



*Life as Prayer:*

## **The Development of Evelyn Underhill's Spirituality**

by Todd E. Johnson

William K. and Delores S. Brehm Associate Professor of Worship, Theology and the Arts School of Theology

Although Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) was baptized and confirmed in the Church of England, the Underhill family could be considered Christians in only the most social of terms. Underhill had little formal religious education and no theological training.

<sup>a</sup> In fact, Underhill's first commitment to any sort of religious group was a hermetic sect known as the "Golden Dawn," a most inauspicious beginning for one who would later be called "the spiritual director for her generation."<sup>b</sup>

Underhill's spiritual journey is a fascinating one, and one which has been well chronicled.<sup>c</sup> Underhill's career began with her classic work *Mysticism* (1911)<sup>d</sup> and can be said to have concluded with her other classic *Worship* (1936).<sup>e</sup> These studies are similar in that they were comprehensive in their scope and pioneering in their approach, and both volumes are standard works in the fields of mysticism and liturgy. The fact that both remain in print is a testimony to their enduring quality. These works are very different in their theological approach however, as *Mysticism* is rooted in a hybrid of psychology, Neo-Platonism and evolutionary thought, while *Worship* is grounded in a Trinitarian theology centered on the Holy Spirit and a theology of sacrifice.

Between these two books Underhill accomplished numerous "firsts": she was the first woman to lecture at an Oxford college in theology, the first woman to lecture Anglican clergy, and one of the first women to be included in Church of England commissions. These accomplishments along with her work as a theological

editor, and her role as a spiritual director and retreat leader made Evelyn Underhill a prominent figure in her day.

One of the little understood facts of Underhill's life and career are the changes of mind she went through over time. Underhill's thought went through three distinct phases. Her earliest theological approach could be defined by a strong emphasis evolutionary thought, psychology and Platonic dualism. This period lasted from 1891-1919, and was dominated by writings on mysticism and mystical theology. Her rather optimistic theology was unable to explain the cruel realities of World War I. So in 1920 she began receiving spiritual direction from Baron Friedrich von Hügel, one of the most respected theologians in Europe at that time. This began a decade long theme of more Christocentric thought and a growing balance between God's immanence and transcendence, which lasted from 1920-1929. The last years of her life (1930-1941) were marked by yet another paradigm shift, where under the influence of Russian Orthodox immigrants to England, Underhill's theology took a firm shift to the third person of the trinity. Her development of a pneumatology happened coincidentally with her growing social conscience as expressed by her pacifism at the on-set of World War II.<sup>f</sup>

In terms of Underhill's understanding of spirituality, it is notable is that over time Underhill shifts from the term "mysticism" that so dominated her early years as an author, to terms such as "life of the Spirit," "the spiritual life," and "spirituality." Only twice in

the late 1920s does Underhill write on mysticism, and from 1930 on her writings are almost exclusively on spirituality and worship. It would be interesting to see if Underhill's use of the term spirituality was reflective of the use of that term by others, either past or present, or if (as I am inclined to believe), that her use of the term in fact, popularized the term "spirituality" for the second half of the century.

Underhill's writings on what we would now call "spirituality" are bracketed by two works, *Mysticism* (1911) and *The Spiritual Life* (1937).<sup>8</sup> The first *Mysticism* can be understood well by reflecting on its subtitle, "A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness." This was a book describing the human potential of ascent to the divine. Underhill uses the classic three-fold paradigm of mystical union of purgation, illumination, and unification, but expands it adding two more stages. The result was her five-step process of conversion, purgation, illumination, surrender, and union. Underhill added a step at the very beginning, that being conversion, or a threshold of awareness of the ultimate reality (God) existing outside oneself. She also added a fourth step, conversion, which she drew from many mystical writings, but St. John of the Cross in particular. This stage was the "dark night of the soul," that period dryness that tests one's ultimate commitment to their spiritual journey. Underhill's massive study, though heavily weighted towards medieval Christian mysticism was intentionally inter-religious. Her goal was to demonstrate the universal human capacity for mystical ascent to "reality," that is, the more real supernatural world that is the goal of human existence. Though some saints and mystics might attain such a state of union with God in this world, most must wait for the life in the world beyond this world. Regardless, the journey was an inward and private one, what Plotinus described and the "flight of the alone to the One."

The small volume *The Spiritual Life* was very different. This little book was a compilation of four radio broadcasts Underhill delivered on the BBC. Gone were the concepts of mystical union and human ascent. In their place was a three-fold pattern of the spiritual life: Adoration, Adherence and Cooperation. This pattern was derived from the French school of spirituality identified with Pierre de Berulle and Jean-Jacques Olier. This was an approach to the spiritual life that began with God's initiative and resulted in a life conformed to the cruciform posture of our Lord. It also involved community and service to others. Gone was the philosophy and psychology of *Mysticism*, in its place was the Christian life of worship, prayer and ministry.

In her review of this book in *Theology*, Aelfrida Tillyard wrote this description of Underhill's broadcasts, some of her last public presentations, "When Evelyn Underhill sat at the accordance, and sent her voice across space to thousands of unseen listeners, her heart must have been full of true apostolic zeal and the love of souls. She was not there to display her knowledge of German metaphysics, or the extent of her acquaintance great and small. She was not there to impress anyone with her grasp of psychological theories involved in spiritual exercises and systems of meditation. She was there to bring human beings in touch with their Creator, and, please God, she would do it, if she could."<sup>9</sup> Underhill at the end of her life was passionately proclaiming a corrected understanding of prayer from her more famous mystical writings.

This essay is not intended to be an exercise in either the history of spirituality or spiritual autobiography. Instead my hope is to focus on a unique aspect of Underhill's understanding of prayer and through it her changing understanding of the life of the Spirit. To do this I will focus on two essays written by Underhill in the late 1920s which indicate the time of a shift in Underhill's thought and will high-

light the importance of her newfound understanding of prayer. It also may provide a sounding board for you to consider your own theology of prayer and definition of Christian spirituality.

The first essay was actually a pamphlet published for the YWCA in England in 1926, simply entitled "Prayer."<sup>i</sup> Although this work still has overtones of Underhill's early mystical writings, such as an emphasis on God's immanence, human effort in prayer, and the solitary nature of prayer. Yet there was a different feel to it than writings a decade earlier. This was more Christ-centered and less esoteric.

Underhill began by describing prayer as a broad genre rather than a single item, prayer is not "simply this or that, (that would) spoil our understanding of (prayers) richness and variety." Still Underhill does define the life of prayer as "our whole life towards heaven," and no matter what type of prayer you pray, it is communion with God. Underhill continues to stress the work of prayer here though, asserting that "real prayer is a great and difficult art."<sup>j</sup>

Underhill offers a metaphor for the spiritual life, that is the life of a healthy body. A healthy spirit, like a healthy body, must have food, fresh air and exercise to thrive. So it is in the spiritual life, one must have food, that is a steady diet of scripture reading and spiritual classics, have fresh air that is to live with an attitude of praise and gratitude, and finally exercise. Spiritual exercises require a disciplined routine; not simply reading praising and praying when one feels like it. Quoting St. Francis de Sales, "We seldom do well what we only do seldom."<sup>k</sup> Fulfilling these three regimens is not the spiritual life, but prepares one for it. For the spiritual life is adoration and adherence. Adoration is the attitude which places God in the center of one's life and not one's self. Adherence is being passionately devoted to your relationship with God to the point where it takes precedence over all other things. It is ultimately, to live every moment with the recognition

that you are in the intimate presence of God.

Though this is a significant move in Underhill's thought, it still ends primarily in the spiritual life being an autonomous relationship (though guided by people of faith past and present) with God. There is little social support, intimacy or relevance for prayer, beyond one's own spiritual self-improvement. This is not quite where Underhill ends up at the end of her life. Baron von Hügel diagnosed this tendency towards inwardness under his spiritual direction a few years earlier. His treatment was for Underhill to spend time caring for the poor. The seeds planted by von Hügel appear to have sprouted shortly after writing this tract, as we will see in her next essay.

In 1928 Underhill was invited to address the United Free Church in Scotland, and the topic she was given was prayer. Her address was not published until five years after her death in her *Collected Papers*.<sup>l</sup> This address is the first indication that Underhill's theology of prayer had taken on a decidedly different tone. The first mark of distinction is the way that Underhill began her address when defining prayer. "What, then, is Prayer? In a most general sense, it is the intercourse of our little human souls with God. Therefore it includes all the work done by God Himself through, in, and with souls which are self-given to Him in prayer.... Prayer, then, is a purely spiritual activity; and its real doer is God Himself, the one inciter and mover of our souls."<sup>m</sup> Although there is still an emphasis on God's immanence it is tempered. More striking in this essay, as the quote above demonstrates, is a tempering of human will and action with God's initiative and provision. In a word, prayer begins with grace and not works.

Of the three-fold pattern of the French school of Adoration, Adherence and Cooperation, Underhill had introduced the first two elements in her essay of 1926. This essay would be the one in which she completes the triad by introducing cooperation. Although she does not use the term cooperation *per se*. The entire essay

is about prayer as the process of releasing yourself to do the will of God in the world. This is the life of prayer.

Underhill stresses in this essay a new theme that will become a common theme for the rest of her life: sacrifice. Prayer requires “self-given” souls in a spirit of sacrifice and oblation. The love of God that inspires us to prayer in the first place, is the love of our crucified Lord—self-sacrificial love. Underhill continues, “Self-offering, loving, unconditional and courageous, is therefore the first requirement of true intercessory prayer.”<sup>n</sup> Such an intercession operates on the supernatural plane, where the human spirit invokes God’s Spirit to act. But it also works on the human plane where the intercessor enacts one’s prayer in deeds of kindness, compassion, justice and mercy.

In what I consider to be one of Underhill’s most revealing and poignant prose, she wrote, “A real man or woman of prayer, then, should be a live wire, a link between God’s grace and the world that needs it. In so far as you have given your lives to God, you have offered yourselves, without conditions, as transmitters of His saving and enabling love: and the will and love, the emotional drive, which you thus consecrate to God’s purposes, can actually do work on supernatural levels for those for whom you are called upon to pray.”<sup>o</sup>

Prayer from this point on in Underhill’s writings had a decidedly social and, in the above sense, intercessory cast to it, as did Underhill’s life. She became much more conscious of the effects of sin in the larger world, not simply the individual life. The foremost example of this was her public advocacy of pacifism at the advent of World War II, a decidedly unpopular position and one that cost her reputation dearly. Still Underhill was unswerving. Her life of prayer had lead her to believe that Christian should kill another Christian for the sake of no nation, and if all baptized should refuse to fight there would be no war.

Few people have studied prayer in theory and

practice—Christian and non-Christian—to the extent the Evelyn Underhill had. At the end of her life, after having considered many options, she concluded that prayer was about availing one’s self to the purposes of God, not invoking the activity of God for either spiritual assurance or earthly benefit, but for conformity to the life and ministry of the one through whom we pray, Jesus Christ the crucified.

In the spiritual bookshelves of our day, this understanding is not a big seller. Underhill’s early writings are those most frequently reprinted, and her later writings more difficult to find. Yet in the world today, what sort of woman or man of prayer would God ask us to be, one who strives for spiritual development alone, or one who offers their lives as living intercessions, empowered by the Spirit, sent by Christ, to do God’s will? Might the latter define all of our lives of prayer.

\* Appeared in **Fuller Theology, News & Notes. Vol. 56, No 2, Fall 2009. 16-19.**

#### (Endnotes)

a Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 11-12.

b See Jonathan Bodgener, “Evelyn Underhill: Spiritual Director to Her Generation,” *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 183 (1958): 46-50.

c Three biographies on Underhill have been published, and one incomplete manuscript remains unpublished. These are: Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life*; Christopher Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill: An Introduction to Her Life and Writings (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975)*; Margret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958)*; and Lucy Menzies, “Biography of Evelyn Underhill,” *TMs unfinished*, Underhill Collection Archives: St. Andrews University Library, St. Andrews, Scotland. By far the most accessible and more important of these works is Greene’s study.

d Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism. A Study of*

*the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 1st ed. (London: Methuen and Co., 1911).

e Evelyn Underhill, *Worship*. Library of Constructive Theology, 1st ed. (London: Nisbet, 1936).

f For a more detailed survey of the development of Underhill's thought see Todd E. Johnson, "Anglican Writers at Century's End: An Evelyn Underhill Primer" *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (1998).

g Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life. Four Broadcast Talks* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1937).

h Aelfrida Tillyard, review of Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, *Theology* 34 (1937), p. 379.

i Evelyn Underhill, "Prayer," in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, ed. Dana Greene. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988) pp. 135-44.

j Underhill, "Prayer," pp. 135-36.

k Underhill, "Prayer," pp. 139.

l Evelyn Underhill, "Life as Prayer" in *Collected Papers of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Lucy Menzies (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1946), pp. 61-72.

m Underhill, "Life as Prayer," pp. 61-62.

n Underhill, "Life as Prayer," p. 68.

o Underhill, "Life as Prayer," p. 62.

