolve and grow. Our new mailing address is: Westar Institute, 41877 Enterprise Circle N, Suite 200, Temecula, California, 92590.

Final Tributes for Roy Hoover

A memorial service for Roy W. Hoover, a veteran scholar of the Jesus Seminar, was held Sunday, January 5, at Horizon House, a retirement community in Seattle. Hoover, coeditor of *The Five Gospels*, was known for organizational exactness. He had prepared detailed notes for shaping a formal service. He chose the hymns and requested that selections from his favorite theologians, Gordon Kaufman and Paul Tillich, be read, as well as passages from his own publications. He also wanted selections from Handel to be the musical bookends of the service.



Robert Matson, his cousin and Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh, and Andrew Scrimgeour, former Chair of the Westar Board, were co-officiants. A memorial tribute was given by Robert A. Skotheim, former president of Whitman College (Walla Walla, Washington), where Hoover taught for most of his career. Scrimgeour read tributes from Lane McGaughey, Arthur Dewey, and Robert Miller, longtime colleagues in the Jesus Seminar, then added his own. Char Matejovsky, Robert Funk's widow, and Wayne Guenther, former Westar Board member, were in attendance.



Hoover's extensive professional files will become part of the Archives of the Society of Biblical Literature, located at Emory University in Atlanta.

Roy W. Hoover

January 1, 1932–October 22, 2024.

He was 92.

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37. Patton, “Hidden,” 93.
38. Meland, *Modern Man's Worship*, 254.
39. O'Murchu, *Ecological Spirituality*, 176.
40. Meland, *Modern Man's Worship*, 142.
41. O'Donohue, “Fluent,” in *Conomara Blues*, 30.
42. Patton, *Hidden*, 116.



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