

EVELYN UNDERHILL REVISITED

Harvey D. Egan

WHEN I RETURNED to the United States in 1973 after doing my doctoral studies in Germany, I spent the summer before classes began reading Evelyn Underhill's collected works. Her book *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* was foundational and formative for me, the right book at the right time. Although published a century ago, it still remains one of the few books I would recommend to someone who is unfamiliar with the Christian mystical tradition.

Evelyn Underhill was the English language's most widely read writer on prayer, contemplation, spirituality, worship and mysticism in the first half of the twentieth century. By recovering forgotten, undeservedly neglected and even suppressed texts, she became the first of many scholars dedicated to providing a genuine understanding of the mystical life to a broad public. Convinced that spiritual–mystical writings attest to a full-blooded, passionate love affair with 'the Eternal', she insisted that such literature, to be understood properly, must be read and studied with the passion of both faith and love.

However, when I read Underhill's works, a question arose, which is not easily answered. Is a penetrating researcher, synthesizer and expositor of mystical texts necessarily a mystic, or a mystical theologian, or a mystagogue, or a combination of all three? Do Kurt Ruh's¹ and Bernard McGinn's² monumental tomes on the history of the Christian

¹ Kurt Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik*, 4 volumes (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1990–1999).

² Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, 4 volumes to date (New York: Crossroad, 1991–2005). McGinn's skill as a mystical theologian, however, is aptly demonstrated in his article, 'Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal', *Spiritus* 8 (2008), 44–63.

mystical tradition and Georges Morel's ground-breaking work on the mysticism of St John of the Cross,³ for example, mean that these extraordinary scholars should be considered as mystics, or mystical theologians, or mystagogues? I view them (and indeed Underhill) as scholars who possess what St Teresa of Avila called a 'certain something'—that is, a sympathetic comprehension of the mystical life—and whose works have influenced many.

But Underhill's life was punctuated by spiritual lapses, numerous conversions, and unusual experiences—some paranormal, and others perhaps incipiently mystical ('the deep quiet mysterious love one wants to keep').⁴ Her books and articles give indirect evidence for her own spiritual journey from agnosticism, to mystical monism, to a struggle between 'pure' mysticism and carrying the cross of daily life, and finally, to the joys of a fully incarnational spirituality which culminated in both individual and communal sacrificial worship of God, the 'wholly Other'.

In her early years, Underhill was indifferent—if not somewhat hostile—to religion, especially in its institutional manifestations. Trips to Italy and a visit to a convent dedicated to perpetual adoration, however, sparked a religious conversion inclining her to the sacramental-incarnational faith of Roman Catholicism. Her spiritual yearnings also led her, for a few years, to participate in the occult, hermetic Golden Dawn Society, which she would later claim opened her eyes to a Reality beneath appearances.

Her first published writings were poetry—a genre she considered the crown of mystical literature—followed by three novels. These are populated by quasi-mystical characters, living in two worlds and seeing below life's surface—heroes who experience the 'first kiss of God'⁵ and eventually see the redemptive value of losing a seemingly higher vocation to find full human integration in self-sacrificing love of others. As with Underhill's later works, these novels—especially *The Column of Dust*—illustrate how the mystical quest can go horribly wrong if it is embarked upon for its own sake. They also

³ Georges Morel, *Le sens de l'existence selon Saint Jean de la Croix*, 3 volumes (Paris: Aubier, 1960–1961).

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Radiance: A Spiritual Memoir of Evelyn Underhill*, edited by Bernard Bangley (Brewster: Paraclete, 2004), 74.

⁵ Coventry Patmore, 'Christianity an Experimental Science', in *Religio Poetae Etc.* (London: George Bell, 1893), 42.

evinced a long-lasting tension in Underhill's own life: should one pursue the mystical life of ecstatic consciousness or the loving, self-sacrificing folly of the cross in daily life?

In 1911, she published the work that established her reputation as a spiritual writer, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. In the next ten years, this was followed by a variety of articles, translations and biographical works related to mysticism. These included *The Mystic Way* (1913), which reinterprets Jesus as a mystic and the early Christians as a mystical community,



Evelyn Underhill

a book 'as impressive as it is unconvincing', according to Baron Friedrich von Hügel. Her 1919 work, *Jacopone da Todi: Poet and Mystic 1228–1306: A Spiritual Biography*, is still a useful introduction. She also collaborated with Rabindranath Tagore in translating a selection from the mystical poetry of the Bengali poet Pseudo-Kabir.

During World War I, Underhill worked in naval intelligence and actively supported the war effort, undertakings that forced her to contemplate the relationship of the mystical calling to the historical, cultural, political and social environment. Although she said that she owed her entire spiritual life to a long-time friend and eventual spiritual director, the distinguished Roman Catholic lay theologian Friedrich von Hügel, she became a practising member of the Anglican Church in 1921—seemingly because of pressure from her husband.

In the mid-1920s, Underhill directed retreats and earned a reputation as a spiritual director, a work she prized highly. Her books *Practical Mysticism* (1914), *The Spiritual Life* (1937), *Abba: Meditations Based on the Lord's Prayer* (1940), and the posthumous *Meditations and Prayers* (1948), are good examples of her practical, flexible and sound Christian advice for finding God in everyday life. She also did excellent

editorial work for the magazine *The Spectator* and, later, *Time and Tide*, while finding time to visit the poor and the sick.

Two books of this period, *Mystics of the Church* (1925) and *The Golden Sequence* (1932), reject her earlier view that mysticism is the 'flight of the alone to the Alone'.⁶ She came to see that the God-centered life must fully embody itself in a living, historical community. Her deeply ecumenical book *Worship* (1936), a study of the nature and principles of the human response to the Eternal, was exceptionally well received. In her view, worship, being a supernatural action that flows from and bestows supernatural life, is the Church's and the individual's witness to transcendence.

In *Man and the Supernatural* (1927) Underhill eschewed the progressive anthropocentrism of her day, valuing only what results from one's inner life in God. Christianity, she held, must be God-centred, not simply directing itself towards social action, philanthropy or the loudspeaker of public opinion. Because she felt herself called to respond to the interior problems of individuals, she avoided party movements, especially of a religious-political nature. However, in the late 1930s she became an ardent pacifist, as attested by her works *Into the Way of Peace* (1940) and *The Church and War* (1941). Intense and unremitting work may have hastened her death from a thrombosis in 1941.

Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness

Underhill remains best remembered for her 1911 book, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, an oft-reprinted 'weathered masterpiece' that may be the twentieth century's most significant book on the subject. Her penetrating understanding and lucid exposition of mystical texts, her wealth of illustrative quotations from numerous major and minor figures in the Christian tradition, her emphasis upon their whole *lives* (not merely 'experiences'), their practical love, and their 'spiritual fecundity' ensure the book's nature as an enduring classic. The book is divided into two parts: 'The Mystic Fact' and 'The Mystic Way'.

⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (Mineola: Dover, 2002 [1911; 1930]), 82.

The Mystic Fact

To my mind, the most fruitful chapter of the first part focuses on 'The Characteristics of Mysticism'. Judging William James's 'celebrated "four marks"' of the mystical state (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity) to be 'dissatisfying', Underhill offers her own four.⁷

First, mysticism is 'active and practical'. It is the 'art' of establishing a conscious relation with the Absolute—an 'organic process' in which the entire self remakes itself under the guidance of 'Reality', and which culminates in the perfect consummation of the love of God. Underhill disagrees strongly with commentators who contend that mysticism is nothing more than an opinion, a philosophy, the pursuit of occult knowledge or a comfortable basking 'in the beams of the Uncreated Light'. In her view, it is 'the most complete and difficult expression of life which is as yet possible to man'. Furthermore, the great mystics tell us how they acted, not how they speculated.

Secondly, Underhill characterizes mysticism as:

... wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving anything in the visible universe (81).

However, the mystic does, in fact, make the world a better place through 'spiritual fecundity' and does not 'as his enemies declare, neglect his duty to the many'.

Thirdly, love is the 'business and method' of mysticism (85). Experienced as the 'Reality' of all that is, the 'One' is grasped as the living, personal object of love that draws the mystic's entire being 'homeward' (81). Later Underhill insists that love must be understood 'in its deepest and fullest sense', as the ultimate expression of the 'self's most vital tendencies', as total dedication of the will and as the 'deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul toward its Source' (85).

Mysticism's fourth mark centres on psychology: the mystic must possess a 'tenacious' and 'heroic' psychological make-up (91), a nature capable of extraordinary concentration which enables him or her to embrace fully the demands of the mystical life. Extraordinary selflessness is demanded as the self is remade under God's guidance.

⁷ This and following quotations, Underhill, *Mysticism*, 81. Subsequent references given in the text.

This first part of the book also explains the mystical life with respect to 'vitalism', 'psychology', 'theology', 'symbolism' and 'magic'. Vitalism underscores the 'vital principle' as the essence of reality. It views reality as dynamic and life as subject to constant change. With the mystic's 'instinct for the Absolute', he or she is conscious of 'Being and Becoming' and of the transcendence and immanence of 'Reality' (26).

In her chapter on psychology, Underhill writes:

Urged therefore by the cravings of feeling and of thought, consciousness is always trying to run out to the encounter of the Absolute, and always being forced to return (45).

Her distinction between the 'transcendental sense' (53)—that dimension of the person open to and hungering for the Absolute—and the unconscious as a reservoir of collective and personal experiences, emotions and memories offers an excellent counterpoint to secular psychologies that are closed to transcendence. In this section Underhill also contends that the mystic's vocation is to plunge below 'normal surface consciousness' (57) to awaken what the classical mystics have called the 'ground', 'apex', 'spark' and 'marrow' of the soul. Contradicting the notion that 'the disease of hysteria, with its astounding variety of mental symptoms, its strange power of disintegrating, rearranging and enhancing the elements of consciousness' (60), explains mystical consciousness, she underlines that a 'mobile threshold' of consciousness 'may make a man a genius, a lunatic, or a saint' (62).

**To plunge
below 'normal
surface
consciousness'**

The chapter on theology elucidates how mystics tend to express their 'transcendental life' in terms of the theories either of 'emanation' or of 'immanence': that the perfections of creatures either descend from a God who remains strictly 'other' (95), or that 'the earth is literally "crammed with heaven"' (99) and immersed in God. They emphasize, too, that the goal of the mystical quest is 'Uncreated Light', 'Life', 'Love' and a participation in the mysteries of the Trinity and the incarnation. Contrary to a common and erroneous opinion, Underhill makes it clear that the mystic is neither a 'spiritual anarchist' nor a heretic (95).

The chapter on symbolism delineates,

... these special mystical diagrams, these symbolic and artistic descriptions of man's inner history—his secret adventures with God—[that] are almost endless in their variety (126).

Underhill selects from the myriad of images 'three great classes of symbols' that express the deepest cravings of the human heart: the desire which makes the person a 'pilgrim and a wanderer'; the craving for the 'perfect mate' which makes the person a 'lover'; and the craving for perfection which drives the person to be an ascetic in order to become a saint (126–127).

In the chapter on magic, Underhill makes the strange assertion—contradicted by the Christian mystics on whom she relies—that magic always accompanies mystical activity. In her view, though, magic wants to *get* whereas mysticism wants to *give* (70). Unlike those who surrender to the path of magic, the true mystic has no interest in the mysteries of life, only in the 'Absolute'—which no amount of magic can attain (151). The mystic knows that only God can teach and that only the 'pure of heart' can learn (137).

The Mystic Way

Part Two of *Mysticism*, on the 'Mystic Way', remains to this day one of the best summaries that exist of the stages of mystical ascent. Underhill writes of the soul's 'awakening', 'purification' and 'illumination', and of the experience of 'voices and visions'. The gradual plunging of contemplatives into 'recollection', 'quiet', 'contemplation', 'ecstasy and rapture' and the 'dark night of the soul' urges them on to the ultimate 'unitive life', in which they discover themselves to be 'parent[s] of transcendental life' (428).

The self's 'awakening', in Underhill's assessment, is a form of conversion far deeper than a religious one. Periods of restlessness and mental stress frequently precede this often abrupt awakening to a 'new consciousness', 'to a new plane of being, new and more personal relation with Reality; hence to a new and more real work that it must do' (197).

The chapter on the 'Purification of the Self' describes the 'true lover of the Absolute' as one by whom purgation is experienced as a privilege and a joy (201). One becomes more aware of the tension between the true and false self—and of the 'web of illusion' that blinds one to the 'unchanging light of Eternal Reality' (229). The demands placed on



Sculpture of Underhill at Guildford Cathedral

the self by its 'adjustment to Reality' are its 'self-simplification', 'cleansing and stripping' and 'detachment' (198) in the 'school of suffering love' (228).

The consciousness of those in the 'illumination of the self' stage differs radically from that of 'normal' people. A sacramental consciousness, one transfigured by God's radiant Light, 'knows the secret of the world' in the 'joyous apprehension' of the oneness of Light, Life, Love and Beauty (240). The twofold expansion of consciousness into God and into the world bestows upon the 'intuitional or transcendental self' an enormously increased energy (240). "Pure contemplation", "lucid vision", or automatic expression' (241) and a new power of perceiving a 'splendour always there' (249) are a few of the descriptions employed by the mystics to describe this state. In Underhill's view,

some prophets, poets, artists and dreamers have 'a measure' of it (233). It has its shadow side: the temptation to 'spiritual gluttony' (246).

The chapter 'Voices and Visions' explains and exemplifies the three classical types of such phenomena: corporeal, imaginative and intellectual (273). Corporeal phenomena are heard or seen with the bodily senses; imaginative ones with the 'inner senses'; and spiritual ones with the soul itself. The first two types can be fabricated by the self and even by the demonic. The spiritual kind, however, come only from God. Bogus locutions and visions are frequently little more than expressions—but dangerous ones—of the mystic's broken, sinful, 'shadow' side (270). Most mystics do not seek, but fear and ignore, voices and visions—except those that enhance transcendental life and transform the mystic into the Light and Love that he or she contemplates.

Contemplation, for Underhill, is the way that the mystic perceives the 'suprasensible' over against itself and makes 'discoveries'; and voices

and visions are the way in which mystical consciousness presents its discoveries to the 'surface mind' (299). They are the soul's artistic expressions, the percolation through various levels of the psyche, of the sense of God's presence at the 'spark of the soul' (274). In this chapter on voices and visions, Underhill also discusses, with insight and numerous examples, the strange experience of 'automatic writing'—providing the reader with one of the best available treatments of this arcane phenomenon.

Underhill next spends two long chapters bringing the myriad of terms used for the pre-mystical and mystical stages of prayer together under the broad heading of 'introversion' and the somewhat narrower ones of 'recollection', 'quiet' and 'contemplation'. Introversion, in her view, is the entire process of 'gathering up and turning "inwards" of the powers of the self', of 'gazing into the ground of the soul' (303). It describes connected experiences of a 'progressive concentration of the entire self under the spur of love upon the contemplation of transcendental reality' (305).

Recollection begins with meditation, an acquired art of pondering, for example, the mysteries of Christ's life, death and resurrection (309). Meditation, for Underhill, is a form of *natural* (rather than supernatural) contemplation, the 'first deliberate act' in which the self voluntarily turns inward and concentrates (313). These 'spiritual gymnastics' usually reward the practitioner with deeper forms of inner silence and simplicity. One rule in the spiritual life: the quieter the prayer, the deeper.

Following a host of classical mystics, Underhill maintains that the transition from natural to supernatural contemplation begins with the 'Prayer of Quiet, or Simplicity', also known as the 'Interior Silence' (316). It has two salient features: the self's ability to receive the divine influx increases dramatically; and the self's 'reflective powers' undergo an almost complete suspension (317). The soul's yearning, its 'metaphysical thirst'—which Underhill maintains is the hallmark of mystical prayer—produces a 'strange silence' that is the outstanding quality of this level of prayer (306, 317). The mystics write of 'pure passivity', 'emptiness' and 'naked orison' (318) but, paradoxically, also of an omnipresent, intangible 'Something' that fills their consciousness permeated with both 'deprivation' and 'acquisition' (317). Although

the 'surface mind' is suspended, the spirit receives a 'dim yet vivid consciousness of the Infinite' (317).

In Underhill's view the prayer of quiet is 'the danger-zone of introversion', the 'most abused, least understood' mystical prayer (322). Drawing upon the teaching of Teresa of Avila and John Ruusbroec, she warns of the 'false idleness' and 'vacant placidity' taught by some of the cults of her day (322, 324). The true mystic never deliberately tries to enter this 'rest most busy' (323).⁸ The genuine prayer of quiet requires 'an ever-increasing predominance of Action over Activity'⁹—which is both 'death ... to all the things of this world' and 'fruit in God' (326). This essentially transitional state is marked by a 'stillness ... ruffled by joy' (327).

Fidelity to the Spirit's guidance during this stage often leads to 'Contemplation proper', which transcends the stages of symbol and of silence. In 'the supreme manifestation of that indivisible "power of knowing", thought, love and will are unified; feeling and perception fuse together' (329). For Underhill contemplation is an act of the whole person who, working under and surrendering to love's stimulus, pours him- or herself 'out ... or *in* towards' overpowering love (329). Totally absorbed in loving communion with the Absolute (Underhill prefers the terms 'Absolute' and 'Reality' to 'God'), unconscious of any acts of mind and will, the mystic's 'faculties are suspended'—in what an older terminology called 'ligature' (330). This 'passive' or 'infused' contemplation is 'ineffable' and 'noetic' (331).

Underhill describes contemplation as a 'whole' but 'brief act' that attains the Absolute (331). The soul cannot doubt that it is in God and God in it. Asleep to the self but awake in God, the mystic experiences a loving and self-forgetting concentration on the Divine, an active 'outgoing self-donation' to the divine gift, a 'divine osmosis' between finite and infinite life—all apprehended by way of participation (333).

Underhill distinguishes between the contemplation of 'transcendence' and of 'immanence'. The mystic of transcendence emphasizes the qualitative difference between God and everything else. God is the

⁸ Underhill is quoting Walter Hilton, see Hilton: *The Scale of Perfection*, translated by John P. H. Clark and Rosemary Dorward (Mahwah: Paulist, 1991), 295.

⁹ Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends: Critical Studies*, quoted in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 325.

‘Wholly Other’, the ‘dazzling’ and ‘strange’ Darkness who illuminates the mystic’s ‘littleness, unworthiness, and intolerable ignorance’ (251, 337). On the other hand, the mystic of immanence boasts of a sense of nearness, intimacy, sweetness—the coming of the Bridegroom, ‘adorable Friendship’, and a rapturous immersion in divine Light—for whom Reality is a ‘Person’, not a state (343).

Moving on from ‘Introversion’ to ‘Ecstasy and Rapture’, Underhill shows how these experiences differ dramatically in both their physical and psychical manifestations. She insists that one cannot equate the mystical and the ecstatic. Because contemplation can be controlled to a large extent by the will, it should not be confused with the totally involuntary and absolutely irresistible experiences of ecstasy and rapture. Underhill contends that all mystics agree on two points: during contemplation they refuse to give the ‘external world’ any attention; but in ecstasy and rapture they are incapable of giving it any attention.

One cannot equate the mystical and the ecstatic

Ecstasy comes upon a person—either gradually or abruptly—to produce a trance varying in depth and time. It depresses both breathing and circulation, makes the body cold and rigid, and engenders a short period of lucidity followed by one of complete unconsciousness.

Not only in love but also with love, the mystic’s conscious life shifts from the ‘circumference’ to the ‘centre’, from ‘surface to depth’ (363). A temporary unification of consciousness around the ‘spark of the soul’ engenders ‘pure perception’ and ‘enormous lucidity’ (366, 363). Such ‘entrancement ... represents the greatest possible extension of consciousness in the direction of “Pure Being”, the ‘Source’, the ‘One’ (367). In short, it is an ‘experience of Eternal Life’—aptly described by St Paul as being caught up to the ‘third heaven’ and into ‘Paradise’ (2 Corinthians 12:2, 4).

Although, as Underhill maintains, mystics unanimously judge ecstasy to be an exceptionally favourable state, they likewise agree that one must distinguish genuine from false ecstasies. Those that are genuine engender psychosomatic wholeness, transforming the mystic and moving him or her further along in the ascent to God; demonic and self-induced ecstasies harm the person physically, emotionally and spiritually.

The titans of the Christian mystical tradition distinguish between ecstasy and rapture—but often unclearly. In their view, ecstasies develop more or less ‘naturally’ from ‘a state of intense absorption in the ‘Divine Vision’, while raptures seize the subject ‘abruptly and irresistibly’ (375). In short, raptures are simply more ‘violent ecstatic states’ which the mystic experiences as ‘quick, sharp shocks’ (376). Episodes of rapture cause such a powerful feeling of being taken outward and upward that the mystic is convinced that he or she is levitating. Although seeing and hearing are not lost, everything—except God—seems far away. This ‘spiritual death’ and ‘life in God’ discloses ‘heavenly secrets’ and enhances both the mystic’s physical and spiritual vitality (378). Although usually brief, raptures leave the mystic dazed and sometimes even crazed with respect to the external world for days—even weeks. In some cases, the ‘remaking of consciousness’ accentuates the mystic’s bodily, emotional and psychological weaknesses (378).

In an unusually perceptive chapter, ‘The Dark Night of the Soul’, Underhill writes that,

... normal mystical development ... is an orderly movement of the whole consciousness towards higher centres, in which each intense and progressive affirmation fatigues the immature transcendental powers and is paid for by a negation, a swing-back of the whole consciousness, a stagnation of intellect, a reaction of the emotions, or an inhibition of the will (381).

One can say that the enormous effort demanded of the mystic during the illuminative stage produces acute emotional, psychological, intellectual and volitional fatigue. The intensity of the experience of God’s absence, of one’s own sinfulness and of one’s indolence brings about the self’s final purgation. In this ‘mystical death’, the mystic has no doubt that the ‘spark of the soul’ has been extinguished and that he or she has been justifiably abandoned by God. Boredom, callousness, spiritual ennui, aridity and ‘complete emotional lassitude’ possess the contemplative (391). The intellect and the will stagnate, leaving the person powerless to control either thoughts or inclinations. Every vice reawakens to plague the contemplative with evil visions, locutions, violent temptations and evil thoughts in ‘a privation worse than hell’ (393).¹⁰

¹⁰ Underhill is quoting Angela of Foligno, but does not give a reference.



Pleshey, where Underhill directed retreats

Underhill focuses on what she hauntingly describes as a ‘dark rapture’, an abrupt invasion of a wild and unbearable desire for God (394). ‘Dark rapture’—effected by an intense and painful concentration upon the ‘Divine Absence’—has all the psycho-physical earmarks of ecstasy. A parent’s suffering from the loss of a child or a lover’s grief over the departed beloved pale in contrast to this mystical grief. The torment from God’s absence, from the acute sense of sin, from dark ecstasies, and from the loss of the self’s former fervour, joy and peace expand the self’s freedom and capacity to receive God’s loving influx. Moreover, because the self in the illuminative way basked ‘in the Uncreated Light’, it erroneously ‘identified the Divine Nature with the Divine Light and sweetness which it then enjoyed’ (396). This ‘increase of personal vision and joy’ (396) produced a surreptitious ‘mercenary love’ too much centred on ‘the I, the Me, the Mine’ (412, 396). Because the contemplative confused ‘Reality with the joy of it’, the ‘naughting of the soul’ cuts out the root of self-love with the ‘knife of self-hatred’ (408). This enables the self to surrender totally to the ‘great movement of Absolute Life’ (400).

In the last chapter of her book, ‘The Unitive Life’, Underhill contends that the ‘final triumph of the spirit, the flower of mysticism, humanity’s top note’ can be understood only by those who have

attained it (413). Contemplatives write of the unitive life as 'deification', 'spiritual marriage' and 'divine fecundity'. As those who have permanently attained Reality, they are now 'ambassadors to the Absolute' and 'pioneers of humanity' (411). Mystically married to 'Reality', they are also mystically fertile 'parents of transcendental life', who pass on their 'transcendental life' to others.

Contemplatives in the unitive life comprehend that their centre of consciousness has shifted from the surface mind to the spark of the soul and that they now live at the deepest and richest level of consciousness. Although utterly 'penetrated' by the Absolute, the self remains 'intact'—like the sponge infiltrated by the sea (417). The human spirit has become 'that which it beholds'—transformed, but remaining itself (418).

**The
deified soul
remains
humble**

'Mystics of the impersonal type', according to Underhill, express the unitive life in terms of 'deification', of 'partak[ing] directly of the Divine Nature'. Paraphrasing Meister Eckhart, she claims that God says to the mystic: 'I became man for you. If you do not become God for me, you do wrong.' (420) The deified soul resembles 'ardent sparks' ablaze in the divine Fire and partakes of the uncreated and energizing life of this Fire (421). Inundations of 'Uncreated Light', of being 'Home', and of foretastes of the beatific vision cause the mystic to sing of her transformation (421). Although it has become divine in the Divine, the deified soul remains humble, neither puffed up nor swallowed up.

Contemplatives of the 'personal and emotional' type (425), in Underhill's understanding, employ the language of 'spiritual marriage' or the more homely language of the 'ghostly glue' to describe the perfect union of lover and Beloved (427). The union is fruitful and begets not only 'children', that is, good works, but also spiritual families bound to each other by transcendental life. Our author marvels at how some mystics overcame hostile environments, ill health, poverty and other acutely debilitating factors to become the 'great active[s]' who accomplished so much even from a worldly point of view. The mystic's spiritual 'reproductive power' is, in her view, 'one of the greatest marks of the unitive life' (432).

Underhill insists, however, that the unitive life is much more than a heroic, apostolic life, more than 'divine motherhood of new sons

and daughters of the Absolute' (432). Living (in God) where it does not live (on earth), the self is 'patient' with respect to God, 'active' with respect to the world. The mystic's 'hidden child' has been released, whose 'simplicity' causes the loss of his or her life on the mystical summit (433). Propelled toward God by *inward* love, the deified soul is *in* God by its fruitful inclination to eternal rest. Mystics write of the 'love dance' and of their spirit of 'dalliance' (438). The Reality they embrace and the life they live is described in paradoxical terms: both static and dynamic, transcendent and immanent, eternal and temporal, Being and Becoming.

It seems appropriate to conclude with Underhill's own words:

Mysticism is seen to be a highly specialized form of the search for reality, for heightened and completed life, which we have found to be a constant characteristic of human consciousness. It is largely prosecuted by that spiritual spark, that transcendental faculty which, though the life of our life, remains below the threshold in ordinary man, emerging from its hiddenness, it gradually becomes the dominant factor in his life; subduing to its service, and enhancing by its saving contact with reality, those vital powers of love and will which we attribute to the heart, rather than those of mere reason and perception, which we attribute to the head. Under the spur of this love and will, the whole personality rises in the acts of contemplation and ecstasy to a level of consciousness at which it becomes aware of a new field of perception. By this awareness, by this 'loving sight', it is stimulated to a new life in accordance with the reality which it has beheld (93–94)

Mysticism is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man (81)

It is the art of establishing a conscious relation with the absolute The true mystic is the person with a genius for God. (104)

Mystic, Mystical Theologian or Mystagogue?

So, to return to the question with which I began: was Evelyn Underhill herself a mystic, or a mystical theologian, or a mystagogue, or a combination of these? A friendly reviewer of my most recent

book¹¹ acutely raised this question when he disagreed with my contention that we have few, if any, mystical texts from those who lived a normal married life.¹² He wrote:

It would be interesting to hear [Egan's] view of Evelyn Underhill or Baron Friedrich von Hügel, in my view two married mystical theologians, mystagogues ... and mystics of the most profound sort.¹³

My view is that according to Underhill's *own* understanding of mysticism she was not a mystic in the strict sense. Her books and personal letters resound with an uncommon spirituality, immense learning and a deep understanding of the mystical life—but not with the timbre of someone who was herself a mystic 'of the most profound sort'.

Moreover, Underhill's *descriptive* synthesis and analysis of mystical texts—however valuable—do not qualify as mystical theology. One needs only to read the *explanatory*¹⁴ mystical theology of Richard of St Victor,¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas,¹⁶ Joseph Maréchal¹⁷ or Karl Rahner¹⁸ (to name but a few) to be convinced of this.

Fifty years of reading the Christian spiritual classics and forty years of personal experience with people of varying degrees of spirituality might permit me to judge Underhill to have been—not a mystic in the strict sense—but a more usual 'mystic of everyday life',¹⁹ a brilliant scholar and expositor of the Christian mystical tradition,

¹¹ Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2010).

¹² William Thompson-Uberuaga, 'Listening to God's Whispers', *America* (20–27 June 2011), 24–25.

¹³ Thompson-Uberuaga, 'Listening to God's Whispers', 25.

¹⁴ For example, ask an 'ordinary' person what fire is and you will receive a common-sense description of fire, that is, what fire is to that particular person. Ask a chemist or a physicist what fire is, and you will receive an explanatory reply, that is, an understanding of what fire is in itself.

¹⁵ See the section on Richard of St Victor in Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the Twelfth Century*, volume 2 of *The Presence of God*.

¹⁶ See the section on Aquinas in Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, volume 4 of *The Presence of God* (New York: Crossroad, 2005).

¹⁷ Joseph Maréchal, *Études sur la psychologie des mystiques* (Bruges, Beyaert and Paris: Charles and Librairie Félix Alcan, 1924–1937).

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 84–170.

¹⁹ Harvey D. Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

and a mystagogue—that is, someone who has led and still leads others to God.

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