



“Mysticism in Context”

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Eleven young Oxford scholars met between 1875 and 1885 in an attempt to “put the Catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems.”¹ These “intellectual and moral problems” were the result of the rapid change initiated by new critical perspectives in philosophy, history, and science, along with the rapid industrialization and urbanization of England. The result of the work of these Oxford theologians was a volume of essays meant to illumine the hearts and minds of faith in the modern world—*Lux Mundi*. *Lux Mundi* originated at Oxford in 1889 as a series of studies in the "Religion of the Incarnation."

The Anglican assimilation of science through the *Lux Mundi* school allowed the church to prevent a rupture between theology and the sciences which had worked together through the middle ages and even during the progress of the seventeenth century.² The emphasis on Incarnation replaced the void left by Deism of the previous century. In his *Lux Mundi* essay "The Christian Doctrine of God," Aubrey Moore (1848-1890) wrote, "Science had pushed the deist's God farther and farther away, and at the moment when it seemed as if he would be thrust out altogether Darwin appeared, and under the guise of a foe, did the work of a friend."³

Darwin had left two choices: God is either everywhere present in nature or nowhere present. By combining idealism and evolutionary thought continuity among nature, man, and God was established. By means of the process of natural development, it was possible to argue for God's continuing creation/incarnation.

The reality of human sinfulness became evident in World War I, a reality the optimistic theology of the *Lux Mundi* school was ill equipped to accommodate. William Temple chaired the committee which wrote the report, *Doctrine of the Church of England* in 1939. Temple's conclusion was telling: if they were to begin the project again they would have a different starting point: atonement not incarnation.⁴ This work marked the close of the "Religion of the Incarnation," reflecting the influences of Neo-orthodoxy from the Continent, and its strong emphasis on God's transcendence, over against God's immanence.

¹ Charles Gore, ed, *Lux Mundi. A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*. 15th ed. (London: John Murray, 1904), vii.

² R. William Franklin, "The Oxford Movement and Science." Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Society of Church History, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1-3 April 1993, 20.

³ *Lux Mundi*, 73.

⁴ *Doctrine in the Church of England*, 17.

Playwright George Bernard Shaw encapsulates the loss of hope felt by many over these years in his play *Too True to be Good*. In this play a chaplain turned thief states, "I stand midway between youth and age like a man who missed his train: too late for the last and too early for the next. What am I to do?...I have no Bible, no creed; the war has shot both out of my hands... We have outgrown our religion...The fatal word NOT has been inserted into all our creeds."

These two works, *Lux Mundi* and *Doctrine in the Church of England* roughly bracket the life of one Evelyn Underhill, born 1875 and died 1941. So too, her life and thought was framed by the tension between immanence and transcendence, incarnation and atonement. But Underhill's life and thought was also responding to the dialectic between spiritual with drawl and social engagement.

As identified by Horton Davies, the religion of the incarnation expressed itself in two ways: new religion, what was called in the States, social gospel, and a renewed emphasis on mysticism, in both the study of mystical writings and the exploration of mystical experiences.

The rise in interest in mysticism was encouraged by the discovery of new mystical texts, such as the short version of Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, and the newly developed science of psychology. The Gifford Lectures at the turn of the century illustrate this well. In 1899, William Inge, later to be Dean of St. Paul's cathedral, delivered lectures on the nature of mysticism, later published as *Mysticism*. In 1901 and 1902 the lectures were delivered by the American philosopher and psychologist William James, which were published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James, son of a Swedeborgian pastor, used the Swedeborgian expectation of ecstatic religious experience as a foundation for his work, connecting directly the mystical with the psychological.

This period at the turn of the century was also a time where human development, individually and socially, was a central theme among all the disciplines. Philosophers Rudolf Eucken and Henri Bergson were on the vanguard of promoting such a progressive and evolutionary ideal in the form of Vitalism. At its most extreme form, it was believed that humanity was on its way to perfection, or the Christian corollary, that human progress was initiating the arrival of the Reign of God.

This emphasis on immanence over against transcendence, and vice versa, was best moderated by Baron Freidrich von Hügel whose scholarship bridged many of these polar opposites with a multi-graded understanding of God's presence known as critical realism. It was von Hügel as well that was able to address both English and Continental thought, and Catholic and Protestant thought. His work on mysticism likewise balanced the subjective and objective, the personal and the corporate, the spiritual and the social.

It is within this milieu that Evelyn Underhill wrote her seminal volume *Mysticism* one hundred years ago. The work was divided into two halves: the Mystical Fact and the Mystic Way. The Mystical Fact presented mysticism from the perspective of vitalism, psychology, theology, symbol and magic. The Mystic Way expanded the classic three-fold pattern of mystical union (Purgation, Illumination and Unification) to a five-fold pattern (Conversion, Purgation, Illumination, Surrender, and Unification). Using Vitalism as a touchstone, Underhill argued that the Mystic Way is the path to personal progression.

Underhill's use of psychology was especially interesting, as she used the subjective experiences of the mystics to develop an objective doctrine of God and mysticism. Underhill grounded mysticism in experience using psychology as a hermeneutic.

By 1930, however, in the preface to the 12th edition of *Mysticism*, Underhill states that if she were to begin again, she would start from the position of Critical Realism, not Vitalism. This is evidence not only of the changing context in which she lived and wrote, but also of her growing knowledge and understanding of life of the Spirit and the traditions of the church. So today we look at Evelyn Underhill, her life, her work and her legacy. Evelyn Underhill, the self-educated skeptic, turned faithful Anglican via the Roman church. Evelyn Underhill the least likely person to revise the study of mysticism and spirituality, and reinvigorate the retreat movement in England. Evelyn Underhill, the trailblazing woman who forged new paths not just for women, but for all people of faith. .