



“Mysticism Revisited” A Panel Presentation

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I have been asked to do two things: to speak about Evelyn Underhill’s legacy and to share with you the impact she has had on my life.

Above all, Evelyn Underhill was a preserver of the mystic heritage. Beginning of 20th century along with William Inge and William James she helped reclaimed the mystic experience which had been out of favor and suspect for more than two centuries. The purpose of her 500 page book with its 1,000 sources was to preserve the mystic heritage, what she felt was an important aspect of human achievement. She did this by defining mysticism and showing how it worked in the lives of the mystics. Her book was written in an accessible style and was a compendium of mystical writing. Underhill defined mysticism fundamentally as an experiential phenomenon which engaged the will. She countered the popular notion that mysticism was centrally characterized by visions and voices. What was important about mysticism was that it changed and transformed lives.

The genesis of this book is interesting because it grew out of Underhill’s life experience. Initially she was not a religious person, but her travels to Italy when she was in her twenties and her engagement with the beauty revealed in the art, architecture and ritual of the Catholicism she encountered there awakened her to an apprehension of some deeper reality. She returned to England to write some not very good novels and even worse poetry. But the die had been cast. She was on a quest for the truth. She experimented initially with the spiritualist movement which was sweeping London, but then moved to focus on mystic texts, which gave evidence of extraordinary lives. Beginning in 1907, thwarted in her desire to become a Catholic---that is to go over to Rome, she began to work on her big book. After three years of assiduous labor she completed it. Underhill must be credited with reclaiming and preserving the mystic heritage first in her book *Mysticism* and then in a series of subsequent biographies of mystics and editions of their texts.

But there is more. Underhill was also a translator. By this I mean not only did she explain the mystic experience but she linked that experience to the lives of what she called “normal” people. She started from the premise that the spiritual life was a biological reality, that to be human was to have a capacity for God. The mystics were of a particular psychological type having extraordinary concentration, an intensity of love and will, a gift for self-discipline and courage, and a craving for truth. As such the mystics had what she called a “pure capacity” for God, but normal people also had this capacity, what she called their “little buried talent.” Hence the mystics and normal people were kin, differing from each other only in degree but not in kind. Every human had to nurture this capacity for God. In the second half of life Underhill dedicated herself to the care of souls (what we would call spiritual direction) and to conducting retreats, clarifying the nature of prayer and the spiritual life. She was a pioneer in the retreat movement in England and would give five or six retreats a year throughout the country. She was the first woman to offer a retreat in Canterbury Cathedral and

the first to give a retreat to Anglican clergy. She had an important impact on her own generation, meeting what her friend T. S. Eliot called the grievous need for the contemplative element among her contemporaries. People always ask: Was Underhill a mystic or one of the normal people? Probably each of us panelists has a different view on this. Clearly Underhill was very normal. A married woman, a hostess for her barrister husband, a well-known writer, a gardener, book binder, yachtswoman and a lover of cats. She was not one of the greatest mystics who achieved some sense of union with God. But to the degree she was a human, growing in the life of the spirit, we can surely say she was kin to the mystics she studied. But she would argue that each of us is kin.

Evelyn Underhill preserved the mystic heritage and translated what that might mean to her contemporaries. But there is yet more to her legacy. Although an Edwardian whose language and metaphors are sometimes dated, she remains accessible and inspirational. Most of her 39 books are in print. Just go to Amazon to see what I am talking about. Why is this? Underhill grasped that human spiritual consciousness is evolutionary—her book *Mysticism* was subtitled “a study of the nature and development of man’s spiritual consciousness.” And she understood that what humans desired was a relationship with a reality which was greater than our minds could grasp. There is something cosmic about her understanding of the divine. She pointed, as the mystics do, to the God beyond God. From the beginning she kept a plaque in her study inscribed with the single word, Eternity. Her horizon was beyond her own time and ours too, but she was also grounded in an incarnational understanding which swept up ordinary life and saw its blessedness and its relationship to a God who was yet beyond our imagination. There is nothing small, puny, or shriveled up about Underhill. She spoke of God as Reality, that which is, while simultaneously urging her readers to do as the Flemish mystic Rysbroeck suggested to have a “wide-spreading love for all in common.” Underhill is a guide worth following. She is a woman who knew the evils of her times, evils which continue to haunt us: urban blight, global war, authoritarian regimes, wretched poverty, and dry as dust religion. The genius of Underhill was brought home to me long ago when I was in Oxford England doing research for her biography. I was standing in the hoary Blackwell’s bookstore. There the books were divided into subject areas---literature, history, theology, etc. and into a classification of new and second-hand. As I entered the store my eyes lighted on a sign high in the back which read: second-hand theology. I burst out laughing. That was it. So much of theology was second-hand—dry as dust, incapable of inspiring the reader. Underhill knew of another kind of theology---a primary theology, deriving from a direct personal experience of God. This was what she had encountered in the mystics. This was what she was able to transmit to her readers in 1911 and in 2011. Underhill understood that religion deprived of a mystical element was no religion at all. In this regard she foreshadowed a remark by the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner who claimed some forty years later that the Christian of the future will either be a mystic or nothing at all. In this sense Underhill was not merely a preserver and translator of the mystic heritage, she was also a revealer, one who prophetically announced that the authentic Christian of the future would be anchored in a relationship with God. In short, the mystic heritage was ongoing, ongoing in us too.

June 15th is the feast day for Evelyn Underhill in the Anglican communion. On that day there is this reading from the Book of Wisdom: “Although Wisdom is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; In every generation Wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets.”

Evelyn Underhill had been a friend of God for me for more than three decades. Although I tried to read *Mysticism* in college, this was impossible. It was over my head. But in my early 40s I was re-introduced to her when I directed a student's senior thesis on the Rhineland mystics. It was an awakening, and I began studying her in earnest. Because she wrote on so many topics, over many years she has served as my Thomas (Aquinas) that is. I mentally refer to her all the time. There are several aspects of her work with which I resonated with particularly.

Her writing on mysticism is best summarized for me in a line from her mostly not very good poetry. Underhill the poet speaks of "a splendor burning in the heart of things." It is the mystic who sees into reality itself and finds there beauty, a splendor. U. has nurtured my conviction that beauty---both natural and created---can be a way to God.

I have also been impressed by the clarity with which she understood the spiritual life. Her best definition of the spiritual life was expressed in her BBC broadcast in 1936. In that she says the spiritual life is that life which is lived from the center where we are anchored in God. In short, the spiritual life is all of my ordinary life, lived with a different intent, one that has been shaped by my anchoring and grounding in a relationship with God.

And what is the method of this anchoring in God? I think she would answer: Prayer. Prayer she says is standing beside the artist lover and seeing with those same eyes. Metaphorically, we stand beside God and learn to see from a different viewpoint than that of our own. Prayer becomes not so much an act as a way of being. Elsewhere she refers to prayer as a school, again metaphorically, as a place which shapes, forms and ultimately transforms us.

But it was Underhill's final writing which gave me the greatest challenge. This last work was begun in 1939, shortly before her death. It was then she dedicated herself to what she called a corollary of the love of God, namely to love one's enemies. She had immediate opportunity to live into this vocation as German tanks rolled through Poland and a year later the Battle of Britain began. She was old, weary and ill, and yet she joined the tiny Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, much to the horror of friends and the Anglican church which condemned that position. Here she was at the height of her influence. She was an acclaimed religious writer who had academic prestige (she had been the first woman to be an outside lecturer in religion at Oxford and was the recipient of honors from King's College, London and the University of Aberdeen.) and she was acclaimed by the Anglican church. Noting her importance Michael Ramsey, a later archbishop of Canterbury attested that Underhill had done more than anyone else to keep the spiritual life alive in Anglicanism in the interwar period. But her announced pacifism challenged her reputation. She had no answers to war, but she knew that the only peace worth having was won by love of one's enemies. She understood her work was vocational; she did not sit in judgment of others. She only proclaimed that the love of God precluded the hatred and killing of enemies. It was the hardest of Christian messages, both then and now. In our last two decades of endless American war, Underhill has been with me trying to teach me what it might mean to love one's enemies, those near and at afar.

Some thirty years ago I approached the study of Underhill as an academic subject, however, something happened to me along the way. She reached into me and began a turning. Little by little she helped me to see the splendor burning in the heart of things and urged me to bring my life into conformity with that vision. My gratitude to her as preserver, translator and revealer is immense.