EVELYN UNDERHILL AND THE FRANCISCAN TRADITION

The English religious writer Evelyn Underhill was acclaimed in her own time. Her work sold well, and she was publicly applauded by church and university alike. Her friend T. S. Eliot hailed her as a writer attuned to the great spiritual hunger of her contemporaries (Gardner 69-70), and Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, attested that more than anyone else she kept the spiritual life alive in the Anglican Church in the interwar period (Ramsey x).

What is little known and largely undocumented is that during the years 1917 to 1920 Underhill experienced a spiritual crisis about which she cryptically said, “I went to pieces” (VHC 21 Dec. 1921); after, she turned away from her self-proclaimed “white-hot Neo-Platonism” (Letters 206) to a clear affirmation of Christianity. She reentered the Anglican Church from which she had been estranged and sought out the guidance of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, the most important Catholic theologian in England. The impact of this axial turning was significantly to reshape her work for the next two decades. For more than twenty years she had been a pioneering author of mysticism and editor of mystic texts. Then in the early 1920s she claimed a new vocation, giving spiritual direction (what in her time was called the care of souls), leading retreats, and interpreting mysticism for what she called “normal” people. How and why this pivotal turning occurred has not been examined by Underhill scholars. Since 2021 marked the eightieth anniversary of her death, this is an appropriate time to explore this lacuna.

As an immensely private person, Underhill never discussed what brought her to this mid-life crisis nor how she was extricated from her morass. She attributed her healing to Friedrich von Hügel whom she claimed was responsible for her whole spiritual life (Letters 196). While von Hügel was important in her development, there were other factors which initially brought her to request his help in the first place and continued to sustain her. In this regard the inspiration of Francis of Assisi and a second-generation Franciscan, Jacopone da Todi, was central.

In these two Franciscans, Underhill encountered a Christocentric, lay spirituality anchored in poverty, penitence, and joy. The Franciscan tradition of adoration of God anchored one in a life of humility but also impelled one to a vocation of compassion for a suffering world.
These same themes of Christocentric devotion and service to the world would later be emphasized by von Hügel in his counsel of her. Underhill would later summarize her spirituality as “adoration” of God, “attachment” to God, and “cooperation” with God in a wide-spreading love of all. She would be saved from the world-denying claims of her “white-hot Neoplatonism” by the world-affirming inspiration of these early Franciscans. They stood in “the gap between the hidden Perfect and the imperfect world, and love[d] not one but both” (MP 149).

In many ways Underhill’s life was charmed. She was the only child of an English barrister and a philanthropist mother and was raised in the toney Kensington section of London. Seemingly the most spiritually formative event in her early life was her visits to the continent, especially Italy, a place she called “the holy land of Europe,” claiming “[t]here is a type of mind which must go there to find itself.” She said Italy was “medicinal to the soul” (Cropper 13). The beauty of the landscape, art, architecture, and religious ritual she experienced there fueled her interest in Catholicism, and she became convinced that she should “go over to Rome.” She attended Catholic services and retreats and had Catholic friends who inspired her to consider conversion. But her conversion was thwarted when at the time of her marriage in 1907 to her childhood friend and intended, Hubert Stuart Moore, he adamantly insisted that he did not want a priest standing between him and his wife. Consequently, she decided to postpone her conversion for a year, hoping he would acquiesce, but when in that same year the papacy issued Pascendi Dominici Gregis, an encyclical condemning Modernism, her conversion became more difficult. As a Modernist herself she decided that in all intellectual honesty she could not become a Catholic. As a result, for years she lived in a kind of exile, unable to attend Catholic services and unwilling to participate in the Anglican Church. These years of separation would have profound implications for her life.

Almost as compensation for this loss, Underhill began research and writing for her “big” book, Mysticism. She worked prodigiously for four years, consulted a thousand sources, many in manuscript form, and ultimately produced a five-hundred-page book. In the first part of the book, she defined mysticism, separating it from other phenomena, and in the second part she described five stages of mystic development, illustrating each with apt quotations from mystical texts. Mysticism was not a theological treatise but rather a book about “the nature and development of man’s spiritual consciousness.” The mystics, “the great pioneers,” reached the outer border of human consciousness where they beheld love itself. In so doing they realized the deepest human
longing and were transformed. It was Underhill’s intent to acknowledge and preserve this mystical contribution. She argued that although many mystics reported seeing visions and hearing voices, those experiences were neither universal nor central. What was central was the transforming experience of the love of God. The contribution of the mystics was not credal, theological, or institutional, but experiential.

Although William Inge, William James, and von Hügel wrote on the subject of mysticism, Underhill’s book was the most accessible and most broadly inclusive. It had twelve editions, and it has never been out of print since its original publication in 1911. When it first appeared, there were those who were convinced that the author must be a male since no woman could have produced such a sustained and erudite discussion of the topic.

Underhill quickly established herself as a leading proponent of mysticism, editing and writing introductions to the texts of The Cloud of Unknowing, Richard Rolle’s Fire of Love or the Power of Love, and John Ruysbroeck’s Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage, biographies of Ruysbroeck and the Franciscan friar and poet Jacopone da Todi, and a pamphlet on war and mysticism in which she defended England’s engagement in World War I, a tract she would ultimately come to regret.

As an English patriot, Underhill served in the Office of the British Admiralty, but, as the war dragged on with great brutality on all sides, life became difficult for everyone, and she acknowledged that “detachment” was almost impossible and “transcendence of the here and now demands at present a strength of will and power of withdrawal which few possess” (Letters 147).

The third year of the war, 1917, must have been particularly difficult for Underhill. The war’s death toll was enormous, and the Russian revolution began. Two cousins, Guy and Harold Thorne, were killed in combat, and her most intimate friend, Ethel Ross Barker, a classicist and Catholic convert, became terminally ill and died. Underhill’s writing dropped off precipitously; she published only one book review that year. She later described this period as a time when she developed “an increasingly anti-institutional bias” and a drift toward what she called an “inwardness” (VHC, 21 Dec. 1921). The “caldron of war” was for her both external and internal; she had to confront her own spiritual life.

Underhill’s intellectual and emotional suffering and its resolution would come only gradually, although it must have begun already in 1918. In that year she published a short article on the future of mysticism in which she assessed whether interest in mysticism might be
revived after the war. What was needed, she wrote, was the emergence of great mystics who would serve as centers of spiritual vitality. She claimed that the history of mysticism revealed that it flourished best when allied with a high moral code, a strong sense of duty, and a definite religious faith. In short, mysticism was more likely to arise within the historic churches than outside them. While she believed that “[t]rue mysticism is the soul of religion,” she also believed that “like the soul of man, [mysticism] needs a body if it is to fulfil its mighty destiny.” She was concerned that “divorced from all institutional expression it [mysticism] tends to become strange, vague, or merely sentimental” (“Future” 336). In this case she might well have been expressing her own experience. Within a year or two she integrated herself within the Anglican communion.

While she recognized the peril of a “vague” mysticism, “inwardness,” and “anti-institutional bias,” she craved models of how her abstracted otherworldliness and overweening desire for detachment and perfection might be modulated. She found a remedy in the life and work of Jacopone da Todi, the thirteenth-century second-generation Franciscan, a poet and mystic (Spiritual Biography vii, 225-48). By 1918 she was at work on his biography.

Although Underhill never divulged why she undertook this biography, it is possible to piece together an explanation. There were several practical reasons which allowed her to undertake the project. She was already familiar with Jacopone, having included brief references to him in Mysticism, and she was increasingly interested in the Franciscan tradition, having written on the influential Angela of Foligno first in Mysticism and subsequently in a 1912 essay (“Angela” 88-107). She had friends who would help her as well. J. A. Herbert, Keeper of Manuscripts in the British Museum, introduced her to the Umbrian manuscripts housed in the Museum’s collections, and in 1910 Dr. Giovanni Ferri, who had published a partial edition of Jacopone’s poems in Italian, agreed to look over the English translation of the poems done by Underhill’s friend Mrs. Theodore Beck. Dr. Edmund Gardner, who wrote on Jacopone in 1914, agreed to offer his advice too. Underhill’s publisher, J. M. Dent, was willing to publish this volume. Most importantly the research and writing of the biography would re-immense her in the Italy she loved.

Underhill believed that the genre of biography illustrated the journey of a soul. In her biography of Jacopone da Todi she tracked his initial active life as a lawyer and man of the world, his dramatic mid-life conversion at the unexpected death of his wife, his entrance
into the Franciscan order as a lay brother, and his leadership of the Spiritualist Franciscans who railed against the corruption, clericalism, avarice, and worldliness of the Order. Like Francis, Jacopone’s actions seemed eccentric but, in both cases, they followed from their sense of wonder and overwhelming love of God. In Jacopone’s case these sensibilities were expressed in his mystical poetry. He was a man who endured extensive suffering and was both imprisoned and excommunicated by Pope Boniface VIII for his attempt to purify the Order and his criticism of the papacy.

For Underhill, Jacopone not only embodied the Franciscan ideals of poverty, penitence, and joy, but he reconciled these three disparate responses to God’s love. In him the extreme of the world-denying claims of the Neo-Platonist were overcome by the world-affirming orientation of the Franciscan. For Underhill Jacopone was above all a gifted, natural poet who transmitted mystic experience through vernacular poetic form (Spiritual Biography 212-48).

In addition to Jacopone’s life and poetry Underhill was nurtured by her encounter with an extraordinary Italian woman, Sorella Maria, who with a small group of women established an ecumenical community near Spoleto to live out the non-monastic Primitive Franciscan Rule of poverty, prayer, and hospitality. Underhill was first introduced to this community by an English friend, Amy Turton, probably around 1918. She met Sorella Maria in person only once in 1925, but their friendship was sustained through correspondence. In an article in the Spectator Underhill describes her “darling Italian saint,” the “Least Sister,” as possessing a “delicate courtesy,” a “serene and wide-spreading love,” a “Teresian inflexibility of purpose,” and a “profound sense of the pain and need of the world and a passionate desire to help” (“Hermitage” 183-84). She attested that these characteristics, embodied in Sorella Maria, were hallmarks of the Franciscan spiritual life. Beginning in 1919 Sorella Maria and Underhill conspired to create what was called the Confraternity of the Spiritual Entente, an ecumenical community of prayer for Christian unity, an early indication of Underhill’s openness to ecumenical efforts. As one who personified the ideals of the Franciscan tradition, Sorella Maria would continue to have influence on Underhill’s life and work for years. Underhill regarded their friendship as one of her greatest privileges.

It was only years later that Underhill clarified her understanding of the Franciscan tradition and its founder. She claimed Francis could not be understood without realizing his simultaneous love both of God and of the world. Her study of Jacopone came at a time of crisis
in her life, and his life and work gave testimony to love and suffering at the heart of the message of Francis, but also at the heart of the Christian message. It was the beginning of Underhill’s commitment to overcoming her Neo-Platonism. As she wrote: “the real greatness of St. Francis is the same as the greatness of the Christian religion” (MP 163). For Francis, love and suffering were one, and will and love, rather than intellect, were the greatest powers of man. Underhill accorded these same attributes to Francis’s disciple, Jacopone, who in his mystic poetry united the double truth of the sublime and the lowly, the simple and the awesome sense of God.

Although Underhill’s encounters with Jacopone and Sorella Maria provided an alternative experience to her Neo-Platonic world view, they did not relieve her turmoil; she claimed her life was “plaited” with pain. By 1921 she resolved to seek the guidance of von Hügel, in whom she saw a reminder of Francis. She recognized in both “a craving for God.” Both “were penetrated by a sense of the realness, more the sacredness, of the natural as well as the supernatural order; as something which was not to be fled from, but to be loved without possessiveness, with an unlimited and humble tenderness cleansed of all desire” (MP 158). If she found resonances of Francis in von Hügel, she found shared commonalities between Sorella Maria and him as well. In 1925 she wrote: “it was wonderful to find how exactly she [Maria] and my Old Man [von Hügel] agree, in spite of great differences in mind and language, in all the deep things of the spiritual life” (Allchin 28).

Initially the relationship between Underhill and the Baron was tense. In 1911 after having read Mysticism he wrote her a letter urging major revisions. She resisted his suggestions. But by the 1920s that was all in the past. She considered von Hügel a truthful, sane, and tolerant person of great intellect and wisdom, a scholar of mysticism, and a Modernist who had suffered from ecclesiastical suspicion. She turned to him for help.

For just over two and a half years Underhill received guidance from von Hügel both in person and through letters. Given their shared interests one can imagine they conversed about Jacopone since the subject of von Hügel’s first book, the fifteenth-century Catherine of Genoa, was deeply influenced by Jacopone’s writing and life. When a second edition of this book was published in 1923, von Hügel acknowledged Underhill’s earlier biography of Jacopone. But apart from their scholarly exchange the main purpose of their sessions was to help reorient Underhill’s spiritual life and ease her turmoil.

Von Hügel’s diagnosis was that Underhill misunderstood the spiritual life as self-cultivation, was afflicted with “pure” mysticism, and
was emotionally starved. In order to counter her detachment, perfectionism, and intellectualism, he urged her to visit the poor, develop non-religious interests, deepen her sacramental understanding of reality, and practice Christocentric devotion (VHC, late 1921).

As Underhill saw it, von Hügel’s gift to her was not principally intellectual or pastoral but personal. She insisted it was the integrative aspects of his personality that made God accessible to her. She attributed his prayer for her as a powerful force in her healing. “Somehow by his prayers he compelled me to experience Christ. He never said anything more about it — but I know that humanly speaking he did it. It took about four months — it was like watching the sun rising very slowly — and then suddenly one knew what it was” (Letters 26). Underhill wrote that “spiritual consciousness is more often caught than taught. . . . We most easily recognize spiritual reality when it is perceived transfiguring human character, and most attain it by sympathetic contagion” (“Sources” 81). If she “caught” the spiritual life from von Hügel, her first experience of this “contagion” was with Jacopone da Todi in whom she encountered the love of God and the love of the world in harmony.

Von Hügel, like Jacopone and Sorella Maria, represented the human embodiments of Christian life for Underhill, and this had healing consequences. Through them she came to realize that God was able to meet one even in one’s sinfulness. This was something Neo-Platonism could never do. “Detachment,” which earlier in her life was her goal, was now replaced with “detachment within attachment,” an alternative offered by von Hügel. As early as 1923 she wrote that the happy life was not the Neo-Platonic goal of “alone with the alone” but rather allying oneself with the spirit of Jesus ceaselessly at work redeeming the world (Fragments 56).

The year 1921 was a pivotal one for Underhill. She began receiving guidance from von Hügel, she gave an important lecture at Manchester College, Oxford, and she agreed to attend a retreat at the Anglican retreat house in the village of Pleshey.

The invitation to give the Upton Lecture at Manchester College was an honor and would make her the first woman to be an outside lecturer at Oxford. She probably began preparing for this major lecture, “The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today,” in 1920 (Life). Her subject was not mysticism but the spiritual life and how it might be lived in the contemporary world. She was particularly interested in how the classic expressions of the spiritual life might be integrated with modern psychology. Her argument was that a spiritual life was available to each person, that it was characterized by integration, vital-
ity, and elements of both contemplation and action, and that it often grew up within institutional religious life. While the lecture built on what Underhill had learned from her study of mysticism, her intent was to inspire and instruct ordinary Christians. As such it was a portent of the new vocational direction her life would take.

In retrospect one can see a constellation of events which propelled Underhill toward this new vocation. She had recently re-entered the Anglican Church but still felt something of an outsider. This separatedness was overcome when at the invitation of her friend Annie Harvey, Warden at the Pleshey retreat house, she agreed to make a retreat there. The experience was one of feeling at home and encountering like-minded people. She began to speculate that it might be here that she could contribute to Anglicanism. She was clear that an experience of God is “in the long run always a vocational experience. It always impels to some sort of service, always awakens an energetic love. It never leaves the self where it found it” (“Authority” 13). Her vocational service was coming into focus. She wrote to her friend Lucy Menzies, “[A] true contemplative vocation involves . . . the development of a spiritual force by which you exercise not only adoration but mediatory — a sort of redemptive and clarifying power working on other souls” (Letters 323).

In 1924 Underhill began offering her own retreats. She gave “Sanctity: The Perfection of Love” at Pleshey and was strengthened knowing that Sorella Maria was praying for her (Fragments 59). The following year she led “Concerning the Inner Life,” for Anglican clergy, and in 1927 she presented “Inner Grace and Outward Sign” at Canterbury Cathedral, the first woman to give a retreat at this center of Anglicanism (Ways 45). During the next several years she would craft ten additional retreats which would be offered at a variety of retreat houses throughout England. These retreats were later published in book form. By the 1930s Evelyn Underhill was recognized as a pioneer of the retreat movement within Anglicanism.

In her journey from scholar of mysticism to mediator of the spiritual life, Evelyn Underhill was inspired by Francis and those who followed him. Her interest in that tradition did not wane. In the five-year period between 1927 and 1931 she reviewed seven books on aspects of Franciscan spirituality, and she continued to write essays and give lectures on this topic. In “Franciscan Mysticism” she asserted that with Francis something new entered the spiritual life of the church — a mysticism that was penitential, uncloistered, poetic, and Christ-like. Underhill admonished her enthusiastic readers to remember that Francis, the little brother of the birds, was also the little brother of the
lice (“Franciscan Mysticism” 91). In 1926 during the 700th anniversary of the death of Francis, Underhill gave a lecture on Jacopone to the Royal Society of Literature. In this she said that Jacopone’s poetry was not that of an awe-struck contemplative unable to find language for that which he beheld, but a mediating poetry that “takes the raw material provided by the great explorers of the spiritual world and makes it accessible to other men” (“Franciscan Poet” 64). Jacopone was an artist and a mediator between God’s love and the great needs of his contemporaries. Now clear about her own vocation it is no wonder she continued to resonate with this Umbrian poet. Underhill herself had become a mediator between the love of God and those who needed to experience that love.

Several years later in her lecture on St. Francis and Franciscan Spirituality, given at University College, London, Underhill spoke directly about what she considered the essence of Franciscan spirituality (MP 147-68). She acknowledged Francis’s genius as poet, artist, and saint. Here was a human who was “devoured” and “transformed” by love. The two objects of this love were God and the world; he loved both. It was precisely Francis’s commitment to this two-fold human heritage of love for God and for the world which gave Underhill a way through her world-denying view and helped her affirm Christian spirituality. She believed Francis’s insight was accessible to all Christian traditions.

For it is one thing to be a believer in Christianity, or even a courageous practitioner of its hard demands, another thing to be sensitized to all its mysterious implications; and it is just these mysterious implications which the poetic intuition and intrepid love of Francis seized and expressed in terms of human life.

(MP 163)

For Underhill, Francis grasped the experience of homely love and beauty, suffering and loneliness, riches and poverty, the Crib and the Cross (MP 164).

During the last two decades of her life Underhill continued to minister to her contemporaries through retreats, spiritual direction, lecturing, and writing. This work followed from her vocation and her understanding of the twinning of the love of God and the grievous need for the contemplative element in the lives of her contemporaries. Her final writing project was Worship published in 1936, a book that illustrated her interest in adoration and ecumenism. A few years before her death in 1941 as war again loomed over Europe, she announced her pacifism,
as a corollary of the Christian mandate to love even one's enemies.\textsuperscript{3} This cost her many friends.

At a time of mid-life crisis Underhill envisioned Jacopone, like his mentor Francis, standing between God and a suffering world. In his vernacular poetry, he gave witness to the dual love of God and the world. This was the beginning of Underhill awakening, and healing, and overcoming her Neo-Platonism which had caused her much anguish.

Lamentably, the influence of Jacopone and the Franciscan tradition on Underhill's life and work has not been adequately explored. Neither, however, has Jacopone da Todi been adequately acknowledged for his important contribution. Bernard McGinn in his magisterial \textit{The Flowering of Mysticism} examines the contribution of Jacopone in his chapter on “Men and Women of the Franciscan Mystical Tradition.” He concludes that although Jacopone is one of the greatest mystical poets of the Middle Ages, he “has eluded interpreters in part because he is among the first Christian mystics . . . who chose to express his sense of God’s paradoxical presence in poetic form and a vernacular one at that” (McGinn 125-31). In a review of the history of criticism on the writings of Jacopone, V. Louise Katainen details the critiques of Jacopone from the medieval period onward and concludes that there is a considerable corpus of this mystic poet which has yet to be explored. In 2019 a conference celebrating the hundredth anniversary of Evelyn Underhill’s publication of her biography of Jacopone was held in Todi.\textsuperscript{4} This may be the beginning of an exploration of the influence of Jacopone and the larger Franciscan tradition on the life and work of Evelyn Underhill.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. Biographies of Evelyn Underhill include those by Margaret Cropper, 1958; Christopher Armstrong, 1975; and Dana Greene, 1990.

2. The best discussion of von Hügel’s diagnosis of Underhill is in VHC, von Hügel to Underhill, late 1921 and Underhill to von Hügel 21 Dec. 1921. See also \textit{Fragments}, 25-68 and 111-20 and Robyn Wrigley-Carr, 30-33.

3. See “Meditation on Peace,” 199-202; “Postscript” 205-10; and “The Church and War” 213-17 in \textit{Guide}.

4. This conference was organized by Dr. Claudio Peri who with Massimo Peri translated Evelyn Underhill’s biography of Jacopone da Todi into Italian as \textit{Jacopone da Todi Poeta E Mistico, 1228-1306}, Todi, IT: Tau Editrice, 2019.
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