

## **Evelyn Underhill – Scholar in Mysticism and Spirituality and Spiritual Director – by Roger Lowans**

### **Background**

Evelyn Underhill was born on 6 December 1875 in Wolverhampton and died at the age of 65 on 15 June 1941 in London.

She was the daughter of a barrister and she married a barrister, Hubert Stuart Moore, on 3 July 1907. They had grown up together. The couple had no children. Underhill was her family name which she kept after her marriage but she was called Mrs Moore by close friends. Evelyn often published her books under her own name of Underhill but she also used the pseudonym 'John Cordelier'. Evelyn was an only child and was devoted to her parents and later to her husband. Both as a daughter and a wife she was fully engaged in both entertainment and charitable work that her supportive role to firstly her father and then husband required of her. Yet despite these duties, she followed a daily routine that included writing, research, worship, prayer and meditation.<sup>1</sup> & <sup>2</sup>

Evelyn was educated at home and in a private school in Folkestone before going to Kings College for Women in London where she at first studied Botany and Languages but, encouraged by her father, she took her degree in History, Philosophy and Social Science.<sup>3</sup>

From an early age she was influenced by her uncle, an Anglican priest, Francis Underhill, who became Bishop of Bath and Wells. Her parents were not very devout and she found her own way to worship. She was the only Anglican in her home and attended church on her own. Due to the circumstances at home, Evelyn learnt to stand up to an atmosphere of tolerant agnosticism. This stood her in good stead as neither her parents nor later her husband shared her interest in spiritual matters. However, her father and husband shared her commitment to writing as both wrote on law issues. If her family had been an orthodox Church family, we may not have had the Evelyn Underhill who became the pathfinder of faith for so many searching souls.<sup>4</sup>

### **Some other influences**

Evelyn Underhill had many other influences upon her life and work, including two which may possibly be linked. The first is travel in Europe and the second that she courted the possibility of conversion to Roman Catholicism.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Jones 'The Saints of the Anglican Calendar(Canterbury Press, 2000) P 145-146

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia 2013

<sup>3</sup> Jones (2000) P 145

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Cropper 'Evelyn Underhill' (Longmans, 1958) P 2-8

In 1898, when Evelyn was twenty three, her parents decided to go to Switzerland and Italy. It was their first holiday abroad for all three. Evelyn's biographer Margaret Cropper says, "It was a choice that affected Evelyn very deeply". Evelyn wrote later,

"Italy, the holy land of Europe, the only place left I suppose that is really medicinal to the soul.....There is a type of mind which must go there to find itself."

These holidays continued with her parents and later her husband, Hubert, for many years. It was not only the beauty of the countryside but also the artistic expression of faith that influenced Evelyn.

The influence of travel really began once her parents returned to England, leaving her to go on alone to Florence. She spent her time visiting the galleries, studying many pictures of religious significance and the frescoes of many churches. Evelyn writes of one chapel,

"I could have lingered there for hours. It was so peaceful, so filled with the best mediaeval spirit, learned yet pious, stern but loving".

In one of her books, she refers to a panel which is called 'The Madonna adoring the infant Child':

"The peculiar fascinations of Florentine piety at once so mystical reasonable and austere, come together in this picture, with joyous purity of outline, the intimate holiness of its atmosphere, the strange majesty of the rapt Madonna who sits with her hands folded in prayer, and looks gently down on her son."

Evelyn comes across as a person who absorbed beauty in landscape, paintings and holy places which affected both her daily and her spiritual life.

Evelyn Underhill certainly courted the idea of conversion to Roman Catholicism. Her visits to Europe had stirred her to visit catholic churches both at home and abroad and she also had catholic friends.

Soon after the publication of her novel, "*The Grey World*" she met Ethel Barker, daughter of Canon Barker of St Pauls Cathedral, who became the greatest friend of her lifetime. Ethel was a person of intellect and a lecturer in history and archaeology at the University of London. Through knowing Evelyn, Ethel came back to faith after a period of agnosticism. At that time, both Evelyn and Ethel were drawn to the Church of Rome and they spent a week at a convent of St Franciscan nuns in Southampton. The quiet peace and welcome of the nuns impressed Evelyn but the atmosphere of perpetual prayer was too heavy for her. Afterwards in a letter to Father Robert Benson,

The Archbishop of Canterbury's son who had become a Roman Catholic, she wrote,

"I fled after the fourth day, otherwise I should have submitted there and then"

to the Church of Rome.

Ethel Barker was received into the Catholic Church about nine months later but Evelyn mistrusted anything that came from an upsurge of emotion. Evelyn slowly became convinced that she should become a Catholic but was advised by Robert Benson, who knew of her engagement to Hubert Moore, to tell Hubert about her plans.

Evelyn and Hubert had never talked to each other about such matters of faith and she was not prepared for his outburst. She wrote to Robert Benson,

"He(Hubert) insists that all hope of our happiness is at an end, that he could never again trust me, no more mutual confidence is possible and that there will always be a priest between us."

It was the confessional that worried Hubert. Evelyn conceded she would wait a year before deciding whether to become a Catholic or not. Hubert wrote a comforting letter to her and they were married with complete openness between them.

A friend, Lucy Menzies, wrote,

"For some strange reason, as a young woman she (Evelyn ) seems to have had few friends belonging to the Church of England.....She experienced the best of the Church of Rome but never the best of the Church of England."

In 1911, her book '*Mysticism*' was published and this brought her into contact with Baron von Hegel who had read and appreciated the book. Von Hegel was an influential Austrian Roman Catholic layman, biblical scholar and theologian living in London and in contact with many other religious writers and theologians. He became her spiritual director but after a period of scholarly investigation she decided to remain an Anglican and in time found a spiritual home as an Anglo-Catholic.<sup>5</sup> In 1931 she wrote to the Abbot of Downside,

"I solidly believe in the Catholic status of the Church of England as to orders and sacraments." <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cropper (1958) P 27 - 37

<sup>6</sup> Jones(2000) P 145

There were many other influences on Evelyn Underhill, scholars, theologians and in her book 'The Mystics of the Church' the saints.

### **Evelyn Underhill - Books**

Evelyn was a prolific writer, starting with novels like '*The Grey World*', '*The Lost Word*', and '*The Column Dust*'. Her books are many and varied. It is claimed that she was the most widely read writer on mysticism and the spiritual life in the first half of the twentieth century. The more she wrote and acted as a spiritual leader of retreats, the more she made her books accessible and practical to people trying to live out the Christian way in their daily lives. Her books, many of which have a practical application, included the following:

- *Concerning the Inner Life* is based on a series of informal talks which touch on spiritual issues such as prayer, contemplation, love and service.
- *The Mystics of the Church* covers people like St Paul, St Augustine, St Teresa, St Catherine of Genoa, St Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross and many others.
- *Practical Mysticism* explains in fewer than 90 pages and in simple and direct language how the practice of mysticism can raise spiritual consciousness. This gives us a sense of reality and helps us with the duties and ideals of daily existence.
- *The Mystic Way* reviews the development of the mystical tradition within Christianity and how it is important to our understanding of the spiritual way of life.
- *Life of the Spirit* is a series of lectures delivered in Oxford in 1921 which concentrates on the relevance of the spiritual life in the light of psychology, showing that psychology can clarify the religious experience.<sup>7</sup>
- *Mysticism* is the book that established Evelyn Underhill as a scholar and religious writer. The book is in two parts; the first an introduction to mysticism and the second looking at the nature and development of spiritual consciousness.

Modern definitions of mysticism usually refer to the claim of Ultimate Reality (whether or not this is called God) by direct experience: mystical theology, including mystical phenomena or the science of the mystical life.<sup>8</sup> Whereas for Evelyn Underhill it was a process by which the individual "soul" moves

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<sup>7</sup> Google Books (2013) <http://books.google.com>

<sup>8</sup> Ed: E L Cross & E A Livingstone The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church ( OUP2005 ) P 1134 - 1135

toward final and utterly ineffable union with the "absolute". In this book, she distills from the writing experiences of Western mystics what she considers to be the characteristic stages that mark the progress of the mystic:

- Awakening: The first step is towards the mystic goal in which a person awakens to the existence of a divine order or reality. Evelyn describes the experience as "well marked" and "accompanied by feelings of joy". She sees this psychologically as an awakening of transcendental consciousness which is a form of conversion.
- Purgation: This stage makes the mystic aware of his/her imperfection and the need to eliminate all that is in the way of coming in to deeper contact.
- Illumination: Evelyn says this is "a state which includes in itself many stages of contemplation, visions and adventures of the soul described in the writing of the great mystics."
- The dark night of the soul: The mystic moves into an experience of the divine. At this stage "The mystic must overcome all attachments to self and ego to merge with the great 'One'."
- Union: This is where the mystic enters into the mystic expansion of the transcendent and becomes not subject to the limitations of the material universe.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion and some quotes from Evelyn:**

I have only sketched the life of a great and prolific writer whose spirituality was a reality to her and I have not even touched on her book of worship. From the experience of preparing this talk, I have learnt much about Evelyn and grown to like her. I now have a basic understanding of mysticism, but have much more to learn. I wish to end with a few quotes to show how she used her knowledge and reflections to apply much of what she learnt in a practical way:

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

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

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.csulb.edu/~plowentr/underhill> California State University

"I don't believe in worrying God with prayers for things we want. If He is omnipotent He knows we want them and if he isn't He can't give them to us. I think it is an insult to Him to repeat the same prayers every day. It is as much to say He is deaf, or very slow of comprehension."

A quote from The Times about Evelyn: "she never ceased teaching and she never ceased learning." A reminder for all Readers!

Roger Lowans – April 2013