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Evelyn Underhill and the Christian Social Movement

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Abstract

Evelyn Underhill is mainly known for her work in mysticism and spirituality. This article explores the political dimension of her work and argues her early work in mysticism and later work in spiritual direction and retreat work underpinned her engagement with leading figures in the interwar Anglican church and their social agenda. During this period Underhill worked closely with William Temple, Charles Raven, Walter Frere and Lucy Gardner among others. In the interwar years she contributed in important ways to the Church of England Congresses, and the Conference on Christian Politics, Employment and Citizenship (COPEC) initiative. She challenged what she called the anthropocentric tendency in the Christian Social movement and insisted on the centrality of the spiritual life for any effective social reform. Underhill worked to engage the general public, as well as Christian communities, in a spiritual life that she saw as essential to the efforts of individuals and organizations seeking to alleviate contemporary social harms.

Keywords: Christian Social movement, Evelyn Underhill, mysticism, pastoral theology, spirituality

Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) is best known for her work in what can be described as liturgical or pastoral theology.² Underhill's earliest scholarship at the beginning of the twentieth century was mainly in the area of Western mysticism and she became a recognized expert in the field with the 1911 publication of *Mysticism*. This book went through 12 editions in her life, with significant revisions in 1912 and 1930, and continues to be important today.³ Bernard McGinn describes Underhill's *Mysticism* as one of the best-known books on the subject in English.⁴ *Mysticism* along with her

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²Ann Loades, 'Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941): Mysticism and Worship', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10.1 (2010), pp. 57–70 (58).

³Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991), p. 111; Christopher J.R. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), pp. 261–63.

⁴Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 273–74.

other publications in this field,⁵ formed the basis of her future contributions to the exploration of human spirituality. The most quoted assessment of Underhill's achievements in this area comes from Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, who wrote in 1975: 'I think that in the twenties and thirties there were few, if indeed any, in the Church of England who did more to help people grasp the priority of prayer in the Christian life and the place of the contemplative element within it'.⁶ Her most recent biographer, Dana Greene, also emphasizes Underhill's contribution to the spiritual life of the early twentieth century, commenting that her significance rests in her service to 'the universal human experience of and response to the infinite'.⁷ Jeffrey Kripal describes Underhill as evolving from a scholar of mysticism 'gracefully into a beloved retreat master, a serene and wise spiritual director'.⁸

However, these assessments of Underhill under-represent the way in which she worked to build her authority in matters concerning the essential connection between the spiritual life and the improvement of contemporary social conditions. Far from 'evolving gracefully' into a purveyor of individual spiritual direction alone, her scholarly and increasingly public activities contributed in important ways to the Christian Social movement,⁹ and their objectives, during the interwar years. She used her authority to insert the discourse of spiritual life, and its practical applications, into discussions of prevailing social issues. In print, speeches and radio broadcasts, she insisted on the essential spiritual basis of all successful social action. She worked with leading religious figures to further their collective social aims by providing advice, participating in groups and committees, and leveraging her substantial public reputation to create increased awareness and support for their goals. Margaret Cropper, Underhill's friend and first biographer, claimed that Underhill was not political,¹⁰ and certainly she eschewed the narrow field of party politics. However, much of Underhill's work from 1913 onward was deeply and pervasively political. The overarching goal that her extensive activities were designed to bring about, as she boldly stated in a BBC radio broadcast in 1936, was the

⁵These include *The Mystic Way* (London: J.M. Dent, 1913); and *Practical Mysticism* (London: J.M. Dent, 1914). She also produced important editions of medieval mystics including *The Cloud of Unknowing* (London: J.M. Watkins, 1912); and biographies of mystics including *Ruysbroeck* (London: G. Bell, 1915) and *Jacopone da Todi* (London: J.M. Dent, 1919). For a full list of her publications see 'Bibliography of Works by and About Evelyn Underhill', in Dana Greene (ed.), *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 219-56.

⁶Michael Ramsey, 'Foreword', in Armstrong, *Underhill*, p. x.

⁷Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 6.

⁸Jeffrey Kripal, *Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 81.

⁹This phrase is used broadly to refer to what Stephen Spencer describes as an ethically defined Christian Socialism that stresses cooperation but also is defined by 'fellowship', 'a duty of service' and 'sacrifice'.

The most visible proponents of this view were F.D. Maurice, Charles Gore, Scott Holland and especially William Temple. See Stephen Spencer, *Theology Reforming Society* (London: SCM Press, 2017), pp. 85-89. See also Bruce Wollenberg, *Christian Social Thought in Great Britain Between the Wars* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1997), pp. 1-10; John Oliver, *The Church and Social Order: Social Thought in the Church of England 1918-1939* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1968); Alan Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism: Scott Holland to Tony Blair* (London: SCM Press, 1998); Malcolm Brown (ed.), *Anglican Social Theology Today* (London: Church House Publishing, 2014).

¹⁰Margaret Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, 1958), p. 136.

development of ‘a spiritual party’ that would make its ‘influence felt in the State’.¹¹ Ramsey noted that from the 1920s Underhill was seen, ‘not as an exponent of mysticism, or as an evolutionary philosopher but as a doctor of the Christian Church’,¹² and certainly her authority stemmed mainly from this designation, confirmed by both the fellowship awarded to her by King’s College, London in 1927¹³ and the Honorary Doctorate she received from the University of Aberdeen in 1938. These awards recognized the importance of her contributions – in print and radio, as a speaker, retreat leader and member of committees and groups – to the discussion of the spiritual life and the social condition within and beyond the Church of England. In all these forums she insisted that a robust and healthy spiritual life was fundamental to any attempt to improve the social condition.

Scholars have generally placed Evelyn Underhill’s active engagement with the social and spiritual aims of the Church of England in the early 1920s, inaugurated by her Upton Lectures, a series of lectures on religion given at Manchester College, University of Oxford in 1921.¹⁴ However, there is much evidence that Underhill was publicly engaging with conversations concerning the relationship between individual spiritual development and social reform as early as 1913. In that year Underhill published ‘The Place of the Will, Intellect and Feeling in Prayer’¹⁵ in the *Interpreter*. This journal was edited by Hewlitt Johnson,¹⁶ who founded the journal in 1905 intending it to ‘articulate and preach a Christian faith for modern times’.¹⁷ Johnson, though still relatively unknown, was able to attract contributions to the *Interpreter* from many important theologians and clearly recognized the benefit of including Underhill.¹⁸ The underpinning goal of the journal was to bring current theology into discussion with broader social aims.¹⁹ In Underhill’s 1913 article, she wrote on what would become her abiding passion, the necessity of prayer as the fundamental basis of any relationship with God and with the world, including with our fellow human beings. Here she insists that prayer allows our consciousness to become aware of that ‘Eternal truth . . . wherein the world is felt to be enshrined’ and that the whole of a person’s life is lived ‘under two orders’. One ‘is at once a citizen of Eternity and of Time’ that ‘moves perpetually . . . between God and his neighbour,

¹¹Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937), p. 138.

¹²Michael Ramsey, ‘Evelyn Underhill’, *Religious Studies* 12.3 (1976), pp. 273–79 (277).

¹³Underhill was awarded a Fellowship to the women’s college of King’s College London in 1913, see *The London Times*, 20 March 1913, p. 9.

¹⁴Underhill was always an ecumenist, as were many Christians involved in the Christian Social movement. She worked closely with Lucy Gardner, a Quaker, while retaining links with the Catholic Church. She described herself as a ‘free-lancer’ on numerous occasions, though she found a home within the Church of England as discussed below.

¹⁵Evelyn Underhill, ‘Place of the Will, Intellect and Feeling in Prayer’, *Interpreter* 9.3 (1913), pp. 241–56, reprinted in *Essentials in Mysticism* (London: J.M. Dent, 1920).

¹⁶Hewlitt Johnson, edited the *Interpreter* from 1905 until he left to serve as Dean of Manchester Cathedral, working with William Temple, then Bishop of Manchester. He went on to become Dean of Canterbury Cathedral 1931–1963, see John Butler, *The Red Dean* (London: Scala, 2011), pp. 24–27. Cropper dates Underhill’s connection with him beginning in 1927, her contributions to the *Interpreter* show their connection began at least as early as 1913.

¹⁷Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 24.

¹⁸Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 25.

¹⁹Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 25.

between this world and that'.²⁰ In this essay she insists that in prayer we become more fully and necessarily engaged with the needs of the world through the inspiration of the divine.

In 1914 she contributed another article to the *Interpreter*, 'Mysticism and the Doctrine of Atonement' where her early ideas concerning the intersection of spiritual and social life become even more pronounced. In this article she explains that each human being is both an individual and part of the 'body of all life'. She insists that 'these two – the separate and the corporate – are aspects of one whole'. It is through this 'corporation actualized in the Christian Church, but potentially co-extensive' with all of humanity, that allows the grace and spirit of God 'to bring forth new life, new vision, new goodness' into the national consciousness.²¹ In 1915 she contributed a third article to the *Interpreter*, 'The Mystic and the Corporate Life'. Here she takes up the criticism that the mystic was 'unsocial', or a 'religious individualist', instead arguing for the corporate nature of the mystic. She describes the mystic as having the ability to establish 'special relations with the spiritual order', which in turn has implications for more positive actions in the world. Underhill insists that the mystic 'is a creative personality, consecrated to the great practical business of actualizing the eternal order within the temporal'.²² The article reflects conceptualizations that were worked out in *Mysticism*, especially her concept of the 'unitive life' wherein contemplatives live an 'intense and creative life within the temporal order', which is tightly bound 'with complete communion with the Absolute Order' and is both 'patient and agent: patient as regards to God, agent as regards to man'.²³ Underhill would reprint these articles six years later in *Essentials in Mysticism*, in a pattern of broad and repeated dissemination of her work that she would employ throughout her life. In 1914 she participated in the *Twelfth Vacation Term for Biblical Study*, in Oxford. Other speakers at this event were Henry Scott Holland, one of the founders of the Christian Social movement; W.F. Lofthouse, who would later become part of the executive committee for the Conference on Christian Politics, Employment and Citizenship (COPEC); and Neville Figgis CR, who had just published *Churches in the Modern State*, where he explores 'the nature of human life in society', the relationship between Church and State, and the 'profoundest of all the problems of men's [human] life together'.²⁴

In 1915 Underhill began contributing to an eight-part series on prayer in William Temple's weekly publication, *Challenge*. Underhill's essay, 'The Prayer of Silence' again links individual devotion to the promotion of social good: 'the prayer of

²⁰'Place of the Will, Intellect and Feeling in Prayer', *Essentials in Mysticism* (London: J.M. Dent, 1920), p. 99.

²¹'Mysticism and the Doctrine of Atonement', *Interpreter* 10.4 (1914), pp. 131-48, reprinted and quoted here from *Essentials in Mysticism*, p. 48.

²²'The Mystic and the Corporate Life', *Interpreter* 11.2 (1915), pp. 143-60, reprinted and quoted here from *Essentials in Mysticism*, pp. 25, 43.

²³Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911) (London: Methuen, 3rd edn, 1912), p. 518.

²⁴*The London Times*, 1 April 1914, p. 6; *Spectator*, 4 April 1914, p. 17. Neville Figgis CR, *Churches in the Modern State* (London: Longman's, Green, 1913), pp. ix-xi. Underhill's contribution here was 'The Mystic and Corporate Life'.

silence has an active and social, as well as a religious and personal value. In it the soul feeds upon God; draws new vitality from the source of all life. The citizen who is so strengthened is worth more to the State than the person whose roots do not strike deep into eternity'. She goes so far in this essay, in the middle of World War I, to describe 'the cultivation of our spiritual faculties . . . is at the present time a patriotic duty, and each one who deliberately makes a place in his [one's] life for it is doing a service to the common cause'.²⁵ The other contributors to this series included George Henry, Bishop of Edinburgh and Handley Moule, Bishop of Durham.²⁶ In 1918 Temple resigned the editorship of *Challenge*.²⁷ Charles Raven was prevailed upon to take it up in 1920, and was tasked with attempting to engage the mainly centre-party Anglicans in the 'application of Christian principles to current affairs'.²⁸ He commissioned an article from Underhill, 'The Indwelling of Christ' as part of this objective.²⁹ We can see by her engagement with these publications and her participation in the 1914 summer school, that Underhill was already involved with those interested in promoting the Christian Social movement, including Holland, Temple, Raven and Johnson. She contributed her particular expertise in prayer and the spiritual life, grounded in her scholarship on mysticism, to their efforts to bring Christianity into discussions regarding social welfare and the political machinery of the West in the first decades of the twentieth century.

By 1920 Underhill was an invited speaker at the Church of England Congress, held at Southend on Sea.³⁰ Her address, on 23 October, was on the general subject of the 'Indwelling of Christ'. Underhill shared the stage on this day with Ernest William Barnes, Canon of Westminster,³¹ Walter Frere, CR,³² and Francis James Chavasse, Bishop of Liverpool. Her paper again addressed the intersection of the social with the spiritual, and the necessity of a constant engagement with both.

²⁵Evelyn Underhill, 'The Prayer of Silence', *Challenger* 3.59 (June 1915), p. 125.

²⁶Underhill also contributed an article, 'Problems of Conflict' to the *Hibbert Journal* in 1915. This along with a letter to the editor, published in *Challenge*, 4 June 1915, show her concern with the underlying issues regarding the war. This letter is overtly political, lamenting the Church of England, 'has failed us . . . they have been following the lead of the politicians and militarists . . . it does not seem so enormously out of place for those who stand for Christian thought to use their influence in trying to avert such fratricidal slaughter'. She registered her disappointment that 'one fails to hear of any individual or corporate action since on these lines' (p. 126).

²⁷Underhill would go on to contribute articles to another journal edited by Temple, *Pilgrim*, 'Some Implicits of Christian Social Reform', *Pilgrim* 3.2 (1923), pp. 141–57.

²⁸F.W. Dillistone, *Charles Raven* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), p. 114.

²⁹*Challenge*, 14.341 (1920), pp. 4–5.

³⁰The Church Congresses were annual events, beginning in 1861, to discuss social, moral, theological and other issues. These meetings had a large and tolerant remit but had no legislative authority within the Church of England, instead facilitating discussions on contemporary issues. For example, see 'The Church Congress, Subjects and Speakers for the Week', *Manchester Guardian*, 18 October 1920, p. 14. The correspondent, while critical of much of the programme, described the session delivered by Underhill, Frere, and Barnes as one that 'cannot fail to be in itself an unforgettable experience'.

³¹Barnes served as Bishop of Birmingham from 1924–1953. He was appointed Master of the Temple in 1915. Underhill's husband, Stuart Moore, was a barrister of the Inner Temple and they may have met through this connection.

³²Co-founder of the Anglican religious order, the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, and Bishop of Truro (1923–35). He was Underhill's spiritual advisor after the death of Baron von Hügel. He would work with Underhill on the revision of the Prayer Book and share a number of platforms with her.

Here she contends that ‘Quietists were content to receive’ while the “social Christianity” of the moment put all its emphasis on giving. Neither, alone, fulfilled the Christian ideal, which was that of an instrument receiving and distributing the gift of abundant life’. Chavasse brought the papers together in his closing address, insisting – in agreement with Underhill’s paper – that the indwelling of Christ was ‘the birth right and inheritance of all true believers’.³³

Underhill’s contributions through addresses and articles from 1913–20 make clear that by 1920 Underhill was an established participant in discussions and activities connected to the Social Christian movement. These early essays and addresses show that by 1913 Underhill’s thoughts regarding the relationship between the spiritual and the social were developing along the lines she would pursue in the 1920s and 1930s. It is also clear that Underhill’s relationship with major figures in the Christian Social movement were already established by 1913.

Underhill became a practising member of the Church of England around 1919, settling into the Anglo-Catholic wing. The Church of England provided her with a stable place of spiritual communion, and a platform from which to work. In later years, Underhill’s letter to Dom John Chapman (1931) confirms the sense of purpose that accompanied her renewed membership in the Church of England: ‘The 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 . . . it seems to me . . . that God means me to be where I am’.³⁴ More playfully, in her speech accepting the Fellowship at Kings College, London, she likens the Church of England to a ship, and thanks the College for admitting her to the ‘fellowship of those experts who are doing most to make & keep the ship sea worthy, & train the crews on which her future usefully must depend’.³⁵ Her invitation to give the first Upton Lecture in Oxford in 1921 gave her the opportunity to mark out what would become her most valuable contribution to keeping ‘the ship sea worthy’, her expertise on the spiritual life, and its necessity for any effective social action.

The Upton Lectures (Manchester College, Oxford) were established by the will of Charles Barnes Upton, a philosopher and theologian who died in 1920. Two lecture series, one on Religion and the other on Philosophy were set up in memory of Upton’s two sisters. L.P. Jacks invited Underhill to give the inaugural lecture series on religion in 1921–22.³⁶ In the invitation Jacks assured Underhill’s choice of topics was hers to make, but he suggested that she might wish to draw on ideas expressed in her most recent article in the *Hibbert Journal*, ‘The Sources of Power in the Human Life’.³⁷ His suggestion clearly suited the trajectory of Underhill’s religious thought, dealing as it does with the necessary inter-dependency of the social and the spiritual within individuals and society. Underhill writes in this article, ‘the struggle for a personal spiritual life is no selfish undertaking, as busy social reformers

³³*The London Times*, 23 October 1920, p. 10.

³⁴Evelyn Underhill, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (ed. Charles Williams; London: Longmans, Green, 1943), pp. 195–96.

³⁵Acceptance speech, KPP75, 3/2/2, King’s College, London Archives, p. 7.

³⁶L.P. Jacks, letter to Evelyn Underhill, 13 May 1921, KPP75, 1/11/1, King’s College, London Archives.

³⁷‘The Sources of Power in the Human Life’, *Hibbert Journal*, 19.3 (April, 1921), pp. 385–400. L.P. Jacks was editor of the *Hibbert Journal* from its inaugural edition in 1902 until 1948.

sometimes insist. On the contrary, it is the first step in all valid social reform'.³⁸ The article goes on to advise a 'practical mysticism' (perhaps in reference to her book of the same title);³⁹ a spiritual development that allows the ordinary person to experience the flowering of a new creative life.⁴⁰ In this article she insists on the centrality of prayer in this spiritual development, a theme that had already emerged in her published work, and was to remain central to her pastoral theology. This article set up the discussions she would explore more fully in the Upton Lecture Series. Underhill published this lecture series in *Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*. The last lecture of the series appears in this book as 'The Life of the Spirit and Social Order'.⁴¹

In this essay Underhill attacks the notion that the spiritual life was some kind of self-indulgent luxury and expresses concern with a social gospel that side-lines spiritual life:

How completely, in the minds of those young people who are interested in religion, the Social Gospel now overpowers all other aspects of the spiritual life. Again and again we are assailed by the most learned among them that in their view religion is a social activity, and service is its proper expression: that all valid knowledge of God is social . . . [and] that the use of prayer is mainly social, in that it improves us for service, otherwise it must be condemned as a merely selfish activity'.⁴²

Instead she insists that 'Without the inner life of prayer and meditation, lived for its own sake, and for no utilitarian motive, neither our judgments upon the social order nor our active social service will be perfectly performed; because they will not be the channel of the Creative Spirit expressing itself through us in the world today'.⁴³ In Underhill's perspective, individual spirituality is essential for any progress in improving the social order, 'since the place and influence of the spiritual life in the social order will depend entirely on its place in the individual consciousness of which that social order will be built'.⁴⁴

The essay also makes quite clear that this is not simply an esoteric debate that one might expect of a scholar of mysticism. She understands the necessity for robust social action on the ground. But she perceives this not as an end in itself – the goal for humanity is not for all to live in a comfortable social situation. The stakes are much higher, eternity – the creation of God's Kingdom on earth. As she puts it, 'we have made many plans and elevations; but we have not really tried to build Jerusalem either in our own hearts or in "England's pleasant land"'.⁴⁵

³⁸'Sources of Power', p. 389.

³⁹*Practical Mysticism* (London: J.M. Dent, 1914).

⁴⁰'Sources of Power', p. 391.

⁴¹Evelyn Underhill, *Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* (London: Methuen, 1922). This book had seven editions published during Underhill's life.

⁴²Evelyn Underhill, *Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* (ed. Susan Howatch; Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1994), p. 206. All quotations taken from this edition.

⁴³*Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 208.

⁴⁴*Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 209.

⁴⁵*Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 215.

Improvements in the quality of life for individuals is essential not simply for their comfort, but because she believed an authentic and engaged spiritual life could not be nurtured amidst human deprivation, and thus social goals would also be hindered:

We shall never get spiritual values out of a society harried and tormented by economic pressure, or men and women whose whole attention is given to the daily task of keeping alive . . . these lives do not represent the most favourable conditions for the human soul. It is not poverty that matters; but the strain and presence of anxiety and fear . . . Every – even the most subtle – kind of cruelty and exploitation, of self-advantage obtained to the detriment of other individuals, must be eliminated.⁴⁶

Underhill here rejects a spirituality that is directed away from the world, and instead insists on a spiritual pragmatism which brings together what she often terms the ‘time-world’ with eternity. She describes the possibilities inherent in a population of individuals fully engaged in the spiritual life. She saw the potential for a society, thus constituted, to reach and use ‘spiritual power . . . for the insertion of eternal values in the time-world’.⁴⁷ She goes on to insist that ‘full identification with the divine purpose must be social as well as an individual expression of full life . . . [and] must mean in the end that the real interests of society are identical with the interests of the Creative Spirit’ and that this must be expressed in the prayer and work of Christian Churches.⁴⁸ The essay ends with a visionary challenge:

Consider alone the immense release of energy for work needing to be done if the civil wars of civilized man could cease and be replaced by that other mental fight, for the up-building of Jerusalem: how the impulse of the Creative Spirit, surely working in humanity, would find the way made clear. Would not this, at last actualize the Pauline dream of each single citizen as a member of the Body of Christ?⁴⁹

In this essay she challenges her readers not simply to contemplate this vision, but to:

Begin, begin with ourselves, and if possible, do not begin in solitude . . . join up with somebody, find fellowship; whether it be in a church or society or among a few like-minded friends. Draw together for mutual support, and face those imperatives of prayer and work which we have seen to be the condition of the fullest living-out of our existence.⁵⁰

⁴⁶*Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 219. Underhill saw this deprivation close up during her visits to families she sought to help in the early 1920s. She writes that these visits were ‘often of a heart-breaking kind; for they are always in some sort of trouble & misery poor darlings, often actually hungry, & its so little one can do to rescue them’ (KPP75, 3/3/2, King’s College, London Archives, p. 6).

⁴⁷*Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 224.

⁴⁸*Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 226.

⁴⁹*Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 228.

⁵⁰*Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, p. 221.

This was not simply a rhetorical flourish to end a successful series of lectures, but her own recognition of a call to embrace this vision of a spiritually rich social activism.⁵¹ The importance of the Upton lectures and the subsequent print publication in Underhill's developing pastoral theology can be seen in a letter to 'a student' written in March 1924. In this letter Underhill advises that her earlier book *Practical Mysticism* should be read 'in conjunction with the sections on the Institutional and Social Spirituality' found in *Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*, making clear Underhill's understanding that social engagement was an essential component of spiritual life.⁵²

Margaret Cropper, Underhill's friend and biographer, comments that by the summer of 1922 Underhill felt herself a 'settled Anglican',⁵³ but I would argue she was anything but settled. She was intent on challenging the status quo of Anglican Christianity, and Western Christianity more generally, by 'drawing together' with leading voices to enact a Christianity more fully embedded in the social realities of the time, underpinned by a deep spirituality.⁵⁴ In the interwar years she would join William Temple, Lucy Gardner, Charles Gore, Charles Raven, George Bell and a number of other men and women who shared a vision for a renewed social reality.

The Upton Lectures were quickly followed by an invitation to Underhill to deliver a lecture at the *Inter-Denominational Summer School of Social Services*, in Swanwick, Derbyshire, in July 1922.⁵⁵ The organization behind this event was the *Interdenominational Conference of Social Services*, chaired by Charles Gore, CR. Gardner, Temple and Raven were also heavily involved in this organization. Underhill's lecture, 'Some Implicits of Christian Social Reform' covers similar ground as her Upton lectures, and is especially insistent on the importance of the spiritual life for any real progress in an improved society. She maintains that 'efforts to Christianize our social conduct are foredoomed, unless those who

⁵¹Ramsey commented that 'perhaps the best exposition of the new trend of her thinking is found in *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* and *Man and the Supernatural*. In these books much of the style and stress of the earlier books remains. But the frame of belief is different with the duality of Creator and creature, and the revelation of God in the Word-made-flesh always prominent' (*Evelyn Underhill: Anglican Mystic* [Oxford: SLG Press, 1996], p. 10).

⁵²*Letters* (ed. Williams), pp. 152-53.

⁵³Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 93.

⁵⁴*Letters* (ed. Williams), p. 307. In this letter Underhill's ecumenicism is clear, 'I see some signs of the beginning of this movement [towards a New Christian England], and one is the new and marked tendency of the various Christian bodies to draw together and work together'.

⁵⁵This organization developed through a merger of earlier groups including the Christian Social Union, in which Charles Gore, along with Scott Holland and E.K. Talbot, were involved, the Wesleyan Methodist Union for Social Services, and other social service unions which united to form an International Social Service Union which include Roman Catholics, the Established and the Free Evangelical Churches, the Unitarians and the Friends. See Maurice B. Reckitt, *Maurice to Temple* (London: Longman, 1946), pp. 138-47; and Stephen Spencer, 'William Temple and the Temple Tradition', in *Theology Reforming Society* (London: SCM Press, 2017), pp. 85-107 (88-89). The ICSS published widely, organized lectures, sermons, discussion groups and conferences. The Summer School at Swanwick, was initiated in 1911. See S. Keeble, *Christian Responsibility for the Social Order* (London: Epworth Press, 1922), p. 182. For a further discussion of the origins of the ICSS see G. Neville, *Free Time* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2004), p. 71.

undertake them give themselves to look steadily at Christ'.⁵⁶ She explains, further, that the life of doing, without a life of contemplation and communion with God, 'means a total surrender to the busy click-click of the life of succession'. Underhill asserts that success in all social action is predicated on a commitment to the spiritual grounding of institutions and individuals: 'The Christian order of society can only come into being as the expression of a corporate Christian Soul . . . Our need, then, is the re-birth of our vast potential energies into a world of fresh values, in which each particular action would be given the meaning that it has for the Mind of Christ'.⁵⁷ Here Underhill draws upon her particular insight into the spiritual life born of her work with Christian mystics,⁵⁸ and personal experience.⁵⁹

As the 1920s progressed Underhill became embedded in a network of individuals committed to the harmonizing of Christian spirituality with social activism. By 1924 she was a sought-after speaker, giving addresses to a number of organizations and contributing journal articles that discussed this harmonization.⁶⁰ It is at this time that we see earlier relationships with Temple, Gardner and Raven, as well as other prominent individuals, flourish. She describes in a letter to Laura Rose the participation of Cosmo Gordon Lang⁶¹ and Temple in the *Christian Citizenship Conference* she had organized early in the year:

The Archbishop of York [Lang] was in the Chair, and the Bishop of Manchester [Temple] gave a very beautiful address. . . . And we had Romans and Nonconformists speaking too, and all sitting happily together on the platform and 'treating each other's beliefs with reverence' – as our Confraternity says. I did really feel the whole thing was a triumph for the Spirit of Christ.⁶²

This conference not only highlights her work with Lang and Temple, but also what would become a key component of her role in the wider Christian community, to speak from within the Anglican Church, while at the same time remaining free from the constraints of organizational authority. She would later describe herself as a 'scamp' and a 'free lance',⁶³ and this allowed her to work ecumenically.

⁵⁶Evelyn Underhill, 'Some Implicits of Christian Social Reform', *Mixed Pastures* (London: Methuen, 1933), p. 71. This essay was first printed in William Temple's journal *Pilgrim* 3.2 (1923), pp. 141–57.

⁵⁷'Some Implicits of Christian Social Reform', pp. 80, 83.

⁵⁸Underhill continued to publish works on the mystics and mysticism in the interwar years including her edition of Walter Hinton's *Scale of Perfection* (1923). A significantly revised (12th) edition of her best-known work, *Mysticism*, appeared in 1930.

⁵⁹See Underhill's description of her personal mystic and spiritual experiences throughout KPP75, 3/3/1, King's College, London Archives, especially the entry for 21 December 1921, pp. 1–4. A transcription of this entry can be found in Dana Greene (ed.), *Fragments from an Inner Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1993), pp. 108–10.

⁶⁰For example, her 'address to the Leaders of Girls Club', 23 January 1923 and her 'Degrees of Prayer', given to the Guild of Health (1922), printed in Evelyn Underhill, *Collected Papers* (ed. L. Menzies; London: Longman Green, 1946), were initially printed as pamphlets.

⁶¹Archbishop of York (1908–28) and Archbishop of Canterbury (1928–42).

⁶²*Letters* (ed. Williams), p. 150.

⁶³*Letters* (ed. Williams), p. 207.

Key to recognizing the importance of Underhill's status in the Christian Social movement by 1924, was her invitation to participate in the COPEC project. Stephen Spencer describes COPEC as 'Temple's first major social reform initiative at Manchester', where he served as the Bishop of Manchester.⁶⁴ Temple's biographer F.A. Iremonger believed that COPEC 'gave to international Christian thinking and planning a sense of direction which was to prove of first-rate importance in the subsequent history of that [Christian Social] movement.'⁶⁵ Charles Raven describes the objective of COPEC 'to present to the Church a broad vision of the Christian gospel, as it affected the social, economic and political life of [hu]mankind' and to unite 'Christians of all denominations' to apply their faith to the 'art of corporate living'.⁶⁶ Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury, praised the aims and the organization of the conference, noting that 'The brains and hearts of some of our foremost Christian thinkers and workers are astir with the resolve to look afresh upon our problems – social, industrial, political, international – and to bring them unreservedly to the touchstone of the Christian faith'.⁶⁷ The two joint secretaries were Lucy Gardner⁶⁸ and Charles Raven. This project grew directly out of the work of the *Interdenominational Social Services Union*, to which Underhill was already contributing, as discussed above.⁶⁹

Underhill records her invitation to COPEC's first conference (April 1924) rather flippantly in a letter to her friend, Lucy Menzies: 'Have just been asked to be one of the three speakers on the opening day of COPEC – a truly horrifying responsibility. Dr. Raven for the Anglicans, Mr. Maltby for Free Churches and I (I suppose) for "Any other Colour" as they say at the Cat Shows'.⁷⁰ Beyond the lightness of the comment, Underhill reveals the way in which she valued her status as a 'free lance', able to move among a variety of denominational positions, and her understanding of the importance and possibilities inherent in the COPEC project.

Temple's speech opened the conference by affirming his belief that the conference was part of a 'great movement within the Church, which is, I am convinced, a movement of the Holy Ghost' and by insisting that the aim of the conference was 'through the contributions of various speakers and perhaps through the very clash of their opinions, to hear God speak. Those who speak will speak as in God's presence;

⁶⁴Stephen Spencer, *William Temple: A Calling to Prophecy* (London: SPCK, 2001), p. 71. For further discussion on Temple and COPEC see John Kent, *William Temple: Church State and Society in Britain, 1880–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 116–25; Edward Loane, *William Temple and Church Unity* (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 155–56.

⁶⁵F.A. Iremonger, *William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury: His Life and Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 335.

⁶⁶Charles Raven, letter to COPEC members, June 1927, MS. Ref. SAEUG/D/58, Wellcome Library, London.

⁶⁷*Proceedings of COPEC* (ed. Will Reason; London: Longman Green, 1924), pp. 15–16.

⁶⁸In her obituary published in the *Manchester Guardian*, Lucy Gardner, from a Bradford Quaker family, was described as the 'real founder of COPEC' and the 'organizing spirit of an inter-denominational group in the first ten years of the century . . . which included William Temple and Charles Roden [Raven] among the Anglicans'. 'Miss Lucy Gardner', *Manchester Guardian*, 9 December 1944, p. 4. Underhill may have been acquainted with Gardner as early as 1914.

⁶⁹Peter Gordon and John White, *Philosophers as Educational Reformers* (New York: Routledge, 2010 [1979]), p. 130.

⁷⁰*Letters* (ed. Williams), p. 152.

those who listen will listen in dependence on God'.⁷¹ Temple's desire to 'hear God speak' in relation to social conditions and corporate living, resonated with Underhill's work from the previous decade.

Underhill was unable to attend the conference because of the death of her mother just prior to the opening. Her paper was read out by W. Moberley. In this forum she makes clear her understanding of social Christianity. She opens with a challenge:

Now then, isn't it our job . . . to bring together and harmonise the life revealed in history and the life revealed in prayer? . . . Is not the whole of the New Testament a demand that this shall be done? Is not the whole of it a declaration of a power accessible to us, in which it can be done?⁷²

And she contends that, 'A genuine Christian ought to be alive all over, with a depth and vitality of soul that makes shallow judgments and prejudices impossible: a Christian social order should be permeated in every part with this life; controlled by a supernatural aim'.⁷³ It is the inter-permeation of this vitality that she saw as essential to any successful Christian social reality.

Underhill is unstinting in her assessment of the challenges to Christianity as she saw practised all around her:

And what is wrong with current Christianity is that its . . . vision and prayer have been divorced from action, and thus both sides of life have been maimed . . . So the purpose of this Conference and the prayers of those who have called it together will only be fulfilled if the Church again becomes a Church of Prophecy and Vision; . . . if she will restore the full vividness, the completely integrated Christian life of adoration and of action . . . lift the life of human intercourse in all its phases to the level on which it ought to be – the level of sacrament.⁷⁴

Here Underhill brings together her conviction that contemplation – adoration – and a robust and integrated social action can and must bring human interaction to the level of the sacramental and through this the complete harmonization of the social and the spiritual. She ends her address by laying before her audience the facts that she sees as both a challenge and a motivation to act: 'countless human souls as dear to God as our own are passing through this world under conditions of which no Christian, no lover of Christ . . . can bear to think . . . I needn't continue – we know quite well that our country is not a Christian one . . . is not corresponding with God's nature or fulfilling God's purpose'.⁷⁵ She sees the answer to this state of affairs to be the goal of living a 'vivid, realistic Christianity – the reign of Christ's love in

⁷¹*Proceedings of COPEC*, p. 22.

⁷²*Proceedings of COPEC*, p. 30.

⁷³*Proceedings of COPEC*, p. 30.

⁷⁴*Proceedings of COPEC*, p. 32.

⁷⁵*Proceedings of COPEC*, pp. 33-34.

individual hearts' that can inspire the kind of charity, compassion and self-sacrifice that will transform society.⁷⁶

Underhill's COPEC address was a call to action, and she disseminated this address far beyond the confines of one conference. It was printed as 'The Will of the Voice' in the publication of COPEC proceedings and in *Pilgrim*, a journal Temple edited, both in 1924.⁷⁷ It was reprinted in the *Homiletic Review*, a US journal of the Roman Catholic Church, under the title of 'The Nature of God' in 1933, and was also published in Underhill's collection of essays, *Mixed Pasture* (1933).⁷⁸ Underhill regularly reprinted articles and addresses as part of a strategy of dissemination which kept her work in front of readers and in dialogue with current religious and social debates. However, this is the only essay she reprinted four times, ensuring a widespread and international audience.

Underhill's involvement with COPEC was much greater than simply providing an opening address. Her address to the ICSS at Swanwick in 1922 staked out her contribution to the discussions that would dominate COPEC. She was also involved in organizational meetings for COPEC's first conference.⁷⁹ She was part of the sub-committee which produced the first volume of committee reports produced under the auspices of COPEC. This volume, *The Nature of God and His Purpose for the World* provided the grounding for a further eleven volumes and serves as a preface to the entire series:

In the cause of social righteousness we believe that the first duty of the Christian and of the Church is not with programmes or policies, not with acquiescence or with revolution, but with God: we believe that it is only the God-possessed and God-inspired who can rightly and radically reform themselves and the world.

The report then quotes Saint Augustine: 'let the children of Thy spirit, placed in their firmament, make their light shine upon the earth ... for the old order is passed and the new arises'.⁸⁰ In this report, Underhill's influence is clear. She worked with Lucy Gardner, Charles Raven, and others, taking a leading role in the production of this first volume.⁸¹

At the end of the COPEC project Gardner would reflect, 'It was a necessary step for the awakening of the Churches and the building up of a united Christian

⁷⁶*Proceedings of COPEC*, p. 35.

⁷⁷*Pilgrim* 4.4 (1924), pp. 373-81.

⁷⁸*Mixed Pastures*, pp. 84-93; *Homiletic Review* 105.2 (1933), pp. 143-46.

⁷⁹Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 132.

⁸⁰*The Nature of God and His Purpose for the World*, COPEC Commission Report, vol. 1 (London: Longman Green, 1924), p. 176.

⁸¹Those working on this sub-committee include: W.R. Maltby (Warden of the Wesley Deaconess Institute, Ilkley); E.K. Talbot, CR (Superior of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield); John Oman (Principal of Westminster College, Cambridge); David Cairns (Principal of United Free Church College, Aberdeen and Moderator of the Assembly of United Free Churches of Scotland); David Phillips (Professor at the United Theological College, Presbyterian Church of Wales); H.G. Wood (Director of Studies, Woodbrooke and Professor of New Testament Literature and Church History, Selly Oak College, Birmingham).

Council'.⁸² Underhill became, through this project, one of that united Christian Council. In the Upton Lectures she encouraged joining with like-minded people to further the work of building God's Kingdom. Through her involvement in COPEC she became a vocal and effective member of a network of individuals determined to further social action through a renewed Christianity. Christopher Armstrong contends that Underhill presented her audiences 'with an uncompromising summons to return to loving contemplation of God as the true source and guarantee of Christian love ... [for Underhill] the mystic is the model even to the "social" Christian in so far as he [/she] alone can really bring a vision to the people and do God's work'.⁸³ Underhill would dedicate the remainder of her life to promote this vital inter-relationship between spirituality (as in a direct and sustained relationship with God) and social action.

Her most widely recognized contribution to the development of this inter-relationship she believed was so vital, was her work as a retreat leader. Underhill led several retreats between 1924 and 1936, many of these at the Pleshy Retreat house in the Chelmsford Diocese, Essex. Carol Poston claims that Underhill 'helped invigorate the retreat movement in the Church of England between the two world wars', while Joy Dixon describes Underhill as a 'pioneer in the Anglican Retreat movement'.⁸⁴ Underhill was involved in the Association for Promoting Retreats and gave addresses to this group.⁸⁵ Dana Greene suggests that the growth of the retreat movement in England can be attributed at least in part to Underhill's involvement.⁸⁶ Opening a 1927 retreat that she delivered four times that year, Underhill explains that 'all our service should be soaked in prayer ... to add to the praise offered by the world, to fit into God's scheme, and to translate some of His spiritual reality into the terms of human life'. Her retreats were designed to assist individuals develop this spiritual capacity within themselves, which would also reflect outward into the world.⁸⁷

Underhill's retreat work complimented an intensive schedule of speaking engagements that again addressed the necessity of a robust inter-relationship of spirituality and social action. In 1925 she spoke at the Central House of the Mother's Union (May), the Anglo-Catholic summer school (July), and the Student Christian Movement Auxiliaries⁸⁸ (October), to list just some of the events to which she contributed that year. In 1926 she was also asked to address the Conference of Clergy, in the Liverpool diocese, at Water Millock, Cumberland by Albert David, Bishop of Liverpool (another COPEC member). In her conference address she told them:

⁸²Lucy Gardner, letter, 15 November 1928, MS ref. SAEUG/D/58, Wellcome Trust Library, London.

⁸³Armstrong, *Underhill*, p. 238.

⁸⁴Carol Poston, 'Introduction', in C. Poston (ed.), *The Making of a Mystic, New and Selected Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p. x; Joy Dixon, 'Sex, Mysticism and Psychology in Early Twentieth-Century England', *Gender and History* 25.3 (2013), pp. 652-67 (653).

⁸⁵Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 93; Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 161.

⁸⁶Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 93.

⁸⁷Evelyn Underhill, *Ways of the Spirit* (ed. Grace Adolphsen Brame; New York: Crossroads, 1990), pp. 147-48.

⁸⁸This lecture was published as 'The Christian Basis of Social Action' in *Mixed Pastures*.

The primary thing, I believe, that will be of use is a conception as clear and rich and deep as you are able to get it, first of the Splendour of God; and next of your own souls over and against that Splendour of God; and last of the sort of interior life which your election of his service demands . . . the soul of a priest, in fact, the soul of every religious worker – stands in a special relation towards God and other souls . . . He is one of the assistant shepherds, not one of the sheep.⁸⁹

Here Underhill groups the priest with ‘every religious worker’ signalling the importance she placed on lay ministry, in which she herself was involved through her work as a retreat leader and spiritual director.⁹⁰ In this address Underhill stressed the importance of the priest’s inner life and its practical working out:

You do far more for your congregation, for helping them to understand what prayer really is, and to practice it, for quickening their religious sensitiveness, by your unselfconscious absorption in God during the services, than you can hope to do by any amount of sermons.⁹¹

This and two other addresses to the Northern clergy were edited and revised for publication in *Concerning the Inner Life* (1926).⁹² Through this relationship with the Liverpool diocese, Underhill was asked by Albert David, the Bishop of Liverpool, to serve on a commission for developing the spiritual life of the clergy and laity.⁹³ At the time her friend Charles Raven was also working for David in revitalizing the northern diocese.

Given Underhill’s belief in the importance of prayer, contemplation and worship in building an authentic and transformative relationship with God, her involvement in the controversy to introduce a new Prayer Book in the Church of England is not surprising. In her support of the new Prayer Book we can see her strategy as an advocate for prayer distilled. She lectured on the topic at Kings College, London and shortly after published this lecture in Maurice Relton’s collection of essays promoting the Prayer Book.⁹⁴ This essay was reviewed in the *London Times* in the summer of 1927. The reviewer notes that Underhill’s essay ‘shows how in the new book we find both the historic attachments and the fresh and living applications of prayer

⁸⁹Quoted in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, pp. 137–38, see also Evelyn Underhill, *Concerning the Inner Life* (Oxford: One World Press, 1995 [1926]), p. 14.

⁹⁰Ramsey says of Underhill’s work as a spiritual director, ‘She did much to extend the tradition of spiritual direction which elicits people’s own spiritual capacities and vocations and helps them to find themselves in paths of freedom’. Ramsey, ‘Evelyn Underhill’, p. 278.

⁹¹Quoted in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 138.

⁹²*Concerning the Inner Life* (London: Methuen, 1926) was favourably reviewed in a number of newspapers and journals including the *Spectator*, *The London Times*, *The Daily Herald* in the UK, *The Cape Times* and *The Cape Argus* (South Africa), *The Southern Cross* (Australia) and the *New York Herald*, providing evidence for the international reach of Underhill’s work, and making clear the efficacy of her publication strategy.

⁹³Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 143.

⁹⁴Evelyn Underhill, ‘The Essentials of the Prayer Book’, in Maurice Relton (ed.), *The Revised Prayer-Book* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1927), pp. 45–62. Underhill’s cousin, Francis Underhill, later Bishop of Bath and Wells, also contributed to this volume.

and adoration deepened and emphasized'.⁹⁵ Underhill would continue her advocacy for the new Prayer Book in several letters to the *London Times* well into the autumn of 1927.⁹⁶ Underhill was also part of discreet conversations concerning the new Prayer Book held at Lambeth Palace some time in 1927.⁹⁷ Her article, 'Hill of the Lord' in the *Spectator* in November 1927 was a final attempt in print to draw together her views on the necessity of the new Prayer Book and by extension the importance of a reinvigorated Christian prayer life necessary to progress any social welfare programme.⁹⁸

The Prayer Book controversy developed further relationships between Underhill and important figures in the Church of England, but it also convinced her of the efficacy of popular print journalism to communicate to a wider public audience. She reacted with perhaps somewhat feigned surprise at the public reception of her first letter in the *London Times* supporting the new Prayer Book:

Life has been complicated by a sudden access of publicity [to her letter in] *The Times* about the Prayer Book . . . they have put it on the central page where everyone sees things, and I have lived ever since under showers of letters . . . and got up to my neck in plans and discussions for outwitting the fanatics and getting it passed on a basis of mutual tolerance.⁹⁹

While Underhill had long published book reviews in mainstream newspapers, especially the *Spectator*, and articles in the Christian press, this was her first foray into explaining the importance of a spiritual life to a mass audience. It was a lesson she would quickly integrate into her already wide range of activities.

In 1929 Underhill became religious editor of the *Spectator*,¹⁰⁰ a position she would hold until 1932. She used this as an opportunity to invite theologians and religious writers (men and women) to speak on theological issues she believed should be brought before the wider *Spectator* audience. She commissioned four series: 'Problems of the Christian Conscience'; 'The Challenge to Religious Orthodoxy: Ideas of God'; 'Studies in Sanctity'; and 'A Christian's Faith'. The many writers who contributed, and the large circulation of the newspaper, allowed Underhill to engage the public in matters of religion in important ways.

⁹⁵*The London Times*, 30 June 1927, p. 21.

⁹⁶Underhill, in *The London Times*: 'Laymen and the Prayerbook', 9 March 1927, p. 12; 'Pray for Common Sense', 15 October 1927, p. 13; 'Pray for Common Sense: A Response to the Bishop of Barking', 24 October 1927, p. 8.

⁹⁷Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 141.

⁹⁸'Hill of the Lord', *Spectator*, 19 November 1927, pp. 869-70. Walter Frere, whom Underhill was now in close contact with, was involved in the discussions and design of the new Prayer Book. See Philip Corbett, 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Prayer Book Revision and Beyond', Nicholas Stebbing and Benjamin Gordon-Taylor (eds.), *Walter Frere: Scholar, Monk, Bishop*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011), pp. 162-78 (162). Underhill had expressed dismay that Frere and his fellow CR brother, Talbot, were unable to join the meeting of Bishops and clergy in Chester to discuss the revival of prayer among the clergy. As Cropper points out, Underhill was the only woman in attendance at this high level meeting (Cropper, *Underhill*, p. 142).

⁹⁹Quoted in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 141.

¹⁰⁰The *Spectator* was first published in 1828. In 1928 the paper was edited by Evelyn Wrench.

Underhill wrote to Lucy Menzies of her hopes for this editorial position, 'it is rather an opportunity to get the things one wishes said before the public'.¹⁰¹

As religious editor of the *Spectator* Underhill also reviewed the Lambeth conference of 1930 where she expressed concern about the lack of spiritual engagement she found in the proceedings there, with the emphasis on, as she puts it, the horizontal rather than the vertical:

All those who heard the great sermon preached in St. Paul's by the Archbishop of York [Temple] at the opening of the Lambeth Conference, with its solemn emphasis on the over-ruling action of God, must have felt that the Bishops set out upon their task with a commission to recall our generation to a new sense of the unsearchable mysteries of the spiritual world, the vivid reality of the Divine. Even the most sympathetic reader of the Report and its accompanying documents will hardly maintain that this great opportunity has been taken.¹⁰²

In the report, Underhill objects to the bishops' emphasis on 'humanizing' religion and their avoidance of 'other-worldliness' which she describes as anthropocentric. This anthropocentricity ran counter to all her published works and lectures, her contributions to the Social Christian movement, her advocacy of the retreat movement, and certainly her early work on mysticism. At the time Underhill was using the public forum of the *Spectator* to lobby for a more God focused, Christocentric spirituality to permeate the church and society. Over and over again she insisted this was the only way in which real and profound change could occur in the world. Underhill had tried before this 1930 Lambeth Conference to exert some influence on the proceedings, which her later *Spectator* article shows was not as successful as she had hoped. A letter to the relatively new Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, with whom she had worked for over a decade, shows how she attempted to influence the direction of this Lambeth Conference. In this letter, opening with the heading, 'A Way of Renewal',¹⁰³ Underhill proposed a serious programme of spiritual renewal for clergy: 'to call the clergy as a whole, solemnly and insistently to a greater interiority and cultivation of the personal life of prayer'. She explains in the letter, 'We were convinced the real failures, difficulties and weaknesses of the Church are spiritual and can only be remedied by spiritual effort and sacrifice, and that her deepest need is a renewal, first in the clergy and through them in the laity; of the great Christian tradition of the inner life'. The 'we' referred to here is the Jerusalem Chamber Fellowship of Prayer, described by St Clair Donaldson in 1927 as a group of individuals 'joining together in prayer ... in the acknowledgement that there is a widespread feeling of impotence in the church which cannot respond to the emergencies of the age', a recognition that 'something is wanted from outside'. The central belief of the group was that 'nothing will avail

¹⁰¹Quoted in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 153. Greene notes that Underhill wrote more than 170 reviews and 13 articles for the *Spectator* in addition to her editorial work (Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 110).

¹⁰²'The Lambeth Report', *Spectator*, 23 August 1930, p. 4.

¹⁰³'The Way of Renewal', PP 75, 3/4/16, King's College London Archives. A transcription of this document, with some minor editorial insertions, was published by Grace Adolphsen Brame in the *Christian Century*, 31 October 1990, p. 998.

us but a revival of the spiritual life'. The meetings were held in Westminster Abbey through the hospitality of the Dean, William Foxley Norris. The overarching goal of the fellowship was 'A Church awakened out of its prayerlessness to a spirit of eager supplication'.¹⁰⁴ Underhill was involved with the group from its inception, as it had emerged out of a 1926 conference Underhill organized at Westminster Abbey. Underhill describes in a letter to Lucy Menzies the conference attendees that included 'progressive ecclesiastics of all parties, four bishops, and quite a bunch of canons, with boys and girls from the universities . . . [and] representatives from missionary societies'. Many of these became part of this loosely constituted fellowship.¹⁰⁵

In her letter to Lang, Underhill makes clear that she is writing not as an individual, but as a part of this fellowship, noting that this call to the clergy for a greater life of personal prayer, 'was the original aim of the founders of the Jerusalem Chamber Fellowship, of whom I am one'. The letter is a distillation of the careful considerations of at least the London branch of the Jerusalem Chamber Fellowship, for which Underhill was the mouthpiece. And clearly her decades long insistence on the necessity of a robust spiritual life, if there was to be any hope of real social change, is written large in the letter. She laments that present Christianity in the Church of England was 'humanitarian rather than theocentric' and this had a stifling effect on the spiritual life of many: 'Hence the dreary character of many church services and the result in the increasing alienation of the laity from institutional forms'. She closes by acknowledging that recovering 'the ordered interior life of prayer and meditation, as a first charge on their time, will be very difficult for clergy . . . They will not do it unless they are made to feel its crucial importance'. She advises that only 'The solemn voice of the united episcopate, recalling the Church to that personal, realistic contact with the Supernatural which has been since Pentecost the one source of her power, will give authoritative support' but cautions that 'the renewal of a spiritual society must depend on giving absolute priority to the spiritual life'. She asks that a proposal be put before the conference to provide ordinands with a 'far more thorough, varied, interesting and expert devotional training'. She requests that the clergy adopt a rule of life and attend an annual retreat. Attached to this letter is a typewritten 'Study Scheme on The Holy Spirit and the Church'.¹⁰⁶ While the conference as a whole disappointed her, there is evidence that some attention was paid to this letter in regards to clergy formation. In Underhill's Lambeth Report, published in the *Spectator*, she notes 'the need of improved and enlightened theological education for both clergy and laity, if they are to maintain religious freshness, and bring their faith into a living harmony with modern thought, is rightly stressed' in the proceedings of the conference.¹⁰⁷ This involvement in the 1930 Lambeth Conference makes clear that Underhill spoke within the Church with authority, and that she felt able to criticize Church leadership publicly in the *Spectator*. Her activities during the first part of the 1930s emphasize the

¹⁰⁴St Clair Donaldson DD, 'The Jerusalem Chamber Fellowship of Prayer', *International Review of Mission* 16.1 (1927), pp. 121-25 (122, 123).

¹⁰⁵Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁶'Study Scheme on the Holy Spirit in the Church', PP75, 3/4/17, King's College, London Archives.

¹⁰⁷'The Lambeth Report', p. 4.

necessity for a robust spiritual life among the clergy and laity as essential to greater social goals.

It was this concern to bring together a revitalized spirituality that would fully underpin the social action that also informed her key publication on Western Christianity, *Worship*. In late 1933, Walter Matthews, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, approached Underhill to write a book on worship. Underhill wrote to Margaret Cropper in early 1934 indicating her interest in the project, 'It looks as if I should do that Christian Worship book – rather exciting' and later 'I've definitely accepted the Christian Worship Book and now feel frightened and incompetent'.¹⁰⁸ *Worship* was published in the Library of Constructive Theology series and became the Religious Book of the Month in the United States.¹⁰⁹

Soon after its publication, J.R. Pridie wrote in *Theology* that 'Its thought moves on the highest plane'.¹¹⁰ T.E. Johnson suggests that even today Underhill's approach in *Worship* makes 'her work surprisingly relevant to contemporary liturgical studies'.¹¹¹ While Ann Loades believes that '*Worship* reveals her continuing preoccupation with the question of how Christology integrates with liturgy, and therefore with the living of a distinctively Christian life'.¹¹² Dana Greene notes that in *Worship* Underhill 'defines Anglicanism not merely as a variant of continental Protestantism but as a special development of traditional Christian worship'.¹¹³ In *Worship* Underhill's activities as a lecturer, spiritual advisor, retreat leader, commission member, scholar, and mystic all came together to inform her conception of the Christian Church and prayer. And yet, what has often been missed in discussions of this work, is its consonance with her understanding of the inter-relationship between the spiritual and the social. *Worship* does not signal a retreat for Underhill into the sanctuary of the liturgical. Instead she insists in the conclusion of this work that the greater 'significance attached to the Church's sacramental life' that she saw emerging in the church from the late nineteenth century, signalled an 'active path' of cooperation 'with the creative purpose within the temporal world, a striving for perfection' – that is a social reality underpinned by total dependence on God's divine presence. This she had long maintained was the only effective way to eradicate social ills, including the threatening international violence that was soon to erupt into the Second World War.¹¹⁴ Underhill insists that within this relationship with God, enabled through sacramental worship, the material order could be transformed, 'and especially the human scene – cleansing, healing, saving, reconciling, and making of it a fit vehicle of the divine indwelling Life – giving, in fact, concrete and social expression to the Eucharistic ideal' on the ground.¹¹⁵ In *Worship* Underhill insists

¹⁰⁸Quoted in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, pp. 181-82.

¹⁰⁹Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (London: Nisbet, 1936). Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 120.

¹¹⁰Quoted in Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 182.

¹¹¹T.E. Johnson, 'Anglican Writers at Century's End: An Evelyn Underhill Primer', *Anglican Theological Review* 80.3 (1998), pp. 402-13 (410).

¹¹²Loades, 'Mysticism and Worship', p. 57. Loades also suggests that *Worship* may have had some influence on the liturgical changes in the Catholic Church in Vatican II, p. 69.

¹¹³Greene, *Evelyn Underhill*, p. 123.

¹¹⁴Underhill was a committed pacifist by the end of the 1930s. See her pamphlets, *A Meditation on Peace* (1939), *The Spiritual Life in Wartime* (1939), *Prayer in Wartime* (1939), *The Church and War* (1940).

¹¹⁵*Worship*, p. 342.

on a spiritual life firmly engaged with, and imbedded in, social relationships – transforming and perfecting these through a continual and developing engagement with the Charity of God. As she makes clear in her Lent book for 1934, *The School of Charity*, ‘we are children of the Eternal Perfect, whose essential nature is generous Love; and we are destined to manifest the splendour of God in and through the homely scenes’ of our daily lives and relationships. In this way, Underhill asserts, ‘a new quality of life’ is possible and awaits us ‘not somewhere else but where we are now’.¹¹⁶

These key ideas, continually expressed in Underhill’s essays and books were to be given a much wider audience in her BBC radio broadcasts. In her first broadcast, ‘The Inside of Life’ aired on 13 December 1931, she told her listeners ‘we are compound creatures, of sense and spirit, of mind and of soul, dwellers in time, yet capable of eternity’.¹¹⁷ In 1936 Underhill took to the airwaves again to press this message home. She gave four broadcast talks, which she published the following year as *The Spiritual Life*.¹¹⁸ It is in the final lecture of this series that she speaks plainly of the imperatives that had motivated much of her work for over two decades:

Here the further questions of the relation of spiritual life to public life and politics comes in. It must mean, for all who take it seriously, judging public issues from the angle of eternity, never from that national self-interest or expediency; backing our conviction, as against party or prejudice, rejecting compromise, and voting only for those who adopt this disinterested point of view. Did we act thus, slowly but surely a body of opinion – a spiritual party, if you like – might be formed; and in the long run make its influence felt in the state. Such a programme demands much faith, hope and charity; and courage too.¹¹⁹

Here Underhill calls for a spiritual revolution – a revolution wherein individuals and corporate bodies recognize and participate fully in the Spirit of God in order to transform earthly society. Her long career as a scholar of mysticism and the church, her extensive engagement with individuals and institutions, and her own intense life of prayer, convinced her there was no other way.

Underhill may have been, as Kripal describes her, a graceful retreat master and a serene spiritual director. However, the evidence of her engagement with the Christian Social movement, and her determination to make the life of the spirit central to this movement, highlights another important dimension to her work. Underhill made use of every forum available to her, exerting pressure on institutions and individuals, to ensure that the spiritual life – intense and shared, vertical not horizontal – was part of the Christian conversation of her time. And this enables us to put into a more dynamic context Michael Ramsey’s comment that ‘there were few, if indeed any, in the Church of England who did more to help people to grasp the priority of prayer in the Christian life and the place of the contemplative element within it’ during the interwar years. Underhill, and many of her most well-known

¹¹⁶Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity* (London: Longman Greens, 1934), p. 70.

¹¹⁷Evelyn Underhill, *Collected Papers* (ed. Lucy Menzies; London: Longman Greens, 1946), p. 104.

¹¹⁸Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937).

¹¹⁹*The Spiritual Life*, pp. 137–38.

contemporaries, believed that without the priority of prayer, through which a robust spiritual life could develop, all human endeavour to improve the social condition would be fruitless. By considering Underhill's work in the light of the social transformation she so vehemently desired, her work today can provide important insights and inspiration as we work to deal with our own social issues both within and beyond the Church.