

**Beyond The Fringe of Speech:  
The Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill and Art**

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## **Statement of Sources**

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

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## **Abstract**

The written works of the English religious writer, spiritual director and exponent of Christian spirituality, Evelyn Underhill (1875 - 1941), contain numerous references to visual art and church architecture. This thesis explores the influence of art on her spirituality by examining her interpretation and understanding of various works of religious art, cathedrals, churches and chapels.

The controlling methodology of the thesis is within the discipline of spirituality. This hermeneutical approach, which seeks to investigate and understand the phenomena of the Christian spiritual life as experience, is structured on three processes: observation and description of the phenomena under investigation, critical analysis of the data, and constructive interpretation of its transformative and integrational character.

The study presents Underhill's early life, reading and education within the Anglican tradition as the backdrop against which her appreciation for art and knowledge of Christianity developed. This knowledge came to life through the experience of Continental Europe and in particular the galleries and churches of Italy and France. While there her sensitive and intuitive personality enabled Underhill to be drawn into the beauty and mystery of visual art and church buildings. In that experience, she came to a new awareness of God.

The thesis traces Underhill's encounter with fourteen works of art, one cathedral and several churches and chapels. It follows the process of how these shaped her experience, stirred her imagination and informed her thinking so that they gradually became a

foundation on which she established her particular understanding of God and the spiritual life. The investigation approaches her encounters with art by examining their influence on her concept of God, on her perception of Jesus Christ and on her understanding of the Holy Spirit. This leads her to a personal understanding of God as the Creative Spirit. This particular perception, together with her experience of art, enables Underhill to recognise a structure within the spiritual life of grace and desire that is enabled by the gifts of the Creative Spirit and expressed through adoration, communion and cooperation. Integral to this progression in Underhill's spirituality is the gradual process of life integration through self-transcendence evident in her spiritual journey and which this thesis traces and develops.

Informed by intuition and experience rather than by theological concepts, doctrinal statements or scripture, Underhill never developed a systematic theological structure. The thesis investigates the implications of this on Underhill's spirituality, particularly in reference to her understanding of the Trinity. The thesis argues that although she was aware of the more formal aspects of Christian teaching, in her understanding of the spiritual life Underhill placed more emphasis on image and place.

While the focus of the thesis is the influence of art on Underhill's spirituality, this inquiry draws also on those determining aspects of her life, of the circumstances and events of the times and of religion in general which were formative of her spirituality. Thus at times throughout the project there is an overlap of philosophy, theology, anthropology, epistemology and aesthetics – all of which are at the service of the overarching methodology of spirituality.

The thesis concludes with the contention that while visual art was not the only guiding inspiration in Underhill's spirituality, it was a major influence on her spiritual development, on her understanding of the spiritual life and on her teaching.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Chapter 1: APPROACHING THE SCENE

While addressing a group of retreatants during 1932, Evelyn Underhill declared that “Christianity . . . is given to us in the form of beauty and love.”<sup>1</sup> In this statement she sums up the spirituality we intend to explore, informed as it is by a philosophical appreciation of beauty and the religious conviction of the centrality of love. In the words of a biographer, Dana Greene, Underhill lived “in the service of humanity, painting the infinite life, luring each one on to its beauty.”<sup>2</sup> In particular, this study will explore the ways in which visual art and church architecture influenced Underhill’s spirituality.

In this first chapter, I intend to:

1. give preliminary descriptions of the key terms “spirituality” and “art” and frame some questions regarding their relationship within the context of this study
2. anchor these terms in Underhill’s life and writings
3. provide a survey of the relevant literature, the better to position this present research
4. explain the methodology on which the research will be based and give an outline of the order of the chapters, and
5. conclude.

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Light of Christ* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1944; reprint 1957), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 150. Hereafter cited as *Evelyn Underhill*.

## 1. The key terms of the topic

In addressing a radio audience during the last years of her life, Underhill defines the spiritual life as “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.”<sup>3</sup> By necessity a broad definition to accommodate the audience, these words emphasise the primary and central position of God in spirituality. Underhill begins with God, and refers to the person only in the sense of her/his responding to God. During the seven decades since that statement, and in particular during the last forty years, there has been a remarkable development in the area termed “spirituality.” Present day perceptions of spirituality, while maintaining a broad perspective, stand in sharp contrast to that of Underhill. While her primary focus is God and her understanding of the person secondary, spirituality in current contexts tends to begin with the lived experience of the person. It also includes other levels of meaning – namely the formulation of teaching about that experience and the academic discipline which studies that experience. Regarding the most frequently referred to level of spirituality – that of lived experience – Schneiders reflects the understanding generally held by current scholars when she describes its basic meaning as “conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one

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<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life: Four Broadcast Talks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937; Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1984; Sydney: Society of St Paul, 1976), 32. Page citations are to the 1984 edition.

perceives.”<sup>4</sup> This broad definition embraces the vast mix of people who pursue the spiritual quest today. Thus in our times, spirituality legitimately can be described as Christian, or non-Christian or secular. For the purpose of this study, I will operate within the framework of Christian spirituality as most formative of Underhill’s life and work.

The “ultimate value one perceives” of Christian spirituality is God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit within the community of believers. Despite their differences, those working within the academic discipline of Christian spirituality tend to agree on certain other identifying characteristics. One feature would be an appreciation of human experience on both a personal and interpersonal level. Further, such spirituality seeks integration of mind, body and soul. Its orientation is marked by the dynamics of self-transcendence in its reaching out to the other – God, the neighbour and the world.<sup>5</sup> It is this definition of spirituality which underpins the entire perspective of our investigation which is situated within the discipline of spirituality. Therefore, throughout this exploration, our

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<sup>4</sup> Sandra Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Sandra Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality: Definitions, Methods and Types,” 1 - 6. Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 30 - 5. Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991; revised edition 1995), 57 - 61. Mary Frohlich, “Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method,” in *Spiritus* 1 (2001): 65 - 78. Joann Wolski Conn, “Spirituality,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph, Mary Collins, Dermot Lane (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 972 - 986. Walter Principe, “Christian Spirituality,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 931 - 938. Bernard McGinn, “Introduction,” in *World Spirituality: An Encyclopaedic History of the Religious Quest: Christian Spirituality Origins to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 16, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, Jean Leclercq (New York: Crossroad, 1985), xv - xxiii. Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979; revised edition 1990), 1 - 4. Hereafter cited as *Wound of Knowledge*.

focus will be the lived experience of our subject, Evelyn Underhill, and our task to interpret and understand the process of personal integration and self-transcendence that occurred in her life through the experience of visual art. As this task progresses other disciplines, namely philosophy, theology, anthropology and aesthetics which shape and inform our interpretation of spiritual transformation, will be employed. However, these auxiliary and complementary aspects remain at the service of the controlling methodology which is within the discipline of spirituality.

There is the further notion of art itself. Underhill's spirituality, however we express it, is clearly influenced by her encounter with visual art and church architecture. She continually presents her readers with a particular spiritual aesthetics. When we define the discipline of aesthetics as "philosophical reflection on the nature of art and beauty and of response to both," we are led to inquire into the place of beauty and art in Underhill's spiritual life and the ways in which she understands this relationship.<sup>6</sup> Though this thesis will investigate the many ramifications of the relationship of spirituality, beauty and art in the experience and writing of our author, a preliminary remark will set our course.

Although in her mature years Underhill provides us with a definition of the spiritual life – cited above – she does not formulate her understanding of beauty or art in a similarly precise way. Her words indicate that the real meaning of beauty is beyond her grasp. "With

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 21. Hereafter cited as *Religious Aesthetics*.

all our busy seeking,” she writes, “we have not found the sorting house where loveliness is extracted from the flux of things . . . Beauty’s secret is still her own.”<sup>7</sup> But if its meaning eludes Underhill its recognition does not, as we shall see in the following chapters of this thesis. This raises questions regarding her encounter with beauty. How does she recognise beauty? In what ways does it become part of her experience? How does it influence her spiritual awareness? Just as Underhill’s encounter with beauty raises questions, so her experience of art. Rather than explain art, she explores it thus drawing her reader to seek explanations. How does she understand art? What part does it play in her experience? In what sense does it inspire and enhance her spiritual insight? When placed within the context of spirituality, these questions take on a more general sense. How are spirituality, beauty and art related? How are they understood to be dimensions of human experience? How do they pervade human experience and inspire spiritual development? These key questions which highlight the dynamic interplay of spirituality, beauty and art will be at the core of our investigation into the influence of visual art and church architecture on Underhill’s spiritual life.

To speak of spirituality and visual art in the terms described above is not to introduce a new aspect of Christianity or the spiritual life. Since the early centuries of catacomb art, the capacity of image to engage perception, to instruct, and to foster devotion has been

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<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen and Co., 1911; revised 12<sup>th</sup> edition New York: Image, 1990), 20. Page citations are to the 1990 edition. Hereafter cited as *Mysticism*.

recognised. Underhill's writings suggest that image has a similar influence on her spirituality. While some of her letters refer to its effect, her other writings subsequent to 1925 provide a more substantial insight into that influence. From her first visit to the Continent, she kept a series of *Journals*.<sup>8</sup> Written in the form of diaries, they record her general travel experiences as well as details regarding her visits to art galleries, churches and museums. They do not contain any great number of specific comments which link what she sees with her growing awareness of God. This is unsurprising as it reflects a natural reserve and level of personal privacy which Underhill carefully guards throughout her life – the only exception being correspondence with her spiritual directors. Yet, as we shall see in subsequent chapters of this study, the comments she does make in the *Journals* lead one to conclude that the works of art and the churches she encounter make a highly significant impact on her thinking. This becomes evident later in her life, when she writes about images she saw during those early visits to the Continent. After years of prayerful reflection, she recalls the rich meaning of the images that have been so significant for her. Thus while on her first visit to Florence in 1898, Underhill records that of the Fra Angelico frescoes she saw in the convent of San Marco, "I liked *Christ in Hades* best."<sup>9</sup> Five days later, she comments that one must take time to look at works of art. She continues:

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<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy 1898 - 1899; Journal 1901 - 1907*. Handwritten documents. Archives box 3/1/1, Underhill Collection, King's College, University of London, London. Evelyn Underhill, *Shrines and Cities of France and Italy*, ed. and arranged by Lucy Menzies (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949) contains an edited version of Underhill, *Journal 1901 - 1907*. Hereafter cited as *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, *Journal 1901 - 1907* and *Shrines and Cities* respectively.

<sup>9</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 17. 4.1898. Fra Angelico, *Christ in Limbo*, fresco, 1439 - 1443,



This even applies to so late a master as Fra Angelico whose panel pictures do not attract me at first glance but are among the most loveable products of Italian painting when once they are known. In the little world of serene piety, presented with a child's simplicity and a miniaturist's finish, he is supreme.<sup>10</sup>

Thirty-four years later, Underhill speaks of this same painting, *Christ in Hades*, during an address given to a group gathered in retreat. There she presents the significance of this fresco within the context of human suffering, captivity and Christ's liberation. She writes:

It shows us the liberated soul of Christ passing straight from the anguish of the Passion to the delighted exercise of rescuing love. He comes with a sort of irresistible rush, bearing the banner of redemption to the imprisoned spirits of those who knew Him not.<sup>11</sup>

Through the years, this particular work of art has worked on her thinking. At first it is her favourite fresco. Then, as she is drawn to study its "serene piety" more closely, it becomes "most lovable." Later, it is an image of liberation and redemption. The gradual development of her understanding of this work – from something only to be enjoyed to a significant theological statement – evidences that works of art provide Underhill's spirituality with depth and foundation. The same can be said of her experience of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres. Having first visited the cathedral in 1901, she speaks

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cell 31, Museum of San Marco, Florence, Italy. See Appendix 1, p. 420. Though Underhill referred to this work as *Christ in Hades*, its official title is *Christ in Limbo*.

<sup>10</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 22. 4. 1898.

<sup>11</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 78.

about it to a group of retreatants in 1932.<sup>12</sup> As she strives to bring home to her listeners the beauty and truth of God, she recalls entering the cathedral.

Then we open the door and go inside – leave the outer world, enter the inner world – and the universal light floods through the windows and bathes us in their colour and beauty and significance, shows us things of which we had never dreamed, a loveliness that lies beyond the fringe of speech.<sup>13</sup>

Her words are not just a careful description. They tell of an image which draws her into the mystery of God in a way that words cannot do. Her experience of this great gothic cathedral has a special role in forming Underhill's image of God and its impact on her spirituality.

In the course of this thesis, we shall return to these and many other images to which our author refers in her writing. In exploring them through Underhill's words, we shall become aware of their significance to her spirituality.

As our topic suggests, the specific area of visual art focuses our investigation. Generally categorised as "fine art," visual art embraces a wide spectrum of human artifacts which are the product of skill, creativity and inspiration and which are aesthetically imaginative, expressive and beautiful. In our investigations, the term "visual art" will include works of painting, etching, engraving, woodcut and sculpture whose central theme is religious. As

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<sup>12</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 1 - 3. Underhill, *Light of Christ*. Underhill based the retreat which she directed in 1932 on the structure and windows of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres. The addresses were later published under the title of *Light of Christ*.

<sup>13</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 27 - 28.

well as focusing on these particular aspects of visual art, this study will also include church architecture with particular emphasis on space and place, architectural design and decorative features especially stained glass. In limiting visual art and church architecture to this particular dimension, we are guided by Underhill's writings. Because much of what follows refers to both artifacts and church architecture on an aesthetic level, for convenience of expression we will refer to them together as instances of "visual art." In her writings, Underhill names some 30 works of art and numerous chapels, churches and cathedrals. Some she deals with in detail, others she mentions in passing. Again, guided by her writings, we will explore only those 14 works of art and those several buildings which are most significant to her spirituality.

Having established the topic of this study, we now turn our attention to Underhill's life.

## **2. Introducing Evelyn Underhill**

Evelyn Maud Underhill was born in Wolverhampton, England, on 6 December 1875. Soon after the birth of their only child her parents moved to London where they settled in Kensington and her father continued his highly successful legal career.

Contemporaries of Underhill record that though she never spoke about her childhood, they sensed it was a lonely period of her life.<sup>14</sup> Her parents certainly provided material security

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<sup>14</sup> Lucy Menzies, *Biography of Evelyn Underhill*, TM 5553 (unfinished), I. 4. Special Collections, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Scotland. Lucy Menzies had completed the biography up to 1922 when she died

for their daughter, but there seems to have been little warmth or affection within the family. Until her teenage years Underhill was educated at home. When she was 13, she went to Sandgate House, a boarding school near Folkstone, where she had her first experience of structured education in religion and participation in the Anglican liturgy, made her First Communion and was Confirmed. In preparation for her Confirmation, Underhill kept a black notebook in which she recorded a number of private prayers, hymns and details of examination of conscience together with a long list of “sins.”<sup>15</sup> That she drew up such a comprehensive list of failings indicates a serious and thoughtful young woman whose personal life was inclined to be introspective. Two years later, on the eve of her 17th birthday, Underhill made another entry in the black notebook. Of broader scope and of more positive bent than that in preparation for Confirmation, it was a self-portrait which revealed a remarkable self-knowledge, high ideals and an enterprising and resolute approach to life. Though she believed in God, she was uncertain as to religion. Underhill’s final statement that she hoped her mind would “not grow tall to look down on things, but

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in 1954. Hereafter cited as *Biography*. Margaret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill* with a memoir of Lucy Menzies by Lumsden Barkway (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1958, reprint with a foreword by Dana Greene Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003), 1. Charles Williams, “Introduction,” in Evelyn Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. and with an introduction by Charles Williams (Longmans, Green and Co. 1943), 7. Hereafter cited as *Letters*. Underhill to Dearest Mudgie, 13. 7. 1888. Archives box 1/22/1, Underhill Collection.

<sup>15</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, I. 4 - 5. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 3 – 5. By 1975, when Armstrong was working on Underhill’s biography, he found that the notebook had “disappeared from view,” and that its precise whereabouts was “unclear.” Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875 - 1941) An Introduction to her Life and Writings* (London: Mowbrays, 1975) 8. Hereafter cited as *Evelyn Underhill*.

wide to embrace all sorts of things,” indicates a probing, analytical and adventurous mind destined to be characterised by broad vision, openness and compassion.

The Victorian era was at the height of its influence when Underhill was born. By the time she entered adulthood, full industrialization was nearing completion, population was concentrated in the big cities and women’s role in society was firmly confined to motherhood and homemaking. Society reflected Darwinian thinking in its interest in science and natural history as the rift between the scientific and religious explanation of the origins and purpose of human life widened. The mind was regarded as the measure of the world and empirical verification through scientific methods was increasingly demanded. As the Victorian era gave way to the Edwardian, new interests emerged. Novels and short stories became popular and the arts and crafts movement developed new interests, while women’s suffrage became a vital issue in society.

The challenge to traditional philosophy and long-held Church doctrine gave rise to what has been termed “Modernism”.<sup>16</sup> It signalled an increasing interest in the meaning of human consciousness and religious experience of which mysticism was seen to be an integral part. The number of philosophical and religious works that appeared in print during the late Victorian era and Edwardian periods indicates the high level of interest in these subjects during those years. It was a milieu in which philosophy and theology were

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<sup>16</sup> Modernism was a position held by some late 19th and early 20th century Roman Catholic theologians and scholars who sought to come to terms with the intellectual thinking of the times. In the Decree *Lamentabili sane exitu* (1907) and the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907) Pope Pius X condemned Modernism.

publicly discussed and in which fascination with the occult flourished at every level of society.<sup>17</sup>

When Underhill left Sandgate House at the conclusion of 1891, it was in this environment that she began her adult life. She settled into her parents' comfortable home in Kensington enjoying all the privileges of the English middle class to which she belonged. King's College had recently opened a department for Ladies in Kensington Square. It was here that the eagerly studious Underhill enrolled. For the next few years she studied history, botany, languages, philosophy and social science. She also belonged to the sketch club.<sup>18</sup> Though she had abandoned her association with the Anglican Church after leaving school, she still maintained a keen interest in religion itself.<sup>19</sup> She read the *Enneads* of the

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<sup>17</sup> Significant works published at the time were: William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (London: Longmans, 1899). William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, 1902). Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as studied in St Catherine of Genoa and her Friends* vol. 1 & 2, (London: Dent, 1908). Later philosophical works that significantly influenced Underhill were: Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness; Matter and Memory and Creative Evolution*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1911). Rudolph Eucken, *The Life of the Spirit: An Introduction to Philosophy; The Problem of Human Life and Christianity and the New Idealism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913). Underhill attended the lectures delivered by Bergson in London in 1912 and published an article on him that same year. Underhill to The Same (Meyrick Heath) Sunday, 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 146. (The given year as 1913 is mistaken and should read 1912.) Underhill, "Bergson and the Mystics," in *English Review* 10. 2. 1912, 511 - 522. Reprint in Evelyn Underhill, *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Quest for the Holy* ed. and with an introduction by Dana Greene (Albany: State University of New York, 1988) 47 - 60. Hereafter cited as *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*.

<sup>18</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II. 5. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 7 - 8. Fossey Hearnshaw, *The Centenary History of King's College, London 1828 - 1928* (London: Harrap and Co., 1929), 490, 501. Extant records held at King's College state that Underhill attended the College in 1894 - 1895 where she studied History during the Lent and Michaelmas terms and was a member of the Sketch Club for both those terms as well as the Easter term. *Record Book, King's College London Department for Ladies 13 Kensington Square, Session 1894 - 1895*. Archives, King's College, University of London.

<sup>19</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II.2.

Neoplatonist, Plotinus, which was to prove a decisive influence on her spiritual development. While at King's College she took her first tentative steps into the world of literature. From 1892 she published a number of short stories, small articles and reviews – many that had been awarded prizes in competitions run by magazines and newspapers.<sup>20</sup> These reveal that nature, silence and an inner voice were gradually drawing the young Underhill, who had declared her belief in God at an intellectual level, into a fragile fresh awareness of God. About the time she began submitting short stories and articles for publication, she was also the sometime art critic for the *Midland Weekly News*.<sup>21</sup> Her reviews evidence a particular sensitivity for beauty. Thus we see a young woman who, even in her early years, was displaying a definite psychological orientation. Naturally more inclined towards imagination, creativity, human experience and intuitive knowledge than towards technology, theories and empirical science, Underhill exemplified the spirit of Romanticism.<sup>22</sup> This innate romantic sensibility would be a highly significant influence in the quest for God throughout her life.

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<sup>20</sup> Evelyn Underhill, "How Should a Girl Prepare Herself for a Worthy Womanhood?" *Hearth and Home*, 27 July 1893. Her works were published in several other publications *The Children's Salon*, *The Midland Weekly News* and *The Lady*. "Some Verses on Easter," *The Lady*, 6 April 1893, is the earliest recorded and preserved of Underhill's religious poetry. These newspaper/magazine cuttings are preserved in Underhill's scrapbooks which contain some 27 articles. Archives box 5/1 - 5.11. Underhill Collection.

<sup>21</sup> The scrapbook (see above n., 20) contains four reviews published in the *Midland Weekly News*: "Looking at the New Pictures: A Wolverhampton Lady at the Studios," 8 April 1892; "A Hasty Glance at the Royal Academy," 21 May 1892; "At Some of the Studios," by a Lady Contributor, 13 April, 1893; "A Dream of Fair Women at the Grafton Galleries" by a Lady Contributor, 2 June 1893.

<sup>22</sup> The broad cultural and artistic movement referred to as Romanticism swept through Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A reaction to rationality, secularism and empirical science of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, it sought meaning in the varied levels of human experience and the depth of

In 1890 while still living at Sandgate House, Underhill had gone to France with her parents. Eight years later she would accompany them to Switzerland and Italy and spend time alone in Florence. During that visit to Italy, and in particular to Florence, she encountered the world of Renaissance art, ancient churches and the expressiveness of Italian Catholicism. Such an exposure would be highly significant in her life. Underhill wrote of Florence: “this place has taught me more than I can tell you; it’s a sort of gradual unconsciousness growing into an understanding of things.”<sup>23</sup> Throughout her life, Underhill returned to Continental Europe many times.

Living with her parents in their Kensington home Underhill moved among the legal circles of her day. She had also begun to move into the literary world, and among her friends were numbered some of the well known writers of the day.<sup>24</sup> She greatly enjoyed company and delighted in pretty clothes and flowers.<sup>25</sup> She had a “sparkling wit”, was a “gay and eager talker,” “delighted in the little things of life” and “was the life of any party.”<sup>26</sup> Yet beneath

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the spiritual, in imagination, the sense of the Ineffable and the symbolic nature of reality. See Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that have Shaped our World View* (London: Pimlico, 1991), 366 - 394.

<sup>23</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24.4.1898. Archives box 1/15/8.Underhill Collection.

<sup>24</sup> Among her close literary friends, Menzies names: May Sinclair, Maurice Hewlett, Mrs Dowson who wrote under the name William Scott Palmer, Mrs Belloc Lowndes, Mrs Baillie Reynolds, Arthur Symons and J.H.Herbert and his wife, Alice. Menzies, *Biography*, II. 15 - 16.

<sup>25</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, VI. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II. 16 - 17.



this vivacity was a growing love of solitude and a lively interest in the mystical. This was illustrated by her attraction for Neoplatonic writing and the work of Maurice Maeterlinck. His works, influenced by Plotinus and the Flemish mystic, Jan van Ruysbroeck, communicated for Underhill a “strange stillness of soul” and pointed to the significance of mystical writing and the importance of the symbolic in ordinary life.<sup>27</sup> It was about this time that she also joined the London Temple of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn.<sup>28</sup> The membership of this group consisted of middle class men and women, some of whom were Underhill’s friends. Such company provided her with an opportunity to explore further her quest for the Ultimate Mystery with the support of a like-minded group. Within a few years, however, she slipped out of the Society although its use of ritual, together with the sacramental rites of the Roman Catholic Church which she had seen in Italy, nurtured her growing appreciation for religious ceremonies.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Underhill to H. Stuart Moore, 1. 12. 1898 cited in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 32. Underhill to Mr Roper, 31. 3. 1900 in *Contemporary Review*, March 1900, cited in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 32. Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Treasures of the Humble*, trans. Alfred Sutro (London: Allen and Unwin, 1908). Maurice Maeterlinck, *Wisdom and Destiny* trans. Alfred Sutro (London: Allen and Unwin, 1908).

<sup>28</sup> The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn was a secret society which studied astrology, alchemy, divination, the Kabbalah and the Tarot and which practised ritual magic. By 1903, the London Temple, under the influence of Arthur Waite, had abandoned most of its ritual magic as it adopted “a relatively orthodox Christian mystical direction.” Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 42. For a detailed analysis of Underhill’s membership of the Society see Michael Stoeber, “Evelyn Underhill on Magic, Sacraments, and Spiritual Transformation,” in *Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter*, vol. 13, November, 2003, 1 - 12.

<sup>29</sup> There is some discrepancy about the year of Underhill’s joining the society. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 18, states that Underhill’s membership began prior to 1904 as does Williams, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *Letters*, 12 - 13. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 36, gives “in or around 1905” as the most likely time. For further discussion regarding Underhill’s membership see: Ellic Howe, “Golden Dawn,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Unexplained*, ed. Richard Cavendish (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 99 - 106. R. A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians. The Rise and Fall of a Magical Order* with a foreword by Francis Regardie (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1983), 72, 90. Michael Stoeber, “Evelyn Underhill

It was soon after the turn of the century that Underhill's writing became quite prolific. In 1902 she completed a small book of satirical poems based on the humorous aspects of legal dilemmas.<sup>30</sup> During the following seven years she produced five short stories and three novels.<sup>31</sup> All belonged to a popular genre at the time – that of the supernatural and the preternatural. Yet there was also an autobiographical dimension in that they reflected Underhill's religious experience and her search for truth. Though well received at the time, these works proved ephemeral compared to her later major works. In fact, the exploration of her own ideas through the medium of fiction was soon coming to an end. By 1907 she had made the decision to look back into the history of the Christian mystics – the “pioneers of the spiritual world” – in order to discover in what ways and to what measure they could satisfy the craving for Absolute Truth.<sup>32</sup> Even before her last novel was published, Underhill had begun what would remain one of her best known works – *Mysticism* – a study of the nature and development of spiritual consciousness.

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on Magic, Sacrament, and Spiritual Transformation,” 2 - 3.

<sup>30</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *A Bar-Lamb's Ballad Book* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trubner and Co. 1902).

<sup>31</sup> The short stories were published in a literary journal edited by Arthur Waite entitled *Horlicks Magazine and Home Journal for Australia, India and the Colonies*. In vol. II, no. 7, (July 1904), four of Underhill's stories were published: “The Death of a Saint,” 173 - 177; “Our Lady of the Gate,” 243 - 247; “The Mountain Image,” 375 - 380; “A Green Mass,” 445 - 448; “The Ivory Tower” was published in vol. III, no. 13, (January, 1905). The novels were: *The Grey World* (London: William Heinemann, 1904), *The Lost Word* (London: William Heinemann, 1907) and *Column of Dust* (London: Methuen and Co. 1909).

<sup>32</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 4.

The years of the novels brought other changes to Underhill's life. On 3 July 1907 she married Hubert Stuart Moore. Though marriage had been their intention for several years, difficulties had arisen in the period immediately prior to that event. Among Underhill's friends were a number of Roman Catholics with whom she shared her search for spiritual fulfilment.<sup>33</sup> Her experience of Roman Catholic liturgy in Italy drew her towards the Catholic Church. From then on, either alone or with friends, Underhill often attended Mass or Benediction, while at the same time attending some Anglican services. Early in 1907 she spent a few days at a Roman Catholic Convent in Southampton. Underhill later described her experience while there:

The day after I came away, a good deal shaken but unconvinced. I was "converted" quite suddenly once and for all by an overpowering vision which had no specific Christian elements, but yet convinced me that the Catholic religion was true.<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding this powerful experience, Underhill never joined the Catholic Church. When she told Hubert of her feelings he reacted with a "storm of grief, rage and misery."<sup>35</sup> He declared that their "happiness was at an end" because there would "always be a priest between" them.<sup>36</sup> Though hoping that Hubert would change his mind, Underhill was unprepared to place the happiness of their future marriage in jeopardy. Accordingly, she

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<sup>33</sup> Among these were J. H. Herbert and his wife Alice and Father Robert Hugh Benson, the archbishop of Canterbury's son who had converted to Catholicism and had been ordained a priest.

<sup>34</sup> Underhill to Meyrick Heath, 14. 5. 1911 in Underhill, *Letters*, 125.

<sup>35</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 30.

agreed to wait for a year before joining the Catholic Church.<sup>37</sup> After the couple was married and before that year was out, the Catholic Church issued a condemnation of both biblical and historical criticism and the authority of personal religious experience.<sup>38</sup> Underhill, who believed herself to be “modernist” on many points, felt she could not in conscience sacrifice her intellectual liberty to a Church whose “narrow exclusiveness” she described as “dreadful.”<sup>39</sup> There was something else that held back any decision to convert to Catholicism: lacking confidence in her experience at the Southampton Convent, she feared that it was self-suggestion and self-delusion that motivated her desires.<sup>40</sup> Thus, she put aside any thought of aligning herself with any specific religious denomination. In the meantime, she and Hubert carried on a busy social life often giving parties in their own home which was staffed by servants whom, as mistress of the household, she supervised. The couple had no children. Outwardly, she was happily involved in married life and writing. But inwardly, she was often in turmoil. Introspection, self-absorption, severe self-

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<sup>37</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, Friday, 1907, in Underhill, *Letters*, 59.

<sup>38</sup> In the Decree *Lamentabile sane exitu* (1907) and the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907) Pope Pius X condemned both these tendencies (popularly known as “Modernism”) among some Catholic scholars of the time.

<sup>39</sup> Underhill to Meyrick Heath, 14. 5. 1911 in Underhill, *Letters*, 126.

<sup>40</sup> In Underhill’s correspondence with Father Benson immediately after that event, she made clear that she dreaded self-suggestion and delusion and feared its influence. Cyril Martindale, *The Life of Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson* vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1916,) 258 - 265. In a report to her spiritual director, Baron Friedrich von Hügel, written in 1921, Underhill, in referring to spiritual experiences going back “over sixteen years,” states: “I feel I must be sure . . . to be *certain* my own experiences are not simply imaginary.” Underhill, Report to von Hügel, 21. 12. 1921, 1. TM 5552. Von Hügel Collection, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Scotland.

examination and self-recrimination began to affect her in ways that would become more intense over the years.<sup>41</sup>

Such was the popularity of *Mysticism* after its publication that by early in 1914 it had gone into its fifth edition, and Underhill was considered a woman of some standing in the contemporary religious scene. Two smaller publications on the subject of mysticism, a book of verse, as well as a number of articles and reviews increased her following and enhanced her reputation in a society which seemed hungry for the spiritual and the mystical.<sup>42</sup> The influence of Rabindranath Tagore, “whose mystical genius” was noted by Underhill, exposed her to the mysticism of the East.<sup>43</sup> The publication of *Mysticism*

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<sup>41</sup> Underhill, Report to von Hügel, Special Points (b), June 1923. Von Hügel Collection. Menzies, one of Underhill’s closest friends for over 20 years, was shocked when, after Underhill’s death, she first read of her friend’s interior suffering. “I confess to the sense of shock with which I first read this letter (21.12.1921) of Evelyn,” she wrote, “because I knew her by then and had no idea of what she was going through.” Menzies, *Biography*, 129. Both Armstrong and Greene have used the word “doubleness” in reference to Underhill’s interior, spiritual suffering and her ability, at the same time to maintain an exterior of calm, humour and serenity. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 212 - 214. Greene in particular draws attention to the disparity between Underhill’s spiritual situation and the teaching she presented to others. “She [Underhill] proclaimed the way of affirmation,” Greene writes, “yet it was that way that she was not fully able to accept for herself.” Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 150.

<sup>42</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1913). Hereafter cited as *The Mystic Way*. Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1915; reprint New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1943). Page citations are to the reprint edition. Evelyn Underhill (under the pseudonym John Cordelier), *The Path of Eternal Wisdom: A Mystical Commentary on the Way of the Cross* (London: J. M. Watkins, 1911). Evelyn Underhill (under the pseudonym John Cordelier), *The Spiral Way being Meditations Upon the Fifteen Mysteries of the Soul’s Ascent* (London: J. M. Watkins, 1912). Evelyn Underhill, *Immanence: A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1912).

<sup>43</sup> Evelyn Underhill, “Introduction,” in Kabir, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* trans. Rabindranath Tagore assisted by Evelyn Underhill (London: MacMillan & Co., 1915), xliii. Rabindranath Tagore (1861 - 1941) was a Bengali poet, novelist, educator and advocate of independence for India who belonged to a sect who worked for the revival of the monistic basis of Hinduism. Underhill had met him in London in 1913. The positive tone of Tagore’s mysticism appealed greatly to Underhill who wrote of their meeting: “This is the first time I have had the privilege of being with one who is a master in the things I care so much about but

occasioned her meeting with Baron Friedrich von Hügel.<sup>44</sup> This was to have lasting repercussions. In the meantime, Underhill's work took another turn. In 1907 she received the first letter requesting spiritual guidance, and her reply marks the beginning of her work as a spiritual director.<sup>45</sup> It was a task she took up only gradually and with some reluctance. It blossomed into a busy and fruitful ministry, particularly from the early 1920s, as she continued to write letters of direction and receive people at her home for that purpose.

Soon after World War I broke out in 1914, Underhill went to work for Naval Intelligence in the preparation and translation of guide books. Her own writing continued but was somewhat reduced.<sup>46</sup> As the war dragged on and the destruction of life and property

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know so little of as yet." Underhill to R. Tagore, 19. 8. 1913. Archives box, 1/20/5 Underhill Collection. As well as her interest in eastern religions, Underhill had a special regard for the orthodox branches of Catholicism. She first encountered a flavour of this in Venice in 1905. A few years later she wrote about attending a Byzantine Mass in Rome – Underhill to J. A. Hubert 19. 3. 1910 in Underhill, *Letters*, 112. In 1935 she joined the Anglo-Russian confraternity. Underhill to L. K., 8. 2. 1935 in Underhill, *Letters*, 243. Underhill wrote of the meaning, beauty and mystery of orthodox worship in *Worship* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1936) 262 - 275. This wide range of interest in Church underscores Underhill's basic theology of Church which was that "the Church always meant the one undivided Church, the Body of Christ." Menzies, *Biography*, VIII.12.

<sup>44</sup> Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852 - 1925) was born in Italy of Austrian parents and went to England with his family in 1867. Roman Catholic, a distinguished scholar and writer and a man of deep spirituality, von Hügel was Underhill's spiritual director from late 1921 to just prior to his death in January, 1925. Underhill to J. H. Herbert, 16. 8. 1911 in Underhill, *Letters*, 129.

<sup>45</sup> Underhill to M. R. (Margaret Robinson), 12. 5. 1907 in Underhill, *Letters*, 63. Underhill to The Same (Stuart Moore), 1. 5. 1907, in Underhill, *Letters*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> Apart from some letters, articles and essays, three more works were published. Evelyn Underhill, *Ruysbroeck* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914). Evelyn Underhill, *Theophanies: A Book of Verse* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1916). Underhill, *Jacopone da Todi Poet and Mystic 1228 - 1306: A Spiritual Biography*. With a Selection from the Spiritual Songs, the Italian Text translated into English Verse by Mrs Theodore Beck (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1919).

increased, she became inwardly depressed. Even her long established practice of attending Sunday Mass at the local Roman Catholic Church was abandoned as she drifted further into what she described as an “increasing anti-institutional bias” and “inwardness.”<sup>47</sup> Slowly she began to realise that the Neoplatonists, whose philosophy had come to underpin her concept of God and mysticism, were incapable of dealing with the conflict, grief and evil of war.<sup>48</sup> Evaluating her interior life during those years, Underhill commented – “during the war, I went to pieces.”<sup>49</sup> Though outwardly she retained all the serenity, charm, wit and appeal that had distinguished her, inwardly Underhill’s interior anguish increased.

While 1907 had been a significant year for Underhill, 1921 also proved to be noteworthy. It was in that year that Manchester College invited her to deliver the inaugural Upton lectures. She became the first woman to lecture in religion at Oxford University.<sup>50</sup> It was while she was preparing the Oxford lectures, that Underhill made the decision to become a

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<sup>47</sup> Underhill, Report to von Hügel, 21. 12. 1921, 1. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>48</sup> In 1918 Underhill wrote of Plotinus’ teachings: “The problem of evil is looked at, but left unsolved. . . . That transformation of pain which was the greatest achievement of the Gospel is beyond the scope of his philosophy.” Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1920; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1960), 131. Page citations are to the reprint edition.

<sup>49</sup> Underhill, Report to von Hügel, 21. 12. 1921, 1. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>50</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, VIII.11. These lectures were later published. Evelyn Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* (London: Methuen, 1922; reprint with an introduction by Susan Howatch, Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1994). Hereafter *The Life of the Spirit*. Page citations are to the reprint edition.

participating member of the Anglican Church.<sup>51</sup> It was a decision from which she never deviated.

The third significant happening of 1921 occurred in the autumn of that year when Friedrich von Hügel agreed to become Underhill's spiritual director.<sup>52</sup> For the next three years – until von Hügel died in January 1925 – he continued in that role, encouraging her to practise Christocentric devotion and enabling her to appreciate that a healthy spirituality has a dimension of social and moral responsibility. Underhill later evaluated his influence on her when she claimed that “under God, I owe him my life.”<sup>53</sup>

The year 1921, therefore, marked a new beginning for Underhill. Her already established reputation as a writer on mysticism, her quiet slipping back into active participation in the Anglican Church and the success of the Upton Lectures meant a steady flow of invitations

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<sup>51</sup> Underhill scholars speculate as to the reasons for Underhill's decision to take her place as a baptised and confirmed member of the Anglican Communion. See Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 61 - 68; Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 200 - 212; Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 73 - 76. Her own words, written in 1931, while they give no definite reasons, throw some light on her decision. “I have been for some years now a practising Anglo-Catholic . . . and solidly believe in the Catholic status of the Anglican Church, as to orders and sacraments. . . . It seems to me a respectable suburb of the city of God – but all the same, part of ‘greater London.’ I appreciate the superior food, etc., to be had nearer the centre of things. But the *whole* point to me is in the fact that our Lord has put me *here*, keeps on giving me more and more jobs to do for souls here, and has never given me orders to move. In fact, when I have been inclined to think of this, something has always stopped me: and if I did it, it would be purely an act of spiritual self-interest and self-will.” Underhill to Dom John Chapman, 9. 6. 1931 in Underhill, *Letters*, 195 - 196.

<sup>52</sup> Von Hügel to Underhill, 29. 10. 1921. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>53</sup> Underhill to Dom John Chapman, 9. 6. 1931, in Underhill, *Letters*, 196. After von Hügel's death, Underhill sought the advice of Dom Chapman and in 1926 she began direction with Bishop Walter Frere. After her meeting Reginald Somerset Ward in 1932, he became her director the following year and continued in that capacity until Underhill's death in 1941. *The Spiritual Letters of Dom John Chapman* ed. R. Hudleston (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), 103 - 107. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 154 - 155. Underhill to Cropper, 8. 12. 1932 cited in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 251.



to deliver addresses, write reviews and articles and serve on committees and commissions. In 1924, she conducted the first of many retreats at the Anglican Retreat Centre, Pleshey, and that was followed by retreat work with both laity and clergy at various centres throughout England. Gradually, Underhill's retreat addresses were published. Spirituality, rather than mysticism, became the focus of her writing.<sup>54</sup> In February 1927 she was elected as a Fellow of King's College, London, in recognition of her contribution to the study of theology.<sup>55</sup> The following year she took up the post of religious editor of *The Spectator* – a task that would continue for four years, after which she wrote for the journal *Time and Tide*. Each week, following the advice of von Hügel to “[drop] all unnecessary thoughts of self and . . . [turn] to thoughts and acts for others,” she spent two afternoons visiting the poor.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, she supervised her own household, supported Hubert in his professional commitments and in their marriage, maintained a wide circle of friends and its

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<sup>54</sup> During the following twenty years, her major works which were not drawn from retreat addresses were: Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1925). Evelyn Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural* (London: Methuen & Co., 1927). Underhill, *Worship*. Evelyn Underhill, *The Golden Sequence* (London: Methuen and Co., 1932), the subject of the retreat Underhill conducted in 1932, was also one of her major published works. Her retreat addresses were compiled and published. Evelyn Underhill, *The House of the Soul* (London: Methuen and Co., 1929, reprint 1933). Page citations are to the reprint edition. Evelyn Underhill, *The Mount of Purification* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1960). Underhill, *The Light of Christ*. Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed* (London: Green and Co., 1934). Evelyn Underhill, *Abba: Meditations on The Lord's Prayer* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1940). Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystery of Sacrifice: A Meditation on the Liturgy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938). Evelyn Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1942).

<sup>55</sup> Underhill, “After Dinner Speech delivered at King's College, London when elected a Fellow of the College,” 2. 2. 1927. Archives box 3/2/2. Underhill Collection.

<sup>56</sup> Von Hügel to Underhill, no date but thought to be December, 1921, Section 2. Von Hügel Collection.

accompanying correspondence, and continued to give spiritual direction to an increasing number of people.

It was not until 1930 that the chronic asthma from which she had suffered for some years began to take a hold. Even so, she undertook and completed the revision of *Mysticism* in preparation for the publication of its 12th edition. She also set about the writing of her last major work, *Worship*. In subsequent years these two works would become the most highly regarded and the most enduring of her publications thus forming the bookends of the life of a remarkable religious writer and exponent of the spiritual life. Her contribution to academic and religious scholarship – some 30 books and over 400 articles – was acknowledged in 1938 when Aberdeen University awarded her a Doctorate of Divinity.<sup>57</sup> Throughout her life, Underhill had maintained a fixed policy never to align herself with any particular parties or movements of a religious or political nature.<sup>58</sup> However, during the early years of World War II, she broke from that pattern. Placing her support squarely on the side of pacifism, she publicly declared her total opposition to all international armed conflict and maintained that stance until her death.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Underhill to Menzies, 23. 2. 1938 cited in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 208.

<sup>58</sup> Underhill to Conrad Noel, 1. 3. 1933 in Underhill, *Letters*, 209.

<sup>59</sup> Underhill, *The Church and War*, (London: The Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, 1940, reprint Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest*, 213 - 217). Underhill to L. K. 20. 5. 1940 in Underhill, *Letters*, 288; Underhill to Mildred Bosanquet, 12. 5. 1941 in Underhill, *Letters*, 308; Underhill to M. C., Trinity, 1941 in Underhill, *Letters*, 310.

During the war years, Underhill's health deteriorated rapidly. She died on 15 June 1941 and was buried in the cemetery of Hampstead Parish Church of St John in London.<sup>60</sup> Her tombstone names her simply as the wife of Hubert Stuart Moore and the daughter of Sir Arthur Underhill.

Those who visited Underhill during her final weeks agreed that she maintained to the last her sense of serenity and peace, exhibiting gracious charm, a sense of humour and a warm spirit of friendship.<sup>61</sup> It is impossible to know if the feelings of self-recrimination and unworthiness that had plagued her interior life for many years still lingered in her mind. During her 65 years of life, Underhill's guiding principle had been the search for God. That had led her to philosophy, to the art galleries and churches of Europe, to the writing of fiction, and to the study of mysticism and spirituality with a return to the Church of her baptism. Though a prolific writer in mysticism and spirituality and an outstanding spiritual director, she nonetheless maintained simplicity in her approach to life and to God. Underhill's entire outlook on life is encapsulated admirably in a few words she wrote just prior to her death. "I am sure," she wrote, "a quiet general waiting on God, and giving

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<sup>60</sup> Death notice of Evelyn Maud Bosworth Stuart Moore 15. 6. 194. Archives box 9/1. Underhill Collection. This notice requested that there be no flowers or mourning.

<sup>61</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 232.

oneself and all one cares about totally and trustfully into His hands, should be the substance of it.”<sup>62</sup>

Having seen an overview of her life, we now direct our attention to the material that has been written about Underhill.

### 3. Review of Underhill studies

Studies of Underhill’s life and work began to appear soon after her death in 1941 and have continued to the present day. These works, though generally comprehensive and critically appreciative, contain few references to the place of visual art in her life and spirituality.

Within the first five years, Charles Williams, Lucy Menzies and Lumsden Barkway had each written introductions to previously unpublished works of Underhill.<sup>63</sup> Among these, only Williams’ biographical sketch draws attention to, but does not explore, her love of ‘Italian painters . . . [who] taught her a gradual growth ‘into an understanding of things’ .”<sup>64</sup> Barkway confines his study to her publications, without going into the context of her life.

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<sup>62</sup> Underhill to E. N., Easter IV (1941) in Underhill, *Letters*, 308. Williams’ edited version of this letter contains the word “quite” (“a quite general waiting on God”). Given the context and sense of what she is writing, I am confident that Underhill meant “quiet” and have accordingly cited “quiet” rather than “quite”.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Williams, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *Letters*. Lucy Menzies, “Memoir,” in Underhill, *Light of Christ*. Lumsden Barkway, “Introduction,” in Evelyn Underhill, *Collected Papers of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Lucy Menzies and with an introduction by Lumsden Barkway (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1946). Hereafter cited as *Collected Papers*.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *Letters*, 12.

Menzies' "memoir" offers yet another perspective of Underhill. It presents a personal insight into her personality and temperament. A short sketch of all that is charming, gentle and spiritual about her, it reflects the feelings of one of her closest friends. These three introductions, therefore, complement each other in that they present a portrait of Underhill that draws together, however briefly, the facts of her life, the nature of her personality and her writings within the perspective of her personal spirituality and teachings.

Menzies was prevailed upon during subsequent years to commit to writing her considerable knowledge of Underhill. In contrast to the "memoir" referred to above, this work contains several references to the impact Italy made on her, her feeling for art and her readiness to absorb every kind of beauty.<sup>65</sup> But, while Menzies implies that this influenced her spirituality, she does not offer any critical analysis of how this may have happened or its consequences.

Menzies' unfinished biography formed the basis for the first published biographical work on her, that of Margaret Cropper in 1958.<sup>66</sup> In using the Menzies' draft freely and adapting it to her own style, Cropper combines the knowledge and memories of two of Underhill's closest friends (herself and Menzies) to produce a somewhat hagiographic account of a remarkable woman who was their friend. Calling on this fund of memory and relationship, Cropper's work emphasises the public and social career of her subject while including her

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<sup>65</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II. 7, II. 14.

<sup>66</sup> Menzies, *Biography*. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*. For details of these works see chap. 1, p. 9, n., 14.

many individual achievements. It makes no effort to analyse the Underhill corpus in order to trace significant events or spiritual development in the life of its subject. Though some of her writing is cited, it is not closely examined, and themes which later emerge as central to her life and spirituality remain, in effect, untouched. Building on Menzies' work, Cropper's account mentions the importance of Continental travel, beauty and art but does not pursue it.

The 1975 biography by the Anglican priest, theologian and linguist Christopher Armstrong commemorates the centenary of Underhill's birth.<sup>67</sup> It adds further depth to Cropper's study by giving priority to Underhill's developing "ideas, feelings and general outlook."<sup>68</sup> As the subtitle, *An Introduction to her Life and Writings* suggests, it aims to present her interior history through an investigation of her published works and some private documents.

Through these studies a number of other themes emerge: Underhill's early quest for knowledge of the supernatural and of God, institutional religion, her interior struggle and the influence of von Hügel's spiritual direction. Armstrong devotes some attention to her poetry and, evaluating her thinking during the 1920s, surveys her journalistic work as religious editor of *Spectator*. He also goes back to *Mysticism* and, through a comparison of the original text with that of the revised 1930 text and with that of a 1936 article, *What is*

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<sup>67</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*. For details of this work see chap. 1, p. 10, n., 15.

<sup>68</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, xiv.

*Mysticism?*, draws into focus the developments in her spirituality. A constant theme throughout the work is the contribution she made to the mystical revival flourishing in England at the time. As in the case of the other two biographers, Armstrong also refers to Underhill's association with Italy and art – albeit with a different slant. He passes off her love for Italy as superficial, the country appealing to her as “the land of the middle ages.”<sup>69</sup> He does acknowledge, however, that she, “shows more of her impressions and abiding preferences,” when she is writing of paintings.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, these bare statements remain undeveloped. In bringing his considerable theological scholarship to a study of the Underhill corpus, Armstrong plots the course of a life that is significantly more realistic and balanced than is Cropper's account.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, these two authors complement each other, with the one focused on the external events of her subject's life, and the other on the interior development of her spirituality – though it should be noted they appeal to generally different sources.

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<sup>69</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 25.

<sup>70</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 26.

<sup>71</sup> Armstrong does not hesitate to judge Underhill's “elastic conceptual framework” of ideas as resulting from her lack of method and theological structure. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 272. He also exposes her sharp words in regard to Dean Inge (Dean of St Paul's) after the Dean's private and unfavourable criticism of *Mysticism* - as opposed to his public approval of the book. Underhill referred to him as “the old wretch . . . who seems a useful advertising medium.” Underhill to Stuart Moore, 11. 4. 1911 and cited in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 130. Armstrong also mentions the “rather frosty exchange of letters” between Underhill and Emily Herman (mistakenly referred to by Armstrong as Emma Hermann) referring to Herman's inadequate acknowledgement of Underhill's writings used in her own (Herman's) writings. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 156. See also Emily Herman, *The Meaning and Value of Mysticism* (London: James Clarke, 1915), 13 - 14; 23 - 33; 96 - 99; 248 - 251. Underhill's membership of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, passed over in a few words by Cropper, is investigated by Armstrong. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 18. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 36 - 43.

In 1990, a third biography was published, written by the American historian Dana Greene.<sup>72</sup> Similar to Armstrong's method, it focuses on the development of Underhill's thought as expressed in her writings. Two years prior to the publication of this biography, Greene had edited a collection of articles written by Underhill over a number of years, to highlight the development of her thought and therefore her spirituality.<sup>73</sup> The Greene biography takes up the pattern of spiritual development illustrated in the previous collection. Despite the similarities between the approaches of Armstrong and Greene in their attempts to uncover Underhill's inner life through her written works, Greene is more successful. Her interpretative and person-orientated approach to the task achieves a more intimate picture of Underhill than does Armstrong's more analytical analysis. Greene sees the entire corpus as a vehicle by which she is attempting to express what she has experienced or is experiencing.<sup>74</sup> Such a literary manner of working out of experience, Greene claims, is based on Underhill's "way of knowing through attachment and relationship" – a pattern typical of identity process in women and of their way of knowing – personal, relational and transformative.<sup>75</sup> Within this context, Greene addresses her

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<sup>72</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*. For details of this work see chap. 1. p. 10, n., 14.

<sup>73</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*. For details of this work see chap. 1, p. 12, n., 17.

<sup>74</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Underhill, *Evelyn Underhill*, 148 - 149. Greene cites Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on a Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), Beatrice Bruteau, "Neo-Feminism and the Next Revolution in Consciousness," in *Cross Currents* vol. XXVII, no. 2 (1977) and Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) among others, as feminist writers who associate personal, relational and transformative characteristics with a feminine way of understanding. Dana Greene, "Towards an Evaluation of the Thought of Evelyn Underhill," in *History of European Ideas*, vol. 8, no. 4/5



study of the mystics and the importance of personal relationships throughout her life. The primacy of her personal experience, her consciousness of reality as both temporal and eternal and her growth towards a “Spirit-centric” spirituality thus emerge as the determining sources of her thinking.<sup>76</sup> Regarding Underhill’s encounter with Continental Europe and its art, Greene offers several evaluative comments. “Beauty was a lure,” she writes, and “for Underhill the medieval world intimately linked matter and spirit.”<sup>77</sup> “Italy changed her life,” she concludes.<sup>78</sup> Though this aesthetic and cultural experience is noted in the first pages of her biography, Greene does not treat it in any extensive fashion in subsequent chapters. She edited a further collection of Underhill’s writing three years after her biographical study. In *Evelyn Underhill Fragments from an Inner Life*, she delves into the correspondence between Underhill and her spiritual directors to expose the interior sufferings that, though hidden, deeply affected her life and work.<sup>79</sup> Taken together, Greene’s three works contribute to a comprehensive view of her subject. While the biography presents an account of the events of her life, and the development of her

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(1987): 550 - 551.

<sup>76</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 5, 80, 148.

<sup>77</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 13.

<sup>78</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 12.

<sup>79</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, ed. Dana Greene and with a foreword by A. M. Allchin (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1993).

thinking is traced through the series of articles, the third work reveals the inner depths of Underhill's conscience.<sup>80</sup>

Reviewing these various biographical studies, we note that the topic of this present investigation – the influence of visual art and church architecture on Underhill's spirituality – has in fact been given scant attention. While they acknowledge her interest in art and even point to some influence of Continental travel and art in their subject's life, they do not develop this aspect. There is a gap, therefore, that this study aims to fill. On the other hand, a certain number of themes do emerge in the studies we are reviewing. These are mysticism, the Holy Spirit, the retreat ministry, the influence of von Hügel, her alleged individualism and ecumenical involvement. Each of these feeds into our investigations as we proceed.

Underhill's exploration of mysticism and the mystics is most clearly presented by her biographers. Integrated into their accounts are her innumerable references to the English and Continental mystics and saints. Such is the significance of the mystics in Underhill's work, that everyone writing about her picks up this interest. The same can be said

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<sup>80</sup> Although strictly speaking, Annice Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill: Spirituality for Daily Living* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997) is not a biography, it nonetheless presents a thorough thematic view of Underhill's life and work which gives the sense and feel of a biography. Hereafter cited as *Evelyn Underhill*.

regarding another substantial theme in her writing – that of prayer. Addressed by a variety of writers, it is most fully developed by Callahan and, to a lesser extent, by Brame.<sup>81</sup>

Another major theme is her “Spirit-centric” spirituality. This is explored to some extent by Greene, but is taken up and substantially developed by Johnson especially in relation to Underhill’s perception of symbols and sacraments.<sup>82</sup> Johnson sees her life in three stages. First, there is evidence of the optimistic and evolutionary philosophy known as vitalism. This is followed by a more critically realistic phase which involved Christocentric and sacramental theology. In a third stage, Johnson claims that Underhill fell under the influence of Alfred Whitehead. Further contact with Eastern Orthodox theology of the Holy Spirit, represents “a theology based on the continuing incarnation of the Spirit, instead of the one time incarnation of Christ.”<sup>83</sup> From this Spirit-centred perspective, Underhill would spend the remaining ten years of her life speaking and writing about the

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<sup>81</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, ed. and with an introduction by Grace Adolphsen Brame (New York: Crossroad, 1990). Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*. Evelyn Underhill, *Lent with Evelyn Underhill: Selections from her Writings*, ed. Mellick Belshaw (London: Mowbray, 1964) is a devotional book using extracts from Underhill’s writings that are accompanied by appropriate reflections.

<sup>82</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 148. Todd Johnson, “Evelyn Underhill: Middle-Way Within The Via Media?” in *Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter*, 1993: 3 - 4. Todd Johnson, “Pneumatological Oblation: Evelyn Underhill’s Theology of the Eucharist,” in *Worship* vol. 68, no. 3, (May, 1994): 313 - 332. Todd Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth: Pneumatology, Modernism and their Relation to Symbols and Sacraments in the Writings of Evelyn Underhill,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1996). Hereafter cited as “In Spirit and Truth.” Todd Johnson, “The Three Faces of Evelyn Underhill,” in *Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter*, 1997: 3. Todd Johnson, “Anglican Writers at Century’s End: An Evelyn Underhill Primer,” in *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. lxxx, (Summer, 1998): 402 - 413. Todd Johnson, “Evelyn Underhill’s Pneumatology: Origins and Implication,” in *The Downside Review*, vol. 116, no. 403, (April, 1998): 109 - 136.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, “The Three Faces of Evelyn Underhill,” 3. Johnson claims that Underhill’s pneumatology is best articulated in her book, *The Golden Sequence*, published in 1932.

Spirit of God of whom Christ was the fullest incarnation and who was encountered in the liturgy through the offering of one's self to God. From Johnson's point of view, Underhill's pneumatology, as enunciated in *The Golden Sequence*, is not only "a unique approach to the spiritual life," but "a creative theological work."<sup>84</sup>

Prior to Johnson's exploration of Underhill's pneumatology, Grace Brame had drawn attention to Underhill's theology of the Holy Spirit. She suggests that the Spirit fills the gap between the human and the divine – weaving together the human experience of the temporal and the eternal.<sup>85</sup> However, Brame's major interest is another of Underhill's distinguishing features – connectedness, balance and correspondence. With these in mind, Brame identifies connections between "revelation and reason; reason and experience; open mindedness and the critical faculty; official and personal authority . . . and nature transformed by grace."<sup>86</sup>

Brame's other major contribution was her discovery of the unpublished texts of the addresses given by Underhill at four retreats. These were subsequently published under Brame's editorial supervision.<sup>87</sup> In her treatment of Underhill as a retreat director and

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<sup>84</sup> Johnson, "Evelyn Underhill's Pneumatology: Origins and Implications," 128.

<sup>85</sup> Grace Adolphsen Brame, "Evelyn Underhill: The Integrity of Personal Intellect and Individual Religious Experience as Related to Ecclesiastical Authority," in *Worship*, vol. 68, no. 1, (1994): 23 - 45.

<sup>86</sup> Brame, "Evelyn Underhill: The Integrity of Personal Intellect," 44. See also Grace Adolphsen Brame, "Divine Grace and Human Will in the Writing of Evelyn Underhill." (Ph.D Diss. Temple University, Philadelphia, 1988).

<sup>87</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*. It contains the following: *Sanctity: The Perfection of Love* (1924

spiritual director, Brame joins with other Underhill scholars who have taken up this theme and whose work stretches from the Menzies biography to recent times.<sup>88</sup> Menzies, as some time warden of Pleshey Retreat House and a directee of Underhill, gives particular insight into her director.<sup>89</sup> Barkway, Williams and, to a greater extent Cropper, also highlight Underhill's work in this area.<sup>90</sup> Olive Wyon – another of her directees – declares that “if there is one sphere above all others in which Evelyn Underhill excelled it was . . . in what is sometimes called “spiritual direction.”<sup>91</sup> Greene also gives prominence to her as a director of souls, pointing out the uniqueness of a woman working in an area that had been the exclusive domain of ordained men.<sup>92</sup> Annice Callahan's study of her ministry of

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retreat); *The End for which We were Made* (1925 retreat); *Inner Grace and Outward Sign* (1927 retreat); *The Call of God* (1928 retreat). The “Introduction” to this work is of particular interest because it records interviews with some women who attended many of Underhill's retreats.

<sup>88</sup> This includes mention of Underhill's expertise as a spiritual director by the theologian John Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology 1900 - 1960* (London: SCM, 1963), 151. Also by Lord Ramsey of Canterbury, “Evelyn Underhill,” in *Evelyn Underhill: Two Centenary Essays*, (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975) 22. Also by Canon A. M. Allchin, “Introduction,” in Evelyn Underhill, *Given to God: Daily Readings with Evelyn Underhill* selected and arranged by Delroy Oberg, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992) xi. Delroy Oberg, “Evelyn Underhill: Spiritual Director,” parts 1 and 2, *Eremos*, no. 35 (1991): 5 - 11 and no. 36 (1991): 11 - 18. Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend* (London: Sheldon, 1977), 32. In regard to Underhill's spiritual guidance, T. S. Eliot wrote – “She was always at the disposal of all who called upon her.” Cited in Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 70.

<sup>89</sup> Lucy Menzies, “Memoir,” in *Light of Christ*, 9 - 22.

<sup>90</sup> Lumsden Barkway, “Evelyn Underhill: Great Pastors – X,” in *Theology*, vol. 56, (Oct., 1953): 368 - 372. Charles Williams, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *Letters*, 28, 33. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, chapter 17.

<sup>91</sup> Olive Wyon, *A Desire for God. A Study of Three Spiritual Classics: Francois Fenelon, John Wesley, Evelyn Underhill* (London: Collins Clear Type Press, 1963), 96.

<sup>92</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 88 - 91.

spiritual guidance reveals the influence of Ignatian spirituality on this ministry.<sup>93</sup> The most searching investigation into Underhill in this capacity, however, is that of Joy Milos who examines her as both the recipient and the practitioner of spiritual direction and declares her to be “a credible model for spiritual direction today.”<sup>94</sup>

Of the directors who gave spiritual guidance to Underhill, none provokes more interest than Baron Friedrich von Hügel. Underhill’s biographers, and other scholars interested in her life and work, all engage in some measure in the assessment of the influence of this Roman Catholic layman on her. Invariably, it is contextualised by the growing spiritual anguish she experienced during and after the First World War along with the question of her understanding of and relationship with the Church.

As has been noted, both Armstrong and Greene devote considerable space to von Hügel’s direction in this regard. As is the case with many who write about Underhill, they clarify some aspects of von Hügel’s direction of her, and pose further questions. There is an effort on the part of some to stress that she came to realise the necessity of the corporate nature of religion well before she came under von Hügel’s guidance and that she had assumed her

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<sup>93</sup> Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, chapter 8. Annice Callahan, *Spiritual Guides for Today: Evelyn Underhill, Dorothy Day, Karl Rahner, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 26 - 42.

<sup>94</sup> Joy Milos, “The Role of the Spiritual Guide in the Life and Writings of Evelyn Underhill,” (Ph.D. Diss., Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 1988). Joy Milos, “Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Evelyn Underhill, A Companion on Many Journeys,” in *The Way*, (April, 1990): 157.

place in the Anglican Church prior to his direction.<sup>95</sup> Others emphasise Underhill's independent thinking and writing<sup>96</sup> in contrast to those who hold that she was little more than a mouth-piece for von Hügel's teachings or simply a transmitter of a received tradition.<sup>97</sup>

In the context of von Hügel's influence, some feminist writers have focused on what they see as Underhill's loss of independence as she gradually became dependent on the significant men in her life. They perceive this more generally in her relationship with the Church.<sup>98</sup> Others hold that her self doubt and self recrimination increased following von Hügel's direction, thus suggesting that his guidance contributed to, rather than alleviated, her interior anguish.<sup>99</sup> It is also suggested that Underhill's serious asthmatic condition was

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<sup>95</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 200. Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 80. Greene, "The Mystic and the Church," in *The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter*, vol. 15, (Jan., 2006): 3.

<sup>96</sup> Allchin, "Evelyn Underhill," 4 - 6. Michael Ramsey, "Evelyn Underhill," 22. Terry Tastard, "Divine Presence and Human Freedom: The Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill Reconsidered", in *Theology*, 94, (1991): 427. Johnson, "Evelyn Underhill's Pneumatology: Origins and Implications," 131, n., 27. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 229.

<sup>97</sup> Urban Holmes, *A History of Christian Spirituality: An Analytical Introduction* (Minneapolis, Seabury Press, 1980), 148 - 149. Douglas Steere, "Introduction," in Friedrich von Hügel, *Spiritual Counsels and Letters of Baron von Hügel*, ed. and with an introduction by Douglas Steere (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), 13 - 34. Martin Thornton, "The Cultural Factor in Spirituality," in *The Great Christian Centuries to Come: Essays in Honour of A. M. Ramsey*, ed. Christopher Martin (London: Mowbrays, 1974), 182 - 183. Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: The Ecumenical Century, 1900 to the Present* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1966), 136, 144. Mary O'Connor, "The Reluctant Anglican: Evelyn Underhill, Baron Friedrich von Hügel and Institutional Religion," (Ph.D. Diss., Monash University, Melbourne, 1997) also deals with these issues.

<sup>98</sup> Grace Jantzen, "The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill" in *Feminist Theology*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1993): 91. Anne Bancroft, *Weavers of Wisdom Women Mystics of the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 1989), 82. Ann Matter, "Mystics/Interior Journeys," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Russell & J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 1996), 188 - 189.

<sup>99</sup> Susan Howatch, "Introduction," in Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, ix.

exacerbated by confining herself to Christianity, by the narrow piety it contained and even by the lack of ventilation in many of the churches she attended as a result of von Hügel's influence.<sup>100</sup> Often this critique is limited in that it places upon Underhill the expectations of modern feminist thinkers and fails to take into account the social structures in which she lived. This is not the case with Ford who claims that she made an "important contribution to contemporary feminist spirituality."<sup>101</sup> In her comprehensive exploration of the Underhill corpus, she evaluates her as "atypical for her gender," given the late Victorian culture in which she lived.<sup>102</sup> Ford emphasises her "theology of self-sacrifice" and recognises her nagging self-doubt and self-recrimination.<sup>103</sup> However, she also suggests that Underhill is significantly empowered by the "mystical abandonment to Divine Charity [which] brings true fulfilment."<sup>104</sup> Thus, it is in the act of self-donation inspired by desire for God, that she finds "an independent feminine human ideal" which enables her to resist the dominant hegemony of her time.<sup>105</sup> Ford acknowledges that the idea of self-donation is

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<sup>100</sup> Howatch, "Introduction," in Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, ix. Bancroft, *Weavers of Wisdom*, 92. It should be noted that others held a vastly different view from that held by the more strident feminists. Curtis claims that "Her [Underhill's] most important development, spiritual as well as intellectual, took place in middle age through discipleship to von Hügel." Geoffrey Curtis, "Evelyn Underhill," in *The Community of the Resurrection Chronicle*, no. 155, Michaelmas, 1941, 11.

<sup>101</sup> Stephanie Ford, "Evelyn Underhill's Mystical Theology in Light of the Feminist Critique of Grace Jantzen" (Ph.D. Diss. The Catholic University of America, Washington DC, 2003), x.

<sup>102</sup> Ford, "Evelyn Underhill's Mystical Theology," 237.

<sup>103</sup> Ford, "Evelyn Underhill's Mystical Theology," 240.

<sup>104</sup> Ford, "Evelyn Underhill's Mystical Theology," 275.

<sup>105</sup> Ford, "Evelyn Underhill's Mystical Theology," 239.



“troublesome for some feminists.”<sup>106</sup> But she reminds us of the great paradox – “desire and sacrifice, joy and self-giving, ecstatic empowerment and surrender” – which has been pivotal to Christian spirituality through the ages.<sup>107</sup>

The historian Greene approaches Underhill in a less theological way than Ford. She cautions against isolating sections of Underhill’s writings – particularly her notes and letters to directors – from the context of her whole work, thereby allowing that this could lead to misunderstanding. Underhill’s stance not to ally or define herself by the feminism of the day is due partly, Greene argues, to her concern that such association might alienate her from those otherwise receptive to her message and also to her suspicion that some feminists were motivated by self-interest.<sup>108</sup> However, Greene does not place Underhill outside the feminist perspective. She contends that she epitomises “the greatest female sin – the devaluation of self and the inability to love oneself.”<sup>109</sup> In drawing attention to her way of knowing as connected to a personal, relational and transformative pattern of experience, Greene sees this as a typically feminine characteristic. Thus she poses the question of the degree to which gender implicitly shapes Underhill’s understanding of mysticism and spirituality.

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<sup>106</sup> Ford, “Evelyn Underhill’s Mystical Theology,” x.

<sup>107</sup> Ford, “Evelyn Underhill’s Mystical Theology,” 244.

<sup>108</sup> Greene, “Preface,” in Underhill, *Evelyn Underhill Fragments*, 14. Greene, “History of European Ideas,” 551, 557.

<sup>109</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 150.

Another theme that occupies a broad section of literature is that of Underhill's perceived privatisation of spirituality and its subsequent removal from social awareness and commitment. Her contemporary, Emily Herman, first raised the question of her "exclusively psychological view" of mysticism, her use of "old world" language and her lack of historical contextualisation.<sup>110</sup> Jantzen now leads the way in critical assessment of this kind.<sup>111</sup> Underhill's "intensely individualistic" devotion and prayer, the exclusiveness of that group she categorised as mystical, and her use of language which spoke only to the educated, are all themes taken up by others.<sup>112</sup> Both Jantzen and Tastard, in commemorating the 50th anniversary of Underhill's death, draw attention to her apparent unawareness of the injustice and oppression of her own times and of the struggle for social justice that was going on.<sup>113</sup> Closing the gap between spirituality and political awareness, Loades briefly highlights the resistance and dissent which characterised Underhill's

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<sup>110</sup> Herman, *The Meaning and Value of Mysticism*, 8 - 9, 13 - 14.

<sup>111</sup> Jantzen, "The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill," 95 - 100. Jantzen, review of *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life*, by Dana Greene, in *Theology*, vol. XCIV, no. 762, (Nov/Dec., 1991): 468 - 469.

<sup>112</sup> Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1963), 11 - 13. Steven Katz, "Introduction," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Katz (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), 2. Roger Lloyd, *The Church of England 1900 - 1965* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 114.

<sup>113</sup> Jantzen, "The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill," 99. Terry Tastard, "Divine Presence and Human Freedom: The Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill Reconsidered," 430. Tastard's article is interesting in that (as its title suggests) it presents a different view of Underhill from that given in a previous writing in which he highlights Underhill's ground breaking work at a time when women's activity in the Anglican Church was restricted. Terry Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul: Spirituality and Social Justice* (London: Darton and Todd, 1989), 68 - 94. A further contribution to this debate has been Debra Jensen, "Mysticism and Social Ethics: Feminist Reflections on their Relationship in the Works of Evelyn Underhill, Simone Weil and Meister Eckhart," (Ph.D. Diss. University of Toronto, Canada, 1995).

pacifist stand during World War II.<sup>114</sup> Integral to this broad theme is Pitt's review of Cropper's biography in which she takes the latter to task for presenting Underhill as the occupant of "a cosy, gossipy world" in which nothing matters but the cultivation of the soul.<sup>115</sup> This review suggests Pitt's own assessment of Underhill in a way that is more negative compared to others who have considered this question. As Ford points out, the shortcoming of much of this critique lies in the failure of Underhill's critics to engage the whole of her oeuvre.<sup>116</sup>

Another neglected aspect of Underhill's life and work is her involvement in non-Christian religions and ecumenism.<sup>117</sup> In examining her theology of Church, however briefly, her biographers have laid the foundation for her approach to ecumenism. Though Cropper does

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<sup>114</sup> Loades, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: HarperCollins *Religious*), 60. James Horne also contributes to the literature on this topic by exploring Underhill's support of World War One and her pacifist stance during World War Two within the context of her personal moral judgement. James Horne, *The Moral Mystic* (Waterloo, Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1983), 77 - 84.

<sup>115</sup> Valerie Pitt, "Clouds of Unknowing," in *Prism* 3, no. 3, (June, 1959): 8. As is the case in many firmly held theories regarding Underhill, an opposite opinion is often equally as resolutely maintained. An example of this occurs when Austin Cooper declares that "there is nothing of the quaint, cosy sort of religion about Evelyn Underhill: this following of Christ will involve us in suffering for people." See Austin Cooper, review of Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* with an introduction by David Walker, in *The Australasian Catholic Record*, no. 54 (1977): 387. Deborah Smith Douglas also argues against Pitt's view of Underhill. See Deborah Smith Douglas, "Evelyn Underhill and the Rattle of Teacups," in *The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter*, vol. 9, Nov., 1999, 2 - 3.

<sup>116</sup> Ford, "Evelyn Underhill's Mystical Theology," 29, 85 - 86.

<sup>117</sup> One area connected with ecumenism that has been the subject of interest in recent years is Underhill's relationship with Sorella Maria, an Italian Franciscan who founded the Confraternity of the Spiritual Entente – an ecumenical group devoted to prayer for Christian unity. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 64, 133 - 134. Williams, "Introduction," in Underhill, *Letters*, 38. Dana Greene, "Spiritual Entente," in *The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter*, vol. 6, 1996, 4. A. M. Allchin, "Discovering Sorella Maria," in *The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter*, vol. 11, 2001, 2 - 3. Menzies, *Biography*, VIII. 8 - VIII. 11. Underhill, "A Franciscan Hermitage," in *The Spectator*, 11. 2. 1928, 183 - 184.

not dwell on her interest in religions other than Christian, Armstrong, and to a lesser extent Greene, comment on the impact of Rabindranath Tagore on Underhill.<sup>118</sup> Since the publication of the biographies, Hogan's article has presented a more thorough view of her religious pluralism.<sup>119</sup> We recall, also, her membership in her early years of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn. This topic, though initially researched by Armstrong, has more recently been the subject of careful scrutiny by Michael Stoeber who connects it with her understanding of symbol and sacrament.<sup>120</sup> This connection adds to Johnson's study of Underhill's theology of Eucharist.<sup>121</sup> Both throw light on her understanding of worship – a topic about which she wrote to much acclaim.<sup>122</sup>

When this non-biographical literature is taken as a whole, the broad spectrum of interest in this exponent of the spiritual life becomes obvious. Using a variety of themes and concerns, these writings have led to a more critical understanding of Underhill's life and spirituality. Only a limited number, however, treat of the place of visual art in her

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<sup>118</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 52. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 128, 138 - 146. Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 57 - 60.

<sup>119</sup> Kevin Hogan, "The Experience of Reality: Evelyn Underhill and Religious Pluralism," in *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. LXXXIV, no. 3, (1992).

<sup>120</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 36 - 42. Michael Stoeber, "Evelyn Underhill on Magic, Sacrament, and Spiritual Transformation," 1 - 12.

<sup>121</sup> Todd Johnson, "Pneumatological Oblation: Evelyn Underhill's Theology of the Eucharist," 313 - 332.

<sup>122</sup> Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 147. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 279. Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 121.

development, and then only in a very limited way.<sup>123</sup> Most of all, the impact of her Italian experience has not been recognised. The great works of art about which she spoke and wrote are seen often as little more than visual aids for her retreat addresses. Their influence on her spirituality has not been fully explored. The strong thread of aesthetic experience woven into her work from her earliest travel *Journals* to her last substantial work, *Worship*, is yet to be traced.

Thus the purpose of this investigation: to fill the gap demonstrably present in current scholarship. We hope, therefore, to provide a more adequate interpretation of Underhill's life by concentrating on the influence of art in the development of her spirituality.

We now move to the methodology that has guided our investigation.

#### **4. Methodology**

We have already given a descriptive definition of spirituality and related it to Underhill's use of the term. The main features stand out: the experience of personal integration, the movement of self-transcendence and commitment to the service of others. This is set within an horizon shaped by a fundamental relationship to God revealed in Jesus Christ

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<sup>123</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 69, 95. Loades, *Evelyn Underhill*, 44 - 45. Ford, "Evelyn Underhill's Mystical Theology," 178 - 182. Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 12, 16, 119, 208. Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 12 - 14. Mary Brian Durkin has also drawn attention to Underhill's use of specific works of art to clarify or highlight a truth she wished to emphasise. Mary Brian Durkin, "Evelyn Underhill," in *Christianity and the Arts*, (Feb-April, 1997): 46 - 53. Mary Brian Durkin, "Evelyn Underhill: Her Life and Religious Thought," in *Spirituality*, vol. 10, no. 53 (2004): 88 - 94.

through the Holy Spirit and located within the community of the Church. Given such a notion of spirituality, this thesis poses the question as to how visual art influences spirituality and how therefore Underhill lived, understood and expressed that relationship.

Taking this understanding of spirituality into account and bearing in mind that the controlling methodology of this investigation is within the discipline of spirituality, the emphasis of the thesis will be on personal integration, self-transcendence and service to others as a lived experience.<sup>124</sup> Schneiders suggests a triple operation whereby the phenomena of Christian life experience might be investigated and interpreted: firstly, “description of the phenomena under investigation;” secondly, “critical analysis;” and thirdly “constructive interpretation.”<sup>125</sup> In appropriating and slightly adapting her suggestion, I have developed a four-point plan which forms the structure of the methodology which will shape the entire thesis.

The first phase of that methodology describes, through the exploration of her writings, Underhill’s encounter with visual art and church architecture. This will include study of her *Journals*, letters, numerous essays, articles and other writings thus setting the Underhill corpus within the history of her spiritual development.

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<sup>124</sup> See chap. 1, pp. 3 - 4.

<sup>125</sup> Sandra Schneiders, “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, (Spring, 1994): 12 - 13.

This will be followed by a more focused examination of the specific places in that literature which provide explicit data on the topic of this research. This second phase of the methodology will involve therefore the exploration of those areas of the Underhill corpus in which she refers to her encounter with works of art and to her experience of some cathedrals and churches in Continental Europe. The first two phases of the methodology are therefore a description of the data at hand.

The third phase of the methodology consists of the constructive interpretation of the extent by which visual art and church architecture had a transforming effect on Underhill's thinking and spirituality. Here we delve further into her understanding of the relationship of art and spirituality. Again, she is her own witness in this respect as we read her writings with this deeper question in mind.

The final phase of the methodology involves the critical analysis of Underhill's own theoretical treatment of such questions, especially that of the influence of art on spirituality. It will be necessary here to compare her early religious understanding with the spirituality of her final years and thus her most mature expressions of the issues we are considering. At this stage, we will be led to treat explicitly the theological and anthropological aspects of our investigation.

While the four phases of this structure have been presented in sequential form, in practical terms they do not function in this strict order. As our investigation proceeds, these phases mutually inform and enrich each other in the context of Underhill's whole life and work.

With this in mind, the seven chapters of our presentation unfold in the following order:

Chapter One: “Approaching the Scene” is introductory, as is now clear.

Chapter Two: “The Plotinian Influence” investigates the Neoplatonic influence on Underhill and the way it conditions her understanding of spirituality, art and their connection.

Chapter Three: “The Experience and Influence of Art” explores Underhill’s growing awareness of God through the aesthetic experience of the galleries, museums and churches of Continental Europe and her interpretation of this through the writing of fiction.

Chapter Four: “Awakening to Christ” investigates Underhill’s gradual awakening to Christ through her continued aesthetic experience, her understanding of Christ and the significance of this in her spirituality.

Chapter Five: “Awakening to the Creative Spirit” examines Underhill’s spiritual awakening to the Creative Spirit through aesthetic experience. It traces the development of her pneumatology and explains its centrality in her spirituality.

Chapter Six: “An Integrated Spirituality” deals with Underhill’s integration of her aesthetic experience in relation to grace, desire and those features of the spiritual life that she names as adoration, communion and cooperation.

Chapter Seven: “The Depth and Range of Underhill’s Spirituality” draws together the theological, philosophical, anthropological and aesthetic aspects of Underhill’s spirituality. It evaluates her contribution to the area we have considered, namely art and spirituality.



## **5. Conclusion**

We mentioned above, in our survey of Underhill studies, that the topic of our proposed research has been little treated. We proceed then, to offer more extensive treatment, in the hope of contributing to a fuller appreciation of Underhill in contemporary scholarship. In the following chapter, we take up the Neoplatonic influence that was so decisive in her spiritual development.

## **Chapter 2: THE PLOTINIAN INFLUENCE**

In the previous chapter, we presented the topic of this thesis by introducing Evelyn Underhill and explaining the methodology on which the research will be structured. We now approach the first and second phases of the methodology as we begin our description of the data under investigation. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the acknowledged influence on Underhill of the Neoplatonic philosopher, Plotinus. By examining her understanding of that philosophy, this chapter seeks to bring to light her early philosophical background against which her initial encounter with art works and churches in Continental Europe might be more clearly understood.

In this second chapter I propose to

1. explore, through her writings, Underhill's early understanding of God, the human person, beauty, contemplation and visual art in relation to the writing of the philosopher, Plotinus.
2. examine the influence of Plotinus in the Underhill novels.
3. present an overview and critical analysis of Underhill's foundational spirituality in its first stage.
4. conclude

## 1. Underhill's appropriation of Plotinus

Before we begin our investigation of the acknowledged influence of Plotinus on Underhill's spirituality, some introductory remarks will establish our timeframe. There can be no doubt that Underhill's boarding school education provided her with knowledge of the essential tenets of Christianity. The fact that she received the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation attest to that. However, her writings indicate that she soon set aside "school days" understanding and practices. Striking out on her own exploration of the meaning of life, she entered into the first adult stage of her spiritual life – a period which stretched from the mid 1890s to approximately 1913. It is these years which set the timeframe of our present chapter. As we shall see, this was a stage of Underhill's spiritual life which was highly influenced by the philosophy of Plotinus. She clearly acknowledges this when she describes herself during these years as "a white-hot Neo-Platonist."<sup>1</sup> Made some thirty years after she had begun to pass beyond that spiritual phase, this comment shows a reflective Underhill writing about her understanding of Plotinus some decades after his most powerful influence was most evident in her life. In our investigation of that period, therefore, we will employ at times words which Underhill wrote many years after the first stage of her spiritual life. Though out of chronological sequence and filtered through her continuing spiritual development, they nonetheless provide us with her understanding of the most dominant influence of her spiritual life during its first stage.

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<sup>1</sup> Underhill to The Same, (Margaret Cropper), Tues., pm 1932, in Underhill, *Letters*, 206.

Underhill herself does not record when she first read Plotinus.<sup>2</sup> Her close friends note that while a student “she was reading . . . philosophy on her own, as well as attending classes at King’s College,”<sup>3</sup> and that “Plotinus comes early in her studies.”<sup>4</sup> Her early reading of St Augustine and Maurice Maeterlinck complemented her reading of the philosopher’s own words.<sup>5</sup> Her reading of St Augustine and her knowledge of the saint’s writings is well illustrated in *Mysticism*. The importance of Augustine in her understanding of Plotinus can be appreciated by Rist’s evaluation of the significance of Plotinus in Augustine’s life and spirituality. He writes:

The greatest effect . . . which Plotinus produced in the development of Christianity was that it was his presentation of Platonism which brought an enormously influential figure, Augustine, towards the Christian fold. For it is from Augustine that, at least in the medieval West, most Western Christians of a Platonic turn of mind (Anselm Bonaventura, even later Francis de Sales) have drawn their more immediate inspiration.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The teachings of Plotinus (205 - 270 CE) are contained in a collection of treatises known as *The Six Enneads*. Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952). Because this is the translation of the *Enneads* most consistent with that used by Underhill, we will maintain this usage. In some instances, where current Plotinian scholars are cited, the translation of their choice – that of A. H. Armstrong – is used. The new phase in the development of the Platonic tradition initiated by Plotinus is referred to as “Neoplatonism.”

<sup>3</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II.7.

<sup>4</sup> Cropper, Evelyn Underhill, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II, 9. Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 15 draws attention to Underhill’s reading of Maeterlinck prior to the writing of the first novel as does Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> John Rist, “Plotinus and Christian Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* ed. Lloyd Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 409.

Among the reasons Underhill gives for her attraction to Plotinus are his “struggling” to impart the realisation of “a reality which is beyond the grasp of reason,”<sup>7</sup> the “synthesis of practical spirituality and formal philosophy”<sup>8</sup> which he presents and the “deep spiritual inwardness, colour and life” which characterise his “map” of the journey and hence the meaning of life.<sup>9</sup> That his “intellectual system” included “the most profound experiences of the spiritual life,” also draws her to his writing.<sup>10</sup> She offers some advice on the reading of the philosopher. “We must always be ready,” she writes, “to look past his formal words to the felt reality which he is struggling to impart.”<sup>11</sup> These words indicate that her understanding of Plotinus does not come from focused attention on the exactitude, sharpness and detail of his words, but rather from sensitivity and openness towards what he struggles to express through “methods of symbol and poetry.”<sup>12</sup> As we examine the influence of the philosopher on Underhill’s thinking, we shall observe how this approach to *The Enneads* characterises her understanding.

From these broad features of Plotinian philosophy which grounded Underhill’s attraction for his teaching and set the tone for her reading, we now move to a fuller explanation of his

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<sup>7</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 119.

<sup>12</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 119.

influence on her thinking during the initial phase of her spiritual life. In so doing, we will be guided by her own writing concerning the five aspects named in our introduction to this chapter: God, the human person, beauty, contemplation and visual art.

## A. God

Underhill never dwelt on the three transcendent yet unequal types of enduring reality or hypostases – the One, the Intellect and the Soul – on which Plotinus structured his complicated understanding of the universe. Acknowledging that “he postulated a three-fold Godhead from which orthodox theology was not too proud to take hints when attempting to philosophise the doctrine of the Trinity,”<sup>13</sup> she declares that his first aim was that of “bringing men to a knowledge of Divine reality.”<sup>14</sup> For Underhill that Divine reality is God whom she describes in broad strokes. God is transcendent, “Pure Being – the Good, Beautiful and True . . . Absolute Reality . . . the Living One . . . Unity.”<sup>15</sup> God is “great Cosmic Life”<sup>16</sup> a “life-giving Force, Light Energy or Heat,”<sup>17</sup> an “Ocean of Being,”<sup>18</sup> “the

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<sup>13</sup> Evelyn Underhill, “A Foster-father of the Church,” review of *Plotinus: The Ethical Treatises*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, in *Saturday Westminster Gazette* 1 September 1917, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 27

<sup>17</sup> Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 135.

<sup>18</sup> Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 137.

fountain of all Being.”<sup>19</sup> Through these words, which occur frequently throughout her writings, Underhill is speaking of a vibrant yet distant and impersonal God. There is no doubt that these positive statements describing God ring with the understanding and intensity of Plotinus who uses similar language in his descriptions. For him the transcendent One is “the wellspring of Life,”<sup>20</sup> “inner core of Light,”<sup>21</sup> “lacking nothing . . . perfect,”<sup>22</sup> “everywhere in entirety,” “the giver to the rest of all things of their being,”<sup>23</sup> “the primal Good,”<sup>24</sup> “self-defined” and “formless.”<sup>25</sup> The idea of Plotinus’ remote and powerful One – the transcendent, mysterious, ineffable Divinity – resonates with Underhill as she adopts an affirmative notion of God that reflects the Plotinian image of the One.

This positive understanding of God, however, is only one side of Underhill’s perception. She also understands God, the First Principle of whom nothing can be said, in a negative sense. This is clearly illustrated and summarised in these words which she wrote in 1913:

The paradox of Deity, in so far as it is apprehended by human intuition and love, appears to us vast, all-encompassing, all-penetrating Reality, which is both transcendent and immanent, static and dynamic, changeless yet changeable, ineffable

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<sup>19</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 112.

<sup>20</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 9, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 4, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 9, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 8, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 9, 3.

yet personal, 'Eternal Rest and Eternal Work' in respect of the soul and of the perceived universe; in essence the still and unconditioned One, in action the unresting and conditioned flux. . . . It does not struggle for expression, it has no qualities, it merely Is.<sup>26</sup>

Here we see her engaging in a series of negatives in her description of God. At the same time, in employing the language of paradox, she enters into a contradictory explanation of the Divine. Thus God "has no qualities," yet "Is." The God who is transcendent is also immanent thereby bringing into focus what Underhill describes as "the two extreme forms under which both mystics and theologians have been accustomed to conceive Divine Reality" – transcendence and immanence.<sup>27</sup> Again, the influence of Plotinus is clear in this dialectical structure of affirmation and negation. In a series of cryptic statements he writes that "generative of all, the Unity is none of all; neither thing nor quality nor intellect nor soul; not in motion, not at rest, not in place, not in time."<sup>28</sup> "The One," he says, "is all things and no one of them . . . no Being but Being's generator,"<sup>29</sup> "nowhere . . . as also everywhere."<sup>30</sup> Although he writes that "it is not that the Supreme reaches out to us seeking communion: we reach towards the Supreme; it is we who become present,"<sup>31</sup> he

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<sup>26</sup> Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 96.

<sup>28</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads* 6, 9, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 5, 2, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 8. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 9, 8.



also describes the One as “present to all,”<sup>32</sup> “very love, lovable,”<sup>33</sup> and “gentle and friendly and tender.”<sup>34</sup> Here Plotinus speaks of the One as present to and caring of the universe and humanity as part of the universe, rather than on an individual basis. The One does not reach out. Humanity becomes present to the One. This puts the entire onus on the individual person who must strive unassisted and alone towards union with the One. In Plotinus’ thinking, chance dictates the life of each person and the only way is to accept life uncomplainingly – “mildly acquiescing” – with what life deals out to victors and vanquished alike.<sup>35</sup> While he recognises suffering in the world and in human life, he regards it in a detached and dispassionate manner.<sup>36</sup>

Even in the “white-hot Neo-Platonist” period of her life, Underhill provides evidence that she does not share this view of an impersonal God. She writes of “the One . . . a living and personal Object of Love”<sup>37</sup> and as “the face of Perfect Love.”<sup>38</sup> She advises a directee “to live within the love of God.”<sup>39</sup> Speaking of humanity’s efforts to attain union with God,

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<sup>32</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 2, 9, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 8, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 5, 5, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 2, 9, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 2, 9, 9; 2, 9, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 81.

<sup>38</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Underhill to The Same, (Margaret Robinson), 16. 1. 1908 in Underhill, *Letters*, 72.

she states that “however great the demand on the soul’s efforts may be, the initiative always lies with the living Divine World itself. Man’s small desire is evoked, met and fulfilled by the Divine Desire.”<sup>40</sup> These words leave no doubt as to Underhill’s knowledge of the God of love and of God’s desire to reach out to humanity. However, in subsequent chapters of our study, we shall see that during the first phase of her spiritual life, this was a latent and undeveloped knowledge which lacked experience and understanding. Heavily influenced by Plotinian thinking during her early years, Underhill places more emphasis on the human effort required to attain union with God, than on the notion of God’s self-gift to humanity.

That Underhill presents her understanding of God through the use of paradox is unsurprising. As we shall see in the following chapter, during this “white-hot Neoplatonist” phase of her life, she experiences God in ways that words fail to express. The mystics, among whom she names Plotinus as one of the most influential, provide her with what she describes as “two apparently contradictory explanations of the Invisible . . . [that are] adequate, and indeed necessary, diagrams by which to suggest something of their rich experience of Reality.”<sup>41</sup> Following in their tradition of kataphatic and apophatic language, she presents her understanding of God as predominantly a mysterious, transcendent Being, the Absolute Godhead who, at the same time, is immanent, personal, beautiful, good and

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<sup>40</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 128.

<sup>41</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 106, 101.

true. Furthermore, she states that God can be known in some way through “human intuition and love.” This is a rich, fertile and cosmic understanding of God. Its strong Plotinian overtones witness to the influence of the philosopher. He obviously provides her with the “diagrams” or philosophical framework whereby she understands and articulates her experience of God during the first stage of her spiritual life.

In this section, we have seen how Underhill presents her image of God in broad strokes of cosmic dimension. Now, as we move on to investigate her understanding of the human person, we shall see how that image of God is the context for her perception of humanity.

## **B. The Human Person**

Underhill’s understanding of the human person hinges on what she describes as “the germ of that transcendent Life . . . latent in all of us; an integral part of our humanity.”<sup>42</sup> The consequence of this is that “man . . . will only find happiness and full life when his true being is re-united . . . with the One.”<sup>43</sup> These words faithfully reflect the core of Plotinian teaching regarding humankind. “We are in the likeness of the Supreme,”<sup>44</sup> he wrote, and when we move “back to the One,”<sup>45</sup> “we have won the Term of all our journeying.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 445.

<sup>43</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 125.

<sup>44</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 9, 9, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 3, 8, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 9, 9, 11.

Underhill often expresses “the Plotinian doctrine of Man,”<sup>47</sup> in one sentence: “God is the only Reality, and we are real only as far as we are in His order and He is in us.”<sup>48</sup> This foundational thinking which Underhill appropriates from Plotinus forms the backbone of the definite anthropological stance which she adopts during the first phase of her spirituality and sets out in her work, *Mysticism*. There, grounded in the philosophy of Plotinus, she takes up Aquinas’ teaching that the human person is “a vision-making animal” or “contemplative animal” dominated by dreams no less than by appetites.<sup>49</sup>

Closely associated with this is Underhill’s perception of the amphibious nature of humanity. “We are amphibious creatures,” she writes, “our life moves upon two different levels at once – the natural and the spiritual.”<sup>50</sup> She also describes this as “two sorts or stages of reality . . . a two-foldness that goes right through man’ experience”<sup>51</sup> which accounts for his sense that he is “somehow capable of relations with more than a natural world.”<sup>52</sup> “The spiritual consciousness of man,” she writes, “flickers to and fro.”<sup>53</sup> This last

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<sup>47</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 124.

<sup>48</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 199; See for example Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 113; Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 4. These words were not original to Underhill – a fact which she recognises in *Mysticism* when she acknowledges Coventry Patmore as their author. See Coventry Patmore, *The Rod, The Root and The Flower*, ed. and with an introduction by Derek Patmore (London: Grey Walls Press, 1950), 169.

<sup>49</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 54.

<sup>52</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 4.

sentence in particular resonates with Plotinus who wrote that souls “have place in both spheres, living of necessity the life there and the life here by turns.”<sup>54</sup>

Living the “natural” life “here” is presented by both Underhill and Plotinus, in the analogy of a journey. Underhill presents the journey in a variety of images. She speaks about “the geography of the individual quest . . . in a land where there is no time and space, no inner and no outer, up or down.”<sup>55</sup> In one sense she understands it as an “outward search.” Yet, she also describes it as “transcendence: a journey upward and outward,” – an “inward change.”<sup>56</sup> It is also “an arduous journey from the material to the spiritual world.”<sup>57</sup> In this analogy she is guided by Plotinus. While he advised that “we must ascend again towards the Good,”<sup>58</sup> he also provided the following instruction to the person setting out on the journey: “Let him arise and withdraw unto himself . . . close the eyes and call upon another vision.”<sup>59</sup> So Plotinus’ journey upwards was really a journey inwards. But even these words were but a metaphor for his real meaning of the journey which was one of self-transcendence. As Plotinus pointed out, it involved rising above oneself until “you find

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<sup>54</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 4, 8, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 98.

<sup>57</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 128.

<sup>58</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 8.

yourself wholly true to your essential nature” which is union with the One.<sup>60</sup> Yet while both shared the same understanding of the journey, Underhill and Plotinus differed in their notion of its conditions. Consistent with her understanding of God, Underhill’s image of the soul journeying in quest of the Divine also includes the image of God who reaches out to meet and fulfil the soul’s desire. Contrary to this, and in accordance with his understanding of the One, Plotinus’ journey was made alone and unassisted. The One did not reach out to the soul upon whose efforts the entire success of the journey depended. Irrespective of this difference, we see something here of the “deep spiritual inwardness, colour and life” which so attracts Underhill to the philosopher and which she readily incorporates into her thinking.<sup>61</sup>

The process by which the journey is made is spelt out as she describes the stages of the soul’s ascent to God. “They are called in *The Enneads*,” she writes, “purification . . . enlightenment . . . ecstasy.”<sup>62</sup> But in her work, *Mysticism*, she develops these three stages into five stages of a single process of spiritual growth: 1. Awakening of the self. 2. Purification of the self. 3. Illumination of the self. 4. The dark night of the Soul. 5. The unitive life.<sup>63</sup> As the naming of these stages suggests, and as Underhill herself acknowledges, stages in the development of the spiritual life form the traditional

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<sup>60</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 118.

<sup>62</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 125.

<sup>63</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 168 - 170.

framework by which movement in the spiritual journey has been described for centuries. She also points out, however, that they are “a formula which Dionysius the Areopagite took from the Neoplatonists.”<sup>64</sup> Her five point structure therefore, originates from Plotinus. Thus not only in her understanding of the human person, but also in her perception of the soul’s journey to God, Underhill’s dependence on Plotinus is evident at this stage of her life.

As we pointed out earlier in this chapter, Underhill, even in this, the first phase of her spiritual life, does not share Plotinus’ view that the journey to God is made entirely through the efforts of the individual person. She certainly agrees with him, however, that the journey to God through the stages of the spiritual life is based on human desire and motivated by love. “Plotinus is at one with all the mystics,” she writes, “in declaring that the driving force which urges the soul along the pathway to reality is love.”<sup>65</sup> Underhill goes on to explain that for Plotinus love meant “active desire.”<sup>66</sup> Based on that broad understanding, she explains desire and love within the context of the awakening of the self

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<sup>64</sup> The three traditional stages of the spiritual life are the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways. While this structure is found in the writings of Origen in the third century, and was described by Pseudo-Dionysius three hundred years later, it was during the Middle Ages that it became established as the classic process of movement on the spiritual journey. Throughout *Mysticism*, Underhill displays a strong and comprehensive command of medieval understanding of the three stages of the spiritual life so that it is reasonable to assume that her understanding of Plotinus’ three stages was complemented by the explanations of the saints and mystics of that time. The point Underhill makes here is that this structure originated from Plotinus. Thus we can conclude that in the matter of Underhill’s development of her five stages, Plotinus was a formative influence. Thomas McGonigle, “Three Ways,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 963 - 965.

<sup>65</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 128.

<sup>66</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 128.

to God. First, there is an awakening to “a splendour without, [as] the Godhead is perceived as transcendent to, yet immanent in, the created universe.”<sup>67</sup> The self’s response to this is “awe and rapture rather than intimate affection.”<sup>68</sup> Then, as this crystallises into an awareness of the immanence of God – the Presence within – “love . . . takes the place of that joyous awe.”<sup>69</sup> Thus the journey to God is not only motivated by “sentiment” – awe and rapture – but becomes an “act of the will” founded in desire and love.<sup>70</sup> For Underhill, this also means God’s reaching out to the individual. That however, does not negate the need for effort on the part of the individual. Although she wrote, “man’s small desire is evoked, met and fulfilled by the Divine Desire,” she places great emphasis on human effort in the attainment of union with God.<sup>71</sup> To this end she speaks of the second stage in the spiritual journey – purification – under the headings of detachment and mortification<sup>72</sup> and comments on their practice in the following words: “The struggle of the self to disentangle itself from illusion and attain the Absolute is a life-long struggle.”<sup>73</sup> The use of Platonic language – “the Absolute” – and the repetition of the word “struggle” indicate the influence of Plotinus who saw union with God only in terms of human effort. As our

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<sup>67</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 195.

<sup>68</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 195.

<sup>69</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 197.

<sup>70</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 197.

<sup>71</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 128.

<sup>72</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 205 - 231.

<sup>73</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 229.



explorations unfold, we will see that Underhill's "white hot Neo-Platonist" period is characterised by an emphasis on human effort rather than on God's reaching out to humanity. Thus in the first stage of her spiritual life, her understanding of the human person is distinguished by the awareness of God's transcendence, a response of awe and rapture, and a keen realisation of the priority of human effort in achieving union with God.

We see, then, how the Plotinian notion of humanity underpins Underhill's perception of the human person. Though contrary to Plotinus she affirms God's love and reaching out towards the individual person, she builds her overall philosophy of humanity on the understanding provided by the philosopher. It complements the foundational framework by which she articulates her experience of Reality. Having explored the influence of Plotinus on Underhill's understanding of God and the human person, we now direct our attention to his influence on her perception of beauty.

### **C. Beauty**

When Underhill speaks of beauty, she does so within the broad perspective of "experiences and sensations."<sup>74</sup> In thus appealing to human experience in setting the context of beauty, she follows the example of her philosopher who called upon the experience of his listeners when he said that what is beautiful is welcomed by the soul as it "thrills with an immediate

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<sup>74</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 17.

delight” and “stirs anew.”<sup>75</sup> Within the context of experience, she also focuses our attention on the elusive nature of beauty which she claims has “a mysterious authority”<sup>76</sup> and which she names “a shadowy companion.”<sup>77</sup> There is no satisfactory explanation, she claims, for the attraction and admiration that certain aspects of the natural world evoke. “With all our busy seeking,” she says, “we have not found the sorting house where loveliness is extracted from the flux of things.”<sup>78</sup> For Underhill beauty has about it an attraction which cannot be ignored or denied. In the tradition of Plotinus who claimed that “all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form,” she identifies the source of its authority.<sup>79</sup> Citing Hegel she declares that “beauty . . . is merely the Spiritual making itself known sensuously.”<sup>80</sup> In the following words she explains what this means in relation to seeing something beautiful: “Here some of the veils of that substantial world are stripped off: Reality peeps through and is recognised.”<sup>81</sup> In explaining how Reality can be recognised, Underhill follows Plotinus. Her words that we recognise beauty because “we already possess something of Being”<sup>82</sup> through our kinship with God, echo his statement

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<sup>75</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 17.

<sup>77</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 20.

<sup>78</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 20.

<sup>79</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 21.

<sup>82</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 23.

that the soul has the capacity to recognise beauty “by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the noblest of Existents in the hierarchy of Being.”<sup>83</sup> Therefore, to experience beauty is to glimpse Reality – the divine Reality of God – which is, in Underhill’s words, “Perfect Beauty,”<sup>84</sup> “Absolute Beauty”<sup>85</sup> and in the words of Plotinus “the Fountain at once and the Principle of Beauty.”<sup>86</sup>

Having examined Underhill’s perception of beauty based on her understanding of the experience of beauty, its mystical quality and its source, we will now explore her particular way of seeing beauty.

In the recognition of beauty, Underhill does not depend on intellectual judgement concerning the beauty of specific objects. Although seeing beauty begins with sensible objects, to perceive beauty requires that the ordinary function of the eyes is bypassed for the sake of an intuition, a seeing or looking into what is perceived. She understands this as seeing with the “inward eye”<sup>87</sup> or letting “your soul be in your eyes.”<sup>88</sup> She also describes

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<sup>83</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 22.

<sup>85</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 9.

<sup>87</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 238.

<sup>88</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 301.

it as “opening the spiritual eye”<sup>89</sup> and “pure sight.”<sup>90</sup> This particular idea of seeing beauty mirrors that of Plotinus who urged his listeners to “see with the soul’s vision.”<sup>91</sup> In commenting upon Plotinus’ way of seeing, Miles carefully notes what she describes as a “critical feature” of his teaching, namely that “to see *as beautiful* is to perceive . . . [that] beauty is supplied by the great beauty.”<sup>92</sup> Thus in Plotinus’ understanding, to perceive beauty, or to see “as beautiful,” was to realise the Form of Beauty, to depth beauty itself. Underhill expresses the same idea within the context of that passage from *The Enneads* in which Plotinus described the choir gathered around the conductor.<sup>93</sup> Citing his words, she says that “when we do behold Him [the conductor] we attain the end of our existence and our rest.”<sup>94</sup> Seeing the conductor with the “inward eye,” or seeing as beautiful, is the secret of “pure sight” which brings harmony with God. She speaks about this kind of seeing within another context when she writes to a directee that “once it has happened to you to perceive that beauty is the ‘outward and visible sign’ of the greatest of sacraments, I don’t think you can ever again get hopelessly entangled by its merely visible side.”<sup>95</sup> The significant word here is “perceive” which for Underhill has the special meaning of looking

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<sup>89</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 307

<sup>90</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 308.

<sup>91</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 4.

<sup>92</sup> Margaret Miles, *Plotinus on Body and Soul* (Maldon: Blackwell, 1999), 42.

<sup>93</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 9, 8 - 9.

<sup>94</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 233.

<sup>95</sup> Underhill to M. R., (Margaret Robinson), 29. 11. 1904 in Underhill, *Letters*, 51.

within with the “inward eye” and has nothing to do with the “merely visible side.” Looked upon with the inner eye, the mystical quality and mysterious authority of beauty are recognised.

Underhill goes further in her adoption of the Plotinian concept of seeing “as beautiful.” In taking up his image of the choir gathered before the conductor, she draws attention to the harmony with the conductor which this way of seeing produces. When the soul sees with the inward eye, it encounters Absolute Beauty and is drawn into that Beauty. There it recognises its own beauty which arises from its kinship with God. Plotinus regarded this unity as the basis for moral responsibility. The soul “is, or tends to become, what it looks at,” he wrote.<sup>96</sup> In perceiving its own beauty and that of the One who is Goodness, the soul recognises the only path to a moral life is pursuit of beauty which leads to unity and goodness. For Plotinus therefore, the perception of beauty was foundational to ethical behaviour. Underhill expresses the same concept in different words. Speaking of beauty she states: “we receive her message and respond to it not because we understand but because we *must*.”<sup>97</sup> Here she is talking about a compulsion, a moral imperative by which those who encounter beauty “must” follow its attraction. Because that attraction is founded in Absolute Beauty, Truth and Goodness, those who encounter it “must” be drawn into Beauty, Truth and Goodness. Thus while their response is one of awe, reverence and

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<sup>96</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 4, 3, 8.

<sup>97</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 20.

rapture in the recognition of God, it also contains a moral dimension as they are drawn into Absolute Truth and Goodness. Underhill and Plotinus are at one therefore in placing beauty within human experience, in their particular way of seeing beauty and in the ethical dimension which is integral to its character.

In her explanation of beauty and her particular way of seeing beauty, Underhill links it with the analogy of the mystical journey to God. She calls beauty one of the “narrow ways going out towards the Absolute”<sup>98</sup> and “this path to reality.”<sup>99</sup> She names it one of the “spiritual messages” that is “central for life.”<sup>100</sup> She concludes that “the whole mystical ascent can be conceived as a movement through visible beauty to its invisible source, and thence to the inaccessible Beauty.”<sup>101</sup> In developing this aspect of the journey, Underhill again takes her cue from Plotinus. Describing the progress of the soul as it journeys towards the One, he wrote: “By only noting the flux of things it [the soul] knows at once that from elsewhere comes the beauty that floats upon them and so it is urged Thither, passionate in pursuit of what it loves . . . never giving up till it attain.”<sup>102</sup> Here he was speaking of beauty as a sign or stepping-stone which assists and encourages the soul along the way to its destination. His stepping-stone was the forerunner to Underhill’s “spiritual

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<sup>98</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 20.

<sup>99</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 23.

<sup>101</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 127.

<sup>102</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 7, 31.

message” of beauty which she says is a sign by which “the conscious self may reach the actuality it seeks.”<sup>103</sup> Thus does Plotinus provide for her the philosophical framework upon which she understands beauty as related to God and therefore to spirituality. The significance of this understanding will come into sharp focus in the following chapter.

We have sketched Underhill’s understanding of beauty by focusing on some of its many dimensions. Inspired by Plotinus, she develops a rich concept of the source of beauty, a way of seeing beauty and its place and function in the journey of the soul to God. Just as she considers the beautiful as a sign along that way, so she regards contemplation as integral to the journey. It is to an exploration of her understanding of contemplation that we now turn.

#### **D. Contemplation**

Our author’s understanding of contemplation, which she defines as “mystical prayer [which] establishes communion between the soul and the Absolute,” is governed by her perceptions of God, the human person and beauty, and is contained within the five stages of the spiritual journey as named above.<sup>104</sup> Although Plotinus did not describe a specific method of contemplation, his English follower at this later time uses his approach to contemplation in order to develop her own distinctive method.

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<sup>103</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 23.

<sup>104</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 304. See chap. 2, pp. 60 - 61 for Underhill’s five stages of the spiritual journey.

Plotinus set out his approach in the following words:

He that has strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of.<sup>105</sup>

He made this more explicit by advising that “you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you.”<sup>106</sup> He concluded by stating that “this is the only eye that sees the mighty Beauty.”<sup>107</sup>

In the following passage, Underhill sets out her method of contemplation, based on the Plotinian approach. Here she invites her reader to focus on an object – “almost anything we please: a picture, a statue, a tree, a distant hillside, a growing plant, running water, little living things.”<sup>108</sup> She continues:

Look, then, at this thing you have chosen. Wilfully, yet tranquilly refuse the messages which countless other aspects of the world are sending; and so concentrate your whole attention on this one act of loving sight that all other objects are excluded from the conscious. Do not think, but as it were pour out your personality towards it: let your soul be in your eyes. Almost at once, this new method of perception will reveal unsuspected qualities in the eternal world. First, you will perceive about you a strange and deepening quietness; a slowing down of our feverish mental time. Next you will be aware of a heightened significance, an

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<sup>105</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 8.

<sup>106</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 8.

<sup>107</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 301.



intensified existence in the thing at which you look. As you, with all your consciousness, lean out towards it, an answering current will meet yours. It seems as though the barrier between its life and your own, between subject and object, had melted away. You are merged with it, in an act of true communion and you *know* the secret of its being deeply and unforgettably, yet in a way you could never hope to express. . . . We have been immersed for a moment in the “life of the All”: a deep and peaceful love unites us with the substance of things, a ‘Mystical Marriage’ has taken place between the mind and some aspect of the external world . . . Life had spoken to life, but not to the surface-intelligence. That surface-intelligence knows only the message was true and beautiful: no more.<sup>109</sup>

The constant emphasis of this instruction is on looking and seeing as Underhill echoes Plotinus’ teaching to “close the eyes and call upon another vision.” She explains this as letting “your soul be in your eyes” or seeing with the eyes of the soul. That she regards this as central to contemplation is illustrated in the following passage:

Nature herself reveals little of her secret to those who only look and listen with the outward ear and eye. The condition of all valid seeing and hearing, upon every plane of consciousness, lies not in the sharpening of the senses, but in a peculiar attitude of the whole personality: in a self-forgetting attentiveness, a profound concentration, a self-merging, which operates a real communion between the seer and the seen – in a word, in *Contemplation*.<sup>110</sup>

The seeing of which she speaks – valid seeing that is well-founded, sound and carries authority – is not about ordinary sight. Synonymous with the particular way of seeing discussed in the previous section of this chapter, it arises from a “particular attitude” of the whole self which enables one to see with the eyes of the soul. It is about a coming together of seer and the seen – in other words a coming together of God who is Beauty, and the

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<sup>109</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 301 - 302.

<sup>110</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 313.

human person whose kinship with God gives beauty to the soul. For Underhill, as for Plotinus, this kind of seeing lies at the heart of that communion which is contemplation. Underhill drives home even further the importance of participation through this unique way of seeing when she says that God is disclosed to the soul in contemplation “by way of participation, not by observation.”<sup>111</sup>

This concentrated way of seeing has special requirements. Firstly, one must “refuse the messages” of the world and exclude “all other subjects” from the mind. At the same time, one must apply the will by concentration on and attention to the object of focus or as Underhill describes it “pour out your personality towards it.” Here her instruction resonates with Plotinus’ words to “withdraw . . . forego . . . turn away.” There follows a gradual development of perception, and with it communion, as “an answering current will meet yours.” “You will perceive . . . you will be aware . . . you are merged . . . you *know*.” For Underhill, this way of seeing takes one beyond the object of focus to what she describes as “unsuspected qualities in the eternal world.” There she says “you are merged . . . in an act of true communion . . . you have been immersed for a moment in the ‘life of the All. . . . Life has spoken to life.” While this process begins in the physical act of seeing, it concludes not in the “surface intelligence” but “deeply and unforgettably . . . in a way you could never hope to express.” Underhill describes it as “a touch of the sublime”<sup>112</sup> and a

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<sup>111</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 333.

<sup>112</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 302.

communion in which the soul “touches the Absolute.”<sup>113</sup> In this she closely follows Plotinus who likened the nature of the soul’s seeing, which is the moment of contemplation, to a “touch with God” that is charged with “very light.”<sup>114</sup>

Underhill’s understanding of contemplation shows therefore a strong Plotinian influence. The key points of her method mirror his approach – from purification of the senses, to a special kind of vision, to the “brief act” of contemplation or “touch with God.” However, one point of difference in their understanding of contemplation reflects the disparity in their perception of God. Irrespective of concentrated participation through the methods she provides, Underhill emphasises that contemplation is “an experience of the All . . . the Absolute,” that is “*given* rather than attained.”<sup>115</sup> As she says in the passage above – “you are merged” – *you* are the object of this action. For Underhill, contemplation – that “brief act” or “touch with God” – is the action of God.<sup>116</sup> Contrastingly, Plotinus regarded contemplation solely as the task and effort of the human person: God does not reach out to those who seek communion in contemplation. Rather, when the soul through its inward vision reaches its inner and truest self, God is there and thus there is communion. “The vision,” Plotinus says, “is not of something that must enter but of something present before

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<sup>113</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 21.

<sup>114</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 9, 9.

<sup>115</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 333.

<sup>116</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 331.

all else.”<sup>117</sup> As our study continues, we will return to the theme of contemplation. While at this first stage in her spiritual life Underhill’s response to God’s self-gift in contemplation is one of awe and rapture, we will note how that response develops at a deeper level, as desire and love become the motivating forces of her spiritual life.

Earlier in this chapter, we noted how Underhill understands beauty as a spiritual message or stepping stone along the spiritual journey to God. We have now seen how, reflecting her Plotinian influences, she perceives contemplation as a way of union with God throughout that journey. Because she often speaks of both beauty and contemplation in relation to visual art and the work of the artist, we now turn our attention to that subject.

#### **E. Art and the artist**

Underhill’s understanding of art and artists is well illustrated through one of her fictional characters who reflects on a group of artists busily going about its work. She writes:

It seemed that some other element, which transcended mind . . . dominated them. A strange magnetism was prevalent: a peculiar power which imposed itself on the hands and minds of the craftsmen. . . . Some faint shadow of the transcendental pattern . . . had begun to appear before the eyes of the workers.<sup>118</sup>

In this short passage Underhill makes a number of observations about artists and how they work. Firstly, she notes that they are dominated by “some other element,” “some faint

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<sup>117</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 5, 5, 8.

<sup>118</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 116.

shadow” or “transcendental pattern” which is greater than themselves, but which their eyes in some way behold. This not only dominates, but also draws the artists to it in a way that cannot be ignored. The desire that arises within artistic spirits is the result of the “strange magnetism” which finds expression in the art-object. Their artistic creations therefore are not only their own work, but originate from the “peculiar power” that draws them to itself. The sense and context of Underhill’s passage confirms that she is speaking here about the relationship of artists with God. Aware of their affinity with God, they see beyond the sensuous world and they disclose their vision through their works. Plotinus expressed a corresponding idea when he said of artists that their works “go back to the Ideas from which nature derives.”<sup>119</sup>

Underhill expresses the same thinking when she states that “artists stand in peculiar relation to the phenomenal world, receiving truths and beauties which are hidden from other men.”<sup>120</sup> In other words, they are what Plotinus called “holders of beauty.”<sup>121</sup>

Underhill clarifies the origin of these truths and beauties when she declares they come from “contact of the artistic mind with the archetypal or . . . transcendental world: the

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<sup>119</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 5, 8, 1. Plotinus’ relatively few words on art and the artist compared with his many on beauty and its source draw into focus the priority he gave to beauty when depicted in a work of art. A. H. Armstrong suggests a reason for this. “He [Plotinus] is only interested in the beauty of art, or of nature, as a help in our ascent to the intelligible beauty and beyond its source, the Good. A. H. Armstrong ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 233.

<sup>120</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 75.

<sup>121</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 5, 8, 1.

underlying verity of things.”<sup>122</sup> However, artists have limitations in their portrayal of truth and beauty. “Whether they are trying to give us aesthetic or religious truth – [they] must always descend one step from the levels of contemplation, and in so doing leave something behind.”<sup>123</sup> The “something” that is left behind is the completeness and fullness of their vision which is beyond any artistic representation. Irrespective of limitations, however, Underhill sees the artist as “mediator between his brethren and the Divine,” who enables humanity to see beyond the surface world of the senses, to the ultimate world of spiritual Reality.<sup>124</sup> As Plotinus expressed it – works of art “go back to the Ideas from which nature derives.”

Given the position of artists in relation to God and the nature of their work, Underhill asks the question: “What is the characteristic that confers greatness on a work of art?”<sup>125</sup> She responds:

Surely the fact that in some degree it weaves together two worlds; gives sensuous expression to the fruits of contemplation, and conveys to us a certain savour of the Infinite by means of finite things.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 74.

<sup>123</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and other Essays*, containing works previously published in *The Essentials of Mysticism*, *Mixed Pastures* and *The House of the Soul*. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995). 111.

<sup>124</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 75.

<sup>125</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*, 108.

<sup>126</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*, 108.

For her, then, a great work of art is born in the act of contemplation. Only in attentiveness to God can thoughts arise that enable and inspire great subjects and great artistry. Then artists have the capacity to link earthly existence and divine Reality. Part of the artists' genius is that they are not confined to the presentation of two separate levels of existence, but can "weave together" the finite and the Infinite in a way that reflects the union of humanity with God. The beholders of a work therefore see a synthesis and harmony that draws them into the unity of God. Underhill points out the special quality of that unity. It empowers the beholder to "savour" the Infinite. Through the use of the word "savour," she gives the sense of the uniquely personal experience of tasting with pleasure. Thus, for her the great work of art is one which causes her to drink in and taste what she beholds and to do so with lingering pleasure and delight. This intimate image of her as "beholder" underpins her understanding of art.<sup>127</sup>

Underhill then sets out what is required of the artist if a great work of art is to be produced:

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<sup>127</sup> Relevant to Underhill's way of beholding a work of art is Miles' speculation about Plotinus and art. She takes up a suggestion that Plotinus' ideas might be expressed in a painting by eliminating depth and bringing figures to the foreground (thereby eliminating shadows, hollows and muted colours) and thus illuminating the work from within with light and radiance. This in turn gives the effect of an emanation of spiritual light which attracts the beholder's inner vision and invites a merger with the painting. See Eric Alliez and Michel Feher, "Reflections of a Soul," *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* Part Two, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), 66 - 67. Miles speaks about this suggestion in consideration of an art work in the Roman catacombs contemporaneous with Plotinus' time in Rome. She describes a painting (lacking in depth) of a male face whose eyes and brow are modelled by light so that the beholder's attention is drawn to the eyes which reflect the radiance and beauty of the soul. Thus she is suggesting that Plotinus could well have influenced painters of his day and that the ways of implementing his ideas of beauty in a work of art have come down through the centuries. Thus what attracts Underhill as she beholds a work of art could well have come from Plotinus' influence on artistry in general as well as his written word. Miles, *Plotinus*, 47 - 48.

1. The contact in his soul's depths with the reality which lies beyond sense. 2. Its translation into symbolic forms which are accessible to the senses, and with which the rational mind can deal. 3. The energetic will, which selects, moulds and creates from this material a picture, a melody, a poem.<sup>128</sup>

These three points are solidly founded in the core of Plotinian teaching that artists are holders of beauty and that their works reflect or go back to the Absolute Beauty, the One. Underhill understands that the subject of a work of art is the Infinite – the Beauty of God which the artist perceives “in his soul's depth.” It is only through “energetic will” and contact with the Infinite through contemplation that the artist will achieve this. Plotinus spoke of a work of art and the task of the artist in the same way. He taught that when, through purification and contemplation, the artist called upon “another vision” and depicted that vision in art form, so that work reflected the Absolute Beauty of God. Beauty issued from the artist because it was born in the moral goodness achieved through purification, and the union with God achieved through contemplation. Thus Underhill and Plotinus converge in that each sees aesthetic values to have a moral edge.

In a significant expression of her own experience of beholding a work of art, Underhill asks what power can account for what she describes as:

The peculiar stimulus which is given by great art to something in us, which ordinary arguments cannot reach: the solemn thrill of the numinous, removed perhaps at several degrees, but still operative which is felt when we stand in the

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<sup>128</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and other Essays*, 109.



Cathedral of Chartres, listen to a Beethoven symphony or read *The Ancient Mariner*.”<sup>129</sup>

She concludes that this power lies in “the touchstone and secret of art,” which is “the power of conveying ecstasy.”<sup>130</sup> And so art penetrates the human spirit to a depth nothing else can reach, and awakens there that kinship with God which is at the heart of the “solemn thrill of the numinous.” Then the soul is swept beyond the senses into the Reality of God.

Underhill’s perception of beauty, though so strongly influenced by Plotinus, also echoes the sentiments of other writers and artists. Her early writing evidences the reading of William Blake as does the extensive Blake bibliography included in *Mysticism*. Menzies mentions that “she [Underhill] was devoted to William Blake.”<sup>131</sup> Among a number of Blake references in the Underhill corpus is that “painting as well as music and poetry exists and exults in immortal thoughts.”<sup>132</sup> John Ruskin, a contemporary of her early years and a major influence on public artistic taste in the Victorian era, is rarely mentioned by Underhill, yet her writing on beauty and art often contains the flavour of his thinking.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*, 108 - 109.

<sup>130</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*, 108.

<sup>131</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II, 9.

<sup>132</sup> William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, cited in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 74.

<sup>133</sup> For references to Ruskin in Underhill’s writings see introductory citations for two chapters in Underhill, *The Lost Word* (London: Heinemann, 1907), 1 and 104. Also see Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 15.4.1898. The reason that Underhill never cited his work to any significant extent may have been her fixed policy to distance herself from “particular parties or movements” or indeed controversial characters (which Ruskin was considered to be) because she felt they “reduced the area within which I can operate.” Underhill

His stance that beauty, “a gift of God,” contains a moral dimension is certainly reflected in her thinking.<sup>134</sup> Her words resonate with his observation that though a person will say that the beautiful thing “gratifies, fills, hallows, exalts his mind . . . he will not be able to say why, or how.”<sup>135</sup> Underhill’s experience of the power of beauty “which ordinary arguments cannot reach,” is confirmed by scholars of more recent times. Tillich speaks of being “grasped by a work of art,”<sup>136</sup> while Brown writes of “the sheerly delightful within perception.”<sup>137</sup> Tracy describes the same experience in the following words. “We find ourselves ‘caught up’ in [the works of art’s] world, we are shocked, surprised, challenged by its startling beauty *and* its recognizable truth, its instinct for the essential.”<sup>138</sup> In his discussion of Maritain’s aesthetic, Williams writes that art “opens up the dimension in which ‘things are more than they are,’ ‘give more than they have’.”<sup>139</sup> Thus Underhill,

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to Conrad Noel, 1 March 1933 in Underhill, *Letters*.

<sup>134</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters: A Volume of Selections* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1935), 93, 97.

<sup>135</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters: A Volume of Selections*, 19.

<sup>136</sup> Paul Tillich, “Address on the Occasion of the Opening of the New Galleries and Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art,” in *Paul Tillich, On Art and Architecture* ed. John Dillenberger & Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 247.

<sup>137</sup> Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 11.

<sup>138</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 110. Hereafter cited as *The Analogical Imagination*.

<sup>139</sup> Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*, (London: Morehouse Continuum Books, 2006) 37. Hereafter cited as *Grace and Necessity*.

while firmly grounded in the Plotinian philosophical dimension of beauty, resonates with other powerful voices in her understanding of beauty – the “shadowy companion.”<sup>140</sup>

In the previous discussion on Underhill’s perception of beauty, we saw how Plotinus provided her with the philosophical structure on which to base her understanding of the relationship between God and beauty. Now, in this section, we have explored how the philosopher enabled her to develop, using the same framework, an understanding of visual art in relation to God and beauty. As the concepts of beauty and visual art are drawn together within the perspective of God, their relationship will become a solid philosophical basis on which Underhill will interpret ongoing experience and build further understanding. So far in this chapter, we have explored Underhill’s understanding of God, the human person, beauty, contemplation, and art and the artist in relation to her reading of the philosopher, Plotinus. We have limited this exploration to the first phase of her spiritual life. What is clearly revealed is that her approach has been deeply affected by the philosophy of Plotinus. While in some instances she further develops his teaching – as in the case of God – her perception is firmly grounded in the words of *The Enneads*. Throughout our exploration of the influence of Plotinus on Underhill we have concentrated on her writings of a spiritual nature. We now shift our attention to her fictional writings. Though we will return to this area of her writing in the following chapter, at this point we will limit our investigation to the Plotinian influence in the Underhill novels.

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<sup>140</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 20.

## 2. Plotinus in Underhill's novels

Our author's three novels, all written prior to 1910, have strong Plotinian overtones. In particular her first novel, *The Grey World* – a highly autobiographical work – reflects the thinking gained from *The Enneads*. One scene in particular illustrates this. In the story the central character, Willie Hopkinson, visits the National Gallery. In the Tuscan room, he sits down and is captivated by the painting before him – *The Virgin and Child with Two Angels*.<sup>141</sup> He contemplates the meaning of the work. His reaction is thus described:

He asked himself what could be the spirit of loveliness if it were not a penetration of the visible by the real: a link between truth and idea for which he had been groping all his life. . . . Beauty seemed to offer him an assurance of exquisite realities to be given to those who desired them in faith and love. He looked at the quiet pictures . . . they seemed to him so many windows built towards heaven. He had a new vision of the world. He saw it as a shadow cast by divine beauty – a loveliness of which material beauty was the sacrament, the faint image thrown by God on the mirror of sense. . . . He was held a prisoner in time and space. But her [the Madonna's] bowers stretched into the invisible. . . . He recognised that the inarticulate ecstasy which came to him in the presence of all beautiful things . . . was a way of approach to God.<sup>142</sup>

This is a highly Neoplatonic scene. Willie sees beyond the surface painting. He looks within the work and realises that in beauty the real becomes apparent. The real is not the world he sees about him but the only Reality – God. Though he lives in a world of time and space, his loving desire leads him beyond that confine to awe and rapture in the

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<sup>141</sup> Andres del Verrocchio, *The Virgin and Child with Two Angels*, tempera on wood, c 1438 - 1488, The National Gallery, London. See Appendix 2, p. 421.

<sup>142</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 238 - 241.

presence of God. He experiences beauty as a way to God. This scene then draws together the salient features of Plotinian teaching. That Underhill builds into her plot and her fictional characters such a strong Plotinian flavour shows not only the depth of Plotinus' influence but also her comprehensive understanding of his teachings. That she uses a work of art in doing this shows the significant place visual art is beginning to hold in her spiritual outlook.

This conclusion is keenly supported by those Underhill scholars who are familiar with her novels. Armstrong points to the Plotinian influence in *The Grey World* when he declares that "Plotinus and Dante are her chief authorities for most of Willie's experiences."<sup>143</sup> Greene makes similar connections claiming that this novel's message is that "beauty points to a world beyond."<sup>144</sup> She also highlights the strong Plotinian theme in Underhill's second novel, *The Lost Word*. The autobiographical nature of this work emerges in its "restatement of Underhill's principal concern, the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds, both real worlds that are linked together."<sup>145</sup> Two years after the publication of *The Lost Word*, Underhill completed her third novel, *The Column of Dust*. Again, Armstrong emphasises its inspiration in "the mental world of Plotinian intelligences."<sup>146</sup> He names Underhill's fictional character – the Watcher – "this Plotinian

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<sup>143</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 68.

<sup>144</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 16.

<sup>145</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 22.

<sup>146</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 75.

‘watcher,’” and “a denizen of Plotinus’ world of intelligible spirit,” whose conversation centres on the discrepancies which can arise between appearance and reality.<sup>147</sup> Both Armstrong and Greene have no doubt that Underhill draws on her comprehensive knowledge of Neoplatonism in all three novels – all written prior to 1910.<sup>148</sup> Armstrong goes so far as to claim that Underhill’s encounter with Plotinus’ philosophy was the first of four major discoveries that she made prior to 1903.<sup>149</sup> The strong Plotinian influence evident in Underhill’s early spiritual writings is therefore also unmistakably obvious in her novels. His thoughts and words ground her spiritual understanding, shape the pattern of her stories, and fashion her characters.

### **3. Overview and critical analysis of Underhill’s spirituality in its first stage**

How then, did the undeniable Plotinian influence shape Underhill’s spirituality during this first phase of her spiritual life? What picture can be drawn of Underhill during these highly significant and formative years?

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<sup>147</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 74.

<sup>148</sup> In 1892, when Underhill was seventeen years of age, she wrote a short essay entitled “A Woman’s Thoughts About Silence.” Though she does not name Plotinus or cite him at any stage, the essay is suggestive of the philosopher’s teaching about silence and the unquestioning acceptance of suffering. This suggests that her writing was influenced by Plotinus even prior to the novels. Underhill, “A Woman’s Thoughts About Silence,” in *Hearth and Home*, 1892. Archives box 5/1. Underhill Collection.

<sup>149</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 83.

Underhill's most concise and comprehensive statement regarding the contribution made by Plotinus to spirituality in general was made in 1917. Though speaking of his effect on others, she could well have been speaking about the philosopher's influence on her own life and spirituality during the years from the mid 1890s to approximately 1913. She writes of Plotinus:

Being himself both a mystic and a philosopher, he gave to the Christian and Mohammedan contemplatives of the Middle Ages a system which allowed them to rationalise and make intelligible to others the most intimate and elusive experiences of their soul. On his great chart, bare and forbidding though it might seem in some respects, all succeeding adventurers were able to mark their course and register their discoveries. Over and over again, at wide intervals of time and place, we find these wayfarers resorting to his language in their efforts to describe to us their voyage and its ineffable end. Even more than Plato, whom the early Germans called "that great pastor," he has proved a foster-father of the invisible Church of the saints.<sup>150</sup>

In this passage, our author focuses on the most significant influence of Plotinus when she highlights the system or philosophical framework which he provided whereby the experiences of the soul could be reflected upon, accounted for and articulated. Equally significant, in Underhill's opinion, was the practical dimension of Plotinus' system. Its great chart offered a course or way of living in response to the understood experiences of the soul. It is these same features which so clearly influenced Underhill during the first phase of her spiritual life. The Plotinian philosophy became the framework for her understanding of the religious impulse in general and her experience of life. It provided the conceptual tools and the language whereby she accounted for and articulated that impulse

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<sup>150</sup> Underhill, "A Foster-father of the Church," 9.

and experience. It is upon these structures that her spirituality developed, characterised by those aspects we have explored in this chapter – namely God, the human person, beauty, contemplation and visual art.

Underhill's understanding of God is foundational to the philosophical framework that underpins her spirituality directing as it does her entire thinking. Guided by Plotinus she describes God in both positive and negative terms against a broad background of dynamic cosmic dimension. This emphasises the transcendence, mystery and ineffability of God – the paradox of the Deity which is central to her experience. In this sense, God is abstract, impersonal and remote. However, as we have seen, Underhill also has a definite knowledge of God as an immanent, loving and personal Presence who reaches out to humanity. Integral to her understanding of the paradox of the deity, this contrasting image adds a rich and fertile dimension to her perception of God. But what is clear about Underhill's sense of God during the years we are discussing is that it is dominated by the Plotinian transcendent, abstract and impersonal Deity, rather than images of a loving and personal God. This is the period in which Underhill later described herself as “a white-hot Neo-Platonist”<sup>151</sup> – her years of an “intelligent and irresponsible sort of theism.”<sup>152</sup> Here the distinction between Underhill's sense or experience and her knowledge comes into focus. Though she knows of an immanent and loving God, her overpowering sense is of

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<sup>151</sup> Underhill to The Same, (Margaret Cropper), Tues., 1932 in Underhill, *Letters*, 206.

<sup>152</sup> Underhill to Mrs Meyrick Heath 14. 5. 1911 in Underhill, *Letters*, 125.



the transcendence and otherness of God. Firmly grounded in Plotinian thinking, she does not as yet have the framework whereby to interpret adequately her knowledge of the immanence of God. Although, as she approaches the Christocentric phase of her spiritual life, Underhill will move towards the realisation of an immanent and loving God, the concept of God gained from Plotinus remains an enduring presence and guiding force throughout her life. Menzies bears witness to this when she writes that “if one were asked to say in one word what was the heart of Evelyn Underhill’s teaching, it would surely be – God. Adoration was for her *the* essential.”<sup>153</sup> Underhill confirms this when, towards the end of her life, she writes that “God alone matters, God alone Is – creation only matters because of Him.”<sup>154</sup> Formed and shaped by the Plotinian image of the Deity, her theocentric spirituality during this early period of her life is grounded in a transcendent, abstract, and impersonal God – the source of all life and the Absolute Reality.

This is the background against which Underhill understands the meaning of her own life. Again, Plotinus provided the simple structure by which she does this. Having come from God, she shares a kinship with God. She therefore belongs to God and consequently is destined for God. This accounts for her sense of living simultaneously in two sorts of reality – the natural and the spiritual – and her innate instinct for the transcendent which

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<sup>153</sup> Menzies, “Memoir” in Underhill, *Christ our Light*, 15.

<sup>154</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, 5.

gives rise to a desire for union with God. It is also the context of her immediate response to God which is one of awe, rapture and reverence expressed in the prayer of adoration.

Following Plotinus' practical response to the meaning of life, Underhill understands her spiritual life in terms of a journey to God. The chart or map as supplied by her philosopher has certain characteristics and contains certain conditions. A journey of self-transformation, its negotiation requires constant self-purification and concerted effort as the traveller passes through its various stages. Along the journey, the stepping-stone of beauty assists the passage, and the practice of contemplation facilitates the way. These characteristics or conceptual tools of spirituality are the means by which the Plotinian influence forms Underhill's thinking against the broad dimension of the transcendent and mysterious God. They ensure a distinctive shape to her spirituality.

Among the most significant aspects of that shape is that Underhill's image of the spiritual life as a journey means that her spirituality is organic – a living adventure of colour and life. She acknowledges this Plotinian influence in the following words:

Whilst many philosophers have spent their powers on proving the necessary existence of an unglimped universe which shall satisfy the cravings of the mind, Plotinus spent his in making a map, based on his own adventures in "that country which is no mere vision, but a home;" and his apparently rigid contours and gradients are attempts to tell at least the characteristics of a living land.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 119.

For Underhill the spiritual life is about journeying through a living land that is a home. It is filled therefore with familiar sights, pulsates with the circumstances and events of everyday life and is filled with personal experience. Part of the adventure of the journey is its mysterious element. While the way is upwards to God, it is also inwards to the depths of her soul where God is present. Louth captures the origin of this paradoxical element of Underhill's spirituality when he writes of the Plotinian journey that "one climbs up by climbing in, as it were."<sup>156</sup> But the rigid contours and gradients which must be negotiated are another part of the adventure. They call for lively and concentrated effort which arises only from genuine desire.

Irrespective of the organic character of Underhill's spirituality, it is also deeply private and personal. During this first phase of her spiritual life, her journey to God is made alone. As we saw in chapter one, even from an early age she was naturally inclined towards personal introspection and solitude.<sup>157</sup> Menzies draws attention to her friend's other-worldly orientation when she writes that "Evelyn had been born with a spirit which could never be satisfied by the outward and visible world."<sup>158</sup> Plotinus' words that the journey to the One was "liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of the earth, the passing of solitary to solitary," resonated with and reinforced Underhill's

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<sup>156</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 40.

<sup>157</sup> See chap. 1, pp. 18 - 19.

<sup>158</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II, 2.

innate private approach to spirituality.<sup>159</sup> She expresses her own feelings about this when she writes that “the more one talks over one’s inwards experiences and compares it with that of others, the more one cheapens it. . . . Each spiritual life is unique and its personal quality should be above all things respected.”<sup>160</sup> However, it is from the direction given to Underhill by her spiritual director, von Hügel, that we learn most about this aspect of her spirituality.<sup>161</sup> In 1921 he advised that she broaden the “exclusive” or “pure” mysticism that characterised her spirituality and that she reflect on the historical and incarnational dimensions of religion. A statement made many years after the period which we are discussing in this chapter, it nonetheless sheds light on the degree to which Underhill’s spirituality took on a deeply private character during that period. Having by this time set aside active participation in the Anglican Church and therefore lacking a spiritual community, her spirituality was largely self-reliant and self-directed. Though she knew of a loving God who reached out to those making the spiritual journey, she did not have the philosophical framework by which to interpret and understand fully this as part of personal experience. This had two effects. Negatively, it contributed significantly to the exaggerated introspection and sense of isolation which colour her thinking during the next phase of her spiritual life. As this thesis unfolds, we will see how she gradually moves out of this isolation as her private approach to spirituality expands. Positively, it gives her spirituality

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<sup>159</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6, 9, 11.

<sup>160</sup> Underhill to The Same, (Margaret Robinson), 1. 12. 1909 in Underhill, *Letters*, 107.

<sup>161</sup> Von Hügel to Underhill, 29. 10. 1921. Section 11. Von Hügel Collection.

a strength and independence which characterise the first phase of her spiritual life and which would endure through the years.

Part of the vibrancy, life and colour of Underhill's spirituality is her recognition that beauty is a way to God. This includes all manner of natural beauty, beauty of soul and, in a special way for her, beauty as expressed in visual art. Once again, Plotinus showed her this through his stepping-stones of beauty along the spiritual journey. But in following Plotinus, this aspect of Underhill's spirituality goes deeper than mere external recognition of beauty. Though she never fully understands beauty, Underhill has a philosophical appreciation of its source and power. When Plotinus showed her the way to see or behold a beautiful object by looking with the inner eye, he provided her with a framework of perception whereby she is drawn into that source and power. Therefore, as she beholds the beautiful with the eyes of her soul, she encounters God who is Absolute Beauty. This way of seeing, integral to her capacity to behold beauty, gives a particular shape to her spirituality in that it is both interior and yet highly visual. This is especially obvious in Underhill's appreciation of visual art. In beholding a work of art, she encounters the beauty of God as external vision becomes inner perception. In the following chapters of our study, we will have cause to become aware of the extent to which visual art shapes her spirituality. However, it is at this first stage of her spiritual journey that the philosophical framework for that influence is firmly established.

That beauty holds such a central position in spirituality has long been recognised. St Augustine addresses God as “Beauty at once so ancient and yet so new.”<sup>162</sup> In recent times von Balthasar has acknowledged the centrality of beauty when he begins his entire works of theological studies by declaring that “beauty is the word that shall be our first.”<sup>163</sup> Bentley Hart also confirms the significance of beauty when he states the question that is the catalyst for his writing on theological aesthetics: “Is the beauty to whose persuasive power the Christian rhetoric of evangelism inevitably appeals, and upon which it depends, theologically defensible?”<sup>164</sup> That Underhill, who “had an eye alert and avid for every kind of beauty,” should give priority to the beautiful, confirms the influence of Plotinus in her early spirituality and places her within one of the earliest, richest and most enduring traditions of Christianity.<sup>165</sup>

Underhill’s spiritual journey to God also includes the practice of contemplation or the prayer of communion with God. This aspect of her spirituality is founded on the particular way of seeing that is integral to the beholding of beauty, and in the discipline of attention to God. Therefore, the foundational structure of her method of contemplation is Plotinian. Underhill further develops that structure, however, as she moves through a process which

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<sup>162</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions* trans. and with an introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 231.

<sup>163</sup> Hans von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* vol.1, *Seeing the Form* ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 18.

<sup>164</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

centres her entire being on God. This structured and definite method of seeking union with God gives her spirituality a disciplined and practical character. Being participatory, her spirituality is part of the vibrant and organic nature of her journey to God. It is in the contemplative aspect of her spirituality that Underhill most clearly indicates its embryonic relational character. Though in this first phase of her spirituality she does not appreciate fully God's reaching out to her, in contemplation she does experience a Divine Power which she describes as "the touch of the sublime."<sup>166</sup> Thus the recognition of the loving desire of God for humankind, which later becomes a powerful force in her spirituality, is already entering her experience. While the practice of contemplation provides Underhill's spirituality with vibrant and relational contours, it is contemplation's distinctly practical character which most clearly shapes her spiritual life. It is the means whereby she seeks and expresses communion with God which is the ultimate goal of the journey.

The Plotinian influence on Underhill's spirituality, expressed in her understanding of God, the human person, beauty, visual art and contemplation is also evident in her three novels. That the philosopher's impact emerges within their pages indicates its far-reaching effects on his follower. Greene highlights his significance in Underhill's thinking by commenting

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<sup>165</sup> Barkway, "Great Pastors – X. Evelyn Underhill," 368.

<sup>166</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 302.

that “certainly her reading of Plotinus and others ignited in her a sense of the Divine.”<sup>167</sup> Johnson gives a more precise opinion when he writes of Underhill that “her sympathetic reading of Plotinus and other Neoplatonist writings were the philosophies which drew her into what she called her period of theism.”<sup>168</sup> This was the formative period of her life when the Plotinian influence was at its strongest. Its most significant aspect lies at this foundational level where he provides her with a philosophical framework and the conceptual tools by which to interpret the religious impulse in general and her own experience in particular. As she adopts his thinking and appropriates his language, her foundational spirituality takes on a distinctive and strong Plotinian flavour. Theocentric, organic, adventurous, private and practical, Underhill’s spiritual life is a journey during which beauty and contemplation are her constant companions, awe and rapture her response, and adoration her prayer. This is the base or ground of her spiritual life upon which other experiences are interpreted and understood, and further development takes place. Even though towards the end of the first phase of her spiritual life Underhill begins to critically evaluate Neoplatonic philosophy, it will remain an enduring and formative presence.

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<sup>167</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*. 12.

<sup>168</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 70.



## **4. Conclusion**

This chapter has aimed at presenting an overview of the foundational aspects of Underhill's spirituality in its first phase from the mid 1890s to 1913, during which Plotinus was the dominant influence. As we move into Chapter 3, we will remain in this timeframe as we explore other formative influences of her spirituality.

## **Chapter 3: THE EXPERIENCE AND INFLUENCE OF ART**

In the previous chapter, we explored the influence of the Neoplatonic philosopher, Plotinus, on Underhill during the first phase of her spiritual life. This chapter will investigate her encounter with art works of Continental Europe during that same period (1898 – 1907). We therefore continue the first and second phases of the methodology as we pursue a description of the data under investigation while at the same time engaging in preliminary constructive interpretation of Underhill's experience of visual art. The chapter has four sections:

1. A description of her aesthetic experience of visual art and church architecture in Italy and France
2. Her account of such experience as it appears in her fictional writings.
3. An overview and critical analysis of the effects of her Continental experience on her spirituality during its first stage.
4. Conclusion

### **1. Travels in Continental Europe**

From 1898 to 1907, Underhill travelled to the Continent nine times. These visits provided material that is relevant to our topic. We will, therefore, treat the most significant

separately, and comment on what the traveller gained on each occasion. After that, we shall be in a position to come to some conclusions as to their significance in her development.

#### **A. Journey of 1898**

In 1898, when Underhill was 22-years-old, she made the first of many visits to Continental Europe. She marks her arrival in Italy with a simple entry, not in her diary, but significantly in her birthday book – “I entered Italy for the first time.”<sup>1</sup> Menzies comments on this short statement. “These facts were so tremendous for her then and were so greatly to affect her life that no words were needed to elaborate them.”<sup>2</sup> Visiting Italy signals a new phase in Underhill’s life – an awakening whose record belongs appropriately in her birthday book.

Even before she reaches her destination in Italy in the company of her parents, her train journey across the Continent suggests that the time ahead will hold a deep significance.

After a 20-minute passage through a tunnel in Switzerland, she observes:

When we came out on the Italian side of the Alps it was less sunny and the scenery was not so fine. But it was most interesting to gradually creep down from mid winter, to where the snow was only on the tops of the hills, & then to broad valleys

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<sup>1</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II. 7.

with green grass & larches in leaf, & then from almond blossom & finally banks of primroses.<sup>3</sup>

Gradually, as the train creeps on its journey, Underhill moves from snow clad mountains where visibility is reduced by the mists and fog of winter, to the colour and life of the European spring. It is a slow journey from mountain top to broad valley. This is a passage from the darkness of winter to the full light of summer – into “a blazing sun in the bluest sky I ever dreamt of,”<sup>4</sup> and where the “colouring is perfect.”<sup>5</sup> It is a voyage into beauty. In describing her journey in these words, our traveller gives a sense that she is thinking of more than her present experience. As we shall see in this chapter, this open, luminous space symbolises a new range of perception. A spiritual adventure begins as she journeys into the “broad valleys” of colour and light. After leaving her home clad in grey winter, she is now under open blue skies.

At Lugano, where she arrives on Holy Thursday, 1898, she spends an hour rowing on Lake Maggiore. There she makes the first of many sketches originating during her Continental travels.<sup>6</sup> While on the lake, she passes many villages where “the population was having a

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<sup>3</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 6. 4. 1898.

<sup>4</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 7. 4. 1898.

<sup>5</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 8. 4. 1898.

<sup>6</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 7. 4. 1898. Underhill’s pencil sketches and very few watercolours are contained in ten small sketchbooks, some of which are only partially filled. Forty-seven of the sketches have been illustrated in Underhill, *Shrines and Cities of France and Italy*. Underhill also took many photographs. Of the quality available at that time, a small collection of these photographs is preserved. Sketchbooks, 6/1 - 6/10; Photographs, 7/1 - 7/7. Underhill Collection.

grand clean-up for Easter; washing their clothes in the lake and scouring their copper things.”<sup>7</sup> She records her joy at seeing the Luini frescoes in the church at Lugano. With her Plotinian sensibilities, she describes such sights as “charming” and “full of beautiful feeling.” She experiences the power of beauty to attract her. The Luini frescoes, “the first Italian painting seen in Italy” cause her to remark that “the difference between seeing pictures in their original setting and in a gallery is enormous.”<sup>8</sup> It is in the same church that she witnesses the devotion of the people during Holy Week as they kiss an image of the crucified Christ that is surrounded by burning candles. She writes to Stuart Moore – “I spent all my odd minutes in the church while we were at Lugano.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Underhill does not mention attending any church services at Lugano during the Easter of 1898, her *Journal* and letters show her observing, with keen interest, some of the Easter customs of the area at this time – the grand Easter clean-up and the reverence shown to the image of the crucified Christ. That she spends all her “odd moments in the church” during the Easter liturgies and celebrations indicates more than interest. Not only the frescoes but also the devotional atmosphere of the church itself attracts her to the extent that she will be repeatedly drawn back to them. She explains the reasons for this attraction in her novel, *The Grey World*. In the previous chapter we saw the central character, Willie,

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<sup>7</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 6. 4. 1898, cited in Menzies, *Biography*, II. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 7. 4. 1898. The frescoes Underhill saw were those by Bernardino Luini in the Church of Santa Maria Degli Angeli. They depict seven scenes from the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ.

<sup>9</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 6. 4. 1898 cited in Menzies, *Biography*, II. 8.

gazing at a painting of the Madonna in the National Gallery. We now see him entering a Roman Catholic Church for the first time.

The first thing he noticed was a faint aromatic smell which soothed his senses. He was nervous, not knowing the meaning of the things he saw, or what his own right of admittance; so that his perceptions were rather exalted, and he felt that there were mysteries very near. An influence, real though elusive, imposed quietness and respect. He had been, of course, in Protestant churches, but they had left no mark on his spirit, and gave him no clue to this experience – to the hush, the awe, the weight of a new form of life. The idea of a religious building as provocative of emotion was strange to him. This place was so still, so remote from ordinary existence. . . . He had suddenly come upon a new country. . . . He also knelt. . . . He divined the beauty which he could not comprehend. . . . He came back to the church again and again: fascinated, puzzled, always without comprehension of the charm which drew him there. . . . He knew then that a beautiful reality wrapped him round and helped him; that this place, where invocation of the invisible never ceased, had an existence in eternity not granted to the hurrying streets.<sup>10</sup>

Given the highly autobiographical character of *The Grey World*, it is reasonable to assume that Willie's experience reflects Underhill in the church at Lugano – her first recorded entry into a Roman Catholic church. Writing of Willie's rapt absorption in this painting, Armstrong remarks: "We shall almost certainly find no more accurate description of the state of her own feelings as she paused before this particular picture and others in Italy."<sup>11</sup> Willie comes back to the church again and again. As with Underhill in her first visits to the church, it is not so much the celebration of the liturgy that is attractive, but the sense of "mysteries very near." The "quietness," "hush" and "awe" of the church draw her into a

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<sup>10</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 194 - 198.

<sup>11</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 68. For a description of Willie's reaction to this painting see chap. 2, pp. 82 - 83.

“beautiful reality” which, though she cannot understand, she cannot ignore. She would later describe this as the “mysterious authority”<sup>12</sup> of beauty whose message we receive and respond to “not because we understand but because we *must*.”<sup>13</sup> This experience of the transcendent and mysterious God – “a beautiful reality” – is the source of reverence and awe.

There is, too, the larger cultural setting. For the first time, she lives among people whose lives throb to the rhythm of the traditions, devotions and ritual of the Roman Catholic Church. She watches on as the ordinary task of cleaning takes on a religious sense. She observes the centuries old tradition of kissing the image of Christ. For these people God is not remote but a presence near at hand and celebrated in human ways through the ordinary events of life. Her *Journal* and letters to Stuart Moore make no comment on this experience, despite its obvious effect on her as she remarks on the people’s recognition of God’s presence in the routine round of life. She has a sense of both the overwhelming transcendence and accessible immanence of God.

When her parents returned to England from Milan, Underhill is left to travel on alone to Florence. The change in landscape and climate signal a change in physical environment. But her parents’ departure also means a psychological change. She writes to Stuart Moore while on board the train from Milan to Florence – “I have just started off on my solitary

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<sup>12</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 20.

travels and so far enjoy the sensation immensely.”<sup>14</sup> Travelling alone, she has the freedom to choose her own activities, to linger, reflect and search. Without distractions she is able to give her full attention to what she sees.

As with the previous record of her first entry into Italy, Underhill writes in her birthday book for 14 April 1898: “I entered Florence for the first time.”<sup>15</sup> There, she arrives in Florence, Menzies writes, “eager and receptive; able, which is most essential to the appreciation of a foreign environment, to speak the language.”<sup>16</sup> Her reading of Plotinus has provided her with the philosophical framework in which to appreciate the works of art that await her. She has come to understand how beauty is perceived. It is seen with the eyes of the soul, to be encountered with the attraction of Absolute Beauty in a world of art. Her experience at Lugano works to prepare her for what is in store in Florence. Menzies astutely remarks that Underhill is “well prepared” for this journey.<sup>17</sup>

Still, Underhill’s first comment on Florence has a clear note of disappointment. “Florence seemed to me a barer, more utilitarian place than I expected; acres of ordinary houses to one palace.”<sup>18</sup> Her *Journal* records further disappointment with the interior of the

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<sup>14</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 14. 4. 1898 cited in Menzies, *Biography*, II. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 14. 4. 1898.



Cathedral although she is greatly impressed by its exterior.<sup>19</sup> But, on the afternoon of her first day in Florence she gives a hint of something similar to her experiences in Lugano. The paintings she sees are “pure in colour and full of feeling” and “worth hours of study.”<sup>20</sup> A few days later, she visits the museum of San Marco, home of many splendid works of Fra Angelico. She singles out the fresco, *Christ in Hades*, among those she likes the best, while observing that all the frescoes were designed to engage the monks in meditation.<sup>21</sup> She is particularly attracted by the figure of St Dominic who is always portrayed by Angelico in an attitude of adoration towards the figure of Christ. She contrasts this with the works of Benozzo Gozzoli who depicts the angels turning aside to gather flowers. She comments that this is “a thing which Fra Angelico would never have allowed.”<sup>22</sup> She concludes that “it is external nature that Benozzo adores.”<sup>23</sup> Her spiritual sympathy is clearly with the spirit of Angelico. As Menzies recalled: “adoration was for her *the* essential.”<sup>24</sup> Underhill returns several times to the Angelico figures. Their spirit of adoration resonates with her own sense of the transcendent. For her, these frescoes are

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<sup>19</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 15. 4.1898.

<sup>20</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 15. 4. 1898.

<sup>21</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 17. 4. 1898. Underhill to Stuart Moore, 17. 4. 1898. Archives box 1/15/7, Underhill Collection.

<sup>22</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 25. 4. 1898. The Benozzo work which generated these comments was *The Procession of the Magi* – a fresco stretching over three walls of the chapel in the Medici-Riccardi Palace, Florence.

<sup>23</sup> Underhill. *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 25. 4. 1898.

<sup>24</sup> Menzies, “Memoir,” in Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 15.

“amongst the most loveable products of Italian painting when once they are known.”<sup>25</sup> From her perspective, this “knowing” arises only out of a spiritual vision and a contemplative spirit.

After briefly commenting on *Christ in Hades* in this manner, she moves to another work, *Crucifixion and Saints*. She judges that this is “a masterpiece of fresco painting.”<sup>26</sup> She makes no comment, however, on another fresco, *The Mocking of Christ*, which she would have seen that day in San Marco. Yet these three frescoes will play a considerable part in her later spiritual development and theological expression. Her spiritual journey is being deeply influenced by these first encounters.

Our traveller also visits the museum of the Pitti Palace where she continues to be absorbed and reflective. The works she sees are “full of deep thoughts,” “spiritual,” “glorious.” She finds it “difficult to tear ones self away.”<sup>27</sup> Of the frescoes in the Spanish Chapel she declares: “I could have lingered there for hours. It was so peaceful, so filled with the best Medieval spirits; learned yet pious, stern but loving.”<sup>28</sup> A reverential attitude marks her approach to each work of art. She “sat before them,”<sup>29</sup> “came before them,”<sup>30</sup> “stood before

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<sup>25</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 22. 4. 1898.

<sup>26</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 17. 4. 1898.

<sup>27</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 18. 4. 1898.

<sup>28</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 19. 4. 1898.

<sup>29</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 21. 4. 1898.

them.”<sup>31</sup> In a Plotinian idiom, she comments on how one must “take trouble to look into them” (the paintings) in order to see that “they are full of sweetness and beauty.”<sup>32</sup> Her words suggest a deepening and reflective approach to what the works of art disclose. As she contemplates them with the “inner eye,” she is held by their mysterious authority and beauty and is inspired to reverence and awe.<sup>33</sup>

Not until she visits the church of Santa Croce does Underhill record any specific, significant spiritual experience. Her *Journal* contains the brief comment that on entering the church, “it seems very large and bare.”<sup>34</sup> Four years later, in a church in Milan, she recalls that first visit to Santa Croce. “Inside there is a sense of bareness and space, of a soul swept and garnished ready for what shall come. I had the same sudden impression when I first entered Santa Croce at Florence.”<sup>35</sup> Having travelled through the broad valleys

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<sup>30</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 23. 4. 1898.

<sup>31</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 24. 4. 1898.

<sup>32</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 22. 4. 1898.

<sup>33</sup> That works of art produce profound religious experience, such as that of Underhill, is not undocumented. Paul Tillich recounts that during World War One, he drew comfort from a reproduction of Botticelli’s painting *Madonna and Child with Singing Angels*. After the war, he viewed the painting itself in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin. Of that experience he writes: “Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colours of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. As I stood here, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken.” Paul Tillich, “One Moment of Beauty,” in *Paul Tillich, On Art and Architecture*, John and Jane Dillenberger eds. with an introduction by John Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 234 - 235.

<sup>34</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 20. 4. 1898.

<sup>35</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 12.

of Italy where her imagination and mind expanded after the grey mists of winter, she now experiences another space – this time in a church. She likens it to a soul that is “swept and garnished” because it anticipates “what shall come.” Willie, a character in *The Grey World*, is depicted as experiencing something similar when in the church of Our Lady of Pity “his . . . most hopeful self trimmed its lamp and patiently waited for the day.”<sup>36</sup> Underhill is here calling on her own experience. She, too, is subject to a “sudden impression.” She knows the feeling of the soul “swept and garnished ready for what shall come” just as she is also the “hopeful self” waiting patiently with lamp trimmed. Up to this point Underhill’s encounter with the art works of Italy has gradually deepened as she is drawn into the mystery of Beauty. But in the “bareness and space” of Santa Croce she moves into a new stage. The austere expanse of the physical space has an effect. It opens her soul to be cleansed and made ready for “what shall come.” Her words anticipate some further step in her spiritual journey. Again, we see the Plotinian echo. Having previously described his map of the spiritual life as “bare and forbidding,” she recognises that map in the bareness of the church and in her own soul which is swept bare – cleansed and purified – in anticipation of communion with God.<sup>37</sup>

During the last days of Underhill’s visit to Florence, we find her still immersed in the galleries and churches of the city. She revisits several works of art and finds them “lovelier

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<sup>36</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 208.

<sup>37</sup> See chap. 2, p. 85.

than ever.”<sup>38</sup> The first negative impressions of the city have undergone a transformation. The streets reveal “solid, handsome buildings” and “charmingly picturesque” areas.<sup>39</sup> Her views of the city have “striking atmospheric effects.”<sup>40</sup> After a drive in the countryside on her last afternoon in Florence, she declares that “the light on the mountains [is] divine.”<sup>41</sup> Even the streets and the surrounding countryside reveal the mysterious presence of God.

On the eve of her departure from Florence, Underhill writes to Stuart Moore giving a significant, if somewhat obscure, summary of her time in Italy.

It takes time to get the feeling of them [works of art] into your mind. . . . This place has taught me more than I can tell you; it’s a sort of gradual unconscious growing into an understanding of things.<sup>42</sup>

While her letters to her fiancé are filled with details regarding train travel, the countryside, galleries, museums and churches of Italy (with particular reference to Florence), the words just cited are all she writes of her inner experiences.<sup>43</sup> When it is placed within the context of her *Journal*, a pattern of the impact of her first journey to Italy emerges.

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<sup>38</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 22. 4. 1898.

<sup>39</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 16. 4.1898.

<sup>40</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 24. 4. 1898.

<sup>41</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 24. 4. 1898.

<sup>42</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24. 4. 1898. Underhill Collection.

<sup>43</sup> Underhill clearly states the reason for her reticence with Stuart Moore regarding inner spiritual experience. She tells him – “you always used to mock at those sorts of things so I didn’t talk about them.” Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24. 4. 1898. Underhill Collection. The fact that her Italian experience was so linked with the

As we saw earlier in this chapter, Underhill – steeped in Neoplatonic thinking – is well prepared for her encounter with Italian art. She understands works of art as expressions of the beauty of God and therefore a way to union with God. The warmth, colour and beauty are her first experiences of Italy, but churches, galleries and museums gradually become her focus. Three particular entries in her *Journal* indicate significant experiences. While in the church in Lugano she encounters the mysterious, eternal, transcendent One. At the same time, she observes the celebration of God’s presence in ordinary, human ways. In Florence the works of Fra Angelico take her deep into beauty, mystery and adoration of God. In the church of Santa Croce she experiences her inmost self cleansed and waiting in anticipation of a new beginning. This exposure gradually works its way into her mind and heart, to indicate an imminent new phase. She arrives in Italy with a sense of divine transcendence and a readiness to appreciate beauty, art and artistic works. She leaves the country after having experienced God in a new way through beauty, art and colour. She is aware, at least to some extent, of personal inner space in anticipation of further purification and discovery. Her approach has become more personal, imaginative and communal. God remains the mysterious, transcendent One to be met with awe and adoration, but the

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Roman Catholic Church would have increased Underhill’s reticence because Stuart Moore was somewhat anti-religion and particularly anti-Roman Catholic. That Underhill was well aware of this is illustrated by her comment to him that the priests in Chartres Cathedral “would set your Protestant teeth on edge.” Underhill to Stuart Moore, 17. 4. 1901, Underhill, *Letters*, 48. Menzies, who knew Stuart Moore over a period of many years, also alludes to this. She notes her surprise at Underhill’s lack of enthusiasm (in the *Journal* and letters) about some of the art works in Florence. She puts it down to Stuart Moore. “It will be remembered,” Menzies writes, “that though Hubert was deeply interested in Church Architecture he had no interest in the purpose for which Churches were built.” Menzies, *Biography*, II. 11.

presence of the Divine has become more immanent and accessible. A transformation has occurred. Her cryptic comments made to Stuart Moore convey a sense of something happening that cannot be fully expressed. All she can say is that gradually, unconsciously she has grown into an “understanding of things.” These words suggest the seminal nature of her experience and the promise of further development.

## **B. Journey of 1899**

In 1899, Underhill returned to Continental Europe. Her *Journals* and letters confirm that during her visit to Florence, she revisited those places which had so attracted her during her previous visit. She also records an important moment. While she makes no mention of any Roman Catholic service or ritual during her first visit to Florence, her second *Journal* contains a detailed description of a religious procession. She writes that

After tea we saw a very rare and beautiful sight – the last Sacrament being carried to the Cardinal Archbishop of Florence who was dangerously ill. The Piazza Duomo was crowded with people and the central bronze doors of the Cathedral were open and people kept going in and kneeling down for a few moments and coming out again. Then the crowd grew denser and the bell on Giotto’s tower began to toll and presently the procession came out of the central doors. First young priests with candles and then one bearing the red cross banner of S. Reparata with a palm fixed into the top of the staff. . . . Then came numbers of acolytes, then priests in crimson and white, then others in purple vestments all bearing candles and chanting. Then came the great white canopy with priests under it in lovely vestments of rose and white brocade and in the middle one carrying the pyx under a white veil. After came more priests and two Dominicans and two Franciscans and

then a crowd of worthy looking citizens, with candles. . . . It was a most picturesque and moving sight.<sup>44</sup>

In the concluding sentence of this description, Underhill indicates that she regards this procession from two different perspectives. As a spectator she describes the scene before her as “picturesque.” It is a detailed account of location, people, colour, solemn chant and toll of bells. Yet, in only two words – “beautiful” and “moving” – Underhill suggests personal spiritual engagement in the ritual she sees. Her carefully recorded description of the procession is evidence of its impact on her. Her comments are largely confined to reactions of an aesthetic kind. Her first visit to Florence profoundly affected her sense of God. But now a new phase opens up. Hitherto her experience has been of beauty as related to paintings and the Italian countryside. Now, for the first recorded time, she experiences beauty in the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church. In this communal and religious context, she is faced with the corporate nature of religion. Though she makes no comment on this at the time, later events will indicate the seminal nature of this experience.

### **C. Journeys of 1901 - 1907**

From 1901, Underhill expanded her area of travel to include France, parts of Italy other than Florence and several other Continental countries, thus taking her further than Italian

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<sup>44</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 11. 4. 1899.



works of art and Italian churches. Her visit to the cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres in 1901 is of special interest. She recorded the event at the time.<sup>45</sup>

She writes of her first impression of the cathedral as a “soaring cathedral . . . silver grey in the morning and golden at night.”<sup>46</sup> She experiences “a strange spiritual force” exhaled by the building which she describes as “a miracle of beauty.”<sup>47</sup> That force becomes more profoundly felt when Underhill enters the cathedral, and her “senses are overpowered by the superb glass.”<sup>48</sup> She is immediately overcome by the “glow and richness” of the light that streams through the windows.<sup>49</sup> Three decades later, she expands on her first description of that experience as she describes entering the cathedral:

Then we open the door and go inside – leave the outer world, enter the inner world – and the universal light floods through the windows and bathes us in their colour and beauty and significance, shows us things of which we had never dreamed, a loveliness that lies beyond the fringe of speech.<sup>50</sup>

She continues her description of the interior of the Gothic structure:

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<sup>45</sup>Underhill’s first mention of Chartres Cathedral is contained in her *Journal 1901 - 1907*, later published as Evelyn Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*. Underhill’s later record of Chartres Cathedral is contained in her retreat addresses prepared for the 1932 Pleshey retreat and published as Underhill, *Light of Christ*.

<sup>46</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 27 - 28.

Some of us perhaps remember the experience of standing for the first time inside Chartres Cathedral; the solemn coloured majesty that enfolds and silences us when we come into the place of adoration and sacrifice; and how gradually we become aware of the strangeness of the light that strikes through those great coloured windows. . . . And within this place we are bathed in the light transmitted by the windows, a light which is yet the very radiance of Eternity. It fills the place where we are, it drowns us in its solemn beauty.<sup>51</sup>

Underhill does not specifically identify this experience as hers alone. She appeals to a larger group: “some of us perhaps remember,” but all the while describes something that can be known only through personal experience. Here she is expanding on similar statements made in her *Journal*. Her experience of Chartres Cathedral is described in terms of light, colour, rapture and awe in which Underhill encounters the Divine. Clearly, she is not speaking of any ordinary light, for it has about it a “strangeness” and “coloured majesty” that “strikes” through the windows and at the same time “bathes,” “enfolds,” “silences” and finally “drowns” in solemn beauty. She tells us she is “overpowered” by this experience which echoes with that of Willie in *The Grey World*. He is described as entering the church, and thereupon “knew that a beautiful reality wrapped him round.”<sup>52</sup> Compared with her previous experience of the paintings whose beauty she encountered by beholding or gazing upon them, this experience is about light, life and love – which Underhill recognises as “the very radiance of Eternity” and “solemn beauty” – penetrating her. We detect a more personal flavour in her descriptions compared with her accounts of Florence. Using an image of intimacy and love, she says that the beauty of the cathedral

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<sup>51</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 28 - 29.

<sup>52</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 198.

bathes her and shows her “things of which we have never dreamed.” Yet, there is a familiar ring to Underhill’s description of Chartres. As in the previous travels, her experience is one of awe-inspiring beauty suggestive of the transcendent and ineffable presence of God. “The very radiance of Eternity” – God – silences, bathes and overpowers her. Her experience of Chartres, though reminiscent of what she felt at the church in Lugano and when witnessing the procession in Florence, is of far greater intensity. Three years before, she had briefly mentioned to Stuart Moore: “this place [Florence] has taught me more than I can tell you.” But now Chartres is “beyond the fringe of speech.” Recalling the atmosphere of Gothic structures four years later, Underhill describes them in terms of “simplicity, ardour, vague gropings, mysticism and familiarity.”<sup>53</sup> This mix of feelings suggests her experience as she stands in the cathedral. Though in one sense at home in the surrounds, she is conscious of a further dimension, of something yet to be satisfied, as the mysterious presence fills her with rapture, awe and longing. That Underhill returned to her Chartres experience with such clarity many years after the event indicates its significance in her spiritual journey: a confirmation of her view that beauty is a way to God. A rapturous encounter, it remained an ongoing source of inspiration and contemplation.

Underhill has a vastly different experience in Venice where she spends the Easter of 1905. Whereas Chartres is an intensely private encounter with God, St Mark’s Basilica is

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<sup>53</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 60.

“alive”<sup>54</sup> with people. It is “astonishing and intoxicating.”<sup>55</sup> It has no paintings but is dominated by mosaics and “mysterious figures – sculptures” and other “exquisite bits of ornament.”<sup>56</sup> Amid the combination of “amazing colour and intricate decoration,” Underhill detects “system, order and mystical theology.”<sup>57</sup> She tells Stuart Moore that “it’s a lovely place and I rather feel as if every minute spent anywhere else was wasted.”<sup>58</sup> Unlike her 1898 Easter in Lugano, Underhill attends all the Easter religious ceremonies in St Mark’s. She writes the following description of the Easter Sunday celebrations:

I saw Pontifical High Mass: a superb sight with great candles alight all round the basilica and all the clergy in cloth of gold vestments and many in mitres. It was intensely ceremonial and majestic, from the entry of the Patriarch, the choir singing *Ecce Sacerdos*, onwards. . . . The golden altar, the golden vestments, crimson and purple cassocks, constant processional movements made an impressive rite, but it was difficult to retain one’s sense of the mystical actuality of the Feast. It was a commemoration, not a renewal, as a festal Mass surely ought to be. But still there was the sense of being in the heart of a great and traditional spiritual household, ordered and coherent, overpowering to the miserable outsider, but a strong tower to her sons. And this Church expresses the ceremonial side of the Catholic spirit, its splendour and order, as the Gothic expresses the other . . . the simplicity, ardour, vague gropings, mysticism and familiarity.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 58.

<sup>55</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 57.

<sup>56</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 58.

<sup>57</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 57. Underhill illustrates this well when she writes that “as one stands at the west end, the figure of Our lady, twice repeated, in the Ascension and Incarnation domes, leads the eye to the Great Christ of the eastern Apse, the culmination of all, as the Church leads to Him.” Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 60.

<sup>58</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24. 4. 1905. Underhill Collection.

<sup>59</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 59 - 60.

Prior to this celebration Underhill had written to Stuart Moore that she was going to “get a seat in the choir for High Mass . . . so as to gaze on it undisturbed.”<sup>60</sup> But she is unprepared for the activity and sounds of the Eastern Easter liturgy and finds it “difficult to retain one’s sense of the mystical actuality of the Feast.” Here, for the first time, we see Underhill drawn away from the mystical atmosphere of a church and from her undisturbed private gazing. Instead, she is in the midst of a participating congregation. This is not to her liking. It is not what it “ought to be.” It lacks mystical quality. Therefore, she concludes it is a “superficial commemoration”, rather than a “solemn renewal.” However, she concedes that at least she experiences “being in the heart of a great and traditional spiritual household.” But that too disturbs her. The ceremony, while splendid, ordered and coherent, is overpowering to a “miserable outsider.” Though she is physically present among this household, Underhill senses that she does not belong. She feels isolated from the worshipping community. Six years before, she was a spectator in the Eucharistic procession in Florence and witnessed its beauty. Now, she is one of the congregation. She feels her lack of theological framework by which to understand what is going on in St Mark’s. She is beginning to examine her private, solitary devotion in contrast with the spirit of the worshipping community of St Mark’s.

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<sup>60</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, Saturday night, April, 1905 in Underhill, *Letters*, 53.

This kind of self-examination continues. One year later (1906) Underhill visits Rocamadour in France. She goes to the chapel of Our Lady which she describes as “a dark and small place and very holy.” She continues:

Very early in the morning I heard a priest whisper Mass before Our Lady. . . . There was a sense of seclusion, intimacy and silence about it all. The chapel itself was soaked with the sense of prayer and adoration: had an atmosphere one could not mistake. Above it, a steep path wound up the cliff with the Stations of the Cross . . . at the top of all, a large bare Cross. . . . There is a sense of clambering, effort, quest, and of havens suddenly reached in the midst of travail – hung as it were on the edge of dangers, yet holding their inhabitants very close and safe. The effort of approach, the secret chapel . . . the close communion of this supernatural haven with the actual structure of the earth, the lifting of it above the homes of men – all these things contribute to the wonder of Rocamadour.<sup>61</sup>

Underhill gives the sense of being quite at home as Mass is offered in the familiar atmosphere of this chapel. It is a place of beauty, silence and solitude where the prayer of adoration continues undisrupted. However, unlike on similar previous occasions, Underhill’s thoughts do not remain in the seclusion of the chapel. She moves outside to where the comfortable and the familiar lead to something quite other. A large bare cross stands at the top of the cliff face. It can be reached only by clambering up the mountainside – each Station of the Cross providing the only haven from danger along the way. This is a journey that requires effort and hard work. Its destination is “above the homes of men,” to a place where one is lifted beyond the world to union with God. Underhill describes it as a “quest,” an aspect of the adventure that now marks her own spiritual journey. Menzies confirms this when she writes that Underhill’s Rocamadour experience “so exactly

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<sup>61</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 94 - 95.

describes the search and effort of her own soul.”<sup>62</sup> Her quest for God has extended beyond the safety, comfort and seclusion of beautiful churches and glorious paintings. It has broadened into another phase where effort and hard work – the cross – lead to fulfilment. The questions which arose in St Mark’s one year before, linger in Underhill’s mind. Yet, she still understands fulfillment as “above the homes of men.” Even on the mountainside, silence and solitude are dominant features of her journey from apparent reality, to the Reality of God.

In April 1907, Underhill travelled once more to Italy. Her *Journal* records that her major focus during this visit is the Franciscan centres of La Verna and Assisi.<sup>63</sup> Her love of Assisi and her devotion to its saint had begun five years before when she declared that the church of “S. Francesco must rank with Our Lady of Chartres as one of the two most beautiful and most spiritual churches that I have ever seen.”<sup>64</sup> Outside the Chapel of the Stigmata, standing on the edge of the precipice, she experiences the “mystery” of the great valleys and hills beneath her and the kindly hospitality of the Franciscan community.<sup>65</sup> Over a period of four days, she is present for the celebration of Mass at the tomb of St Francis which she describes as “intensely quiet.”<sup>66</sup> In the Upper Church of the monastery

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<sup>62</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, III. 12.

<sup>63</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 104 - 106, 110 - 116.

<sup>64</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 28.

<sup>65</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 104 - 106.

<sup>66</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 113.

she follows his life portrayed in Giotto's "rapturous" frescoes which "sing an eternal *Te Deum* in colour and line" in this "lovely place."<sup>67</sup> These lead her into a reflection of Francis' life. She writes:

He lived quite free and happy within the limits of the Church, as all the greatest mystics who were born within those limits, have felt themselves able to do. But it is noticeable in S. Francis that his 'best' minutes were seldom inspired by the ordinances of the Church. Not before an altar, but alone on a precipitous ledge with exquisite landscape below him, he touched God. . . . Alone in S. Damiano, the Crucified spoke to him. Alone in the woods or on the hills all his other visions and illuminations came. Few saints have been more individual, less dependent on sacramental, more constantly receptive of immediate Grace. Had S. Francis never been able to hear Mass, one cannot imagine that it would have made very much difference.<sup>68</sup>

Here Underhill captures St Francis in what she describes as his "best" minutes. On the mountain ledge or the hills, in the woods or the church, he is alone and in deep union with God. In words that reverberate with Plotinus, she speaks of the saint's solitary spiritual quest and recalls that it was on the mountain that "he [Francis] touched God." Francis comes to God alone. But Underhill is also considering the meaning of this saint's membership of the Church. In conjecturing that being a member of the church made no difference to Francis' attainment of union with God, Underhill upholds the centrality of solitary union with God in her own life. The day after she left Assisi, she wrote in one of her first letters of direction: "Follow where you feel that you are being led, wherever that

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<sup>67</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 112.



may be . . .”<sup>69</sup> Her Franciscan experience – one of mystery and beauty – led her into deeper solitude with God.

As we have seen, Underhill does not record any detailed interior responses to her Continental journeys. However, she allows us an insight into her feelings through a fictional character. Though these words refer to Italy only, they nonetheless encapsulate our traveller’s sentiments towards all the places she visited. She writes: “The Holy Land of Europe! The only place left, I suppose, which is medicinal to the soul. There is a type of mind, you know, which must go there to find itself.”<sup>70</sup> As our study of the influence of visual art on Underhill’s spirituality continues, we shall have reason to see how prophetic these words are. The Continent was indeed the place where she began to find herself.

#### **D. Assessment of the journeys**

So far in this chapter, we have examined Underhill’s encounter with visual art at a comparatively early stage in her spiritual life. This experience followed upon the influence of Plotinus on her developing spirituality and continues to interact with it. Prior to Underhill’s 1907 journey to the Continent, she had determined to join the Roman Catholic Church. Due to circumstances described in chapter one, this never happened.<sup>71</sup> The year

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<sup>69</sup> Underhill to M. R. (Margaret Robinson), 22. 4. 1907 in Underhill, *Letters*, 58.

<sup>70</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 329.

<sup>71</sup> See chap. 1, pp. 17 - 18.

1907 was marked by Underhill's marriage and a subsequent decision not to align herself with any church. Though she would make many more journeys to Continental Europe, Underhill's most significant encounter with art works concluded with her 1907 journey. Henceforth, the detailed and highly significant development of visual art in her writings would be based on works seen during the first phase of her spiritual life.

In evaluating the influence of Underhill's travel on her spirituality, Greene pinpoints her recognition of beauty as a way to God as pivotal. "Italy," Greene declares, "changed her life; it taught her that beauty was a way to the infinite life for which she longed."<sup>72</sup> Greene elaborates on this statement describing beauty for Underhill as "a lure, drawing her to an object and then through it to the spirit of a former time," –the medieval world – which she saw as the link between "matter and spirit, the inner and the outer, the natural and the supernatural."<sup>73</sup> Johnson supports Greene's theory. He claims that during her Continental journeys Underhill "found a new world of art, architecture, of the romantic lure of the medieval world and of the Transcendent." He continues that "for Underhill the medieval world was the bridge which connected . . . matter and spirit."<sup>74</sup> Armstrong too places Underhill's Continental encounter with the beauty of art within the medieval world when he writes that "Italy is above all for her the land of the middle ages . . ."<sup>75</sup> He even goes so

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<sup>72</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 13.

<sup>74</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 69.

<sup>75</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 25.

far as to claim that the woman we see journeying through the Continent is “this ‘superficial’ Evelyn.”<sup>76</sup> Greene, Johnson and Armstrong are at one in seeing beauty as a lure which drew Underhill to what they see as the medieval world, enabling her to connect the worlds of matter and spirit. Their understanding of the effect of beauty – and hence her encounter with works of art – is therefore contextualised by these commentators within the historical framework of the medieval world.

However, as we have been suggesting, our traveller does not understand beauty within a limited historical context, but within the philosophical framework formed by her assimilation of Plotinus. God is the source of all beauty. To encounter something as beautiful is to encounter God. Beauty does not lure Underhill to some other time or thing. For her beauty is its own attraction. As Bentley Hart reminds us of beauty “. . . nothing else impresses itself upon our attention with at once so wonderful a power and so evocative an immediacy.”<sup>77</sup> “In the beautiful,” he declares, “God’s glory is revealed.”<sup>78</sup> Underhill’s encounters with beauty during her journeys to Italy and France were profound experiences of God. Through them she learned the place of beauty as a way to God. To understand her encounter with beauty in any other way, is failing to sense the depth and mystery of Underhill’s experience. During the first phase of her spiritual life this understanding of beauty contributed to a sense of the separation of matter and spirit in her thinking. At a

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<sup>76</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 16.

<sup>78</sup> Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 17.

later spiritual phase of integration, through the beautiful, the worlds of the visible and the invisible will meet. There were other aspects of her experience, but none would have such powerful and enduring effect as her exposure to beauty.

## **2. Fictional writings**

It is during the first phase of her spiritual life, when Plotinian philosophy and her Continental experience work their respective influences, that Underhill embarks on her own artistic and creative project – fictional writing. In order that we might gain a deeper insight into the impact of her travels and more clearly grasp the development of her thinking during this period, we now turn to an exploration of Underhill’s short stories and novels.

### **A. The short stories**

Underhill’s five short stories were published in *The Horlicks Magazine and Home Journal for Australia, India and the Colonies* in 1904 and 1905 – some six years after her first visit to the Continent. All belong to a genre that was popular at the time featuring the phenomena of mystical and preternatural experience.

In “The Death of a Saint,” Underhill tells the story of the saintly Father John who spends hours each day in what is presumed to be his private room of prayer. When his companions break down the door to this room because they fear for Father John’s health, they find him dead in what is evidently an art studio. Grotesque and bestial paintings, all bearing an eerie resemblance to Father John, fill the room. Obviously the work of his own hand, these

images represent Father John's self-purgation. His companions remember that Father John always emerged from the room "radiant with thanksgiving," and they start questioning the part that art has played in his sanctity.<sup>79</sup> Was it the means whereby he purged himself of sinfulness and thus attained sanctity? In this short story Underhill examines the meaning of art and its relationship with truth. Producing works of art enabled Father John to see the truth of his own soul and to purge it of sinfulness. The question of purification from all "illusion, evil [and] imperfection of every kind" has arisen for Underhill out of her philosophical readings.<sup>80</sup> Through the character of Father John, Underhill asks herself how beauty is related to truth.

"The Mountain Image" is a story set on a mountain cliff where a sculptor, Nicholas, plans to carve a perfect image of a female figure – the "queen of the world."<sup>81</sup> When he finally satisfies his obsession, the figure comes to life only to seduce him into following her. Dominated by his desire to possess her, he runs towards her and falls to his death. Through the story of Nicholas' desire to create the perfect image, Underhill addresses the urge to seek perfection as a possession. Even at its deepest levels, when humanity strives to satisfy its "persistent other-worldly cravings," there is the risk that this is merely a longing to possess God as a finite object.<sup>82</sup> Here, Underhill is taking a critical look at her own craving

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<sup>79</sup> Underhill, "The Death of a Saint," 177.

<sup>80</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 198.

<sup>81</sup> Underhill, "The Mountain Image," 377.

<sup>82</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 5.

for the Infinite and the character of her own personal quest for God. Nicholas' desire ends in death. Implicit in the story is his lack of genuine love; it leaves his desire self-centred and self-absorbed. Underhill reflects that even the quest for God holds risks, if it is without the love which transcends mere self-satisfaction.

“A Green Mass” is an allegory which tells of a traveller who, at the behest of a messenger, sails far up a river and into the “heart of hidden country.”<sup>83</sup> After entering through an “inner gate” and taking a “secret path,” the traveller finally arrives in a “sudden bare place” where an altar stands and the sound of Latin words indicates that the rite of the Mass has begun. The creatures of the forest and the trees gather in adoration. Then the traveller sees a penitent arrive – one who is “driven to the place . . . by irresistible desire.”<sup>84</sup> Though “full of the anguish of unslaked desire,” the penitent remains apart from the gathering<sup>85</sup> and is not offered the Cup of Communion.. The Mass ends and the traveller, guided by the messenger, begins the journey to the river and back to the world. Although written prior to Underhill's experience in St Mark's Basilica, in Venice, this allegory can be interpreted as foreshadowing what was to take place there. It suggests the increasing attraction of the Roman Catholic Church for her, and her increased familiarity with it. During her holidays in Continental Europe, she has been present for the celebration of Mass in a number of churches. Yet, as one who is not a member of the Church, she is unable to participate fully.

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<sup>83</sup> Underhill, “A Green Mass,” 445.

<sup>84</sup> Underhill, “A Green Mass,” 447.

<sup>85</sup> Underhill, “A Green Mass,” 447.

In the figure of the penitent, she presents herself – a “miserable outsider” – who is “driven to the place . . . by irresistible desire,” but whose “unslaked desire” goes unsatisfied. By 1904, the year when Underhill writes this story, she is beginning to struggle with the possibility of her entry into the Roman Catholic Church. Towards the end of the story, she writes of the penitent – “none may come to the communion of that altar save he who intercedes.”<sup>86</sup> This cryptic remark in the story seems to imply her awareness of a decision in her struggle that only she can take.

The experience of the Father Porter one night in his monastery in the Umbrian hills is the subject of Underhill’s short story, “Our Lady of the Gate.” Father Porter sees a traveller approaching the monastery. He strains his eyes and focuses his stare, peering into the darkness in order to have a clearer view. When the mysterious visitor stands before him, it is a woman who has come “upon my son’s business.”<sup>87</sup> The two “stare at one another in silence,” before the woman moves into the chapel.<sup>88</sup> Father Porter believes it is “the Blessed Madonna herself.”<sup>89</sup> When the Brothers, who “saw her not”<sup>90</sup> and the “dim-sighted” Father Superior at last raise their eyes to look at the woman, they do not see what

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<sup>86</sup> Underhill, “A Green Mass,” 447.

<sup>87</sup> Underhill, “Our Lady of the Gate,” 245.

<sup>88</sup> Underhill, “Our Lady of the Gate,” 244.

<sup>89</sup> Underhill, “Our Lady of the Gate,” 245.

<sup>90</sup> Underhill, “Our Lady of the Gate,” 245, 246.

Father Porter sees.<sup>91</sup> They recognise the mother of one of the novices of the community who has come to visit her son. Seeing more than is immediately apparent to the eyes, is clearly the theme of this story. It evokes something of Underhill's reflections on the art works she has silently faced in her visits to the churches and galleries during her trips to the Continent. Just as Father Porter sees the woman standing before him in another light, so Underhill must see with the inward or spiritual eye, to appreciate the depth of meaning in each art work.

The place of seeing and not-seeing in the quest for truth and love are central to Underhill's last short story, "The Ivory Tower." It tells of the adventures of a young man who sails to an ivory tower in the sea where a young princess, who is the perfection of truth and beauty, lives. On reaching the tower, he realises that the princess is not beautiful. She invites him to close his eyes and kiss her and in this action he knows that she is indeed the princess of truth. The story ends with the princess's statement that "he who knows how to shut his eyes can always find the desired princess."<sup>92</sup> To this the young man replies, "Oh, Truth, blind me forever, for I had rather love than know."<sup>93</sup> Here Underhill again addresses the question of seeing with the soul's vision. She also draws into consideration a theme that will be central to her thinking – the relationship between knowing and loving – and flags the central theme of one of her later novels.

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<sup>91</sup> Underhill, "Our Lady of the Gate," 246.

<sup>92</sup> Underhill. "The Ivory Tower," 210.



## **B. Assessment of the short stories**

The short stories, written during 1904 and 1905, are part of the first fictional writing that Underhill produced. By that time, she was well versed in Plotinian philosophy and a seasoned traveller to the Continent. This is the context of her short stories exploring different aspects of the quest for truth. Through her characters, she stands back from her immediate experience to observe herself from a distance through the medium of fiction. She ponders the ethical dimensions of beauty, the necessity of love and the meaning of seeing with the inner eye. She questions the motives for her craving for God and the reasons for her desire to join the Roman Catholic Church. Through these creative literary forms of ruminations, she is working her way deeper into the mystery of Truth. But her questions require a larger literary medium than that offered by short stories. Her novels indicate the path to a broader resolution of the questions she is facing. We now turn to them as we continue our exploration of our author's fictional writing.

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<sup>93</sup> Underhill, "The Ivory Tower," 211.

### C. The novels

In the previous chapter, we examined and established the significant influence of Plotinian philosophy in the Underhill novels.<sup>94</sup> Though evidence of that influence will continue to emerge this chapter, we will now focus our attention on the novels as a particular expression of Underhill's own life and spiritual journey.

### D. *The Grey World*

Earlier in this chapter and also in the previous one, we met Underhill's fictional character, Willie, as he visited a Roman Catholic church and experienced the beauty of a painting of the Madonna in the National Gallery.<sup>95</sup> He is the central character in her first novel, *The Grey World*, which was published in 1904 – the same year that four of her short stories appeared.

Willie Hopkinson has been reincarnated into a family whom he considers to be materialistic and superficial. In his former life, Willie had died while a small boy. After this, he had drifted into a “new plane of existence . . . a thin grey unsubstantial world.”<sup>96</sup> His new life has not totally erased the memory of the grey world and flashbacks bewilder and disturb him – much to the consternation of his parents who are unaware of his

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<sup>94</sup> See chap. 2, pp. 82 - 84.

<sup>95</sup> See chap. 2, pp. 82 - 83.

<sup>96</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 9.

reincarnation. Lonely and unhappy, Willie tries to cope with living in two worlds. He joins “Searchers of the Soul,” a group seeking spiritual reality, and after becoming an apprentice bookbinder he falls in love with another apprentice. At the same time he becomes associated with Elsa Levi, a middle aged woman, who instructs Willie: “Art is the real language of the soul . . . it is the link with the beyond.”<sup>97</sup> She also speaks to him of beauty. “Beauty is the only thing really worth having. You will know that when you have found it.”<sup>98</sup> Because both his mother and Elsa Levi sense Willie’s dissatisfaction with life, they send him “for a change of scene” to Italy.<sup>99</sup>

Willie is twenty-two years of age when he travels to Italy. During his short stay of just thirteen days, he experiences a place of “real loveliness,” of “beautiful thoughts,”<sup>100</sup> where “the peace of God [is] eternally established.”<sup>101</sup> He sees his journey as a metaphor of life.

He was walking alone, sturdily self-dependent, through exquisite landscape toward an appointed goal. That surely would be his life. That *was* life – a journey upon the great highway of the world towards an abiding city. A journey to be taken joyfully and in gratitude because of the beauty of the road.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 92 - 93.

<sup>98</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 93.

<sup>99</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 242.

<sup>100</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 257.

<sup>101</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 244.

<sup>102</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 250 - 251.

The beauty of the road dominates Willie's thinking. "He felt that he looked out on a world which always had existed, always would exist, and he with it; for the only real existence was in beauty, and beauty was eternal."<sup>103</sup> He meets a Franciscan monk who tells him – "in Italy . . . the soul lives,"<sup>104</sup> and who reminds him "that it was not when he was about useful things that St Francis received the great favour of the stigmata; it was when he meditated upon the hill."<sup>105</sup> As Willie looks back upon his life, he desires "a purging of the eye of the soul that it might look with understanding on a clearer prospect."<sup>106</sup> Declaring that "he has seen, at last, the face of the Great Companion," he desires only "the constant presence of the mysterious guide."<sup>107</sup>

After Willie returns to England, he moves to a secluded area of the countryside where he continues his bookbinding and practises a life of simplicity and contemplation. For Willie, "eternity was here and now: and he, wondrous immortal, saw through the glassy symbol which is nature, the glory of the spiritual flame."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 246.

<sup>104</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 257

<sup>105</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 261.

<sup>106</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 252.

<sup>107</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 251.

<sup>108</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 338.

The autobiographical character of *The Grey World* is obvious. The lives of Underhill and Willie coincide in their childhood, their interests, their sense of the spiritual world and their seeking enlightenment within a religious sect. It is in their journeys to Italy, however, that their lives most clearly come together. Through the character of Willie, whom Johnson correctly describes as “the mouthpiece for Underhill’s interpretation of her own encounter with Reality,” Underhill relives her Italian experience.<sup>109</sup> Two of the major themes of *The Grey World* – the spiritual life as a journey and beauty as a way to God – exactly mirror her experience in Italy. Through her fictional character, our author examines her encounters and explores her feelings and the questions that occupy her. Through him she expresses her finding – buried within Plotinian philosophy yet now immediately experienced – that beauty is a way to God. Through him she determines to follow the quest for God in the solitude of contemplation. As yet the question of church membership has not become significant, although her interest in ritual spiritualism leads her to join the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn.<sup>110</sup> Her spiritual journey along “the raptures of the road” is marked with solitude as she pursues the quest for God.<sup>111</sup>

*The Grey World* is important in the Underhill corpus. It offers considerable insight into her life during the first stage of her spiritual journey. Greene makes this point when she writes

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<sup>109</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 78.

<sup>110</sup> For Underhill’s membership of the Golden Dawn, see chap.1, p. 15.

<sup>111</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 262.

that “this first novel is valuable . . . for what it reveals of its author.”<sup>112</sup> Elaborating this interpretation, she continues:

The autobiographical elements of *The Grey World* are obvious. The search for the world “over the border,” the importance of Italy, the significance of symbol, the role of beauty, nature, the poets and mystics, dominated Evelyn Underhill’s thought during this period of her life.<sup>113</sup>

Menzies also draws attention to the autobiographical quality of her friend’s first novel.

I found it extremely interesting as revealing something of its author’s own experience. . . . In writing of Italy, which she had now visited several times with an increasing awareness of what she would then probably have called Reality, she is actually describing what had happened to herself.<sup>114</sup>

It would be three years before Underhill would produce another novel. While subsequent works would pick up the threads of this first novel, none would so clearly witness to the significance of her encounter with visual art during her trips to the Continent. Still, her other two novels have their significance for the exploration of our topic.

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<sup>112</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 16.

<sup>113</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 17.

<sup>114</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, III. 2 - 3.

## E. *The Lost Word*

Underhill's second novel, *The Lost Word*, is the story of the building of a church.<sup>115</sup> Paul Vickery is an architect who agrees to build a church on the industrial estate of a friend. He assembles a work force for the task. It includes a sculptor, a wood carver, a drawer, an embroiderer and an artist, Catherine. The church that Underhill describes in *The Lost Word* is from the beginning "the home of the mysteries of God."<sup>116</sup> Paul Vickery labours "stone by stone . . . in the darkness and stone by stone the image of his labours [is] perfected."<sup>117</sup> Gradually its walls rise and "he sees the stones of his sanctuary made radiant by that Light of which they did honour."<sup>118</sup> As the light streams in through the stained glass windows, he gazes and sees the "Eternal Spirit."<sup>119</sup> During the building of the church, Paul's attraction to the Roman Catholic Church, based on its use of symbols and ritual, becomes obvious. He explains its appeal:

It's not the name or the outside meaning that matters; it's the turning of its symbols to the service of inner truth. And in the long run, Catholic forms are the loveliest and rightest; all the better because they are so incredible. They were made by people who understood symbols, knew that they were living things; nerves, by

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<sup>115</sup> The title refers to the notion of masonry that the goal of the architect is to find the "lost word of Power" which had enabled the building of King Solomon's temple. The central character of *The Lost Word*, Paul Vickery, believes his quest is to find the "word," which is the secret of right building. Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 52 - 53.

<sup>116</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 60.

<sup>117</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 62.

<sup>118</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 178.

<sup>119</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 183.

which we apprehend the other side. Nothing's true this side of the veil; but the Catholic faith is a hint worth taking.<sup>120</sup>

While Paul and his co-workers rejoice in constructing such a magnificent building for the worship of God, a severe storm damages the yet unfinished church. It is in the midst of repairing this damage that Paul and the artist, Catherine, decide to marry. For Catherine this is a decision involving a definite measure of self-sacrifice. We read this in words spoken by one of her friends to the man that she will marry. "Promise . . . that you will never imprison me in a dainty drawing-room, with lampshades and cushions and things."<sup>121</sup> The marriage takes place and Paul and Catherine depart for their honeymoon. It is while they are in France that Paul receives a letter advising that a number of changes have been made to the building. He is angry and upset over the changes made by men who could not see the vision with which the church was built. However, when he finally returns to view what he expects will be "each element of disaster," Paul is surprised.<sup>122</sup> "Though his mind was obsessed and tormented by the silly, self-spun illusion of ugliness, he was encompassed on every side - held, nourished, helped - by Immortal Beauty, by the incorruptible and timeless habitations of the soul."<sup>123</sup> He stands "in the real world, bathed in its light, hushed by its silence. All was well."<sup>124</sup> But Paul's life had taken a new

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<sup>120</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 88 - 89.

<sup>121</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 270.

<sup>122</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 305.

<sup>123</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 306 - 307.

<sup>124</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 310.



direction. “He . . . turned towards home: setting his face, once for all, towards the steady years of professional duty, domestic affection . . .”<sup>125</sup> Having left behind his desire to devote his life to the designing of beautiful churches, henceforward his wife and family would be the centre of his attention.

*The Lost Word* was published in 1907, the year in which Underhill decided to become a Roman Catholic, but postponed the decision. After her marriage she severed her ties with the Golden Dawn and settled into research on the subject of mysticism. During the two years prior to this momentous year, Underhill had pressing reasons therefore for reviewing the past, weighing up her present situation and deciding the future direction her life would take. In *The Lost Word*, we see our author revisit some of the themes of *The Grey World* – the link between the visible and invisible world and the pursuit of beauty. But she now faces her forthcoming marriage and, what was unacceptable to her finance, her intention to join the Roman Catholic Church. We hear in *The Lost Word* the reasons for her attraction to Catholicism; they are based on the beauty of its symbolism and ritual, and the spiritual homecoming it promises. We listen as she ponders marriage in words that indicate, as Greene argues, that she “was well aware of the nature of love and its illusions.”<sup>126</sup> As she grapples with these feelings through the medium of her characters, other themes emerge – the priority of love, the idea of sacrifice and the place of human relationships. The fictional

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<sup>125</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 315.

<sup>126</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 24.

Paul Vickery determines to sacrifice his desire to design beautiful buildings, for the sake of his wife and family. Underhill herself puts aside her decision to become a Catholic in favour of marriage. Comparing Paul's decision with Underhill, his creator, Johnson remarks: "How similar to the author's own concession of not joining the Roman church to which she believed she was called, for sake of marriage."<sup>127</sup>

During her visits to the Continent, she had experienced something of the corporate nature of the Catholic Church. However, "being in the heart of . . . a spiritual household" had caused her to feel a "miserable outsider."<sup>128</sup> So, while she still pursues her solitary journey to God, she begins to question her position through the characters of *The Lost Word*. She sets the plot within a community and as it develops we see the interplay of human relationships. The priority of love emerges and gives meaning to the notion of self-sacrifice. Underhill sheds light on the change in her own attitude as she describes the change that takes place in her character, Paul:

No longer with the eye of the determined visionary, but rather with the sane outlook of an immortal spirit that has learned, not despised the lesson of the flesh, he perceived the life of the body also to be holy, needful, consecrate.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 87.

<sup>128</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24.4.1905. Underhill Collection.

<sup>129</sup> Underhill, *The Lost Word*, 313.

Johnson nicely summarises the point of the second novel. “The story ended with Paul gaining a seminal insight: the mystic quest has more to do with love than enlightenment.”<sup>130</sup>

Underhill will continue her solitary and private approach to God throughout the first stage of her spiritual journey. Beauty will continue to be her way to God and her prayer will unfold in awe and adoration. Nonetheless, as the priority of incarnational values emerge, *The Lost Word* contains significant moments in its author’s development.

#### **F. *The Column of Dust***

Underhill’s final novel, *The Column of Dust* was published in 1909. While the plot takes many twists and turns, mostly of symbolic meaning, its central theme recalls that of her other novels namely: life in the visible and invisible worlds. Moreover, it revisits the inter-relation of love and knowledge. Through her characters, our author sets up an intriguing confrontation between the natural world of human relationships on the one hand, and the Plotinian spirit on the other.

In the story, the heroine Constance Tyrrel is a bookseller and the mother of a most unattractive and difficult child, Vera. Constance’s interest in spiritualism and its practices results in her possession by a spirit. First observable as a column of dust, the spirit is

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<sup>130</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 88.

named the Watcher. Armstrong refers to it as “a denizen of Plotinus’ world of intelligible spirits.”<sup>131</sup> It resides in Constance’s consciousness where it settles to satisfy its curiosity about human life. Through their many conversations, Constance becomes more aware of the spiritual world:

She had found a little hole in the wall of appearance; and peeping through, had caught a glimpse of that seething pot of spiritual forces whence, now and then, a bubble rises to the surface of things. . . . Only that invisible and intangible eternity behind the shadow-show was real.<sup>132</sup>

Constance becomes aware of her longing for that “invisible and intangible eternity.” For its part the Watcher too begins to learn about the world of humanity. When Constance explains to him that humans are taken up with many activities because “they are alive and have many things to do,” he is unable to understand and puts his case to her:<sup>133</sup>

But there are no real things to do. Reality does not change; it is perfect, and very quiet. I have always existed in it, and therefore I know. This activity is a loathsome illusion; it has no relation to the real.<sup>134</sup>

Meanwhile a priest, who has been the keeper of the Holy Grail, presents it to Constance with this advice:

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<sup>131</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 74.

<sup>132</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 32.

<sup>133</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 64.

<sup>134</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 64 - 65.

Oh learn to love! Do please; learn to love. It's such a terrible waste if you don't. You are made of the stuff that does things thoroughly; and this is the one thing which is worth doing.<sup>135</sup>

When the daughter, Vera, becomes ill her mother follows that advice, thus accepting the symbolic sacrificial act of the Holy Grail. Irrespective of the Watcher's urgings "to let her go . . . [because] she is twisted, imperfect: she will never grow, never be beautiful, never transmit the Idea," Constance nurses her daughter back to health.<sup>136</sup> It is in this loving commitment to her daughter that Constance realises that "truths have to become incarnate before they count."<sup>137</sup> The mother comes to see that "to give up one's will" is the secret to union with Reality.<sup>138</sup> As Vera recovers, her mother, exhausted by the care she has given her daughter, becomes ill and dies. In the redemptive act of saving her daughter's life, "her eyes were opened on eternity . . . she perceived Reality"<sup>139</sup> as her soul "shot up, a penetrating flame of love straight to the Heart of Being."<sup>140</sup> The worlds of the visible and the invisible are reconciled. Constance's sacrificial act of love, her complete acceptance of the Holy Grail, is the Watcher's final lesson.

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<sup>135</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 164 - 165.

<sup>136</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 269 - 270.

<sup>137</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 261.

<sup>138</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 221.

<sup>139</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 301.

<sup>140</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 304.

In the human aspect of her death . . . he recognised, astonished . . . [that] out of all this agony there was reflected for him a ray of that divine Personality which he, the ignorant and impersonal investigator of things, had little suspected to be the energizing light in which alone it was possible to see God. . . . He heard now the voice of that Love . . . dragged and distilled from the turmoil of life, from the midst of that sacrificial torment which he had so bitterly and ignorantly regretted for her [Constance] whom he had learned to call his friend. There, in the healing of division, he saw perfect union attained. He, who had now all knowledge, saw himself outstripped by those who had a very little love.<sup>141</sup>

Finally, released by Constance's death, the Watcher is "initiated into heaven . . . humbled, glorified, redeemed by that humanity into whose august secrets he had tried to look."<sup>142</sup>

While in *The Lost Word*, Underhill examines from a distance the priority of love and sacrifice, in *The Column of Dust* she confronts this demand by bringing together Constance and the Watcher. Through them she explores both the natural and the supernatural worlds and takes a further step in her understanding of knowledge, love and sacrifice. In his careful examination of this novel, Armstrong claims that its climax occurs when Constance "is forced to choose between the ecstatic categories of mystical consciousness and the relatively trivial and demeaning demands of a human love totally devoid of emotional rewards and consolation."<sup>143</sup> Underhill is not faced with such clear-cut alternatives, but through her description of her character's dilemma she faces up to the questions that have intensified during this first stage of her spiritual life. What is the relationship between her

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<sup>141</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 302 - 303.

<sup>142</sup> Underhill, *The Column of Dust*, 304.

<sup>143</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 79.

solitary journey to the mystical, transcendent God and love that empowers sacrifice? How does she live in both the natural and the spiritual worlds? Paul, in *The Lost Word*, and Constance in this later novel, answer that the mystic journey to God is also the journey of life lived within the community of family and the world. There is what we can call an “incarnational dimension.” Besides the solitary self, it must make room for “the other.” Sacrifice to the point of self-surrender is redemptive suffering. Only through love, “dragged and distilled from the turmoil of life,” can there be total integration of human life. Despite all his knowledge, the Watcher is “outstripped by those who had a very little love.” Love is more important than knowledge yet they belong together. Through sacrificial love and a mystical dying to self, the worlds of the visible and invisible are reconciled. When love becomes incarnate, it redeems.

While Constance’s uncertainties dissolve in the attainment of perfect unity with God, Underhill’s continue and increase – as we shall see in next chapter. What we see in this final novel is a deeper questioning of Plotinian philosophy and a gradual engagement with the incarnational and redemptive aspects of relationship with God. While still in the “white-hot Neo-Platonist” period of her life and now settled into marriage, our author brings to a conclusion her fictional writings.

## G. Assessment of the novels

Underhill's three novels, complex in plot, highly symbolic in character and generally over-written, had no lasting impact on the literary world.<sup>144</sup> When considering her extreme privacy regarding her spiritual life however, the Underhill scholar considers them immeasurable. Through the novels, which "allowed her to express the most pressing concerns of her life," we meet her questions, follow her thinking, examine her developing theological understanding and gain a sense of future direction in her spiritual life.<sup>145</sup> From the beauty of Continental Europe's churches and art works and Willie Hopkinson's choice of the solitary life, we move to Paul Vickery's desire to build a beautiful church to the glory of God and his acceptance of the ordinary life of the world. From there we are taken to Constance Tyrrel's sacrificial death, where she attains union with the God of all Beauty. Within that context, the ideas and aspirations most determinative of the first phase of Underhill's spiritual life are apparent. Beauty is a way to God. Life is lived in the world of sense and the world of spirit, symbolism and ritual, love and sacrifice and the milieu of human relationships. Her novels offer a precious insight into Underhill's life. We can both follow her journey so far, and anticipate its subsequent phases.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Both Greene and Armstrong comment on the overwritten character of Underhill's fictional writing. Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 42. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 82.

<sup>145</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 43.

<sup>146</sup> Underhill also wrote poetry. Evelyn Underhill, *A Bar-Lamb's Ballad Book* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1902), is about legal dilemmas that arise in the process of the law. Evelyn Underhill, *Immanence: A Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912,) and Evelyn Underhill, *Theophanies: A*



### **3. Overview and critical analysis of the effects of Underhill's travel during the first stage of her spirituality**

We have been attempting to answer the question: How did Underhill's travel shape her spirituality in its first phase? How are we to understand this young, creative English woman as she approaches the year 1913?

The most important effect of Underhill's travel during the years 1898 to 1907 is that it showed her that beauty is a way to God. Callahan supports this opinion when she says that Underhill's trips to the Continent "showed her forcibly that beauty was a way to God."<sup>147</sup> From her reading of Plotinus, she knew of the power and influence of beauty as a stepping stone on the journey to God. Her experience of the art works and churches of Italy and her visit to the cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres take that knowledge to a level of deep

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*Book of Verses* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1916), contain selections of verse written over a period of many years. In general, they follow a mystical theme highlighting the divine indwelling of nature and the consequent closeness of God. Armstrong described its style as "flowing, bouncy, almost school-girlish rhymes and rhythms about birds and flowers, mountains and clouds" which was "inadequate to articulate her experience," while Greene, in agreement with Armstrong, declares that "poetry was not her vehicle." See Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 179 and Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 59. In a contrasting approach, Ford examines a number of Underhill poems arguing that "through the semiotic fluidity of the poetic genre" Underhill drew upon her own "ecstatic experience" to "uncover feminine images for the divine." Ford, "Evelyn Underhill's Mystical Theology," 159, 160, 161. My reading of Underhill's poetry leads me to agree with Armstrong and Greene. In contrast to her short stories and novels, her verse was never strong or mature enough to grapple with the intensity and complexity of her lived experience. For this reason, in various appropriate sections of this project it is referred to rather than examined in detail.

<sup>147</sup> Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 15. As discussed previously in this chapter, Johnson, Armstrong and especially Greene also acknowledge the importance of beauty in Underhill's life though they fail to appreciate the immediacy of her experience. See chap.3, pp. 120 - 122.

conviction. In beholding these works – in looking with the inner eyes of the soul – she encounters the Source of all Beauty, God. She tells us this through her fictional character, Willie, who “recognised that the inarticulate ecstasy which came to him in the presence of all beautiful things . . . was a way to approach God.”<sup>148</sup> We have seen the reverential attitude with which she approached the paintings of Florence as she “came before” them. Through Willie she tells us how she reverently knelt in the presence of “an exquisite reality” in the churches she visited.<sup>149</sup> In the presence of beauty she is in rapture and awe because she recognises the mysterious presence of God. Her prayer is one of adoration.

Underhill’s realisation that beauty is a way to God has two important implications.

First, as we saw in the previous chapter, Underhill’s spirituality was deeply private and personal during that period of her life.<sup>150</sup> While her natural inclination contributed to that, the nature of beauty itself also significantly determined it. Described by Underhill as “a shadowy companion,” beauty has an elusive character which can be captured only in reflective silence – in seeing with the eyes of the soul – an intensely private exercise. Her relationship with an ineffable and transcendent God, initiated and sustained through her appreciation of beauty, is therefore solitary, withdrawn and individual. That she makes the spiritual journey alone during this first phase of her spiritual life is determined to a large

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<sup>148</sup> See chap. 2, p. 82.

<sup>149</sup> See chap. 2, p. 82.

<sup>150</sup> See chap. 2, pp. 89 - 91.

extent by her realisation that beauty is a way to God and for her at this time, *the* way to God.

The second important implication is that, through it, visual art becomes both Underhill's way to God and her teacher. As she beholds works of art and stands within the churches and cathedrals of the Continent, it is their beauty which draws her into communion with God, to instruct her. The "swept and garnished" space of the church of Santa Croce in Florence teaches the need for purification of life.<sup>151</sup> She herself refers to the instructive nature of visual art when in 1898 she writes of Florence: "this place has taught me more than I can tell you."<sup>152</sup> Visual art, the expression of beauty, is both her way to God and her teacher. It has become foundational in her spiritual life as both a stimulus to contemplation and a rich source of theological wisdom. As we move into further exploration of her spiritual journey, we will have more reason to see the highly formative character of visual art in her spirituality and the enduring significance of this first phase of her spiritual journey. Nearly 40 years later, she was still speaking about art as "witnessing to another beauty beyond sense," an attractive force ever active in her spiritual journey.<sup>153</sup> As Cropper perceptively comments on Underhill's first visit to the Continent: "It was a seed time for her . . . she came home longing to penetrate into that Beyond which had been at the birth of

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<sup>151</sup> See chap. 3, pp. 105 - 106.

<sup>152</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24. 4. 1898. Underhill Collection.

<sup>153</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 16 -17.

those pictures.”<sup>154</sup> And Menzies does not overestimate the significance of her friend’s early exposure to art when she declares that it was “one of the greatest influences of her life.”<sup>155</sup>

While Underhill’s deep conviction of the role of beauty as a way to God is the most important outcome of her Continental journeys, there are other effects which begin to emerge as a result of those journeys. In contrast to the solitary nature of the Plotinian sensibility with which she began, she was launched into the broad fields of the Church as a community of believers while, at the same time, becoming aware of incarnate and redemptive value of human relationships.

Our traveller experienced something of the corporate nature of the Church as the Italians expressed their faith Catholic customs, ritual and liturgy. Such communal celebration of God’s immanence stands in sharp contrast to her private adoration of a transcendent God. Though the beauty of the liturgy attracts her, she does not feel at home in this Latin and Catholic environment – a reaction expressed in both her *Journal* and in her story, *The Green Mass*. As a “miserable outsider,”<sup>156</sup> her “unslaked desire” is unsatisfied.<sup>157</sup> She is, as

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<sup>154</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 16 - 17.

<sup>155</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, II, 7.

<sup>156</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 59.

<sup>157</sup> Underhill, “A Green Mass,” 447.

Johnson puts it, “relegated to the level of spectator.”<sup>158</sup> We see here the first indications of her questioning the hitherto solitary character of her spiritual journey.

All this, along with her impending marriage, leads her into the complex area of human relationships. Her fictional writing explores redemptive and incarnational values of faith lived out within community. The holiness of human life is to be found within the environment of the world. Any Gnostic pretension to spiritual knowledge reserved to the elite is met with demands of sacrificial love. Underhill chose the way of sacrificial love by committing herself to marriage, thereby following the example of one of her fictional characters. The explorations of her fictional writings, however, remain a form of exploration. Through them she continues to probe and to question, searching beyond her established philosophic framework for what is more: namely the realm of human relationships. Accordingly, we can document this period of her life as a time of ambivalence, as her previous Plotinian mindset was disturbed by new experiences and the questions that arose.

That questioning would become more obvious in her later spiritual writings. Even before her last novel was published, she had begun the research for *Mysticism*, eventually published in 1911. In the tradition of Plotinus, it captures the adventure, colour and life of a journey, motivated by active desire for Absolute Life, Absolute Beauty and Absolute Truth. Already in 1907, in articles written in defence of magic, she nonetheless claims that

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<sup>158</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 75.

the separation of knowledge and love is a defect.<sup>159</sup> By 1913, her criticism of Plotinian philosophy is brought to a sharp edge: “For Plotinus there is no question of an outflowing gift to others of the vitality that has been received.”<sup>160</sup> At the end of what we have interpreted as the first phase of her spiritual journey, an impending shift in her perspective has become obvious.

In his evaluation of this period of Underhill’s life, Armstrong concludes that the impression left by the novels is “of a problem worked out.”<sup>161</sup> He continues:

She had come to see as a temptation . . . the flight into solitude. . . . She associated the rejection of solitude with the loving, positive acceptance of this world, supremely exemplified for Christians in the vocation of Jesus. Her way had henceforth to be a way of *inclusion* not *exclusion*.<sup>162</sup>

Nonetheless, even with the end of her fictional career, she had not abandoned her convictions of the solitary nature of her journey to God. Nor, for that matter, had she accepted Jesus as the supreme example of spiritual life. While exploring any number of fresh perspectives, she had not uniformly adopted them. A “white-hot Neo-Platonist”, Underhill’s spirituality remained theistic built on a strong Plotinian foundation, even if questions were beginning to stir. It would be several years before these questions were to

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<sup>159</sup> Evelyn Underhill, “A Defence of Magic,” in *The Fortnightly Review*, Nov., 1907, 754 - 765. Reprint, Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 33 - 46. Mrs. Stuart Moore, “The Magic and Mysticism of Today,” in *The Hibbert Journal*, vol. VI, (1907 - 1908): 374 - 386.

<sup>160</sup> Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 291.

<sup>161</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 93.

<sup>162</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 93.

register in their full impact. In contrast to Armstrong, Johnson accurately captures the spirit of the first phase of Underhill's spiritual life. He describes it as a period of "gradual warming to religion and God."<sup>163</sup> Greene is equally perceptive in naming the chapter of her biography which covers this period of Underhill's life, "The Work of the Borderland."<sup>164</sup> Both correctly address the formative character of this period and indicate future developments in Underhill's spirituality. Convinced that beauty is *her* way to God and inspired by the teachings of her philosopher, our English woman pursues her quest. But as the year 1913 approaches, doubts and questions give rise to ambivalence. Underhill is on the cusp of change.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the previous chapter we saw how Plotinian philosophy was a dominant influence on Underhill's spirituality during its first phase. In this chapter we have seen the influence of her Continental aesthetic experience on her spirituality during the same period. In integrating these two influences on her life, we have presented a critical overview of Underhill's spirituality during the first period of her spiritual life from the mid 1890s to approximately 1913. In this next chapter, we will move to what we can discern as the next phase of her spiritual life.

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<sup>163</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 76.

<sup>164</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 35 - 55.

## **Chapter 4:       AWAKENING TO CHRIST**

In the previous chapter, we described Underhill's aesthetic experience of Continental Europe and explored her understanding of it as expressed in her writings during the first period of her spiritual life. While the investigatory phases of the methodological structure described in Chapter 1 continue, our focus now includes its other phases, namely constructive interpretation and critical analysis. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate her gradual awakening to Christ during the second stage of her spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> I will treat the material of this chapter under the following headings:

1. Preceding Developments.
2. Underhill's awakening to Christ through art.
3. The place of Christ in her theocentric spirituality.
4. Critical analysis of this second stage of her spirituality.
5. Conclusion.

Before we begin our enquiry, some introductory remarks will explain the timeframe of this phase of Underhill's spiritual life. The second stage of her spirituality stretched from

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout her writings Underhill, except in rare instances, used the name 'Christ' rather than 'Jesus'. In keeping with her tradition and spirit, its usage is maintained in this study.



approximately 1914 to 1929. As we shall see, these years naturally fall into two stages: the first from approximately 1914 to 1920 and the second from 1921 to 1929. The first stage, during which our subject does not record any aesthetic experience, is important because it provides the context for the explanation of the second stage. The second stage is significant in her awakening to Christ through aesthetic experience. We now begin our investigation into the first period of stage two of Underhill's spiritual life.

## **1. Preceding Developments**

We recall, from the previous chapter, that as she approached the year 1914, Underhill was becoming ambivalent in her approach to the Plotinian philosophy which still provided the framework for her understanding of the spiritual life. During the first years of the second phase of her spiritual journey, that shift in her thinking was further developed through a project which would occupy her for several years – the study of the lives of the mystics.

### **A. *The Mystic Way***

Central to this study was another major work, *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins* which was published in 1913. Underhill gave as the object of this book:

to estimate, as far as possible, the true character and origin of the Christian mystic and define the qualities which differentiate him from those other mystics who have

been evolved along other lines of spiritual development, Oriental, Neoplatonic, or Mahomedan.<sup>2</sup>

In order to do this, Underhill searched the New Testament. There she found Christianity “which began as a mystical movement of the purest kind,” and its “Founder,” Christ, who possessed “the characteristically mystical consciousness, and passed through the normal stages of mystical growth.”<sup>3</sup> Because Christ was “immersed in the stream of Becoming,” Underhill was able to accommodate vitalism in her understanding while at the same time showing that the Founder of Christianity was the greatest of all the mystics having perfected human life.<sup>4</sup> Her contemporaries generally were highly critical of a work which they saw as questioning the historicity of the scriptures and some aspects of faith.<sup>5</sup> Her current biographers also raise issues concerning *The Mystic Way*.<sup>6</sup> Johnson generally encapsulates these when he says that “She [Underhill] . . . defined Christ as the perfect example of the one who had travelled the Mystic Way to its end, leaving as his legacy the

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<sup>2</sup> Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, vii.

<sup>3</sup> Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, viii.

<sup>4</sup> Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 76. Underhill had included a chapter on vitalism in *Mysticism*. A philosophical understanding that perceives “the principle of a free spontaneous and creative life as the essence of Reality,” vitalism and its promoters, Bergson and Eucken, captivated Underhill. See Underhill, *Mysticism*, 27. After she hears Bergson speak in London, Underhill declares: “I’m still drunk with Bergson, who sharpened one’s mind and swept one off one’s feet at once.” Underhill to The Same, (Meyrick Heath), Sunday, 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Underhill to Miss Nancy Paul, Monday in Easter Week, 1913; Underhill to J. A. Herbert, 30. 3. 1913; Underhill to The Same, (Herbert), April, 1913; Underhill to The Same, (Herbert), 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 140 - 144. Dean Inge was also critical of *The Mystic Way* for what he regarded as its emphasis on psychology, its disregard of some current writers on the subject of mysticism, prejudice against Platonism and its strong bias towards the French School of vitalism. See Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 130 - 131.

<sup>6</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 146 - 157; Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 64 - 65; Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 99 - 107.

world's purest and most clearly mystical religion."<sup>7</sup> His evaluation that "her argument originated out of a Christology from below emphasizing the progress of Jesus' human nature, not the incarnation of the divine into human nature,"<sup>8</sup> resonates with Armstrong's that for Underhill "the atonement of Jesus lies indeed precisely in the fact that he leads the process."<sup>9</sup>

While the complex theological issues of *The Mystic Way* lie beyond the scope of my research, the book opens up three aspects that are significant and will become increasingly so, to our present explorations. Firstly, as Greene comments, *The Mystic Way* was written "to establish that the root of Christian mysticism was in Jesus and not the Neoplatonists."<sup>10</sup> Related to this is the second aspect which Barkway observes when he notes that during the years of *The Mystic Way* Underhill's thinking was becoming more "incarnational."<sup>11</sup> So here, in this 1913 publication, she is continuing to question Plotinian philosophy but now in a new way through the exploration of Christ's humanity. Though she portrays Christ as the greatest of the mystics, Underhill nonetheless directs her attention to a person, Christ, whom she describes as "the *whole man*."<sup>12</sup> While this signals another shift from the

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 99.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 101.

<sup>9</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 150.

<sup>10</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 64.

<sup>11</sup> Barkway, "Introduction," in Underhill, *Collected Papers*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Underhill, *The Mystic Way*, 94.

mystical to the incarnational elements of the spiritual life, it also introduces our writer's first significant exploration into the life of Christ. As this chapter continues, we will see how further experience and other circumstances in Underhill's life will give rise to deeper understanding of Christ. The third aspect which *The Mystic Way* draws into focus arises from Underhill's defense of the book against J. A. Herbert who had, according to its author, "misinterpret [ed] my attitude and intentions quite so completely."<sup>13</sup> She writes to him: "Personally, if I didn't think the *whole* of life was the work of the Holy Spirit, I should give up everything. It is the centre of my creed . . ."<sup>14</sup> Words that give the first indication of her growing awareness of the Holy Spirit, they also flag a crucial development in her spiritual orientation. In the following chapter, as we revisit this statement, we will have reason to appreciate its significance.

## **B. Christian mystics**

However, even while Underhill was writing about the mysticism of Christ in *The Mystic Way*, she had begun a serious investigation into the lives of the Christian mystics.

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<sup>13</sup> Underhill to The Same (J. A. Herbert), April, 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 143. Although Herbert's letters to Underhill are not extant, we can gain from her replies to this correspondence that his criticism focused on three specific areas of her understanding: the historical accuracy of the gospels, the virgin birth and Christ's divinity. Underhill to J. A. Herbert, 30 March, 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 141 - 142; Underhill to The Same, (J. A. Herbert), April, 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 143; Underhill to The Same (J. A. Herbert), 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 143 - 144.

<sup>14</sup> Underhill to The Same, (J. A. Herbert), April 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 143.

Among the first of these is Angela of Foligno.<sup>15</sup> Married with a family and living “a thoroughly worldly if not an actually immoral life,” Angela was converted and adopted the Franciscan Rule of life.<sup>16</sup> With her followers she devoted herself to care of the sick and other charitable works. Underhill sees her as a “passionate, faulty, very human woman who came to the Mystic Way from a disorderly life, and who fully lived her twofold vocation “to the eternal and the temporal.”<sup>17</sup> John Ruysbroeck, who worked as a busy priest in Brussels for twenty-six years, is another of Underhill’s early interests.<sup>18</sup> She describes him as “one of the most manly and human of the mystics,” and draws attention to aspects of his life which she considers integral to his deep level of mystic union with God:

No mystic has ever been more free from the vice of other-worldliness, or has practised more thoroughly and more unselfishly the primary duty of active charity towards men which is laid upon the God-possessed.<sup>19</sup>

And again:

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<sup>15</sup> Evelyn Underhill, “The Blessed Angela of Foligno,” in *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 160 - 182. Angela was born in Italy in 1248 and died in 1309. Underhill was greatly devoted to this mystic whose work, *The Book of Divine Consolations of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, (translated into English in 1908), she liberally cited throughout her writings.

<sup>16</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 162 - 163.

<sup>17</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Ruysbroeck* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914), 34. John Ruysbroeck was born in Belgium in 1293 and died in 1381. His written works include *Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage* and *The Book of the Twelve Béguines* and were much quoted by Underhill. Menzies records that he was Underhill’s favourite among all the mystics. See Menzies, *Biography*, VII. 14. It is interesting that in a number of ways the pattern of Underhill’s life coincides with that of her favourite.

<sup>19</sup> Underhill, *Ruysbroeck*, 16.

. . . Ruysbroeck's theory of transcendence involves, not the passage from one life to another, but the *adding* of one life to another: the perpetual deepening, widening, heightening and enriching of human experience.<sup>20</sup>

In Underhill's examination of these two lives, she is looking at the whole – spiritual and temporal – of each. Both Angela of Foligno and Ruysbroeck experienced mystic union with God, which they recorded. At the same time, they also led active lives of loving service of others. She places particular emphasis on Ruysbroeck's notion of transcendence. It does not involve passing through or above human life to reach some unworldly, elevated life of mystical union with God. Rather it is the whole of life lived in its fullness that God transforms and calls into communion. Here we see Underhill building the incarnational aspects of *The Mystic Way*, moving towards a more expansive understanding of the spiritual life than that which characterised the first phase of her spirituality. She does not abandon her Plotinian understanding that “we must ascend again towards the Good,” but broadens it by, as she explains, “the *adding* of one life to another” and suggests a counterpoint to the metaphor of ascent by her appeal to depth and breadth.<sup>21</sup> She examines the lives of her two mystics from another angle when she points out that “the mystic is not merely a self going out on a solitary quest of Reality. He can, must, and does go only as the member of the whole body.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, as a member of the body of the Church, the life of the mystic affects the whole Church. It enlivens and has a “special redeeming power in

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<sup>20</sup> Underhill, *Ruysbroeck*, 117.

<sup>21</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1, 6, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 55.

respect of the corporate body.”<sup>23</sup> Through the mystics Underhill learns that “the corporate and individual aspects of the spiritual life [are] inextricably twined together.”<sup>24</sup> For Underhill, who had separated herself from institutional religion, this was a telling acknowledgement.<sup>25</sup>

What we observe in Underhill as she explores the lives of the mystics is a continuing broadening of approach and understanding. In highlighting their robust living of life in its completeness – the priority of love, the service of others, the corporate dimension – she places it as integral to their mystical union with God. Commenting on Underhill’s reading of the mystics, Armstrong says that by focusing on these aspects she “looked for a characteristic psychology as well as a doctrine or a philosophy.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, as Armstrong also notes: “Her interest in her mystics and their writings was severely practical and personal.”<sup>27</sup> That practical element is clearly expressed in 1914 with the publication of

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<sup>23</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Underhill’s study of individual Christian mystics other than Angela of Foligno and Ruysbroeck is recorded in a number of essays and articles which include: “The Mirror of Simple Souls,” in *Fortnightly Review*, no. 78, February, 1911, 345 - 354; “St Paul and the Mystic Way” in *The Mystic Way*, 157 - 213; “Julian of Norwich,” in *St Martin-in-the-Fields Monthly Review*, no. 35, May, 1920, 10 - 15; “A Modern Saint - St Theresa of Lisieux,” in *The Fortnightly Review*, no. 644, August, 1920, 279 - 289; “Charles Péguy: In Memoriam,” in *Contemporary Review*, no. 592, April, 1915, 472 - 478. All were reprinted in Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*. Also see “Lucie-Christine” in *Essentials of Mysticism*, 215 - 227 and Underhill, *Jacopone da Todi*. Underhill’s extensive knowledge of a number of other mystics is well illustrated in *Mysticism*. She also wrote specifically on a number of mystics in relation to the Church in *Mystics of the Church*.

<sup>26</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 182.

<sup>27</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 187.

*Practical Mysticism*. A small work addressed to “the average man,” it explains mysticism and instructs its readers in a method of contemplation<sup>28</sup> Heavily charged with Plotinian thinking, it nonetheless reflects Underhill’s changing perspectives. Those who live in “total consecration to the interests of the Real” are not “abstract and dreamy” but “practical and affirmative,” she writes.<sup>29</sup>

### C. Disenchantment with Plotinian philosophy

While Underhill was writing prolifically on the lives of the mystics and arranging for the publication of her poetry, her interior life was suffering. In 1921 she reflected on this period in a letter to Baron von Hügel. In reference to the years subsequent to 1907 and in particular to the wars years, she writes:

However, I went on for a long time going to Mass on Sundays as a sort of freelance & outsider; but gradually this faded out in favour of what I vainly imagined to be inwardness & an increasing anti-institutional bias. Then, during the war, I went to pieces . . .<sup>30</sup>

While the specific causes of this experience remain unclear, an article written towards the end of the war provides us with some explanation. In “The Mysticism of Plotinus” Underhill affirms all that attracts her to the teaching of her philosopher. However, she also points out its inadequacies which come into focus only against the background of war.

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<sup>28</sup> Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, xii.

<sup>29</sup> Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 165.

<sup>30</sup> Underhill to Baron Friedrich von Hügel, 21. 12. 1921. Underhill Collection.



Declaring Neoplatonism to be “an exclusive system of self-culture,” she names, as foundational errors, its failure to acknowledge the outpouring of God’s love on humanity and its inadequate treatment of the problem of evil, conflict, sin and suffering.. “Neoplatonism . . . left man everything to do for himself,” she writes.<sup>31</sup> She continues:

The transfiguration of pain which was the greatest achievement of the Gospel is beyond the scope of his [Plotinus’] philosophy. Its remedy for failure and grief is not humble consecration, but a lofty withdrawal to that spiritual sphere where the divine element of the soul is at home, untroubled by the conflicts, evils and chances of life.<sup>32</sup>

Declaring that Plotinus “speaks in a tone of icy contempt of those who allow themselves to be disturbed by the world’s woes,”<sup>33</sup> she makes her own Augustine’s question regarding *The Enneads* by asking: “When would those books have taught me charity?”<sup>34</sup> These were issues which struck at the very heart of that philosophical framework upon which she had based her understanding of the spiritual journey. The Plotinian philosophy did not stand up to her experience of the war or of herself. As Johnson observes, “Neoplatonism and its inherent optimism – and its accompanying individualism – had led Underhill to a dead-end.”<sup>35</sup> Saddened by the death of relatives and friends, horrified by the devastation of war

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<sup>31</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 131.

<sup>33</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 131.

<sup>34</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 132.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 111.

and drifting into deeper isolation, she writes that “we are all finding it frightfully difficult and most of us are failing badly.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet Underhill did survive this difficult time. Again, her writings offer some clues as to how she did this. As noted earlier in this chapter, the ambivalence that characterised the last years of the first phase of Underhill’s spiritual life, continued into the next phase where it was sharpened by her experience of the war. That she was becoming more interested in institutional religion is further evident in a 1915 article, “The Mystic and the Corporate Life.”<sup>37</sup> Here she concludes that while the Church provides the mystics with “harmonious environment and salutary discipline,”<sup>38</sup> the mystics act as “salt, as leaven permeating and transmuting the general consciousness of the Body of Christ.”<sup>39</sup> Three years later she would be convinced that mysticism “flourishes best in alliance with a lofty moral code, a strong sense of duty, a definite religious faith. . . . It is more likely to arise with, than without, the great historic churches and faiths.”<sup>40</sup> Then, shortly after the war, in an article entitled “The Essentials of Mysticism,” our author makes a more careful examination of Christianity and the institutional Church. The “positive moral purity which Christians declared necessary to the spiritual life,” she writes, “was not centred on a lofty aloofness

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<sup>36</sup> Underhill to M. R., 9. 11. 1917 in Underhill, *Letters*, 147.

<sup>37</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 25 - 43.

<sup>38</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 32 - 33.

<sup>40</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 66.

from human failings, but on a self-giving and disinterested love, the complete abolition of egotism.”<sup>41</sup> Asserting that Christianity addresses itself to “all men . . . takes human nature as it is; and works from the bottom up, instead of beginning at a level which only a few can attain,” she draws out the great strengths of Christianity as compared with the weaknesses of Neoplatonism. Greene correctly claims that from that time (1920), Underhill realised that “the future of mysticism lay not with Neoplatonism but with Christianity.”<sup>42</sup>

So far in this first stage of the second phase of Underhill’s spiritual life, we have explored Underhill’s examination of the lives of the mystics, her experience of the World War I and her increasing disenchantment with Plotinian philosophy. We have seen, running parallel with that, her increasingly incarnational, redemptive and ethical thinking expressed in her writings. However, another influence, integral to her study of the mystics, was making a significant impact on Underhill. It was her Franciscan experience.

#### **D. Franciscan influence**

In the previous chapter, we saw our traveller visiting the Franciscan holy places of La Verna and Assisi in 1907.<sup>43</sup> At that time still embedded in Neoplatonic thinking, she is led deeper into solitude with God through her experience of the surrounds hallowed by St

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<sup>41</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> See chap. 3, pp. 117 - 119.

Francis. But she also records other encounters. While in the Upper Church of the shrine, Underhill sees a fresco depicting Francis standing with a group. In *Madonna Enthroned with the Child, Saint Francis and Four Angels*, Francis stands aside from his companions whose magnificent and regal appearance is in sharp contrast to that of the saint.<sup>44</sup> Underhill first gives her attention to those grouped around the throne. “. . . [T]he remoteness of the whole from the common life of man,” she writes, “is difficult to combine with any spiritual idea.”<sup>45</sup> She then reflects on St Francis:

As a work of art it is beautiful, original and curiously difficult to forget: all the more because of the mean, tired little figure of S. Francis, so evidently ‘belonging to another set’ introduced at one side of the picture and rather bewildered by this pensive, highly bred and loveless Paradise. This is not the ‘troubadour of God’ but the gentle poor little one who would not even allow the vermin which clung to his clothing to be killed. It shows the lover of Lady Poverty in his least picturesque aspect.<sup>46</sup>

The disparity between Francis and his companions is immediately obvious to Underhill as she beholds this work of art. Paradise – regal and loveless – is far removed from the common life of humankind. But Francis belongs with the ordinary. Gentle, poor and conspicuously out of place in the company of such grandeur, his simplicity draws Underhill to consider the relationship of the glory of heaven – and therefore of God – with the mundane world of everyday life. Hitherto Underhill has perceived Francis on the

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<sup>44</sup> Cenni di Pepo (Giovanni) Cimabue, *Madonna Enthroned with the Child, Saint Francis and Four Angels*, fresco, c 1278 - 1280, Upper Church of St Francis, Assisi, Italy. See Appendix 3, p. 422.

<sup>45</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 115.

<sup>46</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 115 - 116.

mountain where “he touched God.”<sup>47</sup> While this remains, a new experience brings heightened awareness. For Underhill the encounter with *Madonna Enthroned with the Child, Saint Francis and Four Angels* initiates a relationship with the Franciscan spirit based on simplicity and couched in the common life.

At the same time that Underhill encountered that fresco, another work depicting St Francis also drew her attention. *Madonna with Saint Francis and Saint John the Evangelist* portrays a sad Madonna showing her anxious child the wounds of the passion on Francis’ hands.<sup>48</sup> By way of interpretation, Underhill puts these words on the mother’s lips: “See, my Son! Here is one that shall come after you and be sealed with your heraldry. See the marks in his hands to show what you and I have got to suffer first.”<sup>49</sup> Reflecting on the meaning of this work, Underhill comments: “Time is not in this conception. It is the perpetual Incarnation, the eternal love and pain of God and Man.”<sup>50</sup> While these words capture her strong sense of an organic relationship with God, they also focus on the suffering Francis who bears the wounds of the passion. Love and pain, the timeless companions of her saint, lead her to reflect on their place in the spiritual journey.

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<sup>47</sup> See chap. 3, p. 118.

<sup>48</sup> Pietro Lorenzetti, *Madonna with St Francis and St John the Evangelist*, fresco, c 1310, Lower Church of St Francis, Assisi, Italy. See Appendix 4, p. 423.

<sup>49</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 115.

These two images of St Francis are foundational to Underhill's perception of the Franciscan spirit which she understands as love and suffering intertwined with simplicity expressed through the banal routine of the ordinary. In her study of the life of the Franciscan Angela of Foligno, which we explored earlier in this chapter, Underhill is attracted by the same human qualities. And it was for the same reasons that she writes so warmly of her welcome by the friars at La Verna:

Gentleness, consideration, eagerness to serve, a faith so simple and profound that it did not think it necessary to explain itself – these were the dominant notes; and truly Franciscan ones.<sup>51</sup>

While the experience of these images drew Underhill into consideration of the Franciscan spirit in relation to her own spiritual journey, it was her research into the life of Jacopone da Todi, which was to prove the most influential of her Franciscan encounters. Menzies records that she became interested in the Italian Franciscan lay brother after his poetry became available in English in 1915.<sup>52</sup> Five years later she completed her life of da Todi which included the text and translation of a selection of his poetry.<sup>53</sup> Her love for this Franciscan clearly corresponds with her attraction for other members of the Order. She describes da Todi as:

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<sup>51</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 106.

<sup>52</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, VIII. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Underhill, *Jacopone da Todi Poet and Mystic – 1228 - 1306: A Spiritual Biography*. With a selection from the Spiritual Songs, the Italian translated into English by Mrs Theodore Beck (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1919).

A vigorous human creature, full of ardent feeling, keen of intellect though unstable and eccentric, passionately interested in the realities both of the temporal and of the external worlds . . . a lawyer and man of the world, a wandering missionary and didactic poet, religious reformer, politician, and contemplative friar . . . and full of a robust humour that is not afraid to laugh at itself . . . yet [who] never ceases to be governed by the love and wonder which . . . [is] the essence of the divine.<sup>54</sup>

Underhill was entranced by this dynamic personality. Having absorbed his founder's teaching of penitence, poverty and adoration, da Todi "touches the common life at all points," she wrote, "as a good Franciscan should."<sup>55</sup> He was a true son of the "strong and ardent spirituality" of Umbria.<sup>56</sup> Fifteen years before she wrote these words, Underhill had spoken of the power of Italy in her novel, *The Grey World*. "The only place left," she said, "which is medicinal to the soul. There is a type of mind . . . that must go there to find itself."<sup>57</sup> In her writing she gives the strong sense that through this holy mystic of Umbria, she somehow finds herself again at a crucial time in her life. Menzies remarks on "how welcome working on Jacopone had been for her [Underhill]."<sup>58</sup> In her assessment of the influence of the Franciscan on Underhill, Greene makes an astute observation. "In Jacopone, she [Underhill] saw the world-denying tendency of the Neoplatonic overcome by the world-affirming orientation of the Franciscan . . . in some indirect way the vocation

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<sup>54</sup> Underhill, *Jacopone da Todi*, vii.

<sup>55</sup> Underhill, *Jacopone da Todi*, 32 - 33.

<sup>56</sup> Underhill, *Jacopone da Todi*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 329.

<sup>58</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, VIII. 4.

of Jacopone da Todi presaged her own future vocation.”<sup>59</sup> Callahan concurs with this opinion when she writes that “studying Jacopone da Todi had something to do with the shift in Underhill from denial of the world of shadow to affirmation of the world of the real.”<sup>60</sup>

That five years after she had completed her life of the Franciscan Underhill visited his tomb – her mind alive with his poetry – speaks of her devotion.<sup>61</sup> Da Todi combined all that she loved and admired about the Franciscans. Their humanity, gentleness, engagement with the world, spirit of adoration and loyalty to the Church inspired and instructed her. This powerful, yet mysterious, Franciscan influence accounts significantly for the gradual development in both Underhill’s thinking and writings during the years 1914 to 1920. It also took her to the edge of major decisions. During 1919 she had affiliated herself with the Spiritual Entente. An ecumenical Confraternity founded in Italy by the Franciscan, Sorella Maria, its members were seekers of the presence of God, people of prayer, and loyal to their Church while at the same time praying for Christian unity. According to Cropper, this further Franciscan contact provided Underhill with a “sustaining and loving friend” to whom she confided “much of the pain that came from her own periods of darkness.”<sup>62</sup> Allchin’s comment that “for Evelyn Underhill it was an extremely important

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<sup>59</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Underhill to L. M., (Lucy Menzies), Feast of the Exultation of the Cross, 1924, in Underhill, *Letters*, 158.

<sup>62</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 65. For other writings on Underhill’s association with Sorella Maria see chap.



contact at a decisive point in her life,” correctly suggests its significant bearing on her decision to become a participating member of the Anglican Church.<sup>63</sup> This she did some time in 1920 or early in 1921.<sup>64</sup> About the same time, she agreed to deliver the inaugural Upton Lectures at Manchester College, Oxford. Research for this project during the next year would take her further into the realms of the spiritual life, modern psychology and religious consciousness.<sup>65</sup> Both these events – her return to the Anglican Church and the Upton lectures – brought her to the attention of Anglican Church leaders who increasingly sought her as a member on commissions, as a speaker at conferences and as a leader of retreats.<sup>66</sup> Drawn into the official realms of Anglicanism, Underhill also seems to have been influenced by Christological debate within the Church, as we shall see later in this chapter.

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1, p. 41, n. 117.

<sup>63</sup> Allchin, “Discovering Sorella Maria,” 2.

<sup>64</sup> Menzies implies that this happened in 1921. Menzies, *Biography*, VIII. 11. In a letter to Underhill from von Hügel, in 1921, he implies her return to the Anglican Church. “I congratulate you and beg you,” he wrote, “to persevere most faithfully in all that is positive in this your now, and I pray, confirmed, outlook . . . it is excellent news, that preparing one of these addresses for Manchester New College Oxford, you found you had really come out strongly and self-committingly for Traditional, Institutional, Sacramental Religion.” Von Hügel to Underhill, 29. 10. 1921. Von Hügel Collection. See also chap. 1, p. 22, n. 51.

<sup>65</sup> Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, xv.

<sup>66</sup> Armstrong states that William Temple, Archbishop of York and later Archbishop of Canterbury, “evidently esteemed Evelyn’s witness for she spoke a good deal thanks to his invitation in these early years.” Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 238. Among events in which she formally participated during the early 1920s were meetings of the Health Guild at Girton College, the International Summer School of Social Services at Swanwick, the Conference on Politics, Economics and Christianity at Birmingham (at which her paper was read because of the death of her mother), the clergy conference at Liverpool and numerous retreats. She also

## E. Baron Friedrich von Hügel as spiritual director

Soon after her move to the Anglican Church, Underhill made another crucial decision. As we saw in Chapter 1, from after the time of her marriage in 1907 she experienced intense introspection, severe self-absorption and rigid self-recrimination.<sup>67</sup> This anguish of soul had increased through the years so that in 1921 she determined to ask Baron von Hügel for spiritual direction.<sup>68</sup> She first met von Hügel in 1911.<sup>69</sup> After the publication of *Mysticism*, he wrote to Underhill detailing his specific criticisms of the work and offering assistance for its thorough revision.<sup>70</sup> She did not accept his offer at the time. However, the 12th edition of the work, published in 1930 and after her serious revision of the work, confirms the significant influence of von Hügel. By the time she requested his spiritual direction, therefore, the two had been friends for some years. In 1913, he had spoken to her about her “Quakerish leanings” and advised that “interior religion is all very well for our exalted moments, but will fail us in the ordinary dull jog-trot of daily life, and is therefore not a

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presented the 1922 Upton Lectures at Oxford. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, chap. 10 - 12.

<sup>67</sup> See chap. 1, p. 19, n. 41.

<sup>68</sup> See chap. 1, p. 20, n. 44.

<sup>69</sup> Underhill to J. A. Herbert, 16. 9. 1911 in Underhill, *Letters*, 129. She recorded: “I have become the friend (or rather, disciple and adorer) of Von Hügel. He is the most wonderful personality I have ever known — so saintly, so truthful, sane and tolerant. I feel very safe and happy sitting in his shadow, and he has been most awfully kind to me.”

<sup>70</sup> Von Hügel to Mrs Stuart Moore, 30. 10. 1911, cited in Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 131 - 132.

‘whole religion’ for men who are not ‘pure spirit’.”<sup>71</sup> Greene speculates that the Underhill writings of 1914 to 1920 demonstrate that she accepted the challenge of her friend to show that “her mysticism was not ‘pure spirit’ and that it could sustain one ‘in the ordinary dull jog-trot of daily life’.”<sup>72</sup> Armstrong too recognises the Baron’s “fatherly interest” in Underhill over several years prior to his becoming her director.<sup>73</sup>

Von Hügel’s spiritual advice to Underhill contained few, but very telling directives. He saw two “distinct, interhostile currents” in her mind: the dominating intellectual and the neglected sensual.<sup>74</sup> She was “not *much* removed from Unitarianism.”<sup>75</sup> Therefore he advised “the gradual inter-working of both currents, with special care given to the sensible, contingent, historical, incarnational current, since this current has been especially starved.”<sup>76</sup> To this end she was to turn gently to God, visit the poor on a weekly basis, cultivate a non-religious interest, give serious consideration to the historicity of Christianity and develop and practise Christocentric devotion.<sup>77</sup> These directives were

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<sup>71</sup> Underhill to The Same, (J. A. Herbert), 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 144.

<sup>72</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 67.

<sup>73</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 200.

<sup>74</sup> Von Hügel to Underhill, December, 1921. Section 9. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>75</sup> Underhill to von Hügel, summer 1922. Section 6. Von Hügel Collection. Von Hügel to Underhill, December, 1921 Sections 1 and 2. Von Hügel Collection. Unitarianism, as distinct from trinitarianism, is the belief that God is one without intradivine differentiation. See Anne Hunt, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery: Developments in Recent Catholic Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 245.

<sup>76</sup> Von Hügel to Underhill, late December, 1921. Section 9. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>77</sup> Von Hügel to Underhill, December, 1921. Section 9. Von Hügel Collection.

underpinned by a philosophical framework which the Baron called “critical realism.”<sup>78</sup> A philosophical structure which was an alternative to that of Plotinus, critical realism allowed Underhill to see the extreme interior dimension of her spirituality. By opening her mind, interests, actions and prayer to Christianity and to the world, her spirituality would become healthier, more stable and, in particular, more balanced particularly in moving towards a view of the mystical way as inherently moral.

So far in this chapter, we have explored the various paths which have led Underhill to the point where von Hügel provides her with this advice. The introductory period of the second phase of her spiritual journey therefore comes to a close. We now move into stage 2 of that phase (1921 - 1929) which will focus on her awakening to Christ through aesthetic experience.

## **2. Underhill’s awakening to Christ through art**

Central to von Hügel’s advice to his directee was that she practise devotion to “this coming down to us of God . . . the person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>79</sup> But she found it impossible. She writes to her director: “I can’t do it . . . God seems to me the centre and the only and

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<sup>78</sup> Based on Von Hügel’s understanding of the three elements of religion: the transcendent, the intellectual and the institutional, “critical realism,” “limited dualism” or “two-step philosophy,” described reality as twofold having both a temporal and a spiritual dimension. This graded world of nature and grace, sense and spirit, “require our reverent acceptance of both levels of our mixed experience; not an arrogant choice between them.” Evelyn Underhill, *Mixed Pastures: Twelve Essays and Addresses by Evelyn Underhill* (London: Methuen & Co., 1933) 213.

<sup>79</sup> Von Hügel to Underhill, December, 1921. Section 8. Von Hügel Collection.

inevitable Object of adoration.”<sup>80</sup> Years of “white-hot” Platonism, though gradually tempered by growing ambivalence, meant that theism still dominated Underhill’s spirituality. Later she describes her situation when she sought the Baron’s help. “. . . I never had any personal experience of our Lord: I didn’t know what it meant. I was a convinced theocentric, thought most Christocentric language and practice sentimental and superstitious.”<sup>81</sup> But these feelings did not persist. In 1922 she again writes to her director: “You forced me thoroughly to reconsider my own foundations and realise that a mere philosophy of value, however sublime, has no power to redeem unless these values have been incarnated in human life.”<sup>82</sup> She also states that she is “still mainly theocentric; but the two attitudes are no longer in opposition in my mind – they are two aspects of the one thing. Something you said showed me how to bridge the gap between theism and Christian devotion . . .”<sup>83</sup> Then, in 1923 she writes that “the Christocentric side has become so much deeper and stronger – it nearly predominates.”<sup>84</sup>

It was not until 1926, and after the Baron’s death, that Underhill describes her experience during those first months under von Hügel’s direction.

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<sup>80</sup> Underhill to von Hügel, 21. 12. 1921. Section 4. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>81</sup> Underhill to Bishop Frere, 1926, in Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, 78 - 79.

<sup>82</sup> Underhill to von Hügel, summer, 1922. Section 7. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>83</sup> Underhill to von Hügel, summer, 1922. Section 6. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>84</sup> Underhill to von Hügel, June 1923. Section 1. Von Hügel Collection.

Somehow by his prayers or something he *compelled* me to experience Christ. He never said anything more about it – but I know humanly speaking he did it. It took about four months – it was like watching the sun rise very slowly – and then suddenly one knew what it was. Now for some time after this, I remained predominately theocentric. But for the last two or three years and especially lately, more and more my whole religious life and experience seem centred with increasing vividness in our Lord – that sort of quasi-involuntary prayer which springs up of itself at odd moments is always now directed to Him.<sup>85</sup>

Underhill's gradual awakening to Christ under the direction of von Hügel is imbued with a mysterious spiritual power. It is an experience over which she has no control and which she is unable to account for in any logical way. Grappling for an explanation, she claims it is "somehow by his prayers or something." Then, for the first time in over a decade, she employs the use of imagery in an attempt to describe what is beyond the power of speech. Her experience of Christ is like "watching the sun rise very slowly." After that she "knew what it was."

Here the imagery of light which Underhill uses to describe her experience of Christ echoes with the language of her travel diaries – especially that section which deals with Chartres Cathedral.<sup>86</sup> There "universal light floods through the windows . . . bathes us in colour and beauty [and] shows us things of which we never dreamed." The "strangeness" of the light of Chartres "enfolds," "silences," "bathes" and "drowns us in its solemn beauty." It is "the very radiance of Eternity." Now, far removed in time and space from the cathedral,

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<sup>85</sup> Underhill to Bishop Frere, 1926, in Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, 78 - 79.

<sup>86</sup> See chap. 3, pp. 110 - 113.

Underhill again experiences the light as, slowly and mysteriously, it illuminates her mind. She “knew what it was” – the light of Christ.

In writing of this experience of Christ, Underhill gives the strong impression that she is swept up once more into a scene of beauty. The difficult war years have passed. All that she has loved and admired in the lives of the mystics and saints, she sees intensified in the life of Christ. Something that lay dormant within her comes to life as the floodgates of memory are unleashed. Visual images of Christ that she saw years before in Florence and in Chartres Cathedral take on new meanings. Once again she is the beholder who savours the images seen with the eyes of the soul. When she writes about Christ, these images inform her. It is to an examination of Underhill’s perception of Christ through visual image that we now turn.

#### **A. Christ portrayed in individual works of art**

Of all the visual images of Christ which Underhill encountered during her journeys to Italy, none had more bearing on her understanding of Christ than those in the Museum of San Marco, in Florence.

The first of these about which she writes is *The Last Supper* which she would have seen during her first visit to Florence in 1898.<sup>87</sup> In this particular interpretation of the institution

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<sup>87</sup> Fra Angelico and Assistants, *The Last Supper*, fresco, 1439 - 1445, cell 35, Museum of San Marco, Florence, Italy. See Appendix 5, p. 424. Underhill recorded her reflections on this work of art in an address

of the Eucharist, the artist set the traditional Last Supper in a monastic cell. While eight disciples stand behind the table, two kneel to the right. Christ moves among them, distributing the Bread. A mysterious figure kneels in the left hand corner of the fresco. Logical thought might suggest that this is Mary, mother of Jesus, included in this unusual 15th century interpretation of the Last Supper. However, Underhill has her own understanding of this figure which she explains to a group of retreatants in these words:

You know old pictures of the life of Christ or the saints in which you see in one corner a tiny kneeling figure just inside the frame? It is a figure called the “donor,” coming from the outer world and humbly gazing at the mystery, utterly absorbed into its atmosphere. We have not come to get information . . . we have come to *look* more deeply and with incredulous awe and love . . . we have come to kneel in the atmosphere of the spiritual world, to live and breathe in the presence of Christ, and to look quietly at the eternal truths revealed in Him.<sup>88</sup>

While in Chapter 2 we explored how Underhill beholds a work of art, here she takes us further into her way of beholding by explaining herself as the “donor.”<sup>89</sup> In savouring the beauty of a work of art she gazes, immersed in awe and love. As the beholder who sees with the eyes of the soul, she firstly gives her reverent adoration before quietly absorbing the lessons of Christ’s life. Thus her position of “donor” or giver of honour and praise in relation to visual art is entirely consistent with the life-long priority she gave to the prayer

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during the 1927 retreat. Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 183.

<sup>88</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 149.

<sup>89</sup> See chap. 2, pp. 65 - 68.



of adoration.<sup>90</sup> As we examine our beholder's encounter with visual art depicting Christ throughout the remainder of this chapter, we will have reason to see that she remains the "donor" in every image she encounters.

In *The Last Supper*, Underhill's focus is on "the eager figure of Christ who passes along the rank of disciples, *giving Himself*."<sup>91</sup> She reflects on such "self-forgetful generosity"<sup>92</sup> in the following words:

Consider . . . the solemnity and touching mystery in all that surrounded that scene: the stress, the tension, the foreboding of disaster that must have been in the minds of all who shared it. Then see the steady, self-oblivious generosity of the One who dominated it. He thinks only of giving all he can to those He is about to leave behind. The standard is thus set for all those in communion with Him.<sup>93</sup>

In this image, she beholds Christ as the eager and generous giver who thinks of others irrespective of his own perilous situation. The eternal truth revealed in his action is that of charity of which Christ is both model and teacher. Underhill then broadens the context of this fresco when she says that the criterion of love is the standard for all those who desire communion with Christ. For her this union is "an interpenetrated society of loving spirits in Christ [who are] living the life of prayer."<sup>94</sup> Because communion means "fellowship

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<sup>90</sup> See chap. 2, p. 87.

<sup>91</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 183.

<sup>92</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 182.

<sup>93</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 183.

<sup>94</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 182.

with Christ, [it] means the Way of the Cross.”<sup>95</sup> For her, therefore, this fresco has various levels of meanings – all revelatory of Christ. He is the model of charity who draws all to himself in a communion of sacrificial service and loving prayer.

Underhill encounters another scene from Christ’s life in an entirely different form of visual art when she beholds *The Agony in the Garden*.<sup>96</sup> Using the gospel account of Christ’s Passion it depicts a scene in the garden of Gethsemane prior to Christ’s arrest. In this image, Christ’s elongated figure stretches face downwards across the earth. Above him an angel holds a dark chalice from which a light shines. In the foreground three figures – evidently three disciples – sleep. After describing this as a “poignant scene,” Underhill continues:

In the foreground three drowsy, earthy figures sit huddled in their cloaks in thick darkness; comfortably somnolent, wholly insensitive to that which is being endured on their behalf. Beyond them, the prostrate figure of the agonized Redeemer lies bathed in a white celestial light which He does not see. . . . Beside Him in that changeless light, an angel holds the dark but radiant chalice of redemptive suffering; the ‘cup of salvation’ willingly accepted from God for other men.<sup>97</sup>

In this passage she emphasises the creaturely status of the disciples by referring to them as “earthy figures.” She describes them as “drowsy” and suggests their level of comfort and contentment in the words “comfortably somnolent” and “sit huddled in their cloaks.” She

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<sup>95</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 181.

<sup>96</sup> Arthur Eric Gill, *The Agony in the Garden*, wood block, date unknown, The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, United Kingdom. See Appendix 6, p. 425.

<sup>97</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 260.

notes that these “earthly figures” are “in thick darkness.” She judges that they are “wholly insensitive” – devoid of feeling – regarding what is happening about them.

As she looks beyond the foreground of this work, she sees Christ whom she names “Redeemer.” In contrast to the disciples, Christ is a “prostrate figure.” She describes Him as “agonized.” Faced downwards, he does not see the “celestial light” in which he is bathed. He sees only darkness. Underhill’s interpretation of the angel suggests her understanding of the “prostrate figure.” The angel holds “the dark but radiant chalice of redemptive suffering.” Though the cup is dark, it is a source of brilliant light. It is a cup of suffering, yet a cup of love because it is “willingly accepted from God for other men.”

In her description of *The Agony in the Garden*, Underhill draws from the scene a series of dialectical images. She sees comfort and agony, huddled figures and a prostrate figure, insensitivity and love, a cup of both darkness and light – all within an overall impression of thick darkness and celestial light. By setting up the stark contrast between the disciples and Christ in this way, she gives sharpness to the sufferings of Christ. Her words focus attention on his abandonment by the disciples, highlight his isolation and emphasise his agony thereby giving prominence to his humanity. In this strong descriptive passage, she gives the sense that in beholding this image, she comes to a profound understanding of the sufferings of Christ and the mysterious relationship between suffering and love.

There is a further sense in which Underhill understands this work of art. The radiant chalice is “a cup of salvation willingly accepted from God for other men.” She explains this within the context of intercession and cooperation. Intercession, she writes, is the “principle that man’s emergent will and energy can join itself to, and work with, the

supernatural forces for the accomplishment of the work of God.”<sup>98</sup> Again, she describes it as “the mercy and generosity of the redeeming saint who gladly takes the burden of another’s sin.”<sup>99</sup> She then designates *The Agony in the Garden* as a work of art that “presents in one poignant scene the very essence of such an intercessory life.”<sup>100</sup> In willingly accepting suffering for the sake of others, Christ both cooperates with God and intercedes for humankind. Just as in *The Last Supper*, Underhill sees Christ as the model of charity, so in *The Agony in the Garden* she understands Christ as the model of intercession and cooperation.

The second work of art which draws Underhill into a deeper understanding of Christ’s suffering is *The Mocking of Christ*.<sup>101</sup> In this fresco Christ, clothed in white and holding the orb and sceptre of kingship, is seated. The tools of the Passion surround him. In the foreground, a woman turns away in sorrow, while a perplexed St Dominic appears to be seeking an understanding of this scene from the book of the gospels. Underhill describes this work of art as:

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<sup>98</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 259.

<sup>99</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 259.

<sup>100</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 260.

<sup>101</sup> Fra Angelico, *The Mocking of Christ*, fresco, 1438 - 1443, cell 7, Museum of San Marco, Florence, Italy. See Appendix 7, p. 426. Underhill would have seen this for the first time during her 1898 visit to Florence.

His strange vision of the various ‘instruments of the Passion’ – the scourge, the mocking face, the nails, the lance, the sponge – emerging out of the invisible to awaken the soul’s adoring grief.<sup>102</sup>

In this bald, blunt description, the stark rawness of Christ’s humanity confronts her with His torment and suffering. The graphic individual depiction of the instruments of the Passion in the image is matched by her brief reference to them. They require no description. Her response to this image is clear as she observes that it “awaken [s] the soul’s adoring grief.” In using the word “grief,” she implies that she is weighed down – not in the body or the mind but in the soul – in the depth of her being.

She provides us with a deeper insight into her interpretation of this image in the following words:

It is here, rather than in his flowery Paradise, that Angelico proved himself a truly Christian artist. For Christianity of all religions most steadily and sternly rebukes all our attempts to get away from the concrete into a region of pious day-dream. She will not tolerate any arrogant rejection of ordinary life. She finds ineffable grace imparted through common food, a royal humility taught by a bowl of water and a towel; and at last, when the soul’s self-giving must yield to the soul’s endurance, and charity be made perfect in suffering, she links spiritual victory to the pain-inflicting power of common wood and iron.<sup>103</sup>

It appears, in effect, that Underhill is looking at *The Mocking of Christ* within the context of Angelico’s other works. Though she does not name them, she describes them as “flowery Paradise.” She says that while they are works of great beauty and peace, they do

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<sup>102</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 166.

<sup>103</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 166.

not portray the concrete reality of life – especially the Christian life. Rather, they depict “pious day-dream.” But in *The Mocking of Christ*, she does find the concrete reality of ordinary life. “The scourge, the mocking face, the nails, the lance, the sponge” are the stark facts of this image and of life – not the beautiful flowers of Paradise. Placing this scene within the context of the Last Supper which Christ has eaten with His disciples prior to His arrest, she speaks of “common food” and “a bowl of water and towel” – the objects of ordinary life. Finally, she sees the harsh reality of other ordinary objects – “wood and iron” – where charity is made perfect in suffering.

During our previous chapters, we have documented Underhill’s growing ambivalence towards the solitary character of her spiritual journey. The lives of the mystics and saints, her disenchantment with the philosophical framework provided by Neoplatonism together with her war experiences, the humanity of the Franciscan attitude and the direction of von Hügel were all influential in her acceptance of the historical, incarnational and redemptive aspects of Christianity. In *The Mocking of Christ* we see another significant influence on the development of her thinking. In the passage cited above, where she refers to Angelico’s “flowery Paradise” there is a strong resonance with her description of Plotinus’ “lofty withdrawal to that spiritual sphere where the divine element of the soul is at home, untroubled by the conflicts, evils and chances of life.”<sup>104</sup> Is the artist’s “flowery Paradise” the philosopher’s “spiritual sphere”? Is this the place of “pious day-dream”? These are

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<sup>104</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 131.

stark questions implicit in her contemplation of *The Mocking of Christ*. Her answer echoes with the experience of the mystics, the humanity of St Francis and the words of her director. Most of all however, it reflects the profound impact which this work of art has on a woman who sees with the eyes of the soul. “Christianity,” she concludes, “. . . rebukes all our attempts to get away from the concrete into a region of pious day-dream. She will not tolerate any arrogant rejection of the ordinary.” Christ did not live or die in comfortable isolation. His life and death exemplified total engagement with the world. For Underhill, He is *the* model of ordinary, human, Christian life.

In one of her favourite churches Underhill first saw the fresco, *Saint Francis Receives the Stigmata* during her 1898 visit to Florence.<sup>105</sup> In this work, St Francis’ prayer is disturbed by a vision of an angel – a seraph – who mysteriously bears the image of the crucified Christ. Rays of light streaming from the Crucified’s wounds touch the hands, feet and side of the saint who from that time bears the marks of the crucifixion. When Underhill beholds this image, her attention focuses on the seraph who bears the image of Christ. She interprets this in two complementary ways – “the beauty of God reconciled to the anguish and sin of the world.”<sup>106</sup> Gazing upon the seraph, she is filled with awe by the “glory of the Eternal.”<sup>107</sup> Here is the “solitary mystery, wonder, overpowering presence and the reality

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<sup>105</sup> Giotto di Bondone, *Saint Francis Receives the Stigmata*, fresco, 1325, Bardi Chapel, Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence, Italy. See Appendix 8, p. 429. Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 20. 4. 1898. Underhill spoke about this fresco during the 1928 retreat. Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 199 - 203.

<sup>106</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 200.

<sup>107</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 200.

of spiritual things.”<sup>108</sup> Yet, in seeing this glory in relation to the crucified figure, she understands that Christ, who “gazes on the whole glory and beauty of God . . . will for love of God and the sake of others endure the very worst.”<sup>109</sup> “At the heart of this picture,” she writes, “one sees heroic suffering and generous sacrifice for others as the supreme revelation of the love of God.”<sup>110</sup> She then moves into a wider reflection. In contemplating this image “we realise we are amphibious creatures and we must react to two layers of reality: the stress and change of daily existence and the changelessness of God.”<sup>111</sup> She presents this same idea when she writes that Francis “wished his inward and his outward life to be at one.”<sup>112</sup> Here her words reverberate with those of von Hügel who instructed her in his particular philosophical understanding – critical realism.<sup>113</sup> In *Saint Francis Receives the Stigmata* Underhill perceives “the holiness of the Eternal . . . and the holiness of Christ.”<sup>114</sup> She has come to appreciate the Christ who teaches that holiness consists in loving and redemptive engagement with the world, while living also within the radiance of God’s glory.

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<sup>108</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 200 - 201.

<sup>109</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 200.

<sup>110</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 201.

<sup>111</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 202.

<sup>112</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 90.

<sup>113</sup> See chap. 4, p. 170, n. 78.

<sup>114</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 202.



When Underhill saw *Crucifixion and Saints* during her first visit to Florence, she declared it “a masterpiece of fresco painting and characterization,” due in great part to its distinctive harmony of colour.<sup>115</sup> It portrays the crucified Christ surrounded by a number of historical figures – founders of Religious Orders, Fathers of the Church, and saints linked to the monastery, the city of Florence and the Medici. When she writes about this work in 1930, she describes that group as “representatives of all men and women of prayer of every type – indeed, all Christians of good will.”<sup>116</sup> She sees its members “linked with the Crucified, living in His aura, working for His sake . . . [carrying] through into history by their own unlimited self-giving some fragment of His love and life.”<sup>117</sup> While contemplating this scene, she takes her place, as it were, among the saints. She is “looking through the eyes of their adoring love,” to see “not torment and darkness . . . but the peace of a Divine and absolute acceptance of selfless and abandoned love . . . suffering accepted and transfigured by the passion of redeeming love.” In this fresco, “so strangely full of joy,” she looks beyond the suffering of *The Agony in the Garden* and *The Mockery of Christ*. She sees the cross transfigured by redeeming love. Here again, Christ is her model and teacher.

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<sup>115</sup> Fra Angelico, *Crucifixion and Saints*, 1442, fresco, Chapterhouse, Museum of San Marco, Florence, Italy. Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 17. 4. 1898. See Appendix 9, p. 428.

<sup>116</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 84 - 85.

<sup>117</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 85.

We recall from our first chapter, Underhill's attachment to a particular work of art – *Christ in Limbo* – a fresco whose rich meaning gradually became apparent.<sup>118</sup> In her *Journal* she notes that this fresco is among those she “liked best,” but she does not write about it in detail until 1932.<sup>119</sup> *Christ in Limbo* depicts the triumphant Christ entering a cave-like dwelling where the souls who died before Christ's triumphant return to heaven await liberation. He has broken down the door of imprisonment and a vanquished devil lies beneath its weight. Other devils retreat from the scene. Christ, carrying the banner of victory and in a blaze of light, offers a gesture of welcome to the souls who surge forward out of darkness. Underhill describes the scene in these words:

It shows us the liberated soul of Christ passing straight from the anguish of the Passion to the delighted exercise of rescuing love. He comes with a sort of irresistible rush, bearing the banner of redemption to the imprisoned spirits of those who knew Him not. There they are pressing forward to the mouth of the cave, the darkness, narrowness, unreality from which He comes to free them, free them at His own cost. Nowhere, not even in the Resurrection garden, does he seem more victorious, more divine. The awed delight of the souls He rescues is nothing beside the rescuer's own ecstatic delight. It is as if the soul released on Calvary could not wait a moment, but rushed straight to the awaiting joy of releasing the souls of other men. There is no hint of the agony and darkness through which He has won the power to do it. Everything is forgotten, the cost, the darkness, everything but the need which the Rescuer is able to meet.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> See chap. 1, pp. 6 - 7. Fra Angelico, *Christ in Limbo*, fresco, 1439 - 1443, cell 31, Museum of San Marco, Florence, Italy. See Appendix 1, p. 420. The term “limbo,” as used in the title of this fresco, refers to where Christ descended after his death in order to liberate those who had died before his salvific death and resurrection and to whom heaven was therefore closed. See Zachary Hayes, “Limbo,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 585 - 586.

<sup>119</sup> Underhill, *Journal Switzerland and Italy*, 17. 4. 1898. Underhill's first detailed reference to this fresco is in *Light of Christ*, 78.

<sup>120</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 78.

In this interpretation, she focuses on the dialectic of captivity and liberation. Christ who was “imprisoned” in “anguish,” “darkness” and “agony,” is liberated. He rushes to liberate those who are still in captivity bringing “joy,” “light,” “redemption” and freedom. He is the “Rescuer” who transforms darkness into light, and captives into liberated souls. The overwhelming sense of this scene is one of “ecstatic delight.” Underhill’s use of the rhetoric and metaphors of captivity provides a possible clue as to why this image is her favourite. In describing her acute personal suffering to her spiritual directors, she employs the same language. She speaks of “utter blackness”<sup>121</sup> and “spiritual blackness,”<sup>122</sup> of “desolation,”<sup>123</sup> and “isolation,”<sup>124</sup> thus identifying with Christ in his Passion and with the souls who await liberation. Yet she also speaks of “joy” and “light” experienced on some rare occasions – an indication that she also experienced Christ’s victory.<sup>125</sup> This allows the speculation that her attraction to *Christ in Limbo* arises from her personal identification with the work and with the hope it offers of final victory over all her suffering. Christ is her Rescuer who through his victory over death offers ultimate peace and joy. *Christ in Limbo* appears, therefore, an image of transformation through suffering and of the power of redemptive love.

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<sup>121</sup> Underhill to von Hügel, 21. 12. 1921. Section 1. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>122</sup> Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, 91.

<sup>123</sup> Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, 40.

<sup>124</sup> Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, 83.

<sup>125</sup> Underhill, Report to von Hügel, June, 1923. Section 2. Von Hügel Collection.

## **B. Christ portrayed in cathedrals, churches and chapels**

The eight works of art dealing with Christ's life referred to so far in this Chapter are all images that Underhill viewed a number of times and at close range. She obviously drew inspiration from the detail of their structure, harmony, colour and characterisation. But now we move to examine Underhill's experience shaped by encounter with another medium of visual art – church architecture and stained glass – also depicting various aspects of Christ's life. Viewing the stained glass that adorned the windows of great cathedrals she has a different mode of experience compared to that with other forms of visual art. This is due in great part to the fact that she does not have a close, clear vision of the windows.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, she is unable to gaze upon the detail they portray. What she does do is to gain an overall impression of each window within the context of a sweeping vision of an entire church structure. Thus interplay of colour, light, atmosphere and beauty is at work. This is particularly true in the case of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres. Though a number of its windows contain detailed illustrations of the life of Christ, Underhill does not reflect directly on these. Her understanding of Christ in this setting is enlivened by the general overall aesthetic atmosphere and ambience of the cathedral.

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<sup>126</sup> There are several possible reasons for this. During the years when Underhill visited the cathedral, the windows (numbered now as 175 in total) had not had the benefit of modern techniques of cleaning, nor were expert guides or guidebooks available to explain the details of the windows which, because they are located high in the structure, are at a distance from the viewer and therefore difficult to see clearly. This is interesting when one considers that one of the original purposes of the windows was the instruction of those who were unable to read. The fact that during the early years of the cathedral its stained glass was new and not as yet covered by dirt and grime would have enabled the reasonably clear vision required for this.

This is clearly illustrated in *Light of Christ*, which contains the addresses of the retreat she directed at Pleshey in 1932. As Johnson points out in regard to this small publication – “here Underhill gave her most concentrated treatment of Christ.”<sup>127</sup> At first glance, it might appear that the author’s detailed images are shaped by the stained glass windows of Chartres Cathedral. However, a close study reveals that while she uses them as the plan of Christ’s life upon which to construct a series of addresses on Christ, only rarely does she refer to any specific detail of any window in the cathedral. In fact, several times she refers to scenes from Christ’s life that are not illustrated anywhere in the entire structure.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, while *Light of Christ* does contain Underhill’s most comprehensive presentation of the life of Christ, the source of her writing, in part, is other than Chartres Cathedral. However, throughout these addresses she communicates a strong sense of inspiration from this source and its panoramic vision of Christ’s life depicted in the windows. She alludes to this when she describes the “windows of Christ’s Mysteries . . . so far above us and yet so divinely near.”<sup>129</sup> Though situated far above her, the windows are mysteriously near through their light and colour. It is from this particular perspective we can proceed to

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<sup>127</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 208.

<sup>128</sup> The scenes from Christ’s life which Underhill includes in the windows of Chartres Cathedral but which in fact are not depicted in any window are: Christ reading from the scroll in the synagogue, the parable of the sower, the healing of the paralytic and Christ walking upon the water as the disciples struggle in a storm. Underhill, *Light of Christ*, Chapters 3 - 5. Noted Chartres Cathedral scholar, Malcolm Miller, confirms this. M. Miller to M. Crowley, 15. 3. 2005. One reason for this confusion or misinterpretation could be that *Light of Christ* was published after Underhill’s death using handwritten retreat notes which may have been misread.

<sup>129</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 29.

suggest how, in broad terms, Chartres Cathedral influenced Underhill's perspective of Christ.

Earlier in this Chapter, Underhill's experience of Christ in 1922 was described "like watching the sun rise very slowly," echoing what she recorded about her visit to Chartres Cathedral, some 20 years before.<sup>130</sup> During that visit, she experiences an awe-inspiring beauty suggestive of the transcendent and ineffable God,<sup>131</sup> but she does not write about the stained glass windows in question until *Light of Christ* in 1932 – some 30 years later, and a decade after the Christocentric turn in her spiritual experience.<sup>132</sup> The significance of this will become apparent as we move on.

Underhill's overall view of Chartres Cathedral is of a great spiritual landscape which stretches from the window of the Incarnation to that of the Cross and finally to the vision of Christ triumphant in the great east window under which is the altar.<sup>133</sup> At intervals within this sweeping view, "family pictures and ideas" illustrate the various stages of

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<sup>130</sup> See chap. 4, p. 172.

<sup>131</sup> See chap. 3, p. 113.

<sup>132</sup> For details regarding the publication of Underhill's description of Chartres cathedral see chap. 3, p. 111, n. 45.

<sup>133</sup> Underhill's reference to the window depicting Christ in triumphant glory as the "east window" of Chartres Cathedral is confusing. In fact, Christ glorified in heaven is the subject of the south rose window. Again, this could be the result of misread handwritten notes. However, in the interests of clarity and in the spirit of Underhill's writing, her description of this window as the "east window" is retained. See Malcolm Miller, *Chartres Cathedral* (Andover, Jarrold Publishing, 1996,) 90.

Christ's life.<sup>134</sup> For Underhill this landscape is not a place of "just finished works of art or memorials of past beauty," but a place "quivering with . . . living Light and Love."<sup>135</sup> Gazing on the beauty and vitality of the cathedral, she recalls her early philosophical reading. "You know how Plato spoke of this life as a cave in which men were imprisoned and could only judge reality by seeing the shadow cast by light outside."<sup>136</sup> Then she shows a new level of understanding with the comment – "But for Christians the cave has become a great shrine."<sup>137</sup> Here she contrasts the darkness and bondage of the Platonic cave to the light and liberation of the cathedral whose windows tell the Christian story. While the glory and beauty of God constitute her overall experience of Chartres, she sees in the windows that Christ is the Sun and the Life illuminating and enlivening the great shrine.

The image of light illumines her understanding of Christ. As the light beams through the windows of the Gothic structure, it breaks up into the "family pictures" of Christ's life. Only then is she able to approach the "many-coloured loveliness" and "hidden richness and colour" of the light and the life of Christ.<sup>138</sup> She reflects on the images:

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<sup>134</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 36.

<sup>135</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 30.

<sup>136</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 30.

<sup>137</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 30.

<sup>138</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 29.

What we see is not very sensational but if we look steadily it pierces the heart. First we see a baby and a long, hidden growth and the gradual outpouring and self-spending of an other-worldly love and mercy in teaching, in healing, rescuing and transforming, but never trying to get anything for itself; in a mysterious anguish and struggle; at last we see the most lonely and generous of deaths, giving life ever since to men's souls.<sup>139</sup>

Here Underhill presents the life of Christ in very broad strokes. The emphasis she places on “outpouring,” “self-spending” “anguish” and “death” echo with her descriptions of the Passion in the art works we discussed earlier in this chapter. But the attention given to the humanity of Christ is intensified as she draws on other aspects of his life. Christ's life begins as every other human life – “a baby.” Most of his life is “a long, hidden growth.” By spending His life in the service of others, he gives life to all humanity. Finally, Christ dies a lonely death. As Underhill comments – “what we see is not very sensational.” But she also advises that this life “pierces the heart.” It does this, she explains, through “other-worldly love and mercy in teaching, in healing, rescuing and transforming.”

In *Light of Christ*, these three titles of Christ – Teacher, Healer and Rescuer, as illustrated in the windows of Chartres – are the themes under which Underhill presents his impact. She is very clear about the meaning of his birth, life and death. Christ came to us “not as an explanation of life but as a direction how to live it.”<sup>140</sup> Again, she advises that in Christ's life – “we see . . . the truth about human life.”<sup>141</sup> His life teaches “what we are and what we

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<sup>139</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 29 - 30.

<sup>140</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 26.

<sup>141</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 27.



ought to do.”<sup>142</sup> Christ does this, she tells us “through other-worldly love and mercy.” Nowhere is this more movingly illustrated than in the window of the Passion which she describes as “the picture of total self-abandonment, the uttermost expression of sacrificial love.”<sup>143</sup> Here she encounters “profound submission to the mysterious Will of God,”<sup>144</sup> and “a suffering and love twined so closely together, that we cannot wrench them apart.”<sup>145</sup> From the window of Christ’s death, Underhill moves to the focal point of the cathedral – the altar. Here, “where the sacrifice is made, where we are all bound together in a life of communion and self-giving to God,” the gift of Christ’s life and the self-gift of humanity come together.<sup>146</sup> It is at the altar that she most clearly sees herself – never standing alone but as “a member of the Mystical Body of Christ.”<sup>147</sup> She reflects: “I too am required to incarnate something of His all-generous and redeeming spirit, share my knowledge of Him, give myself without stint to heal and save other children of God at my own cost.”<sup>148</sup> In other words, union with Christ means a communion with others that also entails cooperation with the will of God. As Christ is Teacher, Healer and Rescuer, so she is called to teach, to heal and to save. However, the window of the Passion and the altar of

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<sup>142</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 30.

<sup>143</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 79.

<sup>144</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 82.

<sup>145</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 82.

<sup>146</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 28.

<sup>147</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 33.

<sup>148</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 33.

sacrifice are not the final images of Chartres. Above the altar, the east window – “the Vision of Christ Triumphant” where “we look into the heart of the light, life and love” – sheds its colours throughout the vast Gothic structure.<sup>149</sup>

In all her interpretation of the windows of Chartres, Underhill keeps her theocentric perspective. They are but part of a great spiritual landscape of light that reflects the glory of God. “Window by window,” she says, “the splendour of the Light of God has been shown to us in all its various degrees, in a Living Person.”<sup>150</sup> In other words, Christ reveals God to humankind. The cathedral is a revelation of Light, Life and Love which shows us “God’s pattern for humanity.”<sup>151</sup> This is why she can claim that Christ’s life “pierces the heart” and that it continues to give life to humankind. It is a life of love that reflects the Light of God. As teacher, healer and rescuer, Christ both reveals God and is the model of a loving Christian life.

Throughout this chapter, we have been attempting to discover how visual art shaped Underhill’s understanding of Christ during the second phase of her spiritual life. Having explored her encounter with art during that period, we will now draw together and discuss our findings.

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<sup>149</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 91.

<sup>150</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 90.

<sup>151</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 33.

### **3. The place of Christ in Underhill's theocentric spirituality**

At the beginning of this chapter, we explored the importance of stage one (1914 - 1920) in the second phase of Underhill's spiritual life. To a notable extent, it was out of her experiences during that period that her encounter with Christ through visual art comes to be a significant influence on her understanding of Christ. By 1920, her ongoing study of the mystics and saints and the failure of the Plotinian philosophical framework to sustain her during the First World War, leads Underhill to resume active participation in the Anglican Church. Under the spiritual direction of von Hügel she becomes more aware of the historical and incarnational aspects of Christianity and seeks to make her spirituality Christ-centred. About that time, she has an experience of Christ which she likens to watching a sunrise. In a mysterious way, this experience affects Underhill's understanding of images of Christ. Her impressions of many previous years take on new levels of meaning. It is not until the mid 1920s that she begins to write about that meaning, and so articulate the influence of visual art on her understanding of Christ. In this context, we see influences other than visual art at work in her gradual awakening to Christ. They are the forerunners to her understanding of Christ through image – awakening her memories, generating further insights and informing her understanding of art work encountered during earlier visits to the Continent. They evidence the fact that the influence of visual art on her awakening to Christ did not occur in a vacuum. Though it is the focus of this Chapter, the effect of visual art on Underhill's perception of Christ must be seen within its rich context.

Her understanding of Christ is predominantly a deep perception of Christ's humanity. The "family pictures" of Christ – his birth, images of his life, his last days and his death – all depict his humanity. Even his mission to the captives of Limbo is presented in human terms while the window of Christ Triumphant depicts this man who has attained heaven. *The Agony in the Garden, The Mocking of Christ, Crucifixion and Saints, and Saint Francis Receives the Stigmata* bring a particular intensity to suffering and death which underscores Christ's humanity. She sees the person of Christ in all these varied ways as the man who shares fully in human nature and in the ordinary life of humanity. Still in accord with her understanding of all humanity, Christ also lives before the Eternal. This is forcefully brought home to her in *Saint Francis Receives the Stigmata* where she sees a crucified Christ mysteriously depicted within the glory of God. In all this, her understanding of humanity underpins her Christological understanding. Johnson expresses his agreement when he writes that "Underhill grounded her Christology in anthropology."<sup>152</sup> While the anthropological aspect will be further explored in a later chapter, we will continue now to see her other Christological perceptions which derive from this foundational base.

The first of these is that Christ, in his person and life, is totally centred on God. All the works of art that we have discussed evidence this. The windows of Chartres that depict Christ's life do so only within the entire structure of the cathedral that reflects the glory of

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<sup>152</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 99.

God. In serving the disciples at table, in suffering, in death and in final triumph, the centre of Christ's life is God, and God is the focus of his teaching. As Underhill states: "his teaching has a deep recurring note of awe, a solemn sense of God and the profound mystery of God."<sup>153</sup> It is about "but one thing, God," she declares, "and our total self-giving to God."<sup>154</sup> The specific orientation of Christ's life and teaching is to reveal God to the world.

Following from this, Christ is the model of perfect submission to God's will. Again, as we look back on the art works depicting Christ, we see how abandonment to God's will is the thread connecting the Incarnation window, the Passion window, the altar, and the window of Heavenly Triumph. The image of Christ among the disciples in *The Last Supper*, the portrayals of his agony and death and his liberation of the captive souls of Limbo all witness to a life that Underhill describes as lived "entirely subordinate to the interests of God"<sup>155</sup> and "in perfect accord with God."<sup>156</sup> In stating that she interpreted "the entire life of Christ as an act of extraordinary harmony of the human will with the divine," Johnson acknowledges the priority which this understanding held in her thinking.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 54.

<sup>154</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 55.

<sup>155</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 48.

<sup>156</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 49.

<sup>157</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 209.

Integral to Christ's perfect submission to God's will is the complete self-emptying love depicted in the works of art referred to in this chapter. Nowhere does Underhill write about this more strongly than where she beholds "the self-oblivious generosity" of Christ who "thinks only of giving all He can," in *The Last Supper*. The windows of Chartres Cathedral also witness to Christ's life given for the world. Beholding "the rescuer's own ecstatic delight" in *Christ in Limbo*, she concentrates on the human elements of this scene which depict Christ as rescuer. Earlier in this chapter, we speculated that Underhill's devotion to this work of art could well have been associated with the sense of liberation it provides for her on a personal level. Christ thus rescues her through submission to God's will expressed through his total self-giving. "He comes to the rescue," she writes, "of those caught in the toils of circumstance."<sup>158</sup>

This brings us to further Christological insight. Throughout Underhill's discussion of the various images of Christ, the strong themes of adoration, communion and cooperation emerge as central to her understanding. Though she does not specifically name adoration in connection with any particular art work, her implied recognition of Christ's adoration of God is obvious. Writing of adoring prayer she declares that "this was Christ's message and attitude, the very heart of his own prayer and doctrine."<sup>159</sup> Clearly evident in Christ's submission and abandonment to God in *The Agony in the Garden*, *The Mocking of Christ*

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<sup>158</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 71.

<sup>159</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 177.

and *Crucifixion and Saints*, adoration of God is the central theme of Chartres Cathedral where Christ's life is depicted only in relation to the glory and praise of God. As we have seen, communion and cooperation are both named by Underhill as integral to the understanding of Christ at which she has arrived. Christ, through loving submission to God, lives in communion with God. It is in this communion that Christ also cooperates with God. In Christ's life, communion with God and cooperation with the divine will come together through teaching, healing and rescuing. Again we see her understanding of Christ as a model for those who desire union with God. While our present discussion of Underhill's perception of adoration, communion and cooperation in Christ's life finds its focus in her experience of visual art, in Chapter 6 we will revisit these themes as we explore their deeper significance in her spiritual life.

There is a further sense, however, in which Underhill perceives Christ's humanity. In the light of Christ's complete self-emptying love and total submission to God in a life wholly given to God through adoration, communion and cooperation, she understands that Christ is a "human personality entirely God-possessed."<sup>160</sup> Another way of saying this is that Christ perfectly embodies God's Spirit. She reflects on this as she gazes on the window of the Incarnation in Chartres: "In this Child God gives His supreme message to the soul –

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<sup>160</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 36.

Spirit to spirit – but in a human way.”<sup>161</sup> Again, she writes in regard to the manifestations of the Spirit in the world:

Christians must regard the historical Incarnation as the greatest of all such insertions of Spirit into history; . . . Jesus Himself is ‘incarnate by the Spirit’: a metaphysical truth to which we sometimes fail to give full weight, for indeed there lies behind it the full pressure of the supernatural world. In His earthly life we see Spirit’s action, in and through a human personality entirely God-possessed; the Absolute Life mingled with the sensible and contingent, and only in rare moments revealing Its presence and power.<sup>162</sup>

For Underhill, Christ was the perfect manifestation of the Spirit of God. Johnson expresses this same understanding when he says that she “interpreted Christ as an incarnation of the Spirit. In Christ Underhill saw the perfect unity of spirit and Spirit.”<sup>163</sup> Through a life totally focused on God and lived in perfect submission to God and as teacher, healer and rescuer, Christ perfectly embodied the Spirit of God. As Underhill writes – in Christ’s life, “we see Spirit’s action.” This is not to suggest that she perceives Christ’s life to differ in kind from other human life. “For Christian experience,” she writes, “the life and person of Christ stand apart as the . . . perfect self-expression of the Holy in human terms . . .”<sup>164</sup> There is a strong sense therefore, in which Underhill’s entire understanding of Christ can be summed up in her understanding of Christ as the perfect incarnation of the Spirit. This does not lessen her perception of the humanity of Christ – that aspect which drives her

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<sup>161</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 37.

<sup>162</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 36.

<sup>163</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 201.

<sup>164</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 165.



Christological understanding. Rather, it clearly explains why for her Christ is “the perfect expression of the Holy in human terms.”<sup>165</sup> In the following Chapter, we will return to this theme as we explore Underhill’s understanding of the Holy Spirit.

#### **4. Overview and critical analysis of Underhill’s spirituality during its second stage**

So far in this evaluation of the influence of visual art on Underhill’s understanding of Christ, we have seen that her entire perception is driven by Christ’s humanity. Therefore, as Johnson correctly judges, her Christology is most appropriately described as an ascending Christology or a Christology from below.<sup>166</sup> Because in her encounter with Christ through visual art Underhill’s major focus is on what Christ does, her Christology can also be described as functional. But her description of images of Christ is not without mention of a number of scriptural and doctrinal references which traditionally have been associated with Christ’s identity. In her description of Christ in *The Agony in the Garden*, she names Christ “Redeemer.”<sup>167</sup> Her publication, *Light of Christ* contains a number of references: “Saviour,”<sup>168</sup> “Word and Thought of God,”<sup>169</sup> “Revelation and Thought of

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<sup>165</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 165.

<sup>166</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 149.

<sup>167</sup> See chap. 4, p. 177.

<sup>168</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 32.

<sup>169</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 33.

God,”<sup>170</sup> “Eternal Christ,”<sup>171</sup> “Word of God, the Wisdom of the Father – Divine Reason – Christ.”<sup>172</sup> In *Man and the Supernatural*, published prior to the writing of *Light of Christ*, Underhill writes that “the phrase ‘I and the Father are one’ gives in six words the very essence of the Christian revelation.”<sup>173</sup> Yet, these confessional statements, while they allow for orthodox interpretation, remain undeveloped and unexplained. They remain disconnected from the numerous statements concerning Christ’s function in the world. What emerges from her lack of integration of these two aspects is a gap in her Christology.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Underhill’s description of *The Agony in the Garden* in which she names Christ “Redeemer,” but does not discuss this title in the soteriological dimension of Christ’s life, death and resurrection.<sup>174</sup> Rather, she concentrates on Christ’s cooperation with God through a life of intercession for others. In the fresco, *Christ in Limbo*, she sees Christ’s “rescuing love” depicted and states that “he comes to free them . . . at His own cost,” but she does not give any sense of the Father giving his Son for the salvation of the world or of the Son offering himself for the world.<sup>175</sup> In both these examples, she presents Christ as the rescuer who teaches through example the way of

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<sup>170</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 68.

<sup>171</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 70.

<sup>172</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 91.

<sup>173</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 129.

<sup>174</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 261.

<sup>175</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 78.

abandonment to God. Christ, therefore, is the model who saves humanity by showing it how to live. Here we see clearly her emphasis on the humanity and function of Christ while confessional statements regarding Christ, although included, remain unexplored and undeveloped. The disassociation between Christ's function and his identity evident in these examples illustrate Underhill's failure to address the systematic dimension of Christology. This is given a sharper edge with her words to von Hügel that accepting Christian devotion has meant "throwing overboard some Nicene language and pre-existence, eternal generation, etc. and Platonic conceptions of the Logos-Christ."<sup>176</sup> Similarly when she questions the conciliar definitions of the Christian Church, as in her observation that:

The figure of Christ stands so exactly on the confines between divine and human – so fully radiating God, while remaining so completely man 'of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting' – that men have never been able to decide in which category to place Him.<sup>177</sup>

Other writings offer further explanation of how Underhill deals with Church doctrine. Writing to a friend experiencing difficulty in accepting all the doctrines of the Church, she offers the following advice:

It [accepting doctrine] isn't so impossible if one gets thoroughly into one's mind the approximate and symbolic nature of all these theological conceptions – the immeasurable extent to which the mysterious realities of Christianity transcend them. Then one can just accept the particular formulas, however difficult, as part of the surroundings in which one has been placed by God, and as embodying (tho' in a manner that does not entirely appeal to one!) the truths by which one's soul lives.

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<sup>176</sup> Underhill to von Hügel, 1922. Section 6. Von Hügel Collection.

<sup>177</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 129 - 130.

Hang on tight to what von Hügel called “the great centralities of religion.” God, Christ and the soul – as to the rest, just let them be. *Don’t* force yourself to swallow them, and don’t on the other hand let yourself be exasperated by them. Just let them alone, and remember that other souls find food in them, even though you don’t.<sup>178</sup>

We note here that it is “the mysterious realities of Christianity” which captivate her. They transcend any and all theological definitions and conceptions. While she accepts “particular formulas” as embodying the truths of the church whose membership she has chosen, she “let alone” and “let be” those aspects which she considers inconsequential. She clearly expresses this approach when speaking of Christ. “He did not invite men to spin theories about what he was; but to ‘follow’ him, leave all unreal interests, accept his view of life, and try the experiment of living in his ways.”<sup>179</sup> Here we see her definite preference for what can be known through contemplation, experience and intuition, rather than through the study of complex theological definitions. This is an aspect of her epistemology to which we will return in subsequent chapters.

At this point in our explorations, it is clear that Underhill’s explanation of Christ draws into question her entire Christological understanding. Indeed, the ambiguity of much of what she has written about Christ has given rise to debate among Underhill scholars as we saw earlier in this chapter.<sup>180</sup> Johnson and Armstrong point to her lack of Christological

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<sup>178</sup> Underhill to Dearest Daphne, (Daphne Martin-Hurst), 3. 5. 1940 in *Evelyn Underhill Anglican Mystic: Eight Letters of Evelyn Underhill & Essays by A. M. Ramsey & A. M. Allchin*, ed. Sisters of the Love of God (Oxford: SLG Press, 1996) 41.

<sup>179</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 79 - 80.

<sup>180</sup> See chap. 4, pp. 152 - 153.

development in her 1922 work, *The Mystic Way*.<sup>181</sup> Greene is of the opinion that she “avoided discussion of Christology.”<sup>182</sup> Callahan maintains that “Underhill portrayed Jesus not as a redeemer but as the revealer of supernatural reality.”<sup>183</sup> Earlier than these writers, Armstrong comments that von Hügel’s attempts to encourage Christocentric devotion in Underhill were “outstandingly successful,” but he offers no further analysis.<sup>184</sup> Johnson, commenting on Underhill’s 1927 work, *Man and the Supernatural*, goes further in his evaluation of her Christology. He maintains that it “lacks any element of atonement in its presentation of Christ. Jesus . . . was the purest revelation of God’s continuing incarnation.”<sup>185</sup> He concludes that she “maintained the centrality of Christ as God’s primary revelation, but in no way presents Christ as an exclusive revelation of God.”<sup>186</sup> He sums up his opinion when he says that she “flirted with the Nicene language”<sup>187</sup> and even in *Light of Christ*, “her most concentrated treatment of Christ . . . hedged her Christology.”<sup>188</sup> In a keenly perceptive statement he declares that “Underhill was never

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<sup>181</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 146 - 157. Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 99 - 107.

<sup>182</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 102.

<sup>183</sup> Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 139.

<sup>184</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 223.

<sup>185</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 148 - 149.

<sup>186</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 150.

<sup>187</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 148.

<sup>188</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 208.

truly as Christocentric as she might appear on first reading.”<sup>189</sup> Prior to Johnson’s assessment, Smalley also highlights the lack of Christological development in Underhill’s writing. Focusing specifically on her soteriological understanding, she states that:

The atoning work of Christ is still interpreted in purely revelatory and exemplary terms. Jesus saves men not by any act of objective propitiation or expiation; but by demonstrating to them that ‘sacrifice, the gesture of complete self-giving, is the deepest secret of life and the only gateway of the supernatural world.’<sup>190</sup>

For Smalley, then, she sees Christ as the revealer of God who saves by showing humanity how to live in abandonment to God. She is in agreement, then, with our earlier contention that Underhill does not develop the soteriological dimension of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. But she goes further in her critique when she writes that:

In her book of meditations entitled *The School of Charity* (based, in the words of the Preface, ‘upon the principal articles of the Nicene Creed’) [Underhill] makes no mention at all of the pre-existence and *homoousion* of the Logos incarnate in Jesus.<sup>191</sup>

Smalley thus states that the reason for Underhill’s inadequate treatment of Christ is her omission of any reference to Christ as the Eternal Word issuing from God through the Holy Spirit; or to Christ as the same substance or being of God – and in a work which pertains to address the principal articles of the Nicene Creed. I take Smalley’s line of

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<sup>189</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 207.

<sup>190</sup> Susan Smalley, “Evelyn Underhill and the Mystical Tradition,” in *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Richard P. C. Hanson* ed. Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 283.

<sup>191</sup> Smalley, “Evelyn Underhill and the Mystical Tradition,” 283 - 284.

argument a step further by contending that the deficiency of Underhill's Christology arises from her lack of development of the relational dimension of Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Nowhere in her writing does she give any developed sense of Christ the Word proceeding from the Father, nor of the eternal relationship between the First and Second divine persons. Though, as we have discussed, she understands that Christ perfectly embodies the Spirit of God, she does not develop this within the eternal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit: namely the life of the immanent Trinity. We can conclude therefore, that she never comes to grips with Christ's identity because she focuses on the functional rather than the relational aspects of his life and death and the work of the economic Trinity. Consequently, she never addresses Christ's divinity, for as O'Collins states: "To name Christ's divinity is to speak of his relationship to the Father in the Spirit."<sup>192</sup> Smalley is correct when she concludes that she "remains adamant that the Divine self-disclosure in Jesus is unique in degree only, not in kind."<sup>193</sup> For Underhill Christ is the human revealer of God who through his exemplary life shows others how to live in communion with the divine.

Our discussion, then, helps explain why Underhill's Christology will always be characterised by ambiguity. As Johnson observed, a careful reading of her works reveals that Christ is not as significant in her spirituality as might first appear.<sup>194</sup> This raises the

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<sup>192</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 198.

<sup>193</sup> Smalley, "Scripture, Tradition and Reason," 282; Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 149.

<sup>194</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 207.

question of why our writer presents an unclear, unspecified and doctrinally questionable Christology and to what extent she is aware of doing so. I suggest that lack of clarity and ambiguity were never her conscious aims, but rather the natural consequence of seven circumstances in which she worked and wrote.

Firstly, although she experienced a newfound devotion to Christ soon after von Hügel became her spiritual director at the conclusion of 1921, this waned during the following years. By 1932, when she was questioned as to why her latest book did not give sufficient space to worship of God through Christ, she answered:

I'm so instinctively pulled to the Theocentric side, and my soul goes off so naturally in that direction when left to itself, that anything I do, or try to do, is sure to be thin on the Christocentric side. You see I come to Christ through God, whereas quite obviously lots of people come to God through Christ. But I can't show them how to do that. All I know is the reverse route.<sup>195</sup>

Here we come back to Underhill's natural orientation to which we referred in Chapter 2.<sup>196</sup> Regardless of her encounter with Christ during the early 1920s, irrespective of stating in 1926 that "more and more my whole religious life and experience seem centred with increasing vividness on our Lord,"<sup>197</sup> Underhill never abandoned her first priority that

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<sup>195</sup> Underhill to Cropper, Tues. p.m. 1932 in Underhill, *Letters*, 205 - 206 and cited in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 171.

<sup>196</sup> See chap. 2, pp. 86 - 88.

<sup>197</sup> Underhill to Bishop Frere, 1926 in Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, 79.



“God alone matters. God alone Is – creation only matters because of Him.”<sup>198</sup> Thus it was only natural that the “thin” Christocentric side would recede, as the “thick” theocentric core of her spirituality strengthened.

Secondly, and closely related to the first point we have discussed, von Hügel’s death in January, 1925, sees the end of that direction which had set Underhill on the road to Christocentric devotion. Smalley speculates with good reason that by 1927 “the influence of von Hügel begins to fall away.”<sup>199</sup> In Underhill’s publication of that year she presents Christ as the “‘Bridge’ between God and man.”<sup>200</sup> Avoiding any suggestion of Christ’s uniqueness, she goes on to name Hinduism and Buddhism to have authentic, though less adequate, incarnations of the Absolute God.<sup>201</sup> The Christocentric devotion nurtured by her director has faded.

This brings us to the third circumstance in which Underhill worked and wrote. An ecumenist from her early years, she remains open to “all sorts and all opinions” including non-Christian religions.<sup>202</sup> In her avoidance of specific doctrine concerning Christ’s

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<sup>198</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, 5.

<sup>199</sup> Smalley, “Scripture, Tradition and Reason,” 282.

<sup>200</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 137.

<sup>201</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 141.

<sup>202</sup> Underhill to Conrad Noel, 1. 3. 1933 in Underhill, *Letters*, 209.

identity, she not only maintains that openness, but also ensures that people of a variety of religious persuasions would be comfortable under her direction.<sup>203</sup>

Fourthly, the vast majority of Underhill's writing consists of the addresses given to small groups of retreatants. They are geared therefore towards reflection, prayer and devotion, rather than to complex theological considerations. Her most explicitly Christological work, *Light of Christ*, which contains the addresses of a retreat given in 1932, clearly illustrates Underhill presenting Christ more in a devotional than doctrinal sense. Therefore, Underhill's audience also contributes to the unspecified nature of her writing regarding Christ.

Fifthly, Underhill's attempt in *The Mystic Way* (1913) to articulate a doctrine of the person and work of Christ had met with what Armstrong describes as a "brouhaha about her heretical opinions."<sup>204</sup> Friends, accusing her of blasphemy, declared that she was no longer Christian.<sup>205</sup> Underhill was surprised and greatly upset by this reaction.<sup>206</sup> That she never again ventures deeply into the realms of theological exposition or debate indicates that the bitter experience of 1913 lingered. When, some fifteen years later and empowered by the

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<sup>203</sup> Underhill to Conrad Noel, 1. 3. 1933 in Underhill, *Letters*, 209.

<sup>204</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 147.

<sup>205</sup> Underhill to J. A. Herbert, 30. 3. 1913 in Underhill, *Letters*, 141; Underhill to Nancy Paul, Monday in Easter week, 1913, in Underhill, *Letters*, 140.

<sup>206</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 51.

experience of visual art she again writes about Christ, she hovers around the edges of systematic Christology.

Having considered five circumstances which contributed to Underhill's particular approach to Christology, we now focus on the sixth contributing factor. One of the continuing themes throughout our discussion has been Underhill's natural inclination of knowing through intuition and experience rather than conceptual superstructure. We see this again in her approach to Christ. The mysterious experience which Underhill describes as significant in her newfound Christocentric devotion awakens the memory of visual images of Christ seen years before. It is these images which inform her understanding of Christ. Here we see with particular clarity the part played by visual art in Underhill's spiritual understanding. For the woman so instinctively drawn to beauty, the images of Christ upon which she gazes offer the freedom of a broad range of interpretation and understanding. Burch Brown reminds us that traditionally "for the Church's ongoing interpretation of the truth *as truth*, the inquirer has looked not to poetry or art . . . but rather to doctrinal statements and theological texts."<sup>207</sup> But Underhill does not fit this traditional model of inquirer. With an interior freedom which allow her to grow in knowledge and understanding from the images she beholds, she comes to an understanding of Christ directed by beauty rather than by doctrinal statements and theological texts. As she herself says of the portrayal of Christ's life in the windows of Chartres Cathedral – [they] "split it

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<sup>207</sup> Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 40.

up into many-coloured loveliness, disclose its hidden richness and colour and make its beauty more accessible to us . . .”<sup>208</sup> In following her natural inclinations as she gazes upon the images of Christ in action, Underhill’s emphasis spontaneously falls on the functional dimension of Christ’s life. This, in turn, informs her speaking and writing about Christ as she seeks to follow, and inspire others to follow, the example he gave. So we return to the question of why Underhill’s Christology lacks the clarity of a systematic exposition, and we see that her predisposition for responding to intuition and experience is a most significant contributing factor. While these six circumstances surrounding Underhill’s work and writing about Christ all affect her Christology in varying degrees, there is yet another dimension associated with her understanding of Christ to which we will now briefly turn.

During the first section of this chapter, we saw that influences other than visual art are at work in Underhill’s gradual awakening to Christ during the years prior to 1921. In concluding this section of the chapter dealing with the years 1921 to 1929, we will briefly examine yet another contributing factor, other than visual art, to her understanding of Christ. As noted, during the early 1920s Underhill became a significant voice in the Anglican Church.<sup>209</sup> This would have undoubtedly necessitated her familiarity with current theological debate within the Church. For some years, Anglican scholars had been engaged

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<sup>208</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 29.

<sup>209</sup> See chap. 4, p. 167.

in an attempt to bring the faith into right relationship with modern thinking.<sup>210</sup> As a result, an emphasis on God's immanence through the incarnation, Christian socialism, and biblical criticism had emerged.<sup>211</sup> By the early 1920s, the devastation of war and its aftermath had revealed the fallen nature of humanity. Consequently, Anglican theology moved from an incarnational orientation towards an emphasis on God's transcendence and Christ's redemptive sacrifice.<sup>212</sup> Foremost among the exponents of this movement was William Temple, who argued that Christ is one with God through the union of their wills, that it is through this union that Christ redeems and is the perfect revelation of God.<sup>213</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter, William Temple – archbishop of York and later Canterbury – invited Underhill to address a number of Church gatherings thereby confirming his high regard for her.<sup>214</sup> It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that her understanding of Christ was in accord with his. We have seen how Underhill's Christological understanding emerged from a number of influences among which visual art is highly significant. Now we see that she was also influenced by Anglican thinking of her day. Her emphasis on Christ as the perfect human revelation of God, as the model of

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<sup>210</sup> Their work was published in 1889 under the title *Lux Mundi* by a group of Oxford theologians, among whom was Charles Gore.

<sup>211</sup> Arthur Michael Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple: The Development of Anglican Theology Between Lux Mundi and the Second World War 1889-1939* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 2-3, 13-14, 25.

<sup>212</sup> Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple*, 133.

<sup>213</sup> Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple*, 148. The various findings of this movement and later commissions were published in *Doctrine in the Church of England. The Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine Appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1922* (London: S.P.C.K., 1938).

<sup>214</sup> See chap. 4, p. 167, n. 66.

perfect submission to God's will and as the one who redeems through showing humanity how to live in abandonment to God's will speaks clearly of the theological thinking of the day, while at the same time reflecting her encounter with visual art. Though she never explicitly referred to this Anglican influence on her thinking, it is reasonable to conclude that it did play a part in the development of her Christological understanding.

## 5. Conclusion

In bringing constructive interpretation and critical analysis to Underhill's understanding of Christ, we have examined its character, explored its theological shortcomings and surveyed the circumstances which contributed to her particular view of Christ. We have concluded that her Christology, focused on the humanity of Christ and influenced by a number of factors, is ambiguous, unclear and, when examined from a theological perspective, questionable. Yet, we have also acknowledged that such is the ambiguity of Underhill's perception of Christ, it is also rich in devotional depth. Therefore, our critical analysis, while it draws into focus the shortcomings of Underhill's Christology, also highlights its positive dimension. As we conclude this chapter, it is to these dimensions that we now turn as we ask ourselves how her spirituality in this second stage differs from that of the first stage. In other words, what difference did her awakening to Christ make in the overall journey of her spiritual life up to this point?

In the previous chapter we found that the first phase of Underhill's spiritual journey was characterised by the centrality of God and the firm conviction that for *her*, beauty was *the* way to God. Throughout the second phase of that spiritual journey, Underhill's focus on God remained unchanged. And, while beauty for her continued to be *the* way to God, her

perception of beauty was broadened and enlarged by the person of Christ who both revealed God and showed her a particular way of making the spiritual journey to God.

That particular way was characterised by the features of Christ's life, namely: total submission to God's will, openness to God's Spirit and unconditional self-emptying love expressed through adoration, communion and cooperation. As we saw in the first stage of this second phase, Underhill continued to be drawn into a more incarnational and redemptive approach to spirituality. But in her awakening to Christ, that gradual realisation became fully incarnational and fully redemptive as her mind opened to the wider community and the service of others. From the solitary road along which she had walked to God during the first stage of her spiritual journey, she became aware, during the second stage of that journey, of the way of adoration, communion and cooperation exemplified in the life of Christ. Offering an alternative to the Plotinian philosophical framework which had dominated her early years, this way took her into the world as a teacher, healer and rescuer. At the same time, in following the example of Christ whose life was totally centred on God, Underhill was led deeper into the mystery of abandonment to God's will – but in a wider and more incarnational sense. She referred to this herself when she wrote that Christ's life shows us “what God in Christ does to and for us,”<sup>215</sup> and that “He [Christ] brings the life-giving mystery of God.”<sup>216</sup> That her encounter with Christ through visual art

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<sup>215</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 31.

<sup>216</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 50.

enriched her understanding of God and enlivened her spiritual journey was powerfully illustrated in the changes in her life during those years – not least of which was her resumption of active participation in the Anglican Church. From the early 1920s her writing expanded to include all areas of spirituality, she became sought after as a spiritual director and retreat director, and as a highly respected public speaker on religious matters. Christ had shown her that the spiritual journey is not a private expedition to the Divine, but a journey made in abandonment to God and in the company and service of others.

However, even as visual art had been highly significant in Underhill's awakening to Christ, so it continued to awaken in her richer dimensions of God. The Cathedral of Chartres, the setting for much of her encounter with God and with Christ was, for Underhill, the place of "Light, Life and Love."<sup>217</sup> Her constant reference in *Light of Christ* to these three great symbols of Chartres was not without theological significance. Just over 20 years before, she had written of the "Light" of the Father, the "Life" of the Son and the "Love" of the Holy Spirit as "a threefold picture of the Real."<sup>218</sup> We have explored the influence of visual art on her awakening to and understanding of "Light" and "Life," which occurred in the first and second phases of Underhill's spiritual life. We now move to Chapter 5 – the third and final phase of her spiritual journey – where her awakening to "Love" through visual art will be our topic.

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<sup>217</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 28.

<sup>218</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 115.



## **Chapter 5:       AWAKENING TO THE CREATIVE SPIRIT**

In the previous chapter, we examined Underhill's awakening to Christ during the second stage of her spiritual life. The purpose of this chapter is to address the third and final stage of her life during which she experiences what we here term: "awakening to the Creative Spirit." In this chapter, we move explicitly into the final phase of the methodology as outlined in Chapter 1, namely critical analysis and critical appraisal of the effect of the influence of visual art on Underhill's spirituality.

In this fifth chapter, I propose to present this dimension of Underhill's experience under four headings:

1. The Creative Spirit in relation to her continued aesthetic experience.
2. A critical appraisal of pneumatology in her spirituality.
3. An overview and critical analysis of her spirituality during the third stage of her life.
4. Conclusion.

Prior to our exploration, some preliminary explanation will establish the timeframe and the context of the third stage of Underhill's spiritual journey. This covered the years 1930 to 1941, thus extending through the final decade of our subject's life. Since the following chapter also treats of this same period, though from a different angle, I present Chapters 5 and 6 as complementary accounts of this vital period of Underhill's spiritual journey. The

conclusions drawn in this present chapter therefore are necessarily partial in that they await a more complete treatment in the chapter to follow.

A further statement of clarification is necessary. As will be evident in what follows, it is clear that the “Creative Spirit” is regarded by Underhill as divine. In most contexts, she tends to stress the intimacy and immanence of the divine action of the God who remains, nonetheless, ever transcendent. To this degree, it is appropriate to employ semantic equivalents of the phrase “Creative Spirit” such as: “God”, “the Creator”, “the divine action”, lest the repetition of the one phrase becomes both cumbersome and wearisome. Moreover, since Underhill has no hesitation in following the convention of her time in using the masculine personal pronoun – “He/His” – we shall do likewise, if the occasion so demands. We recognise, nonetheless, that theology today is searching for alternative ways to speak of God in less exclusively “masculine” terms. Moreover, while the “Creative Spirit” in Underhill’s language most often refers to some aspect of the divine attributes such as creativity, initiative, tenderness, generosity, immanence and transcendence, she tends also to extend the connotation of the phrase to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. This is a source of potential confusion to her readers, perhaps arising from a certain confusion in Underhill’s own writings on this point. We shall draw attention to occasions when this happens, while reserving a fuller discussion of this question to the concluding chapter. When we refer, then, to her “pneumatology”, this must be taken, therefore, to mean her personal perception of the Holy Spirit rather than the orthodox understanding of grace, presence and action of the Third Trinitarian person, the Holy Spirit.

## 1. The Creative Spirit and her Continued Aesthetic Experience

Our exploration of Underhill's awakening to the Holy Spirit begins with a survey of the context which paves the way for this further step in her spirituality. We recall, from the previous chapter, that Underhill recognises in Christ the perfect embodiment of the Spirit of God.<sup>1</sup> We saw also that in her encounter with the interior of Chartres Cathedral, the experience of Light and Life – the Father and the Son – was accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of Love – the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Years before that, in 1913, she had declared the centrality of the Holy Spirit to her creed although without any explanation.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Underhill's recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit, beginning from her childhood, formed part of her general religious orientation throughout those stages of her spiritual life which we have examined. As this chapter proceeds, we will have reason to see how this awakening intensifies during the second phase of her spiritual journey and comes to a developed understanding in relation to her aesthetic experience during the final stage of her spiritual life.

The more immediate context of Underhill's awakening to the Holy Spirit is what she refers to as "the times."<sup>4</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, there had been a gradual evolution of

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<sup>1</sup> See chap. 4, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> See chap. 4, p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> See chap. 4, p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, viii.

theology in England during the 20th century.<sup>5</sup> By the mid 1920s, Underhill concludes that it had resulted in a theological loss of balance in the perception of God. On one hand, she understands that this new theological direction, “the New Theology” with its downplaying of the transcendence of God, tended to produce a “social Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> It reduced humanity’s relationship with God to no more than “shallow immanentism”<sup>7</sup> expressed through “organized kindness”<sup>8</sup> and “pious philanthropy.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there was also at work a Neo-orthodoxy which tended to diminish a sense of divine immanence, with its strong emphasis on the divine transcendence. The result was “a crushing sense of helplessness” together with a feeling of “an unbridged gap between . . . the human and the divine.”<sup>10</sup> Underhill first signals her desire to find a middle course between these two extreme theological positions in the mid 1920s when she writes:

The ultimate doctrinal basis of Christian personal life and social action is that rich conception of God, as both transcendent to and immanent in His world . . . and further that this conception of God, when it becomes to us a living, all-penetrating reality and not a theological statement, is found to require from us a life which

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<sup>5</sup> See chap. 4, pp. 210 - 212.

<sup>6</sup> Underhill, *Mixed Pastures*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, viii.

<sup>8</sup> Underhill, *Mixed Pastures*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Underhill, *Mixed Pastures*, 109.

<sup>10</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, viii. See also Underhill, review of *The Significance of Karl Barth*, by John McConnachie and Underhill, review of *The Theology of Karl Barth: A Short Introduction* by J. Arundel in *The Spectator* 1. 8. 1931, 163; Underhill, review of *The Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* by Karl Barth and *The Barthian Theology* by J. McConnachie, in *The Spectator* 1. 9. 1933, 288.

spends itself in love and service on this world, whilst ever in its best expressions and aspirations, pointing beyond it. A life, in fact, moving towards a goal where work and prayer become one thing; since in both the human instrument is completely surrendered to the creative purposes of God, and seeks more and more to incarnate the Eternal.<sup>11</sup>

In this statement, we see two major aspects of Underhill's theological understanding as they have emerged during the first and second phases of her spiritual life. The Plotinian priority of the Eternal is implicit. The person of Christ, who is the perfect manifestation of God's Spirit, reveals both God, and humanity as called to live in love and service of others. These aspects provide Underhill with some foundation for her statement regarding "the rich conception of God as both transcendent and immanent." However, at this time, she does not elaborate on how she understands God's transcendence and immanence; nor does she explain her perception of God as an "all-penetrating reality." So, while she seeks to find a balance between the extreme "awe-struck sense of God" of Neo-orthodoxy and the equally extreme "adoration by altruism" of New Theology, Underhill does not articulate a clear way of doing so.<sup>12</sup> However, at the same time as she is writing these words, other influences are coming to bear on her thinking.

One of these is the writing of Alfred Whitehead whom Underhill names "the philosophic prophet of our age."<sup>13</sup> His process theology, which gave priority to movement and

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<sup>11</sup> Underhill, *Mixed Pastures*, 110 - 111.

<sup>12</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, viii.

<sup>13</sup> Underhill, review of *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*, by A. N. Whitehead, in *The Spectator* 18. 2. 1928, 234.

becoming over being and substance, underpinned his theory of the activity of God as continually in progress. In 1926, in a review of Whitehead's new publication, *Religion in the Making*, Underhill writes:

God is here seen as the actual fact, the Perfect Real, "from which every creative act takes its rise"; and equally, as the realisation of that ideal harmony to which the world evolves. Hence, while "God in the world is the perpetual vision of the road which leads to the deeper realities," yet room seems to be left for a genuine doctrine of transcendence.<sup>14</sup>

Her agreement with Whitehead's way of understanding the activity of God in relation to humanity and the world is clearly illustrated when, in 1927, she writes that "man's relation with Reality is to be thought of as an emergent and growing relation; a forward moving, energetic process. He is subject to process, yet has attachments to the unchanging."<sup>15</sup> In her understanding of the "processive" and the "unchanging," polarities of God's relational presence, Underhill detects a way of steering a middle course between the two extremes of New Theology and Neo-orthodoxy thus bringing into harmony "the unfilled gap" between pure Immanence and pure Transcendence.

However, as Johnson points out, and as we shall see in this chapter, Whitehead's process theology would have further influences on Underhill.<sup>16</sup> The first indications of this appear

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<sup>14</sup> Underhill, review of *Religion in the Making: A New Correlation of Science and Religion* by A. N. Whitehead, in *The Spectator*, 18. 12. 1926, 1119.

<sup>15</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 165, 206.

a year after the Whitehead review. In 1927 Underhill expresses her acceptance of process theology in a review of a work entitled *The Creator Spirit*. Its author, Raven, presents a “theology of Becoming,” and begins “with a discussion of the theology of the Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> In this connection, Underhill tells us:

We find spiritual life emerging from within physical life; not simply running parallel with it. This principle of emergence Dr. Raven holds to be characteristic of the whole cosmic process; and to indicate, from the human point of view, the way in which the Creator Spirit works.<sup>18</sup>

She must surely have recognised in Raven’s words an echo of Ruysbroeck whose theory of transcendence she understood to mean “not the passage from one life to another, but the *adding* of one life to another.”<sup>19</sup> In this review, we catch her connecting transcendence, immanence, the work of creation and the process of becoming with the action of the Holy Spirit – or in the words of Raven, “the Creator Spirit.” Thus with the foundation of Whitehead’s process theology underpinning her thinking, Underhill is moving into a deeper appreciation of the Creator Spirit.

It is just at that time (1926) that Underhill’s association with Bishop Walter Frere begins. This precipitates another influence on her understanding of the Holy Spirit and on her

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<sup>17</sup> Evelyn Underhill, review of *The Creator Spirit: A Survey of Christian Doctrine in the light of Biology, Psychology and Mysticism*, by Charles E. Raven, in *The Spectator*, 17. 7. 1927, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Underhill, review of *The Creator Spirit*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> See chap. 4, p. 156.

desire to heal the gulf between extreme immanence and transcendence.<sup>20</sup> Frere was her spiritual director from 1926 to 1932. His work in the area of Anglican liturgy included a rich familiarity with the Eastern liturgical tradition. That he passed this on to Underhill is confirmed by Cropper. She states that it was through the influence of Frere that Underhill came into contact with the Russian Orthodox Church and subsequently joined the Anglo-Russian Confraternity.<sup>21</sup> While it is only later that Frere's influence on Underhill in this regard develops more fully, it is reasonable to conclude that even in the first stages of their association, it is fruitful.<sup>22</sup> From her first visits to Ravenna in 1903 and Venice in 1905, Underhill had shown a particular interest in Eastern Christianity and the Orthodox Church.<sup>23</sup> She found the Eastern tradition with its other-worldly sense and emphasis on the mystical and the spiritual expressed in its liturgies, deeply appealing. The Orthodox emphasis on the Holy Spirit specifically as the Spirit of God – not exclusively as the Spirit of Christ – is a clear factor in Underhill's growing appreciation of the Creator Spirit.

However, Underhill had shown her familiarity with another characteristic of Eastern Orthodox theology many years prior to her association with Bishop Frere. Writing within the context of the unitive life in *Mysticism* (1911), she describes the mystic's final

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<sup>20</sup> Bishop Walter Frere, Anglican Bishop of Truro, is described by Armstrong as a "scholar, historian and musicologist." Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 246.

<sup>21</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 155. Underhill to L. K., 8. 2. 1935 in Underhill, *Letters*, 243.

<sup>22</sup> There is evidence of Underhill's later involvement with the Orthodox Church in her letters. See Underhill to L. K., Feb. 8, 1935, 243; to G. F., 30 June, 1935; 248; to Maisie Spens, Whit-Sunday, 1937, 256 - 257 in Underhill, *Letters*.



attainment of God as “deification.”<sup>24</sup> In Byzantine theology, deification or divinisation, (in Greek: *theosis*), refers to the doctrine that the destiny of humankind and all creation is to share in the divine life and to become God through grace.<sup>25</sup> Underhill, in describing it as “a metaphor . . . which tries to hint at a transcendent fact utterly beyond the powers of human understanding, and therefore without equivalent in human speech,” presents it more as a figure of speech than as a doctrine.<sup>26</sup> Borrowing from the mystics, she writes about deification as humanity being “wholly penetrated – as a sponge by the sea – by the Ocean of Life and Love,”<sup>27</sup> as being “wholly identified” with its “native land”<sup>28</sup> and as “ardent sparks” ablaze within a river of fire, yet distinct from it.<sup>29</sup> She then makes two important points. Firstly, deification is about being completely transfused by God, who is Perfect Love, so that human personality is not lost, but made more real “being wholly full of Thee.”<sup>30</sup> Underhill concludes that “the achievement of reality and deification are then one

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<sup>23</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 33 - 34; 56 - 64.

<sup>24</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 415.

<sup>25</sup> Of Biblical origins, deification developed through the patristic understanding of human creation in the image of God, philosophical convictions regarding assimilation of the knower to the known and the doctrine of the incarnation. See Andrew Louth, “Deification,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Spirituality*, 229 - 230.

<sup>26</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 418.

<sup>27</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 417.

<sup>28</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

<sup>29</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 421.

<sup>30</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

and the same thing . . . since we know that only the divine is the real.”<sup>31</sup> Secondly, basing her thinking on Aquinas’ metaphysics of causality, she states that humanity “lifted to the divine order, is to be an agent of the divine fecundity: an energizing centre, a parent of transcendental life.”<sup>32</sup> Thus in becoming Perfect Love, humanity must reach out to each other in love and service, so that all creation is drawn into Perfect Love. Here Underhill, in drawing from Eastern theology and Western philosophy, establishes a fertile base which, as we shall see in this chapter, comes to fruition in her understanding of the Holy Spirit. As our explorations continue, we shall return to the notion of deification.

It is not until 1930 that these influences become evident in Underhill’s first specific writing on the Holy Spirit: “God and Spirit”<sup>33</sup> and “Thoughts on Prayer and Divine Immanence.”<sup>34</sup> She firmly states her point of departure in her declarations: “God is Spirit” and “God is Our Heavenly Father.”<sup>35</sup> The dominant themes of these essays, together with the addresses that she prepares for the 1930 retreat, were published in 1932 under the title of *The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life*. As the title suggests, Underhill takes as

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<sup>31</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420. In linking the notion of deification with reality, Underhill throws light on her understanding of the words which we have seen her repeat so often throughout this project: “God is the only Reality, and we are real only in so far as we are in His order and He is in ours.” See chap. 2, p. 58, n. 48.

<sup>32</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 428. She cites Aquinas: “The last perfection to supervene upon a thing, is its becoming the cause of other things. While then a creature tends by many ways to the likeness of God, the last way left open to it is to seek the divine likeness by being the cause of other things . . .” Thomas Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 3, chap. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 179 - 190.

<sup>34</sup> Underhill, *Collected Papers*, 81 - 93.

<sup>35</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 179.

her central theme in this work, despite its Eastern Orthodox influences, the traditional Latin hymn, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*.<sup>36</sup> In reference to this hymn, Underhill describes her aim in *The Golden Sequence* as:

an attempt to enter more deeply into its unfathomable meaning, give a wider, richer meaning and more supple interpretation to the neglected doctrine which it declares, and bring its phrases into direct relation with the interior experiences of men.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, she declares her intention of entering more deeply into “the neglected doctrine” of the Holy Spirit by searching the meaning of the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. Referring to the “unbridged gap between action and contemplation [and] between the human and the divine,”<sup>38</sup> she writes in the preface of *The Golden Sequence*:

It is the peculiar work of the Christian doctrine of the Spirit to fill this gap; and weave together the temporal and the eternal strands in our strange human experience of reality, without any declension from that deep acknowledgement of Transcendent Majesty, that sense of our creaturely status over against the Eternal, which is the very salt of religion.<sup>39</sup>

In *The Golden Sequence*, as already stated, Underhill sets out to steer a middle course between the two extreme theological positions of New Theology and Neo-orthodoxy. She

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<sup>36</sup> Attributed to Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury (died 1228), *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (‘Come Holy Spirit’) has been traditionally referred to as the *Golden Sequence* in reference to its liturgical use as the Sequence in the Mass of Pentecost Sunday. In Roman Catholic tradition, the Sequence is a liturgical hymn sung during the celebration of the Eucharist just prior to the Gospel on four major feasts of the year: Easter, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary and in the Mass for the Dead.

<sup>37</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, ix.

<sup>38</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, viii.

<sup>39</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, ix.

sees the exploration of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the means by which to do this. We now turn to an examination of how she comes to her particular understanding of the Holy Spirit in relation to her aesthetic experience.

**A. *The Creation of Adam: the image of the Creative Spirit***

In the early pages of *The Golden Sequence*, Underhill struggles to explain “the deep action of Spirit upon and within our spirits.”<sup>40</sup> In an effort to bring home the meaning of this to her readers, she employs two images – that of “a living ocean which pours into every corner of our being,” and “a personal energy [which] compels or . . . enlightens us.”<sup>41</sup> However, she allows that:

Even this language, vague as it may seem, is still far too rigid and too spatial, and those contrasting images too harsh and incomplete, for a situation and experience which only the allusive methods of poetry or inspiration can suggest.<sup>42</sup>

She then employs those “allusive methods of poetry or inspiration” by moving into a detailed description and interpretation of a sculpture in the north porch of Chartres Cathedral – *The Creation of Adam*. She writes:

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<sup>40</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 64. Underhill adapted the addresses she gave during a retreat conducted at Canterbury for the Wives’ Fellowship – a group of educated young married women – as the text for *The Golden Sequence*. Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 160 - 161.

<sup>41</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 64.

There is on the north porch of the Cathedral of Chartres a wonderful sculpture of the creation of Adam. There we see the embryonic human creature, weak, vague, half-awakened, not quite formed, like clay on which the artist is still working: and brooding over him, with His hand on His creature's head, the strong and tender figure of the Artist-Creator. Creative Love, tranquil, cherishing, reverent of His material, in His quiet and patient method: so much more than human, yet meeting His half-made human creature on its own ground, firmly and gradually moulding it to His unseen pattern, endowing it with something of His own life.<sup>43</sup>

Although Underhill left no record of her first encounter with this image, we may assume it was during her first visit to the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres in 1901. So, as in her previous description and interpretation of the cathedral windows, she now revisits a previously encountered work of art. In this image, God the Creator is depicted as a sculptor who is in the process of creating a human creature, Adam. The seated Creator concentrates on the work in hand. The divine figure supports Adam, while God's hands gently go about the work of creation. The incomplete head and one hand of Adam rest upon the Creator, while the remainder of his embryonic body nestles into the figure of the One who is shaping him into life. Let us briefly comment on the images of both the Artist-Creator and Adam.

Though Underhill's first words in this description acknowledge the incomplete figure of Adam, she dwells especially on the "strong and tender figure of the Artist-Creator." The title that Underhill appropriates to the Creator God, "Artist-Creator", immediately sets her

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<sup>43</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 64 - 65. This sculpture is one of a number of small sculptures depicting the story of creation in the central bay of the north porch of Chartres Cathedral. It is located at the summit of the outer archivolt. The archivolt is a moulding which decorates the face of an arch while following its profile. As is the case with the many sculptures of the cathedral, it remains without title and its sculptor remains unnamed. For the purpose of this thesis, in the tradition of Underhill and in the interests of clarity and convenience, this work is referred to as *The Creation of Adam*. See Appendix 10, p. 429.

interpretation of *The Creation of Adam* within a certain perspective. We recall that it is from her study of Plotinus that she comes to a perception of beauty, the artist and the function of the artist. She understands art as a manifestation of the Absolute Beauty of God mediated by the artist.<sup>44</sup> In naming God as the Artist-Creator, she is interpreting God as the supreme artist. She suggests, in effect, that God is the Creative Spirit, and, in the contemplation of Himself, creates a work of art – Adam – the human person. Since this creation of the human being implies personhood, it reflects the image in which it is created, namely, God. In the coming together of the Creative Spirit’s contemplation and the clay of Adam – the Artist and the material – the two worlds of the Infinite and the finite meet.

Thus, prior to Underhill’s detailed explanation of her understanding of *The Creation of Adam*, she is appealing once more to the Plotinian influence to develop her interpretation of the image. The Creative Spirit, the Artist-Creator, is the unique Artist from whose self-contemplation issues the figure of Adam. As the product of the unique Artist, Adam – representing all humanity – embodies something of the Infinite. This is the quality, “which confers on us a certain kinship with Absolute Being, and gives us a “capacity for God’.”<sup>45</sup> Here we can detect another influence in Underhill’s thinking as she contemplates *The Creation of Adam* in terms of deification. The transforming gift of the Artist-Creator enables humanity, who has a “capacity for God,” to become “wholly identified” with

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<sup>44</sup> See chap. 2, pp. 74 - 81.

<sup>45</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 6.

God.<sup>46</sup> Such is the foundation of Underhill's interpretation of the divine action of the Artist-Creator. But this is not for her an entirely new perspective. As we saw in the previous chapter, von Hügel's critical realism introduces her to a twofold dimension of humanity – the spiritual and temporal. It offers a corrective to her Neoplatonic idealism.<sup>47</sup> As she speaks of the human "kinship with" and "capacity for God," she exhibits a more balanced and critical realism in her understanding of humanity. In the rest of this chapter, we will see the significance of this initial perspective derived from *The Creation of Adam*.

As Underhill contemplates *The Creation of Adam*, the hands and fingers of the Artist-Creator – the Creative Spirit – most claim her attention. She begins by employing a range of highly descriptive words which convey her interpretation of the divine creative act. Two words in particular stand out: "touch," and more significantly, "pressure."

We recall from Chapter 2, that Underhill's first use of the word "touch" is in a context different from *The Creation of Adam*. There, based on the Plotinian "touch with God" or "soul's seeing," she explains contemplation symbolically as "a touch of the sublime" or a communion in which the soul "touches the Absolute."<sup>48</sup> Now, she uses the word "touch" in both a physical and symbolic sense in relation to the action of the Creative Spirit depicted

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<sup>46</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> See chap. 4, p. 170, n. 78.

<sup>48</sup> See chap. 2, pp. 72 - 74.

in *The Creation of Adam*. She describes it simply as “the touch of God.”<sup>49</sup> She also understands it as “the gentle touch of the Holy”<sup>50</sup> and “the touch of the Creative Spirit.”<sup>51</sup> “His touches,” she writes, “[are] felt in our very substance,”<sup>52</sup> and are “the touch of transforming grace.”<sup>53</sup> They are “persistent and secret touchings of the Spirit in the soul’s deep,” making the soul “wholly full of Thee.”<sup>54</sup> In this tactile metaphor, she captures echoes of the intimacy of contemplation. It thus evokes the depths of meaning of an action beyond any visible appearance. This touch is a creative and transformative gift, while being gentle, mysterious and persistent as it reaches into the innermost depths of the mind and heart. The unique activity of the Creative Spirit communicates to Adam “something of His own life.” With this image of touch to describe the creation of humankind, Underhill joins a long tradition. Scripture, patristic, medieval and mystical writings abound with this striking image in recording humankind’s experience of God.<sup>55</sup> She cites St John of the Cross as referring to one who “enjoys a certain contact of the soul with the Divinity; and it

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<sup>49</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 118, 122, 134.

<sup>50</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 170.

<sup>51</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 67.

<sup>52</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 171.

<sup>53</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 83.

<sup>54</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 162. Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

<sup>55</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on the metaphor of touch in scripture, patristic and medieval writing see Kilian McDonald, *The Other Hand of God: The Holy Spirit as the Universal Touch and Goal* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003).



is God Himself who is then felt and tasted.”<sup>56</sup> Underhill returns to this image when she beholds the action of the Creative Spirit in *The Creation of Adam*. Again, she cites John of the Cross. “God, to raise the soul to supreme knowledge and do it with gentleness, must begin to touch her in her lowest extremity, that of the senses.”<sup>57</sup> Commenting on these words, she observes that “Reality must stir and touch its half-made creature . . . God must reach into us, before we can reach into Him.”<sup>58</sup> The words of John of the Cross come to life in her meditation on *The Creation of Adam*. She recognises “the touch of the Holy” as the fingers of the Creative Spirit “reach into” the embryonic figure of Adam. An age-old metaphor provides her with a way of expressing that which she sees. But gazing on this sculpture, her lived experience of God focused in this image draws her into a deeper understanding of the action of the Creative Spirit. It develops as the creative act of “touch” gives way to an action which she describes as “pressure.” Thus from the time-honoured metaphor of touch, Underhill moves to her own metaphor of pressure – “the pressure of God” – to interpret the creative act of the Spirit. Let us now explore this further.

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<sup>56</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 73.

<sup>57</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 33.

<sup>58</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 34.

## B. The metaphor: “the pressure of God”

When Underhill begins her description of the Chartres sculpture, she likens Adam to “clay on which the Artist is still working.”<sup>59</sup> She also refers to “the Potter’s tools.”<sup>60</sup> We see here an obvious scriptural allusion. In the second account of creation in Genesis, God “formed man from the dust of the ground.” (Gen. 2: 7) Here God is imaged as a potter modelling man from clay. The same image recurs in Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house where the prophet finds the potter, clay in hand, “working at his wheel.” (Jer. 18: 3) Again, God is the potter and the clay represents humanity. Underhill’s reference to Adam as “clay” and to “the Potter’s tools” immediately sets her interpretation of *The Creation of Adam* within a broader context than the work of sculpture she encounters at Chartres. These scriptural images inform her description of the creative actions of the Artist also as the Potter. These activities involve “moulding,” “gradual changes,” “sharp pinches,” “enlargements” and “smooth pressure.”<sup>61</sup> It is a “tranquil, cherishing and reverent” action.<sup>62</sup> Though “majestic” in character, this action is also “delicate.”<sup>63</sup> It is a “quiet and patient method” which

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<sup>59</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>60</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>62</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>63</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.

conforms to “His unseen pattern.”<sup>64</sup> In this action, Underhill sees the Creative Spirit “ever pressing on His creature.”<sup>65</sup>

Her approach is not unlike certain well-known expressions found in the writings of Irenaeus in the second century. He wrote of God creating through the Word and the Spirit. He writes that “humanity having been molded at the beginning by the hands of God, that is, of the Son and the Spirit, is made after the image and likeness of God.”<sup>66</sup> The similarity between Underhill’s Creative Spirit – shaping and forming humanity – and Irenaeus’ moulding of humanity by the hands of God, the Son and the Spirit is striking. Though there is no evidence of an explicit connection between Irenaeus and Underhill on this point, both have a strong scriptural base. Her interpretation of art works never occurs in a vacuum. Her considerable research, wide reading and vast experience always provide a rich context for the encounter with art which lies at the heart of her understanding.

But we return to the metaphor of “the pressure of God.” When she uses the word “pressure” and “ever pressing action” to describe these actions, she implies that the Creative Spirit is passing on something of God’s being.<sup>67</sup> She explicitly refers to this when

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<sup>64</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>65</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 166.

<sup>66</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5, 28. 4, cited in Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 40. Hereafter cited as *Breath of Life*.

<sup>67</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 166.

she talks about receiving the “impress of Spirit.”<sup>68</sup> The word “impress” gives the sense of engraving, stamping or embossing an object with a certain mark. In the act of moulding, pressing and shaping the clay of Adam, the Creative Spirit engraves into the very being of Adam a mark of an identity or character. Underhill describes this character as “His unseen pattern” which is “something of His own life.”<sup>69</sup> She also describes it as the “deep action of Spirit upon and *within* our spirits.”<sup>70</sup> The impress of the Spirit is *within* each person. Therefore, “the pressure of God” is not only external “action,” but also internal “action” as the Creative Spirit shapes and moulds humanity. Thus through the pressure of the creative fingers, the Creative Spirit of God penetrates the clay of humanity with something of the character of the Spirit and the divine breath of life. The implicit link which Underhill makes between the metaphor of “the pressure of God” and the notion of deification is obvious. The impress of the Spirit divinizes the very soul of humanity. All this is connoted as she employs the metaphor “the pressure of God.” It is exerted by the fingers of the Creative Spirit in *The Creation of Adam*. As she sums up, with specific reference to the Third divine person: “The doctrine of the Holy Spirit means we acknowledge and adore the everywhere-present pressure of God.”<sup>71</sup> This conveys something distinctive in her use of the metaphor of “the pressure of God” and her personal understanding of the Spirit’s action on creation and the human person. We will return to this point later in the chapter.

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<sup>68</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 119.

<sup>69</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.

<sup>70</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 64.

While Underhill initially perceives “the pressure of God” in relation to the creation of Adam, she does not limit it to humanity alone. Rather, she expands the image to include people, events, circumstances and creation itself. As we saw in the previous chapter, she declares that in history the person of Christ is the “the greatest of all insertions of Spirit” and the perfect revelation of the Spirit.<sup>72</sup> The lives of the saints and mystics, the symbolic sacramental acts of religion, the scriptures and the events of history, all alike, also reveal the presence of the Spirit.<sup>73</sup> And so, the Creative Spirit is “the everywhere-present pressure of God . . . entering into, working on and using the whole world of things, events and persons.”<sup>74</sup> While humanity bears the unique imprint of the Creative Spirit, the world and everyday events and situations also reflect a measure of this divine and creative “pressure.” Underhill can say that the Creative Spirit is present “on every plane, in every person, at every point.”<sup>75</sup> Though distinct from the world, this presence is the Energy which moulds, forms, shapes and directs people, events and circumstances. She writes of “the Divine Action . . . whose moulding pressure and demands reach us through and in that finite

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<sup>71</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 36. See chap. 4, p. 198.

<sup>73</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 34 - 36.

<sup>74</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

<sup>75</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

environment to which our natural lives are turned.”<sup>76</sup> In more practical terms, “this penetrating action of God takes place above all, through and in human spirits, and along the paths of the common life.”<sup>77</sup> More explicitly, “all the bustle of my daily life, its ups and downs, its anxieties and tensions, and its dreary, unspiritual stretches . . . even the most trivial events are the ways in which I experience His pressure.”<sup>78</sup>

Underhill’s use of the metaphor the “pressure of God” is richly evocative in an experiential sense. It is therefore highly significant in our explorations directed as they are by the “controlling” methodology of spirituality which places our principal focus on Underhill’s experience as responsive and transforming. Given that Underhill’s interpretation of her experience is coloured by her conceptual and articulated understanding of God, however, there are a number of theological implications involved in her use of this metaphor. To these we now turn.

### **C. Theological implications of “the pressure of God”**

In Underhill’s description of *The Creation of Adam*, she presents the figure of the Creative Spirit as the Origin of the entire scene that is depicted in the sculpture. The Creative Spirit or Creator does not issue from the creative act, but creates. Existing before that act, the

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<sup>76</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 30

<sup>77</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 26.

<sup>78</sup> Underhill, *The Mount of Purification*, 121.

Creator therefore is totally separate from the person being created – Adam, who represents all creation. In other words, the Creative Spirit, separate from and preceding all creation, transcends the world and humankind. Yet Underhill’s interpretation of *The Creation of Adam* also presents the Spirit of God penetrating the world, caring for humanity and endowing creation with the divine presence. She writes:

When we speak of the Spirit . . . we speak of a free and active Reality which transcends and yet penetrates our world, our activity, and our consciousness; not merely as something which is in the making, the soul of an evolving universe, but as something which is there first and which draws its transforming power from the fact that it is already perfect and holy. Here then by the Spirit we mean God Himself in His reality and love, His intimately cherishing care for His whole creation. Not part of the striving evolutionary process, but distinct; and therefore able to intervene, able to pour out veritable dowers of life and light, and reveal actual but unguessed levels of realness, beyond the level which we call the natural world.<sup>79</sup>

In these words, Underhill not only establishes the prevenience and distinctness of the divine Spirit, but guards against pantheistic monism. The Spirit Creator is not an evolving deity coming to be and developing in all things so that all things as they now are, contribute to the deity in some manner. Rather, the Spirit is uncreated and independent. Plotinian rhetoric, biblical metaphors, Barthian language and artistic imagery interweave in Underhill’s words: “The full and genuine Christian doctrine means the immanence of an Absolute Spirit who yet remains utterly transcendent – the Wholly Other, inspiring and supporting His creature in every detail.”<sup>80</sup> Therefore, in the metaphor, “the pressure of

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<sup>79</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 182.

<sup>80</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 183. In this context, Underhill cites Plotinus:

God,” which Underhill develops from *The Creation of Adam*, she sets out what could be described appropriately as her “ground rules” – the prevenience and distinctness of the Creative Spirit.

Another characteristic of the metaphor, “the pressure of God” is its dynamic quality. Reflecting the thinking of both Whitehead and Raven, it captures the ongoing and far reaching action which, for Underhill, is the Creative Spirit. In her initial description of *The Creation of Adam*, Underhill notes that “the artist is still working” on Adam,” who is “half-awakened” and “not yet fully human.”<sup>81</sup> She understands that Adam is in the process of becoming a fully human creature – body and soul. “The pressure of God” works on the bodily form, but she interprets this action to radiate into all dimensions of the growing creature. The Creator broods over Adam “firmly and gradually moulding [him] to His unseen pattern.”<sup>82</sup> “The pressure of God” – the Creative Spirit – is therefore an ongoing movement or divine action which meets the human creature “on its own ground,”<sup>83</sup> and endows the soul with “something of His own life” – “His unseen pattern.”<sup>84</sup> Her

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“We must not,” he says, “think of ourselves as cut off from the Source of life; rather we breathe and consist in It, for It does not give Itself to us and then withdraw Itself, but *ever* lifts and bears us.” Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 6. 9. 9.

<sup>81</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>82</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>83</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>84</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.



teleological view of this process means that she sees the Creative Spirit as “bringing each created spirit to its appointed state.”<sup>85</sup> As Underhill tells the group gathered in Retreat in 1936, each person is “a growing creature whom God has taken in hand and whose completion He will effect in His own time and in His own way.”<sup>86</sup> She understands this relationship to be an energetic process by which the “growing creature”<sup>87</sup> “move[s] towards greater perfection, getting nearer the pattern of His shining thought,” through the transformative action of the Eternal Creative Spirit.<sup>88</sup> Reminiscent of Paul’s humanity groaning inwardly until it comes to fulfilment, Underhill’s thinking also suggests something of Pannenberg’s understanding of the Spirit “working creatively in all events as the power of the future.”<sup>89</sup> Her image of the Creative Spirit loving, urging, inciting and empowering the soul along the spiritual journey comes alive in Edwards’ statement that “the Spirit is the companion of each creature, loving it into being and opening up a future for it in God.”<sup>90</sup>

The dynamism of the Creative Spirit therefore includes the process of transformation which is “a move towards greater perfection, getting nearer the pattern of His shining

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<sup>85</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.

<sup>86</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 25.

<sup>87</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 25.

<sup>88</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

<sup>89</sup> See Romans 8: 22 - 23. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systemic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 101.

<sup>90</sup> Edwards, *Breath of Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 114.

thought.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, the transformation that results from the divine action is a process of deification or divinization as the soul is gradually shaped into the image of God. Human incompleteness is a recurring theme: she weaves this image of *The Creation of Adam* into her Retreat addresses and associated writings. For Underhill, “the pressure of God” is “God Acting” – the Creative Spirit – ever bringing the soul to the completion of “His unseen pattern.”<sup>92</sup> This applies not only to humanity, but to all creation. Speaking of the “great picture of creation,” she observes that “we are not looking at something finished and done with; we look so far as we dare, at an Eternal process – the increasing action of the Divine Love.”<sup>93</sup> Johnson, in stating that for her “the Spirit is a verb,” succinctly captures what he contends is one of “the essential qualities of Underhill’s definition of the Spirit of God.”<sup>94</sup> Dynamic, transformative and continually initiating a process of divinization, the Creative Spirit, is “the everywhere-present pressure of God.”<sup>95</sup>

There is yet another dimension to Underhill’s concept of the divine action of the Creative Spirit. In her description of *The Creation of Adam*, she constantly looks towards who it is that Adam – every person – becomes in the process of creation. The Creative Spirit moulds

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<sup>91</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

<sup>92</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Underhill, *The Mount of Purification*, 118. Here Underhill incorporates into her interpretation of *The Creation of Adam* and her understanding of “the pressure of God” the philosophy of Alfred N. Whitehead.

<sup>94</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 195.

<sup>95</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

Adam “to His unseen pattern” and endows him with “something of His own life.”<sup>96</sup> Through the divine creative action therefore, the ‘who’ that each person becomes is, in a mysterious sense, God. The divine “Presence and Energy” penetrates, works and operates “most deeply and freely in that world of souls where His creation shows a certain kinship with Himself.”<sup>97</sup> Earlier in this chapter, we discussed Underhill’s understanding of deification as being “wholly penetrated” by God, “wholly identified” with God and as “being wholly full of Thee.”<sup>98</sup> We later linked that understanding with her contemplation of *The Creation of Adam*.<sup>99</sup> Here we see a stronger connection. Anna Williams points out that within the Orthodox tradition, Gregory Palamas, “in describing the energies, [of God] does not so much tell us *how* it is we can become God but *who* it is the divinized become.”<sup>100</sup> “We are made partakers,” Williams continues, “of a life that is inherently generous, primarily self-giving.”<sup>101</sup> Palamas’ notion of deification is not Trinitarian, and he does not refer to deification by participation, but rather through union.<sup>102</sup> Although there is no evidence of a direct link between the two, Underhill’s understanding of the

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<sup>96</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>97</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

<sup>98</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 223 - 224.

<sup>99</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 228 - 231.

<sup>100</sup> Anna N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 156. Hereafter cited as *The Ground of Union*.

<sup>101</sup> Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 156.

<sup>102</sup> Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 192.

“everywhere-present pressure of God,” constantly pointing to who we become through the action of the divine Presence and Energy, resonates with Palamas’ mystical approach to union with God. Interestingly for the purposes of our investigations, Williams contrasts Palamas’ way of understanding the union between creature and Creator with that of Aquinas. Whereas Palamas dwelt upon the contemplation of God which is itself sanctifying and through which we are deified, Aquinas articulated the process of ‘how’ this process occurs. Through participation by grace in the intratrinitarian relations of knowing and loving, and through the virtues of faith, hope and love, there is union between creature and Creator.<sup>103</sup> As we proceed through the following chapters, we will have reason to see how Palamas’ understanding of deification takes precedence in Underhill’s spirituality.<sup>104</sup>

Closely connected with her understanding of the Creative Spirit moulding the human person into the divine image, is the intimate dimension which she gives this action. In her initial description of *The Creation of Adam*, she sees the Artist-Creator “brooding” over the

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<sup>103</sup> Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 157 - 158.

<sup>104</sup> The differing approaches to deification which we have observed in Palamas and Aquinas arose from their desire to maintain the ontological divide between Creator and creature. Palamas’ mechanism for preserving this divide was the essence-energy distinction. He argued that since “the essence of God is in itself beyond all contact,” then “it must be God’s energy that makes him manifest.” Hence we know and ‘become’ God through participation in his energies. Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 144. For Aquinas, it was the divine simplicity which “grounds the absolute uniqueness of God and such chief divine virtues as intellect, love and goodness.” Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 157 - 158. Within the human person, the faculties of knowing and loving reflect the relatedness of the divine processions within the Trinity. Hence we know and ‘become’ God through knowledge and love, which is a participation in the life of the Trinity, and through the practice of the virtues. Regarding this divergence of understanding in Palamas and Aquinas, Williams comments on the common ground which they share. “Indeed,” she states, “in most respects, to know and affirm the doctrine of deification in one is implicitly to accept the doctrine of the other.” Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 175. As we shall see in later chapters, this particular observation is borne out in Underhill’s spirituality.

half-made Adam. This suggests the Artist-Creator is bringing forth Adam from the warmth and protection of the Creator's own being. Underhill recognises that she is looking at the action of "Creative Love." Describing this Love as "tender" and "cherishing," she acknowledges that the half-made creature is dear to the heart of the Creator. From this general description, she becomes specific. The "pressure of God" is "deep,"<sup>105</sup> "silent,"<sup>106</sup> "gentle,"<sup>107</sup> "mysterious,"<sup>108</sup> "penetrating,"<sup>109</sup> "steady,"<sup>110</sup> "supple,"<sup>111</sup> "subtle,"<sup>112</sup> "personal,"<sup>113</sup> and "inexplicable."<sup>114</sup> She avers that "God must reach in to us,"<sup>115</sup> – an experience accompanied by "a loving peaceful joy in the great purposes of the Spirit, swamping all personal anxiety and desire."<sup>116</sup> Underhill thus conveys a sense of God's deep personal involvement in the creation of humankind. The Creator does not direct the act of creation from afar. The divine hands are soiled as the Creative Spirit works the clay

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<sup>105</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 68.

<sup>106</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 140.

<sup>107</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

<sup>108</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>109</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 26.

<sup>110</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 24, 27, 65.

<sup>111</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 171.

<sup>112</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 49.

<sup>113</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 102.

<sup>114</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 50.

<sup>115</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 34.

<sup>116</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 171.

of humankind. Nor does the Spirit do this in a haphazard fashion. Underhill's words suggest steady hands, thoughtful planning, deliberate action, attention to detail, careful forming, tender shaping, loving and reverent pressure. Nor does the Creative Spirit mass-produce his works of creation. As the sole agent, the Creator moulds and shapes Adam as an individual, while at the same time supporting the embryonic figure. God is both personal and immanent – “reaching into” Adam, supporting him, brooding over him, shaping, loving and desiring him. Symbolic of all humankind, Adam is every person – moulded into life by the immanent Creative Spirit of Love. He – Underhill habitually uses the masculine pronoun – presses the soul in a gentle, personal way. This action is deep, silent, intimate. In these words, Underhill is speaking of the God she experienced in Chartres Cathedral as “so divinely near.”<sup>117</sup>

However, her description of “the pressure of God” contains another dimension. Whereas the words she uses to describe *The Creation of Adam* and the action of the Creative Spirit are those of intimacy, gentleness and love, they also contain a strong sense of distance, mystery and obscurity. “The pressure of God” has a mysterious and unfathomable character. Again in reference to *The Creation of Adam*, she clearly recognises the Creative Spirit in the dominant roles of initiator and “Absolute Power.”<sup>118</sup> Influenced by her early assimilation of Plotinian philosophy, her sense of the image of the Eternal Principle and

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<sup>117</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 29.

<sup>118</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

the ineffable mystery of Pure Being remains strong. The Creative Spirit is a God of “terrible holiness” and “an energetic Power over against us.”<sup>119</sup> She describes the creative action of the Spirit as “compelling”<sup>120</sup> and “unwavering.”<sup>121</sup> Such words do not suggest a light or passing touch. Rather, they imply the relentless Energy of the Holy Spirit – a force which eludes categorization. Again, reminiscent of Underhill’s experience in Chartres Cathedral, these words relate to the Mystery “so far above us.” For her, therefore, the Creative Spirit is a Spirit of mystery and otherness – a transcendent God.

In a summary of her understanding of the Creative Spirit, Underhill writes:

For the doctrine of the Holy Spirit means that we acknowledge and adore the everywhere-present pressure of God; not only as a peculiar religious experience, not as a grace or influence sent out from another world or order, but as a personal holy Presence and Energy, the Lord and Giver of Life – in this world and yet distinct from it, penetrating all, yet other than all. . . . It means God entering into, working on and using the whole world of things, events and persons; operating at various levels, and most deeply and freely in that world of souls where His creation shows a certain kinship with Himself. And this Presence is moulding, helping and pressing all His creation – on every plane, in every person, at every point – by the direct action of His divine influence, to move towards greater perfection, get nearer the pattern of His shining thought.<sup>122</sup>

Yet, her pneumatology would be incomplete unless it takes into account the other figure in the sculpture. We now turn, then, to her consideration of Adam.

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<sup>119</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 15.

<sup>120</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 50.

<sup>121</sup> Underhill, *The Mount of Purification*, 121.

#### D. *The Creation of Adam: the figure of Adam*

Underhill describes the figure of Adam as depicted in *The Creation of Adam* in these words:

We see the embryonic human creature, weak, vague, half-awakened, not quite formed, like clay on which the artist is still working . . . and brooding over him, with His hand on His creature's head, the strong and tender figure of the Artist-Creator . . . awful holiness reaching out to earthly weakness, and awakening it to new possibilities. . . . It is true that the half-awakened Adam, stirring to consciousness, can give no exact meaning to the strange experiences that seem to reach him: the sudden or gradual changes, sharp pinches, smooth pressures or enlargements, by means of which he is being conformed to the secret type. He is still dazed by his situation.<sup>123</sup>

While her description of *The Creation of Adam* stresses the activity of the Creative Spirit, the passivity of Adam is her focus. Adam is “not quite formed.” He is “weak, vague, half-awakened.” His capacity for God, integral to his kinship with God, is not yet fully developed. His yielding form rests against his Creator who both supports and forms the “embryonic human creature.” Though “stirring to consciousness,” Adam does not understand the movements of the Creative Spirit. Submissive, unresisting and “dazed,” he does not recognise the “awful holiness reaching out to [his] earthly weakness.” He is unaware of the “secret type” – the “unseen pattern,” the “impress of the Spirit”<sup>124</sup> – the

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<sup>122</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

<sup>123</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>124</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 119.



forces that are moulding him. The “new possibilities” awaiting him are unknown. Underhill thus describes a passive, docile and compliant Adam. In his embryonic state, he remains unaware of “the pressure of God.”

Her description of the passive state of Adam ends with the observation: “Perhaps the image is not complete.”<sup>125</sup> She gives the impression of standing back from the whole sculpture and viewing its totality. Indeed, she sees it as incomplete because it does not include a response from Adam. It lacks, in this regard, a sense of the active aspect of the spiritual life which “consists in a submission which is by turns active and passive to the moulding and penetrating action of the supernatural order.”<sup>126</sup> Adam does not “look up towards the Power that holds him.”<sup>127</sup> He does not “lift his eyes to God.”<sup>128</sup>

Underhill is focusing on the relationship between Creator and creature. Through the act of creation, Adam will awaken to the world of change – a “life of sense tuned to time.”<sup>129</sup> But in the act of creation, God establishes a relationship with Adam whereby he (Adam) is awakened to an Eternal Presence – a “life of spirit tuned to eternity.”<sup>130</sup> Underhill

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<sup>125</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 67.

<sup>126</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 67.

<sup>127</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.

<sup>128</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.

<sup>129</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 59.

<sup>130</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 59.

concludes that this relationship “requires a secret collaboration between the soul and God.”<sup>131</sup> God’s part in this collaboration is already established through “the pressure of God” in the creative act. What is required on Adam’s part is “on one hand an utter self-abandonment to the sustaining power [of God]; and on the other hand . . . a vigorous personal initiate” expressed through willed self-giving.<sup>132</sup> Thus the figure of Adam is symbolic of humankind. The necessary collaboration between the soul and God balances on a twofold understanding: the prevenient Creative Spirit’s gift to the soul and the soul’s self-surrender and deliberate self-donation to the Creator.

To complete the picture, we now turn to another work of art. Underhill does not reveal when or where she first saw the painting *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, but she draws on it to complement her interpretation of *The Creation of Adam*.<sup>133</sup>

#### **E. *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*: a figure of grace and desire**

*Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* depicts the Crucified Christ reaching down from the cross to embrace Saint Francis. Francis is portrayed stepping up from the ground onto a nearby rock in order to reach Christ. As he embraces Christ, Francis raises his eyes to meet the gaze of the Crucified. We recall from the previous chapter that Underhill

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<sup>131</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 67.

<sup>132</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 68.

<sup>133</sup> Bartomé Murillo, *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, oil on canvass, 1668, Museum of Fine Arts, Seville, Spain. See Appendix 11, p. 430.

understands Christ as the perfect manifestation of the Spirit of God.<sup>134</sup> It is in that sense that she interprets *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* referring to the crucified Christ as “the Divine.”<sup>135</sup>

Although Underhill writes about this painting within the context of purification, she suggests a clear comparison with the sculpture, *The Creation of Adam*. Just as she understands Adam to be symbolic of humankind, so she understands Saint Francis. Reminiscent of the Creative Spirit “brooding over him [Adam],” Underhill describes Christ’s action from the cross as “the generous stooping down of the Divine.”<sup>136</sup> She notes another similarity. While one arm of Christ draws Saint Francis upward, the hands of the Creative Spirit support, mould and shape Adam. But whereas the half-awakened and therefore passive Adam does not “look up towards the Power that holds him,”<sup>137</sup> Saint Francis makes a “deliberate upward struggle,” as with both arms he embraces Christ.<sup>138</sup> This is “the entry of the human spirit into the redemptive order of the Holy.”<sup>139</sup> The lack of response on Adam’s part in *The Creation of Adam* is made good by the response of Saint Francis. Underhill emphasises the similarities and yet the differences in these two works of

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<sup>134</sup> See chap. 4, p. 198.

<sup>135</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

<sup>136</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65, 98.

<sup>137</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.

<sup>138</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.

<sup>139</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

art when she refers to the action of “Creative Love”<sup>140</sup> in *The Creation of Adam*, and the “two movements of created and Creative love” in *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*.<sup>141</sup> Yet it is in the disparity of these two works that she finds their complementarity. For her the mutual exchange of love between Christ and Francis in the painting is the completion of the creative love of the Creator Spirit in the sculpture. As she beholds *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, she interprets that sense of completion in a new way, namely in terms of grace and desire. We will now turn our focus to that interpretation.

Underhill summarises her interpretation of *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* in two words: grace and desire. “The sacred picture,” she writes, “is a symbolic representation of . . . that double movement of desire and grace.”<sup>142</sup> Other notions enrich her interpretation as she speaks of “the instinctive life of nature” and “the transformed life of grace.”<sup>143</sup> Again, her understanding leads her to see the image as “created and Creative love.”<sup>144</sup> The theme of the painting is the centrality of desire and grace within the vast perspective of the Christian life. She writes that this “double movement of desire and grace

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<sup>140</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>141</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.

<sup>142</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

<sup>143</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.

<sup>144</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.

. . . is the formula of the spiritual life.”<sup>145</sup> This is not, then, *one way* among others, nor does she offer any compromises. Desire and grace are *the formula* – the blueprint, model or mould – of the spiritual life. But what does she mean by “grace”?

She approaches the theme of grace by defining it as “an actual infusion of the life of the Other.”<sup>146</sup> However, her experience of *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* allows her to fill out this initial definition.

She begins with the sculpture. It evokes the action of the Creative Spirit. Working on the figure of Adam, God endows him “with something of His own life.”<sup>147</sup> In the painting of Saint Francis on the other hand, she finds depicted the “generous stooping down of the Divine,” leading to “a share in the divine self-giving.”<sup>148</sup> As discussed above, the actions of the Creative Spirit echo those of the Artist-Creator. In these two images, therefore, Underhill suggests the gift of divine life bestowed upon humanity. However, rather than in the broad context of “the Other” or “Eternal Life,” she situates grace as the action of the Creative Spirit – expressed in her metaphor “the pressure of God.” She writes:

We think now of that One God’s intimate presence with us and support of us; as a living, acting, holy Spirit penetrating the whole world and each soul in that world.

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<sup>145</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

<sup>146</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 206.

<sup>147</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 65.

<sup>148</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

We recognise His ceaseless pressure on and in our spirits, His generous and secret self-giving on which we depend so entirely.<sup>149</sup>

Grace is the “generous and secret self-giving” of the Spirit and “His ceaseless pressure on and in our spirits,” penetrating every person and the entire world, as depicted in both *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*.

As has been referred to several times in this chapter, Underhill perceives that the Creative Spirit, “the pressure of God” – and therefore grace – is distinct and efficacious. She writes that humanity is “entirely dependent on this prevenient and overruling Presence, acting with power and gentleness in the soul’s ground.”<sup>150</sup> The Creative Spirit transcends yet penetrates the world and, as she expresses it, is “there first.”<sup>151</sup> Thus grace, which is entirely independent, is eternally and universally present to humanity.

Underhill takes this point further when she writes of “the steady, secret pressure of the yeast of grace ever at work creating Adam.”<sup>152</sup> Drawing on her metaphor of “the pressure of God,” she employs the image of yeast to describe the transformative character of grace. Slowly, silently and unobtrusively, grace permeates the spirit or soul of every person transforming it from within. Though a steady and secret pressure, grace comes to the soul

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<sup>149</sup> Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 78.

<sup>150</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 182.

<sup>151</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 182.

<sup>152</sup> Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 25.

in a variety of guises and a multitude of ways. For the Creative Spirit penetrates the whole world of people, events, circumstances and situations, and through these, as well as through direct action, grace – the “transforming sway of holiness” – permeates the soul.

Underhill’s understanding of grace contains therefore rich dimensions which enable the soul “for the living of the spiritual life.”<sup>153</sup> In the following chapter, we will continue to develop this theme through an exploration of her perception of the gifts of the Creative Spirit. For now, however, we will explore her understanding of desire.

Underhill defines desire as “the craving for eternal life, the metaphysical passion of the soul stretching from fear through wonder to delight.”<sup>154</sup> Closely associated with this “craving” is what she refers to as “the steady pull . . . of the Love of God.”<sup>155</sup> She writes about this in the context of a journey where “we are drawn almost in spite of ourselves . . . like the inevitable movement of the iron filing to the great magnet that attracts it.”<sup>156</sup> Here she is using magnetic attraction as a root metaphor for desire working in creation and between the Creative Spirit and the human spirit. It is in the figure of Saint Francis making what she describes as his “arduous ascent” accompanied by “the steady pull of the Divine”

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<sup>153</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 81.

<sup>154</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 60.

<sup>155</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 76.

<sup>156</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 27.

in the experience of desire.<sup>157</sup> Francis makes a “deliberate upward struggle” as he raises his eyes to and embraces Christ in an outward expression of desire.<sup>158</sup> Here Underhill sees the response which Adam is unable to give to “the pressure of God.” Francis’ response is wholehearted and deliberate as he stretches upward. In that action, Underhill sees two things at play – love and will. She explains how they come into play by appropriating the words of Ruysbroeck:

A man should always, in all his works, stretch towards God with love . . . but this requires . . . the deliberate direction of the great drive of our human nature – its love and will, its passions and energies – to that supreme attraction and demand.<sup>159</sup>

For Underhill then, the genuine desire she sees in the actions of Saint Francis is grounded in human nature – in love and will. There, where humanity is ever drawn towards the supreme attraction of the Eternal, desire begins and finds its expression.

The core position of love and will in her perception of desire, resonates with her understanding of grace as God’s thought and love penetrating the “very substance” of the person. Her contemplation of *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* reveals a further connection. Francis is stepping on a solid rock in order to move upward towards Christ. Underhill explains the symbolism of this rock. “Saint Francis stands secure on the

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<sup>157</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

<sup>158</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.

<sup>159</sup> Ruysbroeck cited in Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.



great unriven rock of perfect charity, and finds he can reach his master there.”<sup>160</sup> It is the strong, complete and undivided rock of love which provides a solid foundation for Francis’ desire. This kind of love is not limited to emotional qualities. Rather, it is “the whole thrust and drive of a conscious selfhood towards a desired object and end.”<sup>161</sup> It is love expressed through the will – the “meek self-abandonment to the vast and hidden purposes of the Spirit.”<sup>162</sup> This is the love that finds expression in Francis’ raised eyes and outstretched arms. Yet, the generous stooping down of Christ is the gift of Divine Love – the gift of grace. As Saint Francis and Christ embrace in desire and grace, she sees love and will as their meeting place and their point of unity. Thus *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* expresses “two movements of created and Creative love.”<sup>163</sup> The collaboration of creature and Creator comes together in love expressed in the will. It perfectly portrays for her the “secret collaboration between the soul and God” which she realises is absent from *The Creation of Adam*.<sup>164</sup> In Underhill’s perception of desire, we see further into her understanding of grace.

However, there is another significant insight which she gains through her contemplation of *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*. In noting that Christ draws Saint Francis “to

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<sup>160</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

<sup>161</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 78.

<sup>162</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 72.

<sup>163</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.

<sup>164</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 67.

union with Himself,” she focuses attention on the divine expression of desire.<sup>165</sup> Therefore, the crucified Christ stooping down from the cross not only symbolizes grace, but also desire. So in the figures of Christ and Saint Francis, Underhill sees the interpenetration of grace and desire while at the same time acknowledging that grace is specifically the action of the Spirit and desire the response of the creature. And, as we have seen, it is grace which initiates and enlivens all desire. For her, therefore, grace and desire are interpenetrating activities. Constantly interweaving and mutually nourishing, they are grounded in and turn on the love which resides in the will.

It is through her contemplation of *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* that Underhill develops her understanding of the double movement of grace and desire as the formula of the spiritual life. A multi-faceted, rich and fertile formulation, it presents the spiritual life as a journey of love towards final fulfillment in communion with God. In the following chapter we will further explore and expand this central aspect of her spirituality.

## **2. A critical appraisal of pneumatology in Underhill’s spirituality**

At the beginning of this chapter, we recalled the general context regarding the Holy Spirit from which Underhill approaches the third phase of her spiritual life which began in 1930: recognition of Christ as the perfect embodiment of the Spirit of God and the experience, in

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<sup>165</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

Chartres Cathedral, of overwhelming Love which she names the “Holy Spirit”. We saw also the two extreme theological positions: the shallow immanentism of New Theology, on the one hand, and, on the other, the over-powering transcendence of Neo-orthodoxy that formed the immediate context of the time. It is within this perspective that the influence of the writings of Whitehead and Raven and her spiritual director, Bishop Frere, as well as her interest in the Orthodox notion of deification, come to bear on Underhill’s thinking. These varied influences shape the broad context in which Underhill recalls the experience of two works of art: *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*. This remembered experience informs her later thinking on the Holy Spirit, or more generally the Creative Spirit.

In order to understand the significance of this development in Underhill’s thinking, it is necessary to revisit her perception of Christ. We recall that while her Christology is devotionally rich, from a theological perspective it is ambiguous, unclear and doctrinally questionable. Specifically, she has been unable to accept Christ’s pre-existence and therefore is incapable of seeing how Christ is eternally present in the world. To this degree, she has no concrete point of reference on which to focus her conception of God’s eternal presence in the world.<sup>166</sup> So, as she approaches the end of the 1920s and the second stage of her spiritual journey, Underhill’s theological understanding is far from settled. Johnson

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<sup>166</sup> See chap. 4, pp. 199 - 202.

describes her at this time as “adrift again, half way between modernism and orthodoxy.”<sup>167</sup> By contemplating *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, she finds a way through her dilemma.

The metaphor, “the pressure of God,” which arises from *The Creation of Adam* provides an understanding of the Spirit of God as the Creative Spirit. This Creative Spirit, antecedent to and independent of all creation, is transcendent. A loving Creator, the Spirit continually initiates and maintains the process of divinization through which humanity is transformed into the image of God. Eternally active and immanent in human experience and in all the events and circumstances that affect it, and indeed, through all creation, the Creative Spirit is – in Underhill’s words – “the everywhere-present pressure of God.”<sup>168</sup> In *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, she depicts the divine action of love desiring humankind and offering it the grace of sharing in the Divine Life. While this interpretation is similar to that of *The Creation of Adam*, Underhill sees in the figure of Saint Francis the expression of desire as the essential human response to God. Hence she arrives at “the formula of the spiritual life – the double movement of grace and desire.”<sup>169</sup>

Turning to her previous thinking, we see that Underhill’s most fundamental concept – the priority of the Absolute God who “alone matters” and “alone is” – is firmly maintained in

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<sup>167</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 153.

<sup>168</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 12.

<sup>169</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

her developing sense of God's creative action.<sup>170</sup> Her new perspective of grace and desire does not lessen her hold on the fundamental principle of the priority of God above all else. Rather, it colours her concept of God with dynamism and activity so that divine presence in humanity and in the whole of creation is understood as eternally creative.

On this point, we noted a new influence in her thinking – Whitehead's process theology. At the same time, the influence of von Hügel's critical realism remains but with a new perspective. He maintained that God's manifold presence in the world had its culmination and its continuance in the incarnation of Christ. Underhill offers a different interpretation: God is present in the world through the Creative Spirit who "guarantees and informs all those graded, varied, contrasting self-disclosures of God."<sup>171</sup> During the second stage of her spiritual journey, she had been unable to accept God's presence in the world through Christ. Now, she has the means to appreciate that presence through her notion of the Creative Spirit who penetrates all humanity and all creation. Regarding this point, Johnson observes that "she was able to make sense of von Hügel's critical realism in her own terms – the interpenetration of the Spirit."<sup>172</sup> This signals a crucial shift. From ambivalence regarding Christ during the second phase of her spiritual journey, she has moved to the Spirit-centred spirituality which would characterise the remainder of her life.

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<sup>170</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, 5.

<sup>171</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 13.

<sup>172</sup> Johnson, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 177.

## A. The questions

Yet as we accompany Underhill through the final stage of her spiritual journey, questions arise regarding her Trinitarian understanding of the Holy Spirit. How does she understand the Holy Spirit in relation to the Father and to Christ? Is she, in her use of the terms “Creative Spirit” and “pressure of God,” speaking only of the manner of God’s creative action and not of the Trinitarian God of orthodoxy? Does she, in fact, break with a Trinitarian understanding of the Holy Spirit? How are we to draw some order from what at the beginning of this chapter we described as “a source of potential confusion to her readers, perhaps arising from a certain confusion in Underhill’s writing on this point.”<sup>173</sup>

We recall that from the time of Underhill’s first significant encounter with the Absolute in Italy and in Chartres Cathedral, she names that Reality “God.” Even in her growing awareness of Christ, Underhill continues to insist that “God alone matters. God alone is.” We have noted what is, in effect, her lifelong personal mantra: “God is the only Reality, and we are real only as far as we are in His order and He is in ours.”<sup>174</sup> In the first pages of *The Golden Sequence*, we find some clarification of her understanding of God. Drawing on the scriptures, she writes that “God is Spirit” and “our Heavenly Father.”<sup>175</sup> She goes on to say that “our best name for the ultimate Reality is Spirit,” because it incorporates both the

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<sup>173</sup> See chap. 5, p. 216.

<sup>174</sup> See chap. 2, p. 58, n. 48.

<sup>175</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 8.

transcendent and the immanent aspects of God.<sup>176</sup> Henceforth, her already infrequent references to God as Father dwindle as, in Johnson's words, "the term Spirit subsumed the parental aspect of God."<sup>177</sup> Therefore, as she sets out on her exposition of the Holy Spirit in *The Golden Sequence*, Underhill indicates the direction of her thinking. Leaving aside any Trinitarian dimension, she declares: "God is Spirit."

Following from that statement, and as we have discussed in this chapter, Underhill's experience of *The Creation of Adam*, leads her into a particular understanding of the Holy Spirit as the Creative Spirit and to the metaphor "the pressure of God." These designations, in placing emphasis on the dynamic and transformative action of the Spirit, focus on God's relationship with creation and especially humanity. Thus she describes the various divine attributes of this relationship as "penetrating," "gentle," "mysterious" and "immanent" to name but some of the many words she employs. We have seen this also in her contemplation of *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, where the Divine Spirit desires humanity and gifts it with a share in the divine life. However, while she clearly emphasises the relational dimensions of the Creative Spirit in regard to humanity, she makes no attempt to develop an understanding of the Spirit in relation to the Trinitarian God. Earlier in this chapter, we asked how we might draw some order from the confusion

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<sup>176</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 8.

<sup>177</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 196. The one exception to this was the short work, *Abba*, in which she stated: "There should be no situation in life, no attitude, no pre-occupation or relationship, from which we cannot look up to this God of absolute Truth and say, 'Our Father' of ourselves and of all other souls. Our inheritance is God, our Father and Home." Underhill, *Abba*, 17.

which can arise in regard to Underhill's understanding of the Holy Spirit. We might suggest that the answer lies in examining the very point we have reached – her failure to develop a Trinitarian understanding of the Holy Spirit. In order to do this, we must return to her perception of Christ.

We recall, from Chapter 4, that Underhill perceives Christ as a “human personality entirely God-possessed.”<sup>178</sup> To this degree, Christ is the perfect manifestation or incarnation of God's Spirit. She writes, “Christians must regard the historical Incarnation as the greatest of all such insertions of Spirit into history.”<sup>179</sup> Christ is the perfect manifestation of the divine Spirit because he lived and died in perfect and complete abandonment to God's will. Thus he is the supreme model for humanity. To the degree that we abandon ourselves to God's will, so we will be filled with the Holy Spirit. As we saw, Underhill never gives any developed sense of Christ the Word proceeding from the Father or of the eternal relationship between the First and Second divine persons. Nor does she develop the soteriological dimension of Christ's life, death and resurrection.<sup>180</sup> This limited perception of the Father's saving action through Christ is the key to her somewhat confused

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<sup>178</sup> See chap. 4, p. 197.

<sup>179</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 36.

<sup>180</sup> See chap. 4, p. 198.



understanding of the “Creative Spirit” and the Trinitarian person, the Holy Spirit. It is what Johnson rightly refers to as “Underhill’s Achilles heel.”<sup>181</sup>

Lacking a grasp of the redemptive significance of Christ’s life, death and resurrection Underhill is unable to develop any sense of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon humankind in the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. Consequently, she does not seek to make any sense of the Father giving his Son for the salvation of the world, or of the Son offering himself to the Father for the world, or of the outpouring of the Spirit of love on all humankind. The failure to address these crucial aspects of the economic Trinity highlights how integral to this is the distinction between the three divine persons in the Trinity’s immanent life. Hence, another way of explaining Underhill’s approach is to say that she does not ground her understanding of the Holy Spirit on the divine processions that characterise the life of differentiated communication within God – the Son proceeding from the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeding from both Father and Son. In failing to do this, she omits the essential foundation of relationship and distinction within the Trinity, for as Kelly states: “the only basis for such relationships are the processions within divine reality”<sup>182</sup> and “the only way distinction can occur is through relationships.”<sup>183</sup> Underhill’s failure to establish a sound theological grounding for her understanding of the Spirit –

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<sup>181</sup> Johnson, “Evelyn Underhill’s Pneumatology: Origins and Implications,” 114.

<sup>182</sup> Anthony Kelly, *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989.), 130, n. 29.

<sup>183</sup> Kelly, *The Trinity of Love*, 127.

founded within the love relationship of the three divine persons in their distinctiveness – results in an undifferentiated understanding of the Holy Spirit and indeed of the Trinity. This accounts for that recurring and somewhat haphazard interchange of names – “Creative Spirit,” “pressure of God,” “Spirit,” “God,” “Artist-Creator,” “Divine Spirit” “Spirit of Christ” – which we have met throughout this chapter and which give rise to confusion. We will return to this subject of Underhill’s perception of the Trinity in the following chapter. For the moment, we will continue to unfold her understanding of the Holy Spirit.

We recall how, irrespective of comparative silence on the soteriological dimension of her Christology, Underhill notes numerous examples of scriptural and doctrinal statements which refer to that dimension.<sup>184</sup> Her writing on the Holy Spirit exhibits that same characteristic – a number of confessional statements which remain undeveloped and unexplained. Thus she declares that:

The procession of the Spirit takes place in the Eternal order; and through Bethlehem and Calvary, Hermon and the Upper Room, a wealth of life and light which is not yet exhausted comes to wide-open, self-oblivious souls.<sup>185</sup>

A Trinitarian dimension is clearly evident in another statement:

The Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life . . . is the Spirit of Charity poured out from the fresh springs of that fontal being we call God, and that loving Wisdom, the Creative Thought, we call Son.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> See chap. 4, pp. 199 - 201.

<sup>185</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 37.

And again:

Christian worship in its wholeness must include or imply . . . awestruck adoration of the self-existent Eternal . . . total self-offering to Him in Christ, and an active and grateful recognition of the Holy Spirit of God. . . . It involves, then, an adoring acknowledgment first of God's cosmic splendour and otherness, next of His redemptive and transfiguring action revealed in history, and last of His immanent guidance in life.<sup>187</sup>

In reference to Christ she writes that "there is a mounting revelation of the Spirit, in and through this uttered Thought, the incarnate Word."<sup>188</sup> There are more specific insights yet: the Spirit "is both Lord and Life-giver; the Absolute God acting, and bringing the whole Trinity into the soul, which thus becomes the temple of the Holy Giver of Life."<sup>189</sup> The Spirit is "Divine Generosity,"<sup>190</sup> "Divine Love, issuing eternally from the Heart of God,"<sup>191</sup> the "Life of God,"<sup>192</sup> and, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, "The Holy Spirit is God, as He is everywhere and at all times."<sup>193</sup> More explicitly she declares:

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<sup>186</sup> Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 78.

<sup>187</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, 62 - 63.

<sup>188</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 37.

<sup>189</sup> Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 79.

<sup>190</sup> Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 79.

<sup>191</sup> Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 98.

<sup>192</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 5.

<sup>193</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 180.

So by the Christian doctrine of the Spirit we mean God Himself in His holy reality and love, in so far as these can be known to us: the utter distinctiveness of His Eternal Being, yet His intimate cherishing care for His whole creation. We do not mean some immaterial energy, the soul of an evolving universe. We mean a substantial Reality, which is there first in its absolute perfection and living plenitude; which transcends yet penetrates our world, our activity, our souls, and draws its transforming power from the fact that it is already perfect.<sup>194</sup>

The above declarations indicate at least the orthodoxy of her intentions regarding the Trinitarian relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. However, she never elaborates on this doctrinal formulation. Rather, she gives priority to the Holy Spirit as the *experience* of God. This emphasis is evident even in the above-cited statements and highlights her understanding of the Spirit in terms of relation to humanity which we discussed above. The Spirit is “everywhere and at all times,” is “known to us,” has “intimate cherishing care for his whole creation” and “penetrates our world, our activity, our souls.” But she does not limit this experience of the Holy Spirit to the mere experience of God’s action in the world. The Holy Spirit is no mere mode or manifestation of God’s presence.<sup>195</sup> Nor does the doctrine of the Spirit merely equate the Holy Spirit “with the general immanence of God.”<sup>196</sup> The Spirit is the “Absolute God,” “God Himself,” “Eternal Being,” a “substantial Reality” utterly distinctive in “His Eternal Being,” “holy Presence

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<sup>194</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 28.

<sup>195</sup> The third century heresy, modalism, held that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were only different manifestations or modes of God’s action in the world at different times in salvation history, as distinct from the Christian teaching that God is three in God’s very being. See in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 668.

<sup>196</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 18.

and Energy.” “The Holy Spirit is God, as He is everywhere and at all times.”<sup>197</sup> Or again, as she explains the Holy Spirit to a friend: “It’s just God inside you.”<sup>198</sup> Her words, though at times confusing, leave us in no doubt that she recognises the Creative Spirit as the one true God and that God is essentially a Trinity of persons.

Given our exploration of Underhill’s Christology in the previous chapter, it is obvious that her pneumatology follows a similar pattern. We noted above this similarity in regard to undeveloped and unexplained confessional statements which remain disconnected from Underhill’s major themes of understanding. There are other similarities. Her pneumatology is driven by the Creative Spirit’s relation to humanity and creation as the Presence and Energy of God. Her emphasis is on the function rather than identity of the Creative Spirit. Her perception of the Holy Spirit displays a lack of adequate scriptural, doctrinal and theological understanding and vocabulary. Her few confessional statements regarding the Spirit remain disconnected from the bulk of her writing which addresses the activity of the Spirit in relation to creation. Consequently, there is a gap in her pneumatology as there is in her Christology: her pneumatology is ambiguous, unclear and unspecified in its formulations which lack a systematic exposition of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, as a theological category, ‘pneumatology’ can be applied to Underhill’s work in only a limited sense.

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<sup>197</sup> Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 180.

<sup>198</sup> Brame, “Divine Grace and Human Will in the Writings of Evelyn Underhill,” 55, cited in Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 197.

This raises the question of how her theology of the Holy Spirit was received by her contemporaries and by present-day Underhill scholars. There are several positive reviews.<sup>199</sup> Cropper tells us that *The Golden Sequence*, in which Underhill presents her theology of the Spirit, “was well received on the whole but with some reservations, mainly about its soundness.”<sup>200</sup> Reviews give substance to that comment by suggesting that her understanding of the Holy Spirit strays beyond the boundaries of Christian teaching – particularly in its failure to incorporate the incarnation and its lack of doctrinal exactitude.<sup>201</sup> It is interesting that our current evaluation of her pneumatology also takes up the same two points: an inadequate pneumatology resulting from inadequate Christology together with undeveloped doctrine. Among current scholars, Johnson alone engages Underhill’s theology of the Holy Spirit.<sup>202</sup> In his exploration of the relationship of her pneumatology to symbols and sacraments, he concludes that her “theology was

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<sup>199</sup> See review of *The Golden Sequence* by Evelyn Underhill, in *The Spectator*, 1. 10. 1932 and in *The Listener*, 5. 10. 1932. Archives box 5/5. Underhill Collection. See also review by Gerald Hibbert in *The Friend* and cited in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 173.

<sup>200</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 173.

<sup>201</sup> “The Catholic is always conscious of a certain sensation of uneasiness in the perusal of her writings . . . he misses the dependence on the Incarnation, upon the infallible teachership of the Church. . . . He feels that Miss Underhill, no matter how competent, handles the matter from the outside . . . one is impelled to describe *The Golden Sequence* as a difficult book.” Review of *The Golden Sequence*, by Evelyn Underhill in *Month*, November, (1932). Archives box 5/5. Underhill Collection. The *Church Times* echoed the same sentiment: “her teaching . . . lays itself open to criticism” because “Miss Underhill will be found to represent mysticism as resting on a far broader basis than the doctrines of Christianity.” Review of *The Golden Sequence* by Evelyn Underhill in *Church Times*, 30. 9. 1932. Archives box 5/3. Underhill Collection.

<sup>202</sup> In various parts of her book, *Evelyn Underhill*, Callahan briefly discusses the role of the Holy Spirit in Underhill’s spirituality, but she does not present any systematic theological analysis.

pneumatocentric,”<sup>203</sup> and that she understands the Spirit as “God’s self-communication,”<sup>204</sup> “the action and activity of God.”<sup>205</sup> He also states, but does not discuss, that she “seems” to incorporate Augustine’s understanding of the Spirit within the Trinity.<sup>206</sup> We will further discuss that point in the following chapter. Another point to which we will return is Hogan’s perceptive remark that Underhill “is much more concerned with the role of the Spirit in the economy of salvation,” than concepts involving the “inner workings of the Godhead.”<sup>207</sup> In stating that “*The Golden Sequence* is the best book she wrote about the spiritual life in her Anglican period,” Armstrong seems to approve of her pneumatology.<sup>208</sup> Other current writers do no more than acknowledge the centrality of the Holy Spirit in Underhill’s spirituality. Greene writes that “she was more Spirit-centric than anything else; she saw all life infused with the Spirit.”<sup>209</sup> Callahan recognises that “in fact, she was more drawn to the life of the Spirit in her later years.”<sup>210</sup> We see therefore, that her pneumatology evokes a more nuanced and vigorous response from her contemporaries,

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<sup>203</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 206.

<sup>204</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 195.

<sup>205</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 196, n. 66.

<sup>206</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 196, n. 66.

<sup>207</sup> Kevin Hogan, “The Proximity of Doctrine: Underhill and Sayers on the Trinity,” in *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. 78, (1996): 278.

<sup>208</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 275.

<sup>209</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 148.

<sup>210</sup> Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 94.

than it does from students of her writings today.<sup>211</sup> The fact remains, however, that while *The Golden Sequence* was greeted with praise at the time of its publication, some critics questioned its theological soundness.

## **B. Influences on Underhill's thinking**

Underhill's ambiguous and doctrinally questionable pneumatology and the response it evokes, prompt the question of why she wrote in this way. As is the case in her Christological writing, Underhill never sets out to be unclear in her explanation of the Holy Spirit. Nor does she wish to cause her readers confusion. But again, as in her Christology, we can list seven circumstances that influence her thinking. Indeed, in some cases, the same reasons regarding her Christology apply to her pneumatology.

The first among these is Underhill's personal orientation of knowing through intuition and experience rather than conceptual superstructure. As we have seen in this chapter, *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, are her source of contemplation, inspire her particular perception of the Creative Spirit and inform her understanding of the spiritual life based on grace and desire. Once again, we see Underhill's appreciation of beauty enabling freedom of understanding and interpretation.

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<sup>211</sup> The first scholars to acknowledge the centrality of the Holy Spirit in Underhill's spirituality were Brame in her 1988 dissertation and Greene in the same year. Greene noted in her introduction to *Evelyn Underhill, Modern Guide to the Quest for the Holy* that Underhill was "Spiritcentric" (p. 22) and, as editor, included Underhill's essay, "God and Spirit." Johnson suggests two reasons for the current lack of focus on Underhill's pneumatology: firstly, *The Golden Sequence* has been long out of print and is therefore little read; secondly, Underhill's other writings of the same period "might lead one to believe that her incarnational



As Greene comments regarding Underhill's Spirit-centric spirituality: "when one probes for the sources of this Spirit-centric view, they are found not in scripture or in doctrine but in art and in the lives of those 'God-intoxicated' individuals, the mystics."<sup>212</sup> In gazing on the images of the Artist-Creator and Francis responding to the divine gifts of grace, our viewer instinctively sees and understands the activity of the Creative Spirit in the depth of the soul. This is therefore reflected in her writing which emphasise a functional pneumatology, rather than presenting a systematic theology of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, her growing understanding of union with God through the action of the divine Presence and Energy – the process of deification – centre Underhill's thinking on the Creative Spirit. For her, union with God is not a Trinitarian participation, but rather, more in the tradition of Palamas, a union with the Creative Spirit whereby she becomes "wholly full of Thee."<sup>213</sup> Again, the function of the Holy Spirit is foremost in Underhill's writing, rather than an exposition of intratrinitarian relationship.

Other circumstances which influence her Christology also come to bear on Underhill's pneumatology. She continues to keep well away from systematic theological exposition. The emphasis on the Holy Spirit as possessed and experienced within the heart and as a

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thought became more Christocentric in the last decade of her life." Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 206 - 207.

<sup>212</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 148.

<sup>213</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 223 - 224, 230.

transformative presence within creation had emerged as part of the Anglican debate on the nature of the Trinity.<sup>214</sup> Her emphasis on the interior action of the Creative Spirit indicates that these deliberations did not escape her notice. Her understanding of the Creative Spirit – “the everywhere-present pressure of God” – speaks of a universal Spirit thus nurturing the openness to all religious persuasions which she is keen to maintain. And, just as her writings on Christ are originally retreat addresses, this is also true of *The Golden Sequence*. One of the participants in that retreat later describes it as “an immense experience for us all.”<sup>215</sup> This suggests that the group appreciated the depth of reflection, prayer and devotion which characterise all Underhill’s retreat addresses. When the text of *The Golden Sequence* was published, it was that which distinguished it, rather than intricate theological considerations.

One final circumstance influences the manner in which she presents her pneumatology. It is Underhill’s desire to span the divide between “action and contemplation [and] between the human and the divine.”<sup>216</sup> We recall how her understanding of *The Creation of Adam* and the metaphor “the pressure of God” include the image of God’s deep personal involvement with humanity as well as a strong sense of God’s distance, mystery and

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<sup>214</sup> See for example: Kenneth Kirk, “The Evolution of the Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Essays on the Trinity and Incarnation* ed. A. E. J. Rawlinson (London: Longmans and Greene, 1928), 157 - 237. Lionel Thornton, “The Word and the Spirit: The Mission of the Paraclete,” in *The Incarnate Lord* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1907), 317 - 354.

<sup>215</sup> Maisie Fletcher, cited in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 161.

<sup>216</sup> See chap. 5, p. 225.

obscurity.<sup>217</sup> This understanding of the Creative Spirit provides Underhill with a way of bridging that gap between the immanentism of New Theology and the Neo-orthodox emphasis on the transcendence of God. She writes:

Only the Christian theology of the Holy Spirit seems able to safeguard the deep truths in both extremes, and by carrying them to a higher synthesis, to create a landscape wide enough and rich enough for all the varied experiences of the spiritual life.<sup>218</sup>

In reference to the “middle course” adopted by Underhill, Johnson is of the opinion that “Underhill’s theology of the Spirit . . . was able to span the gap between Immanence and Transcendence without conceding to either extreme.”<sup>219</sup> Thus Underhill’s particular presentation of the Holy Spirit is designed to address a feature of current thinking and to meet what she regards as a need in theological debate. She does not attempt to enter that debate through highly complex theological argument, but, remaining on the sidelines, presents her own experience of the Creative Spirit mediated, for the most part, through visual art.

Having surveyed seven circumstances which influence Underhill’s presentation of the Holy Spirit, we now focus on the difference that her awakening to the Creative Spirit makes to her spiritual life. How does the third and final stage of her spiritual life differ

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<sup>217</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 232 - 236.

<sup>218</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 27.

<sup>219</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 197 - 198.

from that of the second? We will discuss this under five headings, namely: change in her image of God, a formulation of the spiritual life, her understanding of collaboration with God, the notion of sin and her ecumenical approach to religion.

### **3. Overview and critical analysis of Underhill's spirituality during its third stage**

The first and foremost difference that Underhill's awakening to the Creative Spirit makes is her changed perception of God in relation to the spiritual journey. In the first phase of her spirituality (mid 1890s - 1913), Underhill is deeply influenced by Plotinus. She thinks of the spiritual journey as a solitary quest for the transcendent God conceived of in somewhat impersonal terms. Admittedly, as we have seen, she does not fully accept the Neoplatonic image of God at that early stage. Her emphasis is on the human effort required to attain union with God rather than on God's self-giving love for humanity. In the second stage of her spiritual life (1914 - 1929), this view, although gradually softening, is still evident. As she becomes more orientated to the incarnational and redemptive, she presents Christ more as the model of the spiritual quest for God. But in this final stage (1930 - 1941), the Creative Spirit "ever pressing on His creature"<sup>220</sup> along with the "generous stooping down of the Divine"<sup>221</sup> is the dominant image. This new image of a loving and

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<sup>220</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 166.

<sup>221</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

personal God coming to meet her on the spiritual journey implies that the Plotinian image of God is gradually fading. The initiative is with God's grace. Her attention has shifted from herself to God. The notion of deification – being possessed by God so as, in a sense, to become God – has matured in her understanding. As she writes: “We recognise . . . His generous and secret self-giving on which we depend so entirely.”<sup>222</sup> Yet, as Greene and Armstrong have pointed out, and as her personal notes reveal, Underhill has difficulty in accepting this loving, possessing presence of God on a practical level in her own life.<sup>223</sup> Nonetheless, this gradual change is crucial. It emerges as foundational to her entire religious understanding of God and the spiritual journey in the final years. It must be seen, too, in relation to other developments occurring at this time.

Amongst these, the most significant is her concise formulation of the spiritual life. In *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, she sees “the double movement of desire and grace . . . the formula of the spiritual life.”<sup>224</sup> The notion of “desire,” often expressed in the metaphor of the magnet, pervades her writings. In *Mysticism*, in calling on various mystical sources, she refers to “this divine spirit of desire . . . found enshrined in our very selfhood; and it is the agent by which that selfhood is merged in the Absolute Self.”<sup>225</sup> To explain her thinking more clearly, she cites Holland's Introduction to Boehme's *Dialogues*: “Desire is

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<sup>222</sup> Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 78.

<sup>223</sup> See chap. 1, p. 19.

<sup>224</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 97.

<sup>225</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 117.

everything in nature; does everything.”<sup>226</sup> Twenty-six years later, and in the final phase of her spiritual journey, she has reached a point of clarification:

While it is true that there is something in man which longs for the Perfect and can move towards it, what matters most and takes precedence of all else is the fact of a living Reality over against men, who stoops toward him, and first incites and then supports and responds to his seeking.<sup>227</sup>

These words strongly resound with the two images considered in this chapter: *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*. We can reasonably assume their influence on her more refined understanding of the two desires, namely: humanity’s desire for God and the divine desire for humanity. Though she distinguishes grace from desire, there is a sense in which desire on God’s part is one with grace, for God “stoops,” “incites,” “supports” “responds.” As a result, human desire follows from God’s action. Citing Eckhart, she writes: “all these motives by which we are moved to love, in these is nothing else than the Holy Spirit.”<sup>228</sup> This explains: “what matters most and takes precedence of all else is the fact of a living Reality over against man.” Thus, grace and desire interpenetrate within the prevenient activity of the Creative Spirit. Her concise formula is an indication of both a significantly developed understanding of spirituality, and a mature confidence in her own thinking.

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<sup>226</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 117.

<sup>227</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 50.

<sup>228</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 117.

Integral to Underhill's concept of desire is the third influence, namely, her understanding of the human response to God's action. It calls for collaboration. Human cooperation with God is based on love and expressed in the will.<sup>229</sup> We shall return to this in the next chapter. For the moment, let us note its ethical dimensions in the final phase of Underhill's life. We recall, from Chapter 2, the moral dimension inherent in her appreciation of a work of art "as beautiful." From her Plotinian background, to recognise something "as beautiful" is to anticipate a vision of Absolute Beauty founded in truth and goodness<sup>230</sup> An ethical response to the true and the good is implied. The many works depicting Christ (referred to in the previous chapter) call forth a moral response in her work as teacher, healer and director. Now in this third phase of her spiritual journey, she has contemplated Saint Francis lovingly and deliberately surrendering himself to Christ as he responds to the divine beauty revealed. He is shown to be collaborating with the Spirit of love. Her sense of moral collaboration with God is now informed by the image of the Crucified. She writes: "The riches and beauty of the spiritual landscape are not disclosed to us in order that we may sit in the sun parlour, be grateful for the excellent hospitality and contemplate the glorious view."<sup>231</sup> She then goes on to say that living a spiritual life means being "tools," "currency," "servants" and "fellow-workers" of God.<sup>232</sup> The beauty of visual art

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<sup>229</sup> See chap. 5, p. 248, 254 - 256.

<sup>230</sup> See chap. 2, p. 66.

<sup>231</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 74.

<sup>232</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 75.

means more than devout enjoyment of a beautiful object. There are moral implications. During World War II, Underhill commits herself to pacifism.<sup>233</sup> A stark contrast to her support of World War I, this public stand epitomises a new and authentically Christian moral stance.

This is not unrelated to the fourth issue, namely, her notion of sin. “What is called a sense of sin,” she tells retreatants in 1931, “only has meaning because of the beauty and splendour and glory of Holiness.”<sup>234</sup> She goes on to define sin as “the self-regarding, irresponsible use of instinct . . . the downward drag of our energetic nature turned the wrong way.”<sup>235</sup> In *The Golden Sequence*, she elaborates. In her contemplation of the dazed and therefore unresponsive Adam, she cites Maritain: “Adam sinned when he fell from contemplation – since then, there has been a cleavage in man’s life.”<sup>236</sup> She continues:

Sin is the willed departure of man’s spirit from correspondence with the Spirit of God; a thwarting of the creative ideal. And such a thwarting of life’s purpose is to be expected, when man ceases to look up and out beyond the world: to lift his eyes to God.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life in War-Time* (London: Christian Literature Association, 1939). Evelyn Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 231 - 217; Underhill to Mildred Bosanquet, 12. 5. 1941 in Underhill, *Letters*, 308; Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 214 - 215.

<sup>234</sup> Underhill, *The Mount of Purification*, 16.

<sup>235</sup> Underhill, *The Mount of Purification*, 10.

<sup>236</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.

<sup>237</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 66.



Again, she writes that sin “cripple[s] our true lives, and twist[s] our souls out of shape.”<sup>238</sup> The association with *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* is evident, for “the pressure of God,” shapes Adam and all humanity into the image of the divine. When the human being ceases to lift its eyes to God – to recognise God in contemplation – then its form is distorted and twisted out of the shape it is intended to have. It is not disposed to respond to “the pressure of God.” In this respect, sin is a failure to respond to the Artist Lover and to the creative gesture of love and so to allow oneself to be shaped as the Artist Creator’s work of art. The result is the marring of the beauty of God’s creation. With its scriptural overtones, this image expresses Underhill’s conviction: “God alone matters. God alone is.”<sup>239</sup> By implication, the more closely attention is centred on God the less likely is the occurrence of sin. But there is a further suggestion in her statement. In the words “cleavage in man’s life,” she refers to a deep disharmony, even division, in human existence. Again, in citing Maritain’s words, “fell from Contemplation,” she seems to be concurring with him about the roots of sin as a type of original or primordial “fall.” Underhill’s gradual understanding of sin is evident here. Human sinfulness is more than souls being twisted “out of shape.” She seems to be suggesting that it is a cleavage in the creative ideal of the human person, and a fall from that union with the Creator which is the source of all creation. We will return to this notion of sin as fundamental disharmony in the following chapter.

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<sup>238</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 64.

There is an interesting contrast here with Underhill as a young woman. In preparing for confirmation, she drew up a long list of her sins.<sup>240</sup> But by 1930, in *The Golden Sequence*, the experienced spiritual guide is speaking about sin in a more deeply theological manner, namely, as a failure to love. A contemporary moral theologian, James Keenan, suggests that sin is best defined as “the failure to bother to love.”<sup>241</sup> The focus is on responding to God’s love. The primacy of love demands a relational understanding of both our virtues and our sins for love “acknowledges the many ways that we are all related.”<sup>242</sup> By the 1930s, Underhill has arrived at a sense of the corporate or social dimension of moral evil. “Certain convictions about God and the world,” she tells us, “become the moral and spiritual imperative of our life; and this must be decisive for the way we choose to behave.”<sup>243</sup> Johnson states that Underhill “defines sin in terms of will and intention,” which is certainly clear in the explanations she provides. Under the influence of art, however, she speaks simply yet powerfully of sin as the failure to respond to “the pressure of God,” and as a fundamental disharmony between creature and Creator. Here, as with

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<sup>239</sup> It resonates with St Paul: “We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.” Eph. 2: 10. Underhill, *Worship*, 5.

<sup>240</sup> Menzies, *Biography*, I. 4 - I. 5.

<sup>241</sup> James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 57.

<sup>242</sup> Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 62.

<sup>243</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 81.

other spiritual themes, her theology of the Creative Spirit underpins her understanding of the spiritual life.

The fifth and final area of development at this time is her approach to religions which we have also discussed as a circumstance which influences her writing.<sup>244</sup> We recall from Chapter 3 that Underhill's interest in Eastern non-Christian mysticism dates from before her research for *Mysticism*.<sup>245</sup> Armstrong says that she "rejoiced" in the depth of knowledge and devotion she found in the mystics of the East.<sup>246</sup> Though as the years progress her interest turns from mysticism and her writing focuses increasingly on Christian spirituality, she retains her attraction for all non-Christian traditions. Hogan agrees that "she [Underhill] consistently demonstrated an openness to other world religions . . . [an] openness that did not diminish as she became more ecclesially centred in Anglicanism in the 1920s and 30s."<sup>247</sup> Her 1936 publication, *Worship*, with its recognition of a variety of traditions and a significant section on Jewish worship, attests to this as does an essay of 1928 in which she examines Christianity in relation to other religions.<sup>248</sup> A work in which Underhill acknowledges all branches of Christianity as "chapels of various

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<sup>244</sup> See chap. 4, pp. 207 - 208, chap. 5, p. 272.

<sup>245</sup> See Chap. 3, p. 115.

<sup>246</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 145.

<sup>247</sup> Hogan, "The Experience of Reality: Evelyn Underhill and Religious Pluralism," 345.

<sup>248</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, 41, 193 - 217. Evelyn Underhill, "Christianity and the Claims of Other Religions," in *Essays Catholic and Missionary* ed. E. R. Morgan (London: MacMillan, 1928), 3 - 22.

types in the one Cathedral of the Spirit,”<sup>249</sup> *Worship*, in Greene’s words, expresses “her ability to see with sympathy the uniqueness and value of these various historical responses to the Holy.”<sup>250</sup> In particular, as already mentioned, she has a special attachment to the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Again, this is clearly demonstrated in *Worship*.<sup>251</sup>

Of all Underhill’s works, *Worship* best illustrates her ecumenical approach to religion. Written during the years when the centrality of the Creative Spirit is firmly established in her spirituality, it provides evidence that her inclusive approach is deepened and confirmed through her pneumatology. The image of “the pressure of God” forming humanity in the image of God (*The Creation of Adam*) and the outstretched arm of the Crucified Christ (*Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*) confirm for Underhill that grace is eternally and universally present to all humanity. The idea of God’s universal love transcends all religions. Underhill’s all-embracing approach to religions has been recognised by Allchin when he names her “a great pioneer of spiritual ecumenism.”<sup>252</sup> Callahan comments that Underhill “became more and more strongly committed to ecumenism.”<sup>253</sup> Reflecting on her respect for the diversity among the churches, Loades asks: “Within the churches, how

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<sup>249</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, xii.

<sup>250</sup> Greene, “Preface” in Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, 22.

<sup>251</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, 243 - 275. Also Underhill, *Eucharistic Prayers from the Ancient Liturgies* (London: Mowbray & Co., 1939; London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1964), which contains a selection of prayers from the liturgies of the Eastern and Western Church, illustrates her devotion to Eastern prayer.

<sup>252</sup> Allchin, “Evelyn Underhill,” 7.

<sup>253</sup> Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 19.

do we come to value the differences between us, rather than homogenise them out of existence?”<sup>254</sup> Underhill’s ongoing interest in and respect for all branches of Christianity and non-Christian religions are confirmed through her sense of “the everywhere-present pressure of God.”<sup>255</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Our discussion of the five significant changes that occurred in Underhill’s spirituality during the third and final stage of her spiritual life leads us now to reflect on the whole of her spiritual journey.

As we look back on the three phases of our subject’s spiritual life, we see a slow and steady progression of thought and understanding. The first phase is dominated by the figure of Plotinus. His writings convince Underhill of the centrality of the transcendent God and that *her* way to God is through beauty, thereby initiating her solitary spiritual journey. During the second phase, her gradual incarnational and redemptive approach to spirituality comes to fruition in her recognition of Christ as the revealer of God. Always

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<sup>254</sup> Loades, Evelyn Underhill, 61.

<sup>255</sup> Irrespective of Underhill’s enthusiastic acceptance of all religions, she never compromised the prime position of Christianity. After careful analysis of Christianity compared with other religions she claims: “Taking all this together, we begin to see that the strength of the Christian position does not lie in any explanation of the world which it may offer, or any ‘way of escape’ from its duties and trials, but its organic character. Its vision of God, experience of God, obligation towards God, form *one* thing. It is as a living church, a Mystical Body, capable of dealing with the world and with life, and not as a creed, that it faces the claims of other systems of belief. We have here, as nowhere else, the coincidence of philosophy, experience, and ethics, each explicating the other, and together fulfilling all the needs of the mind, the heart, and the will of man.” Underhill, “Christianity and the Claims of Other Religions,” 21 - 22.

lacking a sense of conclusion due to her ambivalence regarding Christ, this stage gradually develops into a more definitive form. It is crystallised in a spirituality strongly characterised by her personal understanding of the Holy Spirit as the Creative Spirit. What we see in these three phases is a changing philosophical framework underpinning Underhill's evolving thought. But throughout this process, she never totally abandons the footing she gains along the way. Indeed, we have seen that irrespective of the increasing incarnational and redemptive dimension of her thinking during phase two of her spirituality, her focus remains the mystery of the transcendent, Absolute God.

The same is true for the final phase of her spiritual life. God remains her priority, but with the understanding of God as the Creative Spirit. As she writes, "By the Spirit we mean God Himself."<sup>256</sup> But, from her experience of *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, Underhill brings to this statement her own personal understanding. The Spirit of God she says is "the everywhere-present pressure of God."<sup>257</sup> God is present to humanity and the world through the Creative Spirit. Through collaboration with the Creative Spirit humanity finds union with God who reaches out to it in love. Thus Underhill's spirituality, while maintaining an incarnational and redemptive foundation, has a distinctive and personal pneumatological orientation. This adaptation is the culmination of Underhill's theological development. It distils all the most significant

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<sup>256</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 182.

<sup>257</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 182.

developments of her thinking throughout the years. Arising from her appreciation of the images referred to throughout this chapter, it also incorporates her experience of the churches and cathedrals she visits. Her pneumatology is a place of synthesis. On this point Johnson writes:

The intersection of God transcendent, God immanent, and Human spiritual experience met at the nexus of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit for Underhill. Underhill's theology of the Spirit was able to accommodate all the ingredients necessary for a valid understanding of God, religion, and experience; something her previous attempts were unable to do.<sup>258</sup>

From our study so far, we cannot but agree. Yet, when it comes to the nature of her experience that underpinned all this, I have a wider perspective than Johnson. While, with him, I recognise the many dimensions of Underhill's experience as influential in the development of her pneumatology, I give prominence to her experience of visual art – an area into which Johnson does not enter. Yet, as we have seen, this influence on Underhill's pneumatology does not go unnoticed by Greene who names art as one of the significant sources of her Spirit-centric spirituality.<sup>259</sup>

In our critical analysis of Underhill's understanding of the Holy Spirit, we have explored its nature, deliberated on its weaknesses and discussed its place within her spiritual journey. We have determined that her pneumatology is unclear, ambiguous and theologically questionable and we have observed a lack of scriptural and doctrinal

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<sup>258</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 197 - 198.

<sup>259</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 12.

understanding and vocabulary in regard to the Holy Spirit. We have also acknowledged that her personal understanding of the Spirit is accompanied by an orthodox intention, even if not concerned with doctrinal clarity. But we have also demonstrated and acknowledged its rich, devotional depth and the positive and fruitful dimension of Underhill's formula of the spiritual life – the double movement of grace and desire. As we conclude this chapter, we focus on these positive dimensions.

Writing of *The Golden Sequence*, Cropper records that Underhill told a friend that “a good bit of it is just what I’ve had to find out and live through.”<sup>260</sup> Cropper continues:

I always felt that this book was a special one for her, very much her own. She didn't expect it to have a very large number of readers. . . . When I asked her for whom she was writing it she mentioned the names of a few dear friends who would understand and love it, as indeed they did.<sup>261</sup>

These words tell us much about the personal affection and high regard in which Underhill's close friends held *The Golden Sequence* and therefore the instruction which its pages contained. Cropper says that indeed they did “understand and love it.” Underhill's fertile and rich understanding of the Creative Spirit and the spiritual life penetrated their hearts, inspired their prayer and nurtured their devotion. As another friend wrote: “She could steer the frail craft of human longing out into the deep waters of the Spirit with such

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<sup>260</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 164.

<sup>261</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 164.



humour and vigour, and yet with penetrating understanding.”<sup>262</sup> Their sentiments would certainly be those of the following review: “To open Miss Underhill’s book after being immersed in current literature, is like passing from the confused voices of the street into the mysterious stillness of a great cathedral.”<sup>263</sup>

In the Preface to *The Golden Sequence*, Underhill writes:

This is a personal little book. Its aim is not the establishment of some new thesis. It merely represents the precipitation of my own thoughts, as they moved to and fro during the last few years. . . . It consists of what ancient writers on these themes were accustomed to call ‘considerations.’<sup>264</sup>

Of the some 30 books that Underhill wrote, *The Golden Sequence* is the only one in which she includes such a personal note acknowledging that it contains “just my own thoughts.” By her own admission, then, it is a book which allows us a unique insight into her personal spirituality. It is in this “personal little book” that Underhill introduces *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* and elaborates a theology of the Creative Spirit – “the everywhere-present pressure of God” – that is “very much her own.” During the third and final phase of her spiritual journey, that pneumatology grounds her understanding of the spiritual life. We now move to the next chapter to complete our analysis of the third phase of her spiritual life.

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<sup>262</sup> Maisie Fletcher, cited in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 161.

<sup>263</sup> W. R. Matthews, review of *The Golden Sequence* by Evelyn Underhill, in *The Spectator*, 1. 10. 1932.

<sup>264</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, vii.

## **Chapter 6: AN INTEGRATED SPIRITUALITY**

In the previous chapter, we traced what we termed the “pneumatological” dimensions of Underhill’s spirituality during the third stage of its development. It was necessary to point out her tendency on occasion to confuse “the Creative Spirit,” as a divine attribute governing God’s relationship to humanity, with the Holy Spirit, the third divine person in a Trinitarian sense. Underhill never developed Trinitarian theological or doctrinal dimensions, and her presentation of the “Spirit of God” without any reference to the intra-Trinitarian processions is problematic. This is closely connected with an inadequate understanding of what in traditional theological parlance are named “the invisible missions” of the Word and Spirit in grace and the “visible missions” of the Word in the incarnation, and of the Spirit as poured out in the life of the Church at Pentecost. Moreover, she was unable to anticipate the new vitality of Trinitarian theology of our day, even in the domain of inter-faith dialogue. The purpose of this chapter is to attempt a more rounded view of the undeniable theological depth of her spirituality in its final stage. In this sense, it is a return to the methodological aspects of description of data and constructive interpretation, with less emphasis on critical analysis and appraisal.

The chapter is presented under six headings:

1. Adoration, communion and cooperation.
2. The gifts of the Holy Spirit.
3. The fruits of the Holy Spirit

4. The grace of integration.

5. An overview of Underhill's spirituality in its third stage.

6. Conclusion

Before we begin, let us note the timeframe of the context of this chapter. The previous chapter addressed the third and final stage of Underhill's spiritual journey – from 1930 to 1941. In this present chapter we consider how Underhill understands the practical expression of the interpenetration of “love, grace and desire” – her formula of the spiritual life explored in the previous chapter. In so doing, we will build on our previous findings and become aware of their development during the final years of her life.

### **1. Adoration, communion and cooperation**

In our investigations into Underhill's Christology, we saw that the three themes of adoration, communion and cooperation were central to her understanding of Christ.<sup>1</sup> As revealer of God and as the model of the Christian life, Christ placed adoration at the core of his life which was lived in communion and cooperation with God. We will now revisit these themes in order to throw light on Underhill's most developed understanding of the spiritual life.

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<sup>1</sup> See chap. 4, pp. 196 - 197.

Adoration, as the first Christian responsibility in relation to God, was the foundational principle of Pierre de Bérulle (1575 - 1629) who is accredited with the title “Father of the French School of Spirituality”.<sup>2</sup> Related to his understanding of adoration are two other themes – communion and cooperation – thus forming a threefold structure in the spirituality of the French School. Underhill gives no definite indication as to when she first learned of this structure. We do know that von Hügel introduced her to it in some form after 1911.<sup>3</sup> Further to that, we can trace its genesis in her thinking back to the first stage of her spiritual journey. We will return briefly to that period.

In her 1911 work, *Mysticism*, Underhill, in the tradition of Augustine, names feeling, thought and will as constitutive of the human psyche. In this regard, she specifies three aspects of conscious life: the cognitive which refers to the indwelling knowledge of the intellect; the affective which refers to the feelings of the heart; and the conative which refers to outgoing action stimulated by the will.<sup>4</sup> Following Augustine’s psychological analogy of the Trinity, she describes the self-conscious human subject as “the thing of threes,”<sup>5</sup> and “man’s ‘made Trinity’ of thought, love and will.”<sup>6</sup> Also within a threefold

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<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Buckley, “Seventeenth-Century French Spirituality: Three Figures,” in *World Spirituality: An Encyclopaedic History of the Religious Quest. Christian Spirituality Post-Reformation and Modern*, vol. 18, ed. Louis Dupré and Don E. Saliers in collaboration with John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 42 - 53. Underhill notes that “Bérulle always begins with God. For him, adoration is the primary spiritual act.” Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 196.

<sup>3</sup> See chap. 4, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 111.

framework, but this time borrowing from Ruysbroeck, Underhill uses the analogy of Light, Life and Love as a way of approaching the mystery of the Trinity. The Father is the Light of “our ground and origin,” the Son is the Life that is “generated by the Transcendent Light” and the Holy Spirit is the mutual Love “proceeding from Light and Life.”<sup>7</sup> For Underhill, this image, “enshrined in our very selfhood,”<sup>8</sup> reflects “the Trinity in Unity of feeling, thought and will.”<sup>9</sup>

We move now into the second stage of Underhill’s spiritual journey which began with her preparation of the Upton lectures in 1921. There she returns to a threefold structure when she specifies the “three main ways”<sup>10</sup> whereby humanity engages in the spiritual journey namely: a profound sense of security, peace and oneness with the cosmos – “the sense of Eternal Life”;<sup>11</sup> the experience of relationship felt as “the intimate and reciprocal communion of a person with a Person”;<sup>12</sup> and the enlivening of vitality, vigour and joy

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<sup>6</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 329.

<sup>7</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 115 - 117.

<sup>8</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 115 - 117.

<sup>9</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, 7.

“impelling zealous living out” of life.<sup>13</sup> She names these three ways of spiritual awareness “complementary apprehensions, giving objectives to intellect, feeling and will” thus indicating that they build on human experience.<sup>14</sup> Yet these ways of awareness are also expressive of the Trinity. The cosmic dimension of the Father gives security and peace in the presence of the Transcendent. The personal dimension of the Son enables a personal relationship with the Father. The dynamic dimension of the Holy Spirit indwells and energises humanity in its spiritual life. Underhill concludes that these three ways of awareness are traces of the Trinity’s presence and action. She writes:

And it seems to me, that what we have in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, is above all the crystallization and mind’s interpretation of these three ways in which our simple contact with God is actualized by us.<sup>15</sup>

Drawing together the threefold structure of mind, heart and will which reflects the Trinitarian dimension of each person, Underhill comments: “the soul’s true path seems to be from intuition, through adoration, to moral effort, and thence to charity.”<sup>16</sup> As we pursued her line of thinking, however, we saw that the underlying Trinitarian theme, evident in her writings of 1911 and 1922, faded as her understanding of the Creative Spirit crystallised. In this chapter we will see that at the same time, the practical aspects of the spiritual journey as a path through “through adoration, to moral effort, and thence to

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<sup>13</sup> Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit*, 12.

charity” prevail. Here, we see her first allusion to the Bérulle threefold structure of adoration, communion and cooperation. The spiritual life is a journey through adoration of and loving communion with God, to moral and ethical responsibility expressed through cooperation with the divine will.

It is not until 1927 that Underhill explicitly adopts the three-fold pattern of adoration, communion and cooperation in her writing. In *Man and the Supernatural*, she uses it in relation to prayer.<sup>17</sup> During the 1927 retreat she devotes a separate conference to each of the three themes – again as components of prayer.<sup>18</sup> In *The Golden Sequence*, of 1932, the same pattern appears in the final section devoted to prayer, although this time as related to cooperation as action or the prayer of intercession. Thus, by the third stage of Underhill’s spiritual life (1930 - 1941), she has become familiar with the Bérullian triadic pattern. It resonates with her personal experience of God, even as it had been recommended to her by von Hügel. However, as we will see, during the final years of her spiritual development she takes it further to construct an explicitly theological framework in a much broader perspective.

But first, let us notice the influence of a particular engraving, Dürer’s *Knight, Death and the Devil*.

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<sup>17</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 204 - 230.

<sup>18</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 174 - 191.

Underhill provides no details as to when or in what circumstances she first saw Dürer's engraving, *Knight, Death and the Devil*.<sup>19</sup> She writes about it specifically in *The Spiritual Life* – a set of three broadcast lectures delivered in 1936.<sup>20</sup> There, she speaks of “the secret transformation” to which we are called and which is the response to God's love.<sup>21</sup> She then comments: “I think as I write this of Dürer's wonderful drawing of the *Knight, Death and the Devil*,” which she refers to as the *Knight of the Spirit* – the title we shall adopt.<sup>22</sup> She then describes the embattled, yet strong and upright figure of the knight riding on his horse along a dark, rocky road. Hideous, horrible figures accompany him. The knight of the Spirit does not look at them but rides forward intent on his destination.

This particular work of art generates a context for her theological reflection. Firstly, the work depicts a journey. Underhill interprets the journey concerned in these words: “He [the Knight] rides steadily forth from that lower world and its phantasies to the Eternal World and its realities.”<sup>23</sup> Underhill first visits the theme of the journey in the context of the

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<sup>19</sup> Albrecht Duerer, *Knight, Death and the Devil*, engraving on metal 1513, location unknown. See Appendix 12, p. 431.

<sup>20</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 100 - 103. Prior to the three lectures which were published as *The Spiritual Life*, Underhill delivered her first broadcast lecture, entitled “Mysticism.” Later it was published under the title “What is Mysticism?” in Underhill, *Concerning the Inner Life* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd 1926, reprint 1947), 105 - 120. Page citations are to the reprint edition. See Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 193 - 194.

<sup>21</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 99.

<sup>22</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 100. The name that Underhill gave to this engraving is being used because it more adequately describes her interpretation of the work than does its official name.

<sup>23</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 102.



spiritual life in *Mysticism*.<sup>24</sup> Later she explains how Plotinian philosophy presents life as a “way,” a “voyage” and “great chart” for “adventurers” and “wayfarers” towards the Absolute.<sup>25</sup> As Underhill describes the travelling knight, she is revisiting one of the first and most enduring of her depictions of the spiritual life – the Plotinian spiritual journey. The knight is her adventurer making his way through the “living land” of the spiritual life.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, in selecting this work of art, Underhill is moving away from works with a predominantly religious theme, to those with a more secular theme. The central figure is not Christ, a saint or a mystic. It is an ordinary man – albeit a medieval knight – travelling on horseback. This of course is appropriate for the audience of a radio broadcast as she gives a vivid description of the difficulties involved in the knight’s journey. Being someone who knows the adversities, discouragements and trials of life, the knight is “every man” and “every woman” – a representative of everyone.

Thirdly, in her reference to this knight of the Spirit, Underhill throws into relief his courage in the face of the evil and death also depicted in the engraving. The knight represents the mature traveller along the spiritual path, successfully negotiating the perils of the journey. His “strong and well kept horse” is likened to human nature – the essential

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<sup>24</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 129 - 136.

<sup>25</sup> Underhill, “Foster-father of the Church,” 9.

<sup>26</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 119.

support and carrier along the spiritual path. The attitudes and actions which are portrayed in the engraving are richly evocative of the spiritual journey. In this particular context, the *Knight of the Spirit* points Underhill back into her earlier understanding of the Plotinian spiritual journey, while at the same time opening up the larger perspectives now emerging through her perception of the Creative Spirit.

We note, for instance, how Underhill first describes the evil and hostile forces that surround the knight. “Beside him travels Death, a horrible, doddering figure of decay,” she writes.<sup>27</sup> “On his flank,” she continues, “is a yet more hideous fellow-pilgrim; the ugly, perverse, violent element of our mixed human nature, all our animal part, our evil impulses, nagging at him too.”<sup>28</sup> Irrespective of these exterior and interior assaults, the knight rides on.

But the Knight of the Spirit does not look at them. He has had his hand-to-hand struggle further back; and on his lance is impaled the horrid creature, his own special devil, which he has slain. Now he is absorbed in the contemplation of something beyond the picture, something far more real than the nightmarish landscape through which he must travel; and because of that, he rides steadily forth from the lower world and its phantasies to the Eternal World and its realities. He looks at what he loves, not at what he hates, and so goes safely out of the defile into the open.<sup>29</sup>

Underhill then applies the knight’s actions to the spiritual life:

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<sup>27</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 100 - 101.

<sup>29</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 101 - 102.

There we see the spiritual life as humanity is called to live it; based on the deep conviction that the Good, the Holy, is the Real and only thing that matters, fed and supported by the steadfast contemplation of the Holy and the Real – which is also the Beautiful and the Sane – and expressed in deliberate willed movements towards it, a sturdy refusal to look at that which distracts us from it. Always looking the same way, always moving the same way: in spite of obstacles, discouragement, mockery and fatigue.<sup>30</sup>

After noting the temptations of the journey, Underhill switches her attention to the knight. Describing how he lives the spiritual life, she makes three crucial observations: first, he has a deep conviction regarding God; secondly, his goal is union with God through steadfast contemplation; thirdly, he expresses this in deliberate willed movements towards God. Underhill thus brings together her perception of the interior dynamism of personal consciousness and the triadic structure of the spiritual life as she contemplates the engraving concerned. The knight's spiritual journey suggests three aspects of his response to God. By indicating a deep conviction or a profound sense of the Good, the Holy, the Real, the cognitive aspect of the mind which acknowledges God in adoration is suggested. In the knight's steadfast contemplation and desire for communion, the affective aspect of the heart is evoked. Then, through the knight's deliberate movements to cooperation with God, the conative aspect is present. Thus in the *Knight of the Spirit*, the entire pattern of the human response to God is suggested in the light of the French model. The knight's mind, heart and will are caught up in adoration, communion and cooperation. These interweaving dimensions of spiritual awareness together characterise the figure of the knight as he moves on to the goal. Because he is the knight of the Spirit, he is formed,

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<sup>30</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 102 - 103.

loved and energized by the Creative Spirit. His journey is towards transformation as he steadily moves forward “always looking the same way, and always moving the same way.” It is evident that here Underhill is not confining adoration, contemplation and cooperation to a model of prayer alone as she does in her previous writings. Now, in *The Spiritual Life*, she is extending the Bérullian structure to the spiritual life in its entirety. This is a clear development in her understanding of the spiritual life.

Let us explore more fully Underhill’s understanding of each of these themes.

#### **A. Adoration**

Underhill uses Plotinian language to describe her knight “absorbed in the contemplation of something beyond the picture,” something “which he loves,” namely, “the Good, the Holy, the Real, the Beautiful.” By adding the words “beyond the picture,” she is indicating an element of mystery and distance. The ineffable God is beyond seeing or knowing. Just before her description of the *Knight of the Spirit* in *The Spiritual Life*, she writes that “the Perfection at which the awakened soul gazes is a magnet, drawing him towards itself.”<sup>31</sup> In saying that the knight is “absorbed in . . . something beyond the picture,” to the extent that he is “always looking” and “moving” the same way, she suggests that he is gazing at something more, being drawn by the magnet of Perfection. These words resonate with those of Plotinus who wrote about calling “upon another vision which is to be waked

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<sup>31</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 99 - 100.

within you” – a vision beyond human seeing but which is the “only eye that sees the mighty Beauty.”<sup>32</sup> Underhill names Beauty “a shadowy companion” to whom we respond “not because we understand it but because we *must*.”<sup>33</sup> There is a sense here that the knight’s desire is a moral compulsion to follow what is “beyond the picture” as he stretches towards a beauty and perfection he sees only with the eyes of the soul.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Underhill uses the magnet as a root metaphor for desire.<sup>34</sup> So here she is talking about desire in the same way as when she wrote about the desire of Saint Francis and the desire of the Crucified in *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*. It is a double movement of desire based on love. “Man . . . longs for the Perfect,” she writes, but what takes precedence is “a living Reality . . . who stoops toward him, first incites and then supports and responds to his seeking.”<sup>35</sup> While humanity yearns for God, God reaches out to humanity. But for Underhill, the “generous stooping down of the Divine” is the self-gift of God.<sup>36</sup> She speaks about this gift as “the pressure of God” and as grace. For her, the *Knight of the Spirit* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* share a common theme, and both echo *The Creation of Adam*. God gifts humanity

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<sup>32</sup> See chap. 2, p. 70.

<sup>33</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> See chap. 5, p. 253.

<sup>35</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 50.

<sup>36</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.

with the grace of the Spirit. From that gift arises humanity's desire and love for God. In the *Knight of the Spirit*, love, grace and desire interpenetrate.

However, there is a deeper level. The knight has a deep conviction about what draws him onwards. It is "the only thing that matters." It absorbs him in steadfast contemplation. In our exploration of contemplation in Chapter 2, we saw that Underhill modelled her understanding of contemplation on that of Plotinus.<sup>37</sup> It requires that one "close the eyes and call upon another vision." What follows is the soul's recognition of God and a communion with the Divine which Underhill describes as "a touch of the sublime." The soul's response is rapture and awe. In the engraving, the knight's deep conviction leads him to focus on "that which he loves," – on "another vision." Though she does not specifically name awe and adoration as the attitude and prayer of the knight, the implication is clear. Through steadfast contemplation, he acknowledges the divine Spirit, mysteriously and ceaselessly drawing him onwards.

In a further explanation of adoration, Underhill refers to it as:

The upward and outward look of humble and joyful admiration. Awe-struck delight in the splendour and beauty of God, the action of God and Being of God, in and for Himself alone, as the colour of life . . . not a difficult religious experience, but an attitude of the soul . . . the atmosphere within which alone the spiritual life can be lived.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See chap. 2, pp. 69 - 74.

<sup>38</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 61 - 62.

We note here that Underhill is writing about adoration as “an attitude of the soul.” She takes it to be a whole orientation of life rather than one particular form of prayer.<sup>39</sup> The attitude of adoration arises from a deep conviction of the mind in which both the cognitive and the affective dimensions interweave. She emphasises adoration as in and for God alone – God’s splendour, beauty, action and being. Her words strongly suggest that the self is lost in the immensity of God. This sense of nothingness before God remains a characteristic feature of adoration – a sense of God’s “immensity and our tininess,”<sup>40</sup> and a deep feeling of the “utter difference in kind” between Creator and creature.<sup>41</sup> It is being aware of creaturely nothingness before “the unspeakable mystery over against us.”<sup>42</sup> It is “profound abasement” and reverence before the otherness, wonder and beauty of God.<sup>43</sup> Her expression here reflects that of Bérulle whose expression, *l’anéantissement*, captured the experience of nothingness before the mystery of God.<sup>44</sup> Understood as “a theocentric or Christocentric self-transcendence into the mystery of God, a kenotic movement of

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<sup>39</sup> Here Underhill, delivering a broadcast talk, is mindful of her audience. She speaks of adoration within the perspectives of a basic Christian approach. However, her understanding of adoration is also set within the ordered framework of the Church’s corporate worship – the Eucharist. Underhill writes that “the Eucharistic Liturgy sums up and expresses the worshipping life of the Church . . . through the thankful remembrance and presentation before Him [God] of the one perfect sacrifice accomplished at one point of space and time in Christ” and incorporating “all the loving responses of the creature to the Creator.” Underhill, introduction in *The Mystery of Sacrifice*. Pages unnumbered.

<sup>40</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 111.

<sup>41</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 159.

<sup>42</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 161.

<sup>43</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 161.

<sup>44</sup> Buckley, “Seventeenth-Century French Spirituality: Three Figures,” 49.

consciousness or of affectivity in which one realizes God as the truth of one's being," it lies at the foundation of Underhill's sense of adoration.<sup>45</sup> For her adoration is intent on truth. It acknowledges the real position of the creature in relation to God. In this profound abasement before God, there is the activity of self-transcendence which takes the soul beyond itself to "the one universal chorus of creation; with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven lauding and magnifying one Holy Name."<sup>46</sup> Because adoration is an orientation of life intent on God, it does not narrow or constrain the spiritual life. It expands to universal dimensions "widening our horizons, drowning our limited interests in the total interests of Reality." Thus adoration gives the spiritual life "a wonderful richness, meaning and span" so that every aspect of life can be part of our adoring response to God.<sup>47</sup>

In her description of adoration, we hear a strong echo of the Plotinian "inner core of Light" as well as her experience in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres.<sup>48</sup> The "upward look" and "awe-struck delight in the splendour and beauty of God" recalls her encounter with the glory of God 36 years before in the great Gothic structure.<sup>49</sup> Her description of God as "the colour of life" strongly evokes that young woman who stood "bathed in the light

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<sup>45</sup> Buckley, "Seventeenth-Century French Spirituality: Three Figures," 66.

<sup>46</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 163.

<sup>47</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 64 - 65.

<sup>48</sup> See chap. 2, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 61 - 62.



transmitted by the windows, a light which is yet the very radiance of Eternity.”<sup>50</sup> In the *Knight of the Spirit* Underhill perceives adoration in the embattled figure of the knight, but in a setting vastly different from that of Angelico’s works whose spirit of adoration so attracted her. Yet the strong theme of adoration detected in visual art serves to illustrate the central position it held in Underhill’s understanding of the spiritual life. Menzies’ memory of her friend confirms this: “Adoration,” she emphasises, “was for her the essential.”<sup>51</sup> It is “the atmosphere within which alone the spiritual life can be lived,”<sup>52</sup> so as to deepen “the sacred wonder of communion.”<sup>53</sup>

## **B. Communion**

In Underhill’s interpretation of *Knight of the Spirit*, she describes a man who is totally dedicated to the task in hand. Though surrounded by threatening creatures, he “does not look at them,” but at “what he loves.” Steadfastly pressing on, he is absorbed in the contemplation of Perfection which draws him to itself. The embattled knight is holding fast to “what he loves.” She sees in his actions an image of communion with God. Once again, our author reflects Bérulle who used the word “adherence” to describe this particular union with God, and understood it as an “interior . . . configuration to God . . . a bonding to God

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<sup>50</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Menzies, “Memoir”, in *Light of Christ*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 62.

<sup>53</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 170.

that grows from initial moments of piety to passive transformation and union.”<sup>54</sup> The desire for communion with God arises from the creature’s realisation of nothingness before God. “Thus the prayer of adoration,” Underhill writes, “passes almost insensibly into the prayer of communion and self-offering, as worship becomes more realistic, more deeply coloured by love.”<sup>55</sup> Though love and the desire for union flow from adoration, they are initiated by God who “pours out His undivided love on each of his creatures and call each into an ever-deepening communion with Him, a more complete and confident adherence.”<sup>56</sup> Thus while adoration is a recognition of the transcendent otherness of God, in communion the soul is held in love by God immanently present.

Underhill’s simple description of communion as “the wonderful sense of intimacy and love” highlights the affective dimension of the human response to God.<sup>57</sup> Communion or adherence, the second theme of the Bérullian triadic structure of the spiritual life, describes the relational bond that exists between God and the soul. It is a personal feeling of the heart centred on the love of God personally manifested in Christ. Flowing from adoration, communion nurtures adoration, drawing the soul to a deeper sense of nothingness before

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<sup>54</sup> Buckley, “Seventeenth-century French Spirituality: Three Figures,” 66.

<sup>55</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 169.

<sup>56</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 181.

God. Thus entwined and intermingled, these two spiritual activities draw together the mind and the heart, while “balancing and completing each other.”<sup>58</sup>

In the previous section of this chapter, we discussed adoration in connection with the painting, *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*. We saw there a similar interweaving of love, grace and desire in communion. The extended arm of Christ invites communion, while Saint Francis’ upward movement indicates a loving response. But it is in relation to the sculpture, *The Creation of Adam*, that Underhill most clearly expresses her understanding of communion. Referring to “the rich simplicity of God,” she writes:

That rich simplicity has a certain kinship with the creature which It is ever moulding and creating from without and from within. Spirit indwells and penetrates the soul’s very fabric as a quiet Love; and it is here, in our ground, that we are to experience the most intimate and transforming realities of Prayer. Here we may come to know by the penetration of the Heart, that which we can never understand by the exercise of the mind.<sup>59</sup>

Underhill here describes the intimate depths of communion within the context of God’s “moulding,” “creating” “penetrating” the soul’s “very fabric.” As the creative fingers worked the clay of Adam, so the Spirit penetrates to the heart where the soul rests in quiet communion with its Creator. There the heart knows what is beyond the understanding of the mind.

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<sup>58</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 66.

<sup>59</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 168 - 169.

Adoration and communion are, then, “the first two conditions which govern man’s conscious spiritual life.”<sup>60</sup> Underhill next focuses on what is required by the soul in order that it might more fully respond to God’s creative presence. Drawn into communion and realizing its true position in relation to God, the soul becomes aware of its imperfection. In its desire for deeper union with God, it seeks the transformation necessary for that union, and the means to attain it: mortification and prayer.<sup>61</sup> As we turn our attention to these two aspects of the spiritual journey, we move into the third theme of Bérulle’s structure of the spiritual life – cooperation.

### **C. Cooperation**

We recall that, in *Knight of the Spirit*, Underhill detects in the knight’s spiritual journey what she terms his “deliberate willed movements.”<sup>62</sup> This corresponds with the Bérullian conative dimension of the human response to God. The Spirit stirs human capacities to new energies enabling the soul’s free cooperation with God. The soul awakens to moral responsibility in dealing with itself and with others. Such cooperation is never separate from adoration and communion. The ineffable otherness of God and the force of divine attraction make the soul seek conformity to God in its own actions. Guided by Underhill’s understanding of cooperation, we will now explore it under three headings: personal

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<sup>60</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 53.

<sup>62</sup> See chap. 6, p. 297.

transformation, self-giving service of others and intercession.<sup>63</sup> For the sake of clarity we will treat these three aspects separately, but for Underhill they belong together, and there is no priority of any one of them over others.

(i) Cooperation as personal transformation

In her account of *Knight of the Spirit*, Underhill graphically describes the evil and hostile forces that accompany the rider. One of these is Death to whom she appropriates the words: “is this effort really worth while . . . I am your future.”<sup>64</sup> The other is a “hideous fellow-pilgrim” whom she describes as “the ugly, perverse, violent element of our mixed human nature, all our animal part, our evil impulses, nagging at him too,” and to whom she appropriates the words, “I am your undying past.”<sup>65</sup> These two figures of Death and the hideous fellow-pilgrim represent a disharmony within human experience, one representing the future, the other the past. The polarities of human existence continue to distract, harass and tempt. They are formidable, opponents in the spiritual life. The force of this powerful and deep-seated disharmony speaks in a voice that “we all hear . . . from time to time.”<sup>66</sup> The knight’s journey is no easy path; it is full of “obstacles, discouragement, mockery and

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<sup>63</sup> During these years her fullest treatment of cooperation as personal transformation and service of others is found in *The Spiritual Life*, 73 - 103. She develops cooperation as intercession in *The Golden Sequence* 178 - 190.

<sup>64</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 100 - 101.

<sup>65</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 101.

<sup>66</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 101.

fatigue.”<sup>67</sup> She draws attention to “a horrid creature, his own special devil, which he has slain.” Impaled on his lance, it is stark evidence of a previous battle.<sup>68</sup> The knight experiences a deep disharmony within himself, but he is also drawn by an innate desire to respond to the Holy and the Real. Although this knight of the Spirit is not immune to temptation, and his attackers continue to close in about him, he remains deeply committed to the priority of God, in a communion alive with awe and adoration. “He looks at that which he loves, not at that which he hates, and so goes safely out of the defile into the open; where he will join the great army of God.”<sup>69</sup> His self-abnegation and mortification appear in his “sturdy refusal” to be distracted by the temptations he confronts. Travelling the road of transformation, he is “willing to undertake the journey, whatever it may cost.”<sup>70</sup> We turn now to an exploration of the means by which the knight deals with temptation: namely mortification and prayer.

What, then, is the mortification that the spiritual journey entails? When Underhill writes that “mortification means killing the very roots of self-love,” she is speaking out of a mature spirituality.<sup>71</sup> Echoing Christian tradition, she names these roots of self-love as

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<sup>67</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 103.

<sup>68</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 101.

<sup>69</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 101.

<sup>70</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 103.

<sup>71</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 53. Underhill first wrote about mortification in *Mysticism* (1911) within the context of purification which she saw as the second of the five stages of spiritual growth. Underhill, *Mysticism*, 169 - 170, 216 - 231. Here her emphasis is on “killing the old self” rather than on the notion of addressing the fundamental disharmony between creation and God which characterises her mature

pride and possessiveness, anger and violence, ambition and greed.<sup>72</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, Underhill, in her later years, had arrived at an understanding of sin as a fundamental disharmony and deep-seated dissonance between creation and God – the self-love and pride that is at the root of all distortion of our relationship with God.<sup>73</sup> Now, in her final years, Underhill sees in the *Knight of the Spirit* a means by which humanity meets the cleavage and dissonance which lie at the heart of its longing for God. The good knight’s “sturdy refusal” to be seduced by temptation suggests that his major weapon against radical disharmony is the practice of mortification. It is through the process of purification or mortification that we turn towards Reality or, in words applicable to the knight, look at what we love, not at what we hate. Through that conversion we get “our tangled, half-real psychic lives . . . into harmony with the great movement of Reality.”<sup>74</sup> Mortification, from this point of view, is an assault on the deep-seated disharmony experienced between the self and God which lies at the roots of selfishness.

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spirituality. Purification was also the subject of the 1931 retreat, the text of which was later published as *The Mount of Purification*. There she concentrates on purification as the “cleansing of the soul.” Underhill, *The Mount of Purification*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> In Gal. 5: 19 - 21, Paul names this deep-seated orientation to selfishness. Reflecting his words, the Roman Catholic Church has spoken of seven capital or deadly sins that are the sources of other sin: pride or vainglory, covetousness or avarice, lust, gluttony, anger, envy and sloth. Underhill first writes about the “seven deadly sins” in *The Mount of Purification*, 14. There she describes them as “tendencies . . . ingrained in human nature . . . disorders of our power of love.”

<sup>73</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 278 - 281.

<sup>74</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 53.

Underhill goes into some detail in describing the practical aspects of purification or “dealing with ourselves.”<sup>75</sup> It occurs in the “hidden action of each soul,” in the “effort and struggle of the interior life – what *we* have to do in response to the Love which is drawing us out of darkness into His great light.”<sup>76</sup> In words which resonate with the knight’s “deliberate will movements” and “sturdy refusal,” she states that purification requires:

The drastic elimination of all those desires and repulsions which side-track the will and conflict with the total inclination of our personality towards God; and the deliberate direction of the great drive of our nature – its love and will, its passions and energies – to that supreme attraction and demand.<sup>77</sup>

She then discusses mortification under two headings: active purification and passive purification.

Active purification is the effort of the heart and will to eliminate all that diverts us from God. It involves every area of life: the senses, intellect, memory and imagination.<sup>78</sup> Underhill begins with the cleansing of the senses, “the field of normal consciousness and conduct.”<sup>79</sup> In that human environment, sensitive nature “desires its own satisfactions, clings to its own universe and plays its own hand.”<sup>80</sup> Purification, as a result, involves a

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<sup>75</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 53.

<sup>76</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 98 - 99.

<sup>77</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 98.

<sup>78</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 102 - 103.

<sup>79</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 105.

<sup>80</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 110.



“drastic re-ordering and sublimation of desire,” and “the death of all personal demand.”<sup>81</sup> The selfish, greedy and acquisitive attitude must be cleansed while the desire for personal satisfaction, possessions and success – whether material, emotional or spiritual – must be renounced. For its part, the cleansing of the intellect requires that “we consent to abandon our arrogant attempts towards definition and understanding, become the meek recipients of His given lights, and the silent worshippers of His unfathomable Reality.”<sup>82</sup> It means willingness to live within the mystery of God. Underhill describes the memory and imagination as “great tracks of mental territory,” filled with remembered experiences, resentments, grief, regrets, cravings, passions, prejudices and dreams.<sup>83</sup> This great mix can chain us to the past and tempt us to “sterile self-occupation.”<sup>84</sup> All images and notions that are not of God must be swept away in the general “clearing-up” of the memory and the imagination.<sup>85</sup>

Yet Underhill is careful to place this disciplined approach to the senses, memory and imagination within a balanced perspective of the entire human person. She states that:

The arrogant and total rejection of the helps of the imagination and the senses is a . . . dangerous excess. Each soul must discover and control the degree of its own

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<sup>81</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 111.

<sup>82</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 121.

<sup>83</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 126.

<sup>84</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 127.

<sup>85</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 131.

dependence on the sensible: and, committed as we are to the mixed life of sense and spirit, none of us can strip our house of all its superfluous ornaments without threatening its hidden structure as well. . . . For Spirit, God, the substance of that which the soul loves and longs for, is ever conveyed within the form or figure that we contemplate; since He penetrates all life.<sup>86</sup>

In Underhill's opinion, therefore, it is essential that a healthy balance exist between the mixed life of sense and spirit, for it is these two aspects that define the one human person. And God penetrates and is encountered in every dimension of that one human life. But, as she carefully points out, we are required to recognise those aspects of life which draw us away from God and, through mortification, to bring ourselves into harmony with God's will. It is only through the "disciplined use" of the senses, memory and imagination that "the touch of God may be realised by us: and our sense of the supernatural deepened and enriched."<sup>87</sup> In her customary way, our author gives a final word on active purification by appealing to visual art. In a reference evocative of *Knight of the Spirit*, she speaks of undisciplined action as "the backward glance,"<sup>88</sup> while the disciplined life is distinguished by "the upward confident look," which she defines as the virtue of hope.<sup>89</sup>

Underhill's recognition of God's penetrating presence and action in the entire life experience is also evident in her understanding of passive purification. She defines it as the

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<sup>86</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 132.

<sup>87</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 134.

<sup>88</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 127.

<sup>89</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 128.

acceptance of “the Spirit’s general creative action on us.”<sup>90</sup> Here she returns to the image of *The Creation of Adam* as she writes of “the pressure of His demands” on self-will and self-love.<sup>91</sup> Underhill understands that the Creative Spirit – “the pressure of God” – is active in the whole world of things, events and people.<sup>92</sup> Willingness to be shaped and moulded by this penetrating divine action present in the environment and circumstances of life, cleanses our will, purifies our love and brings us into harmony with God.

In this explanation of passive purification, the active and participatory aspects of purification are abandoned in favour of passive conformity to the Spirit’s action. This is an aspect of Underhill’s life and spirituality which has been taken up by a number of critics and to which we will return in the concluding section of this chapter. Her explanation of purification is distinctly individualistic. For her, purification, which facilitates communion with God, is a private affair between herself and God. As such, it reflects her deeply held conviction of the centrality of God. However, for Underhill, purification is only one aspect of cooperation with God. As we shall see, cooperation equally involves a self-giving, practical service of others and intercession on their behalf. Though her explanation of purification focuses on personal relationship with God, it must be seen within this broad context if it is to be correctly understood. Thus, while the priority Underhill constantly

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<sup>90</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 100.

<sup>91</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 100.

<sup>92</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 235 - 236.

gives to God is acknowledged, we see in her later years a woman whose concept of the spiritual life had become wider and more inclusive.

For Underhill, mortification remains an essential means of spiritual growth. The “deep action of Spirit on spirit” and “our deliberate costly effort of self-conquest”<sup>93</sup> are in fact the one movement of personal transformation. She leaves no doubt as to the difficulties involved, as it is clear from her meditation on the engraving, *Knight of the Spirit*. The effort, struggle and sacrifice it requires are one of her constant themes. She employs a number of images to drive home the challenge. The Christian life is “the narrow way.”<sup>94</sup> It is a climb which requires one to “slog on.”<sup>95</sup> It is a journey of “grim encounters.”<sup>96</sup> It is warfare in “muddy trenches.”<sup>97</sup> Yet, it is only through transformation – “the foundation of all genuine spiritual life” – that the soul attains a harmony and correspondence with the Truth of Reality.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 99.

<sup>94</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 105.

<sup>95</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 34.

<sup>96</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 100.

<sup>97</sup> Underhill, *The School of Charity*, 80.

<sup>98</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 54. Underhill’s account of purification overlaps with Bernard Lonergan’s explanation of conversion. Beginning with the human operations of consciousness – knowing, valuing and acting – he identifies three categories of conversion: intellectual, moral and religious. Through intellectual conversion, we eliminate those symbols and images that cloud our objectivity and mislead our judgement. Moral conversion involves a shift from the satisfaction of self as a basis of choice towards true value as the criterion of choices and decisions. Religious conversion takes place when we turn away from all worldly realities and, radically grasped by God’s love flooding our hearts through the Holy Spirit given in Christ, we

We move now to take up the second means by which the knight confronts temptation: prayer.

In her interpretation of *Knight of the Spirit*, Underhill describes the knight as “absorbed in the contemplation of something beyond the picture” and “fed and supported by the steadfast contemplation of the Holy and the Real.” Thus while the knight is actively and passively involved in the work of purification, he is equally engaged in attending to God in prayer. Underhill’s understanding of the human person also grounds her perception of prayer. We are “haunted by the sense of a Perfection ever calling to us,”<sup>99</sup> we have a “passionate desire for beauty” and a “craving for truth.”<sup>100</sup> Prayer grows out of this experience. Prayer therefore is a “turning to Reality . . . the continual conversation, the communion of our spirits with the Eternal Spirit.”<sup>101</sup> It entails a “correspondence” between

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turn towards the divine in total commitment. Underhill also locates her perception of purification within the structure of knowing, valuing and acting (the mind, the heart and the will), although not in a highly systematic fashion. For her, intellectual conversion takes place through the cleansing of the senses, the memory and the imagination. She indicates moral conversion when she speaks of the death of all personal demand and a corresponding turning towards the love and service of others. Finally, when “we become the meek recipients of His given lights, and the silent worshippers of His unfathomable Reality,” we fall in love with, and are grasped by the Spirit of God who is Love. Underhill, unlike Lonergan, does not give a Trinitarian dimension to her understanding of religious conversion, but her explanation of purification does share common ground with his three categories of conversion. Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 104. See Richard N. Fragomeni, “Conversion,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 230 - 235.. James J. Walter, “Conversion,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 233 - 235.

<sup>99</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 55.

<sup>100</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 56.

<sup>101</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 55.

the visible and invisible environment and with the Creative Spirit.<sup>102</sup> It demands our being in tune with the providential action of God in the world. Underhill's words suggest that her knight of the Spirit is a model of prayer. Though very much in the world, he is in-tune with the Invisible whom he loves and with whom he desires communion. Constantly drawn onwards to the goal, he maintains his direction towards Reality in a continual conversation with the Eternal Spirit.

Underhill perceives mortification and prayer as "two completing aspects of one undivided life" lived in harmony with God.<sup>103</sup> By engaging in them, the purified person moves in prayer towards God who constantly draws all things into communion with the Eternal.

(ii) Cooperation as self-giving service

The previous chapter treated Underhill's understanding of collaboration with God in reference to two works: *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*.<sup>104</sup> They represent a gradual development in her understanding of collaboration as she moves from a solitary and private encounter with God to one which calls for practical,

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<sup>102</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 55 - 58.

<sup>103</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 104.

<sup>104</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 247 - 248, 254 - 256.

communal expression. In the final stage of her life, Underhill articulates this more clearly: collaboration with God means “giving of ourselves to His service.”<sup>105</sup>

The *Knight of the Spirit* is described as riding “into the open where he will join the great army of God.”<sup>106</sup> She also refers to this army as “the great army of rescuing souls.”<sup>107</sup> Previously, we have seen the knight as the adorer who seeks and works for communion with God. But now, to Underhill’s eyes, he moves in a wider perspective. He is in “the open.” He is not a solitary traveller, but a member of “the great army of God.” As such, he is given to the service of his leader in the task of “rescuing souls.” Therefore, his work is not a private affair, but takes him into the community and the world. As a member of a great company, he cooperates with God by active, practical self-giving for the purposes of divine redemptive love, whatever these might be.

As an aspect of the third theme of Bérulle’s threefold pattern of the spiritual life, cooperation through self-giving to God is an expression of the conative dimension of human consciousness. In this sense, it is an activity of the will activated by the energetic and creative powers of the Spirit. From communion with the God of goodness and beauty arises the cooperation expressed in moral responsibility. When Reality discloses itself “in its awe-inspiring majesty and intimate nearness, and becomes the ruling fact of existence

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<sup>105</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 98.

<sup>106</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 102.

<sup>107</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 89.

continually presenting its standards,” it demands “a costly response.”<sup>108</sup> That response involves “an eager willingness to take our place in the vast operations of His Spirit.”<sup>109</sup> Underhill is clearly alert to the communal and universal dimensions of cooperation with God. As the knight journeys on the open road, he is identified as a member of the “great army of God.” He cooperates with the Divine will by working with and for others in the world. Underhill clearly considers that self-surrender to God must lead to involvement in the rich and full activity of humankind on every level.

Still, unreserved self-surrender to God’s will is demanded. “He made us in order to use us,” she writes, “and use us in the most profitable way; for His purposes, not ours.”<sup>110</sup> Active cooperation therefore is about being a worker for God’s purposes. In words evocative of *Knight of the Spirit* and the lives of the saints, she says that it is always done at personal cost requiring energy, humility and the ability to endure privation.<sup>111</sup> Although it takes place in the world, working with God is more than a worldly activity. Whatever the cost involved, those who give themselves to the work of God in the world know that “they

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<sup>108</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 49.

<sup>109</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 79.

<sup>110</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 75.

<sup>111</sup> Underhill uses graphic imagery to drive home this point. Self-giving is not about “our own cosy ideas” but about being willing “to pull our weight,” about “putting on our overalls and getting on with the job.” Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 82, 73, 78.



and all the other souls they love so much, have their abiding place in eternity; and there the meaning of everything which they do and bear is understood.”<sup>112</sup>

The purpose of this costly self-offering to God is the transformation of the world so that the Kingdom of God might reign on earth. Underhill expresses this in several ways. She calls it “striving to bring the Kingdom in,”<sup>113</sup> and “bringing the saving power of the Eternal into time.”<sup>114</sup> To describe the kingdom, she chooses a biblical idiom of vividly contrasting images rather than a definition.<sup>115</sup> It is a seed which contains the life of the tree, and the leaven which works unseen in the dough. Inconspicuous from the human view, it has “tremendous latent energy.”<sup>116</sup> For those who recognise it, it has a powerful attraction – as do the pearl and the treasure. The mysterious and hidden character of the Kingdom causes her to advise keeping oneself “sensitive to His music and light” so that the Eternal may enter time through our efforts.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 95.

<sup>113</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 75.

<sup>114</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 89.

<sup>115</sup> Underhill, *Abba*, 37.

<sup>116</sup> Underhill, *Abba*, 37.

<sup>117</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 88 - 89.

We have already discussed Underhill's understanding of sin as the deep-seated disharmony between the human person and God.<sup>118</sup> Through mortification and prayer, that disharmony can be transformed so that God reigns in the very texture of our being. In her explanation of the Kingdom of God, she takes up the broader aspect of this experience. The Kingdom is "Wholly Other."<sup>119</sup> It is operative throughout all creation as a "transfiguring presence," healing the disharmonies of the distorted world.<sup>120</sup> The "re-harmonizing of [the world] with Reality," Underhill tells us, "is the transfiguration of the natural order by the supernatural: by the Eternal Charity."<sup>121</sup> Cooperation works through the self-giving of love. It implies willingness to accept the risk and adventure which accompany unconditional surrender to the Spirit's perpetual renewal of the world. Underhill points to Christ, who by "being the link between the outpouring love and harmony of the Life of God, and the jangled and defective life of men," showed that love gives wholeness to humanity and the world.<sup>122</sup> Cooperation with God calls for the same compassionate, redeeming and transforming love. Through it the Kingdom of God will reign on earth.

We now come to the final aspect of cooperation – cooperation as intercession.

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<sup>118</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 278 - 281.

<sup>119</sup> Underhill, *Abba*, 29.

<sup>120</sup> Underhill, *Abba*, 28.

<sup>121</sup> Underhill, *Abba*, 30.

<sup>122</sup> Underhill, *Abba*, 36.

(iii) Cooperation as intercession

Underhill defines intercession as “that creative prayer which crowns the life of adoration and communion.”<sup>123</sup> She explains it further:

As adoration led on and in, to a personal relationship of communion and self-offering; so from that entire self-offering – and not otherwise – there develops the full massive and active prayer in which the human spirit becomes in a mysterious way the fellow-worker with the Holy Spirit of Creation; a channel or instrument through which the Spirit’s work is done, and His power flows out to other souls and things.<sup>124</sup>

Cooperation as intercession is therefore more than prayer of petition. It concerns the human spirit’s capacity to be a means through which the Creative Spirit works in the world. Thus, intercession works in the world in real though subtly mysterious ways to establish the Kingdom of God. It has several modes of expression. Underhill names them as supplication, immolation, suffering and “a steady and a patient love.”<sup>125</sup> In this respect, intercession involves “a passionate and unconditional self-offering” on behalf of humanity and the world.<sup>126</sup> It is a form of sacrifice arising from the love which grounds intimate communion with God; and is thereby absorbed into the action of the Creative Spirit. Contributing to “the good of the whole universe of spirits,” it rescues, heals, changes,

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<sup>123</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 178.

<sup>124</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 179.

<sup>125</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 179.

<sup>126</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 91.

supports and illuminates through the transforming power of redemptive love.<sup>127</sup> Underhill likens such a life to a watering-can.<sup>128</sup> It is the channel of the Spirit through which restorative love flows.

An associated theme in Underhill's later writings is the solidarity of humanity amongst the inter-related members of the one living society. At this human level, all are "woven together, the bright threads and the dull, to form a living tissue susceptible of God, informed by His infinite, self-spending love."<sup>129</sup> She understands the Church "at its best and deepest" when its members are united in Christ, to mirror this interconnection of souls with God.<sup>130</sup> As members of this living society, we are never separate individuals. Through prayer, sacrifice and suffering offered to God's purposes, the Spirit generates in us a vigour and power to enliven and nurture humanity. This interior relationship to all, as well as the service of external works, takes on a cosmic dimension. Intercession unites all in contributing to the good of the whole universe and the promotion of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>127</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 185.

<sup>128</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 184. The image Underhill employs recalls that of Teresa of Avila in her description of the four stages of prayer as the cultivation of a garden. While Teresa names the bucket as the first means by which water is carried from the well to the garden, Underhill likens the intercessory life to a watering-can which carries the Spirit's love to the world. St Teresa of Avila, *Life*, ed. and trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1957), 78.

<sup>129</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 188.

<sup>130</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 187.

So far in this chapter, we have explored Underhill's understanding of adoration, communion and cooperation as creative and healing responses to the will to God. Throughout this examination, we have made frequent reference to the energizing action of the Spirit within the threefold pattern of the spiritual life. We now offer some further detail on Underhill's perception of the function of the Creative Spirit related to the ternary structure of adoration, communion and cooperation. This brings us to her understanding of the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit.

## **2. The gifts of the Creative Spirit**

In the previous chapter, we discussed Underhill's notion of grace as "an actual infusion of the life of the Other"<sup>131</sup> and "His generous and secret self-giving."<sup>132</sup> The terms in which Underhill sets out her perception of grace – distinct, prevenient and transformative – form the backdrop to a more specific character by which she understands the self-gift of the Creative Spirit. She explains:

And the transforming Divine influence, quickening and moulding the surrendered spirit, gradually produces within it certain characters which already belong to the transcendent order, and shall enable it for the living of the spiritual life. When theology speaks, in its special language, of the 'gifts' of the Spirit, as the essential marks of the spiritual man, the reference seems to be to the emergence of these

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<sup>131</sup> See chap. 5, p. 251.

<sup>132</sup> See chap. 5, p. 252.

peculiar qualities in those in whom there is established the habitude of other-worldly love.<sup>133</sup>

When Underhill speaks of “certain characters,” the “gifts of the Spirit,” “essential marks” and “peculiar qualities,” she is referring to the traditional gifts of the Holy Spirit which she names: awe, piety, knowledge, courage, counsel, understanding and wisdom.<sup>134</sup> Before she begins her explanation of the gifts, Underhill establishes love as the substance or the “habitue” of the spiritual life.<sup>135</sup> Only through surrender to the “habitue of love” can the soul “direct” its will towards God and “subordinate” its desires to the transforming penetration of the divine action, thereby placing itself at the disposal of the “rapt Spirit.”<sup>136</sup> In firmly grounding the gifts within the dimensions of love, will and abandonment Underhill, in the tradition of Aquinas, is addressing how the human person is divinized – in this instance through the gifts of the Spirit.<sup>137</sup> She then explores what she refers to as “the ‘ordinary’ gifts of Spirit to spirit,” namely: awe, piety, knowledge and courage.

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<sup>133</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 81.

<sup>134</sup> According to traditional Roman Catholic teaching, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, counsel, understanding, knowledge, fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord. Underhill includes all these gifts in her writing on the Creative Spirit, although not in this sequence and not always using these names. In *The Golden Sequence*, she devotes the whole of Chapter 5 to the discussion of each of the gifts. Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 78 - 89.

<sup>135</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 78 - 79.

<sup>136</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 79.

<sup>137</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 222 - 224.

Awe or fear of the Lord is the first gift because it “puts the imperfect spirit into right relationship with the Transcendent Perfect.”<sup>138</sup> Directing our creaturely sense towards God, it enables us to know our nothingness before God and stirs within the soul the virtue of humility. Its natural consequence is “delighted adoration.”<sup>139</sup> The gift of piety balances and completes that of awe, because it “represents its [the soul’s] childlike affection; its delighted recognition of the fatherhood of the God whom it adores.”<sup>140</sup> It gives rise to loving abandonment to and communion with God and loving compassion towards others. Underhill likens these two gifts to the vertical and horizontal arms of the cross: “up to God in humblest worship, and out in loving compassion towards His self-revelation in men.”<sup>141</sup> The gift of knowledge is linked to awe and piety because it provides the soul with “a certain road-sense, a knowledge which is of the Spirit.” Thus it informs awe and piety and assists clarification of judgement in all the circumstances of life. But in order to do this, the soul requires courage – “the answering gift to a maturing love” – which enlivens steady perseverance in the face of difficulties.<sup>142</sup> This gift, by enabling steadfast cooperation with God, completes those of awe, piety and knowledge. Underhill refers to the gifts of counsel, understanding and wisdom as “those three great characters which form the triple crown of

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<sup>138</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 83.

<sup>139</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 84.

<sup>140</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 84.

<sup>141</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 85.

<sup>142</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 86.

established holiness.”<sup>143</sup> Those who reach up to God in worship and out to the world in love are “counselled by God in every circumstance,” come to understand “ever more fully the Divine point of view” and, through wisdom, savour “the very flavour of Reality.”<sup>144</sup>

A careful examination of Underhill's presentation of the gifts of the Spirit reveals three significant points. Firstly, as we saw above, she names grace in terms of “His generous and secret self-giving.” Now she further develops her understanding of the Spirit’s “secret self-giving,” by explaining it as the soul “absorbed, transfused and possessed by God.”<sup>145</sup> The gifts are “infused”<sup>146</sup> and “poured out in the soul’s very ground.”<sup>147</sup> Through the gifts of the Spirit, “God in His substantial Being indwells from the first her [the soul’s] very substance and the pressure of His thought and Love will penetrate and transform her.”<sup>148</sup> These words highlight the fundamental nature of the gifts as God’s indwelling of the very substance of the person – the entire mind and will. Reminiscent of Underhill’s description in *Mysticism* of deification as knowing “the secret life of God,” these words also resound with Palamas’ emphasis on participation in a God of mystery and transcendent beauty.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 87.

<sup>144</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 88.

<sup>145</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 80.

<sup>146</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 81.

<sup>147</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 88.

<sup>148</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 82,

<sup>149</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420. See chap. 5, pp. 222 - 224.



Thus, for Underhill the gifts of the Spirit, or grace, are integral to the entire divinisation process.

Secondly, we see in Underhill's presentation of the gifts of the Spirit an upward spiral pattern fashioned on the spiritual journey and incorporating its various dimensions. As the soul begins the journey, it becomes aware of its nothingness before God through the gift of awe. Other gifts enable the negotiation of the road until the soul savours "the very flavour of Reality" in the gift of wisdom. At the same time however, this is also a journey of adoration, communion and cooperation. While the gift of awe gives rise to adoration, the gift of piety both draws the soul into communion with God and stirs it to cooperate with God in reaching out to others. In the previous chapter, we saw that Underhill recognised these three themes constantly recurring in Christ's life. Here she is showing them as practical responses to and partners with the gifts of the Spirit or grace. There is a strong sense in which Underhill is integrating firstly, the gifts of the Spirit, secondly, the process of divinisation, and thirdly, adoration, communion and cooperation through the notion of knowing and loving. As we saw above, the pressure of God's "Thought and Love" penetrates the soul and informs the mind and the will. Thus it is the mind and the will that accepts the gifts, expresses them at a practical level through adoration, communion and cooperation and that ultimately will be "absorbed, transfused and possessed by God."

Finally, we see in Underhill's understanding of the gifts of the Spirit another example of the influence of visual art on her spiritual perception. In *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, she contemplates the Creative Spirit moulding into her very being a share in divine life and stooping down with unique gifts for the spiritual journey. But these two works of art also inspire a deeper understanding of the

process of deification. Over twenty years before, she has written of deification within the context of mysticism. Now, she presents it within a new setting – that of grace – and specifically within the context of the seven gifts of the Spirit which enable “the living of the spiritual life.” From the mysterious and hidden atmosphere of mysticism, she places divinisation – becoming possessed by God so that the soul, in a sense, becomes God – firmly within the ordinary circumstances and surrounds of daily life. This, in fact, reflects the development of her personal spiritual journey. She is no longer a solitary traveller. Enabled by the gifts of the Spirit, she becomes “wholly full of Thee” through the circumstances of family life, social commitments and a busy work schedule. Whereas once the vertical thrust of the cross dominates Underhill’s thinking, now the horizontal arms take on a significant importance.

During the closing years of Underhill’s life, therefore, the gifts of the Spirit and the themes of adoration, communion and cooperation are closely intertwined in her understanding. The “essential marks of the spiritual man,” the gifts enable the living of the spiritual life in adoration of God, in loving communion with God and in cooperation with God through the service of humanity. As we have discussed above, the image of the Creator gifting Adam with life, and the figure of the Crucified offering gifts to Saint Francis enriched Underhill’s perception of the gifts of the Spirit. We also saw, in the previous chapter, that Saint Francis – stretching upward in desire for the divine – epitomises the free collaboration with God which is essential if the gifts of the Spirit are to bear fruit. We now turn our attention to Underhill’s perception of the fruits of the Spirit and their relationship with the triune theme of adoration, communion and cooperation.

### 3. The fruits of the Creative Spirit

In 1936, Underhill directs what would be her final retreat. The addresses, published after her death, contain a clear explication of her understanding of the fruits of the Spirit.<sup>150</sup>

She begins by naming the fruits according to the Pauline tradition: “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness [and] temperance.”<sup>151</sup> She then gives a detailed explanation:

The Fruits of the Spirit are those dispositions, those ways of thinking, speaking and acting, which are brought forth in us, gradually but inevitably, by the pressure of the Divine Love in our souls. They all spring from that one root. We might call them manifestations of the Mind of God in His creation.<sup>152</sup>

These dispositions that are “brought forth in us,” “spring” from the “one root” described as the “budding point” of love.<sup>153</sup> Under the “pressure of the Divine Love”, these fruits are understood to be “invading, growing up in us . . . His sap rising quietly and secretly in the soul, bringing forth . . . fruits.”<sup>154</sup> They have their own “inherent vitality.”<sup>155</sup> The fruits of the Spirit so described are found in the soul’s receptivity to the gifts of the Spirit, and are

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<sup>150</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit* (London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 1942; reprint edition 1957). Page citations are to the reprint edition.

<sup>151</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 5. Gal. 5: 9.

<sup>152</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>153</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 7.

<sup>154</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 4.

“the necessary results of the action of God in the soul.”<sup>156</sup> They well up, diffused into every dimension of our lives. Such fruit “are brought forth in us.”<sup>157</sup> Already Underhill is giving the sense that she sees a close association between the fruits of the Spirit and the notion of deification. The words “brought forth in us,” “invading, growing up in us” and “His sap gently rising” resonate with her early understanding of sharing in divine life so as to become God through grace.<sup>158</sup> They also clearly reflect her description of the gifts of the Spirit where she uses such words as “absorbed, transfused and possessed by God.”<sup>159</sup> We will return to this point later in our discussion, but for now we continue our exploration of her perception of the fruits of the Spirit.

“Love,” Underhill states, “is the budding point” from which all the fruits flower forth.<sup>160</sup> A generous love of God unfolds into the fruits of joy and peace. Growing up “at the soul’s

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<sup>155</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 5.

<sup>156</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>157</sup> Underhill’s perception of the fruits of the Spirit has a modern counterpart in the writings of Thomas Keating. He understands the gifts of the Spirit as a means of our engagement with the unconscious repressed emotional trauma of our lives as well as the creative energy latent in the unconscious. The free flow of grace and spiritual energies that emanate or spring up within us as a result of this engagement manifest themselves as the fruits of the Spirit. Thomas Keating, *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000), 15.

<sup>158</sup> See chap. 6, p. 329.

<sup>159</sup> See chap. 6, p. 326.

<sup>160</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 7.

very centre,”<sup>161</sup> these three fruits manifest themselves as a tranquil, deep, selfless and adoring delight in “the Beauty of God, the Action of God, the Being of God for and in Himself alone.”<sup>162</sup> While adoration remains central to Underhill’s spirituality there is a different emphasis in evidence. No longer is the emphasis on personal effort of adoration. The Spirit is poured out within us so that the soul experiences a peaceful, adoring delight in God’s presence. The emphasis on human action shifts to the experience of God’s action within us.

Long-suffering and gentleness are the two fruits seen as “the branches,” that, from the central core of love, joy and peace, “stretch out towards the world.”<sup>163</sup> They are manifest in patient endurance and loving acceptance of ourselves, others and the world itself, within the design of God. Such gifts, reminiscent of the *Knight of the Spirit*, are accompanied by goodness and faithfulness. Here this particular goodness refers to the “total quality of beauty and completeness” of soul as it enjoys the Divine Presence.<sup>164</sup> Its partner, faithfulness, is “the steady acceptance and performance of the common duty . . . continuing

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<sup>161</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 19.

<sup>162</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 14.

<sup>163</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 19.

<sup>164</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 26.

quietly with the job we have been given, in the situation where we have been placed; not yielding to the restless desire for change.”<sup>165</sup>

When Underhill writes about the fruits of meekness and temperance, she is returning to something fundamental to her spiritual life. It is a matter of “knowing our own size and own place, the self-oblivion and quietness with which we fit into God’s great scheme”,<sup>166</sup> and of “acting according to scale.”<sup>167</sup> These words suggest an enduring Plotinian influence. The philosopher spoke of “finding yourself true to your essential nature” which is “union with the One.”<sup>168</sup> They echo Underhill’s sense of God’s “immensity and our tininess” given our nothingness before God.<sup>169</sup> They encapsulate the feelings of love, grace and desire so vividly expressed in *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*. In short, “God is the only Reality, and we are real only in so far as we are in His order and He is in us.”<sup>170</sup> For their part meekness and temperance are the fruits that arise from a final conviction that “God is All . . . He alone matters, He alone is.”<sup>171</sup> Accordingly, she refers to them “the last two berries on the bunch . . . [as] absolutely decisive for the classification

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<sup>165</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 27.

<sup>166</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 35.

<sup>167</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 40.

<sup>168</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, 1. 6. 9.

<sup>169</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 111.

<sup>170</sup> See chap. 2, p. 58.

<sup>171</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 34 - 35.

of the plant.”<sup>172</sup> They guarantee the authenticity and quality of all the fruits as dispositions to think, speak and act in accord with the Holy Spirit of God.

Up to this point, we have concentrated on Underhill’s general understanding of the fruits of the Spirit. But there is a further dimension. While these fruits are “dispositions . . . ways of thinking, speaking and acting,” they are also virtues.<sup>173</sup> For example, she refers to temperance as “the crowning grace of creatureliness,”<sup>174</sup> located “at the heart of our prayer.”<sup>175</sup> This reference to the fruits as virtues first appears in her work *The House of the Soul*. In this text of the 1926 retreat, she likens the person to a two-storey house, the ground floor representing the natural life, with the upper floor as the supernatural life. The context is her explanation of the traditional cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. She suggests that we are required to live not on only one level of the house, but also “in the whole of our premises.”<sup>176</sup> In that sense, these virtues are also fruits, as when she declares that the Spirit is the “atmosphere which bathes it, and fills each room of every little house – quickening, feeding and sustaining.”<sup>177</sup> Likewise, tranquillity, gentleness and strength are

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<sup>172</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of The Spirit*, 35.

<sup>173</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>174</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 35.

<sup>175</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 40.

<sup>176</sup> Underhill, *The House of the Soul*, 69.

<sup>177</sup> Underhill, *The House of the Soul*, 67.

both fruits and virtues.<sup>178</sup> By subsuming the traditional cardinal virtues into the fruits of the Spirit, she completes her understanding of these qualities of the spiritual life. They are not merely occasional dispositions, but habitual modes of action. Here Underhill not only provides an insight into her understanding of the fruits and the virtues penetrating “each room” of our house. Through this image she also captures something of her view of the human person as a body/spirit reality created in the image of God rather than the Plotinian notion where spirit alone matters. We will return to *The House of the Soul* and this point in the concluding chapter.

Let us now examine more closely how Underhill sees the fruits, the virtues and the gifts of the Spirit interwoven in a life of adoration, communion and cooperation.

#### **4. The grace of integration**

As already outlined, for Underhill adoration, communion and cooperation are expressions of the mind, the heart and the will in their relation to God. Through our “awe-struck delight in the splendour and beauty of God,”<sup>179</sup> through our “wonderful sense of intimacy and love”<sup>180</sup> and through self-offering to God for his purposes, the Spirit indwells and possesses the soul. The more entirely the Spirit possesses us through spiritual gifts, the

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<sup>178</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 93 - 97.

<sup>179</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 61 - 62.

<sup>180</sup> Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 181.



more fully the Spirit brings forth within us the fruits as discussed in this chapter. Yet the more the fruits ripen in our lives, the more richly we are gifted and the deeper we are drawn into adoration, communion and cooperation. This interpenetration of human effort and receptivity exists in a continuing relationship. The fruits of the Spirit are not received only at the end of our cooperation with God, but are present at every stage, as the Spirit gradually gifts and takes possession of the soul. They are at once the expression of grace (or the gifts of the Spirit) on God's part, and desire on ours, for our desire for God is caught up in God's desire for humankind. This mutual love and self-giving results in communion as God slowly fills the soul. There is a strong sense, therefore, in which the gifts of the Spirit enable the spiritual journey of adoration, communion and cooperation, while the fruits of the Spirit are the continuing harvest of such a journey. Again, as the process of deification takes place within the spiritual journey, there is a further sense in which the fruits of the Spirit are the manifestation of possession by God.

Ryan develops two further aspects of Underhill's understanding of the fruits of the Spirit.<sup>181</sup> He suggests that she sees the fruits at work primarily in creation, rather than in the individual or the Church.<sup>182</sup> While the fruits qualify Christian consciousness, there is a broader perspective of all creation. There, they "manifest in visible form the perfection and

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<sup>181</sup> Tom Ryan, "A Spirituality *For* Moral Responsibility? Evelyn Underhill Today," in *The Australasian Catholic Record*, vol. 85, no. 2 (April, 2008): 148 -161.

<sup>182</sup> Ryan, "A Spirituality *For* Moral Responsibility?" 156.

beauty of God.”<sup>183</sup> In this wider cosmic dimension, the fruits are more than an individual gift or possession, for they are dispersed throughout the world as the Spirit works to establish the Kingdom of God. Ryan makes a second point: Underhill understands the Pauline list of the fruits of the Spirit as progressive in nature and indicative of the form and direction which our growth in the Spirit will take.<sup>184</sup> From the transcendent levels of adoration, and tranquil delight in God, they move to the relational and social dimensions of long-suffering, gentleness and goodness; and finally to the intrapersonal domain of faithfulness, meekness and temperance. In this sense, the Spirit is moving us, along with all creation, towards a “fuller and deeper embrace of the real within the Divine life.”<sup>185</sup>

The universal and progressive features of the fruits of the Spirit converge with the triadic pattern of adoration, communion and cooperation. The soul progresses from awe-struck delight in God through to personal transformation and the service of others. The whole character of the spiritual life, as Underhill sees it, is therefore organic, creative and expansive as the Creative Spirit – the “pressure of God” – shapes creation and simultaneously brings forth the fruits of the Spirit throughout the world. Integral to this understanding of the spiritual life is its transformative character. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, transformation – the Spirit’s moulding of the unfinished product of the human

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<sup>183</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>184</sup> Ryan, “A Spirituality For Moral Responsibility?” 156 - 157.

<sup>185</sup> Ryan, “A Spirituality For Moral Responsibility?” 157.

spirit – is the process whereby we realise our true position in relation to God.<sup>186</sup> Through it we gradually come to know God’s “immensity and our tininess.”<sup>187</sup> Through this realisation our spiritual life is transformed into “the humble correspondence of the human spirit with the Sum of all Perfection, the Fountain of Life.”<sup>188</sup> Thus, the integrated reality of the spiritual life, in the enjoyment of all of its gifts and the manifestation of all its fruits, is lived in adoration, communion and cooperation with the God of grace.

Underhill uses several rich images in this connection. As we have seen, one is that of the two-storey house.<sup>189</sup> Another, borrowed from Francis Thompson, is of the person as a “swinging-wicket, set between the Unseen and the Seen” – standing in the gateway between the natural and the spiritual world.<sup>190</sup> In those whose lives are lived in harmony with God, she says “the wicket seems beautifully balanced.”<sup>191</sup> She writes:

They take up and use together both sides of our wonderful human inheritance, moving to and fro between the temporal world and the eternal world, between communication with God and communion with their fellow men; as Christ did during His life on earth.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> See chap. 6, pp. 308 - 316.

<sup>187</sup> See chap, 6, p. 301.

<sup>188</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 55.

<sup>189</sup> See chap. 6, p. 333.

<sup>190</sup> Underhill, *Collected Papers*, 106.

<sup>191</sup> Underhill, *Collected Papers*, 107.

<sup>192</sup> Underhill, *Collected Papers*, 107.

Almost ten years before Underhill writes these words, another image has come to her attention.<sup>193</sup> It is the painting, *Saint Jerome in his Study*.<sup>194</sup> The saint sits at his desk, absorbed in study. On the edge of the desk stands a crucifix. Nearby, open cupboards reveal books and manuscripts. Jerome's shoes and hat lie on the floor. Close by, a quail walks within snapping distance of a sleeping lion. An open window looks out upon a city set on the coastline and against a backdrop of mountains. Underhill first draws attention to Jerome, the "patient scholar, utterly lost in his work and therefore happy in it."<sup>195</sup> She then broadens her gaze to the crucifix and the scene from the window. "On the edge of his desk," she writes, "stands a crucifix; so placed that when he raises his eyes to the landscape he must look at the Crucified too."<sup>196</sup> She understands this to depict God's love alive and

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<sup>193</sup> Underhill wrote about this painting three years before she explicitly wrote of her theology of the Creative Spirit and nine years prior to writing *The Fruits of the Spirit*. Her commentary on the painting contains no explicit reference to the Creative Spirit or to the fruits of the Spirit. However, as illustrated, it does contain many implicit references to adoration, communion and cooperation and therefore to the fruits of the Spirit as integral to the threefold structure. This gives the strong sense that Underhill, as she writes about the fruits in 1936, is reflecting on the paintings she wrote of in 1927. This notion is generally supported by Brame who holds that Underhill rewrote *Man and the Supernatural* – 1927 (in which the commentary on the Jerome paintings is included) from the perspective of the Holy Spirit in *The Golden Sequence* – 1930 (in which she develops her theology of the Holy Spirit). See Johnson, "The Three Faces of Evelyn Underhill," 3. Therefore the two paintings of Jerome may confidently be included as an encounter with visual art which drew Underhill into an understanding of adoration, communion and cooperation and therefore the fruits of the Spirit, and which led her to see balance and harmony as integral to the spiritual life.

<sup>194</sup> Vincenzo Catena, *Saint Jerome in his Study*, oil on canvass, c 1510, The National Gallery, London. See Appendix 13, p. 432. Underhill first wrote about this painting, which she attributed to Catena, in an article entitled "Our two-Fold Relation to Reality" in *The Hibbert Journal*, 23, No. 2, January, 1925; reprint in Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 174 - 175. Writing about it in *Man and the Supernatural* in 1927, she attributed it to Sebastiano del Piombo. However, in her description of the work, it is clear that she could only be speaking about Catena's painting which she would have seen in the National Gallery. See Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 251 - 255.

<sup>195</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 252.

<sup>196</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 252.

active through Christ and in the world and in “union with the natural scene.”<sup>197</sup> But it also suggests that the saint’s study of God is balanced by the wide perspective which he sees through his window. His “protective, loving influence seems to radiate” to the world.<sup>198</sup> Underhill then shifts her attention to the quail and the lion existing together “in perfect security and confidence.”<sup>199</sup> She then takes in the entire painting in which “Jerome is in full and willing contact with all levels and contingencies of life,” permeated by “quietude of the spirit.”<sup>200</sup> *Saint Jerome in his Study* represents the delicate balance between the natural and the spiritual world, between our surrender to God and our active response, between the interior life of adoration and the active life of cooperation with God. It depicts a life lived in harmony with God.

However, Underhill takes the image of balance and harmony further when she moves to a very different presentation of Saint Jerome – *Saint Jerome in the Desert*.<sup>201</sup> In stark contrast to *Saint Jerome in his Study*, the poorly clad saint is depicted kneeling before a crucifix in a cave. Here, Underhill sees Jerome entirely taken up with “the bare actualities

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<sup>197</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 253.

<sup>198</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 253.

<sup>199</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 253.

<sup>200</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 253.

<sup>201</sup> Joachim Patinir, *Saint Jerome in the Desert*, oil on wood, c 1520, The Louvre, Paris. See Appendix 14, p. 433. Underhill did not specify any particular representation of this painting referring only to “those other pictures of St. Jerome in the Desert.” Within the spirit of freedom that Underhill gave to her reader, Patinir’s work is chosen. Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 253.

of God and his own soul.”<sup>202</sup> She describes the penitent saint as conscious of his “inherent unworthiness, his creaturely imperfection” and his “nothingness” over against the goodness and holiness of God.<sup>203</sup> The painting thus depicts a dimension integral to Jerome’s spiritual life – what she would later write about as “knowing our own size and own place, the self-oblivion and quietness with which we fit into God’s great scheme.”<sup>204</sup> Jerome confronts the disharmony of his human imperfections, the deep-seated dissonance, the “cleavage” in his life, through mortification and prayer. Here we see an image of Underhill’s perception of sin as a fundamental disharmony between creation and God, and mortification and prayer as the means to overcome this disharmony. But, as we have seen, she also provides us with a further depiction of Jerome – that of the saint in his study. The order and tranquillity of this painting suggest an absence of sin. Together, the two paintings present a perspective of the saint’s entire spiritual journey.

This enables us to appreciate Underhill’s broad picture of the spiritual life as she comes to understand it during her last years. The overwhelming factor in Jerome’s life is his creaturely relationship with God. Meekness and temperance – knowing God’s “immensity and our tininess” – have grown in him through the gifts of the Spirit. In this knowledge, he seeks purification and transformation for the sake of union with God. Yet, his life is never inward looking. His “loving influence” radiating to the world bears witness to the fruits of

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<sup>202</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 253.

<sup>203</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 253.

<sup>204</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 35.

long-suffering and gentleness. His life spent in scholarly work exemplifies the fruits of goodness and faithfulness in the service of God and the Christian community. He radiates spiritual peace and joy, “a channel” of “ceaseless divine creativity,” through whom God acts within the world for the establishment of the Kingdom.<sup>205</sup> His life, completely orientated towards God, is a life of adoration founded in the mystery of God’s love and manifesting all the fruits of the Spirit. It is a life wholly possessed by God, deified by God. Jerome, depicted in his study and his cave, speaks of “the lovely balance” of “a fully harmonized life.”<sup>206</sup>

This image of Jerome is a special focus of Underhill’s understanding of adoration, communion and cooperation as they manifest the fruits of the Spirit. Love, grace and desire interpenetrate in a fully integrated spiritual life. In these final years, her understanding of the action of the Spirit crystallises. “The bringing forth in our souls of the fruit of the Spirit,” she declares, “is realised now as one single indivisible act of the Divine Love; God, the Spirit of Spirits, indwelling His creature and moulding it to the pattern of Christ.”<sup>207</sup> The figure of *The Creation of Adam*, after 40 years of meditation, has guided her spiritual journey. Moulded and shaped by the Spirit – “the everywhere-present pressure of God”<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 255.

<sup>206</sup> Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 252.

<sup>207</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 42.

<sup>208</sup> See chap. 5, p. 234.

– to the pattern of Christ, “revealer of God”,<sup>209</sup> she is possessed by the Spirit of Divine Love whom she named in one of her last writings: “Heavenly King, Paraclete, Spirit of truth present in all places and filling all things, Treasury of good and Choir-master of life.”<sup>210</sup>

## **5. Overview and critical appraisal of Underhill’s spirituality in its final stage**

Throughout this chapter, we have been exploring how visual art shaped Underhill’s understanding of the spiritual life, together with the theological lens through which she interprets it as a transformative process, during her last years. We have sought to round out the topic of the previous chapter explicitly concerned with Underhill’s pneumatology. We can now summarise our findings and present the distinguishing features of her spirituality at the conclusion of its third stage.

During the final years of the third stage of Underhill’s spiritual journey, the engraving *Knight of the Spirit* and the two paintings, *Saint Jerome in his Study* and *Saint Jerome in the Desert* assume a significant position in her theological understanding. The engraving of the knight is the last work of art about which she writes. Dark and forbidding, it depicts the difficulties encountered by the ordinary man and woman on the open road of life.

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<sup>209</sup> See chap. 4, p. 205.

<sup>210</sup> Underhill to the Prayer Group, Whitsun, 1940 in Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 52.



Orientated towards “something beyond the picture,” it portrays faith, hope and love lived out in every-day circumstances.<sup>211</sup> It shows the whole person – mind, heart and will – living in the world. The two images of Saint Jerome also depict human experience as the saint faces his weakness amid the day-to-day routine of life. It is within the aesthetic experience of these artistic works that Underhill comes to her final understanding of the spiritual life, already as we have seen, centred on the Creative Spirit. It is against that background, therefore, that we present nine distinguishing features of Underhill’s spirituality during the final years of the third stage of her spiritual journey.

Firstly, Underhill’s spirituality is founded on the Bérullian threefold structure of adoration, communion and cooperation. Although each of these responses to God has gradually developed throughout the first and second stages of Underhill’s spirituality, it is not until the late 1930s that she brings them together in an explicitly theological framework. Founded on her formula of the spiritual life – grace and desire – the triadic structure is particularly inspired by the engraving, *Knight of the Spirit*, which Underhill interprets as a depiction of adoration, communion and cooperation. For her these three responses to God encapsulate the whole of human life: recognition of our nothingness before God and our subsequent delight in and praise of the Divine; the union of intimacy and love with God which results from that recognition; cooperation with God through personal transformation, self-giving service and intercession for others. In appropriating this triadic

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<sup>211</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 101.

structure, Underhill shapes it according to her own spirituality. As we discussed earlier, Underhill recognises in the structure a foundational Trinitarian theme.<sup>212</sup> However, irrespective of the Trinitarian understanding of the divine-human exchange and its outcomes in the gradual transforming of mind, heart and will which grounded Bérulle's understanding of the triadic structure, Underhill does not engage that foundation.<sup>213</sup> Her lack of a theology of the processions within the Trinity limits her appreciation of this dimension of his teaching. Rather, consistent with her already firm pneumatological orientation and her understanding of deification, Underhill takes up the themes of adoration, communion and cooperation in conjunction with the gifts and the fruits of the Creative Spirit, all of which she locates within the broad perspective of her formula of the spiritual life: grace and desire.

This brings us to the second distinguishing feature of Underhill's spirituality: permeation by her understanding of the gifts and fruits of the Creative Spirit. The gifts are the Spirit's secret self-giving poured out in the soul and which enable it to live the spiritual life. Therefore, the gifts not only inspire a desire to adore, love and serve God, but assist the

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<sup>212</sup> See chap. 6, pp. 291 - 293.

<sup>213</sup> Bérulle clearly states the Trinitarian underpinnings of his teaching as, for example: "For in the Holy Trinity the divine persons have a relationship and a rapport to their principle of origin. They only subsist through his attributes and relations and are happy to live in this relatedness, rapport and mutual love . . . therefore, just as uncreated holiness subsists in the mutual relations of Persons who process toward those from whom they proceed, in the same way created holiness subsists in the rapport and singular relation to Jesus and his holy humanity, from which it flows." Pierre de Bérulle, "Second Discourse in the Form of an Elevation to God upon the Mystery of the Incarnation," in *Bérulle and the French School: Selected Writings* ed. William M. Thompson and with an introduction by Thompson (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), 119 - 120.

soul in this spiritual task. So while the gifts of the Spirit are a divine indwelling of love and communion, they are also a transforming and therefore practical presence. Therefore, they require our collaboration and effort as we engage in the day-to-day living of the spiritual life. But Underhill perceives the fruits of the Spirit in a different light. They are the work of the Creative Spirit who brings forth in our souls those dispositions or virtues which she describes as “manifestations of the Mind of God.”<sup>214</sup> The fruits are therefore the divine sap which rises and the divine harvest which springs forth in the souls of those who live the spiritual life in adoration, communion and cooperation. But they are always “the necessary results of the action of God in the soul,” not the result of the soul’s efforts. This particular understanding of the fruits of the Spirit as God’s action within the soul, linked so profoundly with deification, is a highly significant feature of Underhill’s spirituality during its final stage thereby strengthening its pneumatological foundation. Her once heavy emphasis on human effort has undergone a remarkable shift as she underscores her firm conviction that the spiritual journey is God’s work within the soul. It is as though she has reached the fullest meaning of the words that have accompanied her throughout that journey: “God is the only Reality, and we are real only as far as we are in His order and He is in us.”<sup>215</sup> Johnson agrees with our conclusion. He claims that in Underhill’s last retreat, in which she focuses on her understanding of the fruits of the Spirit, “she presented in

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<sup>214</sup> Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 6.

<sup>215</sup> See chap. 2, p. 58.

plainest terms that the Spirit is the foundation of the spiritual life.”<sup>216</sup> Greene agrees when she declares that “*The Fruits of the Spirit* summarised the outcome of the spiritual life.”<sup>217</sup> For Underhill in her final years therefore, the foundational spiritual structure of adoration, communion and cooperation is intrinsically permeated by the gifts and the fruits of the Creative Spirit as the gift of grace in the divine indwelling. This not only confirms the pneumatological thrust of her spirituality during those years, but enables her to pursue the practical aspects of the spiritual journey rather than its complex theological underpinnings.

We now move to the third distinguishing feature of Underhill’s spirituality during its final stage: its holistic and organic character. In her appropriation of the threefold structure of adoration, communion and cooperation, Underhill incorporates into spiritual teaching the whole gamut of human consciousness: the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions. The preceding chapters have documented Underhill’s gradual movement towards this holistic outlook which unifies the mind in knowing God, the heart in loving God, and the will in acting in accordance with God. We have also seen how she understands the senses to be integral to the entire fabric of life so that body and soul constitute the human being. Love forms and energises the entire human person to respond to the divine self-gift. In a final stage, she reaches a point of integration. This three-fold structure she adopts corresponds to the threefold aspects of personal consciousness which is an integration of

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<sup>216</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 211.

<sup>217</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 124.

body and soul. Adoration, communion and cooperation are aspects of the one personal activity in the person surrendered to the action of Spirit.

Underhill's appropriation of the Bérullian model marks a final step. From the intellectual bias which dominates her spirituality until the early 1920s, she has come to a more balanced theological understanding. From the solitary nature of her early devotion, she has moved to an embodied, relational spirituality. Thus she can write of adoration and communion as "balancing and completing each other"<sup>218</sup> while cooperation "is to balance our communion with God."<sup>219</sup> The integration of these activities leads to what can be termed a holistic or organically integrated spirituality – the mark of her mature development.

This spiritual "balance" that Underhill evidently cherishes rests on an incarnational and redemptive orientation which is the fourth distinguishing feature of her spirituality. While God "alone matters," commitment to Christ and the service of one's neighbour is not lost in the mystical stratosphere. Meditating on *The Creation of Adam*, she has recognised our first parent's failure to collaborate with God. *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* has inspired her to a new awareness of the initiative in self-giving love calling forth the soul's self-surrender in return. This is the basis of the spiritual life as she conceives of it. It takes on a more practical expression in *Knight of the Spirit*, representing one engaged with

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<sup>218</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 66.

<sup>219</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 98.

all conditions and circumstances of life as a member of “the great army of God.”<sup>220</sup> Genuine adoration and communion with God are necessarily social. The adoration of the true God finds relational expression in the service of others. The soul must cooperate with God and his saving designs. Love and desire for God must express itself in the service of others. This manifold activity of the spiritual life is permeated with the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. Thus transformed by the Spirit, our actions work towards the establishment of the kingdom of God in the world.

This moral redemptive responsiveness is honed by the recognition of human sinfulness as “some fundamental disharmony between creation and God,” “a cleavage in man’s life which is a fall from contemplation of God” – the fifth distinctive mark of Underhill’s spirituality.<sup>221</sup> Cooperation, with its implications of personal transformation, self-gift to God in the service of others and intercession on their behalf leads to the establishment of harmony where disharmony previously reigned. It flows from “killing the very roots of self-love,” so that in every circumstance of life one becomes a channel through which the Spirit works. It calls for sacrifice on behalf of others. Underhill comes to see that the deeper we are drawn into adoration of and communion with God, the more sincere and active will be our service of others and the transformation of self. This has practical consequences. In the last period of her spiritual life, Underhill departs from her policy of

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<sup>220</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 102.

<sup>221</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 278 - 279.

non-involvement in parties or movements of a religious or political nature. A supporter of European disarmament since 1932, she publicly declares herself a pacifist in the early weeks of World War II.<sup>222</sup> This principled expression of her opposition to all international armed conflict manifests her radical involvement in the human community, and her sympathy for human suffering. As Greene accurately comments: “pacifism followed naturally from everything she believed.”<sup>223</sup>

Notwithstanding her public stance on such issues, most criticism among her commentators is directed against what is perceived as lack of social and moral awareness in her spirituality. An excessive stress on transcendence along with a solitary spirituality disengaged from the struggle against injustice and oppression of the times were especially singled out.<sup>224</sup> Though a theocentric orientation remains fundamental to Underhill’s spirituality, her critics fail to recognise that this core theocentricity is the enabling and nurturing force of all her commitments. Critics, as Ford points out, fail to engage the whole of her oeuvre and consequently miss the direction of her life as a whole.<sup>225</sup> They fail to give credit to the testimonies of Menzies and Cropper. These contemporaries witnessed her

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<sup>222</sup> Underhill to L. K., 20. 5. 1940 in Underhill, *Letters*, 288. Underhill to Mildred Bosanquet, 12. 5. 1941 in Underhill, *Letters*, 308. Underhill to M. C., Trinity, 1941 in Underhill, *Letters*, 310. Underhill’s public support of pacifism included the publication of three articles: “Meditation on Peace” (1939), “Postscript” (1940) and “The Church and War” (1940) all reprinted in Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 199 - 217 and *The Spiritual Life in War-Time* (London: Christian Literature Association, 1939).

<sup>223</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 130.

<sup>224</sup> See chap. 1, pp. 40 - 41.

<sup>225</sup> Ford, “Evelyn Underhill’s Mystical Theology”, 29.

early and ongoing work with poor families in London.<sup>226</sup> As Allchin concludes, such criticisms arise from a “very superficial reading of her work” – which we have sought to remedy.<sup>227</sup> In this perspective, Horne aptly describes our subject’s spiritual journey:

Underhill, in her spiritual journey, went through a spiritual development which began with serving an ideal not unlike that of pure mysticism, but ended with concern for social duties to be done, relationships to be preserved, traditions to be protected, and communities to be honoured and enhanced.<sup>228</sup>

Tastard, too, notes this progression in her thinking. Whereas he had previously deemed that Underhill was “limited by never seeking God in human solidarity in suffering, or in resistance to injustice,” he later tempered his evaluation.<sup>229</sup> Regarding her commitment to pacifism he writes: “The spirituality of this courageous woman was at the last earthed in the painful realities around her.”<sup>230</sup> Her critics, even while they rightly point out her shortcomings, are unjustified in claiming that these typified the whole of her spiritual life. Her limitations are better understood within the process of growth towards the fully integrated spirituality that she finally lived.

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<sup>226</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 88 - 89. See in particular Menzies, *Biography*, X, 1 - 2, where Menzies records Underhill’s care of Laura Rose, an unhealthy widow, and her three children. Over a period of some twenty years, Underhill visited them, supplied them with many of the necessities of life, saw to the education of the children and generally looked after the affairs of the entire family.

<sup>227</sup> Allchin, “Evelyn Underhill,” 10.

<sup>228</sup> Horne, *The Moral Mystic*, 78.

<sup>229</sup> Tastard, “Divine Presence and Human Freedom,” 431.

<sup>230</sup> Tastard, “Divine Presence and Human Freedom,” 431.



The sixth distinguishing feature of Underhill's spirituality is its universality. In this final stage, her thought becomes all embracing. There is little mention of Christ. Nor does she exhibit any sense of corporate worship. This does not mean that she has dismissed or denied such aspects of her Christian faith. Early in the final decade of her life, she presents her Christology in *Light of Christ*. In *Worship*, she has addressed the corporate, ritual and sacrament aspects of religion. Though firmly committed to the Anglican communion, she now moves into a broader, universal understanding in which God is the One God of All. The Creative Spirit – “the pressure of God” – works throughout all creation unbounded by religions, cultures or nations.<sup>231</sup> She now moves into the “great spiritual landscape,”<sup>232</sup> “the mighty symphony that fills the air,”<sup>233</sup> “the greatness of the sky,”<sup>234</sup> “the everlasting hills,”<sup>235</sup> “beauty beyond sense,”<sup>236</sup> – phrases appropriate to the universal activity and presence of God.

The seventh distinctive feature of Underhill's spirituality is its Orthodox dimension. In her latter years, as we have seen, the pneumatological focus of her thinking strengthened through her understanding of the gifts and the fruits of the Creative Spirit and through her

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<sup>231</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 45.

<sup>232</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 12.

<sup>233</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 15.

<sup>234</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 21.

<sup>235</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 21.

<sup>236</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 17.

incorporation of the Orthodox notion of deification. Gifted by the Spirit, the soul is absorbed, transfused and finally possessed by God as the fruits are brought forth in the soul. While early in her spiritual journey Underhill appreciates this notion of “becoming God”, it seems to have been especially clear through her understanding of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. This enables her to appreciate deification as possession by God through the ordinary circumstances and events of life. This is powerfully illustrated in her final letter to the Prayer Group written during the darkest days of World War II. She reminds the Group that “all these various obstacles and difficulties are simply part of the circumstances in which God requires us to serve Him”<sup>237</sup> and through which He may “kindle our cold hearts and light up our dark minds.”<sup>238</sup> Even as the war raged and Underhill approaches death, the knowledge that the Spirit comes and possesses the soul through the events and circumstances of the time holds central position in her understanding of the spiritual journey.

Thus we see that while process theology has appealed to Underhill, it was the Orthodox notion of deification that captured her thinking. As we have seen, she, like Aquinas, does examine the ‘how’ of deification through her discussion of the gifts of the Spirit as forms of *habitus* through which we share and grow in the divine knowing and loving. But we have also seen that, like Palamas, she emphasises the ‘who’ we become through

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<sup>237</sup> Underhill to the Prayer Group, Eastertide, 1941 in Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 69.

<sup>238</sup> Underhill to the Prayer Group, Eastertide, 1941 in Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 72.

participation in the mysterious beauty, presence and energy of God.<sup>239</sup> Indeed, the resemblance between Underhill's view of the Creative Spirit as dynamic divine "Presence and Energy" and Palamas' view on divine essence/energies is striking. It was this divine energy which she experiences and so her emphasis centres on the action, rather than the essence, of the Creative Spirit. The Orthodox influence, which begins during her first visit to Italy, and is nurtured through her sometime director Bishop Frere, comes to fruition in her understanding of the Creative Spirit.

Underhill's spiritual journey is based first and foremost on her intuition and experience. This is the eighth and most highly significant characteristic of her spirituality. Though the theological structure of her thought encompasses the dimensions of the cognitive, affective and conative functions of the mind, it is the affective, rather than the cognitive, that most marks Underhill's way of knowing. This is not a new development in her thinking, but, as we have frequently observed, the continuation of a long-established pattern fundamental to her temperament. Knowing God is based, above all else, on intuition and experience. Experience, rather than conceptual superstructure, animates her theological expression. The "higher activity" of knowing God, she writes, "is intuitive rather than logical in its methods. It knows by communion, not by observation." "This experience," she continues, "overflows all categories, defies all explanations, and seems at once self-loss, adventure,

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<sup>239</sup> See chap. 5, p. 241.

and perfected love.”<sup>240</sup> And again, in her last letter to the Prayer Group, Underhill reminds its members that God and the truths of religion are not “academic propositions, but spiritual facts. We do not learn their true meaning by reading books about them or discussing them, but by dwelling upon them in a spirit of prayer.”<sup>241</sup> For her, the spiritual journey is an adventure of the heart, not a contrivance of the mind. Johnson draws attention to this aspect of her spirituality when he writes that her work “demonstrated her penchant for using the intuitive, poetic and devotional to inform the rational, logical and doctrinal.”<sup>242</sup> Greene also acknowledges this trait when she describes Underhill’s way of knowing as “relational, personal and transformative.”<sup>243</sup>

The intuitive and experiential character of Underhill’s spiritual development and her writings on the spiritual life are most evident in the frequency of her appeals to the impact of visual art, as we have been at pains to emphasise. In this chapter we have observed her encounters with *Knight of the Spirit* and the depictions of Saint Jerome. Underhill expresses herself within the frame of these images, and so contextualises her explanations within their borders. Such images shape her experience and are seminal to her thinking. In her communion with the divine, she knows in a way that “defies all explanations,” even as she embarks on the adventure of “perfected love.” As her life draws to a close, Underhill is

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<sup>240</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*, 9.

<sup>241</sup> Underhill to the Prayer Group, Eastertide, 1941 in Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 70.

<sup>242</sup> Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 251.

<sup>243</sup> Greene, “Towards an Evaluation of the Thought of Evelyn Underhill,” 550.

still stirred by the images that have directed her spiritual journey. We contend, therefore, that they have been a consistent, major influence in her spiritual development and in her understanding of the spiritual life.

Finally, we come to the ninth distinctive feature of Underhill's spirituality: the pre-eminence of God and of adoration as the primary human response to the divine. As we have repeatedly noted throughout our project, this characteristic has been a constantly recurring theme in her spirituality. Now, in its final stage, her spiritual journey remains totally focused on God, but in the understanding of God the Creative Spirit.<sup>244</sup> "God is All. All takes place within Him. He alone matters, He alone is."<sup>245</sup> And to the members of the Prayer Group coping with air raids over London during the war she writes: "Whatever else we may neglect, some part of our prayer time must always be devoted to worship."<sup>246</sup> Whatever the time or the circumstances, "God, the Spirit of spirits"<sup>247</sup> – is the heart of her teaching and "adoration was for her *the* essential."<sup>248</sup> Although we have discussed these two pillars of Underhill's spirituality as the final distinguishing feature of her spirituality, in fact they permeate each of the characteristics we have discussed above. Thus, underpinning and pervading the breadth and richness of her spirituality in its final

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<sup>244</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 266 - 267.

<sup>245</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 34 - 35.

<sup>246</sup> Underhill to the Prayer Group, July 1940, in Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, 55.

<sup>247</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 57.

<sup>248</sup> Menzies, "Memoir", in *Light of Christ*, 15.

expression, is an unwavering focus on the mystery of the transcendent and absolute God, and acknowledgement of that God in adoration.

The final years of this last stage of Underhill's spiritual journey are a time of integration and consolidation of various strands of her theological understanding. The first and second stages of that journey, together with the first years of the third stage, are periods of development and growth. But a mature integration comes with her twilight years. Johnson considers that her work at this time "was an exercise in self-definition and refinement."<sup>249</sup> He also points out the sense of confidence that characterised her writing during this period, citing in particular the diplomatic adroitness she exercised as religion editor of *Spectator*.<sup>250</sup> Greene refers to this period of her life as "part of the process of simplification."<sup>251</sup> For her it was a time of what Walker refers to as "spiritual equilibrium"<sup>252</sup> and Barkway as her "balanced . . . outlook."<sup>253</sup> Allchin declares that, in the course of her life, Underhill found "balance and calm,"<sup>254</sup> while Brame contends that she "is one of the most balanced writers one can find in her field."<sup>255</sup> The *Knight of the Spirit* has inspired an integrated understanding of the spiritual journey. *Saint Jerome in his Study*

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<sup>249</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 185.

<sup>250</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and Truth," 186.

<sup>251</sup> Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 128.

<sup>252</sup> David Walker, "Introduction," in Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Sydney: St Paul, 1976), 18.

<sup>253</sup> Barkway, "Introduction," in Underhill, *Collected Papers*, 29.

<sup>254</sup> Allchin, "Foreword," in Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life*, 10.

and *Saint Jerome in the Desert*, with their pervading accordance and peace, have enkindled a final harmony of life and God. Her spiritual journey has been an encounter with beauty and an experience of love which lead her “beyond the fringe of speech” to communion with God.<sup>256</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In bringing the third stage of Underhill’s spiritual journey to a conclusion, we also come to the end of her life. In the following chapter we intend to draw together its various aspects and make some evaluation of the influence of visual art on her spirituality.

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<sup>255</sup> Brame, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, 32.

<sup>256</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 27 - 28.

## **Chapter 7: THE DEPTH AND RANGE OF UNDERHILL'S SPIRITUALITY**

In the opening chapter of this project, we stated our aim to explore the ways in which visual art and church architecture influenced Underhill's spirituality. We also established that the controlling methodology of our project is grounded within the discipline of spirituality with its focus on the influence of visual art on Underhill's spirituality as the experience of response and transformation. Throughout the project, there has been some overlap with other influences. Theology, aesthetics, epistemology, philosophy and anthropology also shaped her attitude to and interpretation of her experience of visual art. All this led us into an investigation of the dynamic interplay of spirituality, beauty and art in Underhill's life and spirituality from its earliest beginnings to its mature expression. It took us to 14 works of art and several churches all documented in her writings. Having completed our explorations, we are now in a position to look back on the many ramifications of how spirituality, beauty and art are related in the experience of our author and to draw conclusions as to the influence of visual art on her spirituality. Thus in this final chapter, we engage those dimensions of our methodological structure which address constructive interpretation and critical analysis.

In this seventh chapter it is proposed that we

1. appraise the epistemological aspect of Underhill's spirituality
2. evaluate her theological understanding as influenced by visual art



3. assess her anthropological understanding as influenced by visual art
4. evaluate the influence of visual art on her spirituality
5. appraise her contribution to the interconnection of art and spirituality
6. demonstrate how the findings of this study contribute to current knowledge in the field of Christian spirituality
7. draw conclusions

We begin by focusing on the key underlying dimension of Underhill's spirituality – her way of knowing.

## **1. Epistemological perspectives**

At the beginning of our investigation, we posed certain questions regarding Underhill's encounter with beauty: how does she recognise beauty and how does it become part of her experience and a powerful influence on her awareness? The significance of these questions becomes evident when we consider her reflection on her first visit to Continental Europe – an experience of beauty which evoked the following words:

It takes time to get the feeling of them [works of art] into your mind. . . . This place has taught me more than I can tell you; it's a sort of gradual unconscious growing into an understanding of things.<sup>1</sup>

What does Underhill mean by “understanding”? And how is it related to beauty? The following words place the answer to these questions within a broader epistemological perspective. She writes:

The intellect may, and should, conceive of this Absolute Beauty as well as it can; the will may – and must – be set on the attaining of it. But only by intuitive feeling can man hope to know it, and only by love can he make it his own.<sup>2</sup>

Here she sees a convergence of knowing, willing and loving in the desire for Absolute Beauty or God. True knowing is an activity of the intellect – the cognitive dimension – in the context of a deliberate act of the will – the conative dimension. These two dimensions are permeated by love in the affective dimension. True knowing therefore involves being receptive in mind and heart, and responding with love to God who is love. In bringing together the mind which knows God and the heart which loves God, Underhill reflects what Louth describes as “the original unity of the Patristic vision.”<sup>3</sup> For the Fathers, *theologia* was a broad term meaning both intellectual knowledge and contemplation (*theoria*) as the apprehension of God by one drawn to God in love. There was no

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<sup>1</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24. 4. 1898. Underhill Collection.

<sup>2</sup> Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 115. These words resound with Rahner’s statement that “In Christianity the last word is with love and not knowledge.” Karl Rahner, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology,” in *Theological Investigations IV*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: an Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 6.

separation between knowledge and love. Her words also resound with Augustine for whom the co-inherence of love and knowledge was a central theme.

Within this context, we also see that Underhill's perception of contemplation (*theoria*) is grounded in the Patristic tradition. She writes of making it (Absolute Beauty – God) her own through both mind and intention, but in particular through love. Elsewhere she describes contemplation in the same way: “a loving insight,” “disinterested adoring delight” and looking “with the eyes of love,” suggesting that it is a discovery of the intellect as well as a movement of love.<sup>4</sup> Here we see a parallel with the Patristic *theologia* as Underhill blends love and knowledge as the inseparable partners of contemplation. Again, her understanding of contemplation also reflects the medieval approach which was distinguished by the Patristic *theoria*.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, her approach captures Aquinas' notion of affective connaturality in the operation of the gifts of the Spirit, especially in regard to those of understanding and wisdom. In this regard, her views both conserve valuable elements of the past, and point to the future.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Underhill, *Collected Papers*, 194 - 195.

<sup>5</sup> The medieval mystical theologian Richard of St Victor wrote: “Contemplation is a free and clear vision of the mind fixed upon the manifestation of wisdom in suspended wonder.” Cited in Mark McIntosh *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Tallon, in arguing for the continuity of reason-intellect-heart, draws on Aquinas' concept of affective connaturality and Rahner's theory of the heart, in making the following statement: “Heart is what ‘intellect’ becomes at its ethical and mystical point of highest actualization.” Andrew Tallon, “The Heart in Rahner's

Underhill understands this affective knowledge of God in deeply theological terms: the mind both knows God, and knows God “in God.” In Chapter 5 we saw that the experience of communion with God is a participation in God’s own life and conformity to the divine persons.<sup>7</sup> Through this deification, grace works a transformation in the created person beyond all human understanding. We note the contrast here between Underhill’s epistemology and that of Plotinus. Davies points out that the latter’s concern is for *union* with the divine rather than *likeness*, and that this is worked out predominantly in terms of cognition or a form of direct intuition.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, he anticipates “a significant element in the Christian mystical tradition, although there it is union through the will – or intellect powerfully informed by will – that is generally paramount.”<sup>9</sup> Though influenced by Plotinus, Underhill differs from him in two significant ways. First, her understanding of becoming “wholly identified” with God through deification stands in contrast to the Plotinian concept of union with the remote and ineffable One. Second, while for Plotinus beauty has an important mediating role in the return to the One, the fitful and rare presence of the One in earthly existence precludes “a world-transforming programme of ethical and

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Philosophy of Mysticism,” in *Theological Studies* 53, (1992): 720. Benedict XVI writes of love as engaging the will and intellect. “The ‘yes’ of our will to his [God’s] will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love.” Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 9, accessed 20. 07. 2008 from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf)

<sup>7</sup> See chap. 6, pp. 303 - 306.

<sup>8</sup> Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Cambridge: SCM, 2001; Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 2003), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 61.

aesthetic practice.”<sup>10</sup> This stands in contrast with Underhill’s spiritual vision with its strong incarnational emphasis and continual reference to the images and symbolism of art.

So much then for the broad perspective of Underhill’s epistemology. We turn now to how her epistemological stance was influenced by what could be termed her “aesthetic conversion.”<sup>11</sup> As we saw in Chapter 1, our subject was born with an instinctive and dominant romantic sensibility. This developed into a sense of reality in which the affective and the contemplative would predominate. Knowledge, for her, was seeing “with the eyes of the soul.” This strongly intuitive sensibility meant for her an aesthetically differentiated consciousness.<sup>12</sup> It enabled her to experience beauty – especially expressed in visual art and church architecture – as the path to true knowledge “growing into an understanding of things.” As already remarked, here she sat comfortably within patristic and medieval Christian tradition and anticipates later developments in theological aesthetics, particularly those put forward by Frank Burch Brown.<sup>13</sup> Taking body, mind and heart as

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<sup>10</sup> Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Lonergan’s models of conversion include religious conversion (the fruit of God’s grace), moral conversion (the fruit of religious conversion) and intellectual conversion (the fruit of both religious and moral conversion). Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 267 - 268. By analogy we can say that Underhill’s response to the beauty of visual art was an aesthetic conversion.

<sup>12</sup> Lonergan describes artistically differentiated consciousness as “a specialist in the realm of beauty” which promptly recognises and fully responds to beautiful objects. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 273.

<sup>13</sup> Among the Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa writes that “the divine beauty is not set forth either in form or comeliness of design or colouring, but is contemplated in speechless blessedness, according to its virtue.” Cited in Graham Ward, “The Beauty of God,” in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 48, n., 32. Burch Brown points out that “from Augustine through Thomas Aquinas to modern exponents such as Hans von Balthasar, God is seen . . . as beauty itself, and the source and goal of all earthly beauty.” Burch Brown, “Aesthetics,” in *The New Western Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 88. The American Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703 - 1758) wrote theological

“distinguishable but inseparable ‘parts’ or functions of the self”, he shows how each of these “parts” is influenced by art thus “affecting the well-being of the ‘soul’ or self as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> The body benefits from the encounter with art by finding in the work “an extension and evocation of its own capacities, pleasures and sensibilities.”<sup>15</sup> Thus a work of art discloses the body to the self. Art is beneficial to the mind because it increases understanding, inspires the sense of wonder and expands the sense of truth. Through art the heart is enriched by a “range and complexity of expression rarely found in daily life,”<sup>16</sup> it experiences new feelings, and wills to “transform or be transformed.”<sup>17</sup> In explaining her encounter with visual art as “a sort of gradual unconscious growing into an understanding of things,” Underhill implicitly drew together, within an epistemological perspective, body,

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treatises and sermons emphasising the beauty of God and the role of aesthetics in the spiritual life in which he anticipates a 20th century current of theological aesthetics represented by figures such as Hans von Balthasar and David Bentley Hart. Roland Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). This epistemological aspect is being currently pursued by philosophers such as Mark Wynn, *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); John W. de Gruchy *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*. Philip Sheldrake, in his investigation of the aesthetic sense of the gothic cathedral, also reflects something of the influence which these structures had on Underhill’s strong intuitive sensibilities. Philip Sheldrake, “Reading Cathedrals as Spiritual Texts,” in *Studies in Spirituality*, vol. 11, (2001): 187 - 204.

<sup>14</sup> Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 103.

<sup>15</sup> Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 103.

<sup>16</sup> Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 104.

<sup>17</sup> Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 110.

mind and heart thus anticipating Burch Brown's visionary, prophetic and transformative dimensions of art.<sup>18</sup>

While Underhill's spirituality was characterised by this aesthetic sensibility, some blindspots resulted. As we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, her prevailing intuitive and experiential orientation lessened her appreciation of the more objective expression of Christian doctrines and systematically structured theology. Given her definite preference for knowing by way of contemplation, experience and intuition, over theological analysis of a more theoretical type, Lonergan's distinction of the various "functions of meaning" is applicable.<sup>19</sup> He distinguishes some four dimensions: meaning is cognitive when it intends some objective facet of reality. It is constitutive in that it affects the knower with a certain sense of identity – as with the constitution of a state. It is communicative in that it is the basis and fruit of relationships with others. It is effective when it leads to some kind of action. When these are applied, say to meanings of Church belief and teaching, the cognitive function clarifies the objective truth of, say, the Trinity. The constitutive function forms believers, for example, into an awareness of themselves as members of Christ, children of the Father, and temples of the Spirit. It is communicative in that it forms the community of the Church among all the nations of the world. It is effective in that it inspires moral action and witness to the Gospel. Underhill's keen intuitive and experiential

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<sup>18</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24. 4. 1898. Underhill Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 76 - 81.

orientation resulted in an emphasis on the constitutive, communicative and effective function of Christian teaching – with a tendency to minimize the importance of the cognitive dimension. This is the crux of Underhill’s difficulties which we discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. She regarded the cognitive aspect of Church doctrine as somewhat irrelevant to her overall spirituality.

Ormerod makes some pertinent remarks on this distortion: “the communicative, constitutive and effective functions of meaning are valid functions of meaning” in that they “assist in ‘manifesting’ the truth of our faith,” and as allowing us to say “‘more than can be said’ cognitively while still remaining faithful to that cognitive meaning.”<sup>20</sup> However, he suggests that these non-cognitive aspects of meaning must remain grounded in cognitive meaning lest they become “just arbitrary claims being made without foundation.”<sup>21</sup> While Underhill was far from making such claims, her Christological and pneumatological explanations did lack sound grounding because of an absence of a systematically structured theological foundation. In saying “more than can be said”– knowledge gained for the most part from her experience of visual art – she emphasised the communicative, constitutive and effective functions of meaning while sometimes failing to ground her words in the cognitive intentionality of the classic doctrinal definitions of the Church. Critics have noted her “distrust of intellectual schemes,” the “elastic conceptual framework for her

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<sup>20</sup> Neil Ormerod, *The Trinity: Retrieving the Western Tradition* (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 2005), 107.

<sup>21</sup> Ormerod, *The Trinity: Retrieving the Western Tradition*, 107.



ideas,”<sup>22</sup> “a certain looseness in her mode of argument”<sup>23</sup> and the “inexact, approximate only” nature of her theological explanations.<sup>24</sup>

While this contributed to some theological imbalance and vagueness, it did not deter her quest for God revealed in the beauty of art. This leads us into the next area of our evaluation by examining the theological, or better, theocentric character of her spiritual quest.

## 2. Theological dimensions

In the course of this project, we have seen that Underhill’s gradual perception of God culminated in a particular understanding of God as the Creative Spirit – “the everywhere-present pressure of God.”<sup>25</sup>

The Plotinian image of a transcendent, abstract and impersonal Deity influenced Underhill at an early stage. She did, in fact, acknowledge the “Trinity in Unity” by way of Augustine’s psychological analogy of memory, understanding and will.<sup>26</sup> However, her

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<sup>22</sup> Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 272.

<sup>23</sup> McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism. The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 274

<sup>24</sup> Smalley, “Evelyn Underhill and the Mystical Tradition,” 286.

<sup>25</sup> See chap. 5, p. 234.

<sup>26</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 67. See chap. 6, p. 292.

Godward orientation along this path led to some limitations. More recent Trinitarian theologians such as Karl Rahner conceded that the “psychological theory of the Trinity neglects the experience of the Trinity in the economy of salvation in favor of a seemingly almost Gnostic speculation about what goes on in the inner life of God.”<sup>27</sup> More particularly, LaCugna detects limitations in the psychological analogy in that it suggests that “soul knows God apart from God’s economy of redemption.”<sup>28</sup> These criticisms may help to explain the direction of Underhill’s understanding of God. Her adoption of the Augustinian analogy established in her a pattern of thought which concentrated, albeit partially and inadequately, on the inner life of the Trinity – the immanent Trinity – rather than on the economic Trinity which denotes God’s saving activity in the world through the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Underhill seemed to have lost touch with the story of redemption, “where all Trinitarian meaning has its roots.”<sup>29</sup> LaCugna further develops her critique of Augustine’s analogy when she points out that it tends to focus on the individual so that “the soul pursues itself and its God . . . apart from social relations.”<sup>30</sup> This allegedly individualistic emphasis played into Underhill’s naturally private disposition. It is also reasonable to conclude that it reinforced the severe introspection which marked her temperament.

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William Dych (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978), 135.

<sup>28</sup> Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 103.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 207.

There can be no doubt that the psychological analogy of the Trinity enriched Underhill's perception of a loving and immanent God. At the same time, I suggest that its more obvious and stronger influence was to reinforce some Neoplatonic fundamentals which had taken root in Underhill's notion of God during her early years. The concentration on the Trinity *ad intra*, the lack of its development *ad extra*, the subsequent movement away from redemption in Christ through the Holy Spirit and the emphasis on the soul's private relationship with God all worked to buttress and sustain Underhill's Plotinian theism. This is what von Hügel recognised in Underhill in 1921 – 10 years after she had written of the Augustinian analogy. Thus, as we saw in Chapter 4, he described her as “not *much* removed from Unitarianism” and advised attention to the historicity of Christianity, the practice of Christocentric devotion and moderation of introversion by active work for the marginalized.<sup>31</sup>

But, at the same time, Underhill's concept of Christ remained limited to the human person who was the perfect revealer of God and the perfect embodied surrender to the Spirit of God. God's self-revelation in Christ did not essentially change her idea of God. However, the life of Christ did demonstrate what she had gradually come to understand: the

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<sup>30</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> As we saw in chap. 4, p. 169, n. 75, Unitarianism is the belief that God is one without intradivine differentiation.

transcendent God is also immanent to creation, infinitely loves humanity and accompanies each person on the spiritual journey.

Most of all, Underhill's understanding of God revolved around the Creative Spirit – the everywhere-present presence of God. God is the one true God but under the name of the Creative Spirit. God is no longer the remote and impersonal Plotinian "One" This marks a clear shift in Underhill's theological thinking, as well the potential source of theological confusion.

In Chapter 5, we concluded that Underhill's perception of the Holy Spirit appears confused – or at least unclear to her readers. The most obvious cause of this is her frequent interchange of names – God, Holy Spirit, Creative Spirit, Divine Action, presence of God – characteristic of her later writings. Closer examination suggests that Underhill was uncertain of the Trinitarian identity of the Holy Spirit. Compared to the classic cognitively-orientated distinctions of Trinitarian orthodoxy, her language is comparatively undifferentiated. As a result, her pneumatology is not totally consistent with the orthodox understanding of grace, presence and action of the third Trinitarian person, the Holy Spirit. Further confusion arises when she subsumes the notion of God as Father into her comprehensive notion of God as the Creative Spirit. Thus the Godhead is the Creative Spirit and it is through the movement of that Spirit, not the activity of Christ, that God is present in the world. Therefore, when Underhill speaks of the Creative Spirit, she is not speaking of the Holy Spirit in Trinitarian terms. She is speaking of the one God. It is from this perspective that we now summarise her understanding of God in the following five points.

First, God the Creative Spirit is distinct from all creation, is before all creation and is transcendent. Distinct, mysterious and obscure, the Holy Eternal Spirit is unfathomable, unknown and inexplicable.

Second, God the Creative Spirit is present to the world with such universality and intensity that the Spirit penetrates all creation and all humankind with divine presence.

Third, God the Creative Spirit is a dynamic, creative and transformative presence in the world and throughout all creation. This on-going energetic process initiates and sustains creation as it comes to fulfillment and as each person is shaped into the image of God.

Fourth, God the Creative Spirit loves humankind and all creation with a tender, cherishing and gentle love. Deeply, personally and intimately present to humanity, God accompanies each person on the spiritual journey.

Fifth, God the Creative Spirit desires to share the divine life and love with all humankind through the gift of grace and calls humanity to collaboration and communion.

On the other hand, these five points are not only compatible with the traditional spiritualities, but also anticipate later pneumatological developments. We recall that it was the image of *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross* that inspired Underhill's concept of the Creative Spirit. That she came to this understanding through visual art resonates with biblical language which expressed the Spirit in terms of

an image or picture – the breath or breeze.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, her image of the Creative Spirit as “the pressure of God” reflects Irenaeus’ words which likened creation to moulding by the hands of God.<sup>33</sup> O’Donnell, in his description of the Spirit as “the touch of God” reflects something of her image of the Spirit.<sup>34</sup> In a different vein, Taylor, who develops an image of the Spirit as the “go-between God,” captures something of her notion of the Creative Spirit as spanning the gap between immanentism and transcendence.<sup>35</sup> Edwards, whose thesis that the Spirit is “the immanent Life-Giver that enables all creatures to be and to become,” takes up her notion of the Creative Spirit as a dynamic, creative and transformative presence in the world and in all creation.<sup>36</sup> In her theology of the Spirit as friend and sister, Elizabeth Johnson sees a metaphor of friendship which crosses sex, class and race thus capturing Underhill’s understanding of the universality of the Creative Spirit.<sup>37</sup> In each case, however, it must be pointed out that these writers ground their

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<sup>32</sup> In a statement which resounds with much of Underhill’s description of God, Walther Eichrodt remarks that “No wonder, then, that in the blowing of the wind and in the rhythm of human respiration the ancients detected a divine mystery, and saw in this element in Nature, at once so near to them and yet so incomprehensible, a symbol of the mysterious nearness and activity of the divine.” Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1967), cited in John Macquarrie, “Spirit and Spirituality,” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: an Ecumenical Reader* ed. Kenneth Collins (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 64.

<sup>33</sup> See chap. 5, p. 233.

<sup>34</sup> O’Donnell, *The Other Hand of God*, 206.

<sup>35</sup> John Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London: SCM Press, 1972), cited in John McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 197.

<sup>36</sup> Edwards, *Breath of Life*, 117.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 145.

pneumatology within a Trinitarian dimension. Therefore, while they are clear in their reference to the Holy Spirit the third divine person, Underhill's expressions are more general and even Unitarian: *God is the Creative Spirit*.

These five distinguishing features suggest Underhill's underlying, dynamic notion of God. In keeping with the apophatic understanding of God which characterised her Plotinian years, the Divine Spirit remains mysterious, distant and unknowable. Yet a gradually developing kataphatic understanding of God enables her to know the Creative Spirit as present in the world and to each person with a love that is beyond imagination. Her once rather narrowly philosophical approach to God has been broadened and deepened by a gentle awareness of the Creative Spirit. The Neoplatonic philosophical framework which grounded her understanding has receded as the pneumatological foundation gradually takes precedence. But the blending of the apophatic and kataphatic understanding of God which characterises Underhill's last years never reaches a final synthesis in her writings.

Early in our project, we noted that Underhill presents God in "broad strokes of cosmic dimension."<sup>38</sup> God is the one God, devoid of Trinitarian differentiation. This remains largely unchanged. God – the Divine Spirit – is a vast horizon which encompasses all and which gives meaning to all. Her dominant apophatic approach to God contains something of that "element of wildness" which she associated with God in her early writings and

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<sup>38</sup> See chap. 2, p. 57.

which she maintained to the end of her life.<sup>39</sup> Underhill's words, frequently cited throughout our explorations, that "God alone matters, God alone Is,"<sup>40</sup> and "God is All," encapsulate her understanding.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, irrespective of significant developments in her thinking in other ways, she still retains her initial image of a cosmic, undifferentiated God. The opinion that she "did not necessarily abandon previous concepts in favour of new ones but instead adjusted prior assumptions to fit with new data," is an astute evaluation of how she maintained her theistic and apophatic sense of God, while accommodating it to the image of a loving and immanent Divine Spirit.<sup>42</sup> This takes us back to the point made earlier in this chapter that von Hügel described Underhill as Unitarian. In following his advice: "de-Unitarianizing, if you please," Underhill developed a kataphatic approach to God the Creative Spirit, but she remained essentially Unitarian.<sup>43</sup> To that extent it must be judged that her theological conception of God was impoverished. Yet we must balance our conclusions by placing Underhill in her historical context. Without the benefits of the huge

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<sup>39</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 89. Underhill to C. S. Lewis, 13. 1. 1941 in Underhill, *Letters*, 302.

<sup>40</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, "In Spirit and in Truth," 62. Referring to Underhill's approach to traditional doctrinal formulae during her later years, Smalley holds that it "was not as far removed as has sometimes been supposed from the attitude which she had maintained during her years as a free-lance student of mysticism on the fringes of Roman Catholicism." Smalley, "Evelyn Underhill in the Mystical Tradition," 286. Greene offers a similar opinion to that of Johnson when she states that "if one examines her [Underhill's] writing over a forty year period, the development of her thought becomes evident. This development, however, cannot obscure the constancy and continuity of her ideas." Greene, "Introduction" in Underhill, *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Quest for the Holy*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Von Hügel to Underhill, 21. 12. 1921. Von Hügel Collection. Underhill to Bishop Frere, 1926 in Underhill, *Fragments of an Inner Life*, 79.



developments that were to occur in later 20th century Trinitarian theology, and working within the Anglican Church of her day, Underhill reflected much of the thinking of her time.<sup>44</sup>

While she wrote expansively of God as the vast horizon of her world, she gave some attention to doctrinal positions on Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Trinity. As we saw in Chapter 4, she regards these as “the surroundings in which one has been placed by God.”<sup>45</sup> While she acknowledges this doctrinal tradition, she does include it in the foreground of her own spiritual teaching. Following her own advice, she “just let[s] them be . . . let[s] them alone.”<sup>46</sup> Though they remain unexplained and disconnected from her far-ranging account of the spiritual life, her awareness of the doctrinal tradition suggests a degree of ambiguity in her perception of God. Although this remained, as we have argued, essentially Unitarian, a Trinitarian element must not go unnoticed. Indeed, Hogan claims that “Underhill . . . attempted to locate the doctrine of the Trinity at the centre of Christian life.”<sup>47</sup> Basing his argument on Underhill’s meditations on the Christian Creed entitled *The School of Charity*, he concludes that her theology of the Trinity is “grounded in orthodox

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<sup>44</sup> Ramsey notes three trends in Anglican Trinitarian theology after *Lux Mundi* (1889): emphasis on the revelation of the Trinity through experience; preference for the social analogy for the Trinity; emphasis on God as creator. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple*, 2, 183. Underhill, in her understanding of God the Creative Spirit, reflected all these trends. Todd Johnson notes this when he writes of Underhill’s Trinitarian theology that “like her contemporaries, she started from human experience to develop a doctrine of God.” Johnson, “In Spirit and Truth,” 256.

<sup>45</sup> See chap. 4, p. 201.

<sup>46</sup> See chap. 4, p. 202.

<sup>47</sup> Hogan, “The Proximity of Doctrine: Underhill and Sayers on the Trinity,” 275.

understandings,”<sup>48</sup> and displays “the importance of Christ.”<sup>49</sup> However, such conclusions are not convincing, derived as they are from a superficial reading of *The School of Charity*, and made without due reference to other of Underhill’s writings.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, they lack consultation with the wider theological perspective of intra-trinitarian relationships. As a result, Hogan’s attempt to “trinify” Underhill’s spirituality appears rather forced.

In his monumental work on the beauty and glory of God, Balthasar argues that a non-trinitarian God results in “a lusterless and joyless (and also humourless) – in short, an uncomely God.”<sup>51</sup> Barth likewise holds that “The triunity of God is the secret of His beauty.”<sup>52</sup> Given that Underhill operated “apart from God’s economy of salvation,” and without due cognizance of Trinitarian doctrinal statements, her image of God the Creative Spirit was amazing in its richness and beauty.<sup>53</sup> While this may have arisen in part from a Trinitarian understanding which hovered in the background of her thinking, her aesthetic experience was the determining factor. The darkness, colour and grandeur of the cathedrals

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<sup>48</sup> Hogan, “The Proximity of Doctrine: Underhill and Sayers on the Trinity,” 282.

<sup>49</sup> Hogan, “The Proximity of Doctrine: Underhill and Sayers on the Trinity,” 283.

<sup>50</sup> Smalley points out that *The School of Charity*, which pertains to address the principal articles of the Nicene Creed, “makes no mention of the pre-existence and *homoousion* of the Logos incarnate in Jesus.” Smalley, “Evelyn Underhill and the Mystical Tradition,” 283 - 284. In his discussion, Hogan makes no reference to *Light of Christ*, in which Underhill sets out her clearest understanding of Christ or to *The Golden Sequence* in which she presents her pneumatology.

<sup>51</sup> Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol.1, cited in De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 661, cited in De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 115.

<sup>53</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 103.

and churches of continental Europe and the images she contemplated awakened her to beauty – thus to an image of the immanent and transcendent Creative Spirit that was richly vibrant, intense, loving, colourful, joyful and fertile.

Having appraised Underhill’s understanding of God, we now turn our attention to another of the questions posed in Chapter 1: how does Underhill’s experience of visual art shape her theological understanding of the human person?

### **3. Anthropological perspectives**

Underhill’s encounter with visual art was an engagement of the senses. It drew her into contemplation of the human body as expressed through the work of the artist. While we have seen this in all the works of art explored in the previous chapters, it is particularly well illustrated in *Knight of the Spirit* whose demeanour and activity inspired her to ask the meaning of his journey. Her understanding of the knight, and of other figures contemplated through works of art, led her to a particular appreciation of the human person.

Throughout this project we have made many references to Underhill’s oft-repeated saying: “God is the only Reality, and we are real only in so far as we are in His order and He is in ours.”<sup>54</sup> This “personal mantra” sets the entire perspective for any consideration of her understanding of the human person. God is the starting point and the final end of all

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<sup>54</sup> See chap. 2, p. 58 for the first reference.

people, and their lives have meaning only within this theocentric perspective. Here, of course, we are echoing her own language, and even some of its deficiencies. As we saw in the previous section, for her, God is not so much Trinitarian but more the Creative Spirit – the divine incarnational principle present in the world. Every person has meaning, then, within the context of the Creative Spirit who is Absolute Love and Absolute Beauty. This was Underhill’s experience as she stood in Chartres Cathedral surrounded by the beauty and presence of God. She came to see “what we are.”<sup>55</sup> We will now tease out her notion of “what we are,” and situate it in a larger frame of reference.

First, it is clear that her spirituality is in continuity with the tradition that treats the human person in a holistic sense with its emphasis on the embodied nature of our human existence. She recognises the person as a duality of body and soul or, citing von Hügel, as “amphibian.” In a number of places she refers to Aristotle and Aquinas in saying that “man is a contemplative animal,” while at the same time noting that these two thinkers “did not describe man as a contemplative spirit.”<sup>56</sup> Callahan deems that “one could say she meant that the person is a contemplative embodied being.”<sup>57</sup> As a result, Underhill’s spirituality

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<sup>55</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 30.

<sup>56</sup> See for example Underhill, *Man and the Supernatural*, 14, 113; Underhill, *Mixed Pastures*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 134. Callahan also relates Underhill’s understanding of the human person as a contemplative embodied being to Lonergan’s description of the human being as a “symbolic animal.” Self transcendence is the “dynamism of human reality” – a sense and consciousness which integrates love of others and the world and cognitive, moral and religious authenticity. Bernard Lonergan, “Religious Experience,” and “Religious Knowledge,” in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan* ed. Frederick Crowe (New York: Paulist, 1985), 113 - 145, 123 - 124, 131 - 134, 141 cited in Callahan *Evelyn Underhill*, 152, n., 3.

escapes being a Plotinian flight of “the alone to the alone,” for contemplation overflows into action for a better world. It is an ethical mysticism.

Second, Underhill understands the human person to be made in the image of God. Aquinas, drawing on Augustine, explains that the divine image is found in human beings in three ways. Firstly, every person has a natural aptitude to understand, love and worship God. Secondly, we can exist in the image of God by way of a conscious response to God. Through the grace of God and its various gifts and virtues, we actually or habitually know and love God, albeit imperfectly. Through grace we are drawn into communion with the divine persons and are conformed to them. By so sharing in the divine life, we have the capacity to know, love, judge and choose in the way God does – as if it is second nature to do so. Thirdly, the image of God is humanly realised in the perfect “face to face” knowing and love of the blessed in heaven. Here the divine image in us consists in the likeness of glory.<sup>58</sup>

Underhill does not explicitly call on the richness of this theological tradition with its tripartite consideration of realisation of the divine image in human existence. She conveys her understanding of the first two ways of imaging God as in Aquinas through the images

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 93, 4 and 5. For translations of the *Summa*, the author has consulted the Latin/English (Blackfriars) version of the English Dominican Province (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1963 - 1975), and the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. On-line version [www.newadvent.org/summa](http://www.newadvent.org/summa) Accessed 20. 8. 2008. Summaries or paraphrases are the author's. Hereafter cited as *ST*.

of the two storey house, the chalet in the mountains and *Knight of the Spirit*.<sup>59</sup> She thus attempts to capture the specific transcendent dimensions of human consciousness as the vertical God-ward intentionality finding its incarnate fullness in dedication to the horizontal. Secondly, her focus is on the human being as the image of God in the capacity to know, love and worship. This is the very “essence of man’s being, his free and loving will.”<sup>60</sup> But this must be stimulated if a free response of the will to the “incitement” of the Spirit is to occur. She interprets this as a gift, as grace transforms the person in mind, heart, will and psychic life.<sup>61</sup>

There is a striking convergence here between Underhill and Aquinas. She too sees the second level of the person in the image of God in the conscious, willed response to the invitation of the real, and feels the attractions of Love. The human subject finds its ultimate reality in response to the truth of God’s self-giving love. Freedom and true selfhood are realised within God’s freedom and will as the person grows in the image and likeness of God.

The convergence of Aquinas and Underhill in this area can be approached from another angle. This brings us to the third way in which she perceives humanity. Underhill’s overall focus is on the total act of God in creation. This is understood as the great movement of the

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<sup>59</sup> Underhill, *The House of the Soul*, 67 - 73. Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 21, 100 - 103.

<sup>60</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 46.

<sup>61</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 52.

divine will in bringing about the kingdom with each person as part of this “mighty symphony.”<sup>62</sup> There is a teleological dimension in which “all creation has purpose. It looks towards perfection.”<sup>63</sup> The question for each person is: “What function must this life play in the great and secret economy of God?”<sup>64</sup> The person is called upon to move from an individual to a universal standpoint. Movement into God is “movement into reality, into the truth of things.”<sup>65</sup> Here we understand Underhill’s resonating with Dionysius and Aquinas for whom the image of God in the human being has not only an interior realisation, but a cosmic significance. Furthermore, whereas for Augustine sacraments are remedies for a fallen world, for Underhill as for Dionysius and for Aquinas, “symbolic action is a normal part of the dynamism of the cosmos reaching upward towards God.”<sup>66</sup>

There are detectable similarities with Aquinas’ notion of Providence – God’s loving plan and sustaining presence in the universe. This relates to the fourth aspect of Underhill’s notion of the human person. Each individual participates in the work of God by cooperating with what God is bringing about – the Kingdom of God itself. For her, personal freedom finds fulfillment within the freedom of the Spirit at work in the world.

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<sup>62</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 57.

<sup>64</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul*, 81.

<sup>66</sup> M-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essay on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968; 1983), 135.

For Aquinas, personal growth in wisdom is accompanied by the love-inspired prudential action that enables the human being to actively share in divine Providence.

The fifth factor in Underhill's understanding of the human person converges with a well-established spiritual tradition. Her repetition of Augustine's phrase, *capax dei*, indicates that she sees the religious longing for relationship with the transcendent and with God as central to humankind.<sup>67</sup> We recall from Chapter 5 that in the painting *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, she perceived the two ways through which this is expressed: divine and human desire.<sup>68</sup> The "two movements of created and Creative love" portrayed in the image symbolise a double movement of God's desire for us and our desire for God, of God's absolute will and love and our will and love. Underhill uses the magnet as a root metaphor for desire as it works in creation and humanity. The Divine Spirit draws us and we inevitably respond: such is the strength of our desire.<sup>69</sup> The central position which Underhill gave to desire in her writing is consistent with others within the tradition. Teresa writes "this Lord of ours is so anxious that we should desire Him . . . that he calls us ceaselessly"<sup>70</sup> and that "the more the soul learns about the greatness and goodness of God,

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<sup>67</sup> Saint Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1963), XIV: 11.

<sup>68</sup> See chap. 5, pp. 253 - 256.

<sup>69</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 27.

<sup>70</sup> Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. John Venard (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1988), 2.1.



the more her desire increases.”<sup>71</sup> Julian of Norwich favours the word “longing” in her description of desire.<sup>72</sup> The theme of desire is strong in the diaries of Etty Hillesum, a contemporary of Underhill. Imprisoned in Auschwitz, she described her desire for inner truth (God) as “like a slow and stately ship sailing across endless oceans, never in search of safe anchorage.”<sup>73</sup> That desire continues to be central to theological considerations is illustrated in the works of such writers as Sebastian Moore and Walter Conn.<sup>74</sup>

There are further convergences with tradition suggested by the phrase, *capax dei*, which provide an insight into Underhill’s concept of “what we are.” First, she speaks of our having a capacity for the infinite in relation to the true self and its depths. A recurring theme throughout our study, this notion is captured by Underhill in such images “apex” and “ground” of the soul and as the “gathering point of personality” or selfhood.<sup>75</sup> Secondly, for Underhill, *capax dei* provides a link between her epistemology and anthropology. One becomes a true self only through the actions of knowing and loving

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<sup>71</sup> Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, 11.1.

<sup>72</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), chapter 31. She writes: “. . . truly there is in God a quality of thirst and longing [which] enables us to respond to his longing.” Cited in Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending our Desires* (London: Novalis and Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001), 39.

<sup>73</sup> Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941 - 1943* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 92.

<sup>74</sup> Moore writes: “There is also a *direct* experience of my desirableness, not through desiring an object but from within. Thus awakened to myself, I desire I know not what. This is a yearning for *intimacy with that which, by desiring me, makes me to be, to be desirable: God.*” Sebastian Moore, *Let This Mind Be In You* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 1. Walter Conn writes of the desire for transcendence as the most fundamental human desire. See, Walter Conn, *The Desiring Self* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 5.

<sup>75</sup> Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 43.

God. Hence, for Underhill, as in Aquinas and John of the Cross, *capax dei* implies a view of the self as intentional and relational. The soul (self) requires relationships with others and ultimately with God in order to be a self. Thirdly, Underhill captures the dynamics through which *capax dei* is realised in the person through the image of the fish in the sea. “Its surroundings,” she writes, “give it beauty, quality and power which is not its own . . . so the soul sunk in God . . . is supported, filled, transformed in beauty by a vitality and a power which is not its own.”<sup>76</sup> As the fish remains a fish within its surroundings, so the union with God about which Underhill speaks enables the human personality to become its true self. Here we see Underhill’s notion of deification and her understanding of *capax dei* coming together. We are our true selves only when our desire for the transcendent and for God is satisfied by immersion into God so that, “being wholly full of Thee,”<sup>77</sup> “we are in His order and He is in ours.”<sup>78</sup>

Closely linked with Underhill’s understanding of the cosmic dimension of humanity is the sixth dimension of her anthropology – her concept of sin. In Chapter 5, we saw that through her contemplation of *The Creation of Adam*, Underhill regards sin as a marring of the beauty of God’s creation, and a fundamental disharmony between the human person

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<sup>76</sup> Cited in David Walker, *God is a Sea: the Dynamics of Christian Living* (Sydney: Society of St Paul, 1977), 131.

<sup>77</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

<sup>78</sup> See chap. 2, p. 58.

and the Creator.<sup>79</sup> Towards the end of her life she suggested that sin is understood not by “mere theological say-so,” but by relating it “to our whole experience of life.”<sup>80</sup> Human freedom, and its associated ability to choose, is compromised by a deep-seated dissonance disrupting the great symphony of creation. At this point, she anticipates contemporary approaches to original sin in relation to the human being as part of creation, rather than on the more anthropocentric Fall/Redemption approach of Augustine. Marie-Joseph Lagrange describes this sin as the condition of disharmony with each other and with the universe which followed the original self-exclusion from the Creator.<sup>81</sup> Ormerod, following the approach of Sebastian Moore, discusses original sin within the universal victimhood of humankind. Because, “prior to sinning, we are first and foremost sinned against,” our consciousness has been distorted in a way which “muddies our search for direction in the movement of life.”<sup>82</sup> Moore calls this weakened state the self’s “essential ambivalence” or inner “wobble.”<sup>83</sup> And just as Ormerod states that the victimhood that constitutes original sin is “not an ontological constitute of being human,” so Underhill does not assume that sin is intrinsic to our authentic selves. Contemplating *The Creation of Adam*, she remarked that sin cripples our true selves and twists us out of our God-given shape.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, she

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<sup>79</sup> See chap. 5, p. 278 - 281.

<sup>80</sup> Underhill to C. S. Lewis, 13. 1. 1941 in Underhill, *Letters*, 301.

<sup>81</sup> Marie Joseph Lagrange, cited in Moore, *Let This Mind Be In You*, 87.

<sup>82</sup> Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2007), 79.

<sup>83</sup> Moore, *Let This Mind Be In You*, xi.

<sup>84</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 64.

distinguishes between the inherent goodness of the human person and those decisions and actions that are sinful. This positive view of humankind, despite the dissonance which lies at its heart, is fundamental to Underhill's spirituality.

So far in our discussion of Underhill's theological anthropology, we have focused on six characteristics which describe humankind in relation to God. We come now to examine the seventh, which is her theological perception of cooperation with God. Rather than being a separate distinguishing feature, cooperation permeates every aspect of her anthropology so as to be an integrating theme in her spirituality. By cooperating with God, we image God in relation to our self-directed freedom and in our capacity to know and love. We collaborate with God's loving plan for the universe and so participate in divine providence. We share in the work of God as the divine artist in the creation and guidance of the universe. By cooperating with God, the human agent acts within an all-embracing goodness, to be "an agent of divine fecundity", an "energizing centre", a "parent of transcendental life."<sup>85</sup> Underhill cites Aquinas to give a metaphysical foundation to the creature's cooperation with God: "[T]he last perfection to supervene upon a thing, is its becoming the cause of other things."<sup>86</sup> True collaboration with God is the creature's creative response to the call of the Creative Spirit – and so to become, on the finite level, a co-creator with God. This "anthropological maximalism" flows from being created in the

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<sup>85</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 428.

<sup>86</sup> Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk. 3, chap. 21, cited in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 428; Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, 45 - 46.

image of God, knowingly and lovingly to collaborate with God in the work of salvation.<sup>87</sup> Thus while maintaining a stance of humility and obedience before God – characteristic of “anthropological minimalism,” – the human agent works in the synergy of active communion with God.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, we come to the eighth aspect of Underhill’s theological anthropology – the transformative gifts of the Creative Spirit. Here we return to a previous section in this chapter, as we discuss knowledge, contemplation and transformation in her understanding of humanity. We noted previously her explicit reference to gifts of the Spirit that involve insight, wisdom and knowledge.<sup>89</sup> Her earlier work, *Mysticism*, throws light on the kind of knowledge that characterises the life of contemplation. For one who lives in union with God, she uses the analogy of someone – “an exile” – returning home in order to live “in his native land.”<sup>90</sup> The individual is identified with his homeland yet “retains his personality intact.”<sup>91</sup> One is a citizen by right. It is not a privilege granted by external authority. It is birthright founded in the identity of one who belongs to the divine family.

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<sup>87</sup> John Jillions, “Generations call her Blessed,” in *The Tablet*, 25 March, 2006, 15.

<sup>88</sup> Jillions, “Generations call her Blessed,” 15.

<sup>89</sup> See chap. 6, p. 325 - 326.

<sup>90</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

<sup>91</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

This God-centred identity brings a distinctive form of awareness and knowing. No one can really understand a culture from outside it – as an alien. One has to be born in it in order to know it from the inside. No one can “know the spirit of England but the English.”<sup>92</sup> This knowledge is given only by “intuitive participation,” by “immersion rather than by thought.”<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the secret inner life of God is accessible only for those who are its citizens, members of the divine family. It entails a knowing that comes from “living a life, breathing an atmosphere,” through “union with that same Light by which they see, and which they see.”<sup>94</sup> It is the knowing that comes from loving, insight flowing from union with the loved object. In contrast to a dispassionate, objective and analytical mode of investigation, such knowledge is more affective and intuitive; it arises from the union in mind and heart of one person with another. Aquinas terms this kind of knowledge, “connaturality”. Egan explains:

It is this participation in the divine life that renders a person connatural with God. As the mystical tradition avers, this connaturality is the deepest form of knowledge possible. It is trans-conceptual loving knowledge engendered by God at the fine point of the human spirit, prior to its division into intellect and will. It knows God by loving God and loves God by knowing him. In the words of Richard of St Victor, “Where there is love, there is seeing.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

<sup>93</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

<sup>94</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

<sup>95</sup> Harvey Egan, “Negative Way,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 704.

The gifts of the Spirit introduce the contemplative to a present experience of the divine, in anticipation of the face-to-face vision of God that is to come. The call to holiness, and hence to the means to achieve it, is universal. The experience of the indwelling Spirit is not confined to “mystics” in the narrow sense. It is integral to the presence of divine love. It brings with it a sense of the fulfilment of our deepest desires since we are in harmonious relationship with God the goal of all our yearning. There results an overflowing delight and joy. The three prime activities of the normal self – feeling, intellect and will – “though they seem to be fused, are really carried up to a higher term.”<sup>96</sup>

More specifically, following Underhill’s discussion of contemplation, contemplative awareness of God is attached to intellect, will and emotion, yet it is different and transcends them. It is like “an immediate perception, as if one touched its object with one’s hand.”<sup>97</sup> In the words of St Bernard, “it may be defined as the soul’s true unerring intuition, the unhesitating apprehension of the truth.”<sup>98</sup> Then, citing Aquinas, Underhill says that this “simple vision of the truth ends in a movement of desire.”<sup>99</sup> Underhill appeals to these various sources to show the interweaving threads that make up this immediate knowledge. It seems to be primarily a “movement of the heart” since it is

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<sup>96</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 437.

<sup>97</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 50.

<sup>98</sup> Saint Bernard, *Considerations*, cited in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 50.

<sup>99</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, II, II, 180, 3 and 5, cited in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 50.

infused “with burning love.”<sup>100</sup> There is an intensity of focus on its “most sublime object of thought” that brings “intellectual subtlety.”<sup>101</sup> There is a resolute, unflinching will in the face of “natural doubts, prejudices and human self-indulgence.”<sup>102</sup>

As faith enjoys a non-conceptual awareness of the divine, the aesthetic pattern of Underhill’s thinking is a kind of bridge between God’s Absolute Beauty and the limits of human experience. Surrounded by the beauty of Chartres Cathedral and in her contemplation of works of art, she grew into “an understanding of things” which was beyond words.<sup>103</sup>

In our discussion on Underhill’s understanding of the human person, we have focused on eight distinguishing features. The human person is an embodied spirit created in the image of God who loves and desires every person and the whole of creation to come to fulfillment and perfection within the divine plan for the universe. Despite the dissonance which lies at the heart of humanity, it desires union with God and is enabled to achieve this through the gifts of the Creative Spirit. Embedded in each of these characteristics is the notion of cooperation with God whereby the human person responds creatively to the call of the Creative Spirit to be a co-creator with God in the work of salvation.

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<sup>100</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 50.

<sup>101</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 50.

<sup>102</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 50.

<sup>103</sup> Underhill to Stuart Moore, 24. 4. 1898. Underhill Collection.



After drawing together these epistemological, theological and anthropological perspectives, there is a final point to be made. Throughout this project we have frequently noted that Underhill is neither concerned with a theological system or method, nor explicitly attentive to doctrinal definitions. There are elements of continuity and discontinuity in this regard, as her spirituality developed. Robert Schreiter, while investigating local theologies, discusses what he names a “theology as wisdom” or *sapientia*. In his view, “*sapientia*” centres on the interiority of human experience as a vehicle to divine knowledge; it exhibits a cosmic outreach and a longing for unity. For that reason, it frequently uses the image of a pathway or journey to symbolise the spiritual journey.<sup>104</sup> He goes on to say that *sapientia* flourishes in relating the visible to the invisible, in analogy, image and metaphor – all leading to *theologia*, the contemplation of God. These features are evident in Underhill’s thinking and writing, especially with her focus on aesthetic experience as a means of knowing God. This, when linked to constant reliance on the image of the Plotinian journey and the universality of her religious world view, speaks strongly of wisdom theology. It is significant also that in her discussion of the gifts of the Creative Spirit, she maintained the order described by Augustine.<sup>105</sup> Thus, awe or fear of the Lord is first, knowledge (*scientia* or sure knowledge) is third, and wisdom

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<sup>104</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 85. I acknowledge Kevin Hogan, whose article, “The Proximity of Doctrine: Underhill and Sayers on the Trinity,” first drew my attention to wisdom theology in relation to Underhill.

<sup>105</sup> Augustine does not present seven gifts of the Holy Spirit but rather seven steps on a ladder by which we may approach and use scripture as we come to our knowledge of God. While Underhill favoured the Augustinian approach, she adapted it to her own ends taking his steps and his order, but following Church tradition in naming the steps as the traditional gifts of the Spirit. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Bk. II, trans. J. T. Shaw (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), chap. 7.

(*sapientia*) is the culmination of the gifts. Underhill describes this final gift as “that touch or stirring of God which is the very substance of contemplation; tasting Him, savouring as it were the very flavour of Reality.”<sup>106</sup> *Sapientia* is therefore not an abstract knowledge, but a “tasting knowledge” – knowledge by which we taste the flavour of God.<sup>107</sup> Her theology, therefore, can be accurately designed as “sapiential”. It might be suggested even that she developed her own “local theology” along these lines, thereby anticipating the dialogical and interfaith practice of recently developing local theologies.

#### **4. The Influence of visual art and church architecture on Underhill’s spirituality**

In this chapter so far, we have been evaluating the influence of visual art on Underhill’s spirituality under the headings of epistemology, theology and anthropology. But now we return to the principal aim of the thesis and the underpinning of its dominant methodology – spirituality. Here we refine our evaluation by focusing on the question: How does visual art influence her spirituality?

First, we note an apophatic quality. After her first experience of the paintings and frescoes of Florence, Underhill wrote that one must “take trouble to look into them” in order to see

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<sup>106</sup> Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 88.

<sup>107</sup> Keating, *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit*, 108

that “they are full of sweetness and beauty.”<sup>108</sup> In the early morning darkness, “seclusion, intimacy and silence” of Rocamadour she experienced “an atmosphere one could not mistake.”<sup>109</sup> In these words – “beauty, silence, sweetness, atmosphere” – we come to the heart of how visual art influences her spirituality. As we have seen throughout our explorations, it was first and foremost the beauty of image and of place that touched her most profoundly. That beauty was a window through which the unseen world shone through, an intimation of what was “beyond the fringe of speech.” In this sense, the images and churches she encountered have a “threshold” character, to use Crumlin’s adjective, in that they entice the beholder to the edge of new vision and awareness.<sup>110</sup> As she “sees” the glory of heaven looking out upon her, Underhill is in awe at the profound mystery before her. Thus she comes to a deeper awareness of the ineffability of God the Creative Spirit. This profound experience guides her spiritual journey. The incomprehensible, holy mystery of God is the core of her spirituality – appropriately described as apophatic. Thus towards the end of her life, ever conscious of her powerlessness to speak of God, she repeats that dominant theme in her writing and her spirituality: “God is all. All takes place within Him. He alone matters, He alone is.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Underhill, *Journal of Switzerland and Italy*, 22. 4. 1898.

<sup>109</sup> Underhill, *Shrines and Cities*, 94 - 95.

<sup>110</sup> Rosemary Crumlin, *Images of Religion in Australian Art* (Kensington: Bay Books, 1989), 18.

<sup>111</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 34 - 35.

Second, along with the apophatic quality, there is a more positive kataphatic direction. When she contemplates the image of the Creative Spirit lovingly and deliberately shaping the half-formed Adam, she sees a God who is personally engaged with humankind. When she reflects on images of Christ – the revealer of God – sharing human birth, life and death, she realises the totality of that engagement. She sees God incarnate among us in the midst of creation. As the images draw her into this understanding of God, they connect her with human experience and inspire productive insights. Her understanding of the human person as a bodily and spiritual reality made in the image of God is confirmed. The beauty of visual art, while it draws her into the ineffability of God, also inspires her with a sense of the relationship between God and creation. Yet, there is a sense of ordinariness and practicality about Underhill as she remained intent on presenting the fundamentals of spirituality in clear and workable terms. As Cropper noted of her friend: she “hated religious jargon and woolly phrase, and tried to avoid the technical language of theology.”<sup>112</sup> This accounts for her devotion to *Knight of the Spirit* whose application to the grind of daily life both inspired and exemplified her own spirituality. Although her sense of the holy incomprehensible Divine Spirit powerfully affects her spirituality, the kataphatic dimension of her religious thinking, evoked in a particular way by visual art, is highly significant.

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<sup>112</sup> Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 237.

Third, visual art brought to Underhill's spirituality an informed and integrated dimension. We recall from the previous chapters that her experience of visual art was always accompanied by a broad perspective of knowledge and other experience. When she contemplated a work of art therefore, her mind's role was not so much passive, but "akin to that of a lamp" which actively gives shape and colour to image.<sup>113</sup> In her contemplation of a work of art, she was engaged firstly on an affective level. But through that response she was led from the world of appearance to religious insight and understanding on a more cognitive level. Theological truths arose from her contemplation of the artistic image. Visual art instructed her understanding and brought order and direction to her spirituality. That culminated in the "quietude of the spirit" portrayed in *Saint Jerome in his Study*.<sup>114</sup> At the same time, it allowed her the freedom to forge her own understanding of the spiritual journey. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in her interpretation of *Christ in Limbo*. She is led from "a most loveable" fresco to an image of liberation and redemption.<sup>115</sup> Again her interpretation of *The Creation of Adam* and *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*, led to her formulation of the spiritual life as grace and desire. In this interplay of experience, feeling, aesthetic appreciation and deep understanding, an integrated spirituality is apparent.

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<sup>113</sup> Wynn, *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding*, 156. Wynn cites William Hazlitt who gave voice to this kind of perspective when he wrote in 1818: "The light of poetry is not only a direct light but also a reflected light, that while it shews us the object, throws a sparkling radiance on all around it."

<sup>114</sup> See chap. 6, p. 339.

<sup>115</sup> See chap. 1, p. 7.

Fourth, visual art influenced Underhill's spirituality by giving it an ethical character. We recall that Underhill's Plotinian background enabled her to perceive beauty – Absolute Beauty – as a pathway to truth and goodness. Therefore, the images which she saw expressed a moral imperative which communicated values, challenged her thinking and were significant in transforming her spirituality. This is exemplified in her contemplation of *Saint Francis Receives the Stigmata* when she comes face to face with Christ who teaches that holiness consists in redemptive engagement with the world. Again, in *The Last Supper*, she sees that loving service is integral to the spiritual life. The ethical dimension of visual art on Underhill was highly significant in that it was a means of her transformation from a private spirituality to one of social responsibility. On a practical level, it informed her conscience with the sense of social justice characteristic of her later years.

Fifth, visual art influenced Underhill's spirituality by providing it with an institutional dimension. All the works of art about which she wrote, and which we have discussed in this project, are religious in content. Most were executed under the patronage of the Church, and are therefore devotional and specifically didactic in character. But as we have seen, she set aside this aspect, thus allowing herself a more free and individual interpretation. She appreciated these works of Christian art in her own way. For example, the four depictions of Saint Francis referred to in her writings inspired her to recognise the saint as a member of a definite religious body – the Christian Church. Her contemplation of *Crucifixion and Saints* evoked an understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ. Her visit to St Mark's Basilica in Venice provided her with the experience of being in the midst of a participating congregation. Here we see visual art challenging and inspiring her privately orientated spirituality to the point where she takes up her active membership of

the Anglican Church and participates in its liturgy. Her spirituality, in its middle and later years, becomes more ecclesial and sacramental.

Sixth, visual art influenced Underhill's spirituality by inspiring its strong inclusive and ecumenical dimension. For her *Knight of the Spirit* represented everyone engaged in making the spiritual journey. The early interest she had shown in non-Christian religions, the sympathetic view she held towards all Christian denominations and her desire and work for Christian unity all came together in the person of her knight. The road he travelled was the common road of life, his difficulties were shared by all and his virtues were examples to be followed. Underhill's becoming a practising Anglican did not narrow her spiritual or Christian horizons. The image of *Knight of the Spirit* inspired a wider ecumenism.

Seventh, visual art influenced Underhill's spirituality by giving it a special language or grammar. Religious writing through the ages has employed a variety of ways to speak of God: analogy, metaphor and symbol to name the most significant. Visual art can be classified as a symbol in that it participates, through its expression of beauty, in the reality to which it points. As a symbol it has its own power in communicating multi-layered meanings. Underhill understood this. She wrote that "art is the real language of the soul ... it is the link with the beyond."<sup>116</sup> At a personal level, visual art provided the most appropriate way of approaching God because its compelling power elicited wonder, awe,

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<sup>116</sup> Underhill, *The Grey World*, 92 - 93.

passion, feeling and a sense of the superabundance of God. She felt, by way of visual art, a liberation from “toxic literalism” and the “desire to grasp and define” God.<sup>117</sup> She recognised that “paintings are symbols which reveal and invite; they are not doctrines which define and oblige.”<sup>118</sup> In dealing with others, Underhill took the same method. She referred to a certain work of art in few words. During retreats she also supplied a copy of the image. Words being inadequate, she then left the image to speak for itself and to draw its viewer into the mysteries it symbolised. Thus the image became the vehicle of communication and the grammar by which she spoke of God. Art became for her an essential resource for religious communication.

Eighth, visual art imbued Underhill’s spirituality with a contemplative quality. John Drury’s comment is apposite: “Looking at . . . pictures entails a contemplative waiting upon them which puts us alongside those who painted and viewed them so devoutly by putting us in the realm of prayer, with its passive expectancy, its active openness.”<sup>119</sup> Underhill’s contemplative response emerged through such an open and expectant attentiveness. For her, contemplation was more than mere looking at the image. It was seeing “with the eyes of the soul.” It was an experience of light and darkness, of knowing

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<sup>117</sup> Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 20 - 21, cites Sally McFague as suggesting that “only religious contemplation or prayer is sufficient to keep toxic literalism at bay” and free us from “the desire to grasp and define.”

<sup>118</sup> Crumlin, *Images of Religion in Australian Art*, 13.

<sup>119</sup> John Drury, *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and their Meanings* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1999), xiii.



and unknowing, of an image that reveals, but also conceals. This was her experience in Chartres Cathedral where God was “so far above . . . and yet so divinely near.”<sup>120</sup> Her prayerful engagement with visual art underscores the significance of image as a guide to contemplative spirituality.<sup>121</sup>

Ninth, visual art influenced Underhill’s spirituality with a strong Franciscan flavour of simplicity. Of the 14 works of art which we have examined, four feature Saint Francis of Assisi. Contemplating these images, she was inspired by his gentleness, his devotion to the banal routine of the ordinary, his generous love and utter simplicity. Her life and her writings were marked by a similar uncomplicated approach. Though a busy, middle class professional, she remained natural and modest with an ease and openness which revealed simplicity of spirit.

Tenth, visual art influenced Underhill’s spirituality as a source of colour, life, joy and beauty. Therefore, her spirituality can rightfully be termed as aesthetic. While we have acknowledged the extremes of her self-examination and self-recrimination over the years,

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<sup>120</sup> Underhill, *Light of Christ*, 29.

<sup>121</sup> In 1910, Underhill did an iconographical study of two works of the school of Van Eyck: *The Fountain of Life* and *Fountain of Living Water*. It is interesting that the detailed study which she makes of these two works is vastly different in style from the many other works of art about which she wrote. Being an iconographical study, her interpretation of the two Van Eyck works aimed at drawing out what they revealed and taught about God, the Church and the sacraments. It is matter-of-fact and tightly honed as befits her audience. On the other hand, and as we have seen, her treatment of other works of art though brief, is descriptive and reflective leaving the viewer open to the power of the image. This disparity might suggest the difference between a work which has been the subject of Underhill’s intellectual study, and that which has been the subject of her long and oft-repeated contemplation. This illustrates the pivotal role of contemplation inspired by works of art in her spirituality. Evelyn Underhill, “*The Fountain of Life: An Iconographical Study*,” in *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 17, April 1910, 99 - 109.

this inner turmoil never dominated her spirituality. On the contrary, her appreciation for art and her delight in visiting the churches and cathedrals of Continental Europe contributed to the lively, joyful style and colourful manner which typified her spiritual journey.<sup>122</sup> Her spirituality exhibits an aesthetic, dynamic, organic, incarnational and integrated character. The evocative power of visual art drew her into the beauty and the mystery of the Creative Spirit whose presence fills all creation.

Finally, these ten influences of visual art converge in making it a source of wisdom. Her experience of art took her deep into Christian spiritual tradition. We have mentioned such themes as the transcendence and immanence of God, social responsibility, the practice of contemplation, the goal of transformation and the significance of Church – to name but some of the ways she was influenced by visual art. Art grounded her in the “long history and inherited memory of spiritual wisdom,” giving her spirituality strong roots and ensuring a rich and fruitful flowering.<sup>123</sup> What earlier we referred to as her “theology of wisdom,” becomes progressively a spirituality of wisdom under the inspiration of Christian art.

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<sup>122</sup> The Underhill Collection, King’s College, London holds a number of unpublished letters from Underhill to her husband which give a special insight into her lively spirit, keen sense of humour, sensitive nature, warm capacity for friendship and the intimate relationship she enjoyed with her husband. Though these aspects of her character do not contribute to a theological evaluation of Underhill’s writing, they do shed light on her personality which is an outward expression of her spirituality. Her love for art seems to fit with her joyous and dynamic spirit. See Archives box 1/15/10, 11, 18, 30, 31, 118, 128. Underhill Collection.

<sup>123</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 206.

In all this, Underhill, can be located in a rich aesthetic tradition. From early Christian art, to Gregory of Nyssa's "preference for visual imagery" and to Saint Bonaventure's appreciation of art as an aid to "sluggishness of the affections . . . for our emotion is aroused more by what is seen than by what is heard," visual art has played a significant part in Christian spirituality.<sup>124</sup> Julian of Norwich was deeply moved by the image of the hazelnut.<sup>125</sup> A contemporary, Simone Weil, recorded aesthetic experiences that have a striking resemblance to those of Underhill, although their lives followed vastly different paths.<sup>126</sup> Underhill anticipates more recent writers who have recorded the influence of visual art on their lives. We recall Paul Tillich's gazing at a Botticelli painting "in a state

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<sup>124</sup> Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, "Introduction" in Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. by Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 7. Saint Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey*, trans. and ed. E. Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 72 - 73.

<sup>125</sup> Austin Cooper, *Julian of Norwich: Reflection on Selected Texts* (Sydney: St Paul Publications, 1986.), 26.

<sup>126</sup> Weil wrote of three separate experiences. The first took place in a Portuguese village as the fishermen's wives walked in procession carrying candles and, under a full moon, sang hymns. As she watched, Weil was suddenly convinced that "Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among them." The second occurred in the church of St Francis in Assisi (one of Underhill's favourite places) where, as the light played on Giotto's frescoes depicting the life of Francis, she records: "I was compelled for the first time in my life to go down on my knees." The third took place at Solesmes. Listening to the singing of Gregorian chant and reading George Hubert's poem, *Love*, she experienced "a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words." Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 19 - 20. Simone Weil (1909 - 1943) was born into a Jewish family in France. Estimated as "one of the major religious thinkers of the twentieth century," this exponent of political-mystical philosophy wrote for a variety of socialist and communist publications and worked for various social and political causes. See David Tracy, "Simone Weil and the Impossible: A Radical View of Religion and Culture," in Andrew Pierce and Geraldine Smyth ed. *The Critical Spirit: Theology at the Crossroads of Faith and Culture* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2003), 208. After her death her complex and idiosyncratic thought became available through the publication of her notebooks and other works, including *The Need for Roots* and *Waiting on God*, which are regarded by some as spiritual classics. Sheldrake sums up her spiritual orientation as the belief that "in a rootless, spirit-bereft, atheist world there was the need for a new kind of saintliness, expressed in terms of total self-giving, solidarity, and the struggle for justice. This was underpinned by a spirituality of attentiveness to God and waiting in patience on God." Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, 182.

approaching ecstasy.”<sup>127</sup> Thomas Merton, while on pilgrimage in Asia, wrote “I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination.”<sup>128</sup> Henri Nouwen declares that his encounter with Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal* “set in motion a long spiritual adventure that brought me to a new understanding of my vocation and offered me new strength to live it.”<sup>129</sup> But whereas the comments we have cited above are somewhat fragmentary, Underhill’s record of her experience of works of art both focuses on the particular and documents a lifetime of spiritual development.

How then, are we to assess her contribution to the inter-relationship of art and spirituality?

## **5. Underhill’s contribution to the interconnection of art and spirituality**

Underhill’s contribution to spirituality formally began with the publication of *Mysticism*. In this highly regarded book, she made available, in an intelligible way, the classical texts of the Christian mystical tradition, the lives of the mystics and the subject of mysticism. Rather than deal with religious topics removed from the experience of the ordinary person, *Mysticism* explores what it means to be human and religious. Underhill claimed that the

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<sup>127</sup> See chap. 3, p. 105, n. 33.

<sup>128</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (London: Sheldon Press, 1973), 235.

<sup>129</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 3.

mystical element of religion is the personal experience of the love of God in the totality of each individual life. In this respect she de-mystified mysticism by presenting it as a way of being in relationship with God, rather than as some esoteric aspect of religion. The magnitude of her contribution to spirituality through this work has been widely recognised. Allchin declares that “it was in every sense a pioneering work, which marked a new stage in the growth of knowledge of the Christian spiritual tradition in this country.”<sup>130</sup>

As we saw in the previous chapters, during the decade following the publication of *Mysticism*, Underhill’s initial interest in the subject of mysticism matured into the wider field of spirituality. From the early 1920s until her death in 1941, this was the area of her concentration as a spiritual director, public speaker, director of retreats and a highly respected writer on religious topics. During this time, a difficult period in British history, she continued to explore the central theme of *Mysticism*, not as “a category of pure experience or ‘pure consciousness’ prior to or radically separate from institutional religious forms . . . or from interpretation produced by belief-systems” but by concentrating on what it means to be a religious person in a practical sense.<sup>131</sup> In so doing she contributed to spirituality in the following four ways.

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<sup>130</sup> Allchin, “Evelyn Underhill,” 4. Callahan refers to it as “this classic” on the subject of mysticism. Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill*, 34. Greene names it a “remarkable book,” because it “carved out a new subject, made it intelligible, and interpreted it with convincing power.” Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 53 - 54. John Macquarrie makes mention of the extensive knowledge underpinning *Mysticism*. John Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought*, 151 - 152. During the nearly 100 years since its publication, it has remained in print and is currently recommended for reading in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 692.

<sup>131</sup> Sheldrake, *A brief History of Spirituality*, 177. The period of Underhill’s greatest activity, including

First, Underhill showed people that being religious meant personally experiencing the presence and love of God the Creative Spirit. This may, or may not, include involvement in the formally structured religion of the Church. By emphasizing the personal element in this way, she put a new face on religion. It was not limited to the mystics, or the saints, or the Church. God desires and loves humankind and invites every individual to a personal relationship which is to be celebrated from the centre and at the core of all life.

Second, Underhill provided a simple, practical yet firmly grounded way by which to live a Christian spiritual life. God, the divine Creative Spirit, was its starting point, its sure foundation and its final goal. Present throughout creation and humanity in the ordinary circumstances and events of life, the Creative Spirit forms each person in love and calls each person to respond in adoration, to a communion of love and in loving service of others. This personal transformation enables each person to be an agent through which the Creative Spirit works in the world. The foundation of the spiritual life is always grace and desire expressed through adoration, communion and cooperation.<sup>132</sup> Grounded in the tradition, yet inclusive of everyday life and experience, Underhill's explanation of

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writing, was between the two World Wars when the population was both recovering from the horror and death of one scene of battle and fearing the approach of another. Against this background, as we have seen, (chap. 5, pp. 217 - 219) she perceived two movements that impinged on the future of religion: a superficial immanentism based on humanitarian sentiment, and an emphasis on the transcendence of God which created an unbridgeable gap between humanity and God.

<sup>132</sup> We recall here our exploration in Chapter 6 of Underhill's significant link with the strong affective character of the French school of spirituality.

spirituality was firmly based and emphasised the potential for continuing development. At the same time, she was tackling what she saw as the major problem of the times – the loss of a sense of God’s presence and love in the world.

Third, Underhill’s contribution focused on the resource of aesthetic experience in a particular way, in accordance with her own experience of visual art. Rather than referring to the various works of art merely as particular means of devotion or aids to prayer, she incorporated them into her explanation of the basic principles of the spiritual life. Thus they took on a gradually developing pattern with one image building upon another as the structure of the spiritual life emerged. In this harmony of converging experiences and images, spirituality was both aesthetically enriched and firmly structured.

Fourth, Underhill contributed to spirituality by the witness of her own life. A highly intelligent woman of great energy and commitment, she exemplified what she taught by her personal charm, joy of life and capacity for deep friendship. Thus she not only told people about the spiritual life but summoned them, by example, to the adventure of the spiritual journey.

Just as *Mysticism* had marked the formal beginning of Underhill’s contribution to spirituality, so another significant work, *Worship*, signalled the end of her active involvement in the religious scene in England. Addressing “the nature and principles of worship and the chief forms in which they find expression in Christianity,” this substantial

work turned to the importance of the sacraments as an expression of incarnational spirituality.<sup>133</sup> Her spiritual teaching highlighted both the interpersonal relationship existing between God and the individual, and the communal dimension in which this was lived out and celebrated. The impact of *Worship* was immediate: *The Times* reviewer claimed it to be “a masterpiece of the spiritual life, free from all professional partisanship and the prejudices of the sacristy – a book that will bear fruit for many years to come among men and women of many different communions.”<sup>134</sup> Its genius continues to be so recognised.<sup>135</sup>

Evaluating Underhill’s overall contribution to the explanation and nurturing of the spiritual life, Archbishop Ramsey stated that “few in modern times have done more to show the theological foundations of the life of prayer and to witness to the interpenetration of prayer and theology. She has a place of her own, and it is an important one.”<sup>136</sup> Macquarrie estimates her contribution to be “very significant.”<sup>137</sup> Callahan rates her as “a

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<sup>133</sup> Underhill, *Worship*, xi.

<sup>134</sup> Cited in Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 147, n 68.

<sup>135</sup> The religious historian, Horton Davies, noting its ecumenical fairness claims that “no book . . . had been as widely read or as influential in our time in the English-speaking world.” Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 147. Armstrong praises “its clear and spacious outline, its almost irreproachable harmony of theological, historical, devotional and purely practical themes.” Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill*, 279. Greene refers to it as “a lucid and powerful description and analysis of the human response to God.” Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, 121.

<sup>136</sup> Ramsey, “Evelyn Underhill,” 22.

<sup>137</sup> Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought*, 151.



pathfinder”<sup>138</sup> and “one of the few women of her day who saw spirituality and theology as integral to the full Christian life.”<sup>139</sup> David Walker highlights the “spiritual equilibrium” which was foundational to “her great work,” her “deep insight into human nature”<sup>140</sup> and her ability to “transform the simplest life and bring it to be recognised for what it was, a reflection of the divine.”<sup>141</sup> Grace Jantzen, though critical of Underhill in some areas, nonetheless acknowledges that “esteem and indebtedness among the Christian public and my own personal respect and value for her work can hardly be overstated.”<sup>142</sup> Allchin concludes that she “longed to make the teachings of the past come alive for her contemporaries and she succeeded in doing that to a remarkable degree.”<sup>143</sup> Commenting on her contribution to spirituality, T. S. Elliot, a visitor to Underhill’s house, records that “she gave herself to many . . . she was always at the disposal of those who called upon her.”<sup>144</sup> Brame considers that “she became a catalyst for the transformation of ordinary lives into lives of extraordinary commitment and inspiring example.”<sup>145</sup> Though her

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<sup>138</sup> Callahan, *Spiritual Guides for Today*, 40.

<sup>139</sup> Callahan, *Spiritual Guides for Today*, 41.

<sup>140</sup> David Walker, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Sydney: Society of St Paul, 1976), 18.

<sup>141</sup> Walker, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 19.

<sup>142</sup> Jantzen, “The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill,” 80.

<sup>143</sup> Allchin, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *Given to God*, xii.

<sup>144</sup> Cited in Gardner, *The Composition of the Four Quartets*, 70.

<sup>145</sup> Grace Brame, “The Extraordinary within the Ordinary: The Life and Message of Evelyn Underhill,” in *Feminist Voices in Spirituality* ed. Pierre Hegy (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 108.

contribution to spirituality was briefly forgotten after her death, in the opinion of Greene, she has “emerge[d] again today as one of the foremothers of contemporary spirituality.”<sup>146</sup>

The rich, fruitful contribution this woman made to understanding the spiritual life, and to a lesser degree continues to make, is obvious. Compared with others of her time, as Archbishop Ramsey reminds us, “she has a place of her own.” This is remarkable when one considers the torrent of studies on mysticism and spirituality during Underhill’s life. In her early years a number of foreign works became available in English.<sup>147</sup> The writings of William Law, William James, and the Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral (1911 - 1934) William Ralph Inge with whom Underhill had dealings, were also published.<sup>148</sup> Contemporaneous with her own work in England was that of Dom Cuthbert Butler, and of her own spiritual director, Baron von Hügel, as well as the translation into English of several works by Abbé Bremond.<sup>149</sup> Compared to Inge, a pioneer in the area of mysticism, and to von Hügel with

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<sup>146</sup> Dana Greene, “Foreword,” in Cropper, *The Life of Evelyn Underhill: An Intimate Portrait of the Grounding Breaking Author of Mysticism*, (Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003) ix. Allchin writes that “she still opens up, for English-speaking Christians avenues of exploration which can enlarge and deepen their understanding of the workings of the Holy Spirit through the many centuries and cultures which the Church has touched.” Allchin, “Introduction,” in Underhill, *Given to God*, xiv. The fact that her two major works, *Mysticism* and *Worship*, are recommended reading in current editions of *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* and *The New Dictionary of Theology* respectively, confirms the continuing influence of Underhill’s contribution to spirituality.

<sup>147</sup> Among these were Fénelon’s *Spiritual Letters*, Madame Guyon’s *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer*, Bother Lawrence’s *The Practice of the Presence of God* and St Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

<sup>148</sup> William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* with its explanatory subtitle *A Study in Human Nature* appeared in 1902. In 1908, William Law’s *Liberal and Mystical Writings* were edited and published. In her bibliography for *Mysticism* Underhill lists Inge’s *Christian Mysticism* (1899), *Studies of English Mystics* (1906), *Light, Life and Love* (1905) and *Personal Idealism and Mysticism* (1907).

<sup>149</sup> Butler’s *Western Mysticism* appeared in 1919 and von Hügel’s *The Mystical Element of Religion* in 1923.

his emphasis on the institutional and intellectual forms of mysticism, Underhill has a distinctively practical and inclusive orientation. Her down-to-earth approach, her insistence on personal experience in one's relationship with God, the simple directness and clarity of her manner with its use of easy, familiar language all worked to ensure that her teachings influenced larger readership compared to the more specialist and elitist writings of her contemporaries. Here, we must disagree with Davies and others who hold that Underhill was merely a "popularizer" of others' ideas<sup>150</sup> and support the opinion of Ramsey and those who claim that she was "far more than an echo of the Baron," or indeed of anyone else.<sup>151</sup> Her particular understanding of the action of the Creative Spirit, the influence of art on her life and on her account of the spiritual life are original and distinctive. This leads Austin Cooper to state:

She may not have the tight logical mind of an English writer like C. S. Lewis, or the poetical touches of a Charles Williams, but she is decidedly in that tradition which counts Ronald Knox and Michael Ramsey among its better known contributors in more recent years.<sup>152</sup>

There are further contrasts to be noted when we consider others of her contemporaries such as the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the French woman Simone Weil

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<sup>150</sup> Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 136, 144. See chap. 1, p. 37, n. 97 for those who agreed with Davies.

<sup>151</sup> Ramsey, "Evelyn Underhill" 22. Allchin, Tastard, Armstrong and Johnson support this opinion. See chap. 1, p. 37, n., 96.

<sup>152</sup> Austin Cooper, review of *The Spiritual Life* by Evelyn Underhill, 387.

and the American Dorothy Day.<sup>153</sup> These expressed their respective spiritualities through heroic involvement in the political and social issues of their day. Although Bonhoeffer and Day were pacifists, they vigorously confronted, as activists and writers, the injustices and violence of their worlds. On the other hand, Underhill, herself a pacifist in later years, distanced herself from all political parties or popular movements, even if she shared, ultimately speaking, a goal common to the active, politically engaged figures just referred to, in working for the kingdom of God.

Though embedded in the culture of her time and place, Underhill also anticipates the developments in spirituality in more recent times. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the area of aesthetics. Very much within the tradition of Underhill, Rowan Williams in his recent writing on icons comments that “holy places are places where our vision is transfigured . . . new frontiers have been crossed, not from one level of being in the world’s territory to another, but from one level of being in the world to another, a deeper belonging with God and creation.”<sup>154</sup> Elsewhere, he states that art “necessarily relates in

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<sup>153</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 - 1945) lived a community life of teaching, prayer and involvement in the political realities of the day. The last two years of his life were spent in a Nazi prison where he was executed in 1945. Dorothy Day (1887 - 1980) was a journalist and proponent of workers’ struggles and the social gospel. She founded houses of hospitality for the marginalised and as a result of peaceful acts of civil disobedience against war, was arrested many times during her life. We have noted above (see chap. 7, p. 28, n. 126) an outline of Simone Weil’s life. Due in part to a reduction of diet which she voluntarily undertook in sympathy with the Jewish people, she died in 1943. It is interesting that Underhill was aware of men and women of her own time who accepted and re-expressed in a “completely modern spirit” the tradition of the spiritual life. Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 241. Among these were: the French woman who is known under the pseudonym Lucie-Christine, Charles de Foucauld and the Indian mystic, Sadhu Sundar Singh. Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 239 - 256.

<sup>154</sup> Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Mulgrave: John Garratt, 2002), 73.

some way to ‘the sacred’,” “invites contemplation,” and “opens up the dimension in which ‘things are more than they are’, ‘give more than they have’.”<sup>155</sup> Reminiscent of Underhill’s experience in Chartres Cathedral, Sheldrake writes of place as “both here and now, and at the same time a pointer to ‘elsewhere’. God’s presence cannot be imprisoned in the limitations of place.”<sup>156</sup> Nouwen’s detailed reflection on Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal* resonates with Underhill’s treatment of a number of works of art.<sup>157</sup> Art historian and art critic, Sister Wendy Beckett, has done much to invite people to an awareness of the beauty and mystery of God in image and place, as do others working in this field.<sup>158</sup> Underhill stands alone, however, given the number of places and works of art which to which she refers, and the spiritual significance she finds in them.

She can also be considered as a “foremother” in other areas of current spirituality. Albert Nolan, focusing on the spirituality of Jesus, remarks “what matters is not how much I know about God or whether I can know anything at all about God. What matters is whether

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<sup>155</sup> Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 37.

<sup>156</sup> Philip Sheldrake, “Place,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 495.

<sup>157</sup> Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal*.

<sup>158</sup> Sister Wendy’s work in the area of art includes some 30 books, among them *The Story of Painting* (1994), and television series. In Australia, Anne Margot Boyd invites us “to encounter the Gospel narrative with freshness and immediacy” through the contemplation of Rembrandt’s etchings.” See Claire Renkin, “Foreword,” in Anne Margot Boyd, *Christ Our Light: Praying with Rembrandt’s Etchings* (Mulgrave: John Garratt, 2005) 7. In Lois Huey-Heck and Jim Kalnin, *The Spirituality of Art* (Kelowna: Northstone Publishing, 2006), we are invited through a series of images to a deeper enjoyment and appreciation of visual art, the spiritual journey and the connection between the two. Bill Viola, ([www.billviola.com](http://www.billviola.com)), who works in the medium of video art, explores universal human experience from Buddhist, Islamic and Christian traditions. Currently, in the academic world, there are movements towards bringing together Christian theology and other religious and theological traditions with the arts, as in the Institute for Theology, the Imagination and the Arts at St Andrew’s University, Scotland.

God is real to me or not.”<sup>159</sup> Such spiritual realism is easily related to Underhill’s central theme. Examples could be multiplied in the burgeoning world of recent studies of the spiritual life.<sup>160</sup> For instance, Rowan Williams, speaking of spirituality considers:

It must touch every area of human experience, the public and social, the painful, negative, even pathological byways of the mind, the moral and the relational world. And the goal of a Christian life becomes not enlightenment but wholeness – an acceptance of this complicated and muddled bundle of experiences as a possible theatre for God’s creative work.<sup>161</sup>

In her wide ranging presentation of spirituality, Underhill invited people to recognise, in the total experience of life, a wholeness and harmony through which they could acknowledge the centrality of God and be co-creators with God in the world.

Finally, we consider the words of Terry Veling as he reflects on Gadamer’s understanding of “interpretive resonance” with a work of art.

What is required to hear the poetic word is a deeply felt movement of the heart – a *resonance* that responds rather than simply a method that controls. . . . We moderns

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<sup>159</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 141.

<sup>160</sup> Rolheiser’s four non-negotiable pillars of the spiritual life: 1. private prayer and private morality, 2. social justice, 3. mellowness of heart and spirit, 4. community as a constitutive element of true worship, are essential constituents of Underhill’s interpretation of *Knight of the Spirit* and of her development of the formula of adoration, communion and cooperation. Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality: Guidelines for a Christian Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 51. Moltmann, in describing the Spirit as the “unspeakable closeness of God,” reminds us of Underhill’s contemplation of *The Creation of Adam*. Jürgen Moltmann, *Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 12. In Edwards, *Breath of Life*, (119) the author’s invitation to contemplate the Spirit as “a personal divine presence . . . the presence of God in the divine relationship of ongoing creation,” resonates with Underhill’s Creative Spirit as the “everywhere-present pressure of God.”

<sup>161</sup> Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 2.

prefer an interpretative stance of rationally controlled distance, rather than an interpretative approach of heartfelt resonance. What is lost to us . . . is an appreciation of *tradition* as a deep font of *interpretative resonance*. If *resonance* with a work is crucial to the art of interpretation, then surely much is to be gained from the wisdom of past generations who have learned, over the years, to *attune* their hearts to the essential contours of a work.<sup>162</sup>

These words capture the heart of Underhill's contribution to the interconnection of art and spirituality and indeed of all we have learned about her in this project. She did not employ a "method that controls" or stand at a "rationally controlled distance." Hers was the way of intuitive sense and "heartfelt resonance" with visual art. Intensely "attuned to the essential contours of a work" and with a "movement of the heart," she experienced, in the contemplation of image and place, the mysterious presence of a loving God. These words are a fitting conclusion to our discussion on her contribution to art and spirituality.

## **6. The contribution of this study to current knowledge in the field of Christian spirituality**

This project has researched the spirituality of a woman whose life began in Victorian England, spanned the Edwardian era and ended during the Second World War. Our study is two generations removed from her in time. Still, at this later time and in a far distant place, we can capture something of her contribution to the field of Christian spirituality. Despite the broad spectrum of scholarly investigation into her life and spirituality, the aesthetic dimension of her spirituality has been scarcely addressed. Our project, directed to

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<sup>162</sup> Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth as it is in Heaven* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2005), 28.

an exploration of the influence of visual art and church architecture on Underhill's spirituality, therefore fills a gap in current scholarship. Tracing the strong thread of aesthetic experience woven into her work from the earliest travel *Journals* to her last writings, we have considered resources and records not previously studied, and examined in detail a number of works of art to which she refers. Thus, a fuller account emerges, providing a richer context for further explorations into this Englishwoman's life and spirituality within the lively field of contemporary studies in Christian spirituality. This project, it is hoped, makes at least four specific contributions.

First, our exploration of Underhill's understanding of art in relation to spirituality demonstrates the relationship between aesthetics and theology. In recent years, and especially since the seminal work of von Balthasar who argued "to restore theology to a main artery which it has abandoned," there has been a growing effort to recover the aesthetic dimension which once so strongly informed theology.<sup>163</sup> Generally speaking, theology has focused more on spiritual, moral or intellectual beauty than on its sensory aspects so that "the arts have commonly been assigned a place on the lower rungs of the

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<sup>163</sup> Hans von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, 9. Among those currently writings on this topic are: William Dryness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); David Tracy *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981); Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (London: SCM Press, 2001); Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*; David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*.



ladder of spiritual ascent.”<sup>164</sup> However, in practice Christians have employed the arts in a variety of ways – not least in the Eastern Church which continues its tradition of chant and icons in its liturgy. Moreover, due to a more positive attitude towards the body, senses and cosmic creation, and to the recognition of the role of beauty, art and imagination in spiritual experience, aesthetics has taken on a more prominent position in theology, liturgy, prayer and spirituality in general. Timothy Radcliffe reminds us of the necessity of the practice of aesthetic theology when he suggests that “if the Church is to offer hope to the young, then we need a vast revival of beauty in our churches.”<sup>165</sup> Crumlin gives a similar counsel:

To find new ways of clothing the myths and symbols at the heart of a belief system is a guarantee against death from a withering familiarity. Religion, like art, must continually find ways that speak out of everyday life experience. Otherwise it dies of irrelevance and boredom.<sup>166</sup>

In the midst of such urgent need, this study points to the work of one woman who demonstrated, in a practical way, the mutual interpenetration of visual art and theology. Our study throws light on how the doctrines, sacraments and spiritual practices of the Christian community mediate a beauty that can be an ever-fresh source of inspiration for life in the Church today.

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<sup>164</sup> Burch Brown, “Aesthetics,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 88.

<sup>165</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns and Oates, 2005), 27.

<sup>166</sup> Crumlin, *Images of Religion in Australian Art*, 13 - 14.

Second, more negatively, our project offers an insight into the alienation, loneliness and spiritual emptiness in much of modern life. In his study of theological aesthetics in the struggle for justice, John De Gruchy explores the connection between ugliness and spatial void in contemporary art, deliberately in contrast to the mysterious beauty of the divine presence in art. He suggests that some of the ugliest works of art, where Christ is portrayed in agony, are able to show us a more profound meaning of the beauty of God because they reveal the redemptive act.<sup>167</sup> This sense of “alien beauty”<sup>168</sup> puts us in mind of Underhill who contemplated the suffering Christ in several of the works of art she considered and who recognised “indescribable beauty in the most squalid places.”<sup>169</sup> But suffering and ugliness are also darkness, silence and emptiness<sup>170</sup> – a spiritual void – “an alluring and deceptive sort of absence.”<sup>171</sup> Underhill experienced something of that inner space and emptiness in her personal feelings of self-recrimination, as she stood in the great gothic cathedrals of Europe and as she contemplated the “more than” dimension of visual art. Yet her particular understanding of the Creative Spirit enabled her to perceive a loving divine

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<sup>167</sup> John De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 122 - 128. Burch Brown shares this understanding. He writes: “Since the whole of a work of art can be good or beautiful in spite of passages of ugliness or even horror, the Christian can find even within purely aesthetic form an image and token of Atonement and Salvation, which many theologians would say constitute in part God’s recreation of the good possibilities within the fallen and fragmented order of creation.” Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 104 - 105.

<sup>168</sup> De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 122.

<sup>169</sup> Underhill to The Same, (Margaret Robinson), 29. 7. 1908 in Underhill, *Letters*, 80.

<sup>170</sup> De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 122.

<sup>171</sup> Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 106.

presence in the “alien beauty” of darkness and silence. For her, silence and the emptiness of the inner space in human consciousness are filled with the “wholly other.”<sup>172</sup> De Gruchy goes on to remark that:

Transfiguration spirituality, the spirituality of seeing the splendour of God even in the midst of ugliness and pain, is a transformative spirituality and therefore one which can only be understood in the light of the gift of the Spirit.<sup>173</sup>

“Transfiguration spirituality” must include an aesthetic dimension. Even in the “alien beauty” of visual art, the presence of God may be discerned. In the spiritual emptiness and void of visual art, the loving presence of the Holy Spirit is a transforming presence. Here, Underhill is a remarkable witness, and her writings an enduring resource.

Third, our study brings into focus Underhill’s particular understanding of the Creative Spirit as “the everywhere-present pressure of God.” This intimate, gentle and personal sense of God offers a new way of understanding the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Fourthly, in our previous discussion we noted that Underhill’s theological orientation is most appropriately categorised as a theology of wisdom. Closely linked to her understanding of the Creative Spirit as the divine giver of wisdom, this dimension of her

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<sup>172</sup> Rudolf Otto writes that “the ‘void’ is like darkness and silence, a negation, but a negation that does away with every ‘this’ and ‘here’, in order that the ‘wholly other’ may become actual.” Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; 1958), 70.

<sup>173</sup> De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 125.

spirituality is relatively unexplored in Underhill scholarship. It is a promising area for further research.

## 7. Conclusion

In our evaluation of the depth and range of Underhill's spirituality in this final chapter, we have drawn conclusions regarding the influence of visual art on our subject's spirituality. We have found that, in varying degrees, her encounter with image and place penetrated every aspect of her spirituality. Though, as we have been at pains to acknowledge, visual art was not the only influence on her spirituality, its significance cannot be disputed. Seminal to her thinking, it shaped her experience, stirred her imagination, informed her understanding and provided the context for her teaching. Hence, our contention that visual art and church architecture were a consistent, major influence on Underhill's spiritual development, her understanding of the spiritual life and her teaching.

In the opening chapter of our study, we reflected on Underhill's definition of the spiritual life as "a life in which all 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."<sup>174</sup> During the course of our exploration, we have accompanied her on her spiritual journey of life integration and self-transcendence. Beginning with a theocentric and solitary focus, she completed the journey firmly

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<sup>174</sup> See chap. 1, p. 2.

grounded in a personal understanding of the Creative Spirit and an incarnational approach to spirituality. In all this, her journey was a pilgrimage of the heart saturated with the divine presence and surrendered to the divine will. On the way, her journey was coloured and enlivened by the churches she visited, the great gothic cathedrals in which she stood and the many images she contemplated. Their beauty and evocative power drew her into a loveliness that lies beyond the fringe of speech – the incomprehensible, holy mystery of God.

## APPENDIX

### 1. *Christ in Limbo*



Image obtained from [www.christusrex.org/www2/art/san\\_marco.htm](http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/san_marco.htm) on 18.10.2005. Used with permission of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, Florence. Any form of reproduction of this image without the consent of the copyright holders is prohibited.

## 2. *The Virgin and Child with Two Angels*



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3. *Madonna Enthroned with the Child, Saint Francis and Four Angels*



Image obtained on 26.05.2006 from [www.wga.hu/art/c/cimabue](http://www.wga.hu/art/c/cimabue). All requests seeking permission to copy this image were unanswered.



4. *Madonna with Saint Francis and Saint John the Evangelist*



Image obtained on 26.05.2006 from [www.wga.hu/art/l/lorenzet](http://www.wga.hu/art/l/lorenzet). All requests seeking permission to copy this image were unanswered.

## 5. *The Last Supper*



Image obtained from [www.christusrex.org/www2/art/san\\_marco.htm](http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/san_marco.htm) on 18.10.2005.

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6. *The Agony in the Garden*



Image obtained on CD from The Whitworth Gallery, The University of Manchester, Manchester, England. Used with permission.

## 7. *The Mocking of Christ*



Image obtained from [www.christusrex.org/www2/art/san\\_marco.htm](http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/san_marco.htm) on 18.10.2005. Used with permission of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, Florence. Any form of reproduction of this image without the consent of the copyright holders is prohibited.

8. *Saint Francis Receives the Stigmata*



Image obtained from [www.christusrex.org/www1/giotto/SCB-stigmat.jpg](http://www.christusrex.org/www1/giotto/SCB-stigmat.jpg) on 18.10.2005. Used with permission of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, Florence. Any form of reproduction of this image without the consent of the copyright holders is prohibited.

## 9. *Crucifixion and Saints*

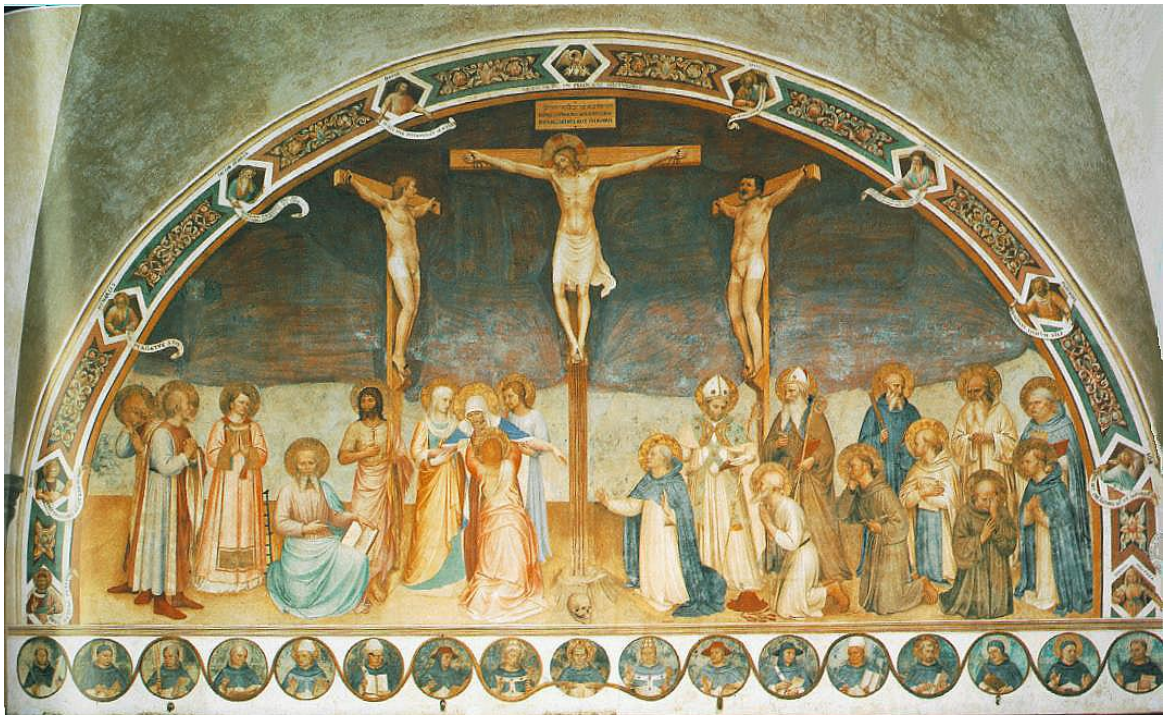


Image obtained from [www.christusrex.org/www2/art/san\\_marco.htm](http://www.christusrex.org/www2/art/san_marco.htm) on 18.10.2005.

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## 10. *The Creation of Adam*



Image obtained from Anne Prache, *Chartres, le Portail de la Sagesse*, with photographs by Edward Fiévet (Belgium: Mame, 1994) 58. All requests seeking permission to copy this image were unanswered.

11. *Saint Francis Embracing Christ on the Cross*

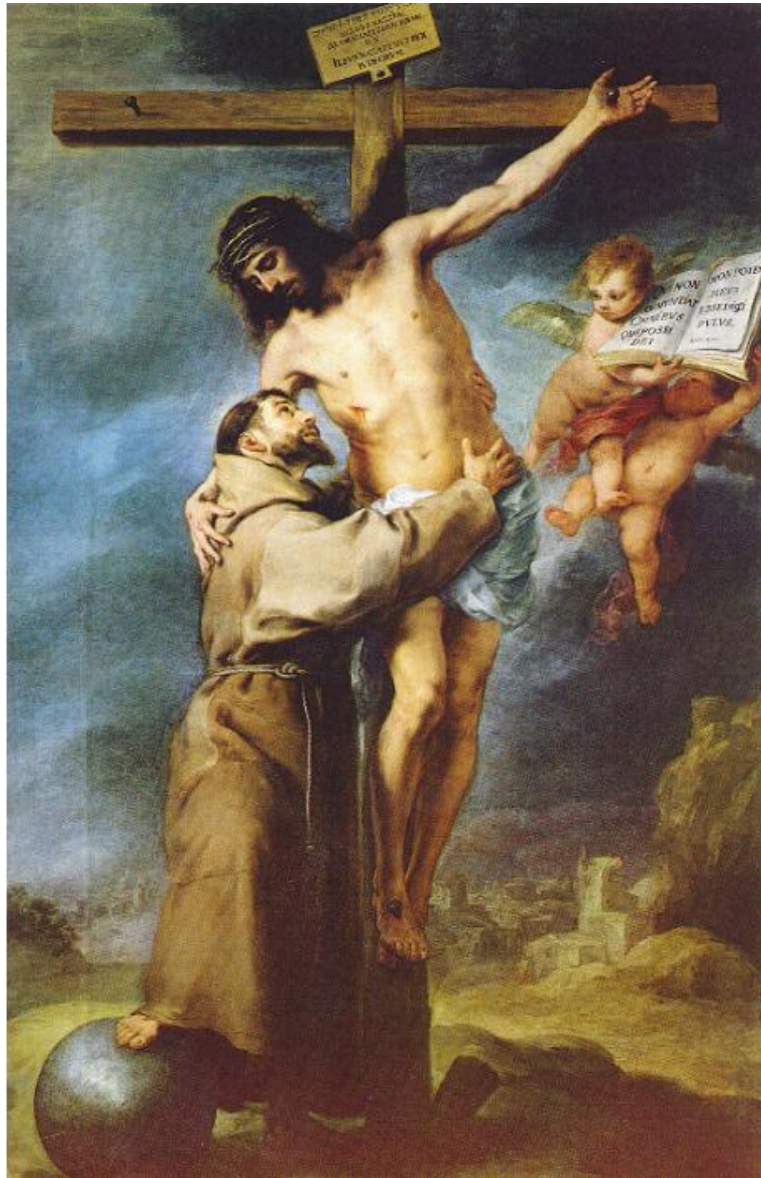


Image obtained from [www.catholic-forum.com](http://www.catholic-forum.com) on 15.05.2006. Used with permission of the Museum of Fine Arts, Seville, Spain.



12. *Knight, Death and the Devil*



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13. *Saint Jerome in his Study*



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#### 14. *Saint Jerome in the Desert*



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