



“How Buried Talent Leads to God”

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In 1966 Karl Rahner predicted that “The devout Christian of the future will be a ‘mystic’ . . . or will cease to be anything at all.” For Rahner a genuine experience of God would be foundational for Christian life in an increasingly complex and global world. This prophetic claim was audacious given that for at least three centuries the phenomenon of mysticism had been either suspect or ignored. The proliferation of retreat centers, prayer days, spiritual guidance, and an abundant literature on mysticism and spirituality was yet a thing of the future. Yet Rahner’s claim had its own antecedents. At the cusp of the twentieth century an incipient interest in mysticism appeared. Books on the subject by William Inge, Dean of St. Paul’s, Baron Friedrich von Hugel, the Catholic theologian, and the American psychologist William James were published. Simultaneously a spiritualist movement swept through London. However, all of this was largely esoteric until 1911, when Methuen and Company brought out *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, by the little-known author Evelyn Underhill. The book was widely acclaimed, had twelve editions and has remained continuously in print for a hundred years as a resource for scholars and an accessible introduction for the general reader. In this its centennial year *Mysticism* can rightly be called a spiritual classic, a work theologian David Tracey defines as one which transforms the reader because it gives an experience of that which is essential and recognized as true. Unbeknownst to Evelyn Underhill this spiritual classic would make her a foremother of contemporary spirituality.

No one would have suspected in 1911 that Evelyn Underhill, novelist, poet and wife of a London barrister, could have produced what the future Benedictine Abbot of Downside, John Chapman, called “the most readable . . . and most enlightening book on mysticism.” At best she would have been dubbed a “lady scribbler.” Although she had attended the Ladies Department of King’s College, London, she had neither academic nor religious training. What awakened her to the rich tradition of mystical writing was her early experience of travel in France and Italy. There she encountered the art, architecture and religious rituals of Catholicism. It was this visual beauty which lured her from her youthful agnosticism to an appreciation of a realm beyond the physical world. On return to London she began an exploration of mystical texts. In her early thirties, and on the verge of marriage to a childhood friend, Hubert Stuart-Moore, she decided to leave her nominal Anglicanism and “go over to Rome” much to the dismay of her future husband and bewilderment of her parents who were not at all interested in religion. In the end she delayed her conversion both because of her husband’s resistance and the 1907 papal condemnation of Modernism, a movement with which she was sympathetic. Thwarted by these circumstances and ardently wanting to find a way to continue her religious exploration, for three years she threw herself into writing a five-hundred page book on mysticism based on over

one thousand sources. This work brought her into intimate contact with the texts of the medieval mystics.

Mysticism was, as its subtitle indicated, a study of human consciousness at its most uncharted reaches. By defining the phenomenon, tracking its development, and illustrating its stages Underhill hoped to preserve this most unique expression of human perception. Her starting point was what she called the “mystic fact,” that is the texts describing mystical experience. These illustrated the personality of their authors who, she claimed, had a particular psychological make-up, a natural capability of extraordinary concentration, an intensity of love and will, a capacity for self-discipline and courage, and a quest for truth which gave meaning to life. The mystic quest was not for knowledge, i.e., the desire for control expressed in science and magic, but for love in which one participated and which allowed one to transcend the self and surrender to ultimate Reality. Underhill claimed that mysticism was an organic process which always led to the transfiguring of the will and a turning from the world of sense to a union with and surrender to God. Although this process was exemplified in the lives of the great mystics, it was available to those she called “normal” ordinary people. Each human had what she called a “capacity for God,” “a little buried talent” to achieve this consciousness. The mystics then were “kin and kith” separated from ordinary people only in degree, not in kind.

Mysticism was remarkable on a number of counts. It was original in that it redefined what it was to be human. Every human has a capacity for God. It was compensatory in that it aimed to illustrate that the highest form of human consciousness was embodied in mystic expression and that this needed to be reclaimed and preserved. It was definitional in that mysticism was set off as distinct from other phenomena, and that contrary to popular opinion it was not defined by abnormal psychic manifestations like visions and voices, but by the desire to participate in love itself. Finally the book, which contained hundreds of quotations, served as a compendium of mystic literature, which previously had been inaccessible to the public. As such Underhill’s “big book” stimulated a renaissance of interest in mysticism and the spiritual life for ordinary people.

If she had written only *Mysticism* Underhill’s reputation would have been ensured, but what followed were decades of prolific writing culminating in a corpus of thirty-nine books and some three hundred and fifty articles and reviews. Her first effort was to edit mystic texts and write biographies of mystics. Then at mid-life, experiencing a need for both guidance and community, she returned to the Anglican church of her childhood and simultaneously sought counsel from the Catholic theologian Friedrich von Hugel, to whom she claimed she owed her whole spiritual life. Gradually she transitioned to a new vocation-- the “care of souls” and conducting of retreats. As a guide in the spiritual life she was the first woman to offer a retreat in Canterbury Cathedral and the first to give a retreat to Anglican clergy. Each year she would offer a retreat at six or seven retreat houses and then revise the retreat for publication. Her care of souls took place through letters and individual visits. This demanding work was halted in 1935 when she was asked to write a book on worship. The result was a major contribution to both the history and understanding of liturgical expression, what she called “the response of man to the Eternal.” Like bookends, *Mysticism* and *Worship* expressed respectively the individual and the corporate encounter with the divine. At a time when there was little appreciation of the diverse forms of Christian worship, Underhill called each of them “a chapel in the Cathedral of

the Spirit.” As the mystics deepened her interior life and lead her to reach out to strengthen the spiritual lives of others, her exploration of the various worship traditions led her to be an early ecumenist.

Underhill’s ultimate vocation was made possible through historical circumstance. In 1939 on the eve of global war and three years before her death she became a pacifist. She faced opposition from friends and church. Her decision followed not from politics but from what she claimed was a corollary of the love of God, namely love of one’s fellow creatures. Her pacifist stance was a coherent aspect of her earlier life and followed from her insight into mystic life which gave priority to the love of God. From that followed service to others and ultimately the commitment to do them no harm.

Although Underhill desired to be a Catholic, she did not become one, saying there was plenty of work for her to do in the Anglican Church. She was, however, formed by the Catholic mystics and transmitted their insights to Catholics, Protestants and unbelievers. Her formation was deepened by the guidance of Friedrich von Hugel, the most prominent Catholic theologian in England in the early part of the twentieth century. Her writing was in service of a catholic heritage. Because she formed no school of thought and had no disciples, it is difficult to track her influence on individual writers. Nonetheless her sway over her generation was substantial. Michael Ramsey, former archbishop of Canterbury, claimed Underhill did more than anyone else to keep the spiritual life alive in Anglicanism in the period between the wars. But her contribution is more than generational. Through her writing she fostered an environment in which mysticism and the spiritual life were made legitimate subjects to be explored by “normal” people. She invited her readers to engage with a “cloud of witnesses” and helped them recognize the truth of Rahner’s prophetic claim.

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