

Evelyn Underhill's Quest for the Holy: A Lifetime Journey of Personal Transformation

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"What is it to be holy?" This question fashioned Evelyn Underhill's life. The young Underhill struggled with lack of intimacy and a disembodied spirituality. Her arduous spiritual searching drove her from pursuing magic, to a meticulous empirical study of the mystics, to facing personal tragedy in the First World War. Her gradual purification and transformation flourished in her encounter with Baron Friedrich von Hügel, her spiritual mentor. In the process, she rediscovered her Anglican roots, and gave her ultimate assent to Christ. Underhill's mature witness to the Christian life is revealed in her final "personal little book" and testament, "The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life."

Writing is an art of expression as much as it is confession. What is written and the form the writing takes speak volumes about why so much labor was put into the work and, consequently, about who the writer is. Evelyn Underhill, a philosopher, a mystic, but above all a voluminous writer,¹ seems not only to have had much to say, but more importantly, much to confess. Most of her life was spent concealing her real desires, hiding who she was even from her closest family and friends.² Yet Underhill seems to have compensated for this lack of intimacy through two primary channels. Through writing, she could engage her tireless intellect in scholarly works while also contributing to the well-being of others through her retreats and her spiritual

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¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Dana Greene (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1993), 15. Eleven pages of bibliography provide an incomplete list of published material written by Underhill. See Christopher J. R. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to Her Life and Writings* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), 293-303.

² Evelyn Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, ed. Grace Adolphsen Brame (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 14-15.

correspondence with her directees.³ And being “the friend (or rather disciple and adorer)” of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, a man “so saintly, so truthful, sane and tolerant,” allowed her to “feel very safe and happy sitting in his shadow.”⁴

In this article, these two media—Underhill’s writings and her relationship with von Hügel—will be explored in an attempt to observe and understand who the woman was, and to listen to and ponder what she desires to share with us, her readers. The focus will be on what was dearest to Evelyn Underhill: her continuing efforts to resolve one “pervading” question, “What is it to be holy?”⁵ This question will take us through Underhill’s life to her “personal little book,” *The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life*,⁶ the book that captures her ongoing discernment and crowns her personal spiritual quest.

Holiness

To be holy was what Underhill desired above everything else, her primary pursuit. Yet because of her reflective mind, because of her intensely inquisitive nature, because being was for her warped into knowing, she could not merely succumb to this supernatural pull. Nor could she allow herself simply to be drawn by this immense yearning to transcend her being. Rather, she did it the hard way, and she suffered for it too. Holiness became an intellectual exercise, a hard-core empirical method: she would collect data, observe and analyze phenomena, and arrive at her tentative conclusions. But she remained unsatisfied, paralyzed by her head, unable to perceive the certainty that screamed from her gut.⁷ Underhill knew certainty in her body, yet found it hard to articulate and accept in her mind—an experience that

³ Evelyn Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Charles Williams (London: Longmans, 1943), 11.

⁴ This is how she describes von Hügel the first time she writes about him. “To J. A. Herbert,” September 16, 1911. Underhill, *Letters*, 129.

⁵ Dana Greene, “Adhering to God: The Message of Evelyn Underhill for our Times,” *Spirituality Today* 39 (1987): 22-38; <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/873912greene.html>.

⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life* (London: Methuen, 1932; reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), vii.

⁷ One of the clearest examples of this pain, self-doubt, and tension can be found in her report to von Hügel of December 21, 1921. She writes of her mystical experiences: “The chief point is: am I simply living an illusion? It seems impossible but all the same, I feel I must be sure. I don’t mean by any unwillingness to make a venture

by 1921 had accompanied her "on and off for over sixteen years."⁸ Underhill's own personal journey as a mystic began when she was about thirty (1904-1905). With the awakening of her mystical consciousness she could not look back. The struggle between experience and intellect had to be resolved, and the cord which promised to bind the two was holiness.

I believe that the biggest tragedy of Underhill's life was that for too long, she did not change her *method* for finding a suitable answer to her longing for holiness. Like most of us, Underhill found it difficult to stretch her psychological comfort zone. She persisted in relying on her intellectual prowess and on the same handful of cognitive skills acquired in her formative years. This caused her, to greater and lesser extents throughout her life, to neglect other channels to holiness—her feelings, her intuition, her body, and the people whom she encountered. This is the "beast" Underhill found so hard to conquer:⁹ her own stubbornness in relying on the false self of her mind addicted to its own ruminations, its own introspection.

Yet to her credit, and unlike many of us, Underhill was also flexible, and courageous enough to experiment with different categories and learn from her own life experiences and from a few intimate and esteemed friends, particularly the Baron. Thus her focus shifted from beauty and magic, to mysticism and the transcendent, to relationship and spirituality. Yet, like her hero in "The Ivory Tower," her pursuit of the mission itself remained constant and unwavering.

Holiness and Magic

Underhill's earliest attempts at understanding her awakened spiritual consciousness were probably undertaken as an agnostic. They coincided with a heightening of her aesthetic sense through her extensive travel in Europe, and through her involvement with the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, a group practicing ritual magic, which she joined in 1904 and belonged to "for some years."¹⁰ Her fictional works,

or any demand for impossible clearness of faith, but simply to be *certain* my own experiences are not simply imaginary." Underhill, *Fragments*, 108.

⁸ Underhill, *Fragments*, 108.

⁹ On June 20, 1924, Underhill wrote in her diary: "I *am* fundamentally a beast—but a beast that can't get over the ceaseless thirst for God." Underhill, *Fragments*, 64.

¹⁰ Michael Stoeber, "Evelyn Underhill on Magic, Sacrament and Spiritual Transformation" (paper presented at the symposium *The Contemplative Life and Society: The Life and Work of Evelyn Underhill on the 60th Anniversary of her Death*, Toronto, June 2, 2001), 6.

published during this time, explored the themes of beauty and magic, together with her understanding of the supernatural as seemingly pantheistic.¹¹ Yet it was Italy, in particular its Roman Catholic churches and rituals, that best captured her imagination and won over her discerning heart, leading her eventually to a theistic awakening and the desire to become Roman Catholic herself.¹² Underhill wrote to Father Robert Hugh Benson (her first spiritual director): "A good deal shaken but unconvinced I was 'converted' quite suddenly once and for all by an overpowering vision which had really no specific Christian element but yet convinced me that the Catholic religion was true. It was so tightly bound up with Roman Catholicism that I had no doubt . . . that that Church was my ultimate home."¹³

It may seem surprising that, this profound personal experience notwithstanding, Underhill decided, first, to please her husband-to-be, and then, because she could not betray her Modernist philosophy,¹⁴ to give up her spiritual "home." Yet this decision was in fact consistent with her overall intellectual, individualist, disembodied bent, a tendency that was evident again in her later years.¹⁵

¹¹ Underhill's five short stories, "The Death of a Saint," "The Ivory Tower," "Our Lady of the Gate," "The Mountain Image," and "A Green Mass" were all published in *The Horlicks Magazine* (vol. 2) in 1904. In the same year she also published her first novel, *The Grey World* (London: William Heinemann, 1904), which explored art, as did the short stories "The Death of a Saint" and "The Mountain Image." Her second novel, *The Lost Word* (London: William Heinemann, 1907), has as its central motif the beauty of architecture. In her last novel, *The Column of Dust* (London: Methuen, 1909), hermeticism and magic are underlying themes. Her short story "A Green Mass" can be described as a creative reflection on the liturgy with pantheistic undertones.

¹² Underhill considered Italy "the holy land of Europe, the only place left, I suppose, that is really medicinal to the soul." Margaret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green, 1958), 13.

¹³ Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 29.

¹⁴ Because Hubert Stuart Moore was "depressed" by the idea that his wife-to-be was to become Catholic, with the consequence that a third party—a confessor—could come between them, Underhill compromised by postponing her initiation to Catholicism for six months (Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 30). In that period, late 1907, the papal encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, "a condemnation of Modernist teaching," was issued. Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 28.

¹⁵ Von Hügel's "diagnosis" in the 1920s of her spiritual ailments as "exclusive" or "pure" mysticism, a tendency to associate spirituality with "self-development," and being "emotionally starved" corresponds to the suggestion that Underhill tended to have a disembodied, intellectual, and individualist stance towards life. Underhill, *Fragments*, 27.

Underhill made a very crucial choice at this point in her life, a choice that had four implications. She chose to endorse her intellectual integrity rather than her experiential desire. Put simply, she chose her head over her heart, her reason over her bodily longing. By withdrawing from the Roman Catholic Church, she opted to journey alone, to travel on the spiritual path relying solely on her intellect. No one in Underhill's family had ever been religious; joining the Roman Catholic Church would have been her first true experience of spiritual community. Yet evidently she preferred the more familiar path of solitary individualism. Underhill had reached a crossroads; either way promised to be painful and difficult. She chose a pain, a suffering that guaranteed no clear resolution over a pain that could perhaps quench some of her cravings for holiness. Finally—and this was Underhill's main redemption, the channel to the next phase of her quest for the holy—her sense of the supernatural finally had a name and was clearly transcendent. The supernatural was called "God"—though she still hesitated to use the term, relying instead on "Reality," "Being," "Absolute."¹⁶ Underhill was now a believer.

Holiness and Mysticism

Underhill had the remarkable ability to learn from her experiences and to mold them fruitfully through her intellectual vigor. In *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, she put these cognitive skills into practice. *Mysticism* served two primary purposes for Underhill, corresponding respectively to the first and second parts of her book. In Part 1, Underhill brought together all that she had learned in the past, most notably magic, vitalism, platonic philosophy, and psychology, while painting the picture of her "Reality" as both "Transcendent" and "Immanent."¹⁷ Even more importantly, she recalled that one core truth that

¹⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1st ed., New York: E. P. Dutton, 1911; 12th ed., New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930; reprint of 12th ed., Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications Inc., 2002). Subsequent references are to the Dover Publications reprint, which has "Man's" deleted from the title.

¹⁷ Chapter 2 of *Mysticism* focuses on vitalism (26-43), chapter 3 on psychology (44-69), and chapters 6 and 7 on magic (125-164). Platonic philosophy underlies much of her thought process. Reality as transcendent and immanent is the subject of chapter 5, "Mysticism and Theology," 95-124.

was still alive but "chilly" in her gut, that physical sense of the holy, which she hoped to "rekindle."¹⁸ As she stated in *Mysticism*:

The mystics find the basis of their method not in logic but in life: in the existence of a discoverable "real," a spark of true being, within the seeking subject, which can, in that ineffable experience which they call the "act of union," fuse itself with and thus apprehend the reality of the sought Object. In theological language, their theory of knowledge is that the spirit of man, itself essentially divine, is capable of immediate communion with God, the One Reality (p. 24).

Armed with these tools, Underhill proceeded to construct her future destination. Brilliantly and meticulously she studied "a thousand sources,"¹⁹ analyzed the lives and experiences of "humanity's pioneers,"²⁰ and set forth to pave the "mystic way." She was no longer alone or directionless on her quest for the holy: she was accompanied by the best that the history of mysticism had to offer.²¹ Through the "pioneering" struggles of the mystics she could now follow the path of awakening, purification, illumination, dark night of the soul, and union. Subconsciously, Underhill was perhaps creating her own "church," building her own community,²² and mapping her own spiritual journey—all through the incredible might of her intellect and scholarship. As Dana Greene points out, Underhill's "need for intimacy and her sense of homelessness, both negatives, worked to propel her into creative activity."²³

Ironically, or perhaps providentially, through *Mysticism* Underhill was awakened to a real, flesh and blood community. Meyrick Heath, who wrote to Underhill to share her reflections on *Mysticism*, sought her spiritual advice. Heath was the first of many who in the following years led Underhill to commit herself fully to her ministry as

¹⁸ "To Mrs. Meyrick Heath," March 19, 1911. Underhill, *Letters*, 122.

¹⁹ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 47.

²⁰ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 133.

²¹ *Theophanies*, Underhill's second collection of poems, brings to life two literary giants, Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, who accompany her musings on eternity and suffering (respectively). *Theophanies: A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1916), "William Shakespeare," 100-102; "On Reading Dostoïeffsky," 33.

²² Up to this point Underhill believed that mystics "lived independently of religious homes." Just like her they were "ecclesiastically homeless." Underhill, *Fragments*, 18.

²³ Underhill, *Fragments*, 18.

spiritual companion and retreat director.²⁴ The second main source of emotional nourishment was Baron Friedrich von Hügel, one of the first to congratulate her on her literary achievement, and the only one to offer to help her edit the less orthodox elements in her work.²⁵ In a few years' time von Hügel would be pivotal in transforming not just Underhill's work, but her whole life.

A deeper irony, however, permeated Underhill's *Mysticism*, for she espoused the radical superiority of the "emotive will" over the "intellectual will"; the way of love over the way of knowledge; selflessness and giving over selfishness and acquiring; a moral way of goodness over an amoral stance of curiosity; union and therefore relationship over individuality; and fruitfulness and action in the world over a quietistic and passive stance disconnected from the world. To put it succinctly, she promoted an embodied spirituality over a disembodied one. Yet throughout this five-hundred-page-book, readers are bombarded by an impressively intellectual text that supports and describes a radically individualistic path whose aim is the transcendence, rather than spiritual embodiment, of the human person. The text asserts that it is only after the painful and hard work of awakening, purgation, illumination, dark night of the soul and union that the mystic can undergo the final test to attest to his or her credibility: "divine fecundity."²⁶ According to Underhill, it is only after all the psychological, disembodied work has been done that the body can be trusted with engaging actively and creatively in the concrete labors of love and compassion in the world.

This was the same paradox enfolded in Underhill's own life. While she desired love, she was still addicted to knowledge. While she needed relationship, she was treading a path very much on her own. While she espoused social justice, she was, at least up to this point in her life, still disconnected from the world's pain. Yet all this changed, radically and irrevocably, as she tasted firsthand the suffering of a

²⁴ Underhill's correspondence with Heath started on March 19, 1911. Underhill, *Letters*, 121. Though Underhill had already been corresponding with people like Margaret Robinson on spiritual matters for some time, it was *Mysticism* that propelled her reputation as a knower and healer of souls.

²⁵ Armstrong records the letter that von Hügel sent to Underhill on October 30, 1911, to congratulate her on publishing *Mysticism*. Underhill, however, "faced the task of seriously revising her work," mostly in its 1930 twelfth edition, after the Baron had died (Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, pp.131-132, 135).

²⁶ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 170, 428.

broken world. The Great War broke Underhill "to pieces,"²⁷ only to rebuild her as a more mature, more engaged, more loving woman.

Holiness and Relationship

Underhill is often quoted as saying that she owed Baron von Hügel her "whole spiritual life."²⁸ Yet her deeper healing process had started before she approached the Baron for spiritual direction in the autumn of 1922.²⁹ Her healing began during the latter years of the First World War, when her "most intimate friend"³⁰ Ethel Ross Barker became terminally ill. Underhill had felt pangs of spiritual loneliness and longing for community, and had decided to move closer to the Anglican Church. In typical Underhill fashion, this conversion was also expressed intellectually. In a short article published in 1918, she argued that "like the soul of man, [mysticism] needs a body if it is to fulfill its mighty destiny"; and that "divorced from all institutional expression it tends to become strange, vague or merely sentimental."³¹ Her first taste of a religious community in more than a decade only awakened in her a desire for a deeper communion with God, and a need to pave her progress with a spiritual mentor. Underhill the individualist was opening up to relationship. Underhill the intellectual and disembodied mystic would be "dusted down"³² through von Hügel's firm but "affectionate" direction.³³

To understand Underhill's complex relationship with von Hügel is in many ways to understand who Underhill desired to be. Although spiritually she felt indebted to him, and intellectually she respected his scholarship to the extent that her later theology reflected his work,³⁴ the real attraction was to the person himself, or perhaps more accurately, to the "icon"³⁵ she believed him to be. As Greene writes,

²⁷ Underhill, *Fragments*, 108.

²⁸ "To Dom John Chapman," June 9, 1931, in Underhill, *Letters*, 196.

²⁹ Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 200.

³⁰ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 70.

³¹ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 73-74; quoting from Evelyn Underhill, "The Future of Mysticism," *Everyman*, July 20, 1918, 336.

³² Underhill, *Fragments*, 28. Lucy Menzies, *Biography of Evelyn Underhill*, unfinished transcript, St. Andrews University Archives, St. Andrews, Scotland, ix, 22.

³³ Underhill, *Fragments*, 27.

³⁴ Underhill quotes von Hügel several times in *The Golden Sequence* (2, 9, 25, 26, 58, 63, 187).

³⁵ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 94.

"The relationship between von Hügel and Underhill was not one of equals. He admired her but she adored him."³⁶ This sense of "adoration" can only be appreciated if we see von Hügel through Underhill's eyes. It can only be understood if we remember that what she saw in him reflected what she most desperately needed in herself.

Underhill's two writings about von Hügel are our best lens through which to observe this relationship.³⁷ The first acknowledgement was a brief note recalling von Hügel as a spiritual director, published anonymously immediately after his death in 1925.³⁸ Evidently, so soon after the pain and shock of his passing away, this was the aspect of the Baron that Underhill missed dearly. The second essay, published in 1932,³⁹ is more informative. Although she focuses explicitly on his philosophy, her appreciation of the man is palpable. She titled it "Finite and Infinite: A Study of the Philosophy of Baron Friedrich von Hügel."⁴⁰ One wonders whether "finite and infinite"—a play on words on the title of his Gifford Lectures, "The Reality of Finites, and the Reality of God"—might not also reflect the way in which she subconsciously saw von Hügel himself.⁴¹ He was human, yes—but godly, holy in her eyes.

This reading becomes immediately tenable in Underhill's description of him in the introductory sentences of the essay. She speaks of von Hügel in superlative terms: his spirituality was "immense"; his personality was "daunting and attractive" and had "an Alpine quality." Those who knew him (presumably herself) thought of him as a "volcanic mountain": his faith was "rock-like," his intellect "massive and lofty," his interior life "intense," recalling "hidden fires." When he "uttered the name of God," all (again, presumably herself) could sense "awe and passion." Those who knew him were "lost in his depth, silenced by his nobility." Evidently, for Underhill, von Hügel was no ordinary human being. He was "a saint transfigured by his passionate sense of God," especially—and here perhaps is the catch—because of his humility, his "simplicity," as he attended to the ordinariness of

³⁶ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 79. See also Underhill, *Fragments*, 27.

³⁷ Republished in Evelyn Underhill, *Mixed Pasture: Twelve Essays and Addresses* (London: Methuen, 1933).

³⁸ Underhill, *Mixed Pasture*, x.

³⁹ That same year she published *The Golden Sequence*. This will be important to keep in mind as I analyze Underhill's own spirituality in contrast to von Hügel's.

⁴⁰ Underhill, *Mixed Pasture*, 209-233.

⁴¹ Underhill, *Mixed Pasture*, 211.

everyday life: feeding his dog, shopping for groceries, truly being with people from all walks of life, "full of unhurried interest." Von Hügel represented the holy ideal that she sought wholeheartedly, "moving easily between the homely and the transcendental, the natural and supernatural levels."⁴²

Von Hügel even had a name for this grounded, connected, embodied spirituality: it was "Christocentric," since through Christ's incarnation the human and divine nature came together in the one person, and transcendence and immanence were manifested as one. He contrasted it with Underhill's own "theistic" spirituality, where the experience of God was more transcendent, otherworldly, not rooted enough in the created realm. Her theistic spirituality fed her "maladies"—"intellectualism," introversion, and "pure mysticism." Therefore, her curative balm had to be a turning towards Christ through a more "devotional," "sacramental," altruistic quest for holiness.⁴³ Underhill could sense that her theistic tendencies had proven to be inadequate. More importantly, she trusted von Hügel and thus had also begun to trust herself. Underhill started the process of letting go—of her individualism, of her disembodied spirituality, of her bias towards the intellect. Her "Green Notebook" witnessed to this gradual painful conversion, where purgation from her excessive introspection was accompanied by moments of blissful, selfless illumination:

Today my God and Joy I felt and knew Thee, Eternal, Unchanging, transfusing all things, and most wholly and perfectly given to us in Christ—our in-dwelling with Him a Total Surrender to Thee—Thyself in all, the one medium of our union—at Communion to find and love Thee in each soul to which Thou has given Thyself. To know and find Thee, actually and substantially, in all nations and races and persons—*this* nourishes and solves the intercession problem. "Not grace alone, nor us alone, but Thy Grace in us." To *use* and cultivate it. I think the parable of the talents meant this. How far beyond anything one conceived the mysteries seem to stretch now. The more vivid the vision of Christ grows and the more insistent the demand for dedication, the more one can es-

⁴² Underhill, *Mixed Pasture*, 209-210.

⁴³ Underhill, *Fragments*, 27, 29. To promote a more altruistic stance, von Hügel encouraged Underhill to work with the poor.

cape by this path from the maze of self-occupation. He draws and we run after.⁴⁴

Underhill had come a long way, yet the moment of separation from von Hügel, of cutting the umbilical cord from "her spiritual father," came perhaps too early. Brame writes that Underhill was "in one sense, very much alone"⁴⁵ after von Hügel died, but this was a different aloneness from that which she had experienced earlier in her life. This was an aloneness rooted in awareness. In her openness with von Hügel, Underhill had learned how not to be alone, how not to be disembodied, how not to be driven merely by her intellect. Her God was now concretely, tangibly, and experientially transcendent *and* immanent. Her community was the Anglican Church; her ministry was with her retreatants and the poor she continued to serve. Underhill had learned a lot, but needed to integrate that knowledge into her quest for holiness.

Holiness as the "Spiritual Life"

When loved ones pass away, our primary desire is to seal their presence in our lives through our memories. It is not surprising, therefore, that when von Hügel died, Underhill brought together all she had learned from him and sealed it in writing.⁴⁶ The fruit of her labor was *Man and the Supernatural*, a fourfold study of divine revelation through themes that were particularly central to von Hügel's theology: history, the Incarnation, sacraments and symbols, and prayer that sanctifies human life.⁴⁷ Yet five years later, Underhill developed her own "fourfold" theology, retelling the story of the divine-human encounter as a lifelong relationship called the "the spiritual life."⁴⁸ The influence of von Hügel was still there, integrated with the rest of her

⁴⁴ Entry on Passion Sunday, March 18, 1923. Underhill, *Fragments*, 39-40.

⁴⁵ Underhill, *Ways of the Spirit*, 16.

⁴⁶ Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 102.

⁴⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural* (London: Methuen, 1927). These themes, explored in chapters 4 through 8, were also central to Underhill's spiritual direction under von Hügel.

⁴⁸ Todd E. Johnson paraphrases Brame, who raised the question of why in *The Golden Sequence* Underhill would "essentially rewrite *Man and the Supernatural* from the perspective of the Holy Spirit." Todd E. Johnson, "The Three Faces of Evelyn Underhill," *Evelyn Underhill Newsletter* 7, no. 1 (November 1997): 3; http://www.evelynunderhill.org/newsletter/EUA_1997/complete_1997_opt.pdf.

accumulated wisdom. Yet this was Underhill's voice, committed to her own journey, finally consciously seeking to answer the one question that had until now remained merely implicit throughout the quest: "What is it to be holy?"

Underhill's answer in *The Golden Sequence* is unequivocal. To be holy is to be spiritual, where "spiritual" implies literally letting go of one's spirit to become one with the Spirit. This play on the words spirit-Spirit is evident at the very beginning of the book: "Spirit, in its most general sense, is our name for that world, life, Being, which is then apprehended by us; and for that quality in ourselves which is capable of such apprehension and response."⁴⁹ The implication is obvious in the statement of her thesis. It is human spirit in the flesh that enables our experience of holiness. It is the transcendent in the earthly that gifts us with holiness. It is the Holy Spirit more than the incarnate Christ that is central to her theology.⁵⁰ This is even clearer in her unapologetic remarks about what she believed to be the priority in the quest for holiness: "That essential life, *out of which* real fellowship and service must proceed; . . . the surrender to the priority of Spirit, and the embodiment of our faith in such meek devotional practice and symbolic action as shall *stimulate the transcendental sense*: this, I believe, is the chief spiritual lack of the modern world."⁵¹ This lack shows how, for Underhill, "the love of neighbor is a corollary of the love of God, not its equivalent."⁵²

Underhill's emphasis on transcendence, yet with a nuanced, embodied desire for the spiritual, should not be confused with Underhill's old tendency towards "pure" mysticism. Von Hügel's influence did not simply dissipate in the seven years following his death. Instead, on closer analysis of Underhill's detailed presentation of the "spiritual life," it becomes apparent that she did not substitute von Hügel's more Christocentric approach for her own earlier theistic tendencies. Rather, she had in fact integrated both into a systematic

⁴⁹ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 3.

⁵⁰ Greene comments: "What *Man and the Supernatural* makes abundantly clear is how thoroughly Underhill avoided discussion of Christology. Under von Hügel's influence she managed to curb her one-sided theocentrism, but no matter what she said, she never did become Christocentric. As late as 1932 she wrote 'I came to Christ through God, whereas quite obviously lots of people came to God through Christ. But I can't show them how to do that—all I know about is the reverse route.' If 'left to myself,' she wrote, I 'would just go off on God alone.'" Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 102.

⁵¹ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, ix-x (italics mine).

⁵² Greene, "Adhering to God," 36.

Trinitarian theology with a strong emphasis on pneumatology, a theology that reflected more her own journey of holiness and her own growth as a thinker, mystic, and spiritual director.

Although Underhill presented *The Golden Sequence* as a fourfold study, I think it is actually simpler to analyze it as a threefold structure which repeats itself as it is further scrutinized. In this study, the first threefold scheme—the divine, the human, and their point of contact which is the “spiritual life”—is incorporated with the second threefold scheme that examines the “spiritual life” itself.

First, the divine is understood to be both transcendent and immanent, acting in the created realm through the person of the Holy Spirit who bestows gifts of grace, holiness, and communion. She writes: “Only the Christian theology of the Holy Spirit seems able to safeguard the deep truths in both these extremes, and by carrying them up to a higher synthesis, to create a landscape wide enough and rich enough for all the varied experiences of the spiritual life.”⁵³

The human person, on the other hand, is understood to be body and spirit. Yet it is through the spirit that he or she can receive the gift of grace. Here Underhill borrows von Hügel's analogy of the amphibian, who can breathe the same oxygen (holiness) through both its lungs and its gills, on dry land and in water. However, von Hügel had written: “Never to lose the sense that we human beings are body as well as soul, not only here but, in some way and degree difficult or impossible to picture, also in the hereafter, is to keep ourselves sane and balanced.”⁵⁴ Underhill, on the other hand, tends to accentuate more of a dualism: “The distinction which was first made by the Platonists, and runs through the spiritual literature of Christendom, between our ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ nature, our ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ powers, does interpret and harmonize a wide range of human experience.”⁵⁵

Underhill describes the “spiritual life” in a threefold pattern of “awe,” “piety” and “judgment.”⁵⁶ Awe is that sense of humility and awareness of our sinfulness with which we approach the divine. It is a stance that leads to adoration and love of God. Piety is the awareness of being a child of God, an image of the divine; it is a state that leads to compassion and love of neighbor. Judgment is the gift of seeing

⁵³ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 27.

⁵⁴ Underhill, *Mixed Pasture*, 219.

⁵⁵ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 53.

⁵⁶ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 83-87.

things through the eyes of God, the gift of selflessness and detachment, and it leads to knowledge of the divine. The "spiritual life" is thus a radically active life pushing towards constant transformation on both the transcendent and immanent planes.

The sense of "awe" with which we journey in the "spiritual life" awakens a desire for "purification" from that which limits our adoration of the divine. Purgation must be holistic, and therefore must affect the three aspects of human nature, starting with our "senses," followed by the "mind," and finally the "will."

The "cleansing of the senses" and the "cleansing of the intellect" occur in "accepting our ignorance, acknowledging the awful gap between the Creator and the creature" and becoming aware that "all concepts of God, from the most crude to the most 'spiritual,' fall to silence before His face."⁵⁷ This form of purification leads to radical apophaticism, where all that is known about God is that God cannot be known. Underhill uses a good analogy which captures the essence of this purified stance: "We have to recognize our intellectual concepts as the useful makeshifts which they really are; paper currency which permits the circulation of spiritual wealth, but must never be mistaken for gold."⁵⁸

The purification of memory and imagination entails the cleansing of our "psychic storehouse," where "pains and pleasures, repulsions and attractions, images and notions" can distract us from true immortality.⁵⁹ Underhill is very critical of "the dangerous realm of supposed 'mystical' experience—which is most often psychosensual experience," and of the "primitive symbols, pagan fantasies, and natural cravings decently disguised by the vestments of faith" which make up "religious experience."⁶⁰ In short, Underhill suggests the "simplifying—so far as is possible without real impoverishment—of the interior decorations of the soul."⁶¹

Finally, the purification of the will and love leads to the paradoxical claim of mystics and saints that through complete selflessness and detachment "the will transformed in charity everywhere discovers God."⁶² This is akin to Ignatius of Loyola's dictum of "finding God in

⁵⁷ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 119.

⁵⁸ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 121.

⁵⁹ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 127.

⁶⁰ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 129, 131.

⁶¹ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 130.

⁶² Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 136.

all things," though Ignatius's understanding of detachment is perhaps even more radical than Underhill's. Underhill notes that "what is asked is the unselfing of the whole drive of our God-given nature, its detachment from all softness and ease, all personal enjoyment and achievement, even of the most apparently spiritual kind,"⁶³ a detachment from what is positive and joyful in life. Yet in the First Principle and Foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius suggests that "we should make ourselves indifferent to *all* created things," and thus "we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life."⁶⁴ He therefore alerts us to attachment even to the negative and painful in life, for, as Underhill writes, "The cleansing and transforming power of suffering abides not in the degree of pain experienced, but in the degree of acceptance achieved."⁶⁵

Further, the stance of "judgment" in the "spiritual life" offers the gift of knowledge of the divine through a threefold method of prayer—"adoration," "communion" and "action." Similarly, Bérulle defined the life of prayer as the "threefold relation of the soul with God: adoring, adhering, and cooperating."⁶⁶ These three forms of relationship with God, inseparable from an ongoing process of purification, seem to parallel illumination, union, and divine fecundity, Underhill's stages of the "mystic way" described in *Mysticism*. Yet in the "mystic way," which can perhaps be described as a radical "spiritual life," the three stages follow each other. However, in the "spiritual life" Underhill suggests that the three actions must occur simultaneously.

Adoration is "the first and greatest of life's responses to its spiritual environment; the first and most fundamental of spirit's movement towards Spirit, the seed from which all other prayer must spring."⁶⁷ It is also a state where the creature relishes the presence of the divine and grows in relationship with the Creator. Thus a sense of communion is created, not only between the person and the Spirit, but also at the level of the corporate community, the church with God.⁶⁸ Through adherence with the Creator, however, the human being

⁶³ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A New Translation based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago, Ill.: Loyola University Press, 1951); Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 141-142.

⁶⁴ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, 12 (italics mine).

⁶⁵ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 102.

⁶⁶ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 175. See also Greene, "Adhering to God."

⁶⁷ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 162.

⁶⁸ Underhill pursued this subject in her last major scholarly work, *Worship*, 3rd ed. (London: Nisbet, 1937).

becomes even more confident of “[evoking] a responsive movement from the enfolding spiritual world.”⁶⁹ This is the “energetic power” of intercessory prayer, that “active prayer in which the human spirit becomes in a mysterious way the fellow worker with the Holy Spirit of Creation; a channel or instrument through which that Spirit’s work is done, and His power flows out to other souls and things.”⁷⁰ Underhill therefore repeats her conclusion of *Mysticism* by implying that it is only through union with the divine that the human can act in the created realm.

On the third facet of the “spiritual life,” the stance of “piety,” of love and compassion to one’s neighbor, Underhill interestingly remains silent. It is that core aspect of the “spiritual life” which her critics would probably name “fellowship and service,” “activities” which were to Underhill “nowadays often regarded as the substance, instead of the symptoms of a living Christianity.”⁷¹ Yet these “symptoms” are precisely those preached by Jesus Christ, the coming of the reign of God where justice, compassion and an ecological conscience would rule in the created realm.⁷² These are the same “symptoms” that she practiced assiduously in her work with the poor, her spiritual accompaniment, and even her emerging pacifism. Underhill’s understanding of holiness, while appreciating the importance of these pursuits, would however still see them as secondary to the pondering of Spirit. Action can only be a consequence of contemplation. In her final pages of *The Golden Sequence* she summarizes her understanding of what it is to be holy:

So the final purification of love of the human spirit, and the full achievement of its particular destiny as a collaborator in the Spirit’s work, must go together: obverse and reverse of the unitive life. Then the soul’s total prayer enters, and is absorbed into that ceaseless Divine action by which the created order is maintained and transformed. For by the prayer of self-abandonment, she enters another region; and by adherence is established in it. There, the strange energy of will that is in us and so often wasted on unworthy ends, can be applied for the world’s needs—sometimes in

⁶⁹ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 178.

⁷⁰ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 179.

⁷¹ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, ix.

⁷² For Underhill’s keen appreciation of the beauty of creation, see her *Immanence: A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912) and *Theophanies: A Book of Verses*.

particular actions, sometimes by absorption into the pure Act of God.⁷³

It is clear that Underhill's understanding of holiness reflected who Underhill was through and through, and consequently did not change drastically throughout the years, though, like Underhill herself, it did become more refined and theologically mature. Her "spiritual life" was a point of contact between transcendence and immanence, feeding from both, being engaged with both. Yet because of Underhill's psychological temperament and life history, she was more comfortable with a point of contact that was closer to the transcendent rather than the immanent plane. Although her understanding of holiness included both immanence and transcendence, her personal disposition was to do theology from above, as compared, for instance, to von Hügel, who preferred a more bottom-up approach. This is precisely why von Hügel's influence was paramount for Underhill. He constantly reminded her to climb down the ladder she had ascended with her mystics, and to be with all the ordinary men and women who find holiness in the labor of the earth, in the toils of their daily spiritual life.

Conclusion

We have accompanied Evelyn Underhill on her path of holiness, a path of self-doubt and mystical awakenings, of loneliness and loving companionship, of searching and finding. Along this path she explored magic, and then became a scholar of mysticism and a doctor of souls who experienced holiness in her being. Through her spiritual direction, in her own reflections, and in her ministry she came to know God in the supernatural, the mystical. Her God, though always mysterious and transcendent, became more palpable, more present in her life as she opened herself to more relationships.

Underhill's desire was to know holiness, yet ironically she always carried holiness within her, if only her sharp intellect could have let her feel it, trust it, and celebrate it. Thus her understanding of holiness, the "spiritual life," can ultimately be seen as the integration which she desired to experience in her own self: the coming together of her intellect and her mystical experiences, a new awakening that would ground her and offer her peace.

⁷³ Underhill, *Golden Sequence*, 182-183.

Underhill's diary reflections end in 1937. Her last entry in "The Green and Flowered Notebook" continues to witness to her shifting back and forth between the experience of God and the ruminations of her head: "New sense of penetrating presence and action of God and my own subjugation. Immense need of purification of will, stopping self-chosen work and self-satisfying work. Humbled under mighty hand of God."⁷⁴ When she died on June 15, 1941, she had fully embraced her holiness. Her writings and her wisdom continue to accompany us in our own "spiritual lives" and personal quests for holiness. Underhill's greatest achievement is the lived reality which still breathes as we learn from her example and are encouraged to live our own destinies. In the end, her intellect and her mystical experiences proved to be the lungs and gills of the same amphibian, through which the one life was fueled with Spirit-filled air.

⁷⁴ Underhill, *Fragments*, 104.

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