

FEATURED ARTICLE:

Reflections on the Inter-Faith Conversations of Evelyn Underhill: Symbolic Narratives of Mysticism¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the inter-faith conversations of Evelyn Underhill, with reference to her poetry, mystical theology, as well as introductions she did for a book on the poetry of Kabir and for the autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore. Special attention is given to her dialogues with Kabīr, certain themes in Hindu spirituality, and the thought Sufi mystic ‘Attar of Nishapur. The paper focuses on the way in which Underhill draws upon non-Christian theology to illustrate major symbolic narratives of mysticism. It shows how she was a forerunner of contemporary “essentialist” theorists of mysticism but also embraced certain methodological practices of modern-day “new comparative theology”. This essay illustrates significant aspects of her pioneering inter-religious and comparative theological context.

Introductory Reflections

Evelyn Underhill regards mysticism as the core of religion. All religions include various dimensions: scripture/ mythology, doctrine/ philosophy, ethics/ law, ritual, social/institutional features, material aspects, and personal and communal experience.² For Underhill, personal religious experience inspires and influences the development of these other aspects of religion—the heart of which is mysticism. Mystics are the

¹ This paper is an integration and extension of two presentations that I gave at the Evelyn Underhill Association Annual Day of Quiet Reflection at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., June 16, 2012. I would like to extend my gratitude to Dana Greene and Kathleen Staudt for the invitation to participate in this event, and for including this paper in the 2012-2013 Evelyn Underhill Annual Newsletter.

² Adapted from Ninian Smart’s categories, *The World’s Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1989) pp. 1-21.

originators and innovators of religious traditions. Underhill asserts: “The mystics are the pioneers of the spiritual world”³ (4); “Mysticism is the art of union with Reality”.⁴

In defining mystics and mysticism generally in this way, Underhill suggests a number of interesting things that pertain to inter-faith conversations.⁵ As pioneers, mystics are regarded as creative originators and innovators of spiritual paths. Mysticism understood as an art suggests a kind of creative and intuitive openness, rather than a rigidly structured orientation and discipline that one finds in the hard sciences, for example. Still, art involves specific skills and practices, and so there are various mystical methods and activities among and between traditions, and the sense of learning and development. Moreover, art involves teachers: and cross-culturally one finds elders, *gurus*, spiritual directors, masters, guides, and exemplars of the mystical path and ideal, people who help the aspiring mystic find her or his way in the discipline of mystical practice.

Underhill suggests that this definition of mysticism might apply beyond Christian and even theistic religious contexts, by referring to the “object” of mystical experience as “Reality”. A mystic becomes aware in an altered state of consciousness of a Reality that is much greater and radically different than one’s normal egoic-self. She refers to this awareness as a “union”, which could mean a rather loose relation or fellowship that might

³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Image Book, Doubleday, 1990 [1911]), hereafter pages from this text are included in brackets in the text-body.

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (London: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1914), 23.

⁵ The following two paragraphs are a close adaptation of reflections I developed in “Mysticism in Ecumenical Dialogue: Questions on the Nature and Effects of Mystical Experience”, in *Teaching Mysticism*, William B. Parsons, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 231-232.

include a wide variety of spiritual experiences or it might refer to a very radical intimacy—a “junction” or “coalition” or even a “unity”—between the subject and the Reality. There is much ambiguity in such a general definition of mysticism.

However, notice how these views of mystics and mysticism are an *invitation* to inter-faith conversation. They begin with the *presumption* that mystics in all authentic religious traditions are the originators and innovators of their traditions and share in a more direct and immediate experience of a common Source. Mystics are the intrepid explorers of spiritual frontiers who provide maps that they draw from their first hand experiences of ultimate Reality, which can assist people in their our own transformative movement towards this redemptive or liberating union. Such were Evelyn Underhill’s original and provocative claims in the early 20th century.

These claims about mystics and mysticism make Underhill one of the first modern mystical “perennialists”, having identified and categorized common core mystical experiences across historical cultures and religious traditions some fifty years before the work of significant scholars of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Fithjof Schuon, Aldous Huxley, W. T. Stace, and Ninian Smart. These folks—dubbed “essentialist” theorists of mysticism—claim there to be a fundamental center of all genuine mysticism that a scholar can discern in her close examination of various mystical descriptions and theology across different traditions, cultures, and time periods. More than this, Underhill also seems to be a forerunner of what has more recently been called “new comparative theology”,⁶ insofar as her detailed reflections on non-Christian traditions involved a form

⁶ See Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010). See especially pp. 3-19 where Professor Clooney summarizes the key features of new comparative theology. One

of participatory engagement that vividly supported her development of mystical symbolic narratives and enriched the Christian perspective to which she was committed and participated in. This essay illustrates significant aspects of Underhill's pioneering inter-religious and comparative theological context.

In exploring the history and dynamics of mysticism, Underhill focused on well over one hundred Christian mystics in her many books and articles. In developing her point of view, she also draws on mystics and ideas from Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and even Buddhism, albeit relatively briefly and mainly in her early writings. In this essay I will focus on comparative reflections she develops in her classic work *Mysticism* (1910) and from her books of poetry (1912, 1916) and from substantial introductions she did for the autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore (1914) and for a book on the poetry of Kabir (1915).

Underhill's Three Symbolic Narratives of Mystical Theology

Underhill argues that mystics are able to transcend the typical mediums of religious experience of normal folk, in a direct "apprehension" of what she calls "Divine Substance". The experienced ultimate Reality, even between very different traditions, has common features: she says it is "always the same Beatific Vision of a Goodness, Truth, and Beauty which is *one*", even though we find diverse accounts of the experience.

significant characteristic of Underhill's view that differs from that of new comparative theology would seem to be her essentialist perspective on comparative mysticism. New comparative theologians typically hope to remain neutral with respect to such truth claims concerning issues of religious or theological pluralism, though it remains unclear to me why such neutrality should be a requirement of their methodology.

Underhill observes: “Attempts...to limit mystical truth by the formulae of any one religion, are as futile as the attempt to identify a precious metal with the die that converts it into current coin. The dies which the mystics have used are many. Their peculiarities and excrescences are always interesting and sometimes highly significant. Some give a far sharper, more coherent impression than others. But the gold from which this diverse coinage is struck is always the same precious metal. ...its substance must always be distinguished from the accidents under which we perceive it: for this substance has an absolute, and not a denominational, importance” (96).

So Underhill is careful to distinguish between the “substance” and the “accidents” of divine Reality. The mystic experiences divine Being *substantially* in a direct, affective embrace and union that transcends her senses, emotions, and mind. However, the mystic perceives, interprets, and understands the experience only *accidentally*—according to her socio-religious context and personal temperament. So one finds “diverse coinage” between traditions, that is always “struck” from the same “gold” (96). She writes: “This experience is the valid part of mysticism, the thing which gives to it its unique importance amongst systems of thought, the only source of its knowledge. Everything else is really guessing aided by analogy” (102).

This “guessing aided by analogy” can be quite different between traditions. Although mystics encounter aspects of the same spiritual Reality, they end up developing a wide variety of beliefs and practices, given their individual temperament and socio-cultural context. For example, Underhill acknowledges some of the specific practices and beliefs of Indian religions that diverge from Christian views, such as the notion of *avatars*, speculations about reincarnation, and claims of extreme quietism, monism, the

illusoriness of the phenomenal world, and the annihilation of the self.⁷ More generally, she recognizes “the classic dangers, heresies and excesses to which the mystical temperament has always been liable” in all traditions.⁸ But her focus in her comparative writings is always constructive and framed within her hope of promoting the positive moral and spiritual transformation of individuals and communities.

In that regard, Underhill insightfully notices in her wide range of reading of mystical writings three major symbolic narratives by which mystics across different traditions have tended to imagine and describe their mystical experiences. There are “three principle ways”, she writes, “in which [humanity’s] spiritual consciousness reacts to the touch of Reality” (126): these are the themes of spiritual pilgrimage, spiritual marriage, and spiritual transmutation or transformation. I will comment on each of these themes and then propose a fourth that we also find vividly illustrated in Underhill’s writings—the theme of divine immanence in nature.

Influential examples of the pilgrimage narrative are John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and St. Bonaventure’s *Journey of the Mind to God*. However, in illustrating this traditional symbolic narrative, Underhill chooses to highlight the 13th century Muslim Sufi poets Azziz bin Mohammed Nafasi (died 1263) and especially Abū Hamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm (1145-1221), who is referred to as ‘Attar of Nishapur. In his story, “The Colloquy of the Birds”, ‘Attar includes the three key features of the traveler’s

⁷ Evelyn Underhill, “Introduction, *The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi, trs. (London, Macmillan and Co., 1914) pp. xvi-xvii.

⁸ Underhill, “Introduction, *The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, p. xvi.

journey, including the magnetic call or deep attraction that draws the pilgrim on a long and difficult journey, the devotional context, which brings illuminating knowledge of God, and, mystical elevation, where the pilgrim enters directly into the Divine whom she has finally reached at the end of her journey.

Guided by the lapwing bird, this pilgrimage for ‘Attar requires the difficult passing through seven valleys, from which none have returned to tell the actual distance. In this narrative, there are wild animals and robbers obstructing the way, and the mystic must travel extremely light, stripping herself of all earthly possessions in the first valley of the quest. Having avoided those obstacles that block one’s path and once sufficiently detached from material cares and social responsibilities, the pilgrim moves in her radical freedom into the valley of illuminative love, then through the valleys of contemplative self-knowledge, absorbed detachment, ecstatic vision, and the dark night of the soul. Finally the mystic pilgrim moves through the valley of self-annihilation, what Underhill calls “the supreme degree of union, or theopathic state, in which the self is utterly merged, ‘like a fish in the sea’ in the ocean of Divine Love” (132).

I will say more about the “theopathic” ideal below. But notice how in this symbolic narrative God passionately draws the pilgrim to Her, just as fish are drawn naturally to their spawning pools: “‘For our natural Will’, says Lady Julian, ‘is to have God, and the Good will of God is to have us; and we may never cease from longing till we have Him in fullness of joy’” (133-134). This idea of the “love chase”—of pursuing and being pursued by God—is a major mystical-pilgrimage theme across traditions, and is even drawn into the imagery of our natural world: “‘Earth’, [Meister Eckhart] says, ‘cannot escape the sky; let it flee up or down, the sky flows into it, and makes it fruitful

whether it will or no. So God does to [humanity]. He who will escape Him only runs to His bosom; for all corners are open to Him” (136).

Notice how the theme of love typically tends at some point to enter deeply into the symbolic of pilgrimage. But it constitutes a major narrative of its own in the form of spiritual marriage. Its most popular grounding is in a Jewish text, *The Song of Songs*, a passionately sensual poem of romance and courtship that does not even mention God. Nevertheless, numerous Christian mystics have drawn passionately from this imagery of human love in imaging their spiritual relationship with God. The 12th century Richard of St Victor (died 1173) writes of the “steep stairway of love” in terms of four aspects or stages: betrothal—which corresponds with the stage of mystical purgation, courtship—which signifies mystical illumination, wedlock—the unitive stage, and finally the fruitfulness of conjugal relations—where the mystic “Bride” becomes “a ‘parent’ of fresh spiritual life”. Richard “saw clearly that the union of the soul with its Source could not be a barren ecstasy” (140). The key in this narrative is the redirecting of erotic passion towards God, which includes sometimes very vivid sexual, pregnancy, and birthing imagery. I should note that Meister Eckhart writes even more provocatively than Richard, of *giving birth* to Christ from this naked immersion in Godhead—of the virgin becoming a wife and then of embodying and exuding the very compassion and justice of God, within which she is immersed in this most intimate union with God.

From the Sufi tradition, intermixed with Hindu devotion to Kṛṣṇa, we find a similar love-narrative in the poetic reflections of the great 15th century north Indian mystic poet Kabīr (1440-1518), which Underhill explores in her introduction to his poetry. In Hindu spirituality, Kṛṣṇa is the human incarnation of the God Viṣṇu who

manifests in the world as the heroic charioteer-prince, or as an infant and child prankster, or as an enchanting young flute player, especially beloved of the fair milkmaid women. Kabīr in his devotion to Kṛṣṇa focuses on the divine flute player. He writes of his mystical union with God: “Subtle is the path of love!/ Therein there is no asking and no not-asking, / There one loses one’s self at His feet, / There one is immersed in the joy of seeking: plunged in the deeps of love as the fish in the water. / The lover is never slow in offering his head for his Lord’s service. / Kabir declares the secret of this love”.⁹

Here we find reference to fish-imagery similar to that given by ‘Attar in his pilgrimage narrative. So Underhill finds in Kabīr’s mystical writings evidence also of “the true *theopathic* state”.¹⁰ This is the state that Madame Guyon has described as a new life *in* God, where the mystic “no longer lives or works of herself: but God lives, acts and works in her, and this grows little by little till she becomes perfect with God’s perfection, is rich with His riches, and loves with His love” (431). I will return to Kabīr’s poetry below. But this idea of the theopathic state brings us directly to the third type of symbolic narrative common to mystical theology, the theme of an inward alteration, “remaking or regeneration” of the person (140).

Such imagery stresses the inner subject of transformation or transmutation, and is influenced in the West by the traditions of Hermeticism and Spiritual Alchemy, where the prime object was to uncover the philosopher’s stone—the transformative substance which

⁹ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Rabindranath Tagore, tr., Evelyn Underhill, asst. tr. and Introduction (London: The Macmillan Company, 1915) p. 60. This book was also published in New York in 1915 by The Macmillan Company titled as *Songs of Kabir*.

¹⁰ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. xxi. My italics.

would convert base metals into gold. In “Christian” Hermeticism, the philosopher’s stone is Jesus Christ, who acts to transmute spiritually the mystic, in redeeming and deifying her fallen nature. Underhill writes: “We have seen that this idea of the New Birth, the remaking or transmutation of the self, clothed in many different symbols, runs through the whole of mysticism and much theology” (140). In Christian mysticism, it is well illustrated in the writings of Jacob Boehme and William Law, and Underhill mentions some parallel symbols in Chinese spirituality (148). I would propose that in Hindu thought we find this theme especially in Tantra and Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, as powerful spiritual energy is understood to be awakened through various rituals and yoga exercises, and drawn to penetrate the subtle energy centers of the person, purifying and transforming those aspects of persons that resist the spiritual life, and awakening them to their spiritual core and ideal.

A Fourth Symbolic Narrative: Spirit in Nature

Underhill herself develops at least one other rich symbolic narrative beyond those of spiritual pilgrimage, marriage, and transmutation, one that is also colored by her inter-faith conversations with non-Christian religious traditions. This is the theme of the presence of spirit in natural life. Here the mystic does not encounter God as transcendent Other (as in the Pilgrimage narrative) or God as lover (as in the Spiritual Marriage narrative) but rather she comes to see and to experience God in nature. This is a major theme of Underhill’s first book of poems, titled *Immanence*, which she published in 1912. For her, this spiritual presence in our created world includes angels, saints, our resurrected ancestors, death itself, and above all Eucharistic liturgy, the Holy Spirit and

Christ—all of the themes found in the various poems of this book. She also points toward a kind of nature mysticism—where the natural world appears transfused by spiritual light and beauty, and the observer of such epiphanies finds herself drawn into that vision, participating with them and in them.

To be sure, in these poems we find the narrative themes of pilgrimage and spiritual marriage quite explicitly. In the poem “Invitatory”, for example, Underhill imagines Christ calling the reader to rest in his healing and nourishing presence: “Dear Heart, poor wearied one! / ... ‘Come! Bride and Pilgrim, rest, / Thy head upon Love’s breast, / ...Come! at Love’s mystic table break thy fast’”.¹¹ But in the opening poem titled “Immanence”, God also comes “in the little things”, He says, “Amidst the delicate and bladed wheat / That springs triumphant in the furrowed sod. / There do I dwell, in weakness and in power; / ...In your strait garden plot I come to flower: / ...I come in the little things, / Saith the Lord:/ ...In brown bright eyes / That peep from out the brake, I stand confest. / On every nest / Where feathery Patience is content to brood / And leaves her pleasure for the high emprise / Of motherhood— / There doth My Godhead rest”.¹²

So Underhill images in feminine symbol the divine spirit in nature, portending the important work of contemporary eco-theologians, such as Thomas Berry and Sally McFague, with her admonitions to recognize and apprehend spiritually the sacred in the natural world. She also echoes the beautiful imagery of Julian of Norwich, who writes of our sweet “Mother Jesus”—the creative Word—our “Mother sensual”, whose

¹¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Immanence. A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1912), pp. 45-46.

¹² Underhill, *Immanence*, p. 1.

unconditional compassion reforms and restores us with supreme and gentle patience. The “Motherhood” of “Godhead”, Underhill writes in her poem “Planting-Time”, is also the source of *creative* light and love: “To paint the earth with tulips is a joy, / It is the satisfaction of desire; / ‘Tis to employ / God’s own creative touch / And from the smouldering world to strike a coloured fire”.¹³

Drawing on a provocative interplay of masculine and feminine imagery, Underhill asks us to imagine being with the holy Mystery of Godhead during God’s period of fallowed gestation: “God dreams in plants, they say. / Ah, would that I might creep / Within the magic circle of his winter sleep: / ...Rapt from all other thing / The flowery fancies that clamp his dark. / There Life, who cast away / Her crumpled dress, / Sets on the loom / The warp-threads of another loveliness / And weaves a mesh of beauty for the Spring”. So nature becomes infused by spirit in God’s creative action: “Here, in this garden bed, / Surely the Spirit and the Bride / Are wed.”.¹⁴

This weaving together of spirit and nature in harmonious and creative unity continues in Underhill’s second book of poems published in 1916, *Theophanies: A Book of Verses*, but it includes significantly the influences of her inter-faith conversations. On the title page, Underhill quotes John Scotus Erigena: “Every visible and invisible creature is a theophany or appearance of God”; and in her little poem *Nihil Longe Deo*—[Nothing is far from God]—she writes: “As sleeping infants in their dream despair / We range, and grope thy breast: / But wake to find that haven everywhere / And we already blest”.¹⁵ We

¹³ Underhill, *Immanence*, p. 54.

¹⁴ Underhill, *Immanence*, pp. 54-55, 55.

¹⁵ Underhill, *Immanence*, p. 93.

are already blessed, she insists, and we need to wake up to this truth—that nature is immersed in spirit and exudes and reveals it dynamically to those who become open to its mystic light.

Drawing explicitly on a significant theme of Hindu spirituality, she titles one poem in *Theophanies* “*Lila, The Play of God*”. This poem is a conversation with God that begins by addressing God’s creative play: “Lord, the magic of thy play, / Ever changing, never still, / It enchants the dreaming heart, / It enslaves the restless will, / Calls it to the player’s part”. / ...O the rush of birds in flight! / O the blazon of the may! / Holy fading of the day, / Mystery of marshes lying / Faint and still beneath the sky, / While the solemn clouds go by / And their massy shadows creep / Grey upon the glistening sheep. / *Noble sport and mighty aim, / Shrouded Player of the Game* “. ¹⁶ Here Underhill links the theme of spirit in nature directly to God’s dynamic *play*, which is magical, mysterious, awesome, and wonderful. Although she goes on in this three page poem to ask the very hard questions of how suffering and evil might possibly fit into this image, it is clear that Underhill is adapting this theme of the world as creative play of God directly from the mystic poetry of Kabīr, who I mentioned above.

Kabīr himself fused in inter-faith dialogue the Hindu devotion to the personal God Viṣṇu with Sufi contemplation on the imageless God of Islam. He was also very popular amongst the Sikh Gurus. According to tradition, he was a common man, an uneducated weaver, married, father of four children, who appealed to a wide and diverse audience of Hindus and Muslims, composing exceptional and brilliant poetry in the Hindi vernacular

¹⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Theophanies: A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1916) p. 34.

of his time. Today there are over 9 million people in the devotional movement (*Kabīr Panthis*) that was founded some five hundred years ago.

In 1915, about a year before she published *Theophanies*, Underhill assisted 1913 Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore in his English translation of one hundred poems attributed to Kabīr that had earlier been translated into Bengali, and she wrote the substantial introduction to this volume. Although Kabīr scholar Charlotte Vaudeville questions the authenticity of most of these poems, she does not specify those in question nor explain the reasons for her judgment. But she notes that these poems, “attributed to Kabīr and sung by itinerant Sadhus all over Northern India”, were translated by Tagore “into beautiful English”, read widely in the West, and also translated into French and Russian. These very popular poems present a *Vaiṣṇava* form of *bhakti* that reflects closely the perspective of Kabīr, even if some of them are not his creation.¹⁷

The year before, in 1914, Underhill also wrote an introduction to the autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore (1817-1905), the great 19th century Hindu reformer of the Brahma Samaj, and the father of Rabindranath. She regarded the senior Tagore as very advanced intellectually and spiritually. She wrote: “Those familiar with the history of Christian mystics will find again, in the self-revelations of this modern saint of the East, many of those characteristic experiences and doctrines which are the special joy and beauty of our own tradition of the spiritual life”.¹⁸

In her introduction to Kabīr’s poetry, Underhill also praised the inter-faith

¹⁷ Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabir*, Vol I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) pp. 18, 24.

¹⁸ Underhill, “Introduction”, *The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, p. x.

inclusivism of Kabīr—a “great religious reformer” of the 15th century. She writes how, from Kabīr’s poetry, “it is impossible to say [if he] was a Brāhman or Sūfī, Vedāntist or Vaishnavite. He is, as he says himself, ‘at once the child of Allah and of Rām’.”¹⁹ Indeed, in her mystical essentialist perspective she considers Kabīr in his poetry to be praising and loving the same spiritual Reality that Underhill addresses in her own Christian context, and similarly calling humanity to unitive relationship with this Source. Echoing the creative activity of the Word of God, who issues forth and creates out of the overflow of love from the infinite Godhead, Kabīr writes: “All things are created by the Om;²⁰ / The love-form is His body. / He is without form, without quality, without decay: / Seek thou union with Him!”²¹

Underhill writes that Kabīr along with St Augustine, Rumi, and Jan Van Ruysbroeck had a special synthetic vision of God. They were able to give vivid expression both to “the personal and impersonal, the transcendent and immanent, static and dynamic aspects of the Divine Nature”.²² So, “Kabīr ponders and says: ‘He who has neither caste nor country, who is formless and without quality, fills all space’” / The Creator brought into being the Game of Joy: and from the word Om the creation sprang”.²³ Underhill notices parallels with the Christian sense of Trinitarian movement,

¹⁹ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. viii, ix.

²⁰ In the Hindu tradition, “Om” is the most sacred syllable and original creative vibration formed within the Divine out of pre-creative emptiness or nothingness.

²¹ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. 32-33.

²² *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. xviii.

²³ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. 88.

from the static and eternal Unity of Godhead, into the manifesting and creative Word of the second Person of the Trinity.

For Kabīr, this formless and unconditioned Being enters into creative play, bringing form out of its own nothingness, as God magically and mysteriously manifests creative life from inert emptiness. The most significant characteristics of this manifestation are joy and play, which go together, hand in hand: “The Creator brought into being this Game of Joy...”, writes Kabīr: “The earth is His joy; His joy is the sky; / His joy is the flashing of the sun and the moon; / His joy is the beginning, the middle, and the end; / His joy is eyes, darkness, and light. / Oceans and waves are His joy: His joy the Sarasvati, the Jumna, and the Ganges. / The Guru is One:²⁴ and life and death, union and separation, are all His plays of joy! / His play the land and water, the whole universe! / His play the earth and the sky! / In play is the Creation spread out, in play it is established. The whole world, says Kabir, rests in His play, yet still the Player remains unknown”.²⁵

Underhill included this last line as the introduction of her poem that I mentioned above, “Lila, The Play of God”: “The whole world, says Kabir, rests in His play, yet still the Player remains unknown”.²⁶ God as Player is not an object of our senses and intellect but He is omnipresent in His creation—immanent in His creative play and joy. Creative immanence is a major theme of Kabīr’s poetry and it begins with divine play, which

²⁴ The “Sarasvati, the Jumna, and the Ganges” are famous rivers of India and thought to possess spiritual power and significance. “Guru” is reference to divine Being as teacher, a term of reference common to Sikhism.

²⁵ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. 88-89.

²⁶ Underhill, *Theophanies*, p. 34.

Kabīr images as a kind of apophatic dancer whose movement stimulates the world to life: “He is pure and indestructible, / His form is infinite and fathomless, / He dances in rapture, and waves of form arise from His dance. / The body and mind cannot contain themselves, when they are touched by His great joy. / He is immersed in all consciousness, all joys, and all sorrows; / He has no beginning and no end; / He holds all within His bliss”.²⁷

Underhill seems fascinated by this sensuous imagery of dance to which Kabīr loves to refer. Although he acknowledges aspects of God that are static and absolute unity, Underhill notes that for Kabīr, God in relation to nature “is essentially dynamic. It is by the symbols of motion that he most often tries to convey it to us: as in his constant reference to dancing, or the strangely modern picture of that Eternal Swing of the Universe, which is ‘held by the cords of love’”.²⁸ Kabīr admonishes his readers to open to the cosmic rhythms of creative life, to learn to dance with God, to follow God’s lead in entering into the ecstatic joy of God’s divine play: “Dance, my heart! dance to-day with joy. / The strains of love fill the days and the nights with music, and the world is listening to its melodies: / Mad with joy, life and death dance to the rhythm of this music. The hills and the sea and the earth dance. The world of man dances in laughter and tears”.²⁹

Of course, dance is associated with music, and so Kabīr claims the natural world moves to the rhythms of God’s music—it listens to God’s songs: “The hills and the sea and the earth dance” to divine melodies, as “The strains of love fill the days and the

²⁷ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. 33.

²⁸ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

²⁹ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. 38-39.

nights with the music” of God’s divine play. So Underhill observes: “Everywhere Kabīr discerns the ‘Unstruck Music of the Infinite’—that celestial melody which the angel played to St. Francis, that ghostly symphony which filled the soul of [Richard] Rolle with ecstatic joy. The one figure which he adopts from the Hindu Pantheon and constantly uses, is that of Krishna the Divine Flute Player”.³⁰

His musical associations give Kṛṣṇa a special place in Kabīr’s poetry, which he integrates also with this rich sense of spirit immanent in the natural world: “The flute of the Infinite is played without ceasing, and its sound is love:”. “I hear the melody of His flute, and I cannot contain myself: / The flower blooms, though it is not spring; and already the bee has received its invitation. / The sky roars and the lightning flashes, the waves arise in my heart, / The rain falls; and my heart longs for my Lord. / Where the rhythm of the world rises and falls, thither my heart has reached: / There the hidden banners are fluttering in the air. / Kabir says: ‘My heart is dying, though it lives’”.³¹

Concluding Reflections

Underhill draws on this evocative symbolism from Hindu spirituality to provoke and enrich the spiritual experiences of her Christian readers, in encouraging them to open to the immanent presence of the Holy Spirit in nature in its various forms, including creative play, dance, and music. In many ways she portends the creative thought of modern eco-theologians—so crucial for any current Christian theology to remain alive and compelling—in stressing the spiritual sacredness of the world and our potential

³⁰ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. xxxv.

³¹ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. 56, 71-72.

awareness of our mystical connection with it and dependence on it. Kabīr and various other non-Christian mystics also helped her to illustrate these other major symbolic narratives of Christian mysticism—pilgrimage, spiritual marriage, and spiritual transformation. One wonders about the degree to which Underhill’s inter-faith conversations might have continued to inform her later work in Christian spiritual direction and retreats, and in Christian liturgy, as her Christian faith matured and deepened.³² However, clearly it affected her development of Christian mystical theology in creative and interesting ways. As I said, her understanding of mystics and the mystic life was an invitation to inter-faith conversation, some one hundred years ago now. Indeed, perhaps Underhill’s influence was sufficiently far-reaching for us to refer to her as a “grandmother” of both essentialist theories of mysticism and of new comparative theology (or at least of the more significant features thereof), when one takes into account the immense popularity of her writings throughout most of the 20th century.

³² For example, one wonders if Underhill’s encounter with the theory and practice of *ahimsā* in Indian religions at all influenced the pacifist orientation she embraced and espoused during the Second World War. Significant shifts in Underhill’s Christian faith-perspective are well illustrated in Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, Dana Greene, ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1993) and in Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).