



After a Century, Why *Mysticism Still Inspires*.

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What is mysticism? Who are the great mystics, and what wisdom do they have to share with us today? How is mysticism related to religion and spirituality, and yet how does it speak to a universal truth that transcends dogma? Questions like these were explored in a great, but often overlooked, literary masterpiece published a hundred years ago -- *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* by Evelyn Underhill.

1911 was not a particularly dramatic year. The Mexican Revolution was ongoing and the Italians declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The Chevrolet Motor Car Company was incorporated and the *Encyclopædia Britannica* brought out its legendary 11th edition. But this otherwise unremarkable year also saw the first publication of Underhill's study on mysticism, a book that has never gone out of print and has become a modern spiritual classic.

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) was a true pioneer in many ways. She was the first woman to deliver lectures on religion at Oxford University; and in a time when the Church of England did not ordain women to the priesthood, she became renowned as a retreat leader and spiritual teacher. She wrote more than 25 books, including novels, collections of poetry, and a variety of books about prayer and spirituality. But her most enduring work has been her in-depth study of the beauty and splendor of the quest for union with God.

Mysticism is a huge book -- more than 500 pages of text and notes, drawing on the wisdom of more than 100 great mystics, not only from Christianity but from around the world. The first part of the book answers the question "What is mysticism?" and explains why the spiritual life matters, even in a world dominated by science and technology. Underhill relates mysticism to art, science and psychology, but also explores how spirituality cannot be reduced to any other field of human knowledge. The second half of the book explores the developmental process of the mystical life, detailing such key transitions as conversion, self-purification, illumination or enlightenment, the dark night of the soul, and the final splendor of "deification," or participation in the Divine Nature of God. Drawing on psychology as well as religion, this evolutionary map of mysticism anticipated by several decades the work of later specialists in human spiritual growth and development, like James Fowler or Ken Wilber.

Most important of all, Underhill emphasized that mysticism was not just for the religious elite, but for anyone who truly sought to live a transcendent life that unites the present moment with the glory of eternity. Although she assumed that mystics somehow had a "greater" or "higher" calling than the "ordinary" person, her insistence that mystical wisdom was for everyone presaged the rise of popular spirituality in the late 20th century, from the freewheeling

explorations of the new age to the widespread popularity of the Christian centering prayer movement. Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner predicted shortly before his death in 1984 that "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist;" Underhill's *Mysticism* explains why Rahner's words can be seen as a challenge rather than a warning.

Given how widespread the quest for enlightenment and inner experience is in our time, it is difficult to imagine how only one hundred years ago the English-speaking world remained dominated by a type of scientific materialism that made topics such as mysticism and spirituality taboo to most people. As the wife and daughter of prominent British attorneys, Evelyn Underhill belonged to the mainstream of society, and her family did not understand her devotion to the spiritual life. But she bucked social expectations and followed her intuition, and by doing so became a foremother of the great rebirth of spirituality that emerged after her death. Key spiritual leaders and authors like Thomas Merton, C. S. Lewis, Alan Watts, and T. S. Eliot were among the many visionaries who were influenced by her teaching. My own work as a blogger and author is directly inspired by Evelyn Underhill.

For those who might find the length and scholarship of Underhill's *Mysticism* daunting, her 1914 book *Practical Mysticism* offers a shorter and more accessible introduction to her thought. But in its centennial year *Mysticism* remains her most essential book of the topic, and offers a lucid and insightful introduction to a subject many people find difficult to comprehend.