

Dear Friend

In the Lectionary for tomorrow we remember Evelyn Underhill, spiritual writer and mystic. Here are some biographical details from Wikipedia with additional material from the web site of the Fuller Studio, including her picture:



Evelyn Underhill was born in Wolverhampton on 6th December 1875. She was a poet and novelist as well as a pacifist and mystic. An only child, she described her early mystical insights as "abrupt experiences of the peaceful, undifferentiated plane of reality—like the 'still desert' of the mystic—in which there was no multiplicity nor need of explanation". The meaning of these experiences became a lifelong quest and a source of private angst, provoking her to research and write.

Both her father and her husband were writers (on the law), London [barristers](#), and yachtsmen. She and her husband, Hubert Stuart Moore, grew up together and were married on 3 July 1907. The couple had no children. She travelled regularly within Europe, primarily Switzerland, France and Italy, where she pursued her interests in art and Catholicism, visiting numerous churches and monasteries. Neither her husband (a Protestant) nor her parents shared her interest in spiritual matters.

Underhill's spiritual journey is a fascinating one, and one which has been well chronicled. Her career began with her classic work *Mysticism* (1911) and can be said to have concluded with her other classic *Worship* (1936). These studies are similar in that they were comprehensive in their scope and pioneering in their approach, and both volumes are standard works in the fields of mysticism and liturgy. The fact that both remain in print is a testimony to their enduring quality. These works are very different in their theological approach however, as *Mysticism* is rooted in a hybrid of psychology, Neo-Platonism, and evolutionary thought, while *Worship* is grounded in a Trinitarian theology centred on the Holy Spirit and a theology of sacrifice.

Between these two books Underhill accomplished numerous "firsts": she was the first woman to lecture at an Oxford college in theology, the first woman to lecture Anglican clergy, and one of the first women to be included in Church of England commissions. These accomplishments, along with her work as a theological editor and her role as a spiritual director and retreat leader, made Evelyn Underhill a prominent figure in her day.

One of the little understood facts of Underhill's life and career are the changes of mind she went through over time. Underhill's thought went through three distinct phases. Her earliest theological approach could be defined by a strong emphasis on evolutionary thought, psychology, and Platonic dualism. This period lasted from 1891–1919, and was dominated by writings on mysticism and mystical theology. Her rather optimistic

theology was unable to explain the cruel realities of World War I. So, in 1920, she began receiving spiritual direction from Baron Friedrich von Hügel, one of the most respected theologians in Europe at that time. This began a decade-long theme of more Christocentric thought and a growing balance between God's immanence and transcendence, which lasted from 1920–1929. The last years of her life (1930–1941) were marked by yet another paradigm shift, where under the influence of Russian Orthodox immigrants to England, Underhill's theology took a firm shift to the third person of the Trinity. Her development of a pneumatology happened coincidentally with her growing social conscience as expressed by her pacifism at the onset of World War II.

In terms of Underhill's understanding of spirituality, it is notable is that over time Underhill shifts from the term "mysticism" that so dominated her early years as an author, to terms such as "life of the Spirit," "the spiritual life," and "spirituality." Only twice in the late 1920s does Underhill write on mysticism, and from 1930 on her writings are almost exclusively on spirituality and worship. The first, *Mysticism*, can be understood well by reflecting on its subtitle, *A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. This book described the human potential of ascent to the divine. Underhill uses the classic threefold paradigm of mystical union of purgation, illumination, and unification, but expands it, adding two more stages. The result was her five-step process of conversion, purgation, illumination, surrender, and union. Underhill added a step at the beginning—conversion, or a threshold of awareness of the ultimate reality (God) existing outside oneself. She also added a fourth step, surrender, which she drew from many mystical writings, but St. John of the Cross in particular. This stage was the "dark night of the soul," that period of dryness that tests one's ultimate commitment to the spiritual journey. Underhill's massive study, though heavily weighted towards medieval Christian mysticism, was intentionally inter-religious. Her goal was to demonstrate the universal human capacity for mystical ascent to "reality," that is, the more real supernatural world that is the goal of human existence. Though some saints and mystics might attain such a state of union with God in this world, most must wait for the life in the world beyond this world. Regardless, the journey was an inward and private one, what Plotinus described as the "flight of the alone to the One."

The small volume *The Spiritual Life* was very different. This little book was a compilation of four radio broadcasts Underhill delivered on the BBC. Gone were the concepts of mystical union and human ascent. In their place was a threefold pattern of the spiritual life: adoration, adherence and cooperation. This pattern was derived from the French school of spirituality identified with Pierre de Berulle and Jean-Jacques Olier. This was an approach to the spiritual life that began with God's initiative and resulted in a life conformed to the cruciform posture of our Lord. It also involved community and service to others. Gone was the philosophy and psychology of Mysticism; in its place was the Christian life of worship, prayer, and ministry.

Evelyn died in London on 15th June 1941.

One of her famous quotes is: *After all it is those who have a deep and real inner life who are best able to deal with the irritating details of outer life.*