Listening to the Life of Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)

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ABSTRACT

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Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), best known for her book, *Mysticism*, was instrumental in popularizing this same topic in her time. However, it is a disservice to the prolific writer to reduce her to this summarisation. In the last twenty years of her life, Evelyn Underhill found a vocation as a spiritual director, becoming the first woman to lead retreats in the Church of England and speak to clergy about spiritual life. Through her personal letters, the testimony of her friends, and studying her notebooks, we become witness to a private spiritual journey which informed her unique ability to render the spiritual realm accessible to people from all walks of life. What one can learn from the life of Evelyn Underhill is that her efficacy as a writer and spiritual director was directly proportional to her own spiritual transformation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) is a woman who is difficult to define. Were a person the mere sum of her published works, an impressive resume of over forty books and anthologies as well as nearly four hundred published articles on a wide variety of topics would most certainly suggest that she was a noted authority on the subject of mysticism and things pertaining to spirituality.[1] However, when we read her notebooks, we can see something of the inner struggle to find a spiritual home, not only in a church tradition, but within her own life of prayer and communion with God.

Were one to note the development of faith throughout her life from a non-religious upbringing to dabbling in the occult society, Golden Dawn,[2] to a conversion that drew her to the Roman Catholic church (a desire which was thwarted by various circumstances) to finally becoming a member of the Anglican community some years later, one would be tempted to use words such as inclusive, ecumenical, or perhaps indecisive. Again, her personal correspondence reveals another side to the story: while she refused to sacrifice critical and independent thinking to church loyalty, the decision about where to land spiritually was not merely an intellectual one. She made the difficult choice to respect her non-religious fiancé's concerns, and this dynamically affected her spiritual course.

[1] For a brief, but excellent introduction to the life and works of Underhill, see Todd E. Johnson, "Anglican Writers at Century's End: An Evelyn Underhill Primer," *Anglican Theological Review* 80 no 3 (Summer 1998), 402-413.

[2] The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, popular in Great Britain in the late 19th and early 20th century, emphasised magic and ritual aspects of spirituality.

Many scholars also make much of her shifting views,[3] an example being the reversal from actively supporting the war effort in 1914 to being a champion for pacifism during the early years of World War II. She became more mature and better informed in her outlook - less naïve, one could say. And to some extent this would no doubt be correct, for as people gain life experience, they tend to become more thoughtful and less reactionary. However, upon careful study, we can see that the motivation behind both of Underhill's diametrically opposed positions was one and the same: the belief that mystics and Christians need to be involved in the issues of the day.

Underhill's extensive body of work began with a strong focus on the topic of mysticism, with nearly every book written during the ten years after *Mysticism* (which appeared in 1911) clearly displaying this theme in the title. However, the mystical titles disappeared and apparently so did this emphasis around the time that she began to accept invitations to deliver lectures and conduct retreats on more pastoral themes. This change also coincided with her alignment with the Anglican Church and placing herself under the spiritual direction of Baron Friedrich von Hügel.[4] Had Underhill outgrown her fascination with mysticism and its broad definition of Reality, or was this a natural progression in her spiritual development as she immersed herself in the stages of the mystic way she had outlined in so many of her writings?

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[3] One such writer is Todd E. Johnson who traces three stages in her theology: 1) emphasis on immanence and vitalism, 2) critical realism, and finally 3) pneumatology. See "Evelyn Underhill's Pneumatology: Origins and Implications," *Downside Review* 116 no 43 (Apr 1998), 109-136.

[4] Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925) was an influential Roman Catholic lay theologian who shared an interest in mysticism with Underhill. See Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion: as Studied in Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends,* 2 vols (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, c1908).

The private life of Mrs. Hubert Stuart Moore (Underhill's married name) reveals yet other, more diverse aspects of her life and personality: her creative ability as a book-binder, her knack for sailing, the trips abroad with her parents, a doting affection for her cats, and her barrister husband's apparent lack of interest in the church. Her personal notebooks reveal that beneath Underhill's respectable upper middle-class existence as a socially active, well-known writer were troubling bouts of self-criticism and depression, shortcomings which she battled to overcome alongside many of her mystic heroes. Her letters, on the other hand, showcased her sharp wit, a delightful sense of humour, and the authenticity that her acquaintances so often remarked on. Evelyn Underhill, noted authority on mysticism, was apparently human after all.

This flawed and sometimes fragile humanity, though not secret, certainly remained hidden in most of her published writings, and understandably so. Early 20th century English etiquette did not deem it appropriate to reveal one's innermost thoughts in the public realm. However, to spiritual advisors and close friends, her struggles with self-doubt, her frustration with an inconsistent prayer life, and occasional sharp criticisms of others were offered with honesty, demonstrating an unusual level of vulnerability on her part. Here, she was not writing for the general public; she was writing as one ordinary person to another. In fact, it is in her correspondence and some of her later writings (specifically, her retreat addresses designated for intimate sessions) that we find her tone decidedly warm and homely. Instead of seeing a confident advocate for mysticism, we get a glimpse of a modest student and teacher, stumbling along in her own spiritual journey.

This word, "homely," appeared often in Underhill's later writings, and it was indicative of a humility that embraced the ordinary, the everyday, the simple, the plain, and unsophisticated. Her homely anecdotes or illustrations often took on a childlike and unlearned tone, adding yet more fuel for critics who were prone to dismiss her as a lightweight in the area of spirituality or scholarship.[5] However, the audience she was speaking to reacted in quite a different way. To these listeners, what appeared to some as silly examples from everyday life, be it comparing one of the fruits of the spirit to the nature of a dog or asking folks to think about the "tut-tut-tut of the little donkey engine" in relation to their efforts in prayer, were what made her teaching accessible and memorable.[6] It is my belief that this was one of the endearing qualities that made Underhill a sought after retreat director and speaker.

And here is it that we come upon the unique features that Underhill brought to her exploration of spirituality, those characteristics which blossomed and flourished in her personal interactions, and which, to the careful eye, can also be seen, although less explicitly, in her prominent publications. These qualities included a strong commitment to face the struggles that accompany a life of faith; even in her sentimental moments, Underhill did not brush aside the necessity of sacrifice or the inevitability of hardship. Furthermore, her persistent desire to provide points of access for ordinary men and women to develop meaningful communion with the Divine (an emphasis which characterised her later years as a retreat director) was evident early on in her writing

[5] Two critics of Underhill's scholarship are feminist theologian Grace M. Jantzen (1948-2006) and Stephen T. Katz. See Katz's *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
[6] Evelyn Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*. The Inner Life Series, printed with *Light of Christ* and *Abba*, 2nd ed. (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1960), 22, 28.

career in the very down to earth style of *Practical Mysticism* (1914). Had she not written volumes on the topic, Underhill would still have outlined the essence of mysticism by her lifelong search for Reality,[7] her dedication to prayerful surrender, and her increasingly gentle spirit of love. She herself acknowledged this often overlooked but vital aspect of a writer's life - the heart behind the words - in one of her last letters, stating that "the little story of St. Thomas Aquinas putting away his ink horn and his pen, saying 'I have seen too much, I can write no more!' tells us more about the spiritual fact of religion, that is to say the communion of our souls with the Mystery that surrounds us, than does the whole of his great *Summa Theologica*."[8]

If one looks only at her well-known books and articles, there is a tendency to reduce Evelyn Underhill to her contribution in the area of mysticism. There is also the temptation when looking at her large body of publications to shake one's head at the changing perspective which comes across as inconsistency long before it hints at maturity. It is easy to become disenchanted with her lapses in scholarship (by today's standards) and to relegate her to the status of an interesting, but unreliable, relic of her time.[9] However, her personal papers and retreat addresses paint a warm, inviting, and multi-dimensional picture of Evelyn Underhill.

My first encounter with Evelyn Underhill was somewhat disappointing. Having been enthralled by great spiritual pioneers such as Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila,

[7] For more explanation of her use of this term, see Chapter 2.
[8] Underhill, from "Letters to the Prayer Group" included in *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 70.
[9] Christopher J. R. Armstrong mentions some of these criticisms in *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to her Life and Writings* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), xi.

John of the Cross, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Brother Lawrence, my expectations were for more of the same. While Underhill had certainly studied these men and women of faith, her words did not seem to carry the same lively and ineffable energy. Early on, I came to the conclusion that Underhill's research on mysticism was more a work in progress, an attempt to answer some of her own questions regarding the nature of union with the Divine, rather than a first-hand treatment of the subject. If this was indeed the case, then what exactly *was* her contribution to the fields of mysticism and spirituality? As I read a broad section of her writing, covering a span of over forty years, it became apparent that her later, more pastoral and personal writing surged with a confidence and directness that had been missing in the earlier years.

I decided that instead of focusing my study on her books which outlined the spiritual pilgrimages and wisdom of the mystics, I would turn my attention to the letters and notebooks which revealed her own spiritual journey. What did Evelyn Underhill as a person (not as a writer or noted authority) have to say about the inner life? And of equal importance is the further question, what did her life disclose about her spirituality? It is generally agreed that she ushered in a renewed appreciation for the ancient mystics, and that her writings made the topic of mysticism more acceptable in the religious mainstream, but I believe that these were by-products of a much deeper contribution. In order to uncover this contribution, we must ask: What did those who encountered her gain from the experience? What did her spiritual directors, her closest friends, and the ones she offered spiritual guidance to, learn from her? What did those who listened to her life, hear?

In order to understand Evelyn Underhill more fully, it is first necessary to look at biographical data, including the major influences and turning points in her life. The three most complete biographies concerning Underhill (by Margaret Cropper, Christopher J. R. Armstrong, and Dana Greene) are all excellent guides when navigating Underhill's life journey. While each author has their own unique perspective on Underhill's influence and contribution, they all succeed in highlighting the significance of various key figures and events in her life. As well, the body of her published work spans over forty years and provides a good overview of her development as a writer and thinker. One can also trace the emergence of several distinct, but overlapping vocations at different points in her life, and it is interesting to note how these different vocations informed each other and coincided with her spiritual quest.

The research on Underhill can be divided into three general categories. There is a rather small, but devoted, group that heralds Underhill as a great spiritual guide for her time and argues that she remains so today. Some writers say that she was instrumental in bringing mysticism in from the cold by making it a respectable topic of study and exploration not only in the church, but for the general public.[10] In addition, she has also been heralded as largely responsible for ushering in the current popularity of spirituality.[11] The biography written by Margaret Cropper, based in part on Underhill's close friend, Lucy Menzies' work, is one of the clearest examples of this

[10] One example is Ann Loades who calls Underhill an "advocate for mysticism." See *Evelyn Underhill,* Fount Christian Thinkers (London: Fount, 1997), 6.
[11] For an example of this, see Kevin Hogan's "The Experience of Reality: Evelyn Underhill and Religious Pluralism," *Anglican Theological Review* 74 no 3 (Summer 1992), 334-347.

friendly and somewhat uncritical treatment of Underhill's life and works.[12] Charles Williams, in his editing of Underhill's letters, also appeared to put her in a positive light by omitting certain pieces of correspondence which hinted at scholarship and consistency issues.[13]

On the other extreme, certain critics have largely dismissed Underhill as a product of her time, unreliable in her research and prone to romanticism.[14] Subsequent research in the area of mysticism has far surpassed any contribution she might have made, they would argue. Another factor in the criticism of Underhill is the fluid nature of her opinions. Because she was a prolific writer, her change of thought can easily be traced through the years, and in some cases, it is quite drastic. A certain level of naïveté in her early writings becomes quite evident in the light of later scholarship and for that matter, in view of her own development.[15]

Recent research has been kinder to Underhill. An attempt has been made to give her due credit for her contributions in the areas of mysticism, spirituality, and the role of women.[16] A few scholars point out the weaknesses inherent especially in some

[12] See Margaret Cropper, *The Life of Evelyn Underhill* (New York: Harper, 1958).
[13] Armstrong and Dana Greene both mention this criticism of Williams' editing. See Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill* and Greene's *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).
[14] Martin Thornton and Valerie Pitt are two of these critics. See Thorton's *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English Pastoral Tradition* (Cowley Publications, 1986) and Pitt's article "Clouds of Unknowing," *Prism* 3 no 3 (1959), 7-12.
[15] Lord Ramsey of Canterbury makes a similar observation in the introduction to Armstrong's biography.
[16] See Debra Joanne Jensen's dissertation with a feminist take on mysticism: "Mysticism and Social Ethics: Feminist Reflections on Their Relationship in the Works of Evelyn Underhill, Simone Weil and Meister Eckhart" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1995).

of her earlier works, but most are gracious in their treatment of her body of work.[17] A great deal of the research places a significant emphasis on tracing her development of thought, and sees this progression as integral to understanding her contribution to spirituality. The focus remains, for the most part, on her writings regarding mysticism and on her changing emphases.

It is unfortunate that very little research has been done on her later years; it is only recently that some of her earliest retreats have been discovered and published,[18] and a collection of writings from Underhill's personal notebooks made public.[19] Unfortunate and perhaps irresponsible as well, considering that it was this phase of her life, focused on the direction of souls, that Underhill identified as her true vocation. In studying Underhill, it would seem prudent to hear not only what the scholars and critics have to say, but to listen to what she herself says.

The documents that let Evelyn Underhill speak most clearly for herself are her notebooks and personal letters which run the gamut from spiritual advice to whimsical notes about her cats. Here she is at her most candid, to a large extent unedited, and at times uncomfortably personal. Here, also, we find valuable insights into her spiritual struggles, her close friendships, and glimpses as to what formed her particular version of spirituality. In addition, the testimonies and remarks of friends, colleagues, and contemporaries provide the necessary complementary material that puts these more

[17] Dana Greene, Grace Adolphsen Brame and Nadia Delicata have some of the best understandings of Underhill that I have come across in their perception of the person behind the writings.
[18] *The Ways of the Spirit*, edited by Grace Adolphsen Brame (New York: Crossroad, 1990) contains four of Underhill's previously undiscovered retreats.
[19] *Fragments from an Inner Life*, edited by Dana Greene (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1993).

subjective writings in perspective. Not to be neglected are a few key themes that continue to surface in Underhill's published works, to some extent reflective of her ongoing questions and concerns in life.

When exploring Underhill as a spiritual director, of special interest is the correspondence between Underhill and her most influential spiritual guide, Baron Friedrich von Hügel, as well as the numerous letters she wrote to the many who sought her advice on spiritual matters. These documents will provide the most intimate and accurate glimpse into the spiritual pilgrimage of Evelyn Underhill.

While it is important to trace her journey, my question is not how she evolved from a student of mysticism to a spiritual director, but what made her an effective teacher? This question breaks down into two basic parts: what did she teach about spirituality, and how did she teach it? My thesis is that her most valuable contributions to spirituality are not to be found in her published works on mysticism. Rather, these writings serve as a backdrop to her true vocation: developing and nurturing the spiritual formation of others by offering insights from her own challenging spiritual journey in a distinctly personal, warm, and humble way.

Chapter 2: Introducing Evelyn Underhill

Trying to adequately portray a person's lifetime through a timeline of events or to measure their significance through a body of work is at best an exercise in reductionism. Even the term "vocation" cannot hold the sum of what a soul knows, feels, believes, and adds to this world. Nevertheless, when attempting to paint a portrait of Evelyn Underhill as a three-dimensional figure in the area of spirituality, one must necessarily begin with a few two-dimensional brush strokes.

2.1. Her life

Evelyn Underhill's life spanned 65 years and was impacted by two world wars. She witnessed the end of the 19th century and the Victorian era, and in her mid-twenties, welcomed the dawn of the 20th century. Like many others, she soon began to lean away from the Romanticism of her formative years and embrace aspects of Modernism. The London School of Medicine for Women had been established in 1874, the year before Underhill was born, and proved to be a forerunner in providing higher education previously denied to women. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) were making psychological history with their theories regarding human consciousness. The implications of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859) were being considered by different schools of thought in ever-increasing measure. The Roman Catholic Church reasserted its commitment to a magisterial tradition by defining papal infallibility in Vatican I (1869-70), while liberal theology birthed out of the Enlightenment embraced freedom of choice while erasing the closed

lines of dogmatic thought. The Tractarian or Oxford movement, which sought to strengthen the Catholic heritage within the Church of England, officially ran its course between 1833 and 1845 when it ended due to John Henry Newman's conversion from Anglicanism to the Roman Catholic Church. However, the ripples of this movement against liberalism in the Church of England continued to be felt for many years. Into this setting we now place Evelyn Underhill's life.

2.1.1 Timeline of events

Evelyn Underhill was born on December 6, 1875 in Wolverhampton, England, the only child of barrister Arthur Underhill and his wife, Alice Lucy Ironmonger.[1] Sir Arthur, a distinguished lawyer and author of several law books on torts and private trusts, encouraged his daughter to share his interests in reading and yachting. Evelyn's education at their well-to-do London home was supplemented by three years at a private school during her early teens, and from there she went on to the recently opened King's College for Women, focusing on history and botany. Though baptized and confirmed in the Church of England, her childhood was for the most part a non-religious one. Despite her privileged upbringing, it was a lonely time in her life, according to Charles Williams,[2] who indicates that Underhill's rather small circle of friends increasingly focused on the neighbouring Stuart Moore boys, especially after

[1] The details of Underhill's life are taken from Carol Poston's introduction in *The Making of a Mystic: New and Selected Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Charles Williams' introduction in *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1945); Greene*, Artist of the Infinite Life*; Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*; Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*; and Dana Greene, "*About Evelyn Underhill's Life*," The Evelyn Underhill Association, accessed March 26, 2011, http://www.evelynunderhill.org/her_work/about_her_life.shtml.
[2] Williams, *Letters*, 7.

their mother passed away. It was around this time that she began to take writing seriously; her first published piece was a short story in *Hearth and Home* when she was sixteen. Her first book, a collection of humorous verse concerned with the subject of law, was published in 1902.[3]

Travel was to play an important part in her life as well. Beginning in 1898, Evelyn and her mother toured different parts of Europe every spring for the next sixteen years. Drawing on some of her travel experiences, she wrote three novels in the next few years, all of which received a fairly good reception.[4] The protagonists in these works struggle with living in two worlds, and each novel offers a slightly different solution to this duality. In the first novel, the main character turns to beauty as an escape; the second work of fiction focuses on the power of ordinary love, and the third culminates in an act of sacrifice. While Underhill's fascination with magic, symbol, and the metaphysical is obvious in her fiction, it was also reflected in her personal life through her brief association with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a society interested in spiritual ritualism.[5]

In July of 1906, Evelyn became engaged to Hubert Stuart Moore, one of her childhood friends who was now a London barrister like her father. When the couple married in 1907, they took up residence at 50 Campden Hill Square, a short walk from her parents' home. This was also the year she began research on the topic of mysticism.

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[3] Evelyn Underhill, *A Bar-Lamb's Ballad-Book* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, & Co., 1902).
[4] The three novels are *The Gray World* (1904), *The Lost Word* (1907), and *The Column of Dust* (1908).
[5] Greene estimates that Underhill's involvement with Golden Dawn was between 1904 and 1905. See Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 21.

The period after the publication of her first major book, *Mysticism,* in 1911 saw Underhill establish herself as an authority in this area as she produced an astonishing number of works on the topic, the last being *The Mystics of the Church* which came out in 1925.

During the First World War she worked at the Admiralty in naval intelligence, preparing and translating guide books, and had a personal crisis of sorts during this tumultuous time. As a result, a shift in her writing as well as her personal spirituality took place. In 1921-1922, she finally and formally aligned herself with a church body (the Church of England), she sought out a spiritual director in Baron von Hügel, she became the first woman to lecture on religion at Oxford University, and she attended her first spiritual retreat at Pleshey. Two years later, Underhill conducted her own retreat at this remote location 100 kilometers northeast of London, the first of many in what was to become her new vocation as a retreat director. Most of her publications in the coming years would be based on the retreat addresses she gave during 1924-1936. Underhill wrote one final major work, *Worship*, which came out in 1936.

With the advent of hostilities that led to World War II in 1939, Underhill and her husband decided to close up their home in London and stay with friends, Marjorie and Roland Vernon, in their country house in Sussex for the summer. At this point in her life, the asthma and bronchitis that Evelyn had suffered from for most of her life frequently incapacitated her. In spring of 1940 she was finally well enough to be moved from Sussex to the Vernons' Hampstead home in London, confined to one room where she

could have ready access to oxygen. She continued to write letters, direct a scattered women's prayer group, and speak out as an advocate of pacifism when her illness would allow. Evelyn Underhill, Mrs. Hubert Stuart Moore, died on June 15, 1941.

2.1.2 Turning points

At the risk of greatly oversimplifying a complex and full life marked by many stages of development, I would like to draw attention to two major turning points in Underhill's life. The first coincided with the events of 1907.

Early in that year, at the invitation of her close friend, Ethel Ross Barker, Evelyn participated in a retreat at a Franciscan convent. Fearing that self-suggestion would lead to an insincere conversion, she left after a few days, only to have a powerful conversion experience at home the next day. Underhill stated that this "overpowering vision which had really no specifically Christian elements … convinced [her] that the Catholic religion was true."[6] She struggled with the idea of converting to Roman Catholicism and consulted a priest, Robert Hugh Benson, with her dilemma. She wrote:

> I have got half-way from agnosticism to Catholicism, and seem unable to get any further … I feel that you know all that there is to be known about this borderland, and the helpless sensations of those who are caught in it. I want to get out, but without sacrificing intellectual honesty, and each struggle only sends me back again with renewed sensations of unreality.[7]

After several months of deliberation, she seemed to make peace with the intellectual problem and decided to embrace Roman Catholicism. However, when she finally informed her fiancé of this desire, Hubert was devastated at the rift he believed it would

[6] From Lucy Menzies' unpublished and unfinished biography, quoted in Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 25.
[7] From a letter Underhill wrote to Father Hugh Benson, quoted in Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 29.

put between them; he had never shared her fondness for religion.[8] Torn between love and faith, she decided to postpone her ecclesial decision. On July 3, 1907, Evelyn Underhill married Hubert Stuart Moore. Her friend, Ethel Ross Barker, joined the Roman Catholic Church shortly after the event. For Evelyn, however, this was not to be the case. On the same day as Underhill's marriage, Pope Pius X issued *Lamentabili Sane*, an encyclical condemning critical scholarship. This was followed on September 8, 1907 by *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, a further delineation of the Roman Catholic Church's attempt to quash certain Modernist influences. Not only did the document condemn such developments as historical and textual criticism, it included some very stern warnings for authors:

> It is also the duty of the bishops to prevent writings infected with Modernism or favourable to it from being read when they have been published, and to hinder their publication when they have not. No book or paper or periodical of this kind must ever be permitted to seminarists or university students. The injury to them would be equal to that caused by immoral reading - nay, it would be greater for such writings poison Christian life at its very fount. The same decision is to be taken concerning the writings of some Catholics, who, though not badly disposed themselves but ill-instructed in theological studies and imbued with modern philosophy, strive to make this harmonize with the faith, and, as they say, to turn it to the account of the faith. The name and reputation of these authors cause them to be read without suspicion, and they are, therefore, all the more dangerous in preparing the way for Modernism.[9]

Given her previous published metaphysical works and her developing research in the area of mysticism, it no doubt became abundantly clear to Underhill that if she was to pursue a writing career, it could not be done within the confines of the Roman Catholic

[8] Hubert Stuart Moore was particularly concerned with the role of the confessor which he saw as being intrusive on their marriage. See Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 27.

[9] Pope Puis X, "*Pascendi Dominicus Gregis*," September 8, 1907, IV.50, accessed March 25, 2011, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis_en.html.

Church. At this point, Underhill abandoned the idea of becoming a Roman Catholic and never looked back.[10]

The second turning point began approximately ten years later. During the First World War, Underhill indirectly revealed an inner unrest and anxiety in a letter to Margaret Robinson, a woman whom she had been giving spiritual direction to for ten years: "The present abnormal conditions are as bad for the spiritual life as for every other kind of life. We are all finding it frightfully difficult and most of us are failing badly."[11] More direct, though nevertheless cryptic, was her admission to von Hügel several years later when she said, "During the war, I went to pieces."[12] It was this personal crisis which, in fact, drove her to make several key decisions in her life that greatly influenced her spiritual development. First, she came to the realization that she needed to become affiliated with a church body and made the decision to return to her roots, the Church of England. Second, she chose to put herself under the spiritual direction of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, a Roman Catholic theologian and author. She had made his acquaintance shortly after the publication of *Mysticism* when he had offered some suggestions for revising her book.[13] The combination of these two events changed Evelyn Underhill's spirituality dramatically, and ultimately, led her into a vocation as a recognized spiritual director and teacher.

[10] I address this issue in more depth in Chapter 4.
[11] Letter to Margaret Robinson, November 9, 1917, in Williams, *Letters*, 147.
[12] Letter to Baron von Hügel, December 21, 1921, in Greene, *Fragments*, 108.
[13] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 131.

2.2 Her body of work

It is a challenging task to attempt to distill the work of a dedicated and productive writer such as Evelyn Underhill. Works that bear her name (and a few that were published under the pseudonym John Cordelier[14]) number well over four hundred and cover the genres of poetry, fiction, articles, book reviews, translations, editorial work, introductions to books, addresses, broadcast talks, and, of course, her better-known studies of mysticism and finally, worship. There is no doubt that Underhill was a writer, but this occupation was not an end in itself. She wrote not only because she had something to say, but her writing was at times a response to some personal crisis, as with *Mysticism*.[15] Something spurred her on to write, and as she wrote, a development took place in her spirituality. As to which happened first, the change or the composition, or whether they happened simultaneously, it is perhaps presumptive to draw any conclusions. Therefore, we will look at the progression of her work and thought from three different angles and by doing so, get a better sense of how to situate her writing career within her spiritual life.

2.2.1 From dualism to incarnation

Underhill's first novel, *The Gray World*, was a study in dualism. From the first pages, the main character, Willie, is grappling with two worlds: the unreal, physical

[14] Underhill chose to use a pseudonym for two short devotional books she produced*: The Path of Eternal Wisdom* (London: J. M. Watkins, 1911) and *The Spiral Way* (London: J. M. Watkins, 1912). She later came to be critical of these writings, her first attempts in the devotional genre. See Williams, *Letters*, 29.
[15] Greene points to a personal crisis of freedom as spurring Underhill on to write about mysticism. See her introduction to *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 5-7.

world and the real, ethereal spirit world. This theme of dualism, which figured quite prominently in her three works of fiction written between 1904 and 1909, can be found scattered throughout most of the writings during the first half of her career. The influences in Underhill's life at this point, which Armstrong identifies as being Neo-Platonism, mysticism, Catholicism, and the experience of love, provided for quite a ménage of subjects coming from her pen.[16] Underhill stated plainly in *Mysticism* that her study concerned "in its pure form … the science of union with the Absolute."[17] Nevertheless, the chapters were rife with references to the irreconcilable differences between the sensory world and the spirit world. She referred to the former as "the largely fictitious 'external world'"[18] and later expounded on the tension between the two realms in a chapter on purification of the self:

> That which we call the "natural" self as it exists in the "natural" world – the "old Adam" of St. Paul – is wholly incapable of supersensual adventure. All its activities are grouped about a centre of consciousness whose correspondences are with the material world. In the moment of its awakening, it is abruptly made aware of this disability. It knows itself finite. It now aspires to the infinite. It is encased in the hard crust of individuality: it aspires to union with a larger self. It is fettered: it longs for freedom. Its every sense is attuned to illusion: it craves for harmony with the Absolute Truth.[19]

This dualism was often expressed, as seen above, as a longing for freedom from the inadequacy of the material and the sensual. Though Underhill made minor changes in the 1930 edition of *Mysticism* in light of more recent critical texts and downplayed the former heavy emphasis on the exclusive nature of the mystic temperament, we still find

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[16] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 86. Though her main theme remained the subject of mysticism from 1911-1920, Underhill also tried her hand at devotional writing under the pseudonym John Cordelier, wrote introductions for poetry anthologies, produced a book of verses, penned some articles relating to the war, and reviewed books on Plotinus, to name but a few of her other interests during this time.
[17] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, 12th ed., (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 73.
[18] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 55.
[19] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 199. See also page 33.

a confirmation of limited dualism in the updated preface.[20] Nevertheless, this emphasis of dualism receded into the background after she began to cultivate an awareness of the incarnational Christ.[21]

In 1921, von Hügel confronted Underhill about this de-emphasis of God in human form, a concept which would have been obviously distasteful to a self-confessed Neo-Platonist. In December of that same year, she admitted that devotion to Christ was difficult and she could not do it because to her, it amounted to a "fusion of two incompatible conceptions."[22] However, six months later, she reluctantly recognized her lack of Christo-centricity and as prescribed, was taking steps to remedy the oversight. Underhill wrote von Hügel about her emerging epiphany: "I take back, with shame, every word I said against this [Christocentric Devotion]. This does not however, mean a devotional *volte-face*. I am still mainly theocentric; but the two attitudes are no longer in opposition in my mind - they are two aspects of one thing."[23] A reversal from years of Platonic, dualistic thought was not without its difficulties over the ensuing years, but the incorporation of incarnational thought was consistent and fruitful. Her devotional life changed significantly as did her writing. In *The House of the Soul* (1929) where Underhill used the analogy of a multi-level house to illustrate the spiritual life, her language was markedly different.

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[20] Underhill, *Mysticism*, xv. See also her note at the end of chapter 2, page 43.
[21] For an interesting comparison to her language in *Mysticism*, see Underhill's desire to integrate both sides of what she sees as the"two-fold action of the psyche" in a lecture from 1930: Evelyn Underhill, "The Philosophy of Contemplation," a lecture delivered at the Ladies' College in Cheltenham on March 25, 1930, in Evelyn Underhill, *Mixed Pasture* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), 1-18. For a good article that demonstrates Underhill's later integration of the many dualisms in man's life, see Evelyn Underhill, "Our Two-Fold Relation to Reality," in Greene, *Modern Guide*, 163-176.
[22] Letter to Friedrich von Hügel, December 21, 1921, in Greene, *Fragments*, 110.
[23] Letter to Friedrich von Hügel, Midsummer, 1922, in Greene, *Fragments*, 118.

> The strength of the house consisted in that intimate welding together of the divine and the human, which she found in its perfection in the humanity of Christ. There, in the common stuff of human life which he blessed by His presence, the saints have ever seen the homely foundations of holiness. Since we are two-story creatures, called to a natural and a supernatural status, both sense and spirit must be righty maintained, kept in order, consecrated to the purposes of the city, if our full obligations are to be fulfilled. The house is built for God; to reflect, on each level, something of His unlimited Perfection.[24]

Clearly, Underhill's movement from dualism toward a more incarnational theology was closely linked to her new-found emphasis on the person of Christ.[25]

2.2.2 From the unnamed Reality to Christ

Underhill's major treatise on the subject of mysticism is filled with references to Reality, though her definition of this proper noun remained somewhat ineffable. She dismissed Naturalism, which recognizes the real world as being what we see, borrowed some ideas from the Idealist, with Platonic phrases such as "the complete undistorted Object" and "the mighty and dynamic Thought of one Absolute Thinker," and pointed out the absurdity of the end of logic, which she called Philosophic Scepticism.[26] What Underhill was left with was a self-evident Reality, beyond reason and intellect, but inhabiting the realm of personality. She acknowledged that theologians would call God this One Reality, but hesitated to identify herself with this statement. Instead, she sidestepped the word altogether and offered these evocative thoughts:

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[24] Evelyn Underhill, *The House of the Soul* (Minneapolis: The Seabury Press, c1929, 1984), 6.
[25] Armstrong, who calls her journey "progressive incarnation," sees evidence of the theme of incarnation early on in Underhill's work, citing her reflection on the thirteenth station of the cross (Jesus dead in the arms of his mother) in *The Path of Eternal Wisdom* (1911 under the pseudonym John Cordelier) and Underhill's decision to bridge the gulf between spirit and sense through exploring mysticism while living a day-to-day life as Mrs. Hubert Stuart Moore. See Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, xv, 89-91.
[26] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 8-15.

> In mysticism that love of truth which we saw as the beginning of all philosophy leaves the merely intellectual sphere, and takes on the assured aspect of a personal passion. Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. Hence whilst the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram – impersonal and unattainable – the Absolute of the mystics is lovable, attainable, alive.[27]

In *Practical Mysticism* (1914) she again refused to answer the question of who or what Reality is, implying that only a mystic could answer this and in terms that only another mystic would understand.[28] However, by 1923, her focus was becoming decidedly Christocentric, as an entry in her notebook from May 8 indicates: "Keep me, O Christ thus centered on Thee."[29] This growing demarcation of the previously unnamed Reality intensified over time and we increasingly find Underhill freely writing about God, Christ and the Spirit, interchanging these names of God with those Platonic concepts found in *Mysticism*. In a lecture in 1930, she equated Reality with the Being of Beings, calling God the full Reality, and indicated that all other religions offer only a partial revelation of this One.[30] By 1934, we see a well-developed integration of philosophy and theology in a retreat address given based on the Lord's Prayer. Here, she expounded on the name of God by using terms such as Reality, Holiness, Beauty, and the Other.[31]

What began as a rather ambiguous metaphysical concept for Underhill eventually took on a name. While she had early on claimed that Reality had a personality, she was reluctant to name this person and as a result, her early writings lacked the intimacy that one often finds in the mystics. However, the tone of her

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[27] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 24.
[28] Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 10-11.
[29] Greene, *Fragments*, 42.
[30] Underhill, "The Philosophy of Contemplation," in *Mixed Pasture,* 21.
[31] Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* and *Abba* (New York: Random House, c1914, 2003), 159.

retreat addresses, all of which were penned after she began to embrace Christ as a central figure in her devotion, show the remarkable change that had taken place in her spirituality.[32]

2.2.3 From *Mysticism* to *Worship*

Though it would be impossible to address all of Underhill's writings in this quick summary of her body of work, a brief look at a few important publications will be offered here. For the most part, Underhill's writings on spirituality can be book-ended by her two major works, *Mysticism* (1911) and *Worship* (1936). In *Mysticism* we see a young writer producing an impressive volume on the subject, citing roughly a thousand sources to make her case for the relevance and importance of the mystics. Nothing like it had ever been produced, and it served as an effective apologetic on the subject.[33] In *The Mystic Way* (1913) she sought to expand on her ideas by appropriating Jesus and other prominent figures from the New Testament and early church history to help illuminate the mystical experience and show how it was the crowning achievement of humanity.[34] She later grew to dislike this book, according to Williams, and saw it as an inaccurate guide to mysticism.[35] This particular venture was to be met with rather harsh reactions from several quarters, two examples being Arthur Machen, who subsequently questioned her Christianity, and J. A. Herbert, who implied that Underhill was bordering

[32] Rebecca M. Blackshear comes to a conclusion similar to mine regarding the change in tone in Underhill's writing according to her life experience in "Evelyn Underhill: A Developmental View of Her Life and Writing," (Independent Study Thesis, The College of Wooster, 1978).
[33] For more on the impact and development of Underhill's *Mysticism*, see Greene's introduction in *Fragments*, 18-19.
[34] See Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 127, 146-147.
[35] Underhill mentions this change of attitude in a letter to Darcie Otter, July 22, 1928, in Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 244. See also Charles William's introduction in *Letters*, 29.

on blasphemy.[36] However, Underhill's *Practical Mysticism* (1914), which was subtitled "A Little Book for Normal People," engendered none of the criticism of *The Mystic Way*, and proved to be a popular condensation and simplification of the ideas originally presented in *Mysticism*. Greene notes that this small volume gives us a glimpse of the Underhill that is later to emerge as a writer "for ordinary people."[37]

Mysticism continued to be her subject of choice in the coming years, with numerous articles and reviews published as well as an anthology of essays on the topic entitled *The Essentials of Mysticism* (1920). It is in the early 1920s that we notice a shift away from the topic that occupied so much of her early writing career and observe a new focus on what Carol Poston calls "a simple spiritual path" with definite emphasis on the Christian faith.[38] In a series of lectures that Underhill gave at Manchester College in Oxford University in 1921, she spoke on the subject of the spiritual life using more accessible language instead of the metaphysical, often technical vocabulary seen earlier. In the introduction to the printed version of these lectures, she stated that "no attention has been given to those abnormal experiences and states of consciousness, which, too often regarded as specially 'mystical,' are now recognized by all competent students as representing the unfortunate accidents rather than the abiding substance of spirituality."[39] This emphasis on demystifying spirituality by embracing the ordinary,

[36] See her letters to Miss Nancy Paul and J.A. Herbert in Williams, *Letters*, 140-141.
[37] Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 65-66.
[38] Carol Poston indicates that this "passing over quietly" from mysticism to simple spirituality points to the centrality of the contemplative way in Underhill's life, evident throughout her somewhat fluctuating theological views. See her introduction in *The Making of a Mystic*, xv.
[39] Evelyn Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of To-day* (London: Methuen & Co., 1922), viii.

sustainable life of the Spirit was a marked shift from the earlier *Mysticism* where the mystic was treated as a special type of temperament, a genius as it were.[40]

Though the lives of the mystics continued to be scattered throughout her writings, from this time on they were in the background. After *The Mystics of the Church* came out in 1925, Underhill's publications began to be based on the various lectures and retreats she was invited to give. For the most part devotional, practical, pastoral, homely, and intimate in nature, these publications should not be seen as separate from her earlier mystical work. Instead, for Underhill, they were the natural and progressive outcome of embracing and integrating her own mystic way: spiritual direction. While the five stages she outlined in *Mysticism* (awakening, purgation, illumination, surrender, union) were now reworked and simplified as three key ingredients (adoration, adherence, cooperation) in *The Spiritual Life* (1937), the purpose of these various practices and disciplines remained communion with the ultimate Reality – God.[41]

With the publication of *Worship* (1936), Underhill once again exhibited her remarkable ability to assemble a daunting amount of information in the scholarly treatment of a subject. It was remarkably similar to *Mysticism* in style and format, and while it likewise explored the nature of the relationship between humanity and the divine, this volume concentrated on the context of community instead of the

[40] See Underhill, *Mysticism*, 57, 65, 74-75 for some examples.
[41] Underhill took these three points from Cardinal de Bérulle. See Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (London: Mowbray, c1937, 1955), 58-59.

uniqueness of the individual.[42] It was a fitting conclusion to *Mysticism* in many ways. The references to "Reality" in the first book had become the more definitive "Reality of God" in *Worship*. What began as man's quest for Truth had evolved into the response of the creature to the Creator. The first book reflected a young Underhill energetically tackling a subject in search of answers to inform her own spiritual quest. In the latter, we see a mature Underhill, sure of her vocation, calling others to embrace the life of the Spirit: "For worship is not merely an expression of the technically religious life. It *is* the religious life, and so, conterminous with life itself: Creation's response to its Origin and Lord."[43]

2.3 Her vocation(s)

Evelyn Underhill is known primarily for her book, *Mysticism*, and in any reference to her in anthologies concerning the subject of spirituality, this is inevitably the work that is quoted. It is unfortunate in some sense that this is the case because her writings on mysticism, especially this initial foray into the topic, which, although a formidable treatise on the subject for her time, represent but a small part of her contribution to the field of spirituality and take into consideration only one aspect of her multi-faceted vocation.

[42] Dana Greene points out the similarities between the approaches of the two books in Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 121.
[43] Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, c1936, 1985), 343.

2.3.1 Student and seeker

A great deal of focus has been placed on Underhill's development of thought over her forty year writing career. What it reveals, most of all, is that at the core of her writing was a student whose quest for knowledge, truth, the Absolute, and Reality made her unafraid to explore a multitude of traditions and sources. She quoted mystics of many origins (Christian, Sufi, Indian), psychologist William James, philosophers Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Hume, Kant, and Hegel (to name a few), biologist Driesch, theologians Aquinas, von Hügel, and Karl Barth, poets William Blake and Robert Browning, as well as contemporary writers and thinkers. The fact that she read widely is evident by the extensive bibliography in *Mysticism* and the numerous sources cited in other books such as *The Mystics of the Church* and *Worship.* Underhill showed herself to be a dedicated scholar, and Armstrong confirms that she exhibited a "willingness to embark on spiritual and mental adventures."[44]

However, for Underhill, being a student did not necessarily mean training at a university. Though she did spend some time at King's College for Women in London, this was not where her education in spirituality took place. She taught herself everything she knew about religious history, philosophy, and mysticism. While this self-education certainly explains how some gaps and inconsistencies might have crept into her writing, it also makes one pause at the sheer breadth of what she accomplished in a field of study where she was a pioneer. An example of the eclectic sources with which she was familiar is found in a letter to Margaret Robinson, whom she was advising

[44] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 18.

spiritually. On May 12, 1907, Underhill supplied Robinson with a short reading list for the woman's enrichment. It began with Augustine's *Confessions* and followed with Ruysbroeck translated into French, *Theologia Germanica*, *The Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich , the Roman Missal, *The Soul of a Christian* by F. Granger (a contemporary treatment of the Christian life using psychology), works by modernist theologian George Tyrrell and his colleague M.D. Petre, and some poetry including *The Hound of Heaven* and *Unknown Eros*.[45] In subsequent letters she added Neale's *Essays in Liturgical History*, bits by Plotinus, and *Papers of a Pariah* by converted priest, Robert Hugh Benson.[46] For a woman responsible for her own education, Underhill certainly appeared to have developed a thoroughness that any university education would have demanded of her.

The later years saw a slight change in Underhill's ongoing education and continued study. Having sensed a certain spiritual dryness and imbalance in her life which led her to engage von Hügel as a spiritual director, the search for knowledge evolved into a much deeper, spiritual search, though obviously this element had been present in some capacity for many years. The references in her works slowly became more focused on the Bible, well-known mystics, theologians, and church history. Most notably absent were the frequent references to philosophy, psychology, and other religious traditions.[47] Underhill, the spiritual seeker, joined herself to the Underhill, the scholarly student, and her writing in the later years reflected a more devotional,

[45] Letter to M.R., May 12, 1907, in Williams, *Letters*, 64-65.
[46] Letters to Margaret Robinson dating May 30 to August 2, 1907. See Williams, *Letters*, 66-67.
[47] A brief glance at the sources for *Mysticism* (1911), *The Mystics of the Church* (1925) and *Worship* (1936) confirms this trend.

personal emphasis which drew on her wealth of knowledge. In 1932, she said, "Psychology of religion cannot teach us prayer, and ethics cannot teach us love. Only Christ can do that and He teaches by the direct method, in and among the circumstances of life."[48] By these statements, Underhill declared herself no longer a student of mysticism, but a student and seeker of Christ.

2.3.2 Writer and speaker

On the eve of her seventeenth birthday, Evelyn Underhill wrote: "My favourite occupations are literature and art, though I do not think I have much taste for the latter. When I grow up I should like to be an author because you can influence people more widely by books than by pictures."[49] Underhill did indeed become a writer, and her body of work stands as a testimony to her diligent dedication to this vocation. She dabbled in poetry and fiction, but she found her stride as an advocate for mysticism. Through her extensive research for her first book on the topic, she reintroduced the public to forgotten figures from church history. Her objective approach and contemporary style succeeded in noticeably improving the perception of this mysterious and misunderstood topic. Greene suggests that "Underhill took up work on mysticism because she believed the mystics had something to teach her contemporaries about a certain kind of human experience."[50] The mystics were not presented as spiritual

[48] From a retreat Underhill gave in 1932 called *The Light of Christ*. See Evelyn Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit; Light of Christ; Abba*, 2nd ed. (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1960), 53.
[49] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 6.
[50] Dana Greene, "Lives Matter: Evelyn Underhill," *Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter* 14 (November 2004), 5.

misfits, but as geniuses whom one could emulate in their quest for union with the Absolute.

Underhill's writing was as much an education for herself as a sharing of her insights and findings with an audience. She saw the mystic as "a pioneer of humanity, a sharply intuitive and painfully practical person: an artist, a discoverer, a religious or social reformer, a national hero, a 'great active' amongst the saints."[51] This attitude about the inspirational nature as well as the accessibility of mysticism played an important part in helping to popularize mysticism.

As well as producing her own works, Underhill also wrote numerous book reviews which resulted in her taking on the role of religious editor at *The Spectator* in 1929 for several years.[52] Greene estimates that Underhill reviewed over 400 books during a nine-year period (1926-1934), a remarkable output for someone who was also a retreat director, writer, and dedicated wife and daughter.[53] As Underhill herself testified, writing was one of her favourite things, and it was no doubt the passion for the work which sustained her forty-year career.

In 1921, Underhill received an invitation to deliver a series of eight lectures at Manchester College at Oxford University. She became the first woman to lecture on religion in this renowned school, and these talks were published in 1922 under the title, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*. Numerous invitations to speak were

[51] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 414.
[52] *The Spectator* is a weekly British magazine known for its conservative stance.
[53] See Chapter 5, endnote 88 in Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 167.

accepted in the coming years, among them being addresses to a Ladies College in Cheltenham, a School of Social Services, the COPEC Conference, an Anglo-Catholic Summer School also at Oxford, the Central Council for Women's Church Work, University College, King's College, a Conference of Clergy from the Liverpool dioceses, and a meeting of Harrow masters. As well, a series of four radio broadcasts which she gave on the BBC were published in 1937 as *The Spiritual Life*. Cropper observes certain qualities that characterized an Underhill talk: "Her speaking was always excellently prepared. It was refreshing both in its demand and in its form. It was often movingly lovely and often irresistibly witty and amusing. It was always salted with the wisdom that she had collected from her wide reading of the Saints and Mystics. It had a breadth that came from her study of philosophy."[54]

While these were mostly formal lectures or informative talks on aspects of spirituality, there were other speaking engagements which were much less learned but gave her a chance to express herself in her uniquely homely and informal fashion. In a letter from 1928, Underhill wrote, "I had to address a big meeting of [Sunday School] teachers the other day! Such nice young things. I talked mostly about sheep-dogs!"[55] A rather unusual opportunity came to Underhill many years later when she and Hubert were staying in the country with the Vernons. She associated herself with the parish church there and, due to the illness of the vicar, was invited to conduct a weekly intercession service as well as teach religious lessons to a group of over thirty

[54] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 99.
[55] Letter to Z.A., August 4, 1929, in Williams, *Letters,* 182.

adolescents aged 11-14 years. She admitted regarding the latter: "This *terrifies* me as I have never taught children."[56] A later letter indicated that she was quite enjoying the "experiment," as she called it, and she referred to the children as "nice little creatures."[57]

A major part of the speaking that Underhill undertook in the second half of her life was the retreats that she conducted from 1924 to 1936. She would prepare one retreat per year and usually present it several times, up to seven or eight times in the peak years. Fay Campbell describes what it was like to be at retreat with Evelyn Underhill: "She had a lovely speaking voice and conducted her retreats with a sense of proportion and with perfection. Nothing was left to chance; everything was combined to focus the retreatant's whole attention to God."[58] This aspect of directing and speaking at retreats would become her prime vocation in the later years, a vocation that can perhaps be seen as the culmination of all her years as a student, seeker, writer, and speaker.

2.3.3 Spiritual director

The retreat work and the direction of souls were what Underhill came to refer to as her "particular calling."[59] Surprisingly, helping people sort out problems in their inner lives began as early as 1904. While Underhill was still rather unsettled in her own spiritual life, Margaret Robinson wrote her a letter after reading *The Gray World*. A few

[56] Letter to D.E., October 25, 1939, in Williams, *Letters,* 279.
[57] Poston, T*he Making of a Mystic*, 331.
[58] Fay Campbell, "Evelyn Underhill: Conversion at Pleshey," *The Living Church* (March 1, 1987), 12.
[59] Letter to Conrad Noel, March 1, 1933, in Williams, *Letters*, 209.

years later, after receiving a second letter from Robinson, Evelyn wrote to Hubert Stuart Moore about the situation: "A lady from Liverpool … has just written me another, rather pathetic, letter, asking me to help her out of her spiritual tangles. I think this sort of thing is a most horrible responsibility, and rather ridiculous when the person applied to is still in just as much of a tangle as anyone else."[60] Despite this admission, she nevertheless displayed a talent for offering gentle yet firm guidance and possessed an endearing humility that enabled her to identify with her directees while authoritatively pointing them towards spiritual health. Perhaps the validity of her advice was found in the very fact that she was traveling the same spiritual road as they were and while not much further ahead, she certainly had more resources at her disposal due to her extensive studies and religious experiences.

This counseling, as was typical of the time, happened for the most part through correspondence; because of this, we are fortunate to have copies of many of Underhill's letters of direction.[61] A few examples will serve to show Underhill's style as a very personable yet forthright director. The following is an excerpt from a letter to Margaret Robinson dated May 30, 1907:

> I feel like writing you a rather bracing, disagreeable, east-windy sort of letter. When I read yours, my first impulse was to send you a line begging you only *to let yourself alone*. Don't keep pulling yourself to pieces: & please burn that dreadful book with the lists of your past sins! If the past really oppresses you, you had far better go to confession, & finish that chapter once and for all! It is emphatically your business now to look forwards and not backwards: & also, to look forwards in an eager & optimistic spirit. Any other course is mere ingratitude, you know.[62]

[60] Letter to Hubert Stuart Moore, May 1, 1907, in Williams, *Letters*, 61.
[61] The most complete examples we have of this are Underhill's letters to Margaret Robinson (1904-1917) and to Darcie Otter (1927-1941).
[62] Letter to M. Robinson, May 30, 1907, in Williams, *Letters*, 66.

Here one can plainly see Underhill trying to direct the focus of Miss Robinson away from preoccupation with her own sinfulness. She does this by advising Robinson to put the past behind her through definitive action, thereby intentionally moving forward towards hope instead of languishing in despair. While somewhat brisk and corrective in tone, it was nevertheless written with a well-meaning and kind familiarity that is quite exceptional considering that the two had not met at this point, and it was only the fourth letter Underhill wrote to her. Some seven months later, we see Underhill once again trying to coax Miss Robinson out of discouragement through a combination of encouragement and bluntness, this time addressing the issue of unrealistic expectations by using the example of the saints:

> Of course, because you had a "good time" before Christmas, & enjoyed devotion, you are now having a reaction & a flat time. But sticking to it in the flat times is of far more value both as service & as discipline – than luxuriating in the religious emotion. It's what strengthens your spiritual muscles. Even the best people – even the saints – have always had to bear it: sometimes for years. It's a natural condition in the spiritual life. I know it's perfectly horrid when it happens - & I do *not* mean to be unsympathetic! But you must get enough grip to go on trusting in the dark. All the prayer in the world won't get you into a state in which you will always have nice times. You mustn't get slack: you must make a rule of life & go on with it steadily.[63]

The letters between them show Underhill wearing many hats, so to speak; sometimes the serious spiritual director, sometimes the chatty friend, at other times the fellow writer and scholar (Robinson helped her with some German translations), but always present was the willingness to offer advice and recommendations for spiritual reading, as well as an identification with the struggles that Robinson shared with her. By this identification, Underhill, perhaps unintentionally, offered reassurance to Miss Robinson

[63] Letter to M. Robinson, January 16, 1908, in Williams, *Letters*, 72.

that she was not alone on the journey and that her spiritual director was in fact a fellow pilgrim.

Underhill also urged Robinson to balance her personal devotion with work among the poor, indicating that this course of action had been presented to her not so long ago and proved helpful. "I remember some years ago being told that I was all wrong because I had not learned to recognize Christ in my fellow-creatures. I disliked the remark intensely at the time – but it was true."[64] Because Underhill had been the recipient of corrective advice, she understood the value of being gently prodded in a direction that one would not naturally be inclined to go.

The retreats Underhill conducted beginning in 1924 reflect some of these same qualities, but in more focused, organized, and mature manner. For example, at the beginning of a retreat there was always a time of preparation in order to ensure that the words and ideas presented in the coming days would be received with ready hearts. Slightly different from her letters of direction was the overall atmosphere of peacefulness and rest that she worked so hard to cultivate in this remote and controlled environment. Here, the focus was not on coping with the demands and challenges of life; here, the intent was "to wait on the Lord and renew our strength – not for our own sakes but for the sake of the world."[65] In her last retreat in 1936, Underhill exhibited the culmination of all that she had learned in giving direction over the years. Here we find a focus on the ordinariness of spirituality, a call to humility and childlike trust in

[64] Letter to M. Robinson, August 29, 1908, in Williams, *Letters*, 81.
[65] Underhill, *Fruits of the Spirit*, 1.

God, and simplicity of faith. Her words are direct and easy to comprehend; her examples are clear, usually plucked from life experience and lives of the saints. In one instance, we see her paint a verbal picture of a well-revered saint in such a way that those present would have been sure to identify with the human element present instead of being overwhelmed by his great spiritual stature. The spotlight was clearly on the work of God instead of the effort of humanity, an emphasis that had not always been present in Underhill's writing.

> Look once again at St. Peter as he goes blundering through the New Testament, the average, natural man, eager, irritable, impulsive, cocksure and always saying the wrong thing. Because the Incarnation means God trusting His imperfect creature it is on this Rock that He builds His Church. *Rock* must have seemed a comic name for Peter to those who knew what he was really like. But it was all right. Peter's constant stumbling, errors and impulses would keep him in humility and dependence; it would never be his own spiritual quality but God's rescuing power which would see *him* through. So it is the human wobbly Peter, not the mystic Philip seeking the vision of the Father, who becomes the pillar of the Church."[66]

These few snippets, taken from Underhill's very first letters of spiritual direction and then from her last retreat, demonstrate not only the potential and gift for spiritual counseling that she exhibited early on, but also the maturity and peaceful wisdom that were present more and more in the latter part of her life. Dana Greene asserts that it was the twenty years that Underhill spent in the company of the mystics that brought her at last to the point of being able to "translate that knowledge to ordinary people."[67] Much more than simply making the mystics and the mystic way available to everyday folk, Underhill's effectiveness in spiritual direction lay most profoundly in living the

[66] Underhill, *Fruits of the Spirit*, 38.
[67] Greene, "Lives Matter," 5.

process herself and offering counsel that she had learned through the school of experience.

Chapter 3: Answering the Critics

The responses to Evelyn Underhill's foray into the field of mysticism have varied over time. Since an extensive exploration of the topic, especially of the kind she did in *Mysticism*, had not been attempted before, there was very little to compare it to, and this made the question of how exactly Underhill's body of work was to be received a bit of a difficult one. It is probably true that critics will always be found who take issue with a writer, no matter how well-written the work is or how thorough the research. In contrast, one must be cautious of overly zealous fans who gloss over errors and omissions that should be addressed. Dana Greene offers this brief but comprehensive summary of some of the criticisms of Underhill's writings:

> Although her work was very well-received in her lifetime, after her death there was criticism of it from several quarters. Some argued that her epistemology was faulty in places, or that her spirituality, offered to the well-heeled Kensington set, was sentimental and cozy. She has been called the Agatha Christie of spirituality, and some have suggested that she represents nothing more than the last gasp of the dying Oxford Movement. Others argue that she was not an original thinker, but a mere popularizer of von Hügel or the French school of spirituality.[1]

Greene insists that these critics are missing the point, and they very well may be, but their critiques must not be ignored. While there is not space here to fully address every criticism brought forth in response to Underhill's various works on numerous topics, I will deal with a few common shortcomings that are mentioned by critics and friends as well. First, there are questions brought up about her scholarship and lack of education. There is also the observation that Underhill was definitely a product of her era and as a result of this, her thought was rather insular. Lastly, her obvious development and

[1] Dana Greene, "Evelyn Underhill: Her Life, Work and Meaning for Our Times." Talk given at Washington National Cathedral, 1990.

change of thought over time has not always been seen as maturation, but chalked up to inconsistency and infatuation.

3.1 Questionable scholarship

The fact that Evelyn Underhill did not have a formal education, aside from a few years at King's College in rather unrelated topics such as botany, languages, drawing, and history, cannot be overlooked. Through her own reading on philosophy, which began in her father's library, she developed a definitely Platonist worldview, and subsequent interpretations of the mystics and theology were flavoured with this strong bias for many years. To her credit, her self-education drew on remarkably broad sources and she was extremely well-read, as the wealth of sources in *Mysticism* suggests.[2] However, the demands of formal and collegial academic rigour were not ones that she had to answer to, and one wonders if this affected how she incorporated historical texts and interpreted them.

There were several glowing reviews of Underhill's book, *Mysticism*, when it first came out, among those being *The New York Times* which named her the "latest apologist" for mysticism, and observed that she wrote "in language so beautiful and inspiring that many readers will doubtless feel a sincere longing themselves to participate in the quest of the Absolute."[3] In addition to this rousing endorsement, another reviewer praised the book for its "restrained style and for its balanced

[2] Geoffrey Curtis lauds Underhill's remarkable wisdom despite very little formal education, stating that she studied at a greater school, that of the "communio sanctorum of the creed." See Geoffrey Curtis, "Evelyn Underhill," *The Community Resurrection Chronicle* 155 (1941), 12.
[3] *The New York Times*, July 30, 1911.

treatment of a subject which has been so often associated with quite the opposite qualities," thereby affirming that Underhill had indeed succeeded in fulfilling her role as an exponent of the topic.[4] However, not all were so kind or generous in their praise.

Armstrong points out what he sees as evidence of some slackness in her use of sources by citing a few letters from Underhill to Margaret Robinson which outlined specific points she wanted Robinson to search for in Eckhardt, a German mystic.[5] These letters lead him to conclude that in addition to a general ignorance of Eckhardt, they show that Underhill did not read all her sources, relying instead on others to do a quick "skip through" on her behalf.[6] This seems a rather sweeping judgment to make based on a few letters written requesting assistance from someone who had more expertise in a language than she did. However, the somewhat cursory treatment of certain mystics could be a fair assessment. Whether this was due to the ambitious scope of her work or the possibility that she was still young to her topic remains debatable.

Interestingly, Carol Poston draws quite the opposite conclusion from the correspondence between Underhill and Robinson. She believes that Underhill's request for a new German translation from Robinson displayed an earnest desire to represent the text well.[7] This seems to be supported in a letter from December 10, 1908 where Underhill displayed a fastidious attention to the proper treatment of sources. She wrote, "Inge mentions some very useful bits in 'Xtian Mystics' – but the beast gave no

[4] *The Nation*, vol 93 no 2419 (November 9, 1911).
[5] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 104-105.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 85.

exact references! These great scholars are too aggravating for words!"[8] It was the same Inge, who, while publicly praising *Mysticism*, privately wrote to its publisher, stating that he believed Underhill did not fully understand Plotinus and that her excessive use of Bergson was incompatible with an absolute God.[9] I will deal with the Bergson issue later in this chapter, but it is quite apparent that the breadth of the topic brought out some weaknesses in her scholarship. Von Hügel, who was later to become her spiritual director and a trusted friend, pointed out the book's shortcomings in its lack of historicity and its neglect in providing an institutional context; he noted that her study focused too exclusively on the alone, the individual, quite apart from outside influence.[10] He was also the only one, as far as we can tell, that offered to help her improve it in subsequent editions.[11] While she did not take him up on the kind offer, for whatever reasons,[12] his influence was definitely present in the twelfth edition from 1930.[13]

Her next book, *The Mystic Way*, applied the topic of mysticism to the documents and characters of early Christianity, focusing on the lives of Christ, Paul, and John. It was an attempt to link mysticism quite strongly with Christianity while still incorporating

[8] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, Letter to M. Robinson, December 10, 1908, 141. She is referring to William Ralph Inge's book, *Christian Mysticism*, which was published in 1899. See also Williams, *Letters*, 87, where, in a letter to M. Robinson about translations, she refers to the "shoddy rhymes of [Mechthild's] only translator (who of course gives no references!)."
[9] Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 54.
[10] Greene makes these observations as well in *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 54.
[11] See von Hugel's letter quoted in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 131-132.
[12] Underhill noted that two subsequent editions were published under very tight deadlines for changes, therefore it might simply have been a matter of lack of time. See Williams, *Letters*, 124, 146.
[13] Underhill made prominent mention of his theological concepts in the preface to this edition and references to him are scattered throughout. See Underhill, *Mysticism*, xv-xvi. See also Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 131.

modern psychology. By the standards of today's biblical scholarship, it is a weak treatment of both subjects, for as Armstrong puts it, Underhill did a rather jarring "take-over" of the New Testament in the process, commandeering it for her mystical agenda.[14] Geoffrey Curtis notes that Underhill later developed a general dislike for the book, regretting the treatment she gave the gospels in particular.[15] With this opinion, she appeared to be in agreement with many of her critics. In Williams' introduction to *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* he mentions that she also grew to dislike the style of *The Path of Eternal Wisdom* (1911) and *The Spiral Way* (1912), devotional books which she published under the pseudonym John Cordelier. This, remarks Williams, was "a great tribute to her authenticity; she was, to the very end, prepared to purge and elucidate her literary expression."[16]

While there is ample evidence to imply that Underhill was always eager to improve what she wrote, a case in point being her quickness to add corrections to subsequent editions of *Mysticism*, criticism from others was not quite as easy to receive. In the spring of 1913 she wrote about the less than positive reaction to the new book, *The Mystic Way*, mentioning two men in particular, Arthur Machen and J. A. Herbert, who questioned her orthodoxy and commitment to Christianity.[17] She admitted to feeling "dismal and outcast" by the unfavourable reaction to this book. However, a year later, *Practical Mysticism* appeared, and this time it was received much more warmly, perhaps in part because it was not touted as a scholarly work (and therefore not as

[14] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 146.
[15] Curtis, "Evelyn Underhill," 9.
[16] Williams, Introduction to *Letters*, 29.
[17] Letter to Miss Nancy Paul, 1913 and to J. A. Herbert, March 30, 1913, in Williams, *Letters*, 140-141.

susceptible to learned criticism); as the subtitle indicated, it was written for "normal people." A testimonial from the Bishop of St. Andrews relates how the timely entrance of this book into his life at the beginning of the war impacted him more than any other theological book, even though he admitted that it was not Underhill's greatest work.[18] This would prove to be a foretaste of her later success as a proponent of everyday spirituality.

The occasional lapses in scholarship that coloured her early works should not overshadow the unique and ongoing contribution that Underhill made to spirituality and theology. Horton Davies puts her work in perspective:

> The three most significant English exponents of mysticism filled three roles. Dean Inge was the pioneer. Baron von Hügel was the philosopher-historian who wisely saw that the institutional and intellectual elements in religion were necessary to undergird the primary mystical element, thus guaranteeing its stability. Evelyn Underhill was the popularizer.[19]

This word, "popularize," does not necessarily mean a diluting or dumbing down of a complex and profound subject. Indeed, in Underhill's case, she began with a strenuous and very thorough treatment of the subject. It was because of this extensive research and exploration of the topic that she was able to simplify it with such clarity and make it accessible. Greene alludes to the multi-faceted nature of Underhill's contribution as well, stating that Underhill's "genius lies in the fact that she discovered this subject, recognized its power and influence, steeped herself in it, and wrote about it with

[18] Lumsden Barkway in an introduction to Evelyn Underhill, *Collected Papers*, edited by Lucy Menzies (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1946), 7.
[19] Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: The Ecumenical Century* vol 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 136.

elegance."[20] No one who has studied Underhill extensively will defend her works as flawless examples of scholarship. However, many of her writings, *Mysticism* in particular, have withstood the test of time and are still in print today, frequently quoted in contemporary anthologies dealing with spirituality or mysticism. Those who focus on the weaknesses of a young scholar without acknowledging the incredible feat that a 32-year-old self-educated woman accomplished in her first time weighing in on a relatively new subject do her a severe injustice. Part of the attraction of Underhill is her progress as a writer, and this included some irregularities along the way as she energetically looked at mysticism from a multitude of angles.

3.2 A product of her era

Another observation made by critics who disregard much of Underhill's contribution to the field of spirituality is that she is dated; her writings very strongly reflect the biases and shortcomings of the time period in which she lived. They cite evidences such as embellished language, a fascination with current trends in philosophy and psychology, the easy optimism of pre-war England, a tendency toward individualism, and romanticized thinking. This is obviously a more recent critical stance, since the advantage of hindsight is necessary to an assessment such as this. A few examples from the past fifty years will serve to illustrate this criticism as well as put it in perspective.

[20] Greene, *Fragments*, 19.

In 1959, Valerie Pitt[21] came out with a rather harsh critique of the popularization of mysticism and generously used Cropper's recent biography and Underhill's writings as examples of the unhealthy influence this trend was having on Anglican spirituality. She indicated that Underhill's retreats, as so gushingly described by Cropper, were far removed from the real and difficult problems of the world where the Gospel is meant to operate. In her opinion, the retreats revealed "a cosy, gossipy world, with a private manner of speech, and almost a private cult."[22] Pitt went on to point out Underhill's glaring ignorance of the social issues of her day, such as the General Strike of 1926,[23] and condemned the section of Underhill's private rule which listed visiting the poor in order to improve her own spiritual state. Pitt found the idea of self-advancement as a motivation for charity work insulting and outrageous.[24]

What Pitt failed to remark on, however, was that in the same paragraph that Cropper mentioned Underhill's apparent disregard for the Strike, she also pointed out Underhill's involvement with the Prayer Book Bill, stating that this "was her country and she was prepared to take steps there and to suffer there."[25] Obviously, Underhill was

[21] Professor Valerie Pitt (1925-1999) became well-known in the Church of England for her "disloyal faithfulness," as Kenneth Leech calls it. One of the outspoken, radical voices often identified as the "angry young Anglicans," she championed causes such as the ordination of women and disestablishment. Leech remarks that she "remained a woman of profound Christian faith, even if increasingly discontented with what she took to be the trivialising, the shallowness and the lack of serious thinking and debate in the Church of England." See Kenneth Leech, "Obituary: Professor Valerie Pitt," *The Independent*, January 14, 1999.
[22] Pitt, "Clouds of Unknowing," 8.
[23] This refers to Cropper's biography where she states regarding Underhill: "I do not feel as if the crux of the General Strike touched her very deeply. Politics never possessed her. I do not remember her talking about them. When the Strike came it meant a hold-up to work and plans but nothing fundamental." See Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 136 and Pitt, "Clouds of Unknowing," 9.
[24] Pitt, "Clouds of Unknowing," 9.
[25] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill,* 136.

not completely passive when it came to her nation's politics. While Underhill did not follow Pitt's ideal of social justice[26] (nor have the opportunity to evaluate the 1929 situation from Pitt's vantage point thirty-three years hence), it seems rather unfair to judge someone from another time and place while disregarding the gulf between one's own contemporary situation and the cultural mores and expectations in play during a previous time. Somewhat ironically, Underhill's public stance as a pacifist in the early years of the second world war might very well have earned her a place next to Pitt in the "radical Anglican" camp had their careers coincided more closely. Pitt also neglected to mention Cropper's indication a few lines later that Underhill spent the first part of the year ill in bed.[27] This observation of Pitt's selectiveness is not meant as a blanket defense of Underhill's lack of social action, but to illustrate that Pitt might have been somewhat unrealistic in the demands she put on Underhill and to note that Pitt seemed to base her criticisms on details pulled out of their original context.

Recently, noted modern historian, Bernard McGinn, has offered a more balanced critical assessment of Underhill, especially her "big book" on mysticism. He mentions certain deficiencies in her writing which reflect her era, but also notices how she differentiated herself from other mystical writers of her time:

> Underhill's florid prose and a certain looseness in her mode of argument make it easy to dismiss her as more journalistic than scholarly. Although *Mysticism* leaves many disputed issues untreated, Underhill's broad acquaintance with the texts of the mystics

[26] Grace Adolphsen Brame points out that those who criticise Underhill's lack of social action are perhaps unaware that she spent most of her evenings at home writing letters of spiritual direction. This was perhaps the primary way in which she offered to help others. See Grace Adolphsen Brame, "Evelyn Underhill: The Integrity of Personal Intellect and Individual Religious Experience as Related to Ecclesiastical Authority," *Worship* 68 no 1 (January 1994), 28.
[27] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 136.

> and her freedom from the prejudices displayed by Inge show why the book has remained a popular introduction for over three quarters of a century.[28]

Armstrong also makes mention of certain mannered sections in the book where Underhill directly addresses the reader, indicating that these passages read awkwardly. While it was obviously Underhill's intent to draw readers in and encourage them to experience the subject for themselves, adopting this particular literary device means that at times, *Mysticism* reads like a book written "in a particular age."[29] However, he points to the romanticism of the writing as one of the chief reasons for its longevity and an important factor in understanding Underhill's motivation behind writing it. He says:

> In fact Evelyn Underhill's greatest book is distinguished by the very qualities which make it inappropriate as a straightforward textbook of *vade-mecum* to anything connected with mysticism. This is why it will probably continue to be read after numerous so-called objective or scientific treatments of its subject have long been replaced and mouldered into oblivion. The spirit of *Mysticism* may be summed up by saying that it is romantic and engaged rather than dispassionate and objective, empirical rather than theoretical, actual rather than historical.[30]

The romantic tone of the book, according to Armstrong, was the reason behind the lack of historicity and the incompleteness of the theory in parts, however this also became one of its strengths, painting the relationship between the mystic and the Absolute as a "full-blooded love affair."[31]

As noted earlier in this chapter, Underhill's works on mysticism, especially her first book, seem to defy categorization to some extent. Scholars can find her uneven and problematic in her conclusions, yet her works can hardly be said to be in the

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[28] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century, v*ol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 274.
[29] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 126.
[30] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 109.
[31] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill,* 110.

popular literary genre, nor are they purely devotional and pastoral. I believe that Armstrong puts forth a strong case for the necessity of placing Underhill solidly in her era, recognizing that her particular emphasis involved the whole self in a daring and reckless pursuit of God, and being able to appreciate the richness that these elements brought to her writing.[32]

3.3 Changing viewpoints

A brief glance through Underhill's body of work confirms the presence of change in some of her views, emphases, and positions. One of the most obvious was her shift from an active supporter of the nation's war effort during World War I to a vocal pacifist during the last years of her life.[33] She also moved from a definite theocentric approach to an emphasis that reflected a new-found Christo-centricity. Her church interest and involvement went through Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox[34] stages. The personal correspondence to which we have access reveals low times of bitter despair, yet at other times contains ebullient passages that show her enthusiasm for a certain book, encounter, or experience. The developing thought of Evelyn Underhill can either be viewed as inconsistency or steps along the path to maturity. Nadia Delicata claims, and I believe rightly so, that these differing viewpoints are examples of Underhill's transformation.[35] Lord Ramsey of Canterbury maintains that while Underhill's early

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[32] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 110, 124.
[33] Williams, Introduction to *Letters*, 42.
[34] In a letter to L.K. on February 8, 1935, Underhill indicated that she joined the Anglo-Russian confraternity, expressing an ongoing interest in Russian and Greek Orthodox traditions. Williams, *Letters*, 243.
[35] Nadia Delicata, email to the author, February 14, 2011.

works reflected a certain naïveté and immaturity, they also revealed a progression. In the end, his estimation of her work is a glowing testimonial to her influence on the spiritual climate of her time: "I think that in the twenties and thirties there were few, if indeed any, in the Church of England who did more to help people to grasp the priority of prayer in the Christian life and the place of the contemplative element within it."[36] It would seem that her early naïveté only served to highlight her later influence and accomplishment.

Delicata picks up on the tension in Underhill's writing by exposing the underlying dualism she sees evident in *Mysticism*: "[Underhill] promoted an embodied spirituality over a disembodied one. Yet throughout this five-hundred-page-book, readers are bombarded by an impressively intellectual text that supports and describes a radically individualistic path whose aim is the transcendence, rather than spiritual embodiment, of the human person."[37] The book was not the only thing at odds with itself at the time. While Underhill was certainly caught in a Neo-Platonic mindset that did not allow her to fully embrace the unity that she so enthusiastically wrote about at length, this separation was rooted in a much deeper place than a philosophical school. Delicata continues her thought by using Underhill's personal struggles to illustrate the dichotomy between Underhill's writing on a topic defined by union and her loyalty to Platonic dualism. "This was the same paradox enfleshed in Underhill's own life. While she desired love, she was still addicted to knowledge. While she needed relationship, she

[36] Michael Ramsey in a preface to Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill,* x.
[37] Nadia Delicata, "Evelyn Underhill's quest for the holy: a lifetime journey of personal transformation," *Anglican Theological Review* 88 no 4 (Fall 2006), 525.

was treading a path very much on her own. While she espoused social justice, she was, at least up to this point in her life, still disconnected from the world's pain."[38] Underhill's attraction to mysticism, in this case, seemed to be not only the doorway to a lengthy career, but perhaps in a way she never imagined, the catalyst for her own transformation.

Situating Underhill's changing views in the context of transformation is a helpful way to reconcile some of the more troublesome and eccentric passages found in her writing. As a case in point, her fascination with Bergson[39] was relatively short-lived, yet because it coincided with her writing of *Mysticism*, his concept of *élan vital* (living energy) appeared prominently in a chapter entitled "Mysticism and Vitalism." In the twelfth edition, Underhill added an addendum to this chapter, noting that Vitalism, as well as Bergson, had gone out of fashion and were she to write the book again, she would draw on other sources, incorporating scholars who were more focused on critical realism.[40] Underhill's infatuation with the French philosopher was clearly reflected in a letter she wrote soon after she heard Bergson give a series of lectures.

> I don't feel in the mood for theology and am not going to argue with you about Sacraments. I'm still drunk with Bergson, who sharpened one's mind and swept one off one's feet both at once. Those lectures have been a real, treat experience: direct contact with the personality of a profound intuitive thinker of the first rank! London

[38] Ibid.
[39] Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was a French philosopher who believed that intuition, not intellect, was the heart of reality. He developed somewhat of a cult following after his publication of *Creative Evolution* in 1907, but by the late 1920s the popularity of his ideas was beginning to fade due in part to his lack of analytical rigour. His ideas were condemned by the Roman Catholic Church in 1913. See Leonard Lawlor and Valentine Loulard, "Henri Bergson," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed. Available online at http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spring2010/entries/bergson/ (accessed March 26, 2011) and McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, 303.
[40] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 43.

> isn't quite so silly as it seems. It provided him with a big, wildly enthusiastic audience which followed him with a deep attention that one could almost *feel*.[41]

Later she was to downplay and even regret the extent to which she allowed his thought to influence both *Mysticism* and *The Mystic Way*.[42] Underhill's tendency toward temporary infatuation was evident in other parts of her correspondence. At one point she raved about Madame Guyon's[43] works ("Are they not wonderful?") when first encountering her writings in November of 1907[44] and then two years later, one can almost hear the disdain in her voice referring to "that gushing Madame Guyon," thereby indicating her growing distaste for the mystic's inclination to excessiveness.[45] In *The Mystics of the Church*, Underhill's understated but constant critique of Guyon stands out in an otherwise predominantly positive presentation of mystics over the centuries. Here is a sample of how Underhill treated the 17th century author: "But for her persistent self-occupation and her lack of common sense, Madame Guyon might actually have become the mystical saint she supposed herself to be …"[46]

Part of the reason for Underhill's inconsistency must be attributed to the fact that we have records of some of her first impressions with which to compare her more mature and informed opinions. No doubt every one of us has uttered opinions that we later regretted or changed significantly after becoming more acquainted with the complexities of the subject. I concur with Delicata that these changes of opinion are to

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[41] Letter to Mrs. Meyrick Heath, 1913?, in Williams, *Letters*, 146.
[42] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 214.
[43] Madame Guyon (1648-1717) was a French mystic associated with Quietism, a form of mysticism identified by extreme passivity and considered heretical by the Roman Catholic Church.
[44] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 109. Charles Williams chose to remove the comment about Guyon in his edited version of this letter of Underhill's.
[45] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 164.
[46] Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1925), 208.

be taken as signs of transformation rather than evidence of incongruous and erratic thinking.[47] Underhill's most striking and perhaps most publicized change, from activist to pacifist, can also be interpreted as growth in the same direction rather than an about-face. Armstrong views the articles that Underhill wrote during the First World War in support of the national effort as significant indication that she was already considering the impact that true mystics must have on society. In this way, he holds, they reflect the "relationship of the mystical vocation to the historical, cultural, political and social environment in which it is lived," thereby preparing her for her later stance of pacifism.[48]

Surprisingly, not many critics have made much of her changing viewpoints and reworked editions. Perhaps this is due in part to the fact that after her death, Underhill became somewhat unfashionable, philosophy and mysticism having moved on from many of her ideas and definitions. Her work simply did not engender much comment at all, either positive or negative. While definitely a pioneer in spirituality, her writings were too dated to have much staying power, it seemed. Lord Ramsey, writing in 1975, noted that her name "went through a phase both of apathy and antipathy."[49]

The growing interest in spirituality in the latter part of the 20th century has no doubt favourably impacted Underhill's visibility in recent years. In my observation,

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[47] Delicata, email to author, February 14, 2011. By comparing *Mysticism* and its revisions with other works of Underhill, Dalgaard observes her shifts from "mysticism to spirituality, from an anti-historical approach to religion to an historical approach and from being strictly theocentric to becoming Christocentric." In stating this, she is also tracing Underhill's personal transformation over the years. See also A. Elisabeth Dalgaard, "The Churching of Evelyn Underhill," *Arc* 17 (Spring 1989), 43.
[48] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 168-169.
[49] Lord Ramsey, introduction to Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, ix.

those who have taken a deep enough plunge into her vast library of writings to speak knowledgably about her and her subject tend to pluck out the strong points and leave the questionable bits in the background, not ignored, but certainly not highlighted. Most scholars choose to glean from Underhill instead of becoming her critics; certainly, this is how we would all want to be treated when future generations read what we have written.

Chapter 4: Listening to Evelyn Underhill Herself

Having sketched a quick portrait of Underhill and glanced at some of the criticisms of her work, we now turn to what Underhill has to tell us, not only in her words, but by the life she lived. Most of what follows in this chapter will not be found in her publications. Though what was written in those works must be taken into consideration when studying Evelyn Underhill, what most clearly reveals the persona behind the celebrated author and speaker are her letters and notebooks. What were Evelyn Underhill's hobbies and what do they tell us about her? What were her greatest triumphs and most painful disappointments? What subjects do we observe her turning to again and again in her writing, the themes of her life, so to speak? The answers to these questions will serve to inform our understanding of Evelyn Underhill and give us a better grasp of what she has to teach us.

4.1 Her passions

While Underhill's life could be described as quiet and fairly typical of an Englishwoman of upper middle-class status in the Edwardian era, there were flashes of definite excitement when it came to certain experiences and topics in her letters, and I shall address a few of them here.

4.1.1 Beauty

Dana Greene points out that Underhill's conversion was due in large part to her encounter with beauty,[1] and a reading of Underhill's letters written during trips to Europe (usually with her mother) to her soon-to-be fiancé verifies the inspirational role it played in her life. We find florid descriptions of lake views that were "heavenly," a cathedral that was a "dream of beauty," mention of "delicious little waggly stony streets," and a piazza in Venice which was "simply gorgeous."[2] Underhill's accounts to Hubert Stuart Moore were filled with chatty and amusing anecdotes as well: at one point she mentioned a cathedral she saw and added, "I wish you were here, and I think you would like it, though the place swarms with priests who would set your Protestant teeth on edge."[3] This hints at the spiritual distance already between them, though it was not to become an issue until Evelyn suggested joining the Roman Catholic Church the year before they were married. However, there was more at work than she revealed in her letters to Hubert.

It was Italy in particular that touched her in a deep way. In one of her notebooks from those travels we read, "Italy, the holy land of Europe, the only place left, I suppose, that is really medicinal to the soul. …There is a type of mind which must go there to find itself."[4] And in another place she wrote, "This place has taught me more than I can tell

[1] Greene, *Fragments*, 16.
[2] Letters to Hubert Stuart Moore, 1901-1905, in Williams, *Letters*, 48-53.
[3] Letter to Hubert Stuart Moore, April 17, 1901, in Williams, *Letters*, 48.
[4] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 13.

you: a sort of gradual unconscious growing into an understanding of things."[5] Margaret Cropper recalls the lasting impact of Underhill's journeys to Italy: "I never remember her speaking at a retreat without some mention of those fiery snowfields which symbolized so much to her of spiritual beauty."[6] Underhill's first two novels, *The Gray World* (1904) and *The Lost Word* (1907), both turned to beauty in some form for the redemption of their characters: the first through nature and the second through architecture. *The Gray World* in particular contained several detailed descriptions of the beauty of Italy where Willie, the main character, had a spiritual awakening.[7] No doubt Underhill, in her first foray into fiction, was drawing on personal experience when she wrote about the lasting impact that classic works of art, ancient sites of worship, and the picturesque countryside had on a soul.

Underhill was undeniably a voracious reader. Aside from the expected diet of philosophy and religious and mystical texts, she enjoyed fiction[8] and had a fondness for poetry. Though writing in verse never became her forte (her third and last book of poetry was published in 1916), she continued to be associated with the genre through occasional reviews of poetry and work on the poems of 13th century mystic, Jacopone da Todi,[9] as well as Underhill's contemporary, Rabindranath Tagore.[10] She managed to marry her love for the printed word with her love of beautiful things by learning the

[5] Quoted by Williams, Introduction to *Letters*, 8. She wrote this when she was 22.
[6] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 13.
[7] See Chapter XIX, "The Delectable Mountains," in *The Gray World,* 244-262.
[8] She developed a friendship with popular novelist at the time, May Sinclair.
[9] Evelyn Underhill, *Jacopone da Todi: Poet and Mystic, 1228-1306, A Spiritual Biography*, with a selection by Mrs. Theodore Beck (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1919).
[10] She worked in conjunction with Nobel prize winner Tagore in translating and compiling *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (London: The India Society, 1914).

craft of bookbinding, the exacting art of creating a unique and individual cover for a printed volume. She alluded to her proficiency at the craft along with several other handiworks such as weaving and lace-making in a letter from 1911.[11] As a testament to her skill, one of the books she bound was bought by the Hungarian government for their national museum.[12] The archives of Vermont Theological Seminary house a book bound by Underhill in 1902 for Hubert Stuart Moore. The cuts in the leather cover are careful, and the work meticulous and neat, though the design is rather simple. It says much about the craftswoman, a spiritual guide who would later be known for her careful work and artful simplicity.

Her appreciation for the beauty of the natural world was also evident in her love of gardening and flowers[13] as well as her affection for her cats, which were often mentioned by name in her letters and on occasion made their own contributions to her correspondence. Underhill was never known for wearing finery, and photographs show her to be a rather plain and unremarkable woman with modest style. However, the more one reads Underhill's letters, the clearer it becomes that the beauty she most valued was of the enduring, spiritual kind. The appreciation of the inner flowering of a soul was what first attracted her to the mystics and what finally led her to spend so much of her energy offering direction to individuals and conducting retreats.

[11] Letter to Mrs. Meyrick Heath, 1911, in Williams, *Letters*, 128.
[12] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 22.
[13] In order to facilitate getting into the country more easily to enjoy the birds, flowers, and trees which she so loved, Hubert acquired a motorcycle with a sidecar which they used for regular Sunday afternoon outings. See Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 127.

4.1.2 Family and friends

It may seem strange to address Underhill's social life immediately after pointing out the priority she gave to internal beauty, but one of the most fascinating and unique aspects of Evelyn Underhill was her determination to work out the spiritual side of things while living a very normal and active life in turn-of-the-century England. While at first glance the juxtaposition of these two sides of Underhill's life might appear to be a nod towards her Neo-Platonist influence, it was, in fact, just the opposite. Underhill, from the beginning pages of *Mysticism*, set her course toward harmony and union as a "genuine life process."[14] One might argue that there is evidence to show that Underhill's spiritual life was quite separate from her social life, especially in the early years. However, this observation does not negate the course that she had set for herself, especially when one notes markers along the way where the two realms met solidly and soundly.

One of those early markers was the crisis that came about in 1907 when Evelyn wanted to join the Roman Catholic Church and her fiancé, Hubert, firmly protested. Whatever his reasons may have been, Underhill was faced with making a decision that would set a precedent for the rest of her spiritual journey. After much deliberation and seeking counsel from Father Benson, she chose to delay her religious commitment and confirm her devotion to Hubert. Armstrong interprets this step in the following way: "Called as she no doubt believed to a life of union she was also committed by her love of

[14] Underhill, Preface to *Mysticism*, xxi.

her fiancé to incarnation."[15] Incarnation is a very strong word for Armstrong to use here, but I believe it is appropriate, because it indicates Underhill's devotion, embryonic as it may have been at the time, to live out her spirituality by grounding it firmly in everyday life with all the earthly ties that implied, especially the social and familial expectations from her loved ones.[16]

It is refreshing to see with what vigour and delight Underhill embraced her social obligations at the same time that her vocation as a formal spiritual director was just beginning to flourish, evident in this letter to a friend in 1924:

> I've had a heavily worldly week with all the parties to the American lawyers, ending last night with a really splendid show, the Lord Chancellor's reception in Westminster Hall. It was a sight, that glorious architecture and roof brilliantly lit up, as one never sees it, and every one in their best, swords, orders and all. I went with my dear old papa, who looked very sweet in his black velvet and buckled shoes."[17]

It is clear that Underhill did not believe she needed to choose between love for God and obligations to her family. Instead, she sought to show that these two could not only co-exist, but that she could be the meeting place between them. This was not an easy position to pursue, as an entry in her notebook from 1926 indicates: "I am as much required to be a Christian wife-daughter-mistress-friend, as to be a writer on religion and director of souls. Must combat persistent self-occupation by forcing myself to enter into interests of others, however alien from my own."[18] Partly because of the impact of the First World War, the period when she admitted that she "went to pieces,"[19]

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[15] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 90.
[16] Armstrong states, "It was a fundamental axiom of Evelyn that all of life was sacred. That, after all, was what incarnation was all about." Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 95-96.
[17] Letter to Lucy Menzies, July 26, 1924, in Williams, *Letters,* 156.
[18] Greene, *Fragments*, 76-77.
[19] Greene, *Fragments*, 108.

Underhill began to more fully understand the high price that incarnation demands and how agonising the tension could be between interior mystical experience and the stark reality of the material world; even her own reason seemed to mock it. In a letter to Baron von Hügel in 1921, she asked, "[Am] I simply living on illusion?" when mentioning her various mystical encounters over the past sixteen years.[20]

It was around this time that Underhill finally affiliated herself with a religious community and officially became part of the Church of England. There was a new awareness on her part that the company of the ancient mystics was not enough to sustain her spiritual journey and that an over-emphasis on the internal had in fact put her in a spot of trouble. If she was truly to be that "Christian wife-daughter-mistress-friend" who lived out the mystic way - the way of love - in her social life as well as her devotional life, then she needed help. Though a quiet, contemplative, and religious existence might have been easier for someone of her temperament, she was committed to the constant challenge of being available for her family and friends, and without the support of significant and consistent spiritual ties, this tension began to take its toll. After Underhill turned to Baron von Hügel for spiritual direction (which I will address in more depth in Chapter 5), her spiritual journey stabilized and manifested itself in a more healthy and consistent way. In a sense, she began to find her stride in embodying her spirituality.

[20] Ibid.

4.1.3 Personal correspondence

Though Underhill's love for beauty and keen interest in philosophy and mysticism found expression through numerous avenues, none of these burgeoned in the way that her writing did. With the publication of *Mysticism* in 1911, she became a scholar of note and this "big book," as Cropper refers to it, testified to the diligence which would sustain her through a lengthy and successful career as a writer. From 1907 until her death, she published at least one title per year, though this swelled to nearly thirty publications annually during her time as religious editor and reviewer for *The Spectator*. However, this was only one aspect of her skill as a writer.

A look at Underhill's established daily routine indicates her dedication to another kind of writing. She set aside from ten o'clock until one o'clock for her literary work, had lunch with her mother every day, liked to spend time gardening, visited the poor twice a week, and wrote letters on her knee by the fire in the evening.[21] Though many of Underhill's letters have been destroyed and others never retrieved, a good number of them remain and have been published in two different works: the first is a collection edited by Charles Williams (1945) which came out a mere four years after Underhill's death, and the most recent is a volume compiled by Carol Poston (2010) which fills in many of the gaps left by Williams' edition and includes a refreshed perspective on Underhill's career and personal life.[22] The importance Underhill placed on personal

[21] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 97-98.

[22] Poston also notes that some of the letters quoted in Lucy Menzies' unpublished biography are the only copies of this correspondence in existence. Apparently Menzies' nephew, in accordance with her will, burned all the Underhill letters. See Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, xvi.

encounter is reflected both in her spirituality and through her correspondence with friends, family, fans, directees, publishers, professional acquaintances, and trusted advisors.

Dana Greene, a scholar intimately acquainted with Underhill, makes this important observation about Evelyn's study of mystical theology and how it reflected her approach to the subject:

> It is, of course, easier to talk about her work and contribution, even though the person and her work are inextricably linked. I can remember when it first dawned on me what her contribution was. I was in the venerable Blackwell's bookstore in Oxford, England when across the room I saw the sign for the Used Book Section which was divided into subject areas. My eyes lighted on "second-hand theology." And I knew that that was the correct designation for much theology at least as I had experienced it - abstracted, remote, disconnected from life and hence used up and barren, second hand. The power of Underhill's writing was rather about first-hand theology, the raw experience of the personal encounter with the divine. It is her subject, first-hand theology if you will, that defines the importance of her contribution.[23]

Greene's inclusion of her moment of epiphany is telling because it serves as an apt illustration of the very point she is making. The person and the work cannot be separated. The fact that Greene was in Oxford - in a bookstore glancing at theology categories - adds something personal, and therefore, first-hand, to her conclusion. Her words carry more weight because they embody exactly what she is stating. In Underhill's case, this ability to live what she wrote showed through most clearly in her correspondence.

The vast amount of energy that she expended on writing personal letters may have been partially indicative of the time period. However, despite the fact that she

[23] Greene, "Lives Matter," 3.

referred to herself in typical self-deprecation as a "bad correspondent" [24] for her occasional tardiness, Underhill by all accounts appeared to be a very devoted and faithful letter-writer, despite a busy schedule. When writing to a friend, she insisted that she was available, asking her to "write any time if I can be of any use to you."[25] A few samples from her letters will serve to demonstrate the significance that personal encounter had in every area of Underhill's life.

In a letter of spiritual direction written to Margaret Robinson in 1908, where Underhill admitted that they were "both in a very confusing forest," she offered this advice on setting life in the direction of love:

> It seems to me that your immediate job must be to make this love active and operative right through your life – to live in the light of it all the while, and act by it all the while – to make it light up your relations with other people, with nature, with life, with your work, just as much as it lights up immediate communion with Our Lord. Try to see people by His light. *Then* they become 'real.' Nothing helps one so much as that.[26]

Here, Underhill underscored the necessity of love as it applied to all the relationships that one has in life, not only because it was a vital virtue, but because by it, people became more than objects or tasks. Later that year, she wrote again to Miss Robinson about a girls' Bible class that her friend was concerned about leading. Underhill advised: "Religion *cannot* be communicated without enthusiasm. They must see it in you before they will get any idea of it for themselves …"[27] The message of incarnation through encounter is clear here. Faith, according to Underhill, was most effectively conveyed by being a carrier of it. Integrity, by implication, then became a non-

[24] Letter to M. Robinson, November 20, 1907, in Williams, *Letters*, 69.
[25] Letter to Y.N., February 15, 1935, in Williams, *Letters*, 245.
[26] Letter to M. Robinson, January 16, 1908, in Williams, *Letters*, 72.
[27] Letter to M. Robinson, September 26, 1908, in Williams, *Letters,* 85.

negotiable component of authoritative teaching. This would become a cornerstone of Underhill's philosophy in her later retreat addresses. The retreats were by nature small groups in an intimate and personal setting. This type of audience allowed Underhill to be available to each person, in sharp contrast to the mostly impersonal and solitary world she had known as a writer at the beginning of her career; this difference changed the way she wrote and addressed people. In 1912, writing to a friend about the need for people to be educated about theology, she confirmed her preference for the personal approach: "I feel the ideal thing for – and for me, the only possible way – is to get people individually bit by bit, one by one, when a 'door is opened' to one."[28]

In another letter of spiritual direction in 1924, Underhill confronted the tendency towards pantheism in the woman to whom she was writing, and bluntly pointed out the problem with this vagueness of devotion. "What you are really short of is the conviction of personal responsibility to a personal God – and pantheism of course can never give you that … it isn't a sufficient religion for the human soul, which absolutely requires a relationship with a personal Object in which its own partial and imperfect personality is summed up and made complete."[29] The word "personal" appeared more and more frequently in her letters in the 1920s, reflecting a spiritual journey which was turning away from the abstract Reality and more and more becoming firmly grounded in the definite person of Christ. Two years before her death, this focus was clearer than ever in a letter Underhill wrote to a woman requesting help with her prayers. Underhill

[28] Letter to Mrs. Meyrick Heath, May 29, 1912, in Williams, *Letters*, 139.
[29] Letter to W.Y., June 20, 1924, in Williams, *Letters*, 155.

stated, “Prayer should never be regarded as a science or reduced to a system – that ruins it, because it is essentially a living and personal relationship, which tends to become more personal and also more simple, as one goes on.”[30] And this was exactly what Evelyn Underhill lived.

4.2 Her struggles

When listening to the life of Evelyn Underhill, it would be a mistake not to take a close look at some of the struggles that she faced in her life. It is important to note that the difficulties do not stand in contrast to her writing and thereby serve to weaken her effectiveness as a spiritual voice, but ultimately reinforce them. The problems that Underhill wrestled with very much informed her choice of subject matter, and the questions that plagued her at different stages of her life drove her to study and seek out the answers. A few of the early questions are easy to identify, such as the quest for meaning beyond the physical universe, and soon after that, what relation the known world had to the unknown world. These queries led her to read Neo-Platonic literature and when the inherent dualistic philosophy caused further questioning and some general dis-ease (especially evident in her novels) she turned to the writings of the mystics. The mystical writers and their talk of mystical union seemed to provide answers for her restlessness. When she wrote about mysticism, it was with confidence and assurance about the veracity and efficacy of her subject.

[30] Letter to S.P., April 12, 1939, in Williams, *Letters*, 271.

However, all was not well, for the ancient mystics could not comfort her when she was confronted with the great evils of the first war. The turmoil caused by these tragic events revealed that Underhill had virtually no spiritual support system. Underhill's letters, as well as her subsequent choice of topics, reflected how she dealt with this crisis as she quietly aligned herself with the Anglican Church, sought out a spiritual director, and began to address more pastoral topics. Her voice as a writer, for the most part, became much more orthodox and down to earth at this point.

Thanks to her notebooks from the 1920s, we can witness the intense internal turmoil that afflicted Underhill. Interestingly enough, having to battle these inner demons led to some of her most peaceful and uplifting writing in the form of retreat addresses. It is clear in many of the pages of the retreat talks that she was uttering words that she herself needed to hear and believe. Her choice of phrasing makes it plain that she identified with her audience and was calling them to join her in the pursuit of godliness. Here is an example of the inclusive, humble, and direct language she used:

> To come down to brass tacks, God loves the horrid man at the fish-shop, and the tiresome woman in the next flat, and the disappointing Vicar, and the mulish parent, and the contractor who has cut down the row of trees we loved to build a lot of revolting bungalows. God *loves*, not tolerates, these wayward, half-grown, self-centred spirits and seeks without ceasing to draw them into His love. And the first-fruit of His indwelling presence, the first sign that we are on His side and He on ours, must be at least a tiny bud of this Charity breaking the hard and rigid outline of our life.[31]

This was written in 1936 for the last formal retreat she gave, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, and stands as an example of where her spiritual journey had landed – at love. The inclusive language, mixing harsh reality with gentle grace, and inviting those we often consider

[31] Underhill, *Fruits of the Spirit*, 8.

outsiders into the world of God's love and by default, our love, is indicative of one who knew the arduous road necessary to get to that place. And to this path, we now turn our attention.

4.2.1 Finding a spiritual home

Underhill was baptized as a child into the Anglican Church, but her family was never what one would call devout or extremely religious. This left Evelyn free to explore the philosophies and worldviews current in her day. She soon found herself in a bit of a quagmire, wanting more depth in her interior life, but not sure where to find it. Perhaps it is best to let Underhill speak for herself about what led up to her conversion, as she explained it to a friend:

> You see, I wasn't brought up to religion really – except just in the formal way of course. So when the "youthful crash" arrived it caught me fair and square, and for 8 or 9 years I really believed myself to be an atheist. Philosophy brought me round to an intelligent and irresponsible sort of theism which I enjoyed thoroughly but which did not last long. Gradually the net closed in on me and I was driven nearer and nearer to Christianity – half of me wishing it were true and half resisting violently all the time. In those days I used to frequent both English and Roman churches and wish I knew *what* their secret was. Finally I went to stay for a few days at a Convent of Perpetual Adoration. The day after I came away, a good deal shaken but unconvinced, I was "converted" quite suddenly once and for all by an overpowering vision which had really no specific Christian elements, but yet convinced me that the Catholic Religion was true. It was so tightly bound up with (Roman) Catholicism, that I had no doubt, and have had none since (this happened between 4 and 5 years ago only), that that Church was my ultimate home. So strong is this conviction that to have any personal dealings with Anglicanism seems for me a kind of treachery. Unfortunately I allowed myself to be persuaded to wait a year before being received; and meanwhile the Modernist storm broke, with the result that now, being myself "modernist" on many points, I can't get in without suppressions and evasions to which I can't quite bring myself. But I can't accept Anglicanism instead: it seems an integrally different thing. So here I am, going to Mass and so on of course, but entirely deprived of sacraments.[32]

[32] Letter to Mrs. Meyrick Heath, May 14, 1911, in Williams, *Letters*, 125-26.

This letter from May of 1911 provides quite a vivid picture of Underhill's spiritual journey up to that point, and though she was only thirty-six at this writing, the road had already been quite a rocky one. There is a sense of restlessness and homelessness throughout the letter, beginning with her spiritually ambiguous heritage. There is no detail as to what the "youthful crash" was that she referred to, but we can assume that it was probably the usual questioning and exploring period that maturing young adults go through when searching for a worldview they can claim as their own. This individuating process led her to assume the moniker of atheist for a time, which lasted through much of her twenties, it would seem. From here, she moved on to philosophy, becoming a fan of Plato, Plotinus and Neo-platonic thought. Even though she said this period did not last long, the influence of it was heavily felt, especially in *Mysticism,* and continued to impact her writing for many years to come.

However, by this time (1911) Underhill had come to recognize a deity, obvious from her conversion account, and no doubt strengthened by her interest in mysticism. Due in part to the relative newness of this development and her previous immersion in philosophy, the God she referred to was somewhat remote and not addressed in a decidedly personal way (though there were glimpses of the Person here and there in *Mysticism*, especially when she quoted the mystics).[33] The divine entity was usually named with somewhat undefined and purposefully abstract words such as "Absolute," "Reality," and "Truth." It is important to note that Underhill was definitely theocentric at this stage and found the person of Christ difficult to relate to. Even as late as 1932,

[33] For an example, see Underhill, *Mysticism*, 346.

when writing *The Golden Sequence*, she admitted the trouble this leaning still brought to her: "I'm so instinctively pulled to the Theocentric side, and my soul goes off so naturally in that direction when left to itself, that anything I do, try to do, is sure to be thin on the Christocentric side. … You see I come to Christ through God, whereas quite obviously lots of people come to God through Christ."[34]

Did this lack of incarnational emphasis have any relation to her being an outsider to the church, the "body" of Christ so to speak, for many years? Or did her downplaying of the immanent Christ mean that she also downplayed the role of the church in her spiritual formation? Perhaps family pressures were still a factor which kept her from committing to a church during the early years after her conversion. Or was it simply a matter of intellectual integrity that forced her into this spiritual borderland? There are no conclusive answers to these questions and likely, the truth is somewhere to be found in a mixture of the factors mentioned above and perhaps others that we may not be aware of. Whatever the case, the lack of Christocentric devotion would have invariably contributed to her spiritual drifting, a factor she made reference to in her correspondence with von Hügel.[35]

There is no doubt that placing herself under the direction of von Hügel around the same time that she formally joined the Anglican church in the early 1920s provided stability and strength that had long been lacking in her spirituality. Some might have questioned her alignment, especially since she had been so strongly devoted to the

[34] Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill,* 171.
[35] See Greene, *Fragments,* 121. Here Underhill alluded to a new appreciation of the Sacramental Life after she embraced the centrality of Christ.

Roman Catholic Church despite its close-minded attitude to the Modernists and was known to regularly attend Mass. However, once the decision was made, Underhill did not waver. She believed that it was where God had placed her.[36] She was no longer a "freelance and outsider" as she had been in the Roman Catholic Church.[37] Not being able to fully participate in a church community had, she admitted, given her somewhat of an "anti-institutional bias" causing her to emphasize the internal aspects to the neglect of the communal context.[38] However, through the aid of von Hügel and his successors, this bias soon disappeared. Her dedication to and appreciation for the church universal came through clearly and maturely in her book, *Worship*, which was replete with references to various expressions of corporate adoration and communion.

She came to refer to herself as Anglo-Catholic and soon became immersed in her retreat work within the Anglican context. The opportunity of spiritual service solidified her commitment to that particular tradition, even though she still held many of the Roman Catholic practices dear. A letter she wrote to Dom John Chapman,[39] a spiritual advisor, stated her position:

> … the *whole* point to me is in the fact that our Lord has put me *here*, keeps on giving me more and more jobs to do for souls here, and has never given me orders to move. In fact, when I have been inclined to think of this, something has always stopped me: and if I did it, it would be purely an act of spiritual self-interest and self-will. I know what the push of God is like, and should obey it if it came – at least I trust and believe so. When … I put myself under Baron von Hügel's direction, five years before his death, he went

[36] Greene suggests that the fact that Underhill's first experience of belonging to a faith community (her baptism) occurred within the Anglican context probably contributed to her decision to embrace that particular tradition. See Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 83.
[37] Greene, *Fragments*, 108.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Dom John Chapman was raised an Anglican, converted to the Roman Catholic Church and became the abbot of Downside Abbey, a Benedictine congregation. He served as Underhill's intermittent spiritual advisor from approximately 1929 to 1932.

> into all this and said I must never think of moving on account of my own religious preferences, comforts or advantages – but only if so decisively called by God that I felt it wrong to resist –and he was satisfied that up to date I had not received this call. Nor have I done so since. I promised him that if ever I did receive it I should obey.[40]

What is interesting to note in this letter from 1931 is the beautiful balance between her firm conviction that she was exactly where she ought to be and the humble willingness to move on if God called her. The juxtaposition of her will in contrast to God's will reveals how centred and stable she had become. She affirmed that there would be no movement based on her own spiritual wants, only in response to the push of God. The quest for certainty which plagued her first letters to von Hügel in 1921 had given way to firm dedication to the work at hand; the emphasis was no longer on settling her troubled spirit, but on caring for the troubled souls around her.

For Underhill, the search for a spiritual home finally came to an end when she was in her mid-forties. It had taken her the better part of fifteen years since her conversion experience to find a "corner [to] fit into, and people with whom [she] could sympathize and work."[41] This important step into the Anglican fold impacted her spiritual journey in a significant way. What had begun as a personal quest for inner equilibrium had culminated in a place of stability and support; here, she had the opportunity for a very productive ministry of intercession, teaching, and counseling. Underhill advised a friend on the difference between the isolated pursuit of knowledge and devoted participation in the church community, no doubt learned through living both of them and finding the first sadly lacking: "But no amount of solitary reading

[40] Letter to Dom John Chapmen, June 9, 1931, in Williams, *Letters*, 195-196.
[41] From a letter to von Hügel, 1922. Quoted in Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 83.

makes up for humble immersion in the life and worship of the church."[42] Though she recognized the imperfections in the institution, she insisted on working on these from the inside instead of criticizing them from the outside.[43] As is often the case when one is confronted with an important truth, she wrote about this principle (the letter referenced is from 1915) several years before she applied it in her own life.

Underhill's relationship to the church was a complex one. After her initial experience of conversion in 1907, she wanted to belong to and consider herself fully part of a community of faith, yet many obstacles, both practical and personal, served to delay and frustrate that desire. Nevertheless, the years she spent as an outsider certainly served some purpose: perhaps she would not have thrust herself so willingly into the hands of von Hügel who shaped so much of her spirituality, nor slipped so quietly and, it appears, seamlessly into the role of a practicing Anglican. And perhaps her later appreciation of the Russian Orthodox tradition and the completion of a book wholly devoted to corporate worship would not have materialized had she not tasted the wilderness of detachment for so many years. We will never know the exact implications of her rather long and wandering trek towards a spiritual home, but some of her remarks years later seem to indicate another byproduct: a lingering, sweet affection for the church that persisted despite ongoing ecclesial issues. She wrote to a friend in 1932:

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[42] Letter to A.B., September 22, 1937, in Williams, *Letters*, 261.

[43] Underhill wrote, "Better for a mystic to stay within the institution and urge it along from within, than sting it from without as if one was an 'enthusiastic spiritual mosquito.'" See "The Mystic and the Corporate Life," in Evelyn Underhill, *Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1920), 44.

> As to feeling rather dismayed by the appearance of the Church Visible at the moment – that is inevitable I'm afraid to some extent. But keep your inner eye on the Church Invisible – what the Baron used to call "the great centralities of religion." That is what really takes one up into itself "with angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven," not only the Vicar and the curate and the Mothers' Union Committee. But there is something entrancing, don't you think, in a supernatural society, so wide and generous and really Catholic, that it can mop up all these – even the most depressing – and still remain the Bride of Christ?"[44]

One finds in these words a great respect for the mysterious and divine appointment of the Church as Christ's beloved. Underhill had indeed come a long way - from an uncertainty about the verity and nature of God to identifying herself as part of the Bride of Christ.

4.2.2 Self-criticism

The confident writing style that characterized Underhill's professional work is very much a contrast to some of the woeful and plaintive language that we find in her notebooks. One must be careful to situate what is revealed in these notebook pages within the context of her overall positive spiritual journey as described in the previous section. To be certain, she experienced dark times and troublesome patches, but it would be a great disservice to Underhill to conclude that she was depressed, morosely self-critical, and a relentless spiritual hypochondriac. Having said that, what one finds in her notebooks does to some extent hint at some of these unhealthy descriptors. Greene, who edited Underhill's notebooks, admits that they are filled with references to "personal unworthiness," especially regarding her attachment and "claimfulness" in certain relationships.[45] Von Hügel's advice to Underhill will be dealt with more fully in

[44] Letter to G.F., 1932, in Williams*, Letters*, 207-8.
[45] Greene, *Fragments*, 30.

the next chapter, but a small excerpt from one of his letters to Underhill regarding this matter of attachment will be helpful here in putting these harsh self-recriminations in perspective:

> I believe this great vehemence & its offshoots to spring, not only from the ardour of your natural temperament but also (perhaps even very largely) from the too intellectual character of your religion. Religious sentimentality "makes you sick"; yes! But if you can get a greater variety of homely emotions & activities into your religion, you very possibly will lose the hunger for the *ardour* of human affection.[46]

If von Hügel was correct, and he most certainly had a good understanding of where Underhill had come from as well as an awareness of her struggles at the time, then the Neo-platonic demand for detachment was fighting against her natural desire for human affection.[47] As well, her determination to reign in her religion to fit an intellectual function was sabotaging her spiritual progress. Because she believed her emotions and strong feelings hindered her religious pursuits, she tried to squelch them. However, instead of being stamped out, these sentiments flared up again and again in inappropriate places. The result was that Underhill tried to suppress them even more, and the vicious circle, fed by guilt and self-reproach, spiraled ever downward. Greene observes that "whatever [Underhill's] emotional needs, it is clear that she had no sense, other than self-recrimination and punishment, of how to extricate herself from the psychic turmoil."[48]

Her spiritual guide, von Hügel, gave her advice which would be repeated often in his letters to her. He urged her not to fight against these strong feelings in trying to

[46] Correspondence between Underhill and von Hügel, Evelyn Underhill Collection, Virginia Theological Seminary Archives, Box 03, Folder 79.
[47] Greene makes this connection in her biography of Underhill and I believe it is a very important and insightful one. See Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 105.
[48] Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 105.

master them, but to counteract them with a "gentle turning to God."[49] This simple phrase carried two important keys to counteract Underhill's ongoing malaise and highlighted the Baron's genius for getting to the heart of the matter. First, von Hügel contrasted her vehemence, both in the intensity of her attachment and in her fierce attempts to master it, with gentleness. Self-effort had to be replaced by the fruit of the Spirit. Second, he redirected her focus. Underhill's preoccupation was with the unhealthy relationships she had developed and her failure at "escaping from the control of [her] own likes and dislikes."[50] Von Hügel pointed her outward instead of inward; an object of worship (God) had to displace her object of derision (herself).

Evelyn's spiritual director also instructed her to avoid strain as much as possible; this was his way of warning her away from the intense self-scrutiny which caused her much stress and anxiety. An entry from Underhill's 1923 notebook, part of a self-examination probably done at a retreat, shows with what severity she tended to view herself:

> I am critical – fastidious – rigid in my attitude to uncongenial people – don't try to love. … Like to be thought well of. Allow Christians to think me a far better and more established Christian than I am. They see I care for Christ now, and I conceal what a disloyal cur I've been. Am satirical, censorious. Enjoy derogatory tales of others. This is a horrible vice in any servant of Jesus.[51]

The list goes on for another lengthy page, itemizing shortcoming after shortcoming. It is somewhat uncomfortable to read these private confessions of a woman who was at this point in her life a very successful author and sought-after lecturer on Christian

[49] Correspondence between Underhill and von Hügel, VTS, Box 03, Folder 79.
[50] Greene, *Fragments*, 86.
[51] Greene, *Fragments*, 44.

spirituality. Before one jumps to any conclusions, these harsh words must be taken together with the subsequent entries in that same year.

In contrast to her intense self-loathing and criticism, Underhill also recorded some of her most profound and beautiful spiritual experiences in the green notebook that spanned the years 1923-1924. In an entry from October 31, 1923, she expounded on the deep Peace of God and its power to deliver one from unrest and anxiety.[52] During Advent just over a month later, she wrote about the "heavenliness" of a recent prolonged illness, mentioning that it had "taught [her] a not intense and vivid, but gentle, constant and peaceful dwelling in the Presence of God."[53] Around that same time, a notation that carried some ecstatic elements illustrated the tension she was experiencing between receiving God's love and reviling her own sinfulness.

> Today, abruptly, in five minutes of prayer I knew the Ocean of Love – the "boundless living substance" – through me, and all of us, immersing us, one Love. … Incredible joy – one feels in such a moment one could never allow oneself an act or feeling below this – that anything but love is impossible – because it's *all* and all GOD – but I *shall* incessantly fall into separateness again. How wonderful that weak and rotten little creatures like me can see this even though one can't "sustain one's gaze."[54]

It appeared that Love was winning the battle for her attention, and even her acknowledgement that this brief sensation would depart was bathed in a sense of wonder at the generous gift that was contained in even the briefest glimpse of joy. As she continued to follow von Hügel's advice to gently turn towards God, there were many more entries that spoke of progress in prayer, peacefulness and a sense of God's redemption.

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[52] Greene, *Fragments*, 54.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Greene, *Fragments*, 55.

However, after von Hügel died in 1925, Underhill found herself floundering again, sinking into the same old patterns and experiencing a very black period which apparently peaked around 1929-1930. She called herself "an unstable pig,"[55] mentioned that she was like "a spoilt child,"[56] and with a sense of discouragement wrote that "[a]ll the faults recognized in last retreat still rampant."[57] She turned to a succession of spiritual directors, seeking help for her troubled spirit. One of the particularly distressing situations that arose during this time was her changing relationship with close friend and secretary, Clara Smith, [58] which resulted in an agonizing distancing between the two and at the same time, the unwelcome "emotional clinging" of another friend. The attachment issue was surfacing again, and she noted her "persistent failure" in managing these affections.[59]

A year after this "spiritual blackness," Underhill was again at retreat, this time at St. Mary's Abbey. While the tone of her entry from this time is not completely triumphant, there is certainly a good deal of hope evident in its lines, and the paragraphs indicate a readiness to turn to God instead of constantly focusing on her many faults. All in all, she was able to put the past difficulties in perspective and see God at work in them:

> In spite of all this, [I] have experienced the power and help of God this year as never before (a) in delivering me from psychic and emotional storms (b) in filling me with strength to do a retreat when exhausted by illness (c) giving the interior knowledge of

[55] Greene, *Fragments*, 87.
[56] Greene, *Fragments,* 88.
[57] Greene, *Fragments*, 90.
[58] Clara, who often attended Underhill's retreats, converted to Roman Catholicism around this time and this would naturally have meant that she could no longer look to Underhill for direction. See Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 99 and *Fragments*, 88.
[59] Greene, *Fragments,* 88.

> when I must accept helplessness, or when He wills me to make an effort in His service. If I am to retain these gifts it can only be through humbleness, simplicity and a great self-oblivion, all qualities I admire but haven't got.[60]

The succeeding entries carry much the same tone. There was still a lingering tendency to pick at her imperfections, especially her lack of love, but there was also the underlying sense that she had found some measure of peace. In 1932 she placed herself under the spiritual direction of Father Reginald Somerset Ward.[61] Here, finally, she found someone to take on the "fatherly" role that had previously been held by her beloved von Hügel. Ward's consistent presence in her life proved to be a stabilizing force, and though her notebook reveals that she still marked areas where she needed improvement, the black despondency had been left behind.

In a final entry, written around 1937, Underhill noted that along with a "[n]ew sense of penetrating presence and action of God and my own subjugation" came a realization that it was time to lay down what she called her "self-chosen work."[62] She gave no retreats after 1936 and her writing slowly declined. At the end of these notebooks, we see an Underhill who had diminished in many ways: her health was tenuous, her career was nearly done, and the energy and verve evident in such abundance throughout much of her life were quite reduced. However, there was an aspect of this diminishing that she willingly embraced. Among her final notes here, we find this simple phrase, "[h]umbled under [the] mighty hand of God," which revealed

[60] An entry from May 1930, Greene, *Fragments*, 91.
[61] Father Ward, an Anglican, became her regular confessor and spiritual director until her death in 1941. On meeting him, she wrote that she felt "absolutely in the presence of a specialist working for the Love of God, & brimming over with common sense!" See Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 251 and Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 104.
[62] Greene, *Fragments*, 104.

her contentment with this new, smaller place in life, a fitting final chapter to her spiritual journey.[63]

4.3 Recurring themes in her writings

The stark details of Evelyn Underhill's spiritual struggles would never come to the forefront in her books, but there were certain themes which appeared often in her professional writing. These themes, I believe, reflect the major motifs in her spiritual life and merit a closer look. Though there were numerous subjects that she came back to again and again, I will only address two of them here.

The first has often been identified as ecumenicalism or inclusivity.[64] Underhill cast the net wide in her first major work, *Mysticism,* by including not only the Christian mystics such as Teresa, Augustine, Francis, Catherine of Genoa, George Fox, and Boehme, but also referencing Sufi writers, Hindu and Kabalistic thought, and quoting from poets and philosophers such as Blake, Dante, Whitman, Aristotle, Plato, and Plotinus. However, she did draw the line at Buddhism, stating that it was not purely mystical due to its incorporation of ultimate annihilation which is at odds with mystic union.[65] The generosity with which Underhill wrote about her subject remained remarkably intact over the years. She wrote *Worship* (1936) long after she had positioned herself firmly within the faith-cloister of the Church of England, but she

[63] Ibid.
[64] See Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 5.
[65] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 170-171.

nevertheless gave space to address worship practices from Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Congregationalist, Methodist, and Quaker traditions.

There is no doubt that Underhill was open-minded in her spirituality, a Modernist of the best sort who quite unintentionally broadened the sometimes suffocating, narrow definition of Christianity that the Church had a habit of burdening people with in various times. However, the adjective "ecumenical" seems too limited to explain her enduring tolerance, equanimity, and general lack of judgment toward others from different religious backgrounds.[66] Certainly, one would have expected a tightening up of her influences when she had a conversion experience in 1907, but aside from an infusion of interest in mysticism, this was simply not the case. She continued to read widely, and though she became more critical and discriminating in her use of sources, she never disregarded a source because it was not overtly Christian.

Earlier, I mentioned Greene's observation that Underhill came to a realization of God through her great appreciation of beauty. I believe this observation is vital to understanding where Underhill's generosity of spirit came from. In beholding the vastness and diversity of beauty, Underhill inherently comprehended the boundless nature of God. While leaders in the Roman Catholic Church spent their energies defining boundaries and outlining the limits of religion through various encyclicals, Underhill tramped up hills and through gardens, sailed on the open water with her father, and admired sunlit architecture. The Absolute, for her, was expansive enough to overcome any shortcomings that various seekers might have. She wrote: "… in every

[66] Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 5.

form of worship – even the least adequate – the positive element, man's upward and outward movement of admiration, self-oblation and dependence, exceeds in importance the negative element which is inevitably present with it."[67] The upward thrust of a person's spirit toward God remained the focus in all her writings, and this meant that as much as possible, she never allowed human pettiness and religious particularities to clutter up the foreground.

In a lecture delivered in 1930, one can see how she reconciled the divine and human elements of religion (and mysticism) by calling on the expansiveness of the Divine to enlarge the very human and limited experience of the mystic. The generous nature of God is reflected in her benevolent language:

> For him [the genuine mystic], every church will be a bridge-church, and all the various experiences of religion graded and partial revelations of the Being of Beings, the one full Reality – God. Conscious of the double nature of his own experience, of the two strands which are present in that incarnate poem we call human life, he is not much troubled by the crude and imperfect means which may be used by religion to convey its ineffable truths: for the most childish and the most sophisticated images may be equally far from representing the holy reality, yet equally able to convey it. The great thing is that the conveyance should take place, and in a way that can reach a wide variety of souls. For this, he knows, it must be combined with familiar material which these souls can understand. And that means an amalgam in which there is something of spirit, and also something of sense: something divine and something human too. It means, in fact, incarnation.[68]

Underhill's spiritual quest began with an appreciation of beauty and culminated in a love for Christ, but the boundlessness of the Absolute and the influence of that vastness remained a constant throughout her life.

The second theme that was liberally sprinkled throughout her forty-year writing career was that of the relationship between the sisters, Mary and Martha, and the two

[67] Underhill, *Worship*, xii.
[68] Underhill, "The Philosophy of Contemplation," in *Mixed Pasture*, 21.

sides of spirituality they represent: the contemplative and the active. One of the mystics Underhill frequently quoted, Teresa of Avila, maintained that in order to "give our Lord a perfect service Martha and Mary must combine."[69] Perhaps Teresa's influence was partially responsible for Underhill's affection for the New Testament sisters and their frequent appearance in her works where she used the siblings to illustrate the tension between being and doing. At times she inserted the sisters into her talks with a homely, humourous example such as this one: "No use getting Martha that splendid up-to-date gas cooker if you have to shove Mary out of the way to find a place where it can stand."[70] Sometimes the sisters' differences were highlighted, as in the previous example, and in other instances, she insisted that the sisters not be separated because their presence together was necessary for a holistic life and unified spirituality.

> Martha and Mary do live together in the house of the soul. One is absorbed in multiplicity; the other is gathered into unity. Martha, the extrovert, is busy and loquacious. Mary, the introvert, keeps her secret to herself. One acts, the other adheres. Together they witness to the two-fold action of the psyche; and the two-fold character of that world, both temporal and eternal, in which the psyche is placed.[71]

As one reads the numerous references to the two women in Underhill's books and articles, we get the feeling that Underhill knew these sisters well; they were like family members to her. She identified with both of them in different ways: her busy writing schedule and a heavy retreat workload showed her tendency to be like Martha, always attending to some important task. Nevertheless, Underhill was also kin to Mary, longing for that mystical encounter with the Divine and cultivating a life of prayer and

[69] Teresa of Avila as quoted by Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 164.
[70] Evelyn Underhill, "The Ideals of the Ministry of Women," in *Mixed Pasture*, 117.
[71] Underhill, "Philosophy of Contemplation," in *Mixed Pasture*, 14-15.

contemplation. The two women were both dear to her, and the many situations in which Underhill placed them revealed how three-dimensional and nuanced her understanding of them was.

In *Mysticism*, she verged on reversing their usual roles by drawing attention to the hard work of contemplation: "Mary has chosen the better, not the idler part. … It remains a paradox of the mystics that the passivity at which they appear to aim is really a state of the most intense activity: more, that where it is wholly absent no great creative action can take place."[72] At a retreat twenty years later, she brought out another aspect of the interaction between the two: she lightly chided Martha, not for working when she should be at Jesus' feet, but for neglecting to find God in the pots and the pans. Martha let her "fuss" handicap her capacity for God, Underhill indicated, and she urged the reader not to toss out all of Martha's jobs to go and sit with Mary, but to find God in whatever one was doing.[73]

The two sisters also made an appearance in a talk about different kinds of prayer: "The prayer of adoration and the prayer of cooperation represent as it were, the Martha and Mary of the interior life. … But like other sisters, they don't always get along together. It is above all through the hidden communion with One who bids us to perfect worship and perfect service that we shall learn to adjust their claims."[74] Underhill was an only child, so obviously she was not writing from personal experience. However, perhaps one could suggest that Mary and Martha served as Underhill's adopted sisters:

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[72] Underhill, *Mysticism,* 50.
[73] Evelyn Underhill, *The Mount of Purification,* The Inner Life Series. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960), 9.
[74] Brame, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 191.

they seemed always to be present to remind her not to err by either turning too far into passivity or too far into exertion: "For the way of the Cross means effort and surrender: the effort only made possible by the surrender and the surrender by the effort."[75]

Mary and Martha served to instruct Underhill as well as comfort her. They rebuked and challenged her, and along with her beloved mystics, showed her what it looked like to live a full and integrated life in close proximity to Jesus.

[75] Underhill, *Mount of Purification*, 81.

Chapter 5: Learning from Evelyn Underhill

When studying someone that lived in a time other than our own, we are always at a disadvantage because first-hand encounter is not possible. The closest that one can come to encountering the person of Underhill, aside from reading what she wrote, is to hear what those who knew her have to say. A valuable supply of information regarding Underhill comes from the testimonies of her friends and acquaintances who describe everything from the quality of her voice to her favourite flowers. However, if one wants to discover how she lived her spirituality, perhaps the best place to turn is to Baron Friedrich von Hügel, her spiritual advisor, and to some of her spiritual directees. These were the people who truly had first-hand knowledge of Evelyn Underhill, and through them, we can learn from her as well.

5.1 The testimony of friends

We look first to Evelyn Underhill's friends and acquaintances whose observations will serve to nuance our understanding of her. Here, we will catch a glimpse of the woman, the friend, the teacher, the writer, and the spiritual guide. Since Underhill cannot correct or comment on these words, it is to some extent a look at the unedited person. In a talk given in 1991 by Lady Laura Eastaugh,[1] we find this glimpse into what it was like to know Evelyn Underhill:

[1] Lady Laura Eastaugh, whose husband served as Bishop of Kensington and Peterborough, was the third daughter of the Earl of Selborne. She and her husband were neighbours of Evelyn and Hubert Stuart Moore. Lady Laura took over Underhill's prayer group after Underhill and fellow member Agatha Norman died. She also undertook conducting several retreats in the Underhill style. Lady Laura died in 1999. See Grace Adolphsen Brame, "Tribute to Lady Laura," *Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter* vol 9 no 1

> She was naturally pale and slight, a woman of middle height. On the street probably no one would have noticed her particularly for she was the kind of person who does not 'light up' until in contact with people. When she did 'light up' – as she always did in any conversation or address – then her face was aglow with intelligence and humour, or affection. She was a good and witty talker, and a deeply sympathetic person. She enjoyed social occasions and was welcome in many different circles. She was a very hospitable person and a party at her house was a delightful event for all her guests. At the time her dress was fashionable and up to date … but she had her hair cut short not so much for reasons of fashion, I understand, as to dampen fulsome praise from some of her admirers![2]

Lady Laura also recounts two occasions on which friends noted a mysterious light surrounding Underhill. The first was just after Evelyn had been very ill, and the second was during a night watch prayer service at Pleshey.[3] Though it is tempting to dismiss these stories as bordering on hagiography, it is important to note that they were not widely spread accounts, and, as indicated by Lady Laura, they were accepted by her cherished friends as incidents confirming the reflection of God's glory which they already saw evident Evelyn's life. Eastaugh succinctly states the case with this sentence: "What she taught she lived."[4]

According to Lady Laura, Underhill was very approachable and never flaunted her scholarship or knowledge.[5] Daphne Martin-Hurst, a frequenter of Underhill's retreats from 1929 onward, confirms how available Underhill made herself. She also

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(1999), 4, accessed March 25, 2011, http://www.evelynunderhill.org/newsletter/EUA_1999/complete_1999_opt.pdf.

[2] Talk given by Lady Laura Eastaugh, June 1, 1991,VTS, Box 06, Folder 34.

[3] Lady Laura quotes from Olive Wyon's book, *Desire for God* (out of print), where she tells the story of a friend who visited Underhill in her home and wrote, "As I entered she got up and turned round – looking so fragile as though 'a puff of wind really might blow her away' but light simply streamed from her face illuminated with a radiant smile." The second incident was recounted by Agatha Norman who observed the phenomenon in 1933 when she came into the chapel at Pleshey.

[4] Talk given by Lady Laura, 1991. VTS, Box 06, Folder 34.

[5] Notes from Dana Greene's conversation with Lady Laura Eastaugh, May 16, 1986, VTS, Box 8, Folder 7.

observes that Evelyn loved spontaneity and was "not churchy, but fun."[6] Among her favourite flowers were larkspur and delphiniums, a fact which would have been obvious to retreat attendees because Underhill always arranged to have flowers at these weekends to add to the contemplative and worshipful atmosphere.

Another good friend of Underhill's was Agatha Norman, a theologian who first encountered Underhill when Evelyn gave a lecture at King's College in 1928 and Norman was a theological student there. Norman also remarks on Underhill's great sense of humour,[7] indicating that she never gave off holy airs. Her manner was decidedly human, approachable, and responsive, though she was known to be somewhat of a tease.[8] Norman also mentions that Evelyn's husband, Hubert, was very proud of her, though he never participated in her religious life, and that she was a gracious and competent hostess on his behalf. There were many visitors at the Stuart Moore residence, people great and small, including author T.S. Eliot and many young friends she had made through her retreats.[9] On a slightly somber note, Norman indicates that after Underhill gained some popularity through her writing, certain friends "dropped her."

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[6] Notes from Dana Greene's conversation with Daphne Martin-Hurst, May 22, 1986, VTS, Box 8, Folder 9.
[7] Here are a few examples of Underhill's humour and wit found in her correspondence. In a letter while on vacation in Italy, she wrote: "After living in a hotel full of Italians, I fully understand why St. Catherine shut herself in one room for three years – but it wouldn't have been much good unless she had a soundproof door." Williams, *Letters*, 158. In 1927, she mentioned one interaction from a recent talk she gave: "X. considered the Saints would have been so much more useful if they had been full of beans and had lived longer and gone about and met more people. I said, from that point of view a mere three years ministry in Galilee instead of a prolonged tour through the Roman Empire did seem a pity." Williams, *Letters*, 333.
[8] Dana Greene's notes from conversation with Agatha Norman, June 16, 1984, VTS, Box 8, Folder 12.
[9] Ibid.

Another retreatant-turned-friend, Renee Tickell, indicates that though there was a great deal of reserve in British society at the time, one never had to feel shy with Underhill. She was adept at making people laugh and feel at ease. Her concern at the retreats was not just with spiritual aspects, but she took special care to see that everyone had plenty of food. According to Tickell, Underhill's genius was the ability to fuse ordinary life with spiritual aspects.[10] When describing Underhill as a speaker, Tickell mentions her gentle voice, her clarity of thought, as well as her directness and unpretentious manner.[11] There is no doubt that Evelyn Underhill was a clever and engaging individual, someone whom long-time acquaintance Lucy Menzies referred to as "an enchanting friend."[12] Perhaps these words encompass much of what has been said about her, indicating her love of people and a genuine, charismatic ability to capture their attention and affection.

5.2 Receiving spiritual direction

Von Hügel said, "Souls are never mere dittos," and this gives some sense of the individual care and approach he took toward each person who sought out his assistance.[13] Underhill first came into contact with von Hügel when he wrote her a letter after the publication of *Mysticism*. His note offered congratulations as well as some suggestions for revision in which he was willing to offer his assistance if she could delay

[10] Dana Greene's notes from conversation with Renee Tickell, May 1986, VTS, Box 8, Folder 15.
[11] Dana Greene's notes from conversation with Renee Tickell, May 23, 1988, VTS, Box 8, Folder 16.
[12] Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill,* 29.
[13] Friedrich von Hügel, *Letters from Baron Friedrich von Hügel to a Niece* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), xxix.

the printing of the forthcoming edition by a month until his schedule was free.[14] While this collaboration never happened, Underhill was obviously taken by his knowledge of the subject and his willingness to guide her. She wrote to J.A. Herbert in September of 1911, saying, "… I have become the friend (or rather, disciple and adorer) of Von Hügel. He is the most wonderful personality I have ever known – so saintly, so truthful, sane and tolerant. I feel very safe and happy sitting in his shadow, and he has been most awfully kind to me."[15] This sense of safety, along with her continued contact with him, was no doubt instrumental in her decision to approach him ten years later when she suffered a spiritual crisis.[16]

After that initial letter in 1911, we find evidence of Underhill's continuing interaction with him through the frequent occurrence of references to von Hügel's advice in her correspondence. In a letter to J.A. Herbert (who had written her a rather harsh and critical letter after *The Mystic Way* was published), she indicated her growing deference to her future spiritual director, demonstrating that he was already serving as her counselor in certain matters.

> I had a long talk with the Baron before he left for Italy – much about your letter, which had disturbed him considerably – and a firm but gentle lecture on my own Quakerish leanings! His main point seems to be that such interior religion is all very well for our exalted moments, but will fail us in the ordinary dull jog-trot of daily life, and is therefore not a 'whole religion' for men who are not 'pure spirit.'[17]

[14] See von Hügel's letter in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 131-132.
[15] Letter to J.A. Herbert, September 16, 1911, in Williams, *Letters*, 129.
[16] An excellent and detailed look at Baron von Hügel as a spiritual director in relation to Underhill can be found in Douglas Steere's introduction to Friedrich von Hügel, *Spiritual Counsel and Letters*, Douglas V. Steere, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).
[17] Letter to J.A. Herbert, 1913?, in Williams, *Letters,* 144.

In these words, we can read von Hügel's protectiveness of her, as well as notice his firm correction. The combination of the two was life-changing for Evelyn. Later she would write, "Under God, I owe him my whole spiritual life, and there would be much more of it than there is, if I had been more courageous and stern with myself and followed his directions more thoroughly."[18] Von Hügel's relationship with Underhill was fatherly in many ways: he could be "affectionate and caring" at times, yet "bracing and patriarchal" when he felt this would serve the purpose.[19] In his response to her first letter from 1921 in which she had laid bare her inner turmoil, his instructions sought to put her mind at ease regarding matters which were worrying her. The kind and humble tone with which he concluded the letter said almost as much, if not more, about his skillful capacity as a spiritual director than the specific directives he offered:

> Do not I pray you, if ever you feel at all clearly that I could help you in any way – even if by only silently listening to such troubles and complications as God may send you – do not, because I am busy, shrink from coming to me, or letting me come to you. We are both very busy, so we have each the guarantee that we will not take up each other's time without good cause. But, such good cause arising, it would, it will be, nothing but consolation to me, if you let me help as much as ever you feel the need. I will pray my little best for you, that God may bless and keep you along this path – so safe and so sound – and which (at least in time) will bring you consolations of a depth and richness far surpassing the old ones. And do not forget me before God.[20]

The gentle tone in his initial response established that he was committed to her improvement and sensitive to her fragile state; it certainly would have reassured her that the respect between them was mutual. As the relationship developed, the trust between them did as well, and von Hügel was able to be more firm and direct with her. During the sessions when she visited von Hügel in his home, he directed her to sit in an

[18] Letter to Dom John Chapman, June 9, 1931, in Williams, *Letters*, 196.
[19] Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 79.
[20] Quoted in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 70.

uncomfortable chair which faced the light, the roles of director and directee clearly delineated by the arrangement. Interestingly, when someone Underhill counseled made a complaint about her apparent harshness, she hinted at the forthrightness and severity with which von Hügel sometimes addressed her: "You should see my old man dusting me down! You are all very lightly dealt with."[21]

Many of Baron von Hügel's directing methods can be observed in letters written to his niece, Gwen, who was also a recipient of his meticulous and patient spiritual care. In a letter dated January 20, 1922, he gave a detailed account of a lady he had recently spent a good deal of time trying to help. Though he never mentions Underhill by name, the date and the details quickly make it obvious to us that when he was talking about "a woman who has much religious influence with many souls," he was referring to Evelyn.[22] In this particular letter, we are given an overview of von Hügel's assessment of Underhill's situation and the gist of his direction during these critical first few months. The letter reveals much about both von Hügel and Underhill, and is worth quoting here at length.

> [If] she [Underhill] succeeds in becoming more harmonious and more deep in herself, [she] will do much pure good instead of as now, I think, not a little harm mixed with some good. She asked me to help her in all her spiritual views, practices, etc. First she wrote me out – very humbly and simply – as to where she stood, etc. I drew up, in response, a rough set of rules and proposals which she came here for me to develop to her. She was then asked to let me have a second report as to how the proposals struck her for direct execution in her life. And the second report she then furnished was carefully criticized by me in my final advice to her, which grew into a bulky affair. It was impossible to be much shorter with a person who has read very much and thought very much; who began as a Pantheistically-inclined Agnostic; and who, although she now, I am happy to say, goes to Anglican Holy Communion, and indeed also to Mass, and even

[21] From Lucy Menzies' unpublished biography, cited in Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 79.
[22] Friedrich von Hügel, *Letters to a Niece* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 244.

> to Benediction at the Carmelites here, never, I found, prays to Our Lord; indeed she declared that she never could do so! – She has undertaken to carry out, in great simplicity, the proposals which I ended by making very definite. She would strive gently to bring consistency into her life, by at least thinking of Our Lord at Holy Communion; and she would give as much time to visiting, and to attending to, the poor, as ever she could without neglecting other duties. She has settled now to give two afternoons a week to them; and to try and learn by their needs – the need of religion of a definitely historical kind - the need of Our Lord, His Life, His Death, His Sacred Person. She is to report at midsummer how things have gone. My Gwen; you who have the great grace to love and to worship Christ our Lord, pray for this soul, please. I promise to tell you how she gets on. But, purposely, I am not going to see her in between-whiles.[23]

Some important details surface in this compact, yet very thorough account of Underhill's first interactions with the Baron. The first is that he dealt forthrightly with the matters at hand, judging her current state to be rather perilous and perhaps of some harm to others. Underhill evidently was in agreement, for a few months later, she wrote, "When I came to you, I was frantic & feverish, & afterwards that was worse & got altogether too near the psycho-physical danger zone."[24] Both Underhill and von Hügel realized the seriousness of her state, a state that she said felt as if "one's soul were being scorched."[25] This complete honesty and frankness from both parties was essential to her progress.

The second observation is that von Hügel tailored his advice as well as his method according to what he believed would be most effective for Underhill's background and temperament. He gave her meticulous instructions and lengthy critiques because he knew she needed this amount of detail if she was to be convinced of the merit of his advice and adopt it. Third, von Hügel immediately sought to correct her lack of incarnational emphasis, realizing that Underhill was very much "in her head"

[23] Von Hügel, *Letters to a Niece*, 244-246.
[24] Greene, *Fragments*, 111.
[25] Ibid.

regarding her spirituality, and therefore lacking harmony and cohesion. Visits to the poor and devotion to Christ were prescribed to lend some flesh to her faith which tended towards the unparticular (pantheistic) and the disembodied (agnostic). Lastly, von Hügel established a support system that reflected his responsibility as a spiritual director but discouraged dependency. He left Underhill to undertake his proposals without further contact for six months; however, he solicited the prayers of others, providing invisible but hopefully not unfelt, support and encouragement during this period.

This brief look at some of the basic methods or principles of the Baron's spiritual direction reveals two things about Underhill. First, much of what attracted her to von Hügel in the first place was his direct and generous manner as well as the respected authority that he held in a field of study that she was very much invested in. They shared other interests (a well-developed sense of humour and an affection for their pets,[26] to name but two), a preference for frankness, a simple and humble relational style, and their mutual respect. It is not difficult to see that the traits which she admired so much about her "old man" were already present in her own spirituality to some extent, though out of sync or dormant.

Second, her reception of von Hügel as her spiritual mentor demonstrates that Underhill was beginning to realize the necessary link between giving spiritual guidance and graciously being able to receive it as well. She had always, to some degree, placed herself on the same spiritual journey as her directees, never distancing herself too far

[26] See Williams, *Letters*, 29.

from their struggles, but this was another matter altogether. She hit bottom, and in the process, saw more clearly than ever before. She wrote: "… it was then – when I could not look at or think of transcendent holiness, that I realized what the agonizing need is that only Christianity *can* meet, by coming right down to one in the dust. *St. Augustine was a thousand times right!* Plotinus can never have had to face his own beastliness. Neo-platonism goes to bits when one gets really to the bottom & knows oneself unmendably displeasing to God."[27]

Shortly after this decisive epiphany about Neo-Platonism's inadequacy, and several weeks at "the bottom," Underhill found herself at a retreat at Pleshey. Of this experience she said: "I lost there my last bit of separateness and wish for anything of my own and gained a wholly new sense of the realness and almost unbearable beauty of the Christian life."[28] This newfound sense of communion with God and community with others would go on to inform her writing, her vocation, and her role as a spiritual director.

5.3 Giving spiritual direction

Evelyn Underhill's association with von Hügel, as well as her retreat experiences, was to inform not only the way she dealt with her own soul, but also the way in which she interacted with those who sought her counsel. Douglas Steere observes that "[f]rom this time [with von Hügel], her own guidance of souls, her increasing service as a retreat leader at Pleshey into which she poured her best thinking and insights during the last

[27] Report to von Hügel, Mid-summer, 1922. Greene, *Fragments*, 112.
[28] Greene, *Fragments*, 113.

fifteen years of her life, and her books and letters take on a new tone and focus. What she learned for herself from von Hügel's direction, she gave costingly and with a moving abandon to others."[29]

It is this time frame, after von Hügel, that we now turn to in order to examine Underhill as a spiritual director. We are fortunate to have extensive correspondence between Underhill and two of the women she directed. The first set of letters to Margaret Robinson falls within the years 1907 to 1917, and contains thirty-eight pieces of correspondence.[30] They reflect Underhill's easy and natural talent for the role, even though it was a fairly new one to her. The second set of letters, twenty-nine in total, span the years 1927 to 1930, and are addressed to Darcie Otter, a woman who came to one of Underhill's retreats.[31] It is in this second collection that we can see Underhill as a mature spiritual director.

In her first letter to Darcie Otter, the influence of von Hügel was clearly visible when she suggested that Otter read Baron von Hügel's *Selected Letters* for "spiritual food."[32] Underhill also addressed Otter's "spiritual type" which was someone who "find[s] the outsides of religion & the disharmonies of experience difficult."[33] By doing this, she was tailoring her advice to the woman's temperament, just as von Hügel did for her six years ago. A few lines down, we read, "Yes, I would like very much to pray for

[29] Douglas V. Steere, Introduction to Friedrich von Hügel, *Spiritual Counsel and Letters*, 21.
[30] This number is based on what Williams chose to include when he edited *Letters*. There may be others extant.
[31] This collection can be found in Poston, *The Making of a Mystic*, which includes many letters omitted by Charles Williams.
[32] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 229.
[33] Ibid.

you & please will you pray for me too?" This suggestion of mutual prayer echoed the last few lines of the Baron's first letter of direction to her.[34] It is clear that Underhill's approach to a new directee incorporated some of the methods that had been so effective in her own relationship with von Hügel.

Nevertheless, Underhill did not become a clone of her "old man." Though his profound and calming influence was evident in these letters, Underhill's unique style was still stamped on every page, including the usual chatty details about her kittens, the list of recommended books, and comments on sailing or travel scattered here and there. Underhill's own experience with ill health and physical weakness helped her advise an ailing Otter with patience and gentleness, recommending that when things became difficult, she "regard it as an honour" and not take any resentment too seriously. Instead, Underhill asked her to consider physical suffering as an opportunity to "share in the Cross."[35] When Otter was going through a particularly difficult and discouraging spell of illness, Underhill responded with strong words that urged her to see beyond the "seedy" bit and look to God's purposes. Evelyn called on one of her beloved mystics to provide a fitting example: "As to the notion that we are 'fulfilling no place here' because we aren't bustling about – that dear Darcie is surely ROT! Did Lady Julian in her cell 'fulfill no place'? Each soul which tends to God in love, helps all other souls - & if for a bit you're obliged to stay quiet & learn to improve in this – what could be better?"[36] It is likely that Underhill, from experience, had often reminded herself to see bodily

[34] See quote on page 90.
[35] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 230.
[36] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 243.

weakness as serving to discipline the inner person. The robust way in which she tackled the issue seems to indicate her close acquaintance with its dangers.

Similarly, Underhill was able to guide Otter through a bout of jealousy using words that reflected not only von Hügel's wisdom, but undoubtedly, her own familiarity with the troublesome sentiment.

> Don't be too much distressed because you keep on having uprushes of jealous, resentful, or acquisitive feelings. Just say gently to God that you don't want to entertain them, & that you do want to accept & be purified of all the elements of suffering He has placed in your life. These instinctive feelings are sure to present to some extent; all that matters is that your *will* should quietly & steadfastly reject them & so gradually kill them out. You are doing very well: don't be in too great a hurry or expect impossibilities of yourself.[37]

A noticeable difference here from the earlier letters to Margaret Robinson was the greater calmness, confidence, and graciousness with which she gave counsel.[38] Also missing was the previous harshness and self-criticism (perfectionism) that sometimes surfaced; it had been replaced by the knowledge that what one felt (immediate experience) was not the primary indicator of the state of the soul. The will had the power to gently turn to God over and over again, gradually overriding the vehemence of sentiment that threatened to overwhelm. There is no doubt that the calm reassurance she offered to Otter was rooted in living experience. In addition, she no longer relied on psychology to be a useful counseling and analytical aid. In fact, now she referred to the

[37] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 231.
[38] See Williams, *Letters*, 96-97, 120 for examples of her more stern approach to directional correspondence.

"silly psychologists" who could not distinguish between a humble and contrite heart and self-deprecation.[39]

As happened with Robinson, over time Underhill's letters reflected a growing closeness with Darcie Otter. Interspersed with spiritual advice were whole letters devoted to the sort of details that good friends exchange: travels on a holiday, excitement at seeing spring flowers, making new and interesting acquaintances, concern for a mutual friend, and expression of gratitude for gifts received.[40] In 1911, Underhill had confessed to Robinson that she was "represent[ing] what I know I ought to be but am not."[41] In contrast, there was very little sense of this dualistic tension in her correspondence with Otter. While she was quick to acknowledge her faults and weaknesses, there was a definite impression of contentment with her present state.

I will offer one last observation about Underhill's spiritual direction. These later letters carry a much more invitational tone than her earlier correspondence. At this point in her life, she was writing from her own experiences with dark places and troublesome times. Instead of coaxing her directee onward by pointing her to activities (spiritual disciplines were still suggested, but were not the focus), she invited her friend to join her in focusing on God rather than their own situations. In one example, when Otter recounted a bad experience at confession (with which Underhill could very well identify), Evelyn's response was written with inclusive language, gently offering wisdom as well as a helping hand. "Those doubts about purity of intentions, the sense of

[39] Poston, *Making of a Mystic,* 234.
[40] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 249.
[41] Letter to M. Robinson, March 31, 1911, in Williams, *Letters*, 122.

separation, the feeling that our 'natural self' reels against the demand & pressure of God – these my lamb are *Trials*, not sins - & don't forget it! They are the actual means of purification for people like you & me."[42]

It would be interesting to take a closer look at Underhill's spiritual direction methods in a group retreat setting and compare them to her individual direction, but that is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that many of the same elements appear, such as placing herself on an even plane with retreatants, using homely and everyday examples, supplying readings to enrich the experience, incorporating the lives of the saints and mystics, and her signature accessible style which included being available for counsel. Dana Greene observes that this part of Underhill's life, the last twenty years which were largely spent in retreat work and publishing devotional writing, is largely undeveloped by researchers and is the least understood, perhaps because it seems to be so distinct from her work on mysticism.[43] However, Greene also indicates that it was Underhill's immersion in the mystics for so many years that gave her the insight necessary to help others deal with the "tangles of the human condition."[44] In this light, it would seem appropriate to say her vocation as a spiritual director was the natural outcome of her years of dedication to the study of mysticism.

[42] Poston, *Making of a Mystic*, 251.
[43] Greene, "Lives Matter," 5.
[44] Ibid.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

While doing research for this thesis, I came across the following quote in the first chapter of Eberhard Bethge's biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Gustave Flaubert maintained: '*L'homme, c'est rien, l'ouvre c'est tout*' (The man is nothing, the work is all). We are about to repudiate the comment and, in fact, almost reverse his assertion. The fact that Bonhoeffer's work is incomplete is part of its fascination. His nature remains undiscovered unless he is encountered as a person."[1] I was standing in a subway station when I read these sentences, and distinctly remember taking in a quick, sharp breath as I realized that I had just come across my thesis statement: if one wants to discover the nature and contribution of Evelyn Underhill, she must be encountered as a person.

After that initial epiphany, I came across this same idea - that engaging with a person's life is an important part of hearing what they have to say - in several other writings,[2] most notably in a collection of essays in honour of philosopher Theodore Plantinga that I was proofreading at the time. One of the authors observed that, "much of my appreciation of Theodore was based on much more than a series of ideas I

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[1] Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: An Illustrated Biography*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Harper Collins, 1979), 3.

[2] During this time, I was also doing some reading on Kierkegaard and happened upon this paragraph: "Kierkegaard's life is more relevant to his work than is the case for many writers. Much of the thrust of his critique of Hegelianism is that its system of thought is abstracted from the everyday lives of its proponents. This existential critique consists in demonstrating how the life and work of a philosopher contradict one another. Kierkegaard derived this form of critique from the Greek notion of judging philosophers by their lives rather than simply by their intellectual artefacts. The Christian ideal, according to Kierkegaard, is even more exacting since the totality of an individual's existence is the artefact on the basis of which s/he is judged by God for h/er eternal validity. Of course a writer's work is an important part of h/er existence, but for the purpose of judgement we should focus on the whole life not just on one part." Willliam McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., accessed March 25, 2011, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/kierkegaard/. See also Parker Palmer's assertion that "We teach who we are," in "The Heart of a Teacher," *Change Magazine* 20 no 6 (Nov/Dec 1997), 1.

learned from him – it was based on who he was as a person."[3] It was becoming apparent to me that the life of a writer cannot be downplayed in comparison to their published works, nor artificially separated from them. The personality of a person has as much, if not more, potential to deeply impact others as their work.

Evelyn Underhill's obituary in *Time and Tide*, the British weekly literary magazine, named only one of her published works, predictably *Mysticism*, and dedicated a mere paragraph to her scholarly endeavours. Nearly three-quarters of the piece was taken up with describing the kind of person Underhill was, an "extraordinarily reasonable" creature with equal appreciation for the unseen and the seen.[4] The specific mentions of her bird watching, sailing, bookbinding, and gardening skills certainly reflected the era in which the piece was written, but the weight given to her social life (she was referred to as a "collector of friends") and her appreciation for an early translation of Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* because of its "childlike sincerity" seem to be an indication of the impact and strength of her personality, even to the neglect of her formidable body of publication.

The details of Evelyn Underhill's life, most of which read as privileged middle-class and very ordinary, are hardly the fodder for a grand adventure story. An interest in philosophy and mysticism led to a variegated journey that traveled through several different spiritual phases before she settled on the rather unremarkable choice of

[3] Jason Zuidema, "Theodyssey: Notes on the Christianity and Ideas of Theodore Plantinga," in *Reformational Thought in Canada: Essays in Honour of Theodore Plantinga*, Jason Zuidema, ed. (Toronto: Clements Academic, 2010), 18.
[4] "Evelyn Underhill," *Time and Tide*, June 21, 1941. See Appendix 1 for the complete text of this obituary.

finding a home in the church where she had been baptized as an infant. Her incredible output of written work serves as a reflection of her steady, but sometimes uneven, theological and spiritual development, and it was Underhill's research and writing that provided the insight necessary for her to fulfil an ultimate vocation as a spiritual director to many. While Underhill enjoyed a measure of success and popularity as an author and lecturer during her lifetime, the critics in the last half of the 20th century found her wanting, especially in the areas of scholarship and sophistication.

But her critics missed the point, to a large extent. Evelyn Underhill was not trying to impress academia in order to ensure a legacy in the publishing world. Her eulogizer wrote: "She hated religious jargon and woolly phrases, and tried to avoid the technical language of theology while making the fundamentals of religion as clear as possible."[5] What Underhill had to say, she wanted to say with such clarity that people like her neighbour Lady Laura Eastaugh, her secretary Clara Smith, theologian Agatha Norman, fellow writer Olive Wyon, dramatist Margaret Cropper, Evelyn's maid Maude Hance, and learned acquaintances like T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis could understand.[6] She wrote for these people because she was one of them; she was a wife, a neighbour, a self-taught scholar, and above all, an ordinary person. The people she corresponded with were those who knew her quirks, her likes and dislikes, and did not mind receiving a personal letter that included ink smudges where a cat had walked across the page while she was

[5] Ibid.
[6] A good number of these names are among a list of Underhill's regular retreat attendees in Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 112.

writing.[7] Though she tried to manage her time wisely and not exhaust her limited supply of energy due to chronic asthma, there is very little evidence that she maintained a professional distance from anyone who approached her or wrote to her. In writing about mysticism, the science of union, she was expressing her belief that all of life is one, and it cannot be partitioned into various sections for convenience. In a letter from 1934, she wrote: "When you speak of reading more than you practice in your life, you put your finger on a real source of spiritual weakness."[8]

From her early study of the mystics, Underhill knew the importance of the life that informed the writings.[9] At times one detects an undertone of somewhat naïve excitement, such as when she wrote about the mystic way in *Mysticism*; this attests to the likelihood that she was not entirely aware of the high price the pursuit of union would demand from her. This did not mean that she was unwilling, however. Evelyn Underhill may have been a diminutive woman, but she was large in courage. She stocked her life full of the riches of beauty, surrounded herself with friends who loved and supported her, and made it a point to maintain a strong net of communication. These, as well as her consistent religious disciplines, proved to be important, stabilizing factors when she faced her own "dark night of the soul" during the first war, and perhaps blunted the full force of the blackness and depression. This network of friends also produced a lifeline, her beloved Baron von Hügel, who was to guide her through a

[7] In a letter to M. Robinson shortly after they had made each other's acquaintance, Underhill wrote: "Do forgive this dreadfully smudged piece of paper. My cat suddenly thought he would like to kiss me, and walked over it!" There is a large, dark smudge on the letter right beside her closing salutation, "Always your friend." VTS Box 3, Folder 28.
[8] Letter to A.M.J., December 13, 1934, in Williams, *Letters*, 240.
[9] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 414.

spiritual transformation which brought many of the disassociated bits of her faith and life into harmony. She had to reconcile her internal Mary and Martha, so to speak. She was able to speak from the depth of her experience in 1927 when she advised, "Remember *all* life comes to you from God, and is to be used for Him – so live in it all, and so get the necessary variety and refreshment without which religious intensity soon becomes stale and hard. … It is crucial that you should get these truths firmly fixed in your mind *now*, as they will have to govern your conduct (and so your growth) for years to come."[10]

Chronic physical ailments became increasingly bothersome as Underhill grew older, and though the internal turmoil, debilitating darkness, and relentless self-loathing abated for many years at a time, they were never completely absent. However, Underhill came to see these troubles as useful apparatuses, sufferings which could be offered "with a light hand" to God for his purposes.[11] Her notebooks indicate that turning these matters over to God and practising self-forgetfulness, which she called "the greatest of graces," were not lessons easily learned, if one could ever be said to have learned such a daily surrender. The new-found stability that came as a result of her struggles, as well as the first-hand knowledge of various setbacks and frustrations, were never squandered, for it was these experiences, along with her intimate knowledge of the mystics, which became staple materials in the spiritual direction she gave others.

[10] Letter to A.B., August 1, 1927, in Williams, *Letters*, 175.
[11] Letter to K.N., May 3, 1941, in Williams, *Letters*, 306.

The intensity of so many of her letters and notebooks should not be mistaken for evidence of a morose personality or a difficult life. On the contrary, the most consistent characteristic mentioned by those who met her was a delightful, light-hearted humour and spirited sense of fun. In fact, one of her closest and most devoted friends, Lucy Menzies, admitted to never knowing that Evelyn wrestled against these inner demons until she examined Underhill's personal notebooks after her death.[12] The discovery that she had troublesome stretches in her life in no way undermines her sense of humour or her natural charisma, but provides added dimension to the portrait of Evelyn Underhill.

She was so much more than the celebrated author of *Mysticism*. She was an ordinary human being, one who could easily identify with the poor in spirit. She was a devoted friend to many living acquaintances and to the mystics she spent so much time studying. It is likely that her exposure to them influenced her writing style, which similarly evoked fervent responses and encouraged participation from the reader.[13] She was a spiritual pilgrim who started a quest of the "alone to the Alone"[14] and soon found herself a vital part of various spiritual communities. She was an intercessor who prayed for all those who came under her care.[15] She wrote what she lived and lived what she

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[12] Greene, *Fragments*, 10.

[13] "In some sense, the truth disclosed in a mystical text can be appropriated only if the reader is willing to allow the text to evoke a response – a response that entails a changed view of reality, a willingness to try out through participation his or her own understanding of the text as a guide for his or her own living." Janet K. Ruffing, *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 15.

[14] From Plotinus, "the flight of the alone to the Alone," (VI, 9, ix).

[15] Richard Leggett says, "Evelyn Underhill prayed. From that prayer and from her study of the mystic tradition emerged insights that have guided readers for three-quarters of a century and an understanding of the role of the liturgy in the formation of the Christian that places her among the leaders of liturgical renewal in the Anglican community." Richard G. Leggett, "Evelyn Underhill: The Sacrifice of a Humble and Contrite Heart," in *How Firm a Foundation: Leaders of the Liturgical Movement*, R.L. Tuzik, ed. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990), 70.

wrote. Yes, Evelyn Underhill's life was much more than the sum of her words, but part of her legacy was the courage with which she put pen to paper.

> *The true relation between the soul and God is the perfectly simple one of a childlike dependence.*[16]

[16] Letter to K.N. May 3, 1941, in Williams, *Letters*, 306. This was written just over a month before she died.

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Appendix 1

C.S., Obituary of Evelyn Underhill, *Time and Tide*, June 21, 1941.

Evelyn Underhill's name may mean to people who did not know her, a scholar who edited Early English texts and wrote a book called *Mysticism* which has become a classic; a poet; a lecturer on the philosophy of religion; a writer on the spiritual life; a brilliant critic of other people's books. A few many remember that she began her career as a novelist and that – though people were not really her métier, at any rate not in the medium of fiction – these were unforgettable novels written by someone with an original, sensitive mind and an unusual point of view. She must always have been conscious of man as a

Swinging-wicket set
Between
The Unseen and Seen

and when she first began to write she was deeply interested in all the side-issues of the Unseen: ceremonial magic, witchcraft, supernatural experiments of any kind. It was Baron von Hügel who brought her back into a Christian fold, and his influence is plain in all her later work.

Her friends will remember her, however, as body as well as reasonable – extraordinarily reasonable – mind and soul: a thin creature with a pale face and dark eyes, a face that when she was truly interested (but she could be very easily and truly bored) would look like alabaster with a light behind it. She might be more aware than most of us of the unseen but she was also passionately appreciative of the seen and unexpectedly clever in some departments of practical life. Her friends did her sewing but she could bind books so beautifully as to win prizes in international exhibitions. She could not even begin to drive her car but she held a Master Mariner's certificate and loved the excitement of sailing a small dinghy in a difficult sea. She was good at birds and, when the wind was too weak to make sailing amusing, her alternative was to drift silently up a Cornish creek and watch those black and white, orange-legged waders who, she said, looked as if they had been dressed in Paris. The owner of a green finger, she made a country garden out of the unpromising strip of earth attached to her Campden Hill house, and even the cats who shared the house had to treat her flowers with circumspection. Time and Tide readers will know that these cats shared also her literary gifts. Snow mountains, Bach, the *Paradiso* and M.R. James's ghost stories were among her other earthly adorations.

Though she demanded a great deal of solitude she could be a delightfully sociable person, gay and witty and liking conversation, a collector of friends. She was a most faithful correspondent who really wrote and answered letters, and her Christmas-present list was formidable. The last "real party" she ever went to was a *Time and Tide* cocktail party at Lady Rhondda's Hampstead flat in the summer of 1939. She had been ill on and off all that year and it represented a return to the world. She said to me afterwards, "I *loved* that party. I felt as though I'd really come alive again."

Some people will think of her as their only reliable interpreter and guide in the way of the spirit. She hated religious jargon and woolly phrases, and tried to avoid the technical language of theology while making the fundamentals of religion as clear as possible. She liked best and always used the earliest English translation of the Imitation because, though it might be a bit inaccurate, its personality and childlike sincerity had not been ironed out by some unliterary, edifying hand. And one of her own favourite passages, one which she read as a prayer at all the retreats she conducted, was the sentence she quoted in her Time and Tide article for the A Kempis anniversary:

> Defend and keep the soul of thy little servant among so many perils of this corruptible life, and thy grace going with him, direct him by the way of peace to the country of everlasting clearness.

Everlasting clearness would be for her an indispensable attribute of heaven. *Ave, carissima, ave atque vale.*

Appendix 2

T.S. Eliot, unpublished obituary intended for the *London Times*, 1941, as cited by Carol Poston, *The Making of a Mystic: New and Selected Letters of Evelyn Underhill (*Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), x.

I should like to supplement your admirable notice of the late E.U. (Mrs. Stuart Moore) with a word about the side of her activity which is not represented by/preserved in her published work or known to most of her readers. She concerned herself as much with the practice as with the theory of the devotional life – her studies of the great mystics had the inspiration not primarily of the scholar or the champion of forgotten genius, but of a consciousness of the great grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern <life> world. She gave (with frail health and constant illness) herself to many, in retreats, which she conducted and in the intercourse of daily life – she was always at the disposal of all who called upon her. With a lively and humorous interest in human beings, especially the young, she was at the same time withdrawn and sociable. With shrewdness and simplicity she helped to support the spiritual life of many more than she could in her humility have been aware of aiding.