
“Mysticism and Social Concern”

At the Evelyn Underhill Quiet Day in June 2008, Rev. Canon Dr. Gerald Loweth presented the following insights:

Evelyn Underhill is well known for her writings on the subject of Christian mysticism. She began her work in the early twentieth century at a time when this tradition was being looked at afresh. Among other writers of her time she was able to describe and define the mystic experience in terms of the encounter with God and its transforming affects on the person. She put this down in such works as *Mysticism and Practical Mysticism*,

Following the turmoil of the First World War, Underhill began to undergo a change in her thinking. The fruits of her research into the mystical tradition were still alive and present in her new writings, but she expanded her thinking towards a more socially conscious and morally responsible context. She was now aware of the importance of the participation in the life of a religious community, and she became part of the Church of England.

She recognized the necessity to link the individual to issues of society, and she was recognized as a speaker and writer on the subject of social justice. Soon she went on her first retreat, and subsequently she became an acclaimed retreat leader. In all this work, she was able to take the writings and experiences of the classical mystics in the Christian tradition and make their insights relevant to the lives of ordinary people and to contemporary social conditions. The village of Pleshey has a rich history going back to Roman days. What today is called “The Street” is a Roman road that runs from east to west. On the south side of this road there is a mound enclosed by the moat that forms the border of the Retreat House garden.

In the last years of her life, Underhill became a part of a growing interest in liturgical reform in both Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. Where worship had become private and personal in both traditions, she helped to restore the corporate sense of worship and its movement of the participants into social involvement.

Finally, she took an unpopular stance on the issue of war and became a pacifist. This was a dramatic climax to a life which ended in London in 1942, in the midst of war.

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