A Spirituality For Moral Responsibility?
Evelyn Underhill Today

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I would like to start with two quotations. In 1936, Evelyn Underhill, the Anglican spiritual writer, opens a retreat with two comments. Firstly, she notes that a retreat’s aim is to ‘wait on the Lord’, to be spiritually nourished ‘not for our own sakes but for the sake of the world.’ Later she observes that the more the Spirit, the ‘Life of God possesses us, the more fully and inevitably it will bring forth its fruits.’

The premise of this article is that Evelyn Underhill’s observations suggest possibilities for spirituality today. This is particularly in the light of two trends: first, many seem to pursue the spiritual path apart from, even in opposition to, Church institutions; second, some do so on the understanding that spirituality is a form of self-development with little or no relationship to others in moral responsibility.

I will set the context by noting key aspects in Underhill’s theological development. Secondly, guided by the two quotations from Underhill, the article will uncover four intersecting themes underpinning her spiritual moral vision. Thirdly, I will test the possibility that Underhill’s Spirit-based approach anticipates today’s spiritual seeker outside either institutional religion, or Christianity, and may even offer something to those whose spiritual quest is pursued ‘without God.’ The article will conclude with some comments on the significance of Underhill’s work in the past and present.

A Word on Evelyn Underhill: Context

We associate Evelyn Underhill with her magisterial study Mysticism. To

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2. Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A study in the nature and developments of Man’s spiritual consciousness (New York: A Meridian Book, 1955). Since the first printing (1911), it has been through at least twelve editions. The Evelyn Underhill Association, the text of Mysticism, some of her writings, related articles and resources can be accessed online at http://www.evelynunderhill.org/
judge her solely on that work is to do her an injustice, given that her overall corpus is vast. Further, her thought evolved significantly after 1911, especially under the influence of Baron von Hügel in the decade prior to 1925. It is generally agreed that *The Spiritual Life* reflects Underhill’s mature spirituality both personally and as a spiritual guide and teacher.

Over the past fifteen years, particularly in the United States, Underhill has been the subject of an ongoing critical reappraisal, especially of her later works [those published between 1921 and her death in 1941]. The main thrust of scholarship highlights the Spirit as the theological foundation of Evelyn Underhill’s spiritual teaching. This has been probed by various authors especially in relation to sacraments, worship, spiritual transformation with its moral dimensions and finally subject to feminist critique.

There seem to be four features in Underhill’s theological development. Firstly, the Platonic tone of her early writing reflects an unresolved tension in the relationship of spirit to matter, the invisible to the visible worlds. At this stage, the spiritual journey for Underhill is a predominantly a movement away from this world to the spiritual realm of true values. Through von Hügel’s influence, she achieves a more integrated, even sacramental view of reality. The visible mediates the invisible. She articulates its depth, scope and dynamisms by her effective use of images and visual art. Truth and values are not found apart from this world but are embedded and disclosed within it. For Underhill, the spiritual quest is no longer an escape from the world but the search for the transcendent within our world and an ensuing responsibility towards it.

Further, Underhill’s theological position reflects her dissatisfaction with pantheism. Her yardstick is the transcendent not as satisfying our deepest yearnings but as a personal reality that is, most significantly, inherently moral. Cosmic awareness of the divine in nature, while religious, is not sufficient.


6. In many ways, her spiritual moral teaching is embodied in a cluster of controlling metaphors. See David Walker, *God is a Sea: The Dynamics of Christian Living* (Homebush, NSW: St Paul’s, 1977). The author gives a commentary on thirty images from the Christian spiritual tradition. Nine are images drawn from the writings of Evelyn Underhill.
a letter of 1924 she observes that pantheism 'offers no real incentive or sanction for moral effort.' The human soul in its partial and imperfect state requires a relationship with a personal object in order to be whole and complete. We ‘need conviction of personal responsibility to a personal God’ that is best met by genuine and preferably Christian theism. Later, she makes this more specific in terms of our need for divine healing and redemption.

Again, her view changes concerning the scope and membership of the spiritual pilgrimage. Writing in 1911, Evelyn Underhill sees the journey towards the Absolute as the task of the ‘mystic.’ In her 1936 retreat and published BBC talks, the quest is no longer the preserve of a special group under the heading of ‘mystics.’ Its call is aimed at every seeker of the True, the Good and the Beautiful. It is, then, a change in context from the extraordinary to the ordinary. All people have the capacity to receive and share in this state of harmony with the spiritual universe.

Finally, Underhill brings a different perspective concerning the source of transformation. The mystical quest is not accomplished through human effort in tune with the evolutionary movement of history. It is a spiritual life beginning and sustained by a divine gift. It is a free and unconditional response to the Spirit’s presence and action so that each person finds their unique role ‘in the great and secret economy of God.’ This self-forgetting participation in a movement to a reality larger than ourselves is the only gateway to the true freedom of the children of God. It is primarily and importantly a journey of being transformed by the Other. This, then, brings us to the underpinnings of the process.

Four Pillars of Underhill’s Spiritual Moral Vision

Any spirituality has, at the least, an implicit theological framework. I will chart the intersecting themes in Underhill’s project: the Holy Spirit animates and guides the spiritual journey as a work of transformation; modified consciousness responds in Adoration, Adherence and Cooperation with God; finally, the Fruits of this process emerge in the form of a changed quality of perceptions and dispositions to respond and act. Binding them together is the fourth theme – the internal dynamism of the Spirit’s action. It is centrifugal,
moving towards the ‘Other’ and others through a different mode of relationships embodied in moral responsibility in the world.

The Spirit as a Gift That Transforms

The hub of Underhill’s mature spirituality is the Spirit, but more the Spirit of God than the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit is not simply a divine presence that is omnipresent but only vaguely experienced. The Spirit, for Underhill, is always personal, free and loving, even if there are gradations in how the Spirit is actually felt and known.14 It is the donative reality, the self-giving presence of God, immanent in creation, permeating and supporting it. The Spirit is the bridge between eternity and time, the transcendent ‘Wholly Other’ and the immanent, derived, limited world of creation.15 The Spirit enables the supernatural to be immanent in nature, von Hügel helps Underhill to appreciate that Christianity’s central conviction concerns the penetration of spirit into sense, of the Eternal into time, especially in the Incarnation in that it encapsulates ‘the real prevenience and condescension of the real God...’16

God’s essential characteristic is as one who stoops down to the human level and whose manifestation in the Spirit and in Christ emerges from the ‘depths of Absolute Being, yet (is) charged with the self-giving ardour of Absolute Love.’17 Christ not only embodies the divine self-gift. He sums up in himself humanity and creation’s response in his own self-giving to his Father in perfect submission to God’s Spirit through a life of sacrifice and surrender.18 For Underhill, the Christian life as responding to and living in the Spirit, is a share in the life of the sacrifice, surrender and self-giving of Christ to God his Father.19

Within creation there is the human being, special and unique.20 Human existence is characterised by an inbuilt yearning capacity to interact with reality. It is the Spirit that is the innate spark inviting the human spirit to open itself to the Real, be receptive to God and the divine purposes.21 In explaining this, Underhill cites von Hügel who says that

God’s Spirit ever works in closest penetration and stimulation of our own; just as, in return, we cannot find God’s spirit simply separate

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14. It can be experienced ‘dimly’ in creation, as inspiring goodness and heroism, as most deeply at work in a person’s interior life, or as perfectly embodied in Christ. Underhill, The Golden Sequence, 28-9.
15. ‘Wholly Other’ is found in her works, for instance in the Introduction to Mysticism (12th. ed., 1930).
18. It is this event and this person that leads us to a full response by acknowledging ‘his personal and eternal Spirit – His Absolute Will and love – at work within the world of time.’ Ibid., 62.
20. Underhill sees this in terms of the three data of religion from von Hügel: ‘the absolute Spirit of God, the derived spirit Man, and the relation between His Spirit and our own.’ See ‘God and Spirit’ published in Theology in 1930 and included in Greene, Evelyn Underhill, 181.
from our own spirit within ourselves. Our spirit clothes and expresses His; His Spirit first creates and then sustains and stimulates our own.22

God’s penetration and pervading presence in the world is at the heart of Underhill’s vision. But it is beyond the Spirit known diffusely as a pervading force within creation. It includes the creative, animating, unifying and guiding roles of the Spirit captured in images in Scripture. The distinctive quality highlighted by Underhill is the Spirit as the expression of divine fecundity – its capacity not just to continue life but to generate new life.23 Though the Spirit’s action is hidden, we become aware of it through its tendency to continually break into the world particularly in the everyday – in acts of love, in endurance despite difficulties, in the urge to live up to certain standards, in a struggle for a better world. When we transcend ourselves in some way, we respond to the gentle pressure of the divine Spirit.24

For Underhill, how does this occur and what are its outcomes? After some general comments on conversion, I will concentrate on two aspects of Underhill’s approach to transformation: its structure – in the human response through Adoration, Adherence and Cooperation; its content, specifically as reflected in the Fruits of the Spirit.

**Conversion**

When the creative action of God as Spirit finds personal response, it entails changes in a person’s awareness and self-awareness, namely a conversion. Whatever the form in which the incitement of the hidden God reaches a person, the human response ‘follows much the same road’ even though its various stages are named in a variety of ways.25 It is a shift at the level of Being (not Wanting, Doing, Having, Acting). It is a waking-up, a noticing of spiritual light, a sensitivity to a spiritual atmosphere that reveals our human world in its true reality.

Thus, one’s horizon is widened, the landscape is seen differently, personal experience is ‘enormously enriched’, and responsibilities are enlarged.26 The mind is enlightened, the heart attracted, power is given to the will to persevere.27 It is a shift to a greater level of freedom and truth – a broadening of horizon, recognition of what is true and good, a step in self-transcendence and a conscious communion with the Real.28

**Human Response to the Transcendent**

The impulse of the Spirit moves us to receive and surrender – in mind,
heart and will. It is around these operations of human consciousness that Underhill builds her structure of the human response to the Spirit’s urgings. The first stage of her understanding is evident in 1922. Speaking at the general level, she points to three principal and complementary ways of engaging in the spiritual journey, namely of realising a relationship with the transcendent realm: first, a sense of awe, of cosmic oneness with the transcendent reality resulting in a sense of deep security and peace; second, awareness of a relationship and union with a Person who brings a ‘previenent and answering love’ that prompts surrender and personal response; third, the arousal of energy and creative powers.29 These three zones of experience overlap and are interfused.

Underhill suggests that this three-fold pattern builds on the structure of human experience as made in God’s image. These three moments in awareness of the divine are traces of the Trinity’s presence and action.30 In other words, the object and symbolic expression of each moment is found in a person of the Trinity: the Father, for the movement towards the transcendent and its ensuing serenity; the Son, for the immanent sense of intimacy and love; the Spirit as the creative response moving outwards.

Adoration, Adherence (Communion), Cooperation

In 1922 Underhill goes no further. After 1930, her mature thought becomes more specific in adopting a threefold pattern for the structure of prayer found in the French school of Spirituality especially in Bérulle. It revolves around Adoration/Adherence or Communion and Cooperation.31 This choice is probably coloured by her experience of practical Christianity and the Social Gospel where she considered the focus was on service to the neglect of awe and prayer. It is worth noting here, however, that beyond these reasons, Underhill offers a rationale for this reading of religious experience, namely that it has its own internal dynamism. It is marked by the interfusing of intellect, will, and affectivity, thus involving the whole person.

With Bérulle and von Hügel, she sees the first and primary experience of God as wonder or awe that crystallises in Adoration. It is the acknowledgment of who God is as creator and who we are as dependent creatures. Worship and prayer, especially their corporate expression, are the two principal expressions of Adoration. Through sharing in the adoration of Jesus – the perfect adorer, we are enabled to share and experience the inner life of God. It is this attitude of Adoration that draws us, with the Spirit, out of ourselves, to wonder at the Other who is Love. Adoration needs to be sustained by constancy and devotion, a pattern of spiritual discipline.32

30. ‘[I]t 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.’ Ibid., 11.
31. In The Golden Sequence (1932) the The Spiritual Life (1937). In the former work she uses the adaptation found in Olier –Adoration/Adherence/Intercession.
32. Tastard, The Spark in the Soul, 76. Tastard suggests that in Adoration we ‘focus our intellectual awareness on God.’ It would seem that this is not so much analytical knowledge but the knowing that comes from immediate, non-discursive awareness.
This awareness permeates further into the affective realm. It moves to Communion or Adherence where the heart is drawn into union with God in friendship. There is both divine nearness and close dependence on God. While this Reality stoops towards humankind in intimate nearness, it is simultaneously a God of ‘awe-inspiring majesty’ who ‘becomes the ruling fact of existence; continually presenting its standards, and demanding a costly response.’

Consequently, we see ourselves and the world differently. The Kingdom of God’s standards are implanted in us. We have insight into the truth of the Real, both as a standard that summons us, and the real in which there is the gap between God’s loving desires for the world and things as they actually are. Since this occurs when we know God’s love, our energy and resolve are enhanced. We are drawn inevitably to act from the love we now share.

Integral to life animated by and guided by the Spirit is a moral imperative and ethical responsibility in the world of relationships.

From adherence to God emerges the transformed self under the momentum of the Spirit to work with God to bring about the Divine Plan in the world. Adoration and Communion flow inexorably to orient and animate the will. The movement away from the self, the ecstatic quality of divine love, experienced in Adoration and Communion, is completed in Cooperation – to become a new centre of creative life. We are called to be both participants in, and agents of, the ‘divine fecundity’ which is the ‘goal of human transcendence.’

Underhill dismisses the prevalent notion that spirituality and politics have nothing to do with each other. An adequate spiritual life implies that ‘certain convictions about God and the world become the moral and spiritual imperatives or our life.’ This requires practical involvement in the lives of people who suffer injustice, poverty, hatred, rejection. In her own life, following von Hügel’s conviction that spirituality is incarnational (‘for the sake of the world’), Underhill committed herself to weekly contact with the poor. This shapes her down-to-earth approach to spiritual direction and her insights into authentic spiritual growth.

35. After noting Bérulle’s three fold relation of the soul with God, Underhill goes on to say that ‘adoration is the root, communion the flower, intercessory action the fruit, of that divine-human love which binds in one the total life of prayer.’ The Golden Sequence, 175.
36. Underhill, The Life of the Spirit, 44 and Mysticism, 434. This idea seems to be fed by two sources: human sharing in God’s ‘absolute repose, absolute fecundity’ (Ruysbroeck) and its emergence in expanding and more inclusive love; Bérulle’s emphasis on the Spirit as the unique expression of the impulse towards fertility outside the inner life of the triune God.
37. It entails ‘every intervention we make in the world around us to bring it into conformity with the longing, loving intentions of God.’ The Life of the Spirit, 78.
Fruits of the Spirit

Underhill outlines the more specific effects of transformation in the Gifts and Fruits of the Spirit. Her methodology continues to be descriptive and experiential. She does not offer, as does Aquinas, an extensive correlation of the virtues, the Gifts, the Beatitudes and the Fruits of the Spirit. While she generally brings a standard approach to the Gifts, this is not the case with the Fruits.

For Underhill, the divine indwelling is most evident in the Spirit’s Fruits listed in Gal. 5:22. They are not administered or inserted as if a new element, such as a gift or faculty. What is central is the ‘receiving’ – one receives God. As ‘new creatures in Christ’, we are slowly transformed by the divine pressure to deeper opening of the self through prayer. Charity is given in the ‘ground of the soul’ (where) ‘abiding union with God takes place; and that the divine love then spreads more and more throughout the whole psychic life.’ It follows the momentum of fecundity – the Spirit’s orientation to reproduce its life in people and action. The Fruits of this transformation emerge in modified perceptions and dispositions to respond and act. The sources of resistance to this process are the seven deadly sins – deeply-rooted inclinations to selfishness whose bitter fruits stand in contrast in Gal. 5: 19-21.

We noted earlier that, for Underhill, the free response to the presence of the Spirit has a ternary pattern: it enlightens the mind, attracts the hearts and strengthens the will. Consequently, we are enabled to move with the ease and suppleness of the truly free (a characteristic of the Gifts as sharing in the divine life). Citing St. John of the Cross, Underhill says that every virtue or quality imprinted by the Spirit on the surrendered soul has three distinguishing marks: Tranquillity, Gentleness, and Strength. These qualities emerge from ‘deification’, or participation in the divine reality bringing membership of a wider family as children of God and being in tune with the harmonising movement of the Spirit. One’s identity and actions are slowly changed. There is a steadiness and depth in the ‘soul’s abiding temper’ since our small action is ‘part of the total action of God whose Spirit (…) “Works always in tranquillity”’. This pattern becomes visible in our relationships.

As the life of God increasingly possesses us, we more fully and inevitably bring forth its Fruits. They are not the result of our deliberate effort as if shaping spiritual plasticine. It is process of growth stemming from ‘the budding point of Love.’ From Peace and Joy they stretch out to in love the

41. Letters, 199-200.
42. Underhill, The Spiritual Life, 46.
43. Ibid., 37.
44. Ibid., 72.
45. Ibid. 73.
46. Ibid., 73. The quality of a person’s spiritual life is not measured by lofty religious notions or in the fervour of feelings. Its criteria are located in the persistent influence of what is tranquil, gentle and strong beneath changes in the surrounding atmosphere, in spite of disappointments, the impact of external events and the variations ‘in religious temperature’ (ibid., 73-74).
47. This occurs ‘at the very centre of our being where the innermost self responds to God.’ Underhill, The Fruits of the Spirit, 19.
world. Divine life adapts to the individual in that ‘God lets the plant grow at its own pace.’ The Fruits are indicators of the health of our spiritual life grounded in prayer. Underhill departs from the traditional approach to the Fruits construed as ongoing attitudes and affective states. She sees more in terms of virtues, as dispositions, ways of thinking, speaking and acting that expand from within, animated by love. They are, in themselves, permanent, promises to be realised in the present rather than in the future. They entail changes in the consciousness of a person (albeit ‘soul’). They infiltrate and shape the contours of our awareness of the world and of self-awareness in its reflexive tasks.

In some ways, Underhill subsumes the traditional cardinal virtues into the Fruits of the Spirit. For instance, practical wisdom is at work in the experience of fundamental peace disclosing the truth whereby we can adjust to life by being in harmony with God’s will, the point where the Spirit guides us as to ‘what we want or ought to be at.’ Temperance, for Underhill, brings a realistic appreciation one’s identity, one’s gifts and one’s role in the plan of God. As a spiritual guide, she emphasises balance in one’s life and a realistic appreciation of our bodily, psychological and social needs. Temperance, for her, involves self-care.

Underhill’s departure from Aquinas’ orderly system enables her to bring a fresh and innovative angle in two respects. First, the primary context in which she sees the Fruits is of the Spirit at work, not in the individual nor in the Church, but as revealing the divine presence and action in creation. Christianity’s meaning and purpose is the transfiguration of creation so that it is the expression of God’s Word and Spirit. This is realised membership in Christ, but more fundamentally, by being participants in the emergence of the world that will give ‘visible expression to the perfection and beauty of God.’ For Underhill, the Spirit’s Fruits in the individual person are part of a wider network of relationships – with God, creation and other people. Her cosmic and ecclesial and cosmic brings a healthy corrective to any individualistic approach to the Fruits of the Spirit.

48. Ibid., 19-21.
49. They are the ‘necessary’ fruits of God’s Spirit and simultaneously the ‘fruits of human nature when it has opened itself to the action of the Eternal Love.’ Ibid., 5-6.
50. They ‘are brought forth in us, gradually but inevitably, by the pressure of the Divine love in our souls. They all spring from one root.’ Ibid., 6.
51. Ibid., 17, 12.
52. Ibid., 15.
53. Underhill’s approach to the Fruits bears a modern comparison. Thomas Keating brings a contemporary perspective to the Gifts and the Fruits. He sees the Gifts as helping us to engage with the unconscious – with the undigested emotional material of a lifetime together with the depths of energy and creativity found there. When these are harnessed they emerge as charity, joy, peace, etc. – the Fruits as listed in Gal. 5:22-23. Thomas Keating, Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit (New York: Lantern Books, 2000), 15.
54. ‘We might call them manifestations of the Mind of God in his Creation; manifestations of his unlimited and generous love, His essential joy, His deep tranquillity, the unmarred harmony of His nature, His patent, gentle action, His faithful cherishing care.’ The Fruits of the Spirit, 6.
55. Ibid., 6.
Second, Underhill sees the list given by Paul as *progressive* in nature, along the continuum noted earlier of Tranquility, Gentleness and Strength. She suggests that they reflect the ‘form and direction’ of spiritual growth, one which does not match our expectations. Further, it follows a trajectory of relationships. There is rapport with the transcendent realm, ‘a tranquil deep delight in God’ (Joy and Peace). In the interpersonal and social domains, there is long-suffering, gentleness, goodness ‘in complete acceptance and use of life, of our human relationships and environment.’ Finally, with regard to the intrapersonal area, it is self-knowledge, faithfulness, meekness, temperance that bring ‘quiet, creaturely acceptance of our own particular limitations and callings.’56 The influence of the Spirit moves us within creation towards a fuller and deeper embrace of the real within the divine life.

‘The Wind Blows Wherever It Pleases’

This brings us to the third stage of the article. Does Underhill’s Spirit-based approach have anything to offer today’s spiritual seeker who is a) a non-institutional Christian, b) or someone not a Christian, or c) walks conscientiously ‘without God’ – as ‘not religious’ and even an atheist?

Underhill is convinced of the need for an institutional framework, especially of worship and sacramental life, for a wholesome Christianity.57 In a letter of 1939, she responds to a believer who receives no nourishment from active participation in worship and sacramental life. She points out that the practice of frequent reception of Holy Communion is a recent development and therefore not essential.58 She recognises that a viable spiritual life is possible apart from the sacraments when she says that ‘God will take care of his own, and will make up in other ways to the really desirous what they can’t at present receive through the sacramental channels of the Church.’59 She is sensitive to the flexibility of the Spirit in dealing with people of good will in their concrete circumstances.

Secondly, the person whose faith is religious/theistic but not Christian is acknowledged by Underhill in three ways. The spiritual resources of other religious traditions (e.g., Indian, Islamic etc.) are recognised and tapped by her in *Mysticism* and other writings. Secondly, we have already noted that her view that, while responses to the Ultimately Real follow much the same road, God reaches people in many ways.60 Thirdly, for Underhill, awareness of the creative action of God as Spirit is an ‘experimental knowledge’ that is ‘not on the one hand possessed by all Christians, nor on the other hand is it confined

56. Ibid., 8.
57. Our ‘need for ‘humble immersion in the life and worship of the Church’ (*Letters*, 261).
58. ‘[T]hree times a year was the usual thing for laity, though Mass was always the principal Sunday service. Therefore it can’t be essential to the supernatural life.’ *Letters*, 276.
59. *Letters*, 276. Johnson sums it up when he notes that for Underhill ‘Even though mysticism was an essential part of the sacraments, the sacraments were not an essential part of mysticism. It was obvious from the non-Christian mystics, the Mystic Way could be traversed without the aid of the sacraments.’ In *Spirit and Truth*, 96.
60. She speaks of the many ways in which the ‘incitements of the hidden God’ may reach people. *The Spiritual Life*, 49.
to Christianity.'61

Finally, there is the matter of someone whose spiritual quest is ‘without God’, as an unbeliever, even an atheist. At one stage, Underhill writes about faithful service in the believing disciple at difficult times, ‘not to God when we feel Him present, but to God when He seems to be absent.’62 She points to three lessons from Jesus on faithfulness found in Matthew Chapter 25. The third on the Last Judgment brings a lesson that she suggests is ‘perhaps the deepest and the most searching.’ It is about devoted service to the demands of people ‘even although we have no sense of God.’ There is ‘no glow of religious joy but sheer will and loving compassion. Though he is not visible, the King is there (…) moving disguised among His people at night.’63

Up to this stage of the parable, Underhill’s concern seems limited to the believer whose sense of the divine presence is darkened as a trial of faith. As she proceeds, the scope of her discussion seems to broaden, in line with the parable itself. She points to ‘those who spend their lives serving the unseen Christ in His poor. I expect they are very dear to God.’ Such people, in her view, may object ‘Oh! I am not a spiritual person at all. I have no experience of God.’64 Her words now appear to be aimed at those for whom God is not a perceived reality in their lives. In spite of this, their constant self-giving and focus beyond themselves is not only part of the Spirit’s action (‘very dear to God’). It is, Underhill continues, ‘a very exacting, complete, penetrating experience of God.’65

Underhill is suggesting the silent workings of grace revealed in the ‘unselfing’, the ‘displacing of the ego (that) becomes a giving “place” to others’, that is inseparable from union with Christ (even if hidden).66 It is a love that brings the sure knowledge of those who ‘have passed out of death and into life.’ (1 John 3:14). This persistent self-transcendence in attitude and behaviour is a clear sign that God’s Reign is present even if it is unrecognised.

**Evelyn Underhill: Yesterday and Today**

I would like to conclude by making some observations on Underhill’s work in its own historical context and then in relation to the contemporary world.

**Yesterday**

In reading Underhill, the spotlight on the Spirit’s internal presence in grace seems, at times, to reduce the role of Jesus to that of a moral exemplar. She does not adequately address the relationship of the Spirit and Christ in some form of Ecclesiology. While Christ embodies the Spirit of love, the
overall impression is that Christ is more an external model than the one who mediates the Spirit’s presence primarily in the Church.

Again, the Fruits have their ultimate grounding in the Gift of the Spirit as the first fruit of Christ’s resurrection, bringing peace and the forgiveness of sins. She refers to peace as a promise in Christ’s public ministry and the presence of the fruits in Jesus during his ministry. But the explicit link to the role of the Risen Jesus is not present. Further, the Risen Jesus and the formative role of the Scriptures on identity, perceptions and dispositions are muted in her work.

In the moral realm, notwithstanding Underhill’s pacifist stance towards the end of her life, there is a certain passive, conforming angle in her moral vision. The attitude of surrender to the Spirit’s movement seems to compromise the need, at times, for creative action and initiative in the face of injustice. This may be a function of her temperament. Her view of sin primarily in terms self-driven resistance, through the capital vices, to God’s gift and action, has limits. Only late in life does Underhill come to a sense of the Original Sin, the deep-seated dissonance in human experience at the roots of selfishness.67

For all that, it is clear that there is a theology of the Holy Spirit inscribed in Underhill’s spirituality. She uses experience rather than a conceptual framework for her theological hermeneutic. Underhill is conscious of the limits and analogical character of theological language. It is only in a qualified theological sense that we can attribute divine actions of the economic Trinity to one person, e.g., the Spirit.68 Perhaps Underhill’s position nudges towards, half-echoes that of Pannenberg? For him, the bringing forth of new life and movement in creation and the new creation accompanied by a share in the Spirit’s ‘own ecstatic self-transcending dynamic’ is properly the work of the Spirit and not just by way of appropriation.69 Overall, the Spirit as the mediating presence of the divine is the dominant and unifying theme of Underhill’s transcription of the divine plan (‘supernal symphony’) unfolding in creation.70 In listening to its ‘elusive music’, Underhill is sensitive to the ternary pulse of the Trinitarian life that vibrates gently in the background (something beyond the scope of this article).

**Today**

Underhill’s vision is embedded in the created world. The knowledge of the transcendent realm disclosed within the visible world shapes the quality

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67. It is reflected in her letter to CS Lewis in 1939 responding to his book *The Problem of Pain*. See *Letters*, 302-3. She is also criticised for the lack of a developed Soteriology in her work.
and texture of our relationships. It is a spirituality that is *a part of* and not *apart from* our material world. Again, she has certain similarities with Bernard Häring’s Moral Theology with their common starting point of awe, adoration and worship. Häring, too, subsumes the cardinal virtues into the eschatological virtues (peace, forgiveness, compassion, joy) which tend to overlap with the Gifts and Fruits of the Spirit.

In Underhill’s mature thought, Bérulle’s ternary pattern (Adoration, Adherence, Cooperation) is the best Christian articulation of the human response to grace (for her ‘the transcendent realm’). The universal pattern of *awe/communion/creative action* follows a trajectory of self-transcendence. This characterises spirituality itself, namely how grace is encountered universally. It is the human response to God’s personal self-communication even if not recognised as grace – a singularly contemporary reality.

Underhill anticipates a contemporary theological anthropology by highlighting the creature/creator relationship. She suggests an organic approach to the Christian life characterised by identification with and participation in the divine life than of imitation and conformity to an external ideal. Underhill reminds us that authentic spirituality has an innate momentum towards a moral life. For that reason, ‘A Spirituality *for* Moral Responsibility’ seems more apt than ‘*of*’ since it expresses the away-from-self momentum of the Spirit’s action in a person and in the world so central for Evelyn Underhill’s spiritual moral vision.

Again, recent writing highlights the relationship of spirituality and morality: the first animates, the second embodies and both need each other. Underhill’s insistence on a personal God seems grounded in our humanity’s prior call to personal moral responsibility. Given this, is it accurate to say that, for Underhill, spirituality provides the underpinnings of the moral life? Perhaps it is the reverse: that her approach suggests that we need a *moral* foundation for an authentic spirituality?

There is, however, a distinctive aspect to Underhill’s approach that has resonances for contemporary Moral Theology. She underlines the fertile, generative, centrifugal power of the Spirit. The Spirit as the divine gift is always expanding in goodness and love. This enables Underhill to underscore two aspects that are currently discussed.

First, in her construal of the Trinitarian pattern of gift/response that reverberates in the intrapersonal realm (knowing, feeling, willing) there is present the same impulse to ‘overflow’ into the interpersonal realm. For Underhill, the Spirit not only animates the moral sphere but binds it inextricably to the spiritual realm from *within*. The Spirit is the personal gift of God that draws the total, responding person more deeply into the divine life and simultaneously outwards into a more life-giving set of relationships.

Second, in seeing the Spirit as ‘the ecstasy of divine generosity’ known in the ‘splendors of creation’, Underhill adumbrates a call today for an experience of the Spirit that goes beyond that of a ‘remainder concept’, namely

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as a ‘generalized, ubiquitous force in the world.’ Del Colle argues that, given the emphasis on experience in contemporary spirituality, we need to articulate a specific presence of God resulting from the power of the Spirit. We should move beyond seeing the Spirit as the vague, universal divine presence intrinsic to Creation. People give verbal assent to this but, in reality, it has no impact on their lives. Mercier and de Colle suggest that the power of the Spirit is best viewed as the ‘actual experience of God’ understood as the divine bestowal to Creation (but discerned within it). If one is aware of the pervading, ubiquitous Spirit without a corresponding sense of the Spirit as ‘giving gift’, then to speak of the wonder of Creation can be ‘an assertion without any meaning.’ Wonder and awe are responses to something given that Creation reveals to us, a mystery that summons us to reach out beyond ourselves. Mercier sums up this approach, one that is consonant with that of Underhill:

The Spirit is the donative, intentional (given) reality of God, a personal, experiential gift that awakens the human person not only to the ubiquity of the Spirit’s presence but also to the depth and meaning of Creation itself.

Conclusion

Some would suggest that Evelyn Underhill’s work has been superseded. Yet, at a time when Church attendance and religious allegiance are plummeting in the western world, Underhill’s Pneumatology of the spiritual moral life is timely. The fecundity of the Spirit within the person and in the setting of relationships is crucial in integrating the spiritual and moral dimensions of life. Again, Underhill reminds us to look not at numbers but at the Fruits of God’s Spirit evident within and beyond Churches and people of faith. Rather than coming to God through Christ, she described her experience as coming to Christ through God. She may have something to offer the multitudes in today’s world whose encounter with grace is not seen as a religious reality. They seek a hidden God, ignoring, even rejecting, the Christ who moves ‘disguised among his people at night.’

Underhill would, no doubt, be reassured by the Catholic liturgy’s Second Eucharist Prayer of Reconciliation with its more eschatological and social approach to the Fruits of the Spirit visible in the world. We pray in the Spirit who turns people towards peace, changes hearts, brings enemies into dialogue and those estranged to renewed friendship. The same Spirit is at work ‘when understanding puts an end to strife, when hatred is quenched by mercy and vengeance gives way to forgiveness.’ This is the Reign of God emerging in our midst. This offers us as much reason to hope as it did Evelyn Underhill.

73. Ibid., 56.
74. Ibid., 56.