



The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter 2011-2012



The Annual Day of Quiet Reflection

“Reflections on the Inter-faith
Conversations of Evelyn Underhill”

directed by Michael Stoeber

June 15-16, 2012

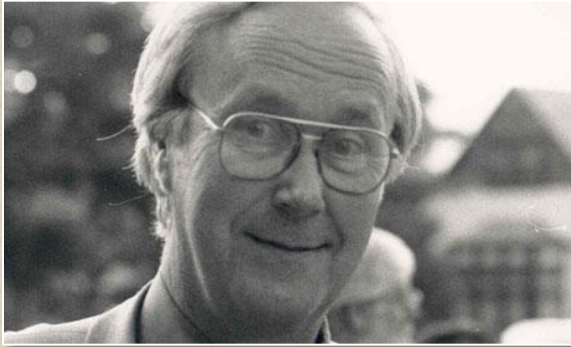
The Washington National Cathedral

In her writings, Evelyn Underhill includes some reference to non-Christian religions, especially to themes in Jewish, Hindu, and Islamic mysticism. She draws these mystics generally into positive relationship with their Christian cousins, by postulating a common ground to all authentic mystical experience. On this Day of Quiet Reflection, we will explore various aspects of Underhill's inter-faith conversations, paying special attention to her reflections on the poetry of the great Sufi mystic Kabir and on the life of the co-founder of the Hindu Brahma Samaj, Devandranath Tagore. Our contemplative reflections will include also reference to Underhill's own experiences and poetry related to this inter-faith dialogue. 9:30a.m. -3:30 p.m.

Join us in the Cathedral the night before this program for a **Pilgrimage with Readings from Evelyn Underhill** beginning at 6:30 the evening of June 15 (Underhill's actual “feast day”). Kathy Staudt and leaders from the Center for Prayer and Pilgrimage will be our guides. Registration materials will be available late in the spring on the cathedral website at <http://www.nationalcathedral.org/worship/prayerPilgrimage.shtml>.

You can also [download a registration form here](#).

*Michael Stoeber, professor at Regis College, Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto, is interested in spirituality, comparative mysticism, the problems of evil and suffering and the intersections of spirituality and art.



Obituary A. M. Allchin

It is with the greatest sadness that we announce the death of Arthur Macdonald (Donald) Allchin, priest, theologian and great supporter of the work of Evelyn Underhill, who died at age 80 on December 23, 2010.

Donald attended Christ Church, Oxford and later trained for the Anglican ministry at Cuddesdon Theological College. He was ordained in 1957. In 1967 and 1968 he taught at General Theological Seminary in New York and from then until 1973 he was warden of the Sisters of the Love of God in Oxford. For fourteen years he served as canon at Canterbury. He had a life-long interest in the Orthodox Church and in monasticism, as well as a deep affection for Wales. He was the author of four books and wrote several articles on Evelyn Underhill and was the keynote speaker at the first Underhill Day held at the Washington National Cathedral. Donald brought joy to the lives of all who knew him. May he rest in peace.

2011 Events Celebrating the Centennial of the Publication of “Mysticism.”

This centennial of the publication of Evelyn Underhill’s “Mysticism” was celebrated by events carried out by EUA associates.

St. Paul’s Memorial Episcopal Church,
Charlottesville, VA and **Our Lady of the
angels Trappistine Monastery,** Crozet, VA.
A Quiet Day on Evelyn Underhill at St. Paul’s,
December 2010 and three lectures on Evelyn
Underhill in Crozet, VA, November-December
2010 given by Bonnie Thurston.

Centre for Spirituality, Cape Town, S. A.
“Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the
Contemplative Life,” a lecture by Dana Greene,
January 10, 2011.



St Bartholomew Episcopal Church, Atlanta, GA

“Awakening to God’s Love: Exploring the Christian Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill,” Feb 19, 2011. Presentations by Dana Greene and Carl McColman.

Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA

“Anchored in God: A Quiet Day with Readings from Evelyn Underhill,” March 11, 2011.

Directed by Kathleen Staudt.

BBC Radio 3

The Rev. Dr. Jane Shaw, Dean, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, gave a lecture on Evelyn Underhill’s “Mysticism” as part of her series “The Mystical Turn,” on May 18, 2011. Archived at www.gracecathedral.org/cathedral-life

Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA

“Evelyn Underhill and Her Writing of Mysticism,” April, 2011

Washington National Cathedral

“Mysticism Revisited: A Day of Reflection in Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of *Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill.”

This celebration, sponsored by the Evelyn Underhill Association, The Cathedral’s Center for Prayer and Pilgrimage, and the Community of Reconciliation, was held at the Washington National Cathedral on June 4th, 2011. On Friday evening a pilgrimage with Evelyn Underhill, Sacred Stories in Glass and Stone, was led by Kathleen Staudt and Kathy Spaar. The program for the following day began with a panel discussion with Underhill scholars Todd Johnson, Brehm Associate Professor of

Worship, Theology, and the Arts, Fuller Theological Seminary, Carol Poston, professor emeriti of English at Saint Xavier University and editor of *The Making of a Mystic: New and Selected Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, and Dana Greene, dean emeriti of Oxford College of Emory University and author of *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life*. The panel was moderated by Kathleen Henderson Staudt, poet, spiritual director and author of *Annunciation: Poems Out of Scripture* and *Waving Back: Poems of Mothering Life*. . Donna Osthaus exhibited a Greek New Testament owned by Evelyn Underhill and now in possession of the Washington Cathedral. This program was followed by Quiet Afternoon of Prayer and Meditation led by Bonnie Thurston, poet, retreat speaker and author or editor of fifteen theological books, including *The Spiritual Landscape of Mark and For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer*. Texts of panelist presentations are available under articles about Evelyn Underhill.

Annual Conference of the Theological Society of Southern Africa, Johannesburg, S. A.

Susan Rakoczy presented “Evelyn Underhill: One Hundred Years of *Mysticism*,” June 23, 2011

Center for Spirituality, St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, IN.

“Evelyn Underhill: An Unlikely Pioneer,” September 23, 2011 symposium, organized by Todd Johnson and Kathleen Dolphin, featured presentations and a panel discussion by Todd Johnson The theological context for the publication of Mysticism; Dana Greene--A biographical study of Underhill; Carol Poston--A feminist reading of Underhill and her early



interest in devotion to Mary, and Kathleen Staudt, Underhill in search of voice.

St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Whitemarsh,
Fort Washington, PA

Dana Greene gave a lecture on “Evelyn Underhill and Forgiveness” and a morning workshop on “The Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill.” October 2011.

Camden Historical Society, London

Ann Loades, Prof. Emerita, Durham University, presented a session to the Camden Historical Society on the Hampstead Parish church where Underhill is buried.

Glenn Memorial Methodist Church, Atlanta,
GA

Dana Greene gave a lecture on “Evelyn Underhill: Her Meaning for the Twenty-First Century,” November 6, 2011.

Dominican Conference Centre,

Pietermaritzburg, S. A.

“Evelyn Underhill: One Hundred years of Mysticism,” December 1, 2011 presented by Sue Rakoczy.

Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation

Under the auspices of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation Dana Greene was interviewed twice by Liz Ward. One interview focused on Underhill and the 100th anniversary, the other dealt with Greene’s three books on Underhill. See www.shalem.org Resources, Video and Audio.

Regis College, University of Toronto

Michael Stoeber, Professor of Spirituality, offered a course, “Spiritual Theology of Evelyn Underhill” during the Fall 2011 semester. www.tst.edu/academic/course/spiritual-theology-evelyn-underhill-1.

Future Events

January 12-15, 2012

Ann Loades will present a paper on “Evelyn Underhill: Mysticism and Worship” at a conference on Christian Mysticism, Oxford.

June 15-16

Annual Quiet Day of Reflection

“Reflections on the Inter-faith Conversations of Evelyn Underhill” directed by Michael Stoeber

See Page 1 for more information

July 18, 2012

Kathleen Staudt will lead *Life as Prayer: A Day of Exploration with the Writings of Evelyn Underhill* the Adelynrood Retreat Center in Massachusetts.

<http://www.adelynrood.org>.

Recent Publications

Francis, John R., "Evelyn Underhill's Developing Spiritual Theology: a Discovery of authentic Spiritual Life and the Place of Contemplation." Anglican Theological Review, Spring 2011.

Greene, Dana "How Buried Talent Leads to God," The Tablet, UK, July 9, 2011, 12-13 and "The Anglican Woman Who Awakened Us to the Catholic Mystics," National Catholic Reporter, March 25, 2011.

Loades, Ann, "Evelyn Underhill: Mysticism and Worship," International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church, 10: 1, 57-70. This article focuses on some themes in the work of Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941). It is now over a century since she began work on the first version of *Mysticism* (1911). She was a pioneer not only in the study she undertook for this book, but in the specifically Christian theology she was bold enough to work out from it, with Christ in person the paradigm mystic. The Latin Mass of her day she deemed both as recapitulating Christ's own experience, as well as re-presenting the stability and growth of his 'Body' present at the Eucharist. Once recommitted to the Church of England in 1921, at a time of liturgical revision and in a deeply troubled political era, her concentration on Christ's sacrifice led her to embrace pacifism as the world lurched towards World War II. Her theological work, summed up in her final major book *Worship* (1936), reveals her continuing

preoccupation with the question of how Christology integrates with liturgy, and therefore with the living of a distinctively Christian life.

McColman, Carl, "After a Century, Why *Mysticism* Still Inspires," The Huffington Post, February 18, 2011.

Milos, Joy, "Underhill's *Mysticism*: a Centenary Review," in The Sewanee Theological Review, Summer 2011.

Nichols, Bridget, "Review of Underhill's *Worship*," International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church, 11, 1, 2011, 103-06.

Rakoczy, Susan, "Evelyn Underhill: One Hundred Years of *Mysticism*," Journal of Theology for South Africa, December 2011.

Ryan, Tom "A Spirituality for Moral Responsibility: Evelyn Underhill Today," The Australasian Catholic Record, 85.2, April 2008.

Shaw, Jane, "The Heart's Antique Urge to Believe without Belonging," The London Times, May 13, 2011.

Stoeber, Michael, "Mysticism in Ecumenical Dialogue: Questions on the Nature and Effects of Mystical Experience," in Teaching *Mysticism*, edited by William Parson, Oxford University Press, 2011.



Thesis and Doctoral Dissertations

Collins, Mary Rose, "The Practical Humility of Evelyn Underhill" a M. A. in Theology, Xavier University, 2011. Included under articles about Evelyn Underhill.

Downey, Martha Elias, "Listening to the Life of Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)." June, 2011. MA thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Ford, Mavis, "Mysticism, Modernism and the Female Bildungsroman: A Study of the

Writings of Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair and Dorothy Richardson," Doctoral Dissertation LaTrobe University, Melbourne, Australia, 2009. Dr. Ford has been granted a Research Fellowship by the University to prepare the dissertation for publication.

Thrall, James Homer, "Mystic Moderns: Agency and Enchantment in Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair and Mary Webb," Doctoral Dissertation, Duke University, 2005.

Other News

Evelyn Underhill is cited in "Reading toward Calvary and the Resurrection," by Bess Twiston Davies and Fiona Wilson, The London Times, March 12, 2011. .

Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill and Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy both edited by Dana Greene have been reprinted by WIPF and Stock Publishers and State University of New York Press, respectively. University of Notre Dame Press will re-issue Greene's Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life in 2012.

Chapters on or citations of Evelyn Underhill are included in the following: Spiritual Leaders Who Changed the World, edited by Ira Rifkin, Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing,

2008; Twentieth Century Theologians: A New Introduction to Modern Christian Thought, by Philip Kennedy, N. Y.: Macmillan, 2010, English Spirituality From 1700 to the Present, by Gordon Marsell, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2001.

Excerpts from *The Spiritual Life* by Evelyn Underhill appeared as daily reflections in our August and October issues of *Give Us This Day*, the new daily prayer publication from Liturgical Press.

The Simple Eye: Vivian Maier's Photographic Mysticism by Jeremy Biles describes a photographic exhibit at the Chicago Cultural Center interpreted through the writings of Evelyn Underhill. Sightings, March 10, 2011.

Featured Article

“Underhill’s Mysticism: A Centenary Review”

At the time of her death, *The Times* of London acclaimed Evelyn Underhill as a writer with “an insight into the meaning both of the culture and of the individual groupings of the soul that was unmatched by any of the professional teachers of her day.”¹ This spiritual guide to her generation, one of the most widely read spiritual writers of the Anglican tradition during the twentieth century, first emerged as a major figure with the 1911 publication of her classic work, *Mysticism*. At the centennial of its publication, Underhill’s *magnum opus* on the topic merits a reexamination since it is still used in most courses that explore the experience of God called mysticism and still attracts contemporary spiritual seekers. In this article I will examine three aspects of the book: first of all, the context of the work within Underhill’s personal and cultural setting; secondly, her understanding of the dynamics of mysticism; and thirdly, the spiritual guidance she believed was offered by classic mystical writings. As she wrote *Mysticism*, Underhill viewed the mystics of the past as supportive of her own spiritual questioning, as well as potential guides for other spiritual pilgrims. There were others, she discovered, who could not identify with an institutional religious commitment, but who hungered for a connection with God. Since many twenty-first century seekers continue to make distinctions between religion and

spirituality, I understand the attraction of *Mysticism*. But Underhill would move beyond this early stage of experience to a deepened understanding of the breadth of the spiritual journey. I will, therefore, conclude with some observations about her subsequent development and the expansion of her vision of mysticism, spirituality and spiritual guidance.

The Personal Context of the Work

Writing in 1907 to Margaret Robinson, perhaps Underhill’s earliest spiritual directee correspondent, Evelyn encouraged her spiritual growth with the following advice: “Direct spiritual experience is the only possible basis; and if you will trust yours absolutely you are safe.”² Eight months prior to such advice, twenty nine year old Underhill had had a profound and unsettling conversion experience herself while spending a few retreat days at a Franciscan convent with a friend. She was looking for her own religious grounding at the time, but apparently found the atmosphere of perpetual adoration so overpowering that she actually fled after the fourth day. Later she would write about the following day’s insight, that she was “‘converted’ quite suddenly once and for all by an overpowering vision which had really no specific Christian elements, but yet convinced...that the Catholic Religion was true...[and] that that Church was [her] ultimate home.”³ In the aftermath, a number of factors

¹ Cited in Lumsden Barkway, “Introduction” to *An Anthology of the Love of God*, by Evelyn Underhill (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1976), p. 17.

² “To M.R.,” October 9, 1907 in *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, edited by Charles Williams. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1946.

³ “To Mrs. Meyrick Heath,” in *Letters*, p. 125-126.



would dissuade her from making such a commitment.⁴ In writing to Robinson, therefore, it is possible to hear Underhill voicing a conviction to which she herself was attempting to cling.

This was a transition time in Underhill's life, one encompassing several major shifts: her marriage to barrister Hubert Stuart Moore; the running of a new household with its incumbent social obligations; additional visits to aging parents; an increasing schedule of research and writing; and, beneath the surface of all these adjustments, the struggle to integrate the religious experience which had turned her spiritual world upside down.⁵

Although her circle of acquaintances had expanded, neither her husband, nor the friends she met in socializing, nor her parents were really interested in religion.⁶ Given both the intensity and simultaneous confusion of her religious convictions at this time, she had to be experiencing a profound loneliness without having friends or relatives to share her struggle. She was torn by the call to Catholicism, the intellectual inability to reconcile herself to such a move, the exclusion of Anglicanism as an

⁴ Included in those obstacles would be the rather condescending attitude of a Roman Catholic guide whose direction she sought; the emergence of the Modernist crisis in Catholicism, one which her intellectual bent could not overlook; and the objections of her fiancé, soon to be husband.

⁵ Although deeply committed to her writing and other works, Underhill always managed to fulfill the expected role of a London barrister's wife with its many social obligations. In March of 1909 she explained to a friend "that she had not had 'a large margin of leisure' having been to five parties that week and given two of her own." Cited in Christopher Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill: An Introduction to Her Life and Writing*. Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 76. Such a calendar dispels the image of the eremitic contemplative with which one might be tempted to envision Underhill the writer.

⁶ See the unpublished and incomplete biography of Underhill written by Lucy Menzies. Unpublished typescript at St. Andrews University Archives, St. Andrews, Scotland, p. 44.

alternative, and yet the need for a communal and sacramental support system. A growing tendency to view religion as individual inwardness appears eventually to cloak the problem and stifle any institutional attraction. As she would later write to Baron von Hügel about this period:

I...very nearly became a Catholic, but didn't quite. However,
I went on for a long time going to Mass on Sundays as a sort of
free lance and outsider; but gradually this faded out in favor of
what I vainly imagined to be inwardness, and an increasing anti-institutional bias.⁷

But an individual cannot long sustain an inner vision without companionship or affirmation to support it. Faced with such isolation, Underhill turned to the study of mysticism. In seeking guidance to reinforce and interpret the experience which had so changed her perspective on religion, she would look to those who had already traveled similar paths, but she would do so in the private realm of her research. It was, therefore, to the mystics of various ages, cultures and religious traditions that she turned.

That a woman with so little formal involvement in religion should turn to such an esoteric study to find spiritual guidance may initially appear enigmatic. And yet, both her personal history and the tenor of her times counter the view that Underhill was working in a vacuum with moorings to nothing other than her introspective quest. By age 32 she had had years of informal tutoring in the history and tradition of Christianity resulting from annual European excursions with her mother. As her

⁷ Letter from Evelyn Underhill to Baron von Hügel quoted in Margaret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958.), p. 72.



correspondence with her husband during these trips reveal, she was enamored by the beauty of such phenomenon as church architecture, classic religious art, religious symbols and rituals, shrines, saints and devotional practices.

Underhill had experienced something of the world out of which her mystic guides emerged and she was deeply attracted to it. By May of 1907 she was already recommending readings from a number of mystical classics to her spiritual correspondents. By October 1908 she was seriously committed to writing about the mystics.

Seeking assistance in the area of Germanic sources and translations for her book, Underhill wrote to Margaret Robinson:

I am writing—or trying to write—a “serious” book on Mysticism

And of course want to make use of the German mystics and some of them have never been translated whilst others have been done

from such a controversial point of view that one dares not trust the translators. I am particularly hung up over Meister Eckhart and

Mechtild of Magdeburg, but there may be others.⁸

Since Underhill knew no German and Robinson was fluent, the latter became an active collaborator on the book. By later that same month Underhill sent the proposed outline of the complete work so that Robinson could see from it what types of research would be useful. At the same time, she indicated her primary purpose: “It is a study of mystical method and doctrine, not of specific mystics.”⁹ She had already specified the tenor of the text when she

explained to Robinson the types of materials for which she was searching:

I want most passages in metaphysical rather than definitely

Christian language: i.e. references by name to Our Lord, the

Blessed Virgin, etc. or bits flavoured with scraps of Scripture

aren’t much good: but those in which the same things are

called the Eternal, the All, the Divine Love, etc. will be useful.

The book is not going to be explicitly theological as I want to

make a synthesis of the doctrine of Christian & non-Christian

mystics—so no “over-beliefs” are admissible.¹⁰

Although it may be evaluated as rather naïve by today’s more sophisticated nuancing of the question of a universal mystical experience, *Mysticism* would be a pioneering study of the question of the universality of religious experience. As a refrain summarizing her belief about the commonality of such phenomena, Underhill quotes Saint Martin’s aphorism that “all mystics speak the same language and come from the same country.”¹¹ As reflective of her own stage of commitment, her classic would mirror a more theistic rather than a specifically Christian perspective in the study of mystical consciousness. One would have to wait for *The Mystic Way* or other later writings to observe the Christian turn in her personal commitment.

Today, when it is easy to find well

¹⁰ Cited in Armstrong, p. 104.

¹¹ Cited in Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2005), p. xiii. Subsequent quotes from *Mysticism* will be included as page numbers within the text.

⁸ “To M. R.,” October 22, 1908, *Letters*, pp. 85-86.

⁹ *Ibid.*



researched and accurate translations of many of the world's mystical classics, one is tempted to forget how recently such resources have been accessible. When Underhill began her tutorial with these great figures of the past, she did so having the additional hurdle of having many primary texts available only in original manuscripts and languages. Since her proclaimed belief about her own study was that "mystics, properly speaking, can only be studied in their works," (p.xii) and she was not intending the work for specialists, her efforts in making mystical texts more available should not be overlooked in evaluating the contribution made by *Mysticism*. Underhill's other published materials of this period reflect the personal context from which *Mysticism* emerged. Perhaps the best mirror of her penchant for the mystical is found in her novels. *The Grey World* (1904), *The Lost Word* (1907) and *The Column of Dust* (1909) all reverberate with neo-platonic overtones, symbolic characters and situations, suffering and atoning love, and characters who struggle with the tension of living in the well reflect her personal option. The novels all focus on the problem of living in two sensory worlds while sustaining a vision of spirit and the really Real. The heroes and heroines of her fiction are not unrelated to her own situation at this time or to that of the mystics. If this be the case, then the recurring patterns of choosing redemptive suffering and relationship over an individualistic mystical *fuga mundi* among her protagonists may. Armstrong notes:

They show in dramatic form just how and why her one type of response to the mystical vocation at least was ruled out of court.

As St. Augustine relates himself in his *Confessions* she had come

to see as a temptation what he calls '*fuga solitudinem*'—the flight of the alone to the Alone. And, like St. Augustine also, she associated the rejection of solitude with the loving, positive acceptance of this world... Her way had henceforth to be by way of **inclusion** not **exclusion**.¹² Being alone, both on her personal and spiritual journey, was not Underhill's final choice. The mystical quest for its own sake, both in fiction and in life, she would find illusory. This decision to accept incarnation rather than a strictly neo-platonic abstract spirituality was undoubtedly one of the most significant of her life. "Her teaching on mysticism as well as her day-to-day life as Mrs. Stuart Moore in the large house in Camden Hill Square was the continuing reflection of this choice."¹³ Fortunately for her contemporaries as well as future generations, Underhill shared the insights of the spiritual guides who helped teach her this lesson. Thus, through her writings, the mystics emerged from story the past to lead new pilgrims, providing guidance for a wider audience than the individual woman who learned from their writings.

The Cultural Context

It was not simply this personal context which explains Underhill's fascination with mysticism. Like the writer of any classic, she not only touched the universal human spirit, but also was affected by her cultural setting. Several theological and philosophical streams converged at that time and that added incentive for her study. At the same time, she contributed to those currents, thus adding to an appreciation of mysticism. Her own evaluation of this development, written several years later is found

¹² Armstrong, p. 93

¹³ *Ibid.*, 90.



in the “Preface to the Twelfth Edition” of *Mysticism* :

Since this book first appeared, nineteen years ago, the study of mysticism—not only in England, but also in France, Germany and Italy—has been almost completely transformed. From being regarded, whether critically or favorably, as a by-way of religion, it is now more and more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man. (p. vii)

Although she contributed to this renewed understanding of mysticism, Underhill did so as part of greater historical and intellectual movements and was influenced by already emerging ideas. Archbishop Ramsey saw the following as the most significant: the pre-war fascination with psychology, Bergson’s vitalistic philosophy, the concept of evolution, and “the poetic immanentism fashionable in much of the theology of the time.”¹⁴ Related to these one might add the general optimism of pre-World War I theology, as well as a pervasive Romantic perspective. All of these streams converge to help explain the tenor of *Mysticism*.

Perhaps most significant, since it is so foundational to Underhill’s approach to mysticism, is her use of psychology. This attention to the field would endure in her later writings, although she would become more discerning and critical in her use of the new science. Psychology was the glamorous pre-war

field of study and, by the first decade of the century, specific psychological applications were already beginning to be made even in theology. Biblical studies, Christology and hagiography were among those areas first witnessing to its impact. Underhill would draw even more heavily on these early studies in her book, *The Mystic Way*, a work which stirred considerable controversy even among her staunch supporters.¹⁵ In *Mysticism* she focused on an exploration of the mystic consciousness using the insights of contemporary psychology as a key hermeneutical tool. In one of her opening chapters, “Mysticism and Psychology,” she made explicit her attempt to reinterpret the traditional faculty psychology of the past, with its dichotomizing of intellect, emotions and will. In its stead, she draws on insights from modern psychology which “incline more and more to dwell upon the unity of the psyche—that hypothetical self which none have ever seen—and on some aspect of its energetic desire, its libido---as the ruling factor of its life.” (p. 45) The second part of the book, which analyzes the stages of organic development in mystical consciousness, is avowedly psychological. Since her work propounded a theory of one form of human development, failure to draw upon contemporary psychological studies would have been a major oversight. Although not formally trained in psychology, Underhill was obviously familiar with the significant figures in the field, as her references demonstrate,¹⁶ and

¹⁵ In addition to psychological hypotheses regarding the person of Christ, Underhill ventured into more critical biblical analysis in *The Mystic Way*. She was apparently quite surprised when even friends reacted negatively to her writing, viewing it as excessively Modernist. See “To J. A. Herbert,” March 30, 1913 and April 1913 in *Letters*, pp. 141-143. Cf. also Cropper, p. 51 and Armstrong, pp. 147-156.

¹⁶ Representative of her psychological sources, either by quotation or allusion throughout the book, are such figures as Leuba, Freud, W. James, Starbuck, Murisier, P.

¹⁴ A. M. Ramsey, *Two Centenary Essays*. Oxford: S. L. G. Press, 1976, p. 18.



she demonstrated a creative appreciation of psychological principles throughout her analysis and applications to spiritual growth.

That Underhill also drew from the philosophical stream of vitalism to complement her psychological emphases she acknowledged several years later:

The changed philosophical outlook since this chapter was

first written eighteen years ago, has now given to it a somewhat

old-fashioned air. The ideas of Bergson and Eucken no longer

occupy the intellectual foreground.

Were I now writing it for the

first time, my examples would be chosen from other philosophers,

and especially from those who are bringing back into modern thought

the critical realism of the scholastics. (p. 43)

Although she never achieved, nor was she really aiming for, a totally systematic philosophy of mysticism in her work, Underhill's thinking at this time was, nevertheless, dominated by two contemporary philosophers: the German Rudolf Eucken and the French Henri Bergson.¹⁷ Even

Janet, Ribot, R. M. Bucke, and J. B. Pratt. Recalling the newness of the science, it is not surprising that her use of modern psychology might by today's standards be considered rather primitive; nevertheless, her familiarity with and integration of the available cross-cultural resources in the field are impressive.

¹⁷ Armstrong, p. 116ff. In 1911, Underhill wrote effusively to a friend about Bergson's London lectures, "for which I have been simply living." "I'm still drunk with Bergson, who sharpened one's mind and swept one off one's feet both at once. Those lectures have been a real, great experience: direct contact with the personality of a profound intuitive thinker of the first rank!" "To Mrs. Meyrick Heath," mid-autumn of 1911, *Letters*, p. 146.

For a brief description of vitalism as a philosophical movement, see *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8,

later revisions could not totally remove traces of their thought. Neither presented a philosophy of mysticism, but both appeared to many of their disciples to advocate "a spiritual explanation of the universe which entailed the possibility, indeed the necessity, of special experience of a mystical-intuitive type."¹⁸ Both likewise insisted on an optimistic understanding of human progress which envisioned a constant expansion of various human capacities. Whereas Eucken "tended to exalt his readers through a language of metaphysical optimism,"¹⁹ Bergson's inclination veered in a more biological direction with his notion of *élan vital* being perhaps his most popular concept. Reflections of this evolutionary optimism are recurrent themes throughout *Mysticism*.

Although enamored by this dynamic concept of life, with its inherent emphasis on ever-opening possibilities for the human spirit, Underhill was never the purist disciple of either writer. Attracted by their optimistic developmental outlook, she held it to be more of a life vision rather than a set map, charting out a comprehensive and dogmatic metaphysical worldview. Thus, not so much the strict biological implications of the vitalist theorists, but rather their imagery, language and general attitude towards life appear to have captivated her.²⁰ As the fashionable creed of its day, vitalism "adequately sums up the prevailing worship of life in all its exuberance, variety and apparently limitless possibility, which pervaded every aspect of pre-1914 culture and society."²¹

"Vitalism," by Morton O. Beckner (Macmillan Reference USA, 2005).

¹⁸ Armstrong, p. 118.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Thus Underhill disclaims that "neither the utter transcendence of extreme Absolutism, nor the utter immanence of the Vitalists will do," avoiding a completely immanentist stance, *Mysticism*, p. 41.

²¹ Armstrong, p. 119.



Even a cursory skimming of *Mysticism* yields ample evidence that Underhill was deeply affected by this creed. The work is checkered with images of Life and “Becoming.” On the Mystic Way, first and foremost, “there is the union with Life, with the world of Becoming.”(p. 41) She speaks of the “scrap of Absolute Life which is the ground of ‘the mystic’s] soul.’”(p. 41) Such a positive and evolutionary philosophy of vitalism would certainly buttress the prevailing mood of Liberal theological progressivism and post-Darwinian thought which Underhill absorbed in post-Edwardian, pre-war England.

The type of “fashionable immanentism” of this era which Underhill chose to reflect was, therefore, that associated with the vitalist propensity to view this dynamic life principle inherent in all of reality. She did, however, manage to draw the fine line between a totally pantheistic understanding of that inner nature and an appreciation for the transcendent dimension of Reality. Thus she avoided the doctrinaire theory of immanentism “which is notoriously apt to degenerate into pantheism; and into those extravagant perversions of the doctrine of ‘deification’ in which the mystic holds his transfigured self to be identical with the Indwelling God.”(p. 99) But Underhill’s intrigue with this question of immanentism obviously focuses on the tendency to spiritualization so common to such a worldview rather than the more socially minded reform movements of the era, those emphasizing the societal consequences of God’s indwelling presence.²²

²² For a summation of this early twentieth century “New Theology” in England, see Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England, vol. 5: The Ecumenical Century, 1900-1965*(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 121-134.

One further cultural stream which explains the framework within which Underhill wrote *Mysticism* was undeniably that of Romanticism. In both style and content, one can discover elements reflecting such a spirit. Admittedly something of a protean term, Romanticism has been characterized as emphasizing strong emotions, individualism, subjectivism, religion and mysticism. Especially in her portrayal of the ideal mystic guide, Underhill demonstrates an affinity for such traits. If primary Romantic interests are change, imperfection, growth, diversity, the creative imagination and the unconscious, then a comparative survey of the motifs of *Mysticism* with those of Romanticism reinforces the impression of Underhill’s immersion in such an outlook. Stylistically, she exudes the Romantic spirit as opposed to a strictly scientific study of mysticism. As Armstrong has correctly noted, “She has little use for, or interest in, theoretical explanation and...the dry dust approach to religious experience generally.”²³ The hardened empiricist or rationalist would have difficulty living in the world Underhill describes. The deeply personal and confessional nature of *Mysticism* “which makes no secret of its author’s belief that this experience is the pearl of life and that she would draw all...to prize and admire it,”²⁴ adds a final confirmation to this romantic bent in Underhill’s writing. This Romantic spirit will also color her view of the portrait of the mystic.

The Ideal Mystical Guide

During this critical period of her life, Underhill sought guidance in understanding her personal religious experience. Unable to find a sympathetic contemporary mentor, she turned

²³ Armstrong, p. 110.

²⁴ Ibid.



instead to the corporate personality and pattern of the mystics for direction. With the personal and cultural context of *Mysticism* as a background, I will explore Underhill's image of the mystic, her "ideal guide" at the time. I will then examine the path she believed mystics had traveled and to which individuals continued to be called.

Although *Mysticism* was obviously the work of a disciplined researcher with interdisciplinary insights into such fields as theology, psychology, philosophy and history, it was not written by a specialist or for specialists. Underhill intended it for a wide reading audience and provided an introduction to the general subject of mysticism. Structurally, it divides into two unequal sections: Part One, the first seven chapters, "The Mystic Fact;" and Part Two, consisting of ten chapters, "The Mystic Way." Since Underhill states her conviction that "mystics, properly speaking, can only be studied in their works," (p. xii) it is not surprising that she draws generously from primary mystical literature.

As Underhill wrote of the mystics, she was deliberately countering the image of the mystic as magician, occultist or visionary oddity. As she contrasted the mystical experience of life with the magical, she offered two fundamentally different human attitudes toward the unseen. Mysticism wants to give, while magic wants to get. (p. 70) By "magical" she broadly lumped together "all forms of self-seeking transcendentalism," (p. 71) outbreaks of "occultism, illuminism, or other perverted spirituality," (p. 149) with her description leaving little doubt about her evaluation of her earlier occult involvements.²⁵ At the same time,

²⁵ Underhill had previously been involved in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, whose fascination

Underhill believed that such movements were typically concomitant with every period of real mystical renewal.²⁶ Therefore, given the cultural biases against the word "mysticism," clarification of her image of what the mystic was not, was an important issue.

The mysticism about which she wrote, she described variously as: "the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood... (p. xiv) or later, as a movement representing "the true line of development of the highest form of human consciousness." (p. xv) This reflects that vitalistic and evolutionary optimism which I previously discussed. In another place, she describes mysticism as 'the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute... and... the mystic [as] the person who attains to this vision, not the person who talks about it.' (p. 72) Throughout *Mysticism*, being, not knowing, marks the real initiate. One might suspect an almost anti-intellectual bent in Underhill's presentation were this work not first of all an obviously scholarly witness to the contrary, and, secondly, her other writings which clarify her stance on the importance of the intellect.²⁷ It is that highly specialized form of the search "for reality, for heightened and completed life, which we have found to be a constant characteristic of human consciousness."²⁸ Although, she notes, it is only the mystic temperament which recognizes and

with the occult and ritual attracted many intellectuals in England at the time.

²⁶ Chapter VII of *Mysticism*, "Mysticism and Magic," provides an elaboration of her critique of magic as a spiritual stance. See pp. 149-64.

²⁷ See especially, "The Place of the Will, Intellect and Feeling in Prayer," *The Interpreter* 9 (April 1913): 241-256. Reprinted in *The Essentials of Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1960), pp. 99-115.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.



develops the fullness of this potential.

She saw this as a universal human potential which she believed in and found reinforced by her research, one of Underhill's implicit purposes in writing appears to have been advocating for the mystic as something of an archetype for the whole of humanity once its innate developmental capacity is recognized. Thus, the Mystic Way, the exploration of which is the central concern in Part II of *Mysticism*, she views as "the crown of human evolution; the fulfillment of life... its entrance into the free creative life of the Real."²⁹ The mystic best embodies the self actualization for which all were created. Underhill proposed four general characteristics of mysticism which she contended were more adequate than those suggested by her contemporary, William James. James offered the four marks of the mystic state as ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency and passivity.³⁰ For Underhill, true mysticism is first of all active and practical, an organic life process in which the whole self is engaged, (p. 81) rather than simply an intellectual apprehension. The great mystics not only grasped new insights into Reality, but also acted upon them, and, as she noted, "the great mystics tell us, not how they speculated, but how they acted." (p. 83) In her estimation, their lifestyles constantly witnessed to the challenge of integrating love, surrender and supreme perception, (p. 84) in ways which were abundantly fruitful.

The second salient feature of mysticism, its aim, is wholly transcendent and spiritual. (p. 81) Mysticism is not "useful" as such; rather, it subordinates all things to knowing and adhering

to God by communion. Though the mystic will be unceasingly self-giving for others, "an agent of the Eternal Goodness," he or she is "destitute of supersensual ambitions and craves no occult knowledge or power." (p. 84)

Her third characteristic states: "The business and method of Mysticism is Love." (p. 85) Active, outgoing and ultimately fruitful, it contrasts with self-absorbed introspective activity whose chief objective is new knowledge. Instead, real Mystic Love is "a total dedication of the will; the deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul towards its Source," (p. 85) a source which is living and personal. This love is the driving force and vivifying principle of all subsequent living for the mystic and is directly connected to Underhill's final attribute.

For her, "mysticism entails a definite Psychological Experience," (p. 90) which initiates and continues a reorganization of the whole self, conscious and unconscious, "a remaking of the whole character on high levels in the interests of the transcendental life." (p. 90) This arduous process of psychological and spiritual growth, this Mystic Way, is not, then, a philosophy, opinion, or way of obtaining Gnostic insight. It is a process of development of the human spirit whose ultimate goal "involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God." (p. 81) Those who have seen the Perfect want to be perfect.

This movement toward perfection and heightened human consciousness inevitably involves stages of development. As she elucidates these, Underhill expands the time honored three fold passage from Purgation through Illumination to Union to include two other distinct phases. Upon entering into this growth process, one first experiences "The Awakening of the Self" even prior to purification. This first stage of conversion, this

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

³⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1961), pp. 299-310ff.



shifting of the individual's field of consciousness to include recognition that "all things are made new," begins the on-going self transcendence which is the beginning of the mystical life. (p. 179) The other subdivision of Underhill's developmental sequence isolates the "Dark Night" as a distinct passage. This intense period of blankness, seeming stagnation and impotence, is the "great swing-back into darkness which usually divides the 'first mystic life,' or Illuminative Way, from the 'second mystic life,' or Unitive Way. (p. 381) Consistent with her basic psychological interest, Underhill interprets the varied experiences of the Dark Night in light of the differences in human temperaments. The actual experience of purgation suffered in this Dark Night will be contingent upon the overused and underdeveloped facets of personality in the individual. She speaks of this passage as exemplifying the operation of the law of psychic balance resulting from the overuse and dependency upon certain areas of mental activity at the expense of others. An equilibrium is regained only after growing pains "due to the double fact of the exhaustion of an old state and the growth towards a new state of consciousness." (p. 386)

Thus, by the inclusion of two additional stages, Underhill expanded the classic mystical pattern of spiritual growth. In her later thought, reinforced by years of direct experience with persons who had been traveling the faith journey, she would move beyond the five stage approach to a more simplified and fluid appreciation of development as she discussed the gradual change in the equilibrium of the self.³¹ A final corollary of the mystic

journey is Underhill's belief that "true mysticism is never self-seeking." (p. 92) In her explanation of this statement, she emerges as the true Romantic. Passion, devotion and duty are pivotal images. Thus, "the passion for perfection for Love's sake" drives the mystic who "claims no promises and makes no demands," but "goes because he must, as Galahad went towards the Grail." (p. 92) And, true to his or her type, the mystic, "the devout lover of romance," gladly serves without any hope of reward.

Underhill describes the figure of the mystic in a further series of images and characteristics which portray these guides in more detail. In her study, she had researched the literature and lifestyles of a wide range of mystical writers. They had differed greatly in temperament, in their use of symbolism to describe their experiences, and in the expression of their encounters with God. Ultimately, she amalgamates the many variations into the one idealized portrait of the "mystic type." Because she believed that "no one mystic can be discovered in whom all the observed characteristics of the transcendental consciousness are resumed, and who can on that account be treated as typical,"³² her final figure is more of a "composite portrait," something comparable to the anthropologist's categorization of a group or race. The outstanding features are highlighted, while minor, though significant variations tend to disappear. Such a homogenized summary of mystical figures might well be debated, but it was Underhill's stance at the time and explains her foundational assumptions about the "mystic type." They are presented, first of all, as somewhat distant figures, distant in both time

³¹ See such works as *The Spiritual Life* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1937) and *The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life* (London: Methuen and Co., 1932) for representative examples of such a shift.

³² Armstrong, pp. 167-168.



and proximity to the “normal” underdeveloped individuals who make up the vast majority of humanity. At the same time, they are significant because of what they reveal about universal human potential. Part of Underhill’s fascination with the mystics as spiritual guides derives from her belief that they are the “real people” of the human race, those who have reached the high point on the human evolutionary ladder. They give the rest of the race a model of full development. They are important because they are our kindred, even if their spiritual adventures are not always those of ordinary people. (p. 125) Nevertheless, their pilgrimage ultimately concerns everyone since “it is a master-key to the [human] puzzle.” (p. 448) For anyone who cares, it is possible to learn from these leaders “the way to freedom, to reality, to peace.” (p. 448) In specific passages devoted to describing the “ideal” mystic, Underhill offers a kaleidoscope of images. The mystics are “the giants,” the “heroes of our race.” (p. 47) They are “expert mountaineers” (p. 448) who are leading the way. They are the “pioneers of the spiritual world” (p. 45) who refuse to substitute their quest for Reality with “the sham realities that furnish the universe of normal men.” (p. 8) Only the mystics can be called whole, since they alone have allowed the dormant powers of the self to awaken and contact the transcendent. (p. 63) As a result of this, they have lived in a state of higher consciousness towards which the rest of the race is potentially and slowly tending. Closely allied with this heightened consciousness is their great vitality and energy level, derived from participation in the Divine Life which explains their fruitfulness and frequent longevity. Great artists of various fields offer a parallel to the mystics, the difference being their area of specialization. The mystics possess a genius for God rather than art or music or some lesser

concentration.(p. 34) They are “our ambassadors to the Absolute.” (p. 414) A compilation of these scattered images reinforces the thesis that Underhill believed these guides to be something of a race apart and yet, most significant for our more mundane existence.

Underhill frequently seems to be juggling the distance and yet meaningfulness of their modeling. Their significance for ordinary people is a vital issue for, in her estimation, unless their history touches and enlightens ordinary experience, as well as clarifies the meaning of human nature and destiny, interest in the mystics “can never be more than remote, academic, and unreal.” (p. 444) For Underhill, the mystics obviously were more than remote beings and yet, the polarities with which she frames them seem to reflect her own tensions at the time. She was still immersed in what she perceived to be the tension of living in two worlds, her ordinary social life with all the here-and-now demands and a call to that more real world to which she has been exposed, a plight she assumes many share. Whereas she and others still struggle with the dichotomy, the mystic, “standing head and shoulder above ordinary men, is...the meeting place between the two orders,” (p. 36) the balance between the sense world and spiritual. How they have managed to achieve this balance is what she is attempting to plumb.

Although she would not have ranked herself among their numbers, she had had personal initiation into the experiential awareness they discussed, the encounter with ultimate Reality.³³ In the

³³ Underhill would use the term Reality most especially during this phase of her search for God. It undoubtedly reflects her neo-platonic and Vitalist leanings, as well as her immersion in mystics with such a penchant. Thus she would frequently quote St. Augustine’s saying: “God is the only Reality; and we are only Real in so far as we are in his order and he in us..” In *Practical Mysticism* she



writings of the mystics, she recognized soul mates, even if her own writing reflected a certain awe of them and a sense that their experiences far surpassed hers. When she turned to them, therefore, she did so searching for patterns of thought and behaviors which would provide a framework for understanding her own situation rather than out of fascination with extraordinary individuals.

One might read Underhill's *Mysticism* and other of her works on the topic as part of her search to discover where her experience could ultimately lead her. Where, subsequent to the great "awakening," did the Mystic Way lead? That she had not traveled the whole of that "way" she readily admits; but that she found future possibilities attractive seems evident in the adulatory tenor of her descriptions of the mystics. Using mystical writers as spiritual guides was a rather individualistic model of direction, not inconsistent with Underhill's anti-institutional stance at the time. Unlike her later emphasis on the mystics as firmly rooted within and contributing to the life of various faith communities, *Mysticism* downplays their institutional involvements and emphasizes the strong personalities who made the heroic pioneering search on the strength of their own characters.³⁴ As previously mentioned, Underhill was attempting to draw from cross cultural sources to illustrate the common roots of all mystical experience. Her

would even define mysticism as "the art of union with Reality." E. Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1914), p. 3.

³⁴ This would be the overall impression after reading the work, although she does not disallow religious affiliation. Thus Underhill stated: "The best and truest experience does not come to the eccentric and individual pilgrim whose intuitions are his only law: but rather to him who is willing to profit by the culture of the spiritual society in which he finds himself, and submit personal intuition to the guidance afforded by the general history of the mystic type." *Mysticism*, p. 300.

rationale for such an endeavor was grounded in the belief that "mysticism avowedly deals with the individual not as he stands in relation to the civilization of his time, but as he stands in relation to truths that are timeless." (p. xiii) Although she does not portray mystics as anti-social or recluses, she clearly focuses on their personal and inner communings with Reality, since "the place they happen to occupy in the kingdom of this world matters little." (p. xiii) Neither "institution," nor "community" even merit a listing in her index. Recalling Underhill's personal situation at the time, one cannot help but see something of her own bent evident in her assumption that the mystic does not necessarily assume any particular institutional commitment or dogmatic system. As she observed, the story shared by the mystics transcends "the dogmatic language in which it is clothed and becomes applicable to mystics of every race and creed," with "little difference in this between the extremes of Eastern and Western thought." (p. 86-87) Unwilling or unable to make a commitment to a community or organization herself, Underhill undoubtedly found consolation in these heroic guides whom she envisioned as lonely leaders for the rest of the more "normal," less adventurous mass of humanity. Given such a privatized context, one might suspect that the mystic guide would above all be offering something of a "blessed assurance" in the personal quest for Reality, an inner conviction of the rightness of such a quest. There is also a broader and more challenging purpose in the spiritual guidance rendered by the mystics in Underhill's presentation. The ultimate goal they propose would be none other than the completion of the mystical life, or, "in the old, frank language of the mystics, . . . the deified life." This final destination is achieved by traveling the route of expanded human consciousness, and there are consequences.



This transformation of consciousness, the five-fold process of human development and progression described throughout “The Mystic Way” as latent in each human person, is not without its cost. What the mystics’ guidance provides and their lives witness to is the “how” of that dynamic, the worthwhileness of the venture, and the human possibility of actually achieving this goal. Attaining an on-going union in love with ultimate Reality and evidencing something of the “divine fecundity” resulting from this union is, therefore, the final aim of the mystic’s spiritual guidance.

If, as was apparently the case, Underhill was able to be nurtured by such guidance, it is not surprising that the depth of both her research and personal enthusiasm for their advice conveyed a message which so many of her readers have found to be supportive. The fact that her classic work has been continuously in print since its first publication witnesses to generations of readers who somehow share her enthusiasm and questions about this process of human transformation.

Later Insights

For ten years Underhill continued to write about mysticism in ways that invited a wide audience to explore the mystic’s way. She also contributed to what might be called a growing democratization of mysticism in the early 20th century. But by 1921, her perspective had shifted, as had her interests, language and commitments. By then, she had had years of personal interaction with real people yearning for guidance and for God. She had finally rooted herself within the Anglican community. She now believed that it was the place to which she was called to nurture others in their spiritual lives. The language of mysticism and heroic figures disappeared as she came to the realization that

“the final test of holiness is not seeming very different from other people, but being used to make other people very different; becoming the parent of new life.”³⁵ That new life, she came to recognize, grew in varied ways and more fluidly than the classical pattern she had previously elucidated so carefully in *Mysticism*. She would now write about the spiritual life, one that took place in faithful people immersed in a real and messy world. The mystics had invited to explore her initial experience of God, her directees invited her to see it as necessarily rooted in the Incarnation.

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³⁵ Cited by Dana Greene in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy* (Albany, NY: State University Press, 1988), dedication page.

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*P*urpose of the Association

The Evelyn Underhill Association exists to promote interest in the life and work of Evelyn Underhill. Each year the Association sponsors a Day of Quiet at the Washington National Cathedral, publishes an online newsletter, supports the work of archives at King's College, London and the Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA, and supplies answers to queries.

*D*onations

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