



Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter

November 2003

Volume 13

Evelyn Underhill Association

www.evelynunderhill.org

Evelyn Underhill on Magic, Sacrament, and Spiritual Transformation

Michael Stoeber
Regis College
University of Toronto

(This important article appeared in the March 2003 issue of *Worship*.(1) It explores little-known aspects of Underhill's early thought, especially the connection between magic and mysticism. In the first years of the twentieth century Underhill grappled with this connection and wrote about it in her novels and early essays—Dana Greene, EUA President)

Underhill and Magic

Evelyn Underhill is firmly established in the mainstream of twentieth century Anglican-Catholic spirituality, probably influencing its contemporary shaping more than most writers in the field. In that regard, she was not extreme nor radical in her perspective. She was not a socio-political activist, except perhaps briefly, towards the end of her life, when she advocated pacifism at the beginning of the Second World War. She possessed no feminist agenda, and theologically she maintained pretty traditional views.(2) Grace Jantzen observes how the mature Evelyn Underhill was "so



fully aligned with the established church that it was no threat at all for her to conduct retreats, give clergy conferences or sit on a church commission: she could be counted on not to rock the boat." (3)

Indeed, even Underhill's early academic work on mysticism proposes a dynamics of spiritual experience and development that is grounded in pretty traditional Christian spirituality, while her later writings tend to stress the authoritative structures of institutional frameworks, a Christ-centered pneumatology, and the importance of communal worship. In sum, it is fair to say that Underhill's mature theology is relatively conservative and non-controversial. And, given its significance, that is not surprising. A feminist in the first half of the twentieth century would have very little influence

in the areas of mainstream academic and pastoral spirituality. Even today, the voices of radical women tend to remain at the outskirts of formal Christian ecclesial contexts.

> Continued on next page

News & Noteworthy

Emilie Griffin's lovely new anthology of Evelyn Underhill's writing—*Evelyn Underhill: Essential Writings*, is now available from Orbis Books, pk. \$15. The introduction by Griffin is followed by chapters on: The Spiritual Life, House of the Soul, Aspects of Mysticism, The Soul's Journey, Worship, and Practical Advice.

Stephanie Ford, Assistant Professor of Religion, Earlham School of Religion, has completed a dissertation on Evelyn Underhill's mystical theology in light of the feminist critique of Grace Jantzen. Ford's degree was completed at The Catholic University of America.

> Continued on Page 12





“Clearly, magic is a major interest of the early Underhill.”

What is surprising is that we do find some controversial theological themes surfacing quite explicitly in her earlier fictional writings. In the novels, short stories, and poems there are various descriptions of an almost pantheistic presence of the Divine in the natural world, as well as a variety of feminine spiritual imagery, including the depiction of saintly female spiritual guides or masters. Indeed, the early Underhill writes in a vein that seems strikingly post-modern, accentuating themes that reflect more closely interests in current ecological and feminist spirituality than that of traditional theology. (4)

The theme of magic is another controversial theme Underhill threads throughout a number of her short stories and novels. It is most prominent in her final novel, *The Column of Dust* (1909). Early in the story, Constance Tyrrel, the main character, performs a conjuring ritual according to the instructions given in *The Grand Grimoire*, a treatise on magic she has found in the book shop where she works. To her astonishment, the ritual magic works, and a spirit “Watcher” materializes, initially as a column of dust, then as a sort of phantom image. Very soon Constance finds herself literally possessed by this Watcher, and so they come to share throughout the novel the consciousness and perception of each other’s experiences. Both are driven by an insatiable curiosity, and come to support each other in their journeys of self-discovery.

Clearly, magic is a major interest of the early Underhill. It is a theme so prominent in her writings up to 1911 that one is not surprised to learn that she was a member of a (now well-known) secret society in London that practiced ritual magic -- the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn. One of her biographers, Margaret Cropper, downplays the significance of this association, in a very brief reference to this period of her life: “Some time in these years before 1904 she joined a little company of people who were interested in occult experiments and experiences. But she probably found it as unsatisfying as the Society of Searchers of the Soul was to her hero in *The Grey World*.” (5) Cropper conjectures that Underhill, who would have been about thirty years old at the time, “persevered” with the organization “till she had learnt enough to serve her when she needed material for her novels.” (6)

But Cropper’s suggestion begs significant questions surrounding Underhill’s view of the nature and significance of magic. Underhill treats the theme of magic often and seriously in her fictional writings, depicting it in rather a positive light. It is highly doubtful she entered into the Society only with the purpose of gathering research material for her novels. In fact, in 1907 she

published an apologetic of it in a journal article called “A Defence of Magic.” (7) Later, in 1911, she adapts this article in a chapter in *Mysticism* which is devoted to the subject. (8)

What is Underhill’s view of magic? What are the major influences upon it? How does it fit into her vision of spiritual transformation and the Christian life? In this paper I will explore this theme of magic in Underhill’s writings, with special attention to its nature and role in her spiritual theology. Her association with The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn immersed her in the theory and practice of magic as well as in the subject of Hermeticism. She does come eventually to take a rather critical stance towards magic as it is practiced in occult schools, as well as towards various esoteric movements. However, she never rejects key features of the themes of Hermeticism and magic, and these play a significant role in the developments of her mystical and sacramental theologies.

The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn

Members of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn studied astrology, alchemy, divination, the Kabbalah, and the Tarot, and participated in complicated initiation rituals of the different grades of the Orders. They were also involved in the creation of magical instruments as well as various meditative practices and paranormal activities, such as the channeling of spirits and astral travel. But it is important to note that, by 1903, much of the ritual magic and paranormal phenomena were abandoned at the Temple in London where Underhill was associated, as the group came to incorporate more Christian theory, ritual, and mysticism into the Society. (9)

Although Margaret Cropper indicates that Underhill joined this occult society for only a short period before 1904, another biographer, Christopher J. R. Armstrong, places her association sometime “in or around 1905,” while Charles Williams indicates 1904 as the year she joined the Golden Dawn, and he suggests that “she belonged to it for some years” after that. (10) Her pseudonym in this group was “Soror Quaerens Lucem” -- “the sister who is seeking enlightenment” -- and she ascended at least to the fourth of eight possible grades of the Society, and perhaps even higher. (11)

Biographers claim that her connections to the Order came through friendships either with Arthur Machen or Arthur Waite. Armstrong suggests that she was introduced to the Society through her contact with the novelist Arthur Machen (1863-1947), who was a member in 1900 and rejoined in 1904. She dedicated her last novel, *The Column of Dust*, to him. (12) Under-

hill's other closest connection to the Society was Arthur Waite (1857-1942), who himself had a very warm friendship with Arthur Machen for 55 years. Waite was editor of *The Horlick's Magazine* in 1904 when Underhill published her short stories in it. Also, he was a significant figure in the Golden Dawn during the time of Underhill's participation in it, having taken control of the London Temple in 1903. He was a writer on occult phenomena, (13) who is thought to have rewritten the rituals of the Golden Dawn "in a Christian spirit." (14) Armstrong suggests that Waite "tilted the ritual [of the Golden Dawn] in an orthodox or relatively orthodox Christian mystical direction." (15)

How did these early experiences in The Golden Dawn influence or affect Underhill? It seems clear that Arthur Waite and the Golden Dawn did influence her own formative development and that of her spiritual theology. (16) But the extent and depth of it is impossible to say, since Underhill was so widely read and open to other sources of spirituality, and because we do not know exactly what was taught and practiced in the Golden Dawn at the time of her participation. We do know generally that ritual magic and Hermeticism were significant features of the practice and theory of the Golden Dawn. These themes are important elements in Underhill's early spiritual theology, and essential features of them remain significant to her later work as well.

Christian Hermeticism

In *Mysticism*, Underhill distinguishes three narratives by which Christian mystics have traditionally tended to express their spiritual journeys. These are: i) the craving for home -- the narrative of the pilgrim or wanderer; ii) the craving for one's beloved -- the narrative of the spiritual marriage; and iii) the craving for regeneration, transmutation, purity, and perfection -- the narrative of the Christian Hermeticist or spiritual Alchemist. (17)

Hermeticism has non-Christian origins. It is a spiritual tradition which developed especially from Greek and Jewish religious influences, but also shows Egyptian and Gnostic inspiration. It probably developed between the first and third centuries of the common era. It is associated with a prophetic sage, Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus ('Hermes the thrice great'), who is said to have transmitted the teachings of the God Hermes. Under that name there are texts and teachings given in a collection of Greek writings from Alexandria, or inspired by these ancient texts, so called "Hermetica." (18)

Popular Hermeticism later comes to incorporate astrology, the Kaballah, the Tarot,

and alchemy in its practices. But the major and common thrust of the tradition is to contemplate and experience the underlying laws or essence of the universe in order to bring a spiritually reintegrating and regenerating power to the human soul. The Hermetic goal is spiritual refinement and transformation of the soul in its ascent to God. To that end the Hermeticist performs initiation and healing rituals, summons helpful spirits, and attempts to instantiate positive correspondences between the supernatural world and human life, through the practice of magic, asceticism and meditation. Those were the kinds of activities in which the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn were involved.

But, as I said, the key feature in all Hermetic thought is the ongoing endeavor to transform the individual person to a condition of spiritual perfection. This transformation is undertaken through a kind of alchemy which attempts to transmute the individual through magical practices. Indeed, this idea of spiritual alchemy has its parallel in ideas of physical alchemy: the attempt to transform base metals into silver or gold.

Physical alchemy is thought to have been first developed in Egypt around the turn of the common era with the refinement of knowledge and techniques in chemistry and metallurgy. (19) Some people came to think that there might be a way of transforming plentiful and cheap metals into precious metals. Physical alchemists searched to discover the methods of transforming base metals into silver or gold. The literature is very obscure because of the tendency towards secrecy amongst alchemists and the association of metallic language with astrological bodies and signs. It is further complicated by the incorporation of "strange heraldic symbolism" and various color and zoological imagery. (20) But, according to Underhill, the prime object of the alchemical process was to discover the transformative substance which would convert base metals into gold. This was called the Philosopher's Stone.

Notice how the structure of physical alchemy is easily adapted to that of spiritual alchemy. Indeed, by the twelfth century Hermes comes to be identified with alchemy. (21) The physical alchemist attempts to change base metals into gold, while the spiritual alchemist works to bring the base elements of humanity to their spiritual perfection. The base elements of human nature are the passions and mind, what the Hermeticists called respectively 'Sulphur' and 'Salt'. The human person is the vessel of the elements. The spirit or immanent spark is the divine transformative principle, what they called 'Mercury'. This is the agent of humanity's transmutation. The idea is to transform the vitality, passions, and mind of



"Her pseudonym in this group was "Soror Quaerens Lucem"—"the sister who is seeking enlightenment..."



the natural person into the energy, virtues, and wisdom of the regenerated spiritual person through the agency of Mercury, or the Philosopher's Stone. "The art of the alchemist," writes Underhill, "whether spiritual or physical, consists in completing the work of perfection, ringing forth and making dominant, as it were, the 'latent goldness' which 'lies obscure' in metal or man [sic]. ...The proper art of the Spiritual Alchemist...was the production of the spiritual and only valid tincture or Philosopher's Stone; the mystic seed of transcendental life which would invade, tinge, and wholly transmute the imperfect self into spiritual gold." (22)

Notice how attractive the Hermetic process and ideal might appear to the Christian mystic, some of whom found the spiritual narrative fitting to their own Christian aspirations. (23) Indeed, the transformative dynamic fits neatly into the traditional stages or categories of Christian mysticism: Purgation, Illumination, and Union. Moreover, in Christian Hermeticism, the Philosopher's Stone is Jesus. Christian Hermeticists taught that through appropriate purgative processes one undergoes a transmuting fire in opening one's heart mystically to Christ's illuminative Presence. One then might experience through the grace of Christ the transformation of the gross elements of one's fallen nature into the eternal beauty, light, love, and wisdom of the divine life. (24)

In Christian Hermeticism, Jesus is the re-creative power given in God to stimulate human transformation to the divine life. Underhill suggests in *Mysticism* that this symbolic narrative of spiritual rebirth and regeneration in Christ becomes fundamental imagery in Christian mysticism, along with the pilgrimage idea and that of spiritual marriage. As I said, it corresponds closely to the traditional stages of ascent or development in Christian mysticism. However, given the severity of the fallen nature of humanity, the processes of spiritual purification, regeneration, and transformation are very difficult, painful, and complicated. They require courage, fortitude, and insight into the dynamics of human nature and the spiritual world. They also involve the power of sanctifying grace and magic, in overcoming the human resistance to this regenerative power of Christ and surrendering to the spiritual ideal.

Magic

Magic plays a crucial role in Underhill's theory of spiritual transformation, as it does in Christian Hermeticism. This is because of the significance she gives to Christian ritual and sacrament. In-

deed, her defence of magic, which she wrote in 1907, is primarily a defence of magic in Christian practice. She writes: "All rituals and ceremonies, whatever explanations of their efficacy may be offered by their official apologists, have, and must have, as the rationale of their existence, a magical--i.e., a hypnotic--character; and all persons who are naturally drawn towards ceremonial religion are in this respect really devotees of Magic." (25) In 1911 she continues along the same line,

*"Magic plays a crucial
role in Underhill's
theory of spiritual
transformation..."*

in the chapter in *Mysticism* that she also devotes to magic: "Sacraments, too, however simple their beginnings, always tend as they evolve, to assume upon the phenomenal plane a magical aspect--a fact which does not invalidate their claims to be vehicles of supernatural grace. Those who have observed with understanding, for instance, the Roman rite of Baptism, with its spells and exorcisms, its truly Hermetic employment of salt, anointing chrism and ceremonial lights, must have seen in its ceremony far nearer to the operations of white magic than to the simple lustrations of St. John the Baptist." (26)

In her earlier defence of magic, Underhill is responding to an educated audience that discounts the subject as unintelligible nonsense which is of no useful purpose. She attempts to show the meaningfulness of the basic principles of magic, in defending its practice in authentic religious contexts. She writes: "It is a living and serious philosophy, descended from immemorial antiquity, and never failing of initiates, who have handed down to the present day its secret wisdom, symbols and speculations." (27) Nevertheless, the title of her 1907 article, "A Defence of Magic," is misleading. For she is quite critical of magic as a school of thought separate from traditional religions, and she certainly does not advocate it. Later, in her 1911 adaptation of this article in *Mysticism*, her criticisms of it are even stronger still. Both writings are heavily influenced by the thought of Eliphas Lévi (1810-1875).

Underhill clarifies three basic postulations of the various magical schools. The first tenet supposes a medium or plane of reality which underlies our phenomenal, material world. This is called the "Astral Light" or "Astral Plane" or "Astral World." (28) Underhill prefers to understand it as an underlying level of consciousness, one which "interpenetrates and binds up the material world." It also contains the vital energy which stimulates and nourishes natural and human life, and it preserves "the images of all beings and events." (29) But she insists that this so-called "Astral Plane" is not a supernatural reality apart from the human subject of experience. She pictures it rather as a shared unconscious storehouse of powers and experiences, not, I suspect, wholly unlike the collective unconscious in the sense that Carl Jung has in mind.

There is a way, then, in which this unconscious plane and our phenomenal world are mutually dependent and inter-related. There are beings, energies, and powers of this unconscious realm that are connected to our world and affect it. This correspondence between the natural and the Astral plane of existence is the second tenet of the magical schools. They assume an analogy

between the supersensible and sensible worlds, between "the microcosm of man [sic] and the macrocosm of the universe." (30) There is a way in which the phenomena of our world are mirrored in the Astral Plane. Though we are normally unaware of it, there is a relation between this underlying plane and our world.

This relation brings us to the third tenet of the magical schools. Humanity can come to know and enter into this supersensible plane, and even manipulate the sensory world through magical action upon this other realm. The magical schools maintain the potential of incredible will-power with respect to esoteric knowledge and control. Through appropriate learning and practices one can come to know the supersensible plane, and to affect the material world through action upon the supersensible. To that end, magical ritual involves words and actions, such as "spells, charms, rituals, [and] perfumes," and objects, such as "divining rods, fortune-teller's cards, and crystal-gazer's balls." (31)

But Underhill insists that these magic symbols possess no secret power apart from their role in helping stimulate or evoke in the human will an awareness of this subliminal plane. She writes how "it is the declared object of occult education, or initiation, to actualize this supersensual plane of experience, to give the student the power of entering into conscious communion with it, and teach him to impose up on its forces the directive force of his own will, as easily as he imposes that will upon the 'material' things of sense." (32) But, she maintains, "There is nothing supernatural about it. It is character-building with an object, conducted upon a heroic scale. In Magic, the uprushes of thought, the abrupt intuitions, which reach us from the subliminal regions, are developed and controlled by rhythms and symbols which have become traditional because the experience of centuries has proved their efficacy." (33)

Magic and Religion

Underhill goes on to argue that traditional "rhythms and symbols" also play a significant role in Christian sacraments and other rituals, nourishing and developing one's religious intuitions and thoughts. However, while she sees nothing supernatural about magic as it is practiced in the magical schools, she is convinced that religious magic does actually reflect the supernatural.

Underhill would seem to suppose that the idea of the Astral Plane, at least in the psychologized form that she interprets it, is true. But, while the occult magician chooses to enter into and to work in this plane of existence, the Christian mystic hopes to move through it to God.



"Sacraments too, however simple their beginnings, always tend as they evolve, to assume...a magical aspect..."

“The transcendental faculties may become aware of this [astral] world; only, in the case of the mystic, to pass through it as quickly as they can.” (34) The object of the mystic is the supernatural, not the astral realm. And authentic ritual and sacrament draw this power of the supernatural world into our natural world, more than just accessing the level of the Astral plane.

Another difference between magic in occult schools and that in Christianity is the attitude that is brought to the practice. In her earlier article Underhill writes that “all modern occultism...is tainted by a certain intellectual arrogance. A divorce has been effected between knowledge and love.” (35) In her later adaptation of this passage in *Mysticism*, she uses stronger words. She writes there of “the cold intellectual arrogance, the intensely intellectual point of view which occult studies seem to induce by their conscious quest of exclusive power and knowledge, their implicit neglect of love.” (36)

She speaks of two attitudes towards the spiritual world, one associated with schools of magic and the other with authentic spirituality. Magic is “The Way of Knowledge,” while mysticism is “The Way of Love.” Magic “wants to get, mysticism wants to give.” (37) Mysticism focuses on love and surrender. It is a “movement of the heart,” seeking the “abolition of individuality.” Magic, on the other hand, is a “self-seeking transcendentalism” which focuses on acquisition, personal gain, and the satisfaction of an insatiable curiosity. Unlike magic, mysticism is “Not to know about, but to Be [with God]...”; “It is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality.” (38)

So Underhill harshly criticizes the self-serving attitudes that drive the magician in his seeking to know supersensible realities and to control the phenomenal world. Yet, as I already mentioned, she is wont to rule out altogether the efficacy of magic in authentic religious practice. Magical practices have always been a crucial feature in Christian spiritual formation and Underhill is adamant to uphold their continued efficacy. She writes: “Orthodox persons should be careful how they condemn the laws of magic: for they unwittingly conform to many of them whenever they go to Church. All ceremonial religion contains some elements of magic.” (39)

What Underhill is criticizing are not magical practices per se, but rather those schools of magic that separate themselves from genuine religious spirituality. Magic is a legitimate practice when it is approached with an appropriate attitude of openness and humility that serves the purposes of authentic religious transformation.

She writes: “Sacred numbers, ritual actions, perfumes, purifications, words of power, are all used, and rightly used by institutional religion in her work of opening up the human to the messages of the supersensible world. ...Founding her external system on sacrament and symbols, on rhythmic invocations and ceremonial acts of praise, insisting on the power of the pure and self-denying will and the ‘magic chain’ of congregational worship, [the Church] does but join hands with those Magi whose gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the first gifts that she received.” (40)

Christian sacraments and sacramentals have a special supernatural character and power in stimulating spiritual reintegration and transformation. But this requires a sincere intention and self-surrender to and within the ritual performance, a kind of co-operative grace of the divine action, rather than the move to know, control, and manipulate supersensible realities.

Despite this reference in *Mysticism* to the immense significance of religious ritual in spiritual transformation, Underhill goes on rather to stress in that book asceticism, prayer, and meditation, in the mystical self-surrender to God. However, she soon explores in some depth the significance of the eucharistic liturgy for spiritual development, in a chapter in *The Mystic Way* (1913). In “The Witness of the Liturgy,” she argues for the essentially mystical character of the eucharistic liturgy, illustrating key elements of the ritual given in the Roman Missal: “The great dramatic poem of the liturgy is still for that [Christian consciousness that has not broken away from tradition] the shrine in which the primal secret of transcendence is preserved. We may yet experience the full force of its immense suggestive magic when we will.” (41)

The ideal of the ceremony is, in the words of Dionysius the Areopagite, “to show forth the union of the initiate with the Adorable One”. Through various ritualistic means -- music, perfume, and rhythmic gestures, words, and actions -- “the tangible [is] made the instrument of supersensual manifestation” and the Eternal emerges into the temporal order. (42) But the Mass of the Faithful is initiated in the Offertory by the action of sacrifice and culminates in the radical self-surrender of Communion. The gifts received through the sacrifice “are at once the food of the faithful, media of the inflowing divine life, and also the veritable images of the surrendered soul ‘made Christ,’ whose highest joy it shall be to grow through sanctification to sacrifice: whose final destiny shall be giving back of ‘more abundant life’ to the world.” (43)

Twenty-three years later, Underhill focuses almost exclusively on the institutional-



“She speaks of two attitudes towards the spiritual world, one associated with schools of magic and the other with authentic spirituality.”

communal elements of this theme of self-surrender, exploring in careful detail the elements and significance of ritual, symbol, and sacrament. In her book *Worship* (1936), (44) she further refines the ideas of ritual action and spiritual transformation that she voiced in her earlier writings, as she integrates them into an extensive ecumenical treatment of the theology of communal and personal worship in Christianity.

Underlying the dynamic is the theme of a radical self-surrender in love to God: “a free self-offering without conditions to the transforming energy of God -- the oblation of the natural life with all its gifts, possessions, and capacities, ‘for all men and women’ -- must be the first movement of this organic life of worship.” (45) Worship has as its goal spiritual reintegration and regeneration in God. In line with her treatment of spiritual transformation which she described earlier in the narrative imagery of Christian Hermeticism, she stresses in *Worship* the divinization of the human being and all of creative life through intimate, spiritual union with the divine Will: “The dedicated will must bit by bit take up, transform, and unify the dedicated body and mind, welding them into a single instrument devoted to the purposes of God. This absorption and transformation of the visible and temporal is a true part of personal worship, since it is done for and towards God, ...So the individual Christian is required to adore God, adhere to Him, and co-operate with Him in the sanctification of life -- that is to say, the bringing of it into conformity with the Divine Perfection... ” (46)

Here in *Worship* we see the same underlying themes that were present in Underhill’s understanding of Christian Hermeticism, though she tends to speak of them now in terms of the “spiritual” rather than the “mystical” and stresses more the communal nature of the ideal: human co-operation in the sanctification of life, through the absorption and transformation of the person in Christ. Moreover, key to Christian worship are elements of magic -- various communal, ritual performances that have radically positive spiritual effects on their performers. Most significant of all is the Holy Eucharist -- a subject that Underhill explored in a number of other writings both before and after *Worship*. (47)

Structuring the various forms that the ritual has taken are the core elements of: Adoration and Thanksgiving; Memorial of the Passion; Offering and Consecration; Supplication; Mystery of the Divine Presence; and Communion. Communion, she writes, is the “proper climax of all Eucharistic worship.” (48) In Communion, the power of the words, gestures, objects, and meanings of the liturgy awaken and instill in the par-

ticipants the regenerative and transformative Presence of the Incarnate Logos: “The essential relationship of the soul to God is here dramatically presented by means of a sacramental mystery, which gives access to the very sources of our life and truly effects that which it declares. The ancient sacrificial meals were held to give all who shared in them a certain communion with the divine nature, by means of spirit-infused nourishment. In the Christian sacrifice, the Logos enters the time-series and is self-given under fugitive species to the creature, that by this feeding on Reality the creature may be transformed: receiving by infusion the gift of charity to strengthen, purify, and at last supernaturalize his own imperfect love, and thus bring a little nearer that transfiguration of the world in Christ which is the creative goal of Christian worship.” (49)

Sacrifice and Self-surrender

In Evelyn Underhill’s spiritual theology, then, magic plays a significant role in the spiritual transformation of the person. The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn introduced her in a theoretical and practical way to the effective power of ritual. It also was the forum for her active participation in a process of spiritual transformation, introducing her to the theory and practice of Hermeticism and providing for her the opportunity to observe the attitudes and motives of the people involved in the Society.



“The essential relationship of the soul to God is here dramatically presented by means of a sacramental mystery, which gives access to the very sources of our life and truly effects that which it declares.”

Certainly she carried this early “occult” heritage with her, as she immersed herself more and more in traditional Christian spirituality. She acknowledged even the effective power of some non-religious magical practices. She perceived authentic parallels between the magical rituals of the Golden Dawn and those of traditional Christianity, as well as dangers that magic might pose for the spiritual well-being of the person. She never abandons in her spiritual theology the essential ideals of Christian Hermeticism, the goal of radical spiritual regeneration and transformation through self-surrender in Christ. Indeed, she marks off in Christian mysticism the themes of sacrifice and self-surrender in love, contrasting them from the orientations of curiosity, knowing, and controlling that are found in the occult schools. Later, she accentuated these themes in her writings.

But these insights into the dynamics of magic and spiritual transformation were present in Underhill at a very early stage of her career. In my introduction I spoke of her treatment of magic in her final novel, *The Column of Dust* (1909). I mentioned how in that story the main character, Constance Tyrrel, conjures up a disembodied spirit -- a “Watcher” -- who comes to inhabit her psyche. Both of them are driven by a most powerful desire for knowledge, and they share together throughout the story their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

The story is complicated in an even more fantastic way when Constance comes into possession of the authentic Holy Grail, the eucharistic cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. The presence and power of this legendary relic eventually lead Constance into an orientation of religious adoration, as she experiences mystically its link with the spiritual world. Gradually she comes to recognise through it the essentially sacrificial nature of God and all human life, the fundamental importance of self-surrender and love. And so she is led in the end to sacrifice herself for her illegitimate daughter, Vera, and finds her spiritual redemption in such selfless love. This act, in turn, also provides the final impetus in the spiritual redemption of the Watcher, who learns from Constance how to love. I suspect that the character of Constance might be inspired by the life of Eliphaz Lévi (alias Alphonse Louis Constant), who himself, following years as an occult researcher, returns toward the end of his life to the Roman Catholic communion. Moreover, the character of Constance seems to echo somewhat Underhill’s own spiritual conversion.

These themes of sacrifice and self-surrender in love, introduced so early in Underhill’s writings, underlie her views of magic and

spiritual transformation, and indeed, the whole of her spiritual theology. For Underhill they are the essence of the Christian life, revealed most profoundly for her in the mysterious magic of the eucharistic liturgy. (50) This truth is conveyed by her in a personal reflection on her own experiences of the eucharistic liturgy, recorded in 1924:

“Going to Communion this morning I saw so clearly all the suffering of the world and the self-giving of Christ to heal it--and that Communion and the life of union mean and involve taking one’s share in that--not being rescued and consoled, but being made into part of His rescuing and ever-sacrificed body. And in the sacramental life one accepts that obligation--joins the redeeming spirit-element of the Universe. Contemplations are the filling up of the reservoir for this--contemplative life does mean Gethsemene and Calvary. All the religious amorists [are] hopelessly off the track. ‘Not as the world giveth, give I unto you!’ How close we stand to the fringe of the supernatural and how its energy seems to penetrate every fibre sometimes.” (51)

This quote reveals the deeply Christian character of Underhill’s spirituality. In line with the testimony of traditional Christian mystics, Underhill observed in human nature a deep resistance to the spiritual Reality that underlies and permeates the natural world and the human person. Through the sacramental life and various contemplative practices, she argued, one might gradually be opened more and more to the presence and power of this Reality, and affected in positively transformative ways. (52)

But the spiritual immersion in Christ in eucharistic liturgy means surrendering to and hence sharing in a redemptive dynamic of selfless sacrifice, a fact that she recognized as early as 1909, though perhaps had not really begun to appreciate fully and appropriate until the 1920s. (53) The authentic spiritual life is not flight from suffering through world-transcending mystical consolations, but rather the acceptance and transformation of suffering in self and others through surrender to the Divine. Sacramental ritual in Christianity means entering into Christ’s “rescuing and ever-sacrificed body.” The contemplative life also but serves this purpose, that the supernatural might “penetrate every fibre” of the person, to be drawn into service of the “redeeming spirit-element of the Universe.”



Michael Stoeber is Associate Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regis College, Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto.

Footnotes:

1 This paper was presented at the symposium *The Contemplative Life and Society: The Life and Work of Evelyn Underhill on the 60th Anniversary of Her Death*, sponsored by Regis College, St. Clement's Anglican Church, Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, and The Evelyn Underhill Association, Toronto, June 2, 2001.

2 See, for example, Grace Jantzen "The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill," *Feminist Theology*, No. 4 (1993), 79-100, and Evelyn Underhill, "Christianity and the Claims of Other Religions," *Essays Catholic and Missionary*, Edmund Robert Morgan, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 3-22.

3 Grace Jantzen, "The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill," 94.

4 On these themes see Underhill's short stories: "The Death of a Saint," "The Ivory Tower," "Our Lady of the Gate," "The Mountain Image," and "A Green Mass," in *The Horlick's Magazine*, 2 (1904); her novels: *The Grey World* (London: William Heinemann, 1904), *The Lost Word* (London: William Heinemann, 1907), and *The Column of Dust* (London: Methuen & Co., 1909); and her poetry: *Immanence. A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1912), and *Theophanies. A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1916).

5 Margaret Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 18.

6 Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 18.

7 "A Defence of Magic," *Fortnightly Review* (November 1907) 751-60. Republished in Dana Greene, ed., *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1988) 33-46.

8 *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1911); the edition cited here is *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1990), Pt. 1, Ch. 7.

9 The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn was

established in 1887-88 in London. Many of the early male members of the Order were Masonic Rosicrucians (*Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia*, est. 1825), but unlike that society, the Golden Dawn was both open to women and officially secret. In 1888 they established the Isis-Urania Temple No. 3 in London, and by 1891 there were forty-two women members and over forty men at this Temple. By 1894 there were temples at London, Weston-Super-Mare, Bradford, Edinburgh, and Paris, and over 200 members. Mostly middle class, there were a few aristocratic members, and a number of medical doctors. Notable members were W. B. Yeats, Algernon Blackwood, Florence (Farr) Emery, Aleister Crowley, Arthur Machen, and Arthur Waite.

Led by Arthur Waite, the London Temple branched off in 1903 as the Independent and Rectified Rite, and came to be more involved in Christian spirituality. But it survived only until 1914. By 1915, Waite had started a new Society, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross. "Golden Dawn," *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained*, Richard Cavendish, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1975) 99, 102-103, 106; Ellic Howe, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order, 1887-1923* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 49; and R. A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Aquarian Press, 1983), 69-72.

10 Christopher J. R. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1975), 36. Charles Williams, ed. *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 12-13. Williams perhaps is the most reliable source on this matter, for he knew Underhill personally and edited a collection of her letters. Also, it is generally thought that Williams was associated with Arthur Waite. According to Gilbert, Williams met Waite in 1915, joined his Fellowship of the Rosy Cross in 1917, and was a member for at least eleven years. Gilbert indicates that Waite refers to Williams in his diary up until 1928. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn*, 76-77.

11 Underhill's active membership is substantiated by two very brief notes she sent to Arthur Waite. One from November 1905 indicates that she was about to undergo initiation into the 3 degree = 8 degree grade of what they called the "Outer Order." That is the fourth of five possible grades of the level of the Outer Order. There were a total of eleven grades of initiation spread over three levels or Orders -- the Outer Order, the Second Order, and the Third Order, but attainment of the Third



Order was restricted to the disembodied “Secret Chiefs” of the Astral Plane. So there were only eight possible grades in the Society. Underhill would have already undergone initiation into the first three grades of the Society at the time of her initiation into the fourth grade in 1905. If she was an active member for “some years” after 1904, as Charles Williams suggests, it seems quite possible that she ascended to higher grades. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn* 72; Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 36-37; “Golden Dawn,” *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained*, 100-101.

12 Wesley Sweetser claims that Machen “endorsed without reservation” her book *Mysticism*, which he may even “have edited unofficially.” Apart from this shared interest in mysticism, not much mention of this relationship is made in the biographies and the autobiographies of Machen that I have searched, nor are details given in Underhill’s biographies. Some evidence would indicate that they might have been quite close: there is his endorsement of her book and her dedication of one of her novels to him, and he and his wife are mentioned in some of her letters. But the mystery surrounding their encounters and the circumstances of their relationship reflect the secrecy of the Society. See Wesley D. Sweetser, *Arthur Machen* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), 64, 57, 82-84; Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 33, 36-7; Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn*, 71-3.

13 Waite wrote books on the Kabbalah, alchemy, the Rosicrucians, and ceremonial magic, as well as a translation of Eliphas Lévi’s (Alphonse Louis Constant) highly influential *Dogma et Rituel de la Haute Magie*.

14 “Arthur Edward Waite,” *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained*, 269.

15 Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 42.

16 Waite’s writings on the themes of the Kabbalah and ritual magic are cited and quoted by Underhill in *Mysticism*, though not extensively. Also, she lists six of his books in the bibliography, and she acknowledges his help in the Preface of the first edition. Francis King suspects that Underhill “owes a little more to Waite and a little less to Von Hügel than is generally recognised.” *The Rites of Modern Occult Magic*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970) 112. Christopher Armstrong argues also that Waite influenced Underhill’s developing sense of spirituality. *Evelyn Underhill*, 38, 40.

17 *Mysticism*, pp. 125-148.

18 The chief treatises are *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius*, and shorter fragments collected by Stobaeus about 500 A.D. Other (“pseudo-hermetic”) texts, also attributed to Hermes, appeared in the middle ages. See *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation, with notes and introduction*, Brian P. Copenhaver, tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). My summary of the tradition is dependant largely on Jean-Pierre Mahé, “Hermes Trismegistos,” and Antoine Faivre, “Hermeticism,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 6, Mircea Eliade, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), 287-302.

19 “Alchemy,” *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained*, Richard Cavendish, ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1974), 24.

20 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 146.

21 Faivre, “Hermeticism,” 295.

22 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 143.

23 Hermeticism was of interest to various Christian theologians from the time of the Patristic Fathers, but only excerpts of the Hermetic texts were known. ‘Christian Hermeticism’ as a formal theological system does not develop until much later, after 1462, when Leonardo da Pistoria brought the *Corpus Hermeticum* from Macedonia to Florence. Faivre mentions *De harmonia mundi* by Francisco Giorgi Venetus, written in the early 16th century, as an early significant attempt to reconcile the teachings of the two traditions. See “Hermeticism,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 295, 297. A modern sophisticated Hermetic work is Anonymous [Valentin Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, Robert A. Powell, tr. (Rockport, MA: Element, Inc., 1991).

24 So Jacob Boehme, a 16th century Lutheran mystic, urges the Christian to “come to the Cross,...and there lieth the [Philosopher’s] Stone without any great painstaking, for it is pure and not defiled with any earthly nature.” “In this stone there lieth hidden, whatsoever God and the Eternity, also heaven, the stars and elements contain and are able to do. There never was from eternity anything better or more precious than this, and it is offered by God and bestowed upon man; every one may have it...it is in a simple form, and hath the power of the whole Deity in it. Underhill,



Mysticism, 144. As quoted from Boehme, *The Threefold Life of Man*.

25 Underhill, "A Defence of Magic," 44-45.

26 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 163.

27 Underhill, "A Defence of Magic," 33.

28 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 154.

29 Underhill, "A Defence of Magic," 38.

30 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 159.

31 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 159.

32 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 159, 156.

33 Underhill, "A Defence of Magic," 39.

34 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 156.

35 Underhill, "A Defence of Magic," 44.

36 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 162.

37 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 70.

38 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 71, 72.

39 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 152.

40 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 163-64.

41 Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1913), 334.

42 Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 368, 334.

43 Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 363.

44 *Worship* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1936). The edition cited here is *Worship* (Guilford, Surrey: Eagle, 1991).

45 Underhill, *Worship*, 145.

46 Underhill, *Worship*, 142.

47 Chapter 6, "The Witness of the Liturgy," *The Mystic Way; The Mystery of Sacrifice: A Meditation on the Liturgy* (London: Longmans, Green

and Co., 1938); and *Eucharistic Prayers from the Ancient Liturgies* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939).

48 *Worship*, 121.

49 Underhill, *Worship*, 121.

50 One wonders how Underhill would have responded to the changes to the eucharistic liturgy (and other sacraments and the sacramentals) undertaken by the Roman Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council. In a passage from "A Defence of Magic" (which she largely excludes from the later version of this article in *Mysticism*) she writes: "The true 'magic word,' or spell, is untranslatable, because its power resides only partially in that outward sense which is apprehended by the intellect, but chiefly in the rhythm, which is addressed to the subliminal mind. Did the Catholic Church choose to acknowledge a law long known to the Magicians, she has here as explanation of that instinct which has caused her to cling so strenuously to a Latin liturgy, much of whose amazing--and truly magic--power would evaporate were it translated into the vulgar tongue. Symbols, religious and other, and the many symbolic acts which appear meaningless when judged by the reason alone, perform a similar office." 39-40.

It strikes me that there is some truth to Underhill's point here, though I think she might be overly stressing the hypnotic character of rhythmic sounds and gestures, and underestimating the essential and powerful roles that intention, imagination, and conscious participation play in religious ritual.

51 Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill*, Dana Greene, ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1993) 63.

52 She outlines the spiritual dynamics as the response of people "to the creative action of God" - - "to the incitement of this hidden God" -- in a relational knowing evoked by the Mystery of God. One enters affectively into the Mystery through a "self-oblivious adoration" and "an attitude of humble and grateful acceptance," and cooperates as an agent "of the Creative Spirit in this world," in discerning and fulfilling one's particular role "in bringing in the Kingdom of God." Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1955) 44, 52, 66, 67, 78, 112. These broadcast talks were first published in London by Hodder & Stoughton in



1937. Underhill explores in that extended homily the essential ingredients of the spiritual life in relation to God, drawing them from the seveneenth century French Cardinal de Bérulle: adoration, adherence, and co-operation.

53 See *Fragments of an Inner Life* for a moving account from her diaries, 1923-1937, of the desolations, consolations, and insights involved in her mystical opening to the Reality of Christ.

News & Noteworthy Continued

Oxford University Press' New Dictionary of National Biography includes an entry on Evelyn Underhill by Dana Greene.

Carol Poston, Professor of English at Xavier University, Chicago, has received a contract from the University of Illinois Press to publish a new edition of Evelyn Underhill's letters. More than 600 unpublished letters will be added to those already published by Charles Williams.

Upper Room Books will soon publish *Pilgrims in the Kingdom* by Deborah and David Douglas. The book contains a chapter by Deborah Douglas entitled "Pleshey and Evelyn Underhill: 'A house soaked in love and prayer.' ". Travel notes at the end of the book provide information on travel to and contacts for the Pleshey Retreat House as well as a bibliography of works by Underhill. This is a wonderful resource for armchair travelers as well as a guide for Christian pilgrims in the United Kingdom.

Catherine M. Wallace's sermon, "Evelyn Underhill and the Creative Spirit," was given June 16, 2003 at the Seabury Institute, Evanston, Illinois and is available on line at www.CatherineMWallace.com.

Amazing! Type in Evelyn Underhill on any search engine and you will find more than 825 entries. This is up from 250 entries one year ago. Literally, E. U. is everywhere. Spend an afternoon exploring this rich treasure trove.

THE PRAYING LIFE; A DAY OF QUIET REFLECTION IN HONOR OF EVELYN UNDERHILL

Each year the EUA sponsors a Quiet Day at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington,

D. C. The fourteenth annual Quiet Day topic, "The Praying Life," was centered around a passage from *The Spiritual Life*--"Prayer is really our whole life toward God, our longing for God.... The praying life is 'a life in which all that we do comes from the center where we are anchored in God.'" Under the leadership of Deborah Smith Douglas, Kathleen Henderson Staudt, and Milo Coerper the gathered group explored the praying life using Underhill's own insight and clarity and her long experience of prayer. They examined what their lives might look like if they were more securely anchored in God and how they might deepen and broaden their own sense of prayer not as an action or duty but as a vital relationship with God. Those interested in attending the June 2004 Quiet Day should check the website of the Washington National Cathedral--www.cathedral.org. The Living Church covered the Quiet Day in its July 20, 2003 issue.

NEWSLETTER BY MAIL

If you know of persons who do not have access to a computer and who might like to receive the annual newsletter, please have them send their name and address to EUA, 1205 Wesley St., Oxford, GA 30054.

MAY SHE REST IN PEACE

Mary Brian Durkin, O. P. died September 2, 2003 at the Dominican Mother House in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin at the age of 91. She taught at Rosary College (later Dominican University) and directed its graduate studies program in Florence. A prolific author, she published several articles on Evelyn Underhill in *The Spiritual Life*. She will be missed by those who cherished her and her work.

NEW EVELYN UNDERHILL BOOK

In April 2004, Paraclete Press will publish *Radiance: A Spiritual Memoir* by Evelyn Underhill and edited by Bernard Bangley. This a collection of Underhill's autobiographical writings.

NEWSLETTER INFORMATION

This Newsletter is updated annually. Information to be included in the Newsletter should be sent to greene@learnlink.emory.edu.

