

Evelyn Underhill's Developing Spiritual Theology: A Discovery of Authentic Spiritual Life and the Place of Contemplation

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What is authentic spirituality and what is the role of contemplation in the spiritual life? Throughout her life, Evelyn Underhill journeyed on a process of discovering the answers to these questions. The life of the Christian involves ongoing conversion, and Underhill's was no exception. Her works reveal Underhill's developing thought on the goal and nature of the spiritual life, self-surrender, and contemplation. In Underhill's life and work the integration of spirituality and theology can be seen, in that her discovery of truth coincides with her deepening conversion and vice versa. Beginning in 1907, Underhill's Christian life began to move away from neoplatonic spirituality and thought toward Christocentric contemplative action. To facilitate a demonstration of this process, in this essay a selection of Underhill's works are divided into three periods, beginning with Mysticism, and her thought is examined with regard to the goal and nature of the spiritual life, self-surrender, and contemplation.

According to her entry in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) was "a prolific writer, producing 39 books on mysticism and spiritual life, and more than 350 articles and reviews." Throughout this extensive body of work an evolving spiritual theology is noticeable, just as her terminology for the deeper life changes from the unitive life, the mystic life, and the spiritual life, to the sacramental life. In Underhill's life itself there is evidence of change and growth as well: movement from an anti-institutional bias toward an affirmation of institutional Christianity; from Neoplatonism toward

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¹ "Underhill, Evelyn," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14, second edition (Detroit, Mich.: Gale, 2003), 291.

an incarnational and sacramental life; from pride toward more humility;² from elitism toward servanthood; from an individualistic spirituality³ toward a theistic⁴ and later a Christocentric spirituality. For this essay I divide Underhill's Christian life into three periods in order to examine the development of her understanding of the spiritual life in terms of its goal, its nature, and its relationship to surrender and contemplation. In this exercise, it will be seen that Underhill's movement toward Christocentric spirituality meant a movement toward affirming creatureliness, incarnational spirituality, and contemplative action.

In her early adult life, from 1902 to 1905, Evelyn Underhill was involved in the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, and her spirituality as an "agnostic" could be characterized as esoteric, spiritistic, and neoplatonic.⁵ But in 1907, Underhill converted from agnosticism to Christianity. In that year "she was attracted to Roman Catholic mystical experience as a result of a retreat at a Roman Catholic convent,"⁶ and she later wrote in her 1926 letter to Bishop Frere, "I had from time to time what seemed to be vivid experiences of God, from the time of my conversion from agnosticism (about twenty years ago now)."⁷ Given this evidence, I define Evelyn Underhill's Christian

² An example of Evelyn Underhill's growing and deepening humility appears in her notebooks in the entry for May 21, 1924: "Much, *much* more difficult than I thought. More tension, pain, weakness, liability to humiliating temptations, need of self-renouncement. Humbling discoverer of my own utterly unspiritual state." And she writes on June 20, 1924: "I *am* fundamentally a beast." In Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, ed. Dana Greene (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1993), 64.

³ Evelyn Underhill's retrospective assessment of magic, having been involved in the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn which practiced ritual magic, may indicate her recognition of having been individualistic herself during her involvement with this Society. Of magic she writes, "It is an individualistic and acquisitive science" (Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, third edition [New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1912], 85).

⁴ Nadia Delicata, "Evelyn Underhill's Quest for the Holy: A Lifetime Journey of Personal Transformation," *Anglican Theological Review* 88, no. 4 (2006): 522. Delicata describes Underhill's conversion as a theistic awakening.

⁵ This observation is drawn from her early novels and poetry: *The Grey World* (1904), *The Lost World* (1907), *The Column of Dust* (1909), and some of *Immanence: A Book of Verses* (1912).

⁶ "Underhill, Evelyn," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 291. Also see Grace Adolphsen Brame, "Evelyn Underhill: The Integrity of Personal Intellect and Individual Religious Experience as Related to Ecclesiastical Authority," *Worship* 68, no. 1 (1994): 28.

⁷ Underhill, *Fragments*, 79.

journey as beginning in 1907. And I have divided this journey into three time periods for the purpose of exploring changes in Underhill's developing spiritual theology: the *early* period from 1907-1920; the *middle* period from 1920-1934, and the *later* period from 1934-1941.

It was in 1907 that Underhill began her work *Mysticism*.⁸ Thus for her early Christian life, I draw from three works on mysticism: *Mysticism* (third edition, 1912), *The Mystic Way* (1913), and *Practical Mysticism* (1915). *Practical Mysticism* was written "during the last months of peace" before World War I. It is from these early works on mysticism that Grace Jantzen draws her criticism of Underhill: "The work for which she is chiefly remembered feeds materially into the privatized individualism of much of contemporary spirituality."⁹ At that time of her life, writes Jantzen, Underhill was "strongly if idiosyncratically neoplatonist . . . and still much taken with the writing on mysticism, magic and the occult of Arthur Waite."¹⁰ It was not until around 1918 that Underhill began to reject the remaining neoplatonic influences in her spirituality. As Dana Greene observes, through her work on Jacopone da Todi in 1918 Underhill "came to see the limitations of the neoplatonic worldview she had embraced." This was preparation for Underhill's decision "to reintegrate herself into institutional religion and to forsake her Neoplatonism for a more authentically Christian outlook." By 1920, Underhill saw Neoplatonism as an "'excessive system of self-culture' which had as its final aim a 'flight of the alone to the Alone,— and which as a system was "incapable of dealing with the problem of evil." Over the years, Greene concludes, she "gradually became an incarnationalist."¹¹ Underhill was greatly helped in the development of her incarnational spirituality by the influence of Catholic spiritual directors, most notably Baron Friedrich von Hugel, who became her spiritual director in 1921.¹² Thus I have chosen to begin the second time period in Underhill's Christian life around 1920,

⁸ Underhill, *Fragments*, 17-8. Dana Greene provides commentary interspersed with Underhill's words throughout *Fragments*. Though not indicated in the citation, Greene's comments may be cited from the text.

⁹ Grace M. Jantzen, "The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill," *Feminist Theology* 4 (1993): 100.

¹⁰ Jantzen, "The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill," 81.

¹¹ Underhill, *Fragments*, 26-27, 72.

¹² See "Underhill, Evelyn," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 291.

drawing for this period from her notebooks¹³ in *Fragments from an Inner Life* and from *The Golden Sequence* (1932), which is mostly a compilation of her thought from the late 1920s to 1932.¹⁴

Concurrent with her detachment from Neoplatonism, Underhill's personal development involved a growing departure from nineteenth-century Romanticism and from a psychological approach to mysticism. Robert Hughes reports the observation that the revival of mysticism in the nineteenth century was colored by several factors which serve to determine the "ongoing romanticism and psychologizing [of mysticism] in the contemporary context."¹⁵ The influence of this milieu upon writers on mysticism in the twentieth century, especially Underhill, is underscored in Grace Jantzen's later work, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. According to Jantzen, the conception of mysticism as a subjective and psychological state is closely related to the Romantic reaction against excessive formalism and intellectualism. Jantzen points out that although Underhill's thought had changed by 1930 (evidenced by her comments in the preface of the twelfth edition of *Mysticism*), the psychological approach to mysticism is seen clearly in the Underhill's early writings.¹⁶

Lastly, two late works published in 1936 and 1937, *Worship* and *The Spiritual Life*, will serve to describe the later period in

¹³ It is astonishing to read Evelyn Underhill's notebooks and discover that she had not personally experienced—and therefore not truly understood—much of those things on which she wrote and espoused in "Part Two: The Mystic Way" of *Mysticism* at the time of its writing until later in her life. For example, on October 31, 1923 she writes in her notebook, "Though consciousness of God is so often absent, the deep hidden peace never seems really to fail, and wells up gently when the mind is at rest. I wonder whether this, which I have only just discovered by introspection, is what the medievals meant by the 'ground of the soul.'" Greene comments on this text as "Underhill's ability to integrate psychology and spirituality with her own experience" (Underhill, *Fragments*, 54).

¹⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1932, 2002). Evelyn Underhill writes in the preface that it is "a personal little book" and "it merely represents the precipitation of my own thoughts, as they have moved to and fro during the last few years" (p. vii).

¹⁵ Robert Davis Hughes III, *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in Christian Life* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 24.

¹⁶ Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 317. Jantzen's chief concern in her feminist critique of this way of defining mysticism is that a psychological conception of mysticism as an ineffable, private state of consciousness is disenfranchised of power and a public voice. Thus she concludes, "Women can be mystics only in a world where mysticism is no longer constructed as public or powerful" (p. 321).

Underhill's life and her more mature spiritual theology. Underhill's notebook entries are very sparse from 1934 on, and she began writing *Worship* in 1934.¹⁷ *The Spiritual Life* (1937) is a reprint, revised and expanded, of four broadcast talks given in late 1936 prior to Advent. Therefore I have defined the later period of Underhill's Christian life as being from 1934 to her death in 1941, although this essay draws from work that only represents the years 1934 to 1936. It must be acknowledged that there is not a marked change in Underhill's thought during this later period, though there is a subtle deepening of the theology of the spiritual life she developed in the middle period.

The Goal of the Spiritual Life

In her early period, Underhill spoke of the spiritual life in terms of the mystic life or the mystic way. The goal of the mystic life is made clear in her definition of mysticism. In *Practical Mysticism* she writes, "Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment."¹⁸ The goal is union with God, or the unitive life, a "correspondence with Transcendental Reality"¹⁹ or "complete harmony with the divine,"²⁰ where one's life is wholly penetrated by God's life and love. In *The Mystic Way*, the goal of the mystic way is to attain to the end of a process of organic growth through a sequence of psychological states to union with Reality. Underhill writes:

The great Christians of the primitive time, the great mystics in whom their spirit has lived on, exhibit, one and all, an organic growth, pass through a series of profound psychic changes and readjustments, by which they move from the condition of that which we like to call the "normal man" to that state of spiritual maturity, of an actually heightened correspondence with Reality, an actually enhanced power of dealing with circumstances, which they sometimes call the "Unitive Life." This sequence of psychological states is the "Mystic Way," which gives its title to my book.²¹

¹⁷ Underhill, *Fragments*, 72.

¹⁸ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1915, 1943), 3.

¹⁹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 499.

²⁰ Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1913), 55.

²¹ Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, viii.

These stages of growth, beginning with rebirth, are purgation, illumination, dark night, and union.²² The last psychological state at which one is to arrive is "perfect" or "unbroken" union with Reality: the deified life or unitive life. According to Underhill, this union is "a permanent condition of equilibrium . . . a new status, 'never to be lost or broken.'²³ And this state of union brings with it a more perfect connection to Reality and empowerment for living. It is a "state of spiritual maturity, of an actually heightened correspondence with Reality, an actually enhanced power of dealing with circumstances,"²⁴ in which the goal appears to be a sort of self-fulfillment, an empowerment attained by union with Reality. This self-fulfillment, however, is not self-seeking. Underhill's contrast of magic and mysticism in *Mysticism* shows that she rejects self-seeking: "The fundamental difference between the two is this: magic wants to get, mysticism wants to give. . . . We may class broadly as magical all forms of self-seeking transcendentalism."²⁵ The notion of ascending up into a higher and higher "status" has an elitist tone. But perhaps Underhill has begun to move from her esoteric and neoplatonic idea of the spiritual life—though there are still many supportive references to Plotinus in *Mysticism*. Annice Callahan observes that Underhill's study of the mystics made several positive contributions to her life, such as serving as "a catalyst for her intellectual conversion from Neoplatonic idealism." This work also "led her to see the value of the communal, sacramental, institutional dimension of the spiritual life, which for many years she did not feel was important," and "convinced her that relating to God is not a matter of 'flight of the alone to the Alone,' but rather a loving engagement with one's daily life and with others ."²⁶

Further on in her life, Underhill's perspective moves toward a more Christocentric view. She sees the goal of the spiritual life as a participation in Christ's own rescuing mission in the world. The spiritual life still involves "the tendency of the created spirit to union with

²² Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 53-55.

²³ Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 144.

²⁴ Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, viii.

²⁵ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 84. Given Underhill's previous involvement in the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, she may indeed be writing from personal experience.

²⁶ Annice Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill: Spirituality for Daily Living* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997), 49.

that Spirit-God,"²⁷ but the concept of union is understood more precisely. The unitive life is a sacramental life, which includes an obligation to be part of Christ's sacrificial body. In May 1924 Underhill wrote in her notebook about an experience of a "tide of adoration" sweeping through her soul. Then on her way to Holy Communion she clearly saw that "Communion and the life of union mean and involve taking one's own share" in the self-giving of Christ, "not *being* rescued and consoled, but being made into part of His rescuing and ever-sacrificed body."²⁸ In other words, the spiritual life is not a flight from the world of sense to the world of spirit, but the self-sacrificial engagement in suffering and death. As she writes, "Contemplative life *does* mean Gethsemane and Calvary. All the religious amorists [are] hopelessly off the track."²⁹ Thus Underhill is shifting her perspective away from self-fulfillment and more toward self-sacrifice. In *The Golden Sequence*, the goal of spiritual growth is not a self-fulfilling beatitude or awareness, "but humble and useful co-operation with God,"³⁰ a "life-giving state of active union"³¹ and "self-giving to the vast Divine action, rather than an individual self-fulfillment."³² This state of active union does "fulfill our life," but it is not a self-fulfillment. It is, rather, an act of self-gift.

In her later work an even greater selflessness is evident; the goal of the spiritual life is put in terms of becoming a vehicle or channel of God's own self-giving and will. In *The Spiritual Life*, she writes that in order for our lives to be real and complete they must consciously correspond with God's will and kingdom. Our lives are meant to become "tools and channels of the Will of God,"³³ and to be "the self-expression of the Eternal God."³⁴ This involves the self-abandonment of one's own willing; self-abandonment makes one "a vehicle of the divine self-giving."³⁵ This seems to indicate a deeper self-surrender than was previously seen, and this surrender is a loving response to the self-giving love of God. Resonating with Romans 12:1, surrender

²⁷ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 11.

²⁸ Underhill, *Fragments*, 63.

²⁹ Underhill, *Fragments*, 63.

³⁰ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 62.

³¹ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 112.

³² Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 139.

³³ Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 14.

³⁴ Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 15.

³⁵ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 190.

or sacrifice is put in terms of one's response of loving worship. In *Worship* Underhill writes, "Understood in the deepest sense personal worship is man's [*sic*] return-movement of charity to the inciting Charity of God."³⁶ Here, charity is "that love of God which He is loved for Himself alone, and all creatures in and for Him; and which is man's [*sic*] response to the Divine self-giving love."³⁷ Thus Underhill has come to see that Christian devotion is not "concerned with conscious spiritual contacts or achievements," but rather, "how entirely its emphasis lies on loving subordination to God, a quiet acceptance of 'the sacrament of the present moment' as a major means of grace."³⁸ The incarnational aspect of the goal of devotion is clear. Underhill develops this further in a discussion of the Eucharist, where this act of Christ is meant to be actualized in each Christian. As she writes, "The total oblation of Christ toward God in His human nature, and the self-giving of God in and through that accepted sacrifice [that is, the Eucharist] . . . must be actualized, openly or secretly, in the experience of each Christian soul."³⁹

Thus Evelyn Underhill's understanding of the goal of the spiritual life began with the notion of a self-fulfilling and empowering attainment of union with God, which matured into seeing that union as more humble cooperation with God and the participation in the self-giving of Christ. In this view, becoming part of Christ's body involves self-gift and the acceptance of suffering. Then in her later period, Underhill's understanding of the goal of the spiritual life involves loving and worshipful self-abnegation toward becoming the self-expression of God, a tool and channel of his will. There is a needed caveat here, however, in light of feminist criticism of self-surrender. Grace Jantzen's examination of Christian mysticism voices one concern (among many) that its definition is a social construction affected by the struggle for authority by ecclesiastical males over women.⁴⁰ Of particular alarm here is the possibility that Underhill's change in understanding might be entwined with a male agenda to assert authority—that of her spiritual directors, for instance. Underhill's view of the goal of the spiritual life changed from an empowering union to

³⁸ Underhill, *Worship*, 167.

³⁷ Underhill, *Worship*, 167, n. 1.

³⁸ Underhill, *Worship*, 189.

³⁹ Underhill, *Worship*, 189.

⁴⁰ Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 24.

participation in Christ's suffering and self-gift. But if there is any alarm here, I suggest it is founded on confusion about the idea of self-gift or *kenosis*. Underhill is not suggesting submission that comes at the expense of personhood. In response to feminist concerns, Sarah Coakley presents *kenosis* as "not only compatible with feminism, but vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of it, a manifestation which does not eschew, but embraces, the spiritual paradoxes of 'losing one's life in order to save it.'"⁴¹

The Nature of the Spiritual Life

Evelyn Underhill's developing thought on the goal of the spiritual life relates closely to her sense of the nature and character of this life. In the writings of the early period, the spiritual life is referred to as the "mystic way" and involves awakening and developing the spiritual faculty. The spiritual life concerns the life of the human spirit, which is involved in a growing process as it tends toward a state of spiritual maturity. Callahan notes that in her study of the mystics, Underhill "represented that mystics move from a consciousness of the ego, as a center of activity, to modes of the divine consciousness and a life of oneness with all that is as an organ revealing universal being."⁴² The spiritual life begins with the activation of a latent faculty or a consciousness of spiritual reality. Then this faculty and consciousness requires some development, which is achieved by turning one's attention from the outer world of sense to the inner world of spirit. This is "a training of his [*sic*] latent faculties, a bracing and brightening of his languid consciousness, an emancipation from the fetters of appearance, a turning of his attention to new levels of the world."⁴³ This "brightening" involves the struggle of the higher form of consciousness (the inner self) to gain supremacy in one's life, where this deepest level of personality attains to light and freedom.⁴⁴ There is a shift of emphasis in one's consciousness to spiritual reality (substantial life) from physical reality (accidental life).⁴⁵ When the spirit is "full-grown," it has

⁴¹ Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writings," in *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), 83.

⁴² Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 36.

⁴³ Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 11.

⁴⁴ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 498.

⁴⁵ Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 166.

"complete harmony with the divine" in a state of "enhanced vitality and freedom," and is "capable of performing the supreme function of maturity—giving birth to new spiritual life."⁴⁶

The character of the spiritual life is different in Underhill's middle period. In this period, Underhill did not greatly emphasize "the old three-fold division of the spiritual life according to purgative, illuminative and unitive stages," writes Christopher Armstrong. Rather, she more significantly refers to "the three-fold non-progressive, non-evolutionary scheme she owed to M. Olier: adoration, communion, cooperation."⁴⁷ Callahan observes, "The threefold approach to God of Jean-Jacques Olier appeared in 'Spiritual Life' [in *Man and the Supernatural* (1927)] where the three forms of prayer are described as worship, communion, and intercession."⁴⁸ In Underhill's *The Golden Sequence* the spiritual life, rather than being a growth of the spirit, involves living out of the spirit: it is "the essential life, out of which real fellowship and service must proceed."⁴⁹ Here Underhill describes the fourfold relation between human spirit ("created spirit") and the Holy Spirit ("Spirit Increate") as revelation of Spirit, response of spirit, purification, and prayer:

The four sections into which the work has fallen, do represent in some sense the fourfold relation between the created spirit and that Spirit Increate: for they cover first the revelation of its reality and the movement of response which it incites in us, and then the two capital means [that is, purification and prayer] without which our destiny as spiritual beings can never be fulfilled⁵⁰

Purification and prayer are thus the means to fulfill the goal of the spiritual life. Because the word "Spirit" is used both for divine and human spirit, the term needs qualification when used for the human spirit. In Underhill's spiritual anthropology, spirit is *true* being and gives a person capacity for God. Spirit is the "best word for a certain fundamental essence or quality we divine in ourselves, the ground of our being, wherein our reality consists: a quality which confers on us

⁴⁶ Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 55.

⁴⁷ Christopher J. R. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill, 1875-1941: An Introduction to Her Life and Writings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), xx.

⁴⁸ Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 138.

⁴⁹ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, x. ⁵⁰

Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, ix.

a certain kinship with Absolute Being, and gives us a 'capacity for God.'⁵¹ Thus for Underhill, *true* action proceeds out of *true* being (spirit); and the nature of the spiritual life is twofold. A human "is amphibious, a creature of the borderland 'set between the unseen and the seen.' He cannot be explained in physical terms alone, or spiritual terms alone; but partakes of both worlds."⁵² And the spiritual life is a twofold response (active and contemplative) in order to actualize the one *true* life into creation. This is a shift to incarnational spirituality and a greater self-surrender. As Underhill writes,

There is only one life—the "spiritual" life consists in laying hold on it in a particular way, so that action becomes charged with contemplation, and the Infinite is served in and through all finite things. The twofold experience of Spirit, as a deeply felt inward Presence and as the Ocean of reality and life, must be actualized in a twofold response of the soul: a response which is at once "active" and "contemplative," outgoing and indrawing, an adoring gaze on the Splendour over against us, and a humble loving movement towards the surrendered union of will and Will.⁵³

In *Worship*, Underhill qualifies the essential activity of the human side of spiritual union as a response of worship: "It is by worship alone that we have access to the Holy and the Real."⁵⁴ For Underhill, worship "is the response of the creature to the Eternal" and "is always a subject-object relationship."⁵⁵ Thus the spiritual life involves response to God in the context of a relationship with God, which is much more personal than previously seen. As earlier, this response is twofold: surrender to God and cooperation with God's creative action. Personal worship "is ultimately concerned with both aspects of our double-relatedness, the eternal and the successive. In both, not one alone, it reaches out towards the Holy, as the final and sufficing object of worship and love; first in surrender to His pure Being, and secondly in loving cooperation with His creative activity."⁵⁶ Worship is a "willed" response and "humble" cooperation: "The individual's

⁵¹ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 5-6.

⁵² Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 45.

⁵³ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 93-94.

⁵⁴ Underhill, *Worship*, 166.

⁵⁵ Underhill, *Worship*, 3.

⁵⁶ Underhill, *Worship*, 167.

worship, then, is always to be thought of as a willed response to God's inciting action: humble and costly co-operation with His grace, moving towards the complete dedication of life."⁵⁷ Underhill accepts herself as creature, and her spiritual life is not a movement away from creatureliness but its affirmation. God is always to be worshiped, because God is always Other: "For worship is an acknowledgement of Transcendence; that is to say, of a Reality independent of the worshipper, which is always more or less deeply colored by mystery, and which is there first."⁵⁸ In *The Spiritual Life*, the nature of the spiritual life includes turning one's attention from self-focus to self-gift, and it is not something for oneself: "Any spiritual view which focuses attention on ourselves, and puts the human creature with its small ideas and adventures in the centre foreground, is dangerous till we recognize its absurdity."⁵⁹

To sum up, Evelyn Underhill's understanding of the nature of the spiritual life evolved from her early view of seeing the spiritual life as a developmental process of one's spiritual faculty toward spiritual maturity and a growing consciousness and union with spiritual reality. She began to see the spiritual life as more than gaining the predominance of the higher form of consciousness, and rather as a twofold response of adoration and surrender, contemplation and action, in order to incarnate the unseen in the seen. Lastly, with more humility and with the attitude of selfless worship, Underhill develops the aspects of the spiritual life that involve surrender to and cooperation with God as one's self-gift.

Surrender and the Spiritual Life

As we have seen thus far, a predominant theme in the spiritual life is self-surrender. Grace Adolphsen Brame notes that surrender is a sign of authenticity: "The result of authoritative experience thus is that one's vision and one's surrender are simultaneous, one thing."⁶⁰ In Underhill's early period, surrender seems to be limited to a surrender of consciousness in the context of communion with God. This surrender allows or permits the inflow of God's life into

⁵⁷ Underhill, *Worship*, 177.

⁵⁸ Underhill, *Worship*, 3.

⁵⁹ Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 12. ⁶⁰ Brame, "Evelyn Underhill," 44.

consciousness; one "submits to the inflow" of spiritual vitality.⁶¹ In *The Mystic Way* surrendered consciousness "has, in mystical language `died to live.'" This is a kind of spiritual osmosis where the surrendering of human consciousness makes room for the spirit to increase in vitality. Underhill writes, "In that everlasting give-and-take, that unearthly osmosis, between the human and the spiritual spheres, which constitutes the true interior life of man [*sic*], the complete surrender of individual selfhood seems to invoke the inflow of a new vitality; so all-transfusing, so all-possessing, that he who has it is indeed 're-made in God.'⁶² Thus surrender involves a submission to God's work of transformation of consciousness.

In the middle period, surrender includes a surrender of one's whole being, not merely the inner self. At Easter in 1924, Underhill reports an insight in her notebook: "Only when we offer ourselves *whole*, taking all risks for inner life as well as 'body,' for, to, and in God, can we even begin to understand the mystery of Christ. Only then God begins to act in us and communicate Himself to others through us."⁶³ The incarnational aspect of surrender is evident: one's surrender of body, not the consciousness or inner self alone, ensures an active component to the spiritual life and makes contemplation fruitful in active service to God and others. There is also an aspect of suffering and sacrifice in surrender, where surrender involves the acceptance of suffering. As Michael Stoeber puts it, "The authentic spiritual life is not flight from suffering through world-transcending mystical consolations, but rather the acceptance and transformation of suffering in self and others through surrender to the Divine."⁶⁴ In *The Golden Sequence*, Underhill's thought is even more clearly defined. The Christian's response to the life of the Spirit is paradoxically both an utter self-abandonment and a vigorous initiative where the action of God is expressed by human action. The supernatural life, writes Underhill, "requires from us a response which seems a paradox: on one hand an utter self-abandonment to the sustaining power; and on the other hand, because of that abandonment, a vigorous personal initiative—a ceaseless balance and tension, through and by

⁶¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 518.

⁶² Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 144.

⁶³ Underhill, *Fragments*, 61-62.

⁶⁴ Michael Stoeber, "Evelyn Underhill on Magic, Sacrament, and Spiritual Transformation," *Worship* 77, no. 2 (2003): 151.

which our human action, ever more fully laid open to the Spirit, at last becomes part of the deep action of God."⁶⁵

A few years later, the role of surrender in the spiritual life retains the dual aspects of abandonment and action. But these aspects are ideally unified into one, made possible when active dedication serves as the completion of contemplation. In *Worship*, self-abandonment "is only to be understood in the light of its completing opposite, the creative unity of the dedicated life: for the supposed contrast between action and contemplation is false. Contemplative action . . . is the true ideal of the Christian life of worship; the surrender of spirit to Spirit."⁶⁶ And self-surrender is not a loss of personality but the way to realize its fullness, when selfhood is integrated with the human spirit. Underhill asserts that self-abandonment "is the only way in which man [*sic*] can achieve full personality: for it means the integration of the self about its highest centre, the fine point of the spirit, and its restoration to that life of worship for which it was made."⁶⁷ Rather than a flight of the inner life from the outer life, self-surrender (in its dimension of absolute dependence on God) brings about their integration and unity—one incarnational life. The desire for the will of God orders our disordered desires in such a way that the outer life is not rejected but reordered and brought into unity with the inner life. As Underhill puts it in *The Spiritual Life*, "Since our dependence on Him is absolute, and our desire is that His Will shall be done, this great desire can gradually swallow up, neutralize all our small self-centered desires. When that happens life, inner and outer, becomes one single, various act of adoration and self-giving; one undivided response of the creature to the demand and pressure of Creative Love."⁶⁸ All this and other aspects of transformation require "effort and struggle" and "pain and tension." The deeper the transformation, the greater the sacrifice. There is even more pain and tension "when it comes to the deeper action, the more entire self-giving, the secret transformation to which that vision of perfection calls us; and the sacrifice, struggle and effort which, sooner or later, this transformation must involve."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 68.

⁶⁶ Underhill, *Worship*, 187.

⁶⁷ Underhill, *Worship*, 188.

⁶⁸ Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 36.

⁶⁹ Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 98-99.

Thus we have seen that Evelyn Underhill's understanding of surrender in the spiritual life began with the idea of the surrender of consciousness and the permission to allow a transforming inflow. Later her view of surrender matured to affirm the body and incarnational spirituality, and to include suffering. More than a mere opening to receive vitality, the spiritual life involves self-abandonment and initiative in order for human action to become part of God's action. Lastly, surrender is seen as a side of one coin (contemplative action) and a way for the realization of full personality by one's integration of the inner and outer self.

Contemplation and the Spiritual Life

I have referred to contemplation many times so far. What is the place of contemplation in the authentic spiritual life? Christopher Armstrong writes, "It is likely that the reputation of Evelyn Underhill will stand high whenever the Christian philosophy of the contemplative life is taken seriously as a basis for Christian action."⁷⁰ In her early understanding of contemplation, Underhill draws heavily upon Teresa of Avila for her work on mysticism. Contemplation is a kind of prayer that requires the preparation of recollection. There are three forms of contemplation after one achieves recollection: illumination, quiet ("the attainment of that intuitive awareness, that meek and simple self-mergence"⁷¹), and ecstasy (an "utter self-surrender"). The first two forms are active, involving effort of the will; but the third form is passive or infused and happens without effort. In illumination, she writes in *The Mystic Way*, quoting Ruysbroeck, "'grace,' the transcendent life-force, surges up ever stronger from the deeps—'wells up within, like a fountain of the Spirit,'—forming new habits of attention and response in respect of the supernal world. The faculty of contemplation may now develop, new powers are born, the passion of love is disciplined and enhanced."⁷² Thus for Underhill, contemplation is a prayer in which a person may receive the "life-force" of the Spirit and develop an interactive consciousness of the spiritual realm. Contemplation is the exercise of a certain faculty different from the intellectual and emotional ones. Associated with this faculty are

⁷⁰ Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill, 1875-1941*, 292.

⁷¹ Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 124.

⁷² Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 54.

spiritual powers and increased *eros* for God. And sensible delights or consolations are a significant part of contemplation.

However, later in February 1923, Underhill questions in her notebook the value of good feelings and overwhelming emotions in prayer. Having benefited from the help of von Hugel, she observes that her prayer has changed to be more "quiet, calm, [and] expansive." Then to illustrate this she writes, "I *saw and felt* how it actually is that we are in Christ and He in us—the interpenetration of Spirit—and all of us merged together in Him actually."⁷³ This intuition is not individualistic, since Underhill includes her sense of the reality of the mystical body of Christ. And she no longer wants the "psycho-physical adventures" which are more of a distraction than a help to transform the will in love. Underhill writes in her notebook, "More and more I should like to get away from sensible consolations or at least their dominance. They are entrancing and overwhelming; but they don't really lead anywhere. It's the deep, quiet, mysterious love one wants to keep, and gradually transfer focus to the will."⁷⁴ Contemplation is a means of grace to increase one's capacity for self-sacrifice: it is "the filling up of the reservoir" for being made part of Christ's "rescuing and ever-sacrificed body."⁷⁵ In *The Golden Sequence* she observes that grace is not a "life-force" but "the actual self-giving of the immanent Divine Life, the personal, manward-tending, love and will of God."⁷⁶ And therefore the point of contemplation for the spiritual life, rather than an exercise of developing the spiritual faculty, is to respond to the grace of divine self-giving with one's own self-giving in order to "become more deeply living and creative, and be woven into that spiritual body, the Invisible Church, through which the work of the Spirit is done."⁷⁷

Some time later, in *Worship*, Underhill understands contemplation (or rather personal prayer and worship) more deeply as the "secret personal life of adoration," which is "the only condition under which [the Christian] can hope to become a channel of the Divine Charity, and co-operate in the sanctification of life."⁷⁸ She is actually referring to contemplative prayer in her description of the Christian

⁷³ Underhill, *Fragments*, 35.

⁷⁴ Underhill, *Fragments*, 36.

⁷⁵ Underhill, *Fragments*, 63.

⁷⁶ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 151.

⁷⁷ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 179.

⁷⁸ Underhill, *Worship*, 165.

life of adoration as "the self-oblivious gaze, the patient and disciplined attention to God, which deepens understanding, nourishes humility and love; and, by gentle processes of growth, gradually brings the creature into that perfect dedication to His purposes."⁷⁹ Thus the place of contemplation for Underhill in this later period is to facilitate the dedication of one's will to the will and purposes of God. In *The Spiritual Life* contemplation is helpful for cooperating with the Spirit such that each member of the church may work for the salvation of the world. "We are transmitters as well as receivers. Our contemplation and our action, our humble self-opening to God, keeping ourselves sensitive to His music and light, and our generous self-opening to our fellow creatures, keeping ourselves sensitive to their needs, ought to form one life; meditating between God and His world, and bringing the saving power of the Eternal into time."⁸⁰

In review, Evelyn Underhill's understanding of the role of contemplation in the spiritual life started out as a way to develop one's spiritual faculty in power and love. Then, moving away from consolations in prayer, Underhill values contemplation as a means for increasing one's capacity for self-sacrifice and for responding to grace with one's own self-gift. Lastly, contemplation is seen as a part of worship, for the purpose of dedicating oneself to God's purposes. Contemplation is completed by action; what one receives in openness with God, one mediates in openness to others.

Conclusion

Underhill once noted that most people come to God through Christ, but she came to Christ through God,⁸¹ and I think we have seen the truth of that description of her spiritual journey in this discussion. When Underhill discovered that Christ is truly God *and* truly man, she came to understand that to follow Christ means following him in his passion and death. It means becoming truly incarnate in the world as Christ was and is—and becoming truly incarnate *as* Christ, having been fitted into his body (Eph. 4:16) and drawn into his mission. Underhill's Christian journey began with the goal of self-fulfillment and empowerment, and emptied into the goal of being the self-abnegating expression of God. It began as a development of

⁷⁹ Underhill, *Worship*, 165.

⁸⁰ Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 88-89.

⁸¹ Evelyn Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Charles Williams (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1989), 205-206.

the spiritual faculty toward union with Reality, and diffused into a response of self-gift in humble, selfless worship. Surrender at first meant allowing a vivifying inflow, and then came to embrace suffering and action. Contemplation was once for experiencing delights and receiving power, but became concrete as empowerment to act as God's action. Thus overall, Evelyn Underhill's spiritual theology developed from a spiritistic leaning toward an incarnational one. The authentic spiritual life is not an individualistic "flight of the alone to the Alone," but rather is one of contemplative action.

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