Adhering to God: The Message of Evelyn Underhill for Our Times Dana Greene

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BIOGRAPHY has power to move, inspire, and provoke. It provides a model of personal integration, and in times like our own when the sense of the world's complexity and the loss of shared meaning cripple us, the individual attempt to make sense of life has great appeal.

The life of Evelyn Underhill¹ the twentieth century British religious writer, offers us not only inspiration, but an example of a modern woman, who was not broken by confrontation with complexity and the disintegration of meaning, but in fact worked to heal that confusion and brokenness. She has particular appeal for us because she is a modern woman. I mean by that not only that she lived in our century, but that she was well aware of the forces which shape our contemporary world and appreciated the power and achievement of modern science and technology. She was thoroughly familiar with developments in modern psychology and was acutely aware, as was her contemporary, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that God was absent in her time.

We can resonate with Underhill because the questions she asks are our questions. She has appeal as well because she lived a life very much like ours. She was a lay woman who had no backing from an ecclesiastical institution. She basically worked alone. It is not that she did not receive recognition in her own time; she clearly did. She was the most prolific female religious writer in the English language in the early twentieth century; the first woman to lecture at Oxford; a Fellow of King's College, London; the recipient of an honorary degree from the University of Aberdeen; the first woman to give retreats within Anglicanism; a religious writer of the Spectator; and a widely acclaimed writer whose major books, *Mysticism* and *Worship*, have been recognized as pioneering works and have remained in print since their publication. If we are to believe Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Underhill did more than anyone else in Anglicanism to keep the spiritual life alive in the period between the wars.

There is a resurgence of interest in Evelyn Underhill because she is one of us. She knows our world and its needs and her response is one of a call for personal spiritual renewal. Underhill's contribution is in the realm of personal religion, what today we call spirituality.

If we examine the history of religion in the West, we can see that personal religion sometimes flourishes within institutional structures and sometimes grows up in response to the limitations of those structures. The tremendous outpouring of religious literature from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries was, at least in part, a response to the failure of institutional Christianity to meet the deep spiritual needs of its followers. There are parallels here within the early twentieth century when religion, attacked by Biblical criticism, science, and psychology, and unable to speak boldly to its attackers or passionately to its adherents, drove away many like Underhill to find some avenue for the expression of their religious intensity. Her response was the exploration of mysticism and the spiritual life.

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THE PRIORITY OF MYSTICISM

Evelyn Underhill was a prolific writer.² I have examined her more than three hundred essays, books, introductions, editions, book reviews, and hundreds of her letters, and I am convinced that in this writing, with its diverse and changing themes, there is a dominant question which pervades it all -- that is, what is it to be holy? She addresses this question first in her study of the mystics, those who were considered holy, and then later she devotes herself to an exploration of the spiritual life and how we, normal people, can lead this life of holiness.

The mystical life is, for Underhill, the spiritual life because all true religion has a central mystical element. This does not mean that all those who lead the spiritual life have lives like those of the great mystics, but rather that the pattern of those lives is the same. She never principally associates mysticism with extraordinary phenomena -- visions, voices, etc., but with the quiet movement of the heart. For the great mystic and the garden variety person, the ". . . spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of His reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of His will." This is the sum of Underhill's thought. How she came to have this understanding of the spiritual life is the subject of this essay.

Although Evelyn Underhill is remembered as an elegant and sensitive religious writer on topics of mysticism and the devotional life, her early life gives few indications of her later religious intensity nor does the certitude of her writing hint at her own spiritual anguish.

Evelyn Underhill's life has been referred to as "quiet." By that it is meant that it was not dramatic in any outward sense. As the only child of a London barrister and his wife, she lived a life of material comfort. At age thirty-two, she married H. Stuart Moore, a childhood friend, who like her father had a profession in the law. They had no children, and Mrs. Moore, as she was known in private, spent her days writing. Her work was favorably received and sold well. After about 1925, when she was fifty, she turned increasingly to spiritual direction and the giving of retreats.

Her later writing was almost entirely devotional. Although she almost never voiced her position on political questions (she believed this would alienate her readers), in the late 1930s she became a pacifist. As the air war over Britain raged, she claimed that although Hitler was a scourge, his evil should not be met by the evil of war. Only love could overcome evil. Her spirituality led her ultimately to a position which was incomprehensible to most of her contemporaries.

She died in 1941, ten years before her husband, and is buried with him in a grave in the churchyard of St. John's in Hampstead. If one pushes away the weeds and brambles that have grown up over it, one can read the inscription on the stone -- "H. Stuart Moore and his wife, Evelyn, daughter of Sir Arthur Underhill." The defining of this prominent female writer in terms of the men in her life, while historically appropriate, is ironic for those of us who follow her.

This "quiet life" of Evelyn Underhill was marked by certain paradoxes. Although she was born into a nominally Anglican home, for a number of years as a young woman she considered herself to be an atheist. As she became more intensely interested in religion, however, she had an experience

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which clarified for her that she wanted to join the Roman church. But because of the church's position on Modernism and her fiancé's opposition to such conversion, she did not "go over to Rome." For years she lived unable to join the Roman church and not participating in Anglicanism. The strain of living between these two worlds taxed her. She was taxed in other ways also.

As the wife of a London barrister, she was expected to keep up a lively social life. But she was as well a woman of great religious intensity who expressed herself in a torrent of writing which kept up for thirty-four years. She was a writer who was acclaimed in her own times, but one who moved in no literary circle and had no disciples. She was a woman who cherished community and had many friends, but one who worked essentially alone, writing from her home without the direct support of any institution, academic or ecclesiastical. She was a director of retreats and spiritual guide to many, but she shared her own spiritual anguish with almost no one. Although devoted to both her husband and her parents, neither shared her interest in religion.

Yet this "quiet" life of Evelyn Underhill, filled with seeming paradoxes, produced some of the best religious literature of our time. Moreover, there is not only development in her thought, the diverse themes of her writing are interconnected and fit together to create a unique and convincing understanding of reality. THE WORK If one is to discuss Underhill's work, one must begin with *Mysticism*, a pioneering study of, as the subtitle indicates, the nature and development of human spiritual consciousness. It was this book which established her reputation and set the theme, whether expressed in analytical pieces, biographical essays, editions, or introductions, which would dominate her writing for more than a decade to follow. She became the authority on *Mysticism* England. William James had discussed this phenomenon in *Varieties of Religious Experience* and William Inge's book, *Christian Mysticism*, stimulated interest in the subject, but neither explored it in the way Underhill would.

Underhill followed a circuitous route to the publication of her first major work. She came to the subject of Mysticism first through an interest in philosophy and then in the occult. She became a theist of sorts, and then in her late twenties, she began to feel the pull of Christianity, which she both wanted to embrace and yet resisted violently. By her early thirties, she began gathering material for her book on Mysticism. She was thirty-six years old when it was published in 1911.

An artifact from Underhill's life I came across in England tells us a great deal about what she thought was important. At the retreat house in the village of Pleschy, near Chelmsford, where Underhill frequently gave retreats, you will find on the mantle of the Warden's study an embroidered plaque which belonged to her. Stitched on the plaque is the word, ETERNITY. In our pragmatic, complicated lives, which seem anything but connected to the eternal, the word startles and assaults our sensibilities; yet in many ways it summarizes Underhill's view. This plaque hung in her home as a reminder of where she needed to place her focus. In order to understand Underhill, one must begin at the beginning with Mysticism, that five hundred page book which has had thirteen editions, remains in print, and is available on the shelves of even mediocre libraries. In it, she establishes what she calls "the mystic fact," namely that there are those who claim to have experienced union with Reality. To use her words: Mysticism then is not an opinion; it is not a philosophy. It

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has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. Or, if you like it better -- for this means exactly the same thing -- it is the art of establishing...[a] conscious relation with the Absolute.⁴

Her point in writing the book was to convince her readers that the mystics had something to teach them about the nature of Reality. In her work she first separates Mysticism from theology, magic, and philosophy, and then explores the mystic way, the universal process of the mystical life. By using illustrations from the lives of western mystics, she introduces her readers to the vast treasury of mystical literature which was largely unknown in the English-speaking world. THE WAY TO REALITY In Mysticism, Underhill examines the organic, psychological life process which moves from the world of appearances to the world of reality. She does not examine this as it exhibits itself in normal people, but rather as it expresses itself in the lives of the human giants, the "pioneers" of humanity, that is, the mystics, who follow the same path as all others but with greater intensity. Of them she wrote,

[they] are men and women who insist that they know for certain the presence and activity of that which they call the Love of God. They are conscious of that Fact which is there for all, and which [is the] true subject-matter of religion; but of which the average man remains either unconscious or faintly and occasionally aware. They know a spiritual order, penetrating, and everywhere conditioning though transcending the world of sense. They declare to us a Reality most rich and living, which is not a reality of time and space; which is something other than everything we mean by 'nature; and for which no merely pantheistic explanation will suffice.⁵

The end of this mystic process, this movement from appearances to Reality, is not some esoteric, theoretical knowledge, but rather a transfigured and remade consciousness which operates at a different level than that of others and literally perceives a different world. In the mystic, a transcendental consciousness, apprehending and uniting with Reality, comes to dominate normal consciousness which is battered and buffeted in a world of sense appearance.

For Underhill, there is a natural human tendency to unite with Reality, to seek harmony with the transcendental order. It is in the mystics that we find this tendency most fully realized. For them, the desire for Reality, the movement of one's whole being in surrender to Reality is not done for personal gain or power or for curiosity, but only because of a desire to be united with Reality. Such union demands the entire redirection (not the denial) of all human powers -- sensual, intellectual, and volitional -- toward that which one loves. It produces a transformed consciousness and a life which is filled up with the object of one's love. Such a life is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is a life which aims specifically at the spiritual and has as its object a living and personal One. Finally, union with this living and personal One results in what Underhill calls divine fecundity. The self is not so much overcome as filled up with the One, God; it becomes theopathetic and manifests itself in a deified life.

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

In addition to establishing the mystic fact, Underhill outlines the universal mystic way, the actual process by which the mystic arrives at union with the absolute. She identifies five stages of this process. First is the awakening, the stage in which one begins to have some consciousness of absolute or divine reality. The second stage is one of purgation which is characterized by an awareness of one's own imperfections and finiteness. The response in this stage is one of self-discipline and mortification. The third stage, illumination, is one reached by artists and visionaries as well as being the final stage of some mystics. It is marked by a consciousness of a transcendent order and a vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

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The great mystics go beyond the stage of illumination to a fourth stage which Underhill, borrowing the language of John of the Cross, calls the *dark night of the soul*. This stage, experienced by the few, is one of final and complete purification and is marked by confusion, helplessness, stagnation of the will, and a sense of the withdrawal of God's presence. It is the period of final "unselfing" and the surrender to the hidden purposes of the divine will. The final and last stage is one of union with the object of love, the one Reality, God. Here the self has been permanently established on a transcendental level and liberated for a new purpose. Filled up with the Divine Will, it immerses itself in the temporal order, the world of appearances in order to incarnate the eternal in time, to become the mediator between humanity and eternity.

In *Mysticism*, Underhill sets out the framework of her understanding of human psychological development. The focus for full development must be on the eternal, the transcendental order which exists, but is not immediately obvious to us. By following the natural tendency towards union with this order, one becomes liberated and unselfed, filled up with that eternal reality which one loves. *Mysticism* is not some rare, esoteric phenomenon, but rather a movement of the heart, open to all, fully realized by the few, in which the object, method, and consequence are all the same. To seek, to find, to be transformed by that which is eternal and fully real, the One, which the mystics call God.

BREAKDOWN AND BREAKTHROUGH

Mysticism was well-received and it established Underhill as the preeminent authority on the subject. During the next decade she continued to explore this topic, turning out books, articles, editions, and reviews on Mysticism and the lives of the mystics.

But something happened to Underhill during this period. As she wrote later, "I went to pieces." The external events of her life give little hint of her inner turmoil. There was, of course, the Great War, what we call World War I, which shook every thinking European to the core. There was the death of her closest friend, Ethel Ross Barker, the only person with whom she shared her inner life. There was the conflict about institutional affiliation. As indicated, she could not convert to Catholicism nor could she bring herself to participate as an Anglican. All indications are that during this time, and I speak here of the period about 1916 when she was in her mid-forties, the great advocate of *Mysticism* and the mystic way, a woman of extraordinary religious intensity, drifted from any institutional participation to a kind of inwardness which presumably did not include the regular discipline of prayer.

Underhill realized she needed help and took two actions which were to have enormous consequences for her life. She began to participate regularly in the Anglican church and she sought out the well-known Catholic lay theologian Baron Friedrich von Hügel, as her spiritual director. Both of these actions were to have dramatic consequences. Underhill had come to the conclusion that participation in the institutional church was necessary; it created a group consciousness, connected with one's past, helped in the continuance of spiritual culture, and assisted in disciplining the individual. Since she could not join Rome, she opted for Anglicanism. She defended this move with the retort that she found plenty of work to do there and that if she ever felt compelled to do so, she

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would go elsewhere. This statement should not be seen as cavalier, but rather reflective of Un-

derhill's principal concern with personal religion rather than institutional affiliation.

Underhill's second decision, to put herself under the direction of von Hügel, was even more momentous. Although von Hügel died in 1925, and consequently his direction lasted less than four years, his influence in her life was great. Some scholars have argued that Underhill's real importance was as a disciple of von Hügel. Underhill herself claims, somewhat hyperbolically I think, that she owed her whole spiritual life to him. There is no question in my mind that she owed a great debt to him. She shared her anguish with him and no one else and it was he, through discipline, discussion, and prayer who was able to help bring her to a more full and mature understanding of the spiritual life. Nevertheless, while she was helped by him, her own contribution was unique.

My evaluation of von Hügel's impact on her is based on the reading of letters between them and a manuscript notebook kept by her during the period of his direction. These materials give clues to an understanding of Underhill's later spirituality. The letters and notebooks have various themes. Underhill is concerned about her ability to accept certain Christian doctrines as historically true. She is deeply aware of her failing and how far she falls from the mark of perfection. She is also aware of what von Hügel called her tendency toward "pure mysticism," an intellectualizing and disembodying of the spiritual life.

Von Hügel met Underhill's needs in a variety of ways, but his greatest contribution was to help her to see that no religious value, principle, or idea had any power actually to redeem, that is to transform, unless it was incarnated in one's life. The central problem for Underhill was how to bring her religious intensity into realms other than the intellectual. Von Hügel assisted her in this by suggesting disciplines, Christocentric devotions, works of mercy and charity, and by his own prayer. He sent her out to work in the slums of North Kensington and gently guided her to understand the sacramentality of all of life. In other words, that that life take root in her. It did, and the consequence was a transformed person.

THE ORDINARY WAY

It is not that the Underhill of the mid-1920s and onward is vastly different from the person who came before. In fact, the continuities in her life prevail. What is obvious is a redirection of her work and energies and the development of a much more concrete, pragmatic, and almost homey spirituality which had great potential for reaching the lives of ordinary people. In many ways this spirituality is summed up by Underhill's modification of the famous line from John of the Cross, namely, that in the end, we are judged not by our mysticism, but by our love. This is not to say that Underhill had come to devalue mysticism, but rather that her later spirituality focuses on the spiritual life and its special rootedness in Love.

Not only does her writing take new direction, but so to does her work. After 1925 she began to give retreats for women and for clergy. She also took up the work of spiritual direction, a work to which she gave much time and energy. It is important to remember that these activities, while

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widely accepted today, particularly in Catholicism but in other communions as well, were in Underhill's day largely unknown outside the circle of vowed religious. Our great debt to her is that she recognized the importance of the spiritual life and worked to make it the vocation of the many, rather than the few. Likewise she redefined the understanding of what it meant to be a religious person but associating religion principally with the spiritual life rather that specifically with theological or doctrinal adherence. It was not that she denounced or belittled the latter; rather, she defined religion first as adherence to God whom one experienced in a myriad of ways not by adherence to an institution or to intellectual formulations. The genius of Underhill was to define a new area for exploration, namely the spiritual life, and to make it the purview not only of those who lived a life apart from the world, but for everyone who, by virtue of humanity, had potentiality for growth in this area.

What was this sphere called the spiritual life which Underhill helped to make available to her contemporaries? It was that realm in which human persons experienced and responded to the divine. Its essential character was that it was organic, relational, experiential, and transformative. In order to examine it, new questions had to be framed and new approaches employed. Underhill used examples from both the lives of the holy and from human experience to illustrate its operations. While it was an area of investigation which was still elusive, this neither denied its existence nor its importance but only confirmed how much more needed to be done to understand this phenomenon. Underhill knew that the only way to understand the spiritual life was to participate in it. Consequently, she wrote as a fellow participant, one engaged, as we all are, in a relationship with mystery which transforms us at the very core of our being.

In her earlier work on the mystics, Underhill emphasized exclusively the lives and work of the great "pioneers of humanity," those who had responded most powerfully to the divine. In her later work she stressed the corporate human response to the divine, namely worship, as well as the individual devotional response. Her last major work *Worship*, the original study of various Western liturgical forms, was both analytical and descriptive, examining the basic characteristics of worship, namely ritual, symbol, sacrifice, and sacrament, and the diverse liturgical expressions including Judaism, Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, the Reformed Churches, and Catholicism. Long before it was fashionable, her ecumenical approach provided a new methodology for exploration of religious phenomena.

WORSHIP

Her devotional writing expressed itself in letters of direction, retreats, radio broadcasts, and books and articles. In examining these diverse materials one is struck by the importance of a few themes. In discussing the spiritual life, Underhill no longer uses the stages of the mystic way as a guide, but rather emphasizes human responsiveness to the divine by talking about three actions: adoration, adherence, and cooperation. Like Cardinal de Berulle, the seventeenth-century religious writer, and her director von Hügel, Underhill claimed that the first and primary experience of God was one of awe and that adoration followed from it. Together, awe and adoration reflect the humble acknowledgment of the Transcendent, the fact of God. Worship and prayer become two primary expressions of adoration and the mean by which one participates in and experiences the life of God. "Worship," she wrote,

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purifies, enlightens and at least transforms, every life submitted to its influence; and this is not merely in the ethical or devotional sense. It does all this because it wakes up and liberates that 'seed' of the supernatural life, in virtue of which we are spiritual beings capable of responding to that God who is Spirit; and which indeed gives to humanity a certain mysterious kinship with Him. Worship is therefore in the deepest sense creative and redemptive. Keeping us in constant remembrance of the unchanging and the Holy, it cleanses us of subjectivism, releases us from 'use and wont; and makes us realists. God's invitation to it and man's response, however limited, crude or mistaken this response may be, are the appointed means whereby we move towards our true destiny.⁶

Adoration is at the heart of prayer as well. Prayer is not so much a distinct act, but a state and condition of soul in which we receive God's spirit, and accept our nothingness. Our prayer of adoration passes into a prayer of communion and of self-offering. In fact, adoration and self-giving become one. "... [W]hole-hearted adoration," she wrote, "is the only real preparation for right action; ... First the awestruck recognition of God: and then, the doing of His Will."

This belief in the priority and centrality of God in life colors all of Underhill's writing and it is this notion which she offers to ameliorate the contemporary state of religion and our frazzled lives: "... enrichment of the sense of God is surely the crying need of our current Christianity," she wrote.

A shallow righteousness, the tendency to be content with a bright ethical piety wrongly called practical Christianity... seems to me one of the defects of institutional religion at the present time. We are drifting towards a religion which consciously or unconsciously keeps its eye on the Deity which lays all the stress on service, and hardly any of the stress on awe; and that is a type of religion which in practice does not wear well. It does little for the soul in those awful moments when the pain and mystery of life are most deeply felt. It does not provide a place for that profound experience which Tauler calls 'suffering in God: It does not lead to sanctity: and sanctity after all is the religious goal. It does not fit those who accept it as adequate for the solemn privilege of quiding souls to God In fact, it turns its back on the most profound gifts made by Christianity to the human race. I do not think we can deny that there is... a definite trend in the direction of religion of this shallow social type...⁸

ADHERENCE AND COOPERATION

It is clear that Underhill believed that one of the functions of adoration, expressed in worship and prayer, is to win our will to God's will. Here we have passed to a second response to the divine, namely *adherence*, an attitude of humble and grateful acceptance of God, a sense of self-opening and expectancy as well as a willingness to sacrifice with the result that we are purified and that there is a transfer of interest from self to God.

The effect of this adherence to God is a transformed self, one who works with God in the world. This final response of cooperation follows logically from adoration and adherence. Like the previous responses, it wells up out of love: "The spiritual life of any individual has to be extended both vertically to God and horizontally to other souls; and the more it grows in both directions, the less merely individual and therefore the more truly personal, it will be."

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Underhill's message, however, runs counter in some ways to what her society and ours maintain about our relationship with God and our fellows. She claims that love of God is paramount and that from this follows love of our fellows. As she said, the love of neighbor is a corollary of the love of God, not its equivalent. It was only by maintaining the priority of God that one could possibly come to love one's enemies, do good to those who hate you, and reach out to those who in themselves are unlovable.

This ever expanding love, of necessity, reaches out to our fellows and infuses all of our lives and everything we do. The spiritual life, Underhill wrote,

will decide the papers we read, the movements we support, the kind of administrators we vote for, our attitude to social and international justice. For though we may renounce the world for ourselves, refuse the attempts to get anything out of it, we have to accept it as the sphere in which we are to cooperate with the Spirit. . . Therefore the prevalent notion that spirituality and politics have nothing to do with one another is the exact opposite of the truth. Once it is accepted in a realistic sense, the spiritual life has everything to do with politics. It means that certain convictions about God and the world become the moral and spiritual imperatives of our life; and this must be decisive for the way we choose to behave about that bit of the world over which we have been given a limited control. ¹⁰

The result of these responses to the divine -- adoration, adherence, and cooperation -- is the sanctifying of personality and the subordination of the will to God. The self becomes filled up with God and hence is holy. This holiness is manifested neither in a long face nor in an ethereal aura. The saints, she writes, ". . .do not stand aside wrapped in delightful prayers and feeling pure and agreeable to God. They go right down into the mess; and there, right in the mess, they are able to radiate God because they possess Him." 11

HOLINESS

At the beginning of this essay, I proposed that the dominant theme of all Underhill's writing is one of holiness. I have discussed this topic only briefly. I hold to my initial statement, however, because I think Underhill's writing as a whole leads us to an understanding of what it is to be holy. She begins with the human person and the human condition, with its great possibilities for holiness, and she illustrates how we can become new creatures.

Underhill assumes that we are loved and that the purpose of life is to endure, accept, and claim that love. In the claiming we are lured closer and closer to that which loves us, and in this process we become like that which we love. Filled up with God, we become like God, holy, sanctified, deified, a link between our brothers and sisters and the source of all love, that which we call God. The import of all of Underhill's life and work is to lead us to understand the deified life and how it is accessible to us.

In some ways Underhill's message is a very traditional one. Yet the fact that it is propounded by a twentieth century lay woman who understood her times and their great spiritual needs makes a difference. The message is clear and powerful to be fully human we must fully adhere to God.

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NOTES

- See Margaret Cropper, Evelyn Underhill (London: Longman's Green, 1958) and Christopher Armstrong Evelyn Underhill: An Introduction to Her Life and Writing(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975).
- The most extensive bibliography of Underhill's work is "Works By and About Evelyn Underhill," by Dana Greene, to be published in 1987 in The Bulletin of Bibliography. This includes almost three hundred and fifty entries by Underhill.
- 3 The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937), p. 36.
- 4 Mysticism: A Study In the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness, 12th ed. (London: Methuen, 1930; reprinted, New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 81.
- 5 Man and the Supernatural (London: Methuen, 1927, pp. 21-22.
- 6 Worship (London: Nisbet, 1936), p. 18.
- 7 Abba, compilation of extracts by Roger L. Roberts (Wilton, Ct.: Morehouse Barlow, 1982), p. 23.
- 8 Concerning The Inner Life (London: Methuen, 1926), pp. 3-4.
- 9 "The Spiritual Life," Mixed Pasture: Twelve Essays and Addresses (London: Methuen, 1933), p. 51.
- 10 The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks, pp. 90-91.
- 11 Concerning the Inner Life, pp. 60-61.