
Dana Greene

EVELYN UNDERHILL:

Artist of the Infinite Life

New York: Crossroad, 1990
179 pages — \$18.95 hardcover

Evelyn Underhill

THE WAYS OF THE SOUL

Edited with an Introduction by Grace Adolphsen Brame

New York: Crossroad, 1990
247 pages — \$19.95 hardcover

Reviewed by **Anne E. Carr**

It is appropriate to consider the life and work of Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) in *The Merton Annual* because of the many concerns she shared with Thomas Merton and because he indicated the influence of her writings on his own life and work. And it is appropriate to consider these two books in tandem because Dana Greene's thoroughly researched and beautifully written biography provides the framework for understanding the hitherto unpublished manuscripts of the retreats Underhill gave in 1924, 1925, 1927, and 1928, discovered in her archives by Grace Adolphsen Brame.

Although Underhill's life was ordinary in many ways, following the somewhat stuffy class expectations of Edwardian England for a well-off married woman, hers is also a fascinating life, an interior journey that, like Merton's, was to have extraordinary external effect through her writing. Evelyn Underhill was one of the rare women in the modern history of spirituality who achieved a distinctive and authoritative voice of her own. Her studies, *Mysticism* (1911) and *Worship* (1936), among the thirty-nine books and almost four hundred articles that have now been catalogued, are considered classics. And these titles point to the changing direction, despite the continuity, of her focus across the span of her life.

Dana Greene describes Underhill's early "atheism," her brief dabbling in magic and the occult, and her attraction to Christianity. Although

born into a nominal and respectable Anglicanism, she was drawn for a while to Roman Catholicism. But her husband's unease with Catholicism, particularly the practice of confession, and her own intellectual difficulties with the condemnation of Modernism in 1907 meant that she never converted. Rather, she devoted her life first to the discovery of the mystics of the past, producing learned studies and popularizing mysticism as a practical possibility for everyone in several books and many articles. Although not highly educated in a formal way, her research into original texts (securing accurate translations with the aid of librarian and linguist friends) and her sensitive studies brought public recognition: she was the first woman to deliver the prestigious Upton lectures at Oxford in 1921.

Later, she made a serious commitment to Anglicanism as acceptance of the context in which God had placed her. After she chose Baron Friedrich von Hugel as her spiritual director, she began offering spiritual guidance to friends, retreats for women and then clergy, a realm of preaching and teaching usually reserved for men. She moved from her earlier focus on the neo-platonic austerity and individual inwardness of the mystics to the more social spiritual life of the ordinary Christian. However, she never lost her conviction that genuine mysticism was an integral part of the spiritual teaching of Christianity. Even as she more frequently cited Ignatius of Loyola and the questions, "What am I for?" and "What am I doing?" derived from his *Spiritual Exercises*, the names of Ruysbroek and Eckhart, Teresa, Julian and Angela, Thomas a Kempis and Francis of Assisi are scattered through the texts of her retreats.

Her earlier work demonstrates Underhill's conviction that the mystics were the pioneers of the unseen, hidden, spiritual world that is the human inheritance. The mystics had charted the contours of that other world, the heavenly realm or invisible church, a world that was available to all who learned to see with a kind of "double vision." Later her own twofold vision becomes more explicitly sacramental and, while still intensely personal, is more concerned with the spiritual network among people that is organic life in the Body of Christ, the communion of saints and the vital connections of prayer that embrace the living and the dead.

Like Merton, Underhill makes a distinction between the "individual" and the "person," and returns often to the importance of extirpating selfish motives, self-centeredness and spiritual ambition in the Christian life. While some of her language, the language of the mystics, can seem forbidding, her sacramental vision of the ordinary, even as it is expressed in a kind of dated homeyness, wins out. She always opts for a sane, balanced,

common sense perspective, pointing out, for example, that "the bread of life seldom has any butter on it," that Teresa of Avila held the object of spiritual marriage to be "work, work, work," and that "hot milk and a foolish novel" were often better evening activities than reading the mystics.

In her retreats, Evelyn Underhill uses the example and teaching of the Christian saints and especially the virtues of the Christian life to organize her teaching. Thoughtfully introduced and analyzed in their sources and themes by Grace Adolphsen Brame, who also describes the practical planning and experience of an Underhill retreat, her conferences treat love, joy, peace, prayer, courage, generosity, patience, adoration, cooperation, penitence and consecration in rich description. The quest for God leads to an attitude of adoration that issues in service to others and participation in the network of prayer. While occasionally the tone and some of the language and examples are dated, the retreats still provide solid spiritual fare and are often compelling. Underhill's analysis of the Christian virtues led, at the end of her life to an outspoken pacifism and like Merton, she criticized her nation's bishops on questions of war and peace.

One can well appreciate the judgment of the former archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, that she was a singular figure in keeping alive Anglican spirituality in the period between the wars. In 1988, the Episcopal Church in the United States added Evelyn Underhill's name, as mystic and theologian, to its liturgical calendar. June 1991 is the fiftieth anniversary of her death and promises further recovery of her life and work for the history of spirituality and for its contemporary reappropriations. The recent republication of many of her texts, and the books considered here, suggest that Merton's (and T. S. Eliot's and Charles Williams') acknowledgment of the significance of Evelyn Underhill was thoroughly justified.