



The Evelyn Underhill

Association Newsletter 2014-2015



Evelyn Underhill circa 1930 flanked by Orthodox priests, King's College London

Annual Day of Quiet Reflection
Saturday, June 13, 2015 9:30am - 3:30pm
Sayre House
The Washington National Cathedral

“The Mastery of Time”

Directed by Donna Osthaus

[Download Registration Form](#)

“He that believeth shall not make haste.” Isaiah 28:16

A lately discovered article by Evelyn Underhill from a time near the end of her life (and the beginning of World War II) will bring us to contemplate this very contemporary issue of our time. We will explore the subject through Underhill's essay, through a scriptural reference to Jesus's attitude toward his use of time (Matthew 15:21-28), and briefly through the references to the subject of time in the contemporary poetry of her colleague and friend, T. S. Eliot.

The Quiet Day will be directed by Donna Osthaus, formerly Director of Program at the College of Preachers at Washington Cathedral. She subsequently organized and led art and literature pilgrimages in Italy, France, and England, including two Evelyn Underhill pilgrimages with Dana Greene.

A (Very) Short History of the Evelyn Underhill Association

In 1989 the Rev. Carole Crumley organized a conference on Evelyn Underhill at the Washington National Cathedral. The principal speaker was the Rev. Canon A. M. Allchin of Canterbury Cathedral. In 1992 Rev. Milo Coerper, whose life had been deeply influenced by the work of Evelyn Underhill, and Dana Greene, author of several books on Underhill, offered a retreat at the College of Preachers at the Cathedral. Shortly thereafter the Evelyn Underhill Association was legally incorporated. Initially a print issue of an annual newsletter was distributed and subsequently the newsletter was made available in electronic form. It continues to be made available in the late Fall each year at www.evelynunderhill.org. The Association serves to promote personal interest and scholarly work on the life and writings of Evelyn Underhill. Each year on the Saturday closest to the anniversary of Underhill's death on June 15th the Association sponsors a Quiet Day at Sayre House on the grounds of the Cathedral. In 2001 the EUA participated in a number of events celebrating the 100th anniversary of the publication of Underhill's *Mysticism*. Persons who want to be notified about the annual Quiet Day or the appearance of a new edition of the electronic newsletter should send a message to evelynunderhill@gmail.com



*"For a lack of attention a thousand forms of
loveliness elude us everyday"*
-- Mysticism

NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

The Rev. Susan Dean, a spiritual director and Episcopal priest, is Priest-in-Residence and Executive Director of the newly founded Underhill House, a quiet place to pause and pray in downtown Seattle. Underhill House is under the wing of the Episcopal church of Olympia, Washington. Dean and supporters are in the process of raising \$170,000 to support this effort; \$53,000 are now on hand. Donations are welcome and may be sent to The Diocese of Olympia, 1551 10th Ave. E., Seattle, WA 98102, att: Sharon Pethers with Underhill House written in the memo line. Further information is available at www.underhillhouse.org or from susan@underhillhouse.org.

“Celestial Thinking”; by Stefany Anne Goldberg in The Smart Set. This is a review of Underhill’s “Practical Mysticism.” <http://www.thesmartset.com/article/article08011402.aspx>

Jean Hite’s blog contains the article: “Evelyn Underhill: Mysticism to Worship.” See www.jeanhite.wordpress.com/2011/05/21.

Paul Woolf’s blog on Evelyn Underhill, “Embracing Aesthetics,” explores EU’s writing in beautiful manner. <http://embracingaesthetics.weebly.com/underhill-blog>

A small book on Evelyn Underhill; Grace through Simplicity: The Practical Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill, ND: Ave Maria Press, 2004.

Chris Glaser’s blogspot www.chrisglaser.com contains two articles on Evelyn Underhill: Why Can’t It Always Be This Way? and War and Peace, August 27 and September 17, 2014, respectively.



The Retreat House at Pleshey, Evelyn Underhill’s favorite retreat house, dates from 1906. For over a century it has been a haven of peace and prayer, a spiritual power house. There are aspirations to make it a centre for teaching about prayer and spirituality. But refurbishment is needed. A campaign for 1.5 million pounds is now underway. The staff asks for your prayers and for your financial support. For further information see www.retreathousepleshey.com.

Finding Underhill in Cuba

In January, during the week of Christian Unity, I traveled on an ecumenical pilgrimage to Cuba with the Shalem Institute. Our mentor was Thomas Merton who soon after his baptism and before he entered the Trappist monastery at Gethsemane made a pilgrimage to Cuba. Our intent was to interact with seminary students and prison chaplains at the ecumenical seminary in Matanzas, a city about two hours from Havana. One morning after our opening prayer as I was walking to breakfast one of our Cuban colleagues approached me and asked if I were the author of books on Evelyn Underhill. Obviously I was surprised and interested. Carlos Exposito, an Episcopal priest, regaled me with a touching story. While a student at the seminary he was casting about for a thesis topic when his professor, Adolfo Ham, a prominent theologian and former president of the Cuban Council of Churches, suggested he pursue a study of Evelyn Underhill. With Professor Ham's assistance, Carlos Exposito was gradually able to secure the necessary books to write his thesis. Among them were my studies of Underhill. I was stunned and overwhelmed with joy. Evelyn Underhill had reached Cuba, a nation which for more than three decades had defined itself as atheistic. Yet there were those who resonated with her message. The guiding song of our pilgrimage was "Dios esta aqui", God is here. Among others, Evelyn Underhill had nurtured God's presence on this Caribbean island. She was there.

-- Dana Greene



The direction and constancy of the will is what really matters, and intellect and feeling are only important insofar as they contribute to that.

(Evelyn Underhill)

The Evelyn Underhill Day of Quiet Reflection held on June 21, 2014



Kathy Staudt

Kathy Staudt's meditations focused on Evelyn Underhill: "The Mystic as Poet, the Poet as Mystic". She invited us to attend to moments in Underhill's poetry that open onto what one early poem calls "the splendour burning at the heart of things" (**Corpus Christi*, from *Immanence*). In the morning twenty-five gathered participants listened to poems from Underhill's volume *Theophanies* that offer a "God's eye view" of the beloved world, sharing what Underhill would later call "the eye of the Artist-Lover" as we look at the created world. We moved from poems about nature: "The Thrush" and "The Summit" to an intensely personal poem, "The Day Before" in which the poet contemplates her mortality and her love of life on the evening of a surgical operation. We ended the morning by sitting in silence with Underhill's poem "High Tide" resonating. After a silent lunch with readings offered by Donyelle

Donyelle McCrea, we returned to the poetry and especially spent time with one of Kathy's favorites, Underhill's "Thought's a Strange Land" in which we hear something of the strength and sense of mystical purpose in the poet's exploration of her inner landscape. She ended by sharing some of her own poems inspired by images or quotations from Underhill's poetry. The day ended with a Eucharist led by the Rev. Howard Kempzell.

Here are a few participant prayers of thanksgiving from the Quiet Day followed by a selection of poems which served as meditations.

"I am grateful for the deep serenity of the day; the sense of comradeship in the silence, and lines from poems that propelled my prayers."

"'God comes in the little things.' I give thanks for language, for human imagination, for the whole created universe and each and every part of it, large and small."

"A magnificent gift I received today: Experiencing a most unusual day surrounded by, but aware of and welcomed by others in a holy atmosphere—without any need for speaking in order to honor silence."

"I give thanks for the new awareness that Evelyn Underhill held: the conviction that the mystical life is not only open to a saintly few, but to anyone who cares to nurture it."

Some examples of poems by Evelyn Underhill, from *Theophanies: A Book of Verses* (London: J.M. Dent, 1916):

HIGH TIDE

Flood thou my soul with thy great quietness.

O let thy wave

Of silence from the deep

Roll in on me, the shores of sense to lave:

So doth thy living water softly creep

Into each cave

And rocky pool, where ocean creatures hide

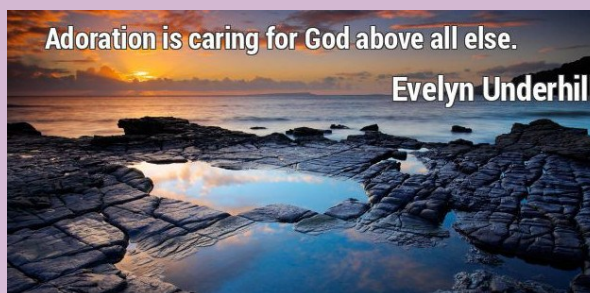
Far from their home, yet nourished of thy tide,

The Evelyn Underhill Day of Quiet Reflection held on June 21, 2014, cont'd.

Deep-sunk they wait
The coming of thy great
Inpouring stream that shall new life communicate;
Then starting from beneath some shadowy ledge
Of the heart's edge
Flash sudden coloured memories of the sea
Whence they were born of thee
Across the mirrored surface of the mind,
Swift rays of wondrousness
They seem;
And rippling thoughts arise
Fan-wise
From the quick-darting passage of the dream
To spread and find
Each creviced narrowness
Where the dark waters dwell
Mortally still,
Until
The Moon of Prayer,
That by the invincible sorcery of love
God's very self can move
Draws thy life-giving flood
E'en there.
Then the great swell
And urge of grace
Refresh the weary mood;
Cleaning anew each sad and stagnant place
That seems shut off from thee,
And hardly hears the murmur of the sea.

THRUSHES

I think the thrush's voice is more like God's
Than many a preacher's telling of the Word;
I think the mother-thrush, who turns the sods
To find fat earth-worms for her baby bird—
And, worn by her maternal toil,
With busy eye and mild
That marks each subtle movement of the soil
Patiently tends upon her greedy child—
She is the feathery image of that grace
Which spends itself to feed our thankless race



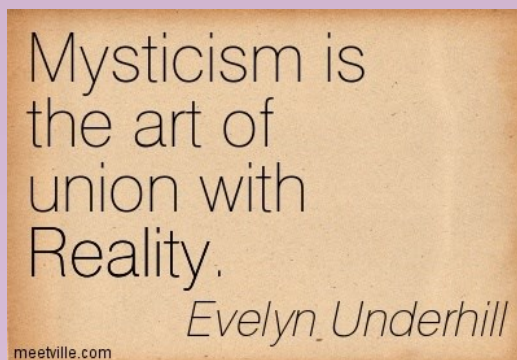
THOUGHT'S A STRANGE LAND

Thought's a strange land.
Some dig its fields with diligence,
Some pass through it steadfastly as pilgrims to
the Sepulchre,
Some haste in dust and heat – toward what goal?
Some climb its difficult hills and clouds receive
them from our sight.
Some take a neat villa, and plant geraniums in their borders,
And test the drains and trim the wandering roses,
And set up a paling to hide the restless road.
I'm a gipsy therein.

I go leisurely upon the highways,
I try the lanes and trespass in the copses;
I love the soft edge of the straight-driven road,
The bramble and nuts, the comfrey and wild carrot,
The campion and crane's-bill deep in the tufted grass.
Mine are the wild strawberries:
I can spare others the turnips.
There's always a rabbit for my pot.

Thought's a strange land.
It has square, fenced fields for honest farmers—
To each his own field: they never look over the hedge
to
see what their neighbours are growing.
It has gardens enclosed full of fragrant and coloured things.
I love the wild places best.
Others may grow admirable cauliflowers,
Crisp chrysanthemums in pots,
Plump calceolarias if they have a mind to them,
Dahlias full of earwigs,
Fuchsias full of sensibility.
(Thought's a strange land!)
But I'm the one that hears the gossip of the waters,
The mysterious whisper of the dew:
I prefer the voices of the aspen to the clack of the threshing machine.

Thought's a strange land.
It's full of small delicate plants, of lonely and solemn spaces
Where the sky is wide and the earth turns under the stars.
It's there I would be,
Touching with love the exquisite blossoms of dream.
There's many an old pasture where I pitch my tent at twilight,
Where the fairy rings are written and the daisies start to my hand:
There's many a lonely fell and rocky valley,
And drink for the gipsy in every enchanted stream.



The Evelyn Underhill Day of Quiet Reflection held on June 21, 2014, cont'd.

Thought's a strange land.
Far off, a long day's journey, there's a marsh that stretches to the sea.
(The sea! the sea!)
It's a place of mystery and danger, the earth shakes beneath the feet;
I leave my old horse behind when I venture there.
What do they know of it, who till the fields and herd within the houses:
Of the strange grey plants, the sudden pools, the wide, the white horizons,
The narrow saltings, where the secret waters come
Creeping between the banks, bringing the solemn impulse of the ocean,
The stretching fingers of the deep
Into the very heart of the measured land?
Tall birds breed there:
They nest between the rushes
And hunt the silent edges of the shore,
And go on their occasions to the sea.

There's news to be had in the marshes—
A salted wind, sharp taste of the hidden wave:
There on the fringes of thought when the night is falling
I'll wait the invading tide.

The Marsh at South Byfield, MA
By Kathleen Henderson Staudt

"There's news to be had in the marshes" -- Evelyn Underhill

Cattails and tall grasses bend,
In the hidden breeze.
Rooted and resilient
Watered deep down

Behind each row of tightly woven grass, another rises
Row upon row, to the river's bend
Too dense, too tall for me to enter
The sun too bright, the mud
Too deep for me.

But in among the grasses, winged creatures bring tidings
Crickets trill. Tree swallows swoop and dance
Their tails flash white on the unseen wind.

Now with his scooping flight
A goldfinch flies ahead of me.
His feathers flash gold.
He rests on a cattail beside me
Perches, turns,
then swoops into the rushes
as if he were daring me, he beckons
Come follow further!
Come
Come and see!

Adhering to God: The Message of Evelyn Underhill for Our Times
Dana Greene

This article first appeared in SPIRITUALITY TODAY Spring 1987, Vol. 39, pp-22-38. Used with permission.

BIOGRAPHY has power to move, inspire, and provoke. It provides a model of personal integration, and in times like our own when the sense of the world's complexity and the loss of shared meaning cripple us, the individual attempt to make sense of life has great appeal.

The life of Evelyn Underhill¹ the twentieth century British religious writer, offers us not only inspiration, but an example of a modern woman, who was not broken by confrontation with complexity and the disintegration of meaning, but in fact worked to heal that confusion and brokenness. She has particular appeal for us because she is a modern woman. I mean by that not only that she lived in our century, but that she was well aware of the forces which shape our contemporary world and appreciated the power and achievement of modern science and technology. She was thoroughly familiar with developments in modern psychology and was acutely aware, as was her contemporary, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that God was absent in her time.

We can resonate with Underhill because the questions she asks are our questions. She has appeal as well because she lived a life very much like ours. She was a lay woman who had no backing from an ecclesiastical institution. She basically worked alone. It is not that she did not receive recognition in her own time; she clearly did. She was the most prolific female religious writer in the English language in the early twentieth century; the first woman to lecture at Oxford; a Fellow of King's College, London; the recipient of an honorary degree from the University of Aberdeen; the first woman to give retreats within Anglicanism; a religious writer of the *Spectator*; and a widely acclaimed writer whose major books, *Mysticism* and *Worship*, have been recognized as pioneering works and have remained in print since their publication. If we are to believe Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Underhill did more than anyone else in Anglicanism to keep the spiritual life alive in the period between the wars.

There is a resurgence of interest in Evelyn Underhill because she is one of us. She knows our world and its needs and her response is one of a call for personal spiritual renewal. Underhill's contribution is in the realm of personal religion, what today we call spirituality.

If we examine the history of religion in the West, we can see that personal religion sometimes flourishes within institutional structures and sometimes grows up in response to the limitations of those structures. The tremendous outpouring of religious literature from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries was, at least in part, a response to the failure of institutional Christianity to meet the deep spiritual needs of its followers. There are parallels here within the early twentieth century when religion, attacked by Biblical criticism, science, and psychology, and unable to speak boldly to its attackers or passionately to its adherents, drove away many like Underhill to find some avenue for the expression of their religious intensity. Her response was the exploration of mysticism and the spiritual life.

THE PRIORITY OF MYSTICISM

Evelyn Underhill was a prolific writer.² I have examined her more than three hundred essays, books, introductions, editions, book reviews, and hundreds of her letters, and I am convinced that in this writing, with its diverse and changing themes, there is a dominant question which pervades it all -- that is, what is it to be holy? She addresses this question first in her study of the mystics, those who were considered holy, and then later she devotes herself to an exploration of the spiritual life and how we, normal people, can lead this life of holiness.

The mystical life is, for Underhill, the spiritual life because all true religion has a central mystical element. This does not mean that all those who lead the spiritual life have lives like those of the great mystics, but rather that the pattern of those lives is the same. She never principally associates mysticism with extraordinary phenomena -- visions, voices, etc., but with the quiet movement of the heart. For the great mystic and the garden variety person, the ". . . spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of His reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of His will."³ This is the sum of Underhill's thought. How she came to have this understanding of the spiritual life is the subject of this essay.

Although Evelyn Underhill is remembered as an elegant and sensitive religious writer on topics of mysticism and the devotional life, her early life gives few indications of her later religious intensity nor does the certitude of her writing hint at her own spiritual anguish.

Evelyn Underhill's life has been referred to as "quiet." By that it is meant that it was not dramatic in any outward sense. As the only child of a London barrister and his wife, she lived a life of material comfort. At age thirty-two, she married H. Stuart Moore, a childhood friend, who like her father had a profession in the law. They had no children, and Mrs. Moore, as she was known in private, spent her days writing. Her work was favorably received and sold well. After about 1925, when she was fifty, she turned increasingly to spiritual direction and the giving of retreats.

Her later writing was almost entirely devotional. Although she almost never voiced her position on political questions (she believed this would alienate her readers), in the late 1930s she became a pacifist. As the air war over Britain raged, she claimed that although Hitler was a scourge, his evil should not be met by the evil of war. Only love could overcome evil. Her spirituality led her ultimately to a position which was incomprehensible to most of her contemporaries.

She died in 1941, ten years before her husband, and is buried with him in a grave in the churchyard of St. John's in Hampstead. If one pushes away the weeds and brambles that have grown up over it, one can read the inscription on the stone -- "H. Stuart Moore and his wife, Evelyn, daughter of Sir Arthur Underhill." The defining of this prominent female writer in terms of the men in her life, while historically appropriate, is ironic for those of us who follow her.

This "quiet life" of Evelyn Underhill was marked by certain paradoxes. Although she was born into a nominally Anglican home, for a number of years as a young woman she considered herself to be an atheist. As she became more intensely interested in religion, however, she had an experience

Adhering to God: The Message of Evelyn Underhill for Our Times, cont'd. 3
Dana Greene

which clarified for her that she wanted to join the Roman church. But because of the church's position on Modernism and her fiancé's opposition to such conversion, she did not "go over to Rome." For years she lived unable to join the Roman church and not participating in Anglicanism. The strain of living between these two worlds taxed her. She was taxed in other ways also.

As the wife of a London barrister, she was expected to keep up a lively social life. But she was as well a woman of great religious intensity who expressed herself in a torrent of writing which kept up for thirty-four years. She was a writer who was acclaimed in her own times, but one who moved in no literary circle and had no disciples. She was a woman who cherished community and had many friends, but one who worked essentially alone, writing from her home without the direct support of any institution, academic or ecclesiastical. She was a director of retreats and spiritual guide to many, but she shared her own spiritual anguish with almost no one. Although devoted to both her husband and her parents, neither shared her interest in religion.

Yet this "quiet" life of Evelyn Underhill, filled with seeming paradoxes, produced some of the best religious literature of our time. Moreover, there is not only development in her thought, the diverse themes of her writing are interconnected and fit together to create a unique and convincing understanding of reality. THE WORK If one is to discuss Underhill's work, one must begin with *Mysticism*, a pioneering study of, as the subtitle indicates, the nature and development of human spiritual consciousness. It was this book which established her reputation and set the theme, whether expressed in analytical pieces, biographical essays, editions, or introductions, which would dominate her writing for more than a decade to follow. She became the authority on *Mysticism* in England. William James had discussed this phenomenon in *Varieties of Religious Experience* and William Inge's book, *Christian Mysticism*, stimulated interest in the subject, but neither explored it in the way Underhill would.

Underhill followed a circuitous route to the publication of her first major work. She came to the subject of Mysticism first through an interest in philosophy and then in the occult. She became a theist of sorts, and then in her late twenties, she began to feel the pull of Christianity, which she both wanted to embrace and yet resisted violently. By her early thirties, she began gathering material for her book on Mysticism. She was thirty-six years old when it was published in 1911.

An artifact from Underhill's life I came across in England tells us a great deal about what she thought was important. At the retreat house in the village of Pleschy, near Chelmsford, where Underhill frequently gave retreats, you will find on the mantle of the Warden's study an embroidered plaque which belonged to her. Stitched on the plaque is the word, ETERNITY. In our pragmatic, complicated lives, which seem anything but connected to the eternal, the word startles and assaults our sensibilities; yet in many ways it summarizes Underhill's view. This plaque hung in her home as a reminder of where she needed to place her focus. In order to understand Underhill, one must begin at the beginning with *Mysticism*, that five hundred page book which has had thirteen editions, remains in print, and is available on the shelves of even mediocre libraries. In it, she establishes what she calls "the mystic fact," namely that there are those who claim to have experienced union with Reality. To use her words: Mysticism then is not an opinion; it is not a philosophy. It

has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge It 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. Or, if you like it better -- for this means exactly the same thing -- it is the art of establishing...[a] conscious relation with the Absolute.⁴

Her point in writing the book was to convince her readers that the mystics had something to teach them about the nature of Reality. In her work she first separates Mysticism from theology, magic, and philosophy, and then explores the mystic way, the universal process of the mystical life. By using illustrations from the lives of western mystics, she introduces her readers to the vast treasury of mystical literature which was largely unknown in the English-speaking world. *THE WAY TO REALITY In Mysticism*, Underhill examines the organic, psychological life process which moves from the world of appearances to the world of reality. She does not examine this as it exhibits itself in normal people, but rather as it expresses itself in the lives of the human giants, the "pioneers" of humanity, that is, the mystics, who follow the same path as all others but with greater intensity. Of them she wrote,

[they] are men and women who insist that they know for certain the presence and activity of that which they call the Love of God. They are conscious of that Fact which is there for all, and which [is the] true subject-matter of religion; but of which the average man remains either unconscious or faintly and occasionally aware. They know a spiritual order, penetrating, and everywhere conditioning though transcending the world of sense. They declare to us a Reality most rich and living, which is not a reality of time and space; which is something other than everything we mean by 'nature; and for which no merely pantheistic explanation will suffice.⁵

The end of this mystic process, this movement from appearances to Reality, is not some esoteric, theoretical knowledge, but rather a transfigured and remade consciousness which operates at a different level than that of others and literally perceives a different world. In the mystic, a transcendental consciousness, apprehending and uniting with Reality, comes to dominate normal consciousness which is battered and buffeted in a world of sense appearance.

For Underhill, there is a natural human tendency to unite with Reality, to seek harmony with the transcendental order. It is in the mystics that we find this tendency most fully realized. For them, the desire for Reality, the movement of one's whole being in surrender to Reality is not done for personal gain or power or for curiosity, but only because of a desire to be united with Reality. Such union demands the entire redirection (not the denial) of all human powers -- sensual, intellectual, and volitional -- toward that which one loves. It produces a transformed consciousness and a life which is filled up with the object of one's love. Such a life is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is a life which aims specifically at the spiritual and has as its object a living and personal One. Finally, union with this living and personal One results in what Underhill calls divine fecundity. The self is not so much overcome as filled up with the One, God; it becomes theopathic and manifests itself in a deified life.

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

In addition to establishing the mystic fact, Underhill outlines the universal mystic way, the actual process by which the mystic arrives at union with the absolute. She identifies five stages of this process. First is the awakening, the stage in which one begins to have some consciousness of absolute or divine reality. The second stage is one of purgation which is characterized by an awareness of one's own imperfections and finiteness. The response in this stage is one of self-discipline and mortification. The third stage, illumination, is one reached by artists and visionaries as well as being the final stage of some mystics. It is marked by a consciousness of a transcendent order and a vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

The great mystics go beyond the stage of illumination to a fourth stage which Underhill, borrowing the language of John of the Cross, calls the *dark night of the soul*. This stage, experienced by the few, is one of final and complete purification and is marked by confusion, helplessness, stagnation of the will, and a sense of the withdrawal of God's presence. It is the period of final "unselfing" and the surrender to the hidden purposes of the divine will. The final and last stage is one of union with the object of love, the one Reality, God. Here the self has been permanently established on a transcendental level and liberated for a new purpose. Filled up with the Divine Will, it immerses itself in the temporal order, the world of appearances in order to incarnate the eternal in time, to become the mediator between humanity and eternity.

In *Mysticism*, Underhill sets out the framework of her understanding of human psychological development. The focus for full development must be on the eternal, the transcendental order which exists, but is not immediately obvious to us. By following the natural tendency towards union with this order, one becomes liberated and unselfed, filled up with that eternal reality which one loves. *Mysticism* is not some rare, esoteric phenomenon, but rather a movement of the heart, open to all, fully realized by the few, in which the object, method, and consequence are all the same. To seek, to find, to be transformed by that which is eternal and fully real, the One, which the mystics call God.

BREAKDOWN AND BREAKTHROUGH

Mysticism was well-received and it established Underhill as the preeminent authority on the subject. During the next decade she continued to explore this topic, turning out books, articles, editions, and reviews on *Mysticism* and the lives of the mystics.

But something happened to Underhill during this period. As she wrote later, "I went to pieces." The external events of her life give little hint of her inner turmoil. There was, of course, the Great War, what we call World War I, which shook every thinking European to the core. There was the death of her closest friend, Ethel Ross Barker, the only person with whom she shared her inner life. There was the conflict about institutional affiliation. As indicated, she could not convert to Catholicism nor could she bring herself to participate as an Anglican. All indications are that during this time, and I speak here of the period about 1916 when she was in her mid-forties, the great advocate of *Mysticism* and the mystic way, a woman of extraordinary religious intensity, drifted from any institutional participation to a kind of inwardness which presumably did not include the regular discipline of prayer.

Underhill realized she needed help and took two actions which were to have enormous consequences for her life. She began to participate regularly in the Anglican church and she sought out the well-known Catholic lay theologian Baron Friedrich von Hügel, as her spiritual director. Both of these actions were to have dramatic consequences. Underhill had come to the conclusion that participation in the institutional church was necessary; it created a group consciousness, connected with one's past, helped in the continuance of spiritual culture, and assisted in disciplining the individual. Since she could not join Rome, she opted for Anglicanism. She defended this move with the retort that she found plenty of work to do there and that if she ever felt compelled to do so, she

would go elsewhere. This statement should not be seen as cavalier, but rather reflective of Un-

derhill's principal concern with personal religion rather than institutional affiliation.

Underhill's second decision, to put herself under the direction of von Hügel, was even more momentous. Although von Hügel died in 1925, and consequently his direction lasted less than four years, his influence in her life was great. Some scholars have argued that Underhill's real importance was as a disciple of von Hügel. Underhill herself claims, somewhat hyperbolically I think, that she owed her whole spiritual life to him. There is no question in my mind that she owed a great debt to him. She shared her anguish with him and no one else and it was he, through discipline, discussion, and prayer who was able to help bring her to a more full and mature understanding of the spiritual life. Nevertheless, while she was helped by him, her own contribution was unique.

My evaluation of von Hügel's impact on her is based on the reading of letters between them and a manuscript notebook kept by her during the period of his direction. These materials give clues to an understanding of Underhill's later spirituality. The letters and notebooks have various themes. Underhill is concerned about her ability to accept certain Christian doctrines as historically true. She is deeply aware of her failing and how far she falls from the mark of perfection. She is also aware of what von Hügel called her tendency toward "pure mysticism," an intellectualizing and disembodiment of the spiritual life.

Von Hügel met Underhill's needs in a variety of ways, but his greatest contribution was to help her to see that no religious value, principle, or idea had any power actually to redeem, that is to transform, unless it was incarnated in one's life. The central problem for Underhill was how to bring her religious intensity into realms other than the intellectual. Von Hügel assisted her in this by suggesting disciplines, Christocentric devotions, works of mercy and charity, and by his own prayer. He sent her out to work in the slums of North Kensington and gently guided her to understand the sacramentality of all of life. In other words, that that life take root in her. It did, and the consequence was a transformed person.

THE ORDINARY WAY

It is not that the Underhill of the mid-1920s and onward is vastly different from the person who came before. In fact, the continuities in her life prevail. What is obvious is a redirection of her work and energies and the development of a much more concrete, pragmatic, and almost homey spirituality which had great potential for reaching the lives of ordinary people. In many ways this spirituality is summed up by Underhill's modification of the famous line from John of the Cross, namely, that in the end, we are judged not by our mysticism, but by our love. This is not to say that Underhill had come to devalue mysticism, but rather that her later spirituality focuses on the spiritual life and its special rootedness in Love.

Not only does her writing take new direction, but so to does her work. After 1925 she began to give retreats for women and for clergy. She also took up the work of spiritual direction, a work to which she gave much time and energy. It is important to remember that these activities, while

widely accepted today, particularly in Catholicism but in other communions as well, were in Underhill's day largely unknown outside the circle of vowed religious. Our great debt to her is that she recognized the importance of the spiritual life and worked to make it the vocation of the many, rather than the few. Likewise she redefined the understanding of what it meant to be a religious person but associating religion principally with the spiritual life rather than specifically with theological or doctrinal adherence. It was not that she denounced or belittled the latter; rather, she defined religion first as adherence to God whom one experienced in a myriad of ways not by adherence to an institution or to intellectual formulations. The genius of Underhill was to define a new area for exploration, namely the spiritual life, and to make it the purview not only of those who lived a life apart from the world, but for everyone who, by virtue of humanity, had potentiality for growth in this area.

What was this sphere called the spiritual life which Underhill helped to make available to her contemporaries? It was that realm in which human persons experienced and responded to the divine. Its essential character was that it was organic, relational, experiential, and transformative. In order to examine it, new questions had to be framed and new approaches employed. Underhill used examples from both the lives of the holy and from human experience to illustrate its operations. While it was an area of investigation which was still elusive, this neither denied its existence nor its importance but only confirmed how much more needed to be done to understand this phenomenon. Underhill knew that the only way to understand the spiritual life was to participate in it. Consequently, she wrote as a fellow participant, one engaged, as we all are, in a relationship with mystery which transforms us at the very core of our being.

In her earlier work on the mystics, Underhill emphasized exclusively the lives and work of the great "pioneers of humanity," those who had responded most powerfully to the divine. In her later work she stressed the corporate human response to the divine, namely worship, as well as the individual devotional response. Her last major work *Worship*, the original study of various Western liturgical forms, was both analytical and descriptive, examining the basic characteristics of worship, namely ritual, symbol, sacrifice, and sacrament, and the diverse liturgical expressions including Judaism, Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, the Reformed Churches, and Catholicism. Long before it was fashionable, her ecumenical approach provided a new methodology for exploration of religious phenomena.

WORSHIP

Her devotional writing expressed itself in letters of direction, retreats, radio broadcasts, and books and articles. In examining these diverse materials one is struck by the importance of a few themes. In discussing the spiritual life, Underhill no longer uses the stages of the mystic way as a guide, but rather emphasizes human responsiveness to the divine by talking about three actions: adoration, adherence, and cooperation. Like Cardinal de Berulle, the seventeenth-century religious writer, and her director von Hügel, Underhill claimed that the first and primary experience of God was one of awe and that adoration followed from it. Together, awe and adoration reflect the humble acknowledgment of the Transcendent, the fact of God. Worship and prayer become two primary expressions of adoration and the mean by which one participates in and experiences the life of God. "Worship," she wrote,

purifies, enlightens and at least transforms, every life submitted to its influence; and this is not merely in the ethical or devotional sense. It does all this because it wakes up and liberates that 'seed' of the supernatural life, in virtue of which we are spiritual beings capable of responding to that God who is Spirit; and which indeed gives to humanity a certain mysterious kinship with Him. Worship is therefore in the deepest sense creative and redemptive. Keeping us in constant remembrance of the unchanging and the Holy, it cleanses us of subjectivism, releases us from 'use and wont; and makes us realists. God's invitation to it and man's response, however limited, crude or mistaken this response may be, are the appointed means whereby we move towards our true destiny⁶

Adoration is at the heart of prayer as well. Prayer is not so much a distinct act, but a state and condition of soul in which we receive God's spirit, and accept our nothingness. Our prayer of adoration passes into a prayer of communion and of self-offering. In fact, adoration and self-giving become one. "... [W]hole-hearted adoration," she wrote, "is the only real preparation for right action; ... First the awestruck recognition of God: and then, the doing of His Will."⁷

This belief in the priority and centrality of God in life colors all of Underhill's writing and it is this notion which she offers to ameliorate the contemporary state of religion and our frazzled lives: "... enrichment of the sense of God is surely the crying need of our current Christianity," she wrote.

A shallow righteousness, the tendency to be content with a bright ethical piety wrongly called practical Christianity... seems to me one of the defects of institutional religion at the present time. We are drifting towards a religion which consciously or unconsciously keeps its eye on the Deity which lays all the stress on service, and hardly any of the stress on awe; and that is a type of religion which in practice does not wear well. It does little for the soul in those awful moments when the pain and mystery of life are most deeply felt. It does not provide a place for that profound experience which Tauler calls 'suffering in God: It does not lead to sanctity: and sanctity after all is the religious goal. It does not fit those who accept it as adequate for the solemn privilege of quiding souls to God In fact, it turns its back on the most profound gifts made by Christianity to the human race. I do not think we can deny that there is... a definite trend in the direction of religion of this shallow social type...⁸

ADHERENCE AND COOPERATION

It is clear that Underhill believed that one of the functions of adoration, expressed in worship and prayer, is to win our will to God's will. Here we have passed to a second response to the divine, namely *adherence*, an attitude of humble and grateful acceptance of God, a sense of self-opening and expectancy as well as a willingness to sacrifice with the result that we are purified and that there is a transfer of interest from self to God.

The effect of this adherence to God is a transformed self, one who works with God in the world. This final response of cooperation follows logically from adoration and adherence. Like the previous responses, it wells up out of love: "The spiritual life of any individual has to be extended both vertically to God and horizontally to other souls; and the more it grows in both directions, the less merely individual and therefore the more truly personal, it will be."⁹

Underhill's message, however, runs counter in some ways to what her society and ours maintain about our relationship with God and our fellows. She claims that love of God is paramount and that from this follows love of our fellows. As she said, the love of neighbor is a corollary of the love of God, not its equivalent. It was only by maintaining the priority of God that one could possibly come to love one's enemies, do good to those who hate you, and reach out to those who in themselves are unlovable.

This ever expanding love, of necessity, reaches out to our fellows and infuses all of our lives and everything we do. The spiritual life, Underhill wrote,

will decide the papers we read, the movements we support, the kind of administrators we vote for, our attitude to social and international justice. For though we may renounce the world for ourselves, refuse the attempts to get anything out of it, we have to accept it as the sphere in which we are to cooperate with the Spirit. . . . Therefore the prevalent notion that spirituality and politics have nothing to do with one another is the exact opposite of the truth. Once it is accepted in a realistic sense, the spiritual life has everything to do with politics. It means that certain convictions about God and the world become the moral and spiritual imperatives of our life; and this must be decisive for the way we choose to behave about that bit of the world over which we have been given a limited control.¹⁰

The result of these responses to the divine -- adoration, adherence, and cooperation -- is the sanctifying of personality and the subordination of the will to God. The self becomes filled up with God and hence is holy. This holiness is manifested neither in a long face nor in an ethereal aura. The saints, she writes, ". . . do not stand aside wrapped in delightful prayers and feeling pure and agreeable to God. They go right down into the mess; and there, right in the mess, they are able to radiate God because they possess Him."¹¹

HOLINESS

At the beginning of this essay, I proposed that the dominant theme of all Underhill's writing is one of holiness. I have discussed this topic only briefly. I hold to my initial statement, however, because I think Underhill's writing as a whole leads us to an understanding of what it is to be holy. She begins with the human person and the human condition, with its great possibilities for holiness, and she illustrates how we can become new creatures.

Underhill assumes that we are loved and that the purpose of life is to endure, accept, and claim that love. In the claiming we are lured closer and closer to that which loves us, and in this process we become like that which we love. Filled up with God, we become like God, holy, sanctified, deified, a link between our brothers and sisters and the source of all love, that which we call God. The import of all of Underhill's life and work is to lead us to understand the deified life and how it is accessible to us.

In some ways Underhill's message is a very traditional one. Yet the fact that it is propounded by a twentieth century lay woman who understood her times and their great spiritual needs makes a difference. The message is clear and powerful to be fully human we must fully adhere to God.

Adhering to God: The Message of Evelyn Underhill for Our Times, cont'd. 10
Dana Greene

NOTES

- 1 See Margaret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longman's Green, 1958) and Christopher Armstrong *Evelyn Underhill: An Introduction to Her Life and Writing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975).
- 2 The most extensive bibliography of Underhill's work is "Works By and About Evelyn Underhill," by Dana Greene, to be published in 1987 in *The Bulletin of Bibliography*. This includes almost three hundred and fifty entries by Underhill.
- 3 *The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937), p. 36.
- 4 *Mysticism: A Study In the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 12th ed. (London: Methuen, 1930; reprinted, New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 81.
- 5 *Man and the Supernatural* (London: Methuen, 1927, pp. 21-22.
- 6 *Worship* (London: Nisbet, 1936), p. 18.
- 7 *Abba*, compilation of extracts by Roger L. Roberts (Wilton, Ct.: Morehouse Barlow, 1982), p. 23.
- 8 *Concerning The Inner Life* (London: Methuen, 1926), pp. 3-4.
- 9 "The Spiritual Life," *Mixed Pasture: Twelve Essays and Addresses* (London: Methuen, 1933), p. 51.
- 10 *The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks*, pp. 90-91.
- 11 *Concerning the Inner Life*, pp. 60-61.

Evelyn Underhill Quotes

“On every level of life, from housework to heights of prayer, in all judgment and efforts to get things done, hurry and impatience are sure marks of the amateur.”

“If God were small enough to be understood, He would not be big enough to be worshipped.”

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

“Every minute you are thinking of evil, you might have been thinking of good instead. Refuse to pander to a morbid interest in your own misdeeds. Pick yourself up, be sorry, shake yourself, and go on again.”

Eternity is with us, inviting our contemplation perpetually, but we are too frightened, lazy, and suspicious to respond; too arrogant to still our thought, and let divine sensation have its way. It needs industry and goodwill if we would make that transition; for the process involves a veritable spring-cleaning of the soul, a turning-out and rearrangement of our mental furniture, a wide opening of closed windows, that the notes of the wild birds beyond our garden may come to us fully charged with wonder and freshness, and drown with their music the noise of the gramophone within. Those who do this, discover that they have lived in a stuffy world, whilst their inheritance was a world of morning-glory: where every tit-mouse is a celestial messenger, and every thrusting bud is charged with the full significance of life.” *Practical Mysticism*

“The spiritual life of individuals has to be extended both vertically to God and horizontally to other souls; and the more it grows in both directions, the less merely individual and therefore more truly personal it will become.”

“Idealism, though just in its premises, and often daring and honest in their application, is stultified by the exclusive intellectualism of its own methods: by its fatal trust in the squirrel-work of the industrious brain instead of the piercing vision of the desirous heart. It interests man, but does not involve him in its processes: does not catch him up to the new and more real life which it describes. Hence the thing that matters, the living thing, has somehow escaped it; and its observations bear the same relation to reality as the art of the anatomist does to the mystery of birth.” *Mysticism*

“All men, at one time or another, have fallen in love with the veiled Isis whom they call Truth. With most, this has been a passing passion: they have early seen its hopelessness and turned to more practical things. But others remain all their lives the devout lovers of reality: though the manner of their love, the vision which they make to themselves of the beloved object varies enormously. Some see Truth as Dante saw Beatrice: an adorable yet intangible figure, found in this world yet revealing the next. To others she seems rather an evil but an irresistible enchantress: enticing, demanding payment and betraying her lover at the last. Some have seen her in a

test tube, and some in a poet's dream: some before the altar, others in the slime. The extreme pragmatists have even sought her in the kitchen; declaring that she may best be recognized by

her utility. Last stage of all, the ~~Philosophical~~ ~~Quoted~~ ~~concluded~~ ~~unsuccessful~~ courtship by assuring himself that his mistress is not really there.” *Mysticism*

“For a lack of attention a thousand forms of loveliness elude us everyday” *Mysticism*

“Therefore it is to a practical mysticism that the practical man is here invited: to a training of his 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. Thus he may become aware of the universe which the spiritual artist is always trying to disclose to the race. This amount of mystical perception—this “ordinary contemplation,” as the specialists call it—is possible to all men: without it, they are not wholly conscious, nor wholly alive. It is a natural human activity, no more involving the great powers and sublime experiences of the mystical saints and philosophers than the ordinary enjoyment of music involves the special creative powers of the great musician. *Practical Mysticism*

“Mysticism is the art of union with Reality.” *Mysticism*

“As the beautiful does not exist for the artist and poet alone—though these can find in it more poignant depths of meaning than other men—so the world of Reality exists for all; and all may participate in it, unite with it, according to their measure and to the strength and purity of their desire.” *Practical Mysticism*

“The business and method of mysticism is love.” *Mysticism*

“As the genuine religious impulse becomes dominant, adoration more and more takes charge. 'I come to seek God because I need Him', may be an adequate formula for prayer. 'I come to adore His splendour, and fling myself and all that I have at His feet', is the only possible formula for worship.”

Inter-Religious Contexts and Comparative Theology in the Thought of Evelyn Underhill: Symbolic Narratives of Mysticism and the *Songs of Kabīr*¹

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Introductory Reflections

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) regards mysticism as the core of religion. All religions include various dimensions: scripture/ mythology, doctrine/ philosophy, ethics/ law, social/ institutional features, ritual, material aspects, and personal and communal experience². For Underhill, personal religious experience inspires and influences the development of these other aspects of religion—the heart of which is mysticism. Underhill asserts: “The mystics are the pioneers of the spiritual world³” (4); “Mysticism is the art of union with Reality⁴”.

In defining mystics and mysticism generally in this way, Underhill suggests a number of interesting things that pertain to inter-faith conversations⁵. 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 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 about mystics and mysticism are an invitation to inter-faith conversation. They suggest 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 intrepid explorers of spiritual frontiers. They provide maps that they draw from their first hand experiences of ultimate Reality, which can assist people in their 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, illustrated, 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 Frithjof 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 scholars can discern in their close examination of various mystical descriptions and theology across different traditions, cultures, and time periods⁶. More than this, Underhill in her approach to comparative studies also seems to be somewhat of a forerunner of what more recently has been called “new comparative theology”.

**Inter-Religious Contexts and Comparative Theology in the Thought of Evelyn Underhill:
Symbolic Narratives of Mysticism and the *Songs of Kabīr*ⁱ, cont'd. p 2**

Central guidelines of this method of comparative study include: a critical conscious awareness and acknowledgement by theologians of their own faith commitment and biases in comparative analysis; creative, engaged reflection on particular aspects of theological belief or practice of a tradition in comparison with those of one's own; and subsequent creative clarification, elaboration, and rethinking of specific aspects of one's own faith perspective in light of such comparative study ("extended significance").⁷ As I will illustrate in this paper, Underhill's detailed reflections on specific aspects of non-Christian traditions involved a form of active engagement that vividly supported her development of mystical symbolic narratives and enriched and advanced the Christian perspective to which she was normatively committed and participated in.

However, in response to concerns about foundationalist models of comparative religion grounded in presuppositions and agendas that have been biased by modern liberalism, some new comparative theologians question positions which regard the concept of "religion" as "a universal category of experience" and they tend to avoid any theorizing related to meta-perspectives about religions⁸. So, one significant characteristic of Underhill's view that differs from that of some new comparative theologians would seem to be her essentialist perspective on mysticism. New comparative theologians typically remain neutral (or critical) about claims concerning issues of religious or theological pluralism, though it remains unclear to me why such neutrality (or criticism) should be a requirement of their methodology⁹.

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 develop-

ing her point of view, she also draws on mystics and ideas from Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and 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), from her books of poetry (1912, 1916), and from introductions she did for the autobiography of Mahārshi Devendranath Tagore (1914) and especially for a book on the poetry of Kabīr (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. Underhill observes:

Attempts...to limit mystical truth—the direct apprehension of the Divine Substance—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 distinguishes between the "substance" and the "accidents" of divine Reality.

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ty. The mystic experiences divine Being *substantially* in a direct, affective embrace and union that transcends her senses, emotions, and mind. Underhill observes in mystical experience a shifting of awareness to an underlying “higher” Self, in intimate union with Spirit. However, the mystic perceives, interprets, and understands the experience *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 and Underhill does not downplay its significance to the social, spiritual, and religious life of people¹⁰. 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. More generally, she recognizes “the classic dangers, heresies and excesses to which the mystical temperament has always been liable” in all traditions¹¹. As we will see, she also clarifies differences between common threads among traditions. But her focus in her comparative writings is always constructively and explicitly framed within her hope of promoting the positive intellectual, moral and spiritual expansion and 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 common themes—the specifics of which diverge considerably among different writers—and then propose a fourth that we also find vividly illustrated in Underhill’s writings—the theme of divine immanence in nature.

Influential Christian 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 three key features of the traveler’s 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.

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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 Underhill draws on a Sufi perspective in illustrating possible Christian mystical orientations. Indeed, Underhill shifts to Christian examples in illustrating further how in this symbolic narrative God passionately draws the pilgrim to God’s-Self, 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, who Underhill does not mention in this context, 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 Indian traditions, we find a similar love-narrative in some of the poetic reflections that have been traditionally attributed to the great 15th century north Indian mystic poet Kabīr (1440-1518), which Underhill explores in

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her introduction to his poetry, including the themes of the love-chase, intimate union, and its creative effects:

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.
Kabīr declares the secret of this love.¹²

Here we find fish-imagery similar to that given by 'Attar in his pilgrimage narrative, highlighting the radical intimacy one has in relation to divine Reality—of being immersed in the divine Presence—who is immanent Source of our being. One is called by Kabīr to awaken to this *Satguru* (divine eternal teacher) at the heart of one's life.

Underhill perceives in Kabīr's writings evidence also of "the true theopathic state",¹³ mentioned above. 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 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.¹⁴ 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 also 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 spiritually, emotionally, and physically, 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. From her Christian experience in that period of her life, this spiritual presence in our created world includes angels,

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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 integrates both themes, in imagining 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’.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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

theme also pronounced in some of her early novels and short stories. She also echoes the beautiful imagery of Julian of Norwich, who writes of our sweet “Mother Jesus”—the creative Word—our “Mother sensual”, whose 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.¹⁷

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 summer 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: ...¹⁸

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

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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.¹⁹

We 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:

What the sport, and what the aim,
Shrouded Player of the Game?

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. ...20*

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 mystic poetry attributed to Kabīr, who I mentioned above.

According to tradition, Kabīr was a common man, an uneducated weaver, married, father of four children, who appealed to a wide and diverse audience of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, composing exceptional and brilliant poetry in the Hindi vernacular of his time. Today there are over 9 million people in the devotional movement (*Kabīr Panthis*) that was founded some five hundred years ago, and he has been embraced by a wide variety of traditions and movements.²¹ His historical context is difficult to ascertain. As Underhill notes, “Kabīr’s story is surrounded by contradictory legends, on none of which reliance can be placed”.²² It seems clear that he criticized aspects of Yogic, Brahmanic, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, and Islamic beliefs and practices of his time, which complicates the discernment about his origins and orientation. John Stratton Hawley notes that Kabīr “seems more at home with Hindu ways”, though his Muslim name—“a Quranic title of Allah meaning great”—suggests that he was Muslim, perhaps part of a recently converted social group.²³

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 from Hindi into Bengali script by Kshitimohan Sen, and she wrote the introduction to this volume.²⁴ Although some contemporary Kabīr scholars question the authenticity of most of these poems,

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Charlotte Vaudeville notes that they were “sung by itinerant Sadhus all over Northern India”, translated by Tagore “into beautiful English”, read widely in the West, and also translated into French and Russian. These popular poems present a form of *bhakti* that reflects some of the perspectives of Kabīr, and they certainly reflect a traditional view of Kabīr, even if many of them are probably not his creation.²⁵ In his afterword of Robert Bly’s more recent popular revised version of Tagore’s *One Hundred Poems of Kabīr*, Hawley notes the contrast of this western, more intimately devotional, collection with the eastern “*Bijak*” collection of the “Barnarsi Kabīr”—which has become the scripture of the *Kabīr Panthis*—where Kabīr in his poems is more irreverent, confrontational, critical, and skeptical of other religious movements and practices of his time²⁶ (though this latter thread certainly runs through the Tagore collection as well). In my exposition I will highlight some of the differences between Underhill’s reading of Kabīr—which reflects developments within *traditional* understandings and devotional movements of Kabīr—from what some more recent scholars claim to be the more historically *authentic* Kabīr.

In her introduction to Kabīr’s poetry, Underhill praised the inter-faith inclusivism of the traditional 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 Vaiṣṇavite. He is, as he says himself, ‘at once the child of Allah and of Rām’,” even if he showed a “frank dislike of all institutional religion, all external observance” and of “the tendency to an exclusively anthropomorphic devotion which results from an unrestricted

cult of Divine Personality”.²⁷ Indeed, in her mystical essentialist perspective, Underhill considers Kabīr in his poetry to be praising and loving the same spiritual Reality that she addresses in her own Christian context, and similarly calling humanity to mystic union with this Source. Although I think it doubtful that Kabīr himself was essentialist in Underhill’s sense, he did seem to claim a core mystical awakening involving a radical unitive devotional surrender to underlying divine Reality of a formless and qualityless nature. As Hawley observes, for Kabīr “God is not an object, but lies closer to us than our acts of language and symbolic organization permit us to view, and closer to life than the limitations of our own brief and flawed existences allow us to comprehend.”²⁸ So, Kabīr can sing:

All things are created by the Om;²⁹
The love-form is His body.
He is without form, without quality, without decay:
Seek thou union with Him!³⁰

It is said by some traditional commentators that Kabīr himself fused in inter-faith dialogue Sufi contemplation of the imageless God of Islam, Tantric and Yogic ideas with Hindu devotion to the personal God Viṣṇu, who he encountered under the guidance of his famous teacher Ramanand. However, some modern scholars question the historical connection to Ramanand and doubt the characterization of his *bhakti* as essentially Vaiṣṇava. Charlotte Vaudeville, for example, notes with Underhill that Kabīr was critical of Hindu devotional practices oriented towards idols, images, and forms of God, and feels that he was much more his own man—“that he never consciously followed any other guidance than that of the interior Master, the divine Satguru, so that his ‘faith’ or ‘confidence’ remained apparently

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supportless, . . . ”³¹ Kabīr was a proponent of a *bhakti* Yoga focused strictly on the nirguḍa aspects of divine Reality—beyond all name and form—which he tended to call Ram or Satguru or Hari. Hindus in Northern India regard Kabīr as a liberal Vaiṣṇava —“the initiator of *nirgu ī bhakti*”—and contemporary scholars acknowledge Kabīr’s inter-religious dependence on the Nāth-panthi form of Yoga and his lively encounters with many other religious traditions. Clearly, the authentic Kabīr was involved in some significant form of inter-religious dialogue (which perhaps even reflected some aspects of the methods of new comparative theology), even if he was in many respects spiritually innovative and could be quite critical of other spiritual paths in some of his poetry.³³

Underhill writes that the traditional 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”. 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. . . .³⁴

Underhill notices parallels with the sense of Trinitarian movement we find expressed by some Christian mystics, from the static and eternal Unity of Godhead, into the manifesting and creative Word of the second Person of the Trinity. Coming from her essentialist perspective, she is struck by the apparent correspondences in vision and description, but goes on to

note the subtle shifts in Kabīr’s Indian sensibility. For Kabīr—or at least for Kabīr as he has been traditionally understood and read—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, beginning with the sacred vibratory Om. 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:³⁵ 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.³⁶

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”.³⁷ God as Player is not an object of our senses and intellect but He is omnipresent in His creation—underlying and immanent in His creative play and joy—“Hidden within the blade of grass, is the Mountain of Rām”—as he sings in a Sākhī from another collection.³⁸ Creative immanence is a major theme of the traditional poetry of Kabīr, and it begins with divine play, which Kabīr images as a kind of apophatic dancer whose mysterious movement stimulates the world to life:

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...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.³⁹

Underhill is fascinated by this sensuous imagery of dance to which Kabīr loves to refer, and one gets the sense she wants her Christian readers to appreciate deeply the possible devotional dynamics. Although he acknowledges aspects of God that are static and absolute unity, Underhill notes that for Kabīr—at least for the traditional 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’”.⁴⁰ Kabīr in these songs 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. ...⁴¹

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 nights with the

music” of God’s divine play. So Underhill observes in relation to Christian mystics: “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.”⁴² In this collection, Kabīr makes extensive reference to a divine flute player, which Underhill in her commentary naturally associates with Kṛṣṇa, 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. However, in these poems, Kabīr does not mention Kṛṣṇa, and the divine flute player is never actually named, though in other poems in this collection Kabīr does refer devotionally to Brahma, Guru, Ram, and Hari. In this traditional reading of Kabīr, the divine is integrated with his rich sense of spirit immanent in the natural world, and of the significance of sacred sounds in evoking Satguru’s mystical presence: “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.”⁴³

Concluding Reflections

I am not sure if Underhill appreciates fully the significance of song for Kabīr as a mystical means that parallels traditional contemplative meditative practices that she develops in her writings. For Kabīr, the practice of vocal *mantra* meditation would have been a key feature of his devotionalism. Music or sacred sound thus functions in Kabīr's theology as much more than symbol of the divine presence in the created world. Its active *practice* is crucial in the surrender to *Satguru* and in opening to the awareness of one's essential immersion in *Satguru*. In line with Kabīr's mystical orientation on this, one contemporary Sikh writer speaks of *Shabd Guru*—sacred sounds that function as teacher—where meditative chanting might stimulate “a merger between the personal experience of you and the impersonal experience of Infinity beyond you and within you”.⁴⁴ I think this factor is what contributes most to the fact that, as Hawley observes, Kabīr “retains a certain bodily focus” in all of his poems, both those traditionally attributed to him and those considered authentic.⁴⁵

Still, Underhill draws on much 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—and its transformative impetus and dynamics. She thus seems to be involved in methods of new comparative theology, in “proceeding by means of limited case studies”⁴⁶ between traditions, which are influencing her understanding and development of Christian spiritual theology. She also portends the creative thought of modern eco-

theologians—so crucial for any current Christian theology if it hopes to remain alive and compelling—in stressing the sacredness of the natural world and our potential awareness of spiritual 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 continued to inform her later work in Christian spiritual direction and retreats, and in Christian liturgy, as her Christian faith matured and deepened.⁴⁷ 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.

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¹ This paper is an extended adaptation 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 thank Dana Greene and Kathleen Staudt for the invitation to participate in this event, and for including an earlier draft of this paper in the 2012-2013 Evelyn Underhill Annual Newsletter, "Reflections on the Inter-Faith Conversations of Evelyn Underhill: Symbolic Narratives of Mysticism". Also, my thanks to two anonymous readers of *JHCS*, and to Ted Ulrich, for helpful suggestions I incorporated into the final draft.

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

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) p. 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) pp. 231-232.

⁶ In more recent scholarship, essentialism has become over-shadowed by "contextualist" theories of mysticism, which tend to focus in their comparative studies on the differences between traditions, in highlighting the way in which socio-religious categories enter into and over-determine the mystical experiences themselves. See, for example, influential anthologies of essays edited by Steven Katz, especially *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (N.Y.: Oxford Press, 1978) and *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1983). I should note, however that not all contextualists are critical of essentialist perspectives and some influential contextualist perspectives are compatible with and even lean towards a kind of essentialist point of view (e.g. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Indeed, Kathleen Henderson Staudt outlines certain contextualist features in Underhill's *Mysticism* ("Rereading Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*", *Spiritus*, 12 (2012) pp. 113-128). Also, overly narrow or extreme contextualist theories have come under serious criticism. See, for example, Donald Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do?", *Religious Studies*, Vol. 25, No 3 (1989) pp. 53-60; G. William Barnard, "Explaining the Unexplainable: Wayne Proudfoot's Religious Experience", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (1992) pp. 231-256; and Michael Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism: A Hindu-Christian Comparison* (N.Y.: St Martin's Press, 1994) esp. chs. 1 and 2.

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⁷ See Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), especially pp. 3-19, where he summarizes the key features of new comparative theology. See also Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, "The Return of Comparative Theology", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (2010) pp. 477-514. They give a substantial survey of the field and related influences, and speak of "extended signification" on p. 493.

⁸ Locklin and Nicholson, "The Return of Comparative Theology", pp. 478-481. For another substantial overview of these concerns, see also James Fredericks, "A universal religious experience? Comparative theology as an alternative to a theology of religions", *Horizons* Vol. 22, No. 1 (1995) pp. 67-87.

⁹ I think that some comparative theologians who criticize essentialist theories of mysticism conflate positions that should be treated separately. It is one thing to suggest that certain socio-cultural trends that followed upon modern liberalism led historically to unquestioned and problematic methodological presuppositions about a universal "religion" and "theology" that now need to be brought to light so that scholars do not continue to misrepresent or mistreat other religious traditions or that of their own. It is quite another to claim that all comparative theologians must cease completely in their studies from considering questions about universalist (or inclusivist or exclusivist) religious truth claims. Underhill is not dogmatically presupposing a religiously mystical essentialism—she thinks that specific theological evidence across some religious traditions supports her point of view and she illustrates and argues this extensively in some of her writings. Moreover, as I will develop in this paper, her analysis of the particularities of other traditions is advancing and enriching her own sense and experience of Christian spirituality—which deepened and widened significantly over her lifetime. Perhaps more importantly, Underhill's essentialist perspective might to some degree actually reflect the truth of the matter. It seems unwise to me to dismiss this possibility at the outset of one's comparative studies, as some recent comparative theologians seem to be doing, because of methodological presuppositions.

¹⁰ James Fredericks argues against the essentialist point of view on the grounds that it significantly devalues dimensions of religion other than the common experiential core. Ted Ulrich clarifies Fredericks' concerns: "...the focus on ineffable experience tends to diminish the importance of the particulars of the religions: 'If all religious traditions are in fact different expressions of the same ineffable experience, then the historical specificities of the various religions can be safely overlooked as secondary, if not merely accidental.' If these specificities are not significant, then what is the point of comparative study, except to attempt to point out a common, pre-conceptual experience?". Ulrich is quoting Fredericks, "A universal religious experience?", p. 76, in Edward T. Ulrich, "CATHOLIC THEOLOGY, COMPARATIVE STUDY, AND A PRACTICE OF HINDU MEDITATION", at the website for the *Dialogue Interreligieuse Monastique*, at http://www.dimmid.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B6E8A313C-7CC6-4E72-B33D-9B5D42299401%7D (accessed June 7, 2013).

However, we need to stress here that Underhill obviously regards non-experiential dimensions of religion as very significant; and the point of comparative study for her seems to be primarily to enrich and deepen her own faith-experience and that of her readers, as well as to stimulate, inspire, and inform her readers.

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¹¹ Evelyn Underhill, "Introduction", *The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi, trs. (London, Macmillan and Co., 1914) pp. xvi-xvii. See also Evelyn Underhill, "Introduction", *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Rabindranath Tagore, tr., (London: The Macmillan Company, 1915) pp. vi, xxvii-xxx. This book was also published in New York in 1915 by The Macmillan Company titled *Songs of Kabir*.

¹² *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, LV, p. 60.

¹³ Underhill, "Introduction", *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. xxi. My italics.

¹⁴ I explore this topic in "Evelyn Underhill on Magic, Sacrament, and Spiritual Transformation," *Worship*, vol. 77, no. 2 (2003) pp. 132-151.

¹⁵ Evelyn Underhill, *Immanence. A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1912) pp. 45-46.

¹⁶ Underhill, *Immanence*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Underhill, *Immanence*, p. 54.

¹⁸ Underhill, *Immanence*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁹ Underhill, *Immanence*, p. 93.

²⁰ Evelyn Underhill, *Theophanies: A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1916) p. 34.

²¹ Charlotte Vaudeville notes: "In Indian religious history, Kabīr is unique: to the Hindus, he is a Vaiṣṇava *bhakta*, to the Muslims a *pīr*, to the Sikhs a *bhagat* to the sectarian Kabīr-panthīs an *avatār* of the supreme Being; to the modern patriots, Kabīr is the champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, to neo-vedāntins a promoter of the Universal Religion... ." *Kabīr*, Vol I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) p. 3.

²² Underhill, "Introduction", *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. x.

²³ John Stratton Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 36.

²⁴ 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 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". Evelyn Underhill, "Introduction", *The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, p. x.

²⁵ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, pp. 18, 24.

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²⁶ John Stratton Hawley, “Afterword: Kabir and the Transcendental Bly” in Robert Bly, *Kabir: Ecstatic Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004) pp. 81-82.

²⁷ Underhill, “Introduction”, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. viii, ix, xv, xxvii.

²⁸ Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, p. 42.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, XXVI, pp. 32-33.

³¹ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, p. 119.

³² Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, pp. 24, 106.

³³ Vaudeville notes: “Living in sacred Kāśī, [Kabīr] must have been in constant contact with the holy men of his time, Paṇḍits, Yogīs, Śaiva saṁnyāsīs, and Vaiṣṇava Bairāgīs, Vīraśaiva Jangamas, Munis and Tapīs—ascetics of every robe and denomination, the motley crowd of saints and sādhus which filled, even more than today, the narrow lanes of the old city. ... This is the confused and somewhat discordant clamour that we hear in his poems”. *Kabīr*, pp. 120, 118.

³⁴ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. xviii, LXXXII, 88.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, LXXXII, pp. 88-89.

³⁷ Underhill, *Theophanies*, p. 34.

³⁸ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, p. 194.

³⁹ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, XXVI, p. 33.

⁴⁰ Underhill, “Introduction”, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

⁴¹ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, XXXII, pp. 38-39.

⁴² *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, p. xxxv.

⁴³ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, L, pp. 56, LXVIII, pp. 71-72.

⁴⁴ Yogi Bhajan and editors, *The Aquarian Teacher: KRI International Teacher Training in Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan, level 1 instructor textbook*, 4th ed., (Santa Cruz, NM: Kundalini Research Institute, 2007) p. 72.

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⁴⁵ Hawley, "Afterword: Kabir and the Transcendental Bly", p. 81.

⁴⁶ Fredericks, "A universal religious experience?", p. 83.

⁴⁷ For example, one wonders if Underhill's encounter with the theory and practice of *ahii' s̄ā* 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).

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