
The Mystic and the Church

BY DANA GREENE

Evelyn Underhill attempted to reconcile the inherent tension between mysticism and institutional religion. Her sympathy for the mystical tradition nuanced her understanding of what it means to participate in the Body of Christ and was the basis for her ongoing critique of the foibles of the “visible church.”

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) is best known for her pioneering work, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. First published in 1911, it saw twelve editions and established Underhill as the leading authority on mysticism writing in English. She was a prolific writer, authoring or editing thirty-nine books and hundreds of articles and essays.

She came to the subject of mysticism with a bias against institutional religion, but later recognized the human need for participation in some collective expression of worship of the Divine. Her sympathy for the mystical tradition nuanced her understanding of what it means to participate in the Body of Christ and was the basis for her ongoing critique of the foibles of institutional religion. Underhill's major achievement was a lifelong pursuit of the love of God and her unique ability to express that search in writing. Her understanding of mysticism and the church and the necessary tension between them is best understood by tracking her own deepening appreciation for both phenomena.

AVOIDING RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Although she was baptized and confirmed in the Anglican Church, Underhill, an only child, inherited her religious skepticism from her barrister father. She claimed not to have been “brought up to religion.” Her early adolescent writing attests to this. She believed in God and in helping

the poor, but she saw religion as dogmatic and bigoted and the clergy as pompous and narrow. The exclusiveness of institutional religion was particularly off-putting; she urged her youthful readers to experience the liberation of nature and art. Beauty appealed to her, but she found none of it in English churches. In her late twenties, however, she began to make regular trips to Italy; there she was able to experience beauty firsthand in religious art, architecture, and ritual. Italy, she claimed, was "the only place left...that is really medicinal to the soul.... There is a type of mind which must go there to find itself." In Italy she did find herself, experiencing a slow "unconscious growing into the understanding of things."¹

This experience led her to participate in the Golden Dawn, a Rosicrucian society much in vogue in London in the early years of the twentieth century. But she soon withdrew from participation, realizing that what she was attracted to was not magic but mysticism. She began her lifelong commitment to exploring the riches of this long-buried tradition.

In a white heat of enthusiasm, she began to research and write her major work, a five-hundred-page exploration of the Western mystical tradition, a labor to which she gave her complete attention for almost four years, consulting some one thousand sources in the process. At this same time, she had become convinced that she should join the Roman Catholic Church, but the papacy's condemnation of Modernism, the movement to bring historical and scientific evidence to bear on religious questions, delayed her entrance, as did the opposition of her new husband. In the end she never joined, but for almost a decade and a half she hung on the edges of institutional commitment, unable to "go over to Rome" but dissatisfied with Anglicanism. Her writing did not abate. She turned out biographies of mystics and edited their writings, all the while broadening the sources of her inspiration to include the French philosopher Henri Bergson and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. Yet neither her writing nor her spiritual counseling of others gave her solace or reprieve from her sense of personal isolation and detachment. By the end of the century's second decade, she wrote that she "had gone to pieces."

In desperation she did two things: she visited Baron Friedrich von Hügel, the most prominent Catholic theologian in Britain and someone familiar with but critical of her work on mysticism, and she began to participate reluctantly in the liturgical life of the Anglican Church.

Von Hügel was of great assistance to her; she claimed, somewhat hyperbolically, that she owed her whole spiritual life to him. But he did help her as she struggled with inwardness, detachment, a transcendent flight from a sinful world, and her anti-institutional bias, all of which she attributed to her "white-hot Neo-Platonism." Von Hügel, responding to her great psychological need, nudged her toward a more embodied spirituality and an acceptance of God's love. He sent her out to work among London's poor and reaffirmed her fragile commitment to live within the Anglican

communion. He appreciated the mystical tradition and saw it as an essential element of religion but recognized the institutional and intellectual elements as essential as well. He served as her spiritual director from 1921 until his death in 1925.

Even before meeting with von Hügel, Underhill had begun to be aware that her bias toward institutional religion as exclusive and narrow was a

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limited one. Her brief encounters with the work of Sorella Maria and the ecumenical Spiritual Entente which this Italian Franciscan nun founded convinced Underhill that Christ could be known in a variety of ways and in the many parts of the Christian church. As well,

she became increasingly aware of the need for an alliance between institutional religion and mysticism. In 1918, she wrote:

[Mysticism] flourishes best in alliance with a lofty moral code, a strong sense of duty, and a definite religious faith.... [It] is more likely to arise with than without the great historic churches and faiths. To these churches and faiths it has again and again brought its gift of fresh life, of renewed and intensified communion.... It is in this direction that its future may most hopefully be looked for, since divorced from all institutional expression it tends to become strange, vague, or merely sentimental. True mysticism is the soul of religion, but, like the soul of man, it needs a body if it is to fulfill its mighty destiny.²

Underhill's realization of the reciprocal need of institutional religion for mysticism and vice versa was tentative; it would take time for her to grow into that understanding. That growth was already evident in *The Mystics of the Church*, published in 1925. In this, Underhill's last book on the mystics, she presented them as “life-giving” members of the church who helped create and sustain its mystical character. This was in contrast to her portrayal in the earlier *Mysticism* where she emphasized their independence from religious institutions.

RECLAIMING THE CHURCH'S MISSION

For Underhill, the frowziness, parochialism, dogmatism, and conservatism of the church were symptomatic of a more fundamental problem, namely that the church was not focused on its central mission: to redeem the world by forming souls and fostering holiness among them. In fact, it

too often created dependent and obedient believers and was suspicious of individual intuition and direct spiritual experience.

Underhill distinguished between what she called the “visible” and the “invisible” church, that is, the institutional church and the mystical body of Christ, a divine society linking a communion of saints—past, present, and future. She appreciated the tension between these two, and counseled those who sought her wisdom about how to deal with negative aspects of the church “visible.” Her advice was often homey: “The Church is an ‘essential service’ like the Post office, but there will always be some narrow, irritating and inadequate officials behind the counter and you will always be tempted to exasperation by them.”³ The point was to build up the “invisible” church and in so doing revivify the “visible” church that was either moribund or not focused on its mission to form souls. In 1921 in *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, she summarized the importance of the spiritual life to the church:

Thus it means an immense widening of the arc of human sympathy; and this is not possible to do properly unless we have found the centre of the circle first. The glaring defect of current religion—I mean the vigorous kind, not the kind that is responsible for empty churches—is that it spends so much time in running round the arc and rather takes the centre for granted...and it is at the centre that the real life of the spirit aims first; thence flowing out to the circumference—even to the most harsh, dark, difficult and rugged limits—in unbroken streams of generous love.⁴

While she appreciated the need of the mystical tradition to feed the invisible church as it fulfilled its mission, she was also aware that mysticism unattached to a religious tradition was perilous. She knew this from personal experience. She had come, at least intellectually, to the position that the mystical tendencies toward strangeness, vagueness, or sentimentality could be countered by being anchored in corporate religious life. Such life fostered group consciousness, gave a sense of unity, and offered both a ready-made discipline and a capacity to hand on a culture. She wrote later in her last major book that corporate life “checks religious egotism, breaks down devotional barriers, obliges the spiritual highbrow to join in the worship of the simple and ignorant, and in general confers all the supporting and disciplinary benefits of family life.”⁵ In short, corporate and personal worship complete, reinforce, and check each other. But the priority must be given to that which creates “living” religion and forms souls because it is focused on the priority of God.

For the reality of the Church does not abide in us; it is not a spiritual Rotary Club. Its reality abides in the One God, the ever-living One whose triune Spirit fills it by filling each one of its members.

We build up the Church best...by opening ourselves more and more with an entire and humble generosity to that Spirit-God Who is among us as one that serveth, and reaches out...towards the souls of men. Thus the real life of that Church consists in the mutual love and dependence, the common prayer, adoration and self-offering of the whole interpenetrating family of spirits who have dared

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to open their souls without condition to that all-demanding and all-giving Spirit of Charity, in Whom we live and move and without Whom we should not exist.⁶

By the time Underhill sought out von Hügel for help, she knew both that she needed the context of institutional religion and that institutional religion, if it was to be true to its mis-

sion, needed to be regenerated by the mystical element. Having rejected the Roman church for its exclusiveness and anti-Modernist tendencies, she saw her only alternative in the church of her baptism, the Church of England. She considered Anglicanism a “bridge” church and called it a “respectable suburb of the city of God” but all the while a “part of the greater London.”

RESPONDING TO HER VOCATION

Underhill’s reluctant participation in the Church of England gradually became more palatable when, at the invitation of a friend, she attended a retreat in the Anglican retreat house in the village of Pleshey in 1922. There she experienced a sense of connectedness and belonging to a community of belief. She wrote to von Hügel that she felt satisfied as an Anglican, having found both a place where she would fit and those with whom she could sympathize and work. She sensed she was a “cell in a boundless living web” through which redeeming work could be done. Her new vocation, the care of souls through retreat work, began to take shape. As part of the burgeoning retreat movement in the Anglican Church, from 1924 on she gave six or seven retreats a year. While most who sought her out were women, even some clergy attended. In 1927, she became the first woman to give a retreat in Canterbury Cathedral. This work not only gave her a great sense of joy and freedom, it cemented finally her ability to stay within the Anglican communion. She was fifty years old when she wrote, “Now

the experience of God...is, I believe, in the long run always a vocational experience. It always impels to some sort of service: always awakens an energetic love. It never leaves the self where it found it. It forces the experient to try and do hard things."⁷

Underhill's vocational commitment as retreat conductor dominated her later life. Through it she hoped to renew the Anglican Church. Her contemporary, T. S. Eliot, acknowledged that contribution, saying her work captured "the grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world,"⁸ and Michael Ramsey, a subsequent Archbishop of Canterbury, attested that she had done more than anyone else to keep the spiritual life alive in the Anglican Church in the period between the wars.⁹ Her care of souls continued to be carried out through correspondence, and in person through retreats given across England. These retreats reached a larger audience through publication. They represent her mature thinking on a variety of aspects of what she called the spiritual life, that life of prayer, love, and holiness which is "simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God..."¹⁰

Although Underhill remained committed to the Church of England, her outlook was ecumenical, and her focus was always on building up the life of the spirit within the church. It is no surprise that her final book, *Worship*, in 1936, was about corporate adoration. In it Underhill defines the elements of worship and examines eleven different institutional expressions, each of which she claimed was like "a chapel in the Cathedral of the Spirit." *Worship* was an extraordinarily inclusive study of the human impulse toward the Divine, the self-offering of the individual in the worship of God expressed historically and institutionally. It reflects Underhill's commitment to institutional religion and her deep appreciation of its variety of forms. Its appreciative ecumenicity was remarkable for the time.

In the final years of Underhill's life, there is a renewed tension between what she considered to be the demands of the life of the spirit and the orientation of the institutional church. In 1939, as war loomed over Europe, she became a pacifist, joining the tiny Anglican Pacifist Fellowship and writing for their publications and those of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Although her position was incomprehensible to most of her fellow believers, Underhill held that pacifism followed naturally from the demands of universal charity. She urged believers to stay steady and close to God in this harsh wilderness of war and to give themselves to God in intercessory prayer for the good of the world. Her requests to pray for the so-called enemies, Hitler and Mussolini, so that their hearts might be changed seemed bizarre to a nation enduring the Blitz. Yet she persisted, even as the Anglican Church officially denounced the pacifist position. She called the attitude of the Church toward the war "sub-Christian" and claimed that contemporary Christianity was "impoverished," "second-hand," and "incapable of the transformation of life" which was needed.

She believed that the Church should be the rallying point for all those who believed in the creative and redeeming power of love, but that it was incapable of seizing this opportunity because its supernatural life was so weak and ineffective. She urged believers to pray and, thereby, transform the hatred of the world. Prayer not only steadied the Christian, but also increased one's consciousness of complicity with the war effort.

Underhill feared the alliance of religion and war and the claim that God was an ally as one performed irreligious acts. For her, pacifism was an entire orientation of life, following from faith and hope in a God whose purpose was love. Pacifism was then an extension of the love of God, and hence a vocation. In those dark and uncertain times she continued to maintain that one could not fight evil with evil, that only love could overcome, and that any new life which would well up would come from the deepest sources of prayer. The long winter of 1941 brought her great physical suffering from persistent asthma; she died at age sixty-five in mid-June.

In both her writing and her life, Evelyn Underhill attempted to acknowledge the genius of mysticism and institutional religion and to reconcile the inherent tension between them. The result was a creative exploration of two important phenomena, both needed for a full Christian life.

NOTES

1 Margaret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958), 13.

2 "The Future of Mysticism," in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, ed. by Dana Greene (New York: SUNY Press, 1988), 66.

3 "To G. F., St. Francis, 1932," in Charles Williams, ed., *Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 208.

4 Evelyn Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 220-221.

5 Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982), 84.

6 Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1934), 100.

7 Evelyn Underhill, "The Authority of Personal Religious Experience," *Theology* 10:55 (January 1925), 13.

8 T. S. Eliot, MS A. ff. 90, 91. Cited in Helen Gardner, *The Composition of the Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 69-70.

9 Michael Ramsey, "Foreword," in Christopher Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill: An Introduction to Her Life and Writings* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), x.

10 Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks* (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1984), 32.



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