

THE EVELYN UNDERHILL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

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DAY OF QUIET REFLECTION

The annual Day of Quiet Reflection in honor of Evelyn Underhill will be held on June 17, 2006 in Sayre House, on the grounds of the Washington National Cathedral. As usual participants will meet from 9-3:30 p.m. for a day of meditations and periods of quiet, with noon Eucharist at the Cathedral for those who want to participate. This year's leader will be Carol Poston, professor of English, Xavier University, and editor of a new edition of Underhill's letters. To receive registration information (probably in April or May) please contact Kathy Staudt at kstaudt@umd.edu.

THE MYSTIC AND THE CHURCH

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) is best known for her pioneering work, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual*

Italy, she claimed, was "the only place left ... that is really medicinal to the soul.... There is a type of mind which must go there to find itself"

Consciousness. First published in 1911, it saw twelve editions and established Underhill as the leading authority on mysticism writing in English. She was a prolific writer, authoring or editing thirty-nine books and hundreds of articles and essays.

She came to the subject of mysticism with a bias against institutional religion, but later recognized the human need for participation in some collective expression of worship of the Divine. Her sympathy for the mystical tradition nuanced her understanding of what it meant to participate in the Body of Christ and was the basis for her ongoing critique of the foibles of institutional religion. Her major achievement was a life-long pursuit of the love of God and her unique ability to express that search in writing. Underhill's understanding of mysticism and the church and the necessary tension between them is best understood by tracking her own deepening appreciation for both phenomena.

Although baptized and confirmed in the Anglican Church, Underhill, an only child, inherited her religious skepticism from her barrister father. She claimed not to have been

“brought up to religion.” Her early adolescent writing attests to this. She believed in God and in helping the poor, but saw religion as dogmatic and bigoted, and the clergy as pompous and narrow. The exclusiveness of institutional religion was particularly off-putting; she urged her youthful readers to experience the liberation of nature and art. Beauty appealed to her, but she found none of it in English churches. In her late twenties, however, she began to make regular trips to Italy; there she was able to experience beauty first-hand in religious art, architecture and ritual. Italy, she claimed, was “the only place left ...that is really medicinal to the soul....There is a type of mind which must go there to find itself”¹ In Italy she did find herself, experiencing a slow “unconscious growing into the understanding of things.”

This experience led her to participate in the Golden Dawn, a Rosicrucian society, much in vogue in London in the early years of the twentieth century. But she soon withdrew from participation, realizing that what she was attracted to was not magic but mysticism. She began her life-long commitment to exploring the riches of this long-buried tradition.

In a white-heat of enthusiasm she set to work to research and write her major work, a 500-page exploration of the Western mystical tradition, a labor to which she gave her complete attention for almost four years, consulting some 1,000 sources in the process. At this same time she had become convinced that she should join the Roman church, but the Papacy’s condemnation of Modernism, the movement to bring historical and scientific evidence to bear on religious questions, delayed her entrance, as did the opposition of her new husband. In the end she never joined, but for almost a decade and a half she hung on the edges of institutional commitment, unable to “go over to Rome” but dissatisfied with Anglicanism. Her writing did not abate. She turned out biographies of mystics and edited their writings, all the while broadened the sources of her inspiration to include the French philosopher Henri Bergson and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. Yet neither her writing nor her spiritual counseling of others gave her solace or reprieve from her sense of personal isolation and detachment. By the end of the century’s second decade she wrote that she “had gone to pieces.”

In desperation she did two things: she visited Baron Friedrich von Hugel, the most prominent Catholic theologian in Britain and someone familiar with but critical of her work on mysticism, and began to participate reluctantly in the liturgical life of the Anglican Church. Von Hugel was of great assistance to her; she claimed, somewhat hyperbolically, that she owed her whole spiritual life to him. But he did help her as she struggled with inwardness, detachment, a transcendent flight from a sinful world, and her anti-institutional

Such a simple exercise, if entered upon with singleness of heart, will soon repay you. By this quiet yet tense act of communion, this loving gaze, you will presently discover a relationship -- far more intimate than anything you imagined -- between yourself and the surrounding “objects of sense”; and in those objects of sense a profound significance, a personal quality, an actual power of response, which you might in cooler moments think absurd.
Practical Mysticism
(1914)

bias, all of which she attributed to her “white-hot Neo-Platonism.” Von Hugel, responding to her great psychological need, nudged her toward a more embodied spirituality and an acceptance of God’s love. He sent her out to work among London’s poor, and reaffirmed her fragile commitment to live within the Anglican communion. He appreciated the mystical tradition and saw it as an essential element of religion, but recognized the institutional and intellectual elements as essential as well. He served as her spiritual director from 1921 until his death in 1925.

Even before meeting with von Hugel, Underhill had begun to be aware that her bias toward institutional religion as exclusive and narrow was a limited one. Her brief encounters with the work of Sorella Maria, and the ecumenical Spiritual Entente which this Italian Franciscan nun founded, convinced Underhill that Christ could be known in a variety of ways and in the many parts of the Christian church. As well, she was aware increasingly of the need of an alliance between institutional religion and mysticism. In 1918 even before meeting with von Hugel she wrote:

(Mysticism) flourishes best in alliance with a lofty moral code, a strong sense of duty, and a definite religious faith.... (it) is more likely to arise with than without the great historic churches and faiths. To these churches and faiths it has again and again brought its gift of fresh life, of renewed and intensified

communion....It is in this direction that its future may most hopefully be looked for, since divorced from all institutional expression it tends to become strange, vague, or merely sentimental. True mysticism is the soul of religion, but, like the soul of man, it needs a body if it is to fulfill its mighty destiny.²

My spiritual life is not something specialized and intense, a fenced-off, devotional patch rather difficult to cultivate, and needing to be sheltered from the cold winds of the outer world. Nor is it an alternative to my outward, practical life. On the contrary, it is the very source of that quality and purpose which makes my practical life worthwhile.

The Spiritual Life (1937)

Underhill’s realization of the reciprocal need of institutional religion for mysticism and vice versa was tentative; it would take time for her to grow into and deepen that understanding. That growth was already evident in *The Mystics of the Church*, published in 1925. In

this, her last book on the mystics, she presented them as “life-giving” members of the church who helped create and sustain its mystical character. This was in contrast to her portrayal in the earlier *Mysticism* where she emphasized their independence from religious institutions.

For Underhill, the frowziness, parochialism, dogmatism, and conservatism of the church were symptomatic of a more fundamental problem, namely that the church was not focused on its central mission, to redeem the world by forming souls and fostering holiness among them. In fact it too often created dependent and obedient believers and was suspicious of individual intuition and direct spiritual experience.

Underhill distinguished between what she called the “visible” and the “invisible” church, that is the institutional church and the mystical body of Christ, a divine society linking a communion of saints, past, present and future. She appreciated the tension between these two, and counseled those who sought her wisdom about how to deal with negative aspects of the church “visible.” Her advice was often homey: “The Church is an ‘essential service’ like the Post office, but there will always be some narrow, irritating and inadequate officials behind the counter and you will always be tempted to exasperation by them.”³ The point was to build up the “invisible” church and in so doing revivify the “visible” church that was either moribund or not focused on its mission to form souls. In 1921 in *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* she summarized the importance of the spiritual life to the church:

Thus it means an immense widening of the arc of human sympathy; and this is not possible to do properly unless we have found the centre of the circle first. The glaring defect of current religion—I mean the vigorous kind, not the kind that is responsible for empty churches—is that it spends so much time in running round the arc and rather takes the centre for granted.... and it is at the centre that the real life of the spirit aims first; thence flowing out to the circumference—even to the most harsh, dark, difficult and rugged limits—in unbroken streams of generous love.⁴

While she appreciated the need of the mystical tradition to feed the invisible church as it fulfilled its mission, she was also aware that mysticism, unattached to a religious tradition, was perilous. She knew this from personal experience. She had come, at least intellectually, to the position that the mystical tendencies toward strangeness, vagueness or sentimentality could be countered by being anchored in corporate religious life. Such life fostered group consciousness, gave a sense of unity, and offered both a ready-made discipline and a capacity to hand on a culture. She wrote later in her last major book that corporate life “...checks religious egotism, breaks down devotional barriers, obliges the spiritual highbrow to join in the worship of the simple and ignorant, and in general confers all the supporting and disciplinary benefits of family life.”⁵ In short, corporate and personal worship complete, reinforce and check each other. But the priority must be given to that which creates “living” religion and forms souls because it is focused on the priority of God.

For the reality of the Church does not abide in us; it is not a spiritual Rotary Club. Its reality abides in the One God, the every-living One whose triune Spirit fills it by filling each one of its members. We build up the Church best,by opening ourselves more and more with an entire and humble

Please at once check the habit of getting the bulb out of the dark to see how it is getting on! It is impossible, and also undesirable for you to judge your own progress. Just go along simply, humbly, naturally, and when tempted to self-Occupation of this or any other sort, make a quiet act of trust in God.
Letters (1925)

generosity to that Spirit-God Who is among us as one that serveth, and reaches out ...towards the souls of men. Thus the real life of that Church consists in the mutual love and dependence, the common prayer, adoration and self-offering of the whole interpenetrating family of spirits who have dared to open their souls without condition to that all-demanding and all-giving Spirit of Charity, in Whom we live and move and without Whom we should not exist.⁶

By the time Underhill sought out von Hugel for help, she knew both that she needed the context of institutional religion and that institutional religion, if it was to be true to its mission, needed to be regenerated by the mystical element. Having rejected the Roman church for its exclusiveness and anti-Modernist tendencies, she saw her only alternative in

the church of her baptism, the Church of England. She considered Anglicanism a “bridge” church and called it a “respectable suburb of the city of God” but all the while a “part of the greater London.”

Underhill’s reluctant participation in the Church of England gradually became more palatable when, at the invitation of a friend, she attended a retreat in the Anglican retreat house in the village of Pleshey in 1922. There she experienced a sense of connectedness and belonging to a community of belief. She wrote to von Hugel that she felt satisfied as an Anglican, having found a place she would fit into and those with whom she could sympathize and work. She sensed that she was a “cell in a boundless living web” through which redeeming work could be done. Her new vocation, the care of souls through retreat work, began to take shape. As part of the burgeoning retreat movement in the Anglican Church, from 1924 on she gave six or seven retreats a year. While most who sought her out were women, some were clergy. In 1927 she became the first woman to give a retreat in Canterbury Cathedral. This work not only gave her a great sense of joy and freedom, it cemented finally her ability to stay within the Anglican communion. She was fifty years old when she wrote: “Now the experience of God...is, I believe, in the long run always a vocational experience. It always impels to some sort of service: always awakens an energetic love. It never leaves the self where it found it. It forces the experiment to try and do hard things.”⁷

Underhill’s vocational commitment as retreat conductor dominated her later life. Through it she hoped to renew the Anglican Church. Her contemporary, T. S. Eliot, acknowledged that contribution, saying her work captured the grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world,”⁸

Christianity is not a pious reverie, a moral system, or a fantasy life; it is a revelation, adapted to our capacity, of the Realities which control life. Those Realities must largely remain unknown to us; limited little creatures that we are. God, as Brother Giles said, is a great mountain of corn from which we, like sparrows, take a grain of wheat; yet even that grain of wheat, which is as much as we can carry away, contains all the essentials of our life. We are to carry it carefully and eat it gratefully, remembering with awe the majesty of the mountain from which it comes.

The School of Charity
(1934)

and Michael Ramsey, a subsequent Archbishop of Canterbury, attested that she had done more than anyone else to keep the spiritual life alive in the Anglican Church in the period between the wars.⁹ She care of souls continued to be carried out through correspondence, but also in person through retreats given throughout England. These retreats reached a larger audience through publication. They represent her mature thinking on a variety of aspects of what she called the spiritual life, that life of prayer, love and holiness which is “simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God...”¹⁰

Although Underhill remained committed to the Church of England, her outlook was ecumenical, and her focus was always on building up the life of the spirit within the church. It is no surprise that her final book, *Worship*, 1936, was about corporate adoration. In it Underhill defines the elements of worship and examines eleven different institutional expressions, each of which she claimed was like “a chapel in the Cathedral of the Spirit.”

Worship was an extraordinarily inclusive study of the human impulse toward the Divine, the self-offering of the individual in the worship of God expressed historically and institutionally. It reflects Underhill’s commitment to institutional religion and her deep appreciation of its variety of forms. Its appreciative ecumenicity was remarkable for the time.

In the final years of Underhill’s life there is a renewed tension between what she considered the demands of the life of the spirit and the orientation of the institutional church. In 1939, as war loomed over Europe, she became a pacifist, joining the tiny Anglican Pacifist Fellowship and writing for their publications and those of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Although her position was incomprehensible to most of her fellow believers, Underhill held that pacifism followed naturally from the demands of universal charity. She urged believers to stay steady and close to God in this harsh wilderness of war and to give themselves to God in intercessory prayer for the good of the world. Her requests to pray for the so-called enemy, Hitler and Mussolini, so that their hearts might be changed seemed bizarre to a nation enduring the Blitz. Yet she persisted, even as the Anglican Church officially denounced the pacifist position. She called the attitude of the Church toward the war “sub-Christian” and claimed that contemporary Christianity was “impoverished,” “second-hand”

Meekness is the grace of the childlike and yet, as a matter of fact, it is the last grace to be added to the mature soul, not the first... Meekness and temperance mean accepting my position, capacities, spiritual attributes, as an indication of God’s will for me, and not fussing about the things other souls do and feeling despondent because I cannot do them! God hates nothing that He has made. He made it because He liked it. His creation is an act of love. And He has made me perhaps to be a temperate plant and to grow in a temperate climate. So what is required of me is to correspond with that climate and environment and to grow the fruit of His Spirit here in the ordinary English garden in which I find myself. No use trying for things which need a tropical climate or a hothouse. We are all rather inclined to be a bit romantic about religion. But God is a realist. He likes home-grown stuff. He asks me for a really good apple, not for a dubious South African peach.

The Fruits of the Spirit (1942)

and “incapable of the transformation of life” which was needed. She believed that the church should be the rallying point for all those who believed in the creative and redeeming power of love, but that it was incapable of seizing this opportunity because its supernatural life was so weak and ineffective. She urged believers to pray, and as such transform the hatred of the world. Prayer not only steadied the Christian, but also increased one’s consciousness of complicity with the war effort.

Underhill feared the alliance of religion and war and the claim that God was an ally as one performed irreligious acts. For her, pacifism was an entire orientation of life, which followed from faith and hope in a God whose purpose was love. Pacifism was then an extension of the love of God, and hence was a vocation. In those dark and uncertain times she continued to maintain that one could not fight evil with evil, than only love could overcome, and that any new life which would well up would come from the deepest sources of prayer. The long winter of 1941 brought her great physical suffering from persistent asthma; she died at age sixty-five in mid-June.

In both her writing and her life Evelyn Underhill attempted to acknowledge the genius of mysticism and institutional religion and to reconcile the inherent tension between them. The result was a creative exploration of two important phenomena, both needed for a full Christian life. (Endnotes at end of Newsletter)

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“Dana Greene, “The Mystic and the Church,” Mysticism, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, volume 17 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2005), 70-76. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. A free subscription to Christian Reflection is available on line at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

2005 DAY OF REFLECTION

The 2005 Evelyn Underhill Day of Reflection was held on June 18th at the Washington National Cathedral and was offered by Merrill Carrington, spiritual director and retreat leader. The theme--Rooted and Grounded in a Hidden World---considered Underhill's relationship to the natural world and was built around excerpts from her writing including:



[A] sooty tree...contains for you
the whole divine cycle of the seasons;
upon the plane of quiet, its inward pulse
is clearly to be heard.
But you must look at these things as you would
look into the eyes of a friend:
*ardently, selflessly, without considering his reputation, his
practical uses, his anatomical peculiarities,
or the vices which might
emerge were he subjected to psycho-analysis.”*
Practical Mysticism (1914)

“Please at once check the habit of getting the bulb out of the dark to see how it is getting on! It is impossible, and also undesirable for you to judge your own progress. Just go along simply, humbly, naturally, and when tempted to selfoccupation of this or any other sort, make a quiet act of trust in God.”
Letters (1925)



NEWS AND NOTEWORTHY:

Inquires regarding copyright permissions should be addressed to Mr. Richard D. Wilkinson at a new address: 1 Westley Close, Winchester, HANTS. S022 5LA U.K.

“A Celebration of Evelyn Underhill” will be held at the Retreat House, Pleshey, and Chelmsford, England on June 14-15, 2006. Leader of the retreat will be Revd Christopher Armstrong, author of the second biography of Evelyn Underhill. Contact the Warden, Sheila Coughtry for details at sheil@retreathousepleshey.com.

The best collection of Underhill materials in the United States is housed at the Virginia Theological Seminary Library in Alexandria, VA. The library contains not only an excellent collection of Underhill's books, but archives with copies of many of the original materials in the Underhill Archive in the Library of King's College, London.

Evelyn Underhill in Wikipedia. Wikipedia is a web-based free encyclopedia begun in 2001. It is written by volunteers who can add and change articles. Those interested in

adding to the article on Underhill should go to www.en.wikipedia.org.

Great good thanks go to Gary Goodwin and Wanda Ritter Saenz for their help in preparing this newsletter. To submit copy, please submit to Dana Greene at [greene@emory.edu](mailto:green@emory.edu).

Purpose of the Association:

The Evelyn Underhill Association exists to promote interest in the life and work of Evelyn Underhill. Each year the Association sponsors a Day of Quiet at the Washington National Cathedral, publishes an online newsletter, supports the work of archives at King's College, London and the Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA, and supplies answers to queries.

Bookstore:

Please visit our online bookstore, accessible from the opening page. Each sale provides a small commission to the Association to support its activities.

Donations:

Donations to the work of the Association may be sent to Mr. Milo Coerper, 7315 Brookville Rd., Chevy Chase, MD 20815.

Evelyn Underhill at the Retreat House at Pleshey circa 1930. From 1925 until 1934 Underhill was a regular retreat conductor at the Anglican retreat house in Pleshey. She said of retreat: "It is an extraordinarily difficult thing to

do....It is no use at all to enter...that inner sanctuary, clutching the daily paper, your engagement book and a large bundle of personal correspondence. All these must be left outside. The motto for your retreat is GOD ONLY."

SOME RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON EVELYN UNDERHILL:

[Evelyn Underhill on magic, sacrament, and spiritual transformation](#) By: Stoeber, Michael Source: *Worship*, 77 no 2 Mr 2003, p 132-151. Publication Type: Article

[Evelyn Underhill: spirituality for daily living](#) By: Johnson, Todd E. Source: *Anglican Theological Review*, 81 no 2 Spr 1999, p 359-360. Publication

[The Time is Ripe](#). By: Mogabgab, John S. (Editor) Source: *Weavings*, 14 no 1 Ja-F 1999, p 2-43. Publication Type: Article

[Evelyn Underhill at Pleshey](#). By: Douglas, Deborah Smith Source: *Weavings*, 14 no 1 Ja-F 1999, p 15-25. Publication Type: Article

[Anglican Writers at Century's End : An Evelyn Underhill Primer](#). By: Johnson, Todd E. Source: *Anglican Theological Review*, 80 no 3 Sum 1998, p 402-413. Publication Type: Article

[Evelyn Underhill's Pneumatology: Origins and Implications](#). By: Johnson, Todd E. Source: *Downside Review*, 116 Ap 1998, p 109-136. Publication Type: Article

[Evelyn Underhill : Anchored in God](#). By: Durkin, Mary Brian Source: *Christianity and the Arts*, 4 F-Ap 1997, p 46-54. Publication Type: Article

[Evelyn Underhill](#) By: Loades, Ann. London : Fount, 1997. Publication Type: Book

[Evelyn Underhill: spirituality for daily living](#) By: Callahan, Annice. Lanham, Md : Univ Pr of America, 1997. Publication Type: Book

[Evelyn Underhill : The Integrity of Personal Intellect and Individual Religious Experience as Related to Ecclesiastical Authority](#). By: Brame, Grace Adolphsen Source: *Worship*, 68 no 1 Ja 1994, p 23-45. Publication Type: Article

[Feminist voices in spirituality.](#) By: Hegy, Pierre (Editor). Lewiston, NY : Edwin Mellen Pr, 1996. Publication Type: Book

[Evelyn Underhill : The Integrity of Personal Intellect and Individual Religious Experience as Related to Ecclesiastical Authority.](#) By: Brame, Grace Adolphsen Source: *Worship*, 68 no 1 Ja 1994, p 23-45. Publication Type: Article
[Pneumatological Oblation : Evelyn Underhill's Theology of the Eucharist.](#)

By: Johnson, Todd E. Source: *Worship*, 68 no 4 Jl 1994, p 313-332. Publication Type: Article
[The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill.](#) By: Jantzen, Grace M. Source: *Feminist Theology*, no 4 S 1993, p 79-100.

[Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill](#) By: *Underhill, Evelyn*, Greene, Dana (Editor). Harrisburg, Pa : Morehouse Pub, 1993. Publication Type: Book

ENDNOTES

¹ Margaret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958), 13.

² "The Future of Mysticism," in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, ed. by Dana Greene (N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988), 66.

³ "To G. F., St. Francis, 1932." In Charles Williams, ed., *Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 208.

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* (N.Y.:Harper&Row,1986), 220-21.

⁵ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (N.Y.: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982), 84.

⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1934), 100.

⁷ Evelyn Underhill, "The Authority of Personal Religious Experience," *Theology*, 10, no. 55 (January 1925), 13.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, MS A. ff. 90, 91. Cited in H. Gardner, *The Composition of the Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 69-70.

⁹ M. Ramsey, "Foreword," in C. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), x.

¹⁰ Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks* (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1984), 32.