

**DIRECTING MODERNIST SPIRITUALITY:
EVELYN UNDERHILL, THE SUBLIMINAL CONSCIOUSNESS
AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

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Outlining an alternative trajectory for modernist spirituality to that traced in Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010), I argue that modernist religious thought, far from playing heir to the long march of secularization, was in fact conditioned by a late-nineteenth-century cultural crisis that issued in a range of religious experiments and renewals, one of which was Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911); a text that brought together not only mystical traditions and scientific discoveries, but also used this interdisciplinary remit to counter existing secularizing perspectives. An important dimension of Underhill's work was its collaborative nature; it offers, I argue, not access to rarefied enlightenment, but rather a bold attempt to navigate a treacherous religious landscape.

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In *Stephen Hero* – the first draft of the work that would become *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* – the young Joyce has the even younger Stephen preach his doctrine of epiphany to one of his largely uncomprehending disciples. According to this theory, an epiphany – as a “sudden spiritual manifestation” – could take place anywhere at any time and, underlining this time-related uncertainty with something of a wry smile, Stephen suggests that even a public clock tower is capable of one (Joyce, 1963, p. 211). Stephen’s theory was one of many similar accounts popular at the turn of the twentieth century. In a famous article from 1896, the Belgian poet, dramatist and essayist Maurice Maeterlinck was able to anticipate the dawning of the twentieth century as an opening-out into a new spiritual epoch; he observed “that in the work-a-day lives of the very humblest of men, spiritual phenomena manifest themselves – mysterious, direct workings that bring soul nearer to soul and of all this we can find no record in former times” (Maeterlinck, 1897, p. 32). Such wide-ranging, spontaneous and unchanneled spiritual possibilities are presented, by Stephen and Maeterlinck alike, as preferable to the oppressive, restrictive and un-modern limitations of the Catholic Church.

For Pericles Lewis, it is this anti-Church rhetoric that shapes modernist engagement with religion. Reflecting upon the role of spirituality at the turn of the twentieth century, Lewis, remarks:

Something has certainly happened to religious experience during the first half of the twentieth century, and insofar as it involves an imagined emptying-out of the churches, it might plausibly be called secularization. Yet the modernists did not accept secularization as inevitable or embrace a world emptied of the sacred. [...] They sought to offer a new understanding of the sacred in their own texts, and in so doing they created a modern form of sacred text, charged with the meaning and power that seemed to them to have evacuated the church buildings. (Lewis, 2010, p. 19).

Literary modernism here is presented as a response to the emergent sociological narrative of secularization. Lewis may well encounter critics, whatever Joyce and Maeterlinck say, who disagree with him regarding the extent to which the West experienced an “emptying-out of

the churches” but he nonetheless finds wide-ranging acceptance that the early twentieth century was marked by a reorientation of spiritual life; the entry for “religion” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* offers the occult, spiritualism and theosophy as three potential directions for this new turn (Luckhurst, 2010, p. 444).¹

More contentious, however, is Lewis’s suggestion that the locus of religious attention shifted from the institutional churches to literary productions, with the great works of the era serving as a “modern form of sacred text”. Such a claim is irreparably bound up with justifications for literary studies – and particularly English literary studies – as a discipline, whether we turn to Arnold or to Leavis (Arnold, 1888; Leavis, 1975).² Yet, T.S. Eliot’s disdain for the Victorian sage insofar as he “set up Culture in the place of Religion” only “to leave Religion to be laid waste by the anarchy of feeling” questions whether the interchangeability between literature and religion, cited by Lewis, is a modernist phenomenon at all (Eliot, 1951, p. 436). The perception might in fact owe more to the canny promotional strategies, employed by artists at the turn of the twentieth century, to establish the aesthetic category of modernism: through not only the praise lavished on experimental writing but also the tactical dismissal, criticism or obfuscation of wider cultural engagement with a range of issues, religion among them (Joffe, 2005, p. 3; Ardis, 2002, p. 99; Jacobs, 1994, p. 278).³ Lewis, for instance, cites *To a Lighthouse* as an example of this new form of “sacred text” but could that argument be made convincingly for peripheral modernist works such as *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, *Armed with Madness* or *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot?* (Loy, 1996; Butts, 1927; Warner Townsend, 1927). It is the aura and mystique of canonical modernist works, as much as any spiritual content, that lends them the air of religious books.

In what follows I will offer an alternative to the co-dependence of liberated spirituality and canonicity within the study of modernism and religion: a dysfunctional relationship that issued in the figure of the literary-religious genius or the writer who not only evinces mastery

of literary style but also sage-like insight into the spiritual state of the modern world, an all-too-easy pairing that arises from an unwillingness to consider the culture-wide interest in a new spirituality that accompanied and informed literary modernism. Through the examination of a work of amateur scholarship, Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, I will argue that the anti-institutional staging that Lewis carries over from Joyce obscures a central preoccupation of modernist spirituality as we find it in Underhill's immensely popular volume: that being the grey area between science and the spiritual as exemplified in the psychology of religion.⁴ Exploration of this new territory, I will suggest, opened the way for a far more collaborative approach to spirituality than that afforded by the literary-religious genius model.

I. Epiphanies, Awakenings, and the Sublime: The Structure of *Mysticism*

While the young Joyce pitches the epiphanic in terms of opposition to the Catholic Church, Woolf, in her account of Joyce, and in a fashion that distinguishes her from Lewis, avoids Joyce's own staging of the debate:

In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, Mr Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence or any other of these signposts which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see (Woolf, 1929, pp. 190-191).

Woolf agrees with Joyce, Maeterlinck and Lewis insofar as she detects and outlines the formation of a new worldview at the turn of the century; for her, this visionary dimension demands that a writer set aside narrative "probability" or "coherence" in favor of a single-minded pursuit of the "spiritual". Her choice of the terms "materialist" and "spiritual" rather

than the pairing that comes more naturally to the twenty-first-century mind “spiritual” and (or, rather, not) “religious” owes something to the atheistic milieu of Bloomsbury where the Church had ceased to function as a worthy adversary.⁵ Yet, the complication, for the essay, is that this is a background Woolf shares with her adversaries: Wells, Shaw and Galsworthy. The claim that modernism threw its lot in with the congregations rushing from the pews risks obscuring what is distinctive about the modernist attitude towards religion and, in fact, blurring the dividing lines between experimental writing and the texts against which modernists distinguished themselves.

Woolf’s characterization of Edwardian literature as “materialist”, concentrated on a practical this-worldliness, touches on a central concern for twentieth-century explorations of religion, insofar as it reflects attention to material progress and the ethical rather than the transcendent.⁶ It is a much-rehearsed fact that mysticism was an important facet of modernist thought with *Four Quartets* being its great exemplar (See also Anderson, 2013). Yet Eliot, himself, complained of there being so “many kinds of qualities of mysticism”: a fact that made it impossible, in his eyes, to deploy the term with any degree of precision (Eliot, 1994, p. 55). For Eliot’s friend, the Jesuit priest and philosopher, Fr. Martin D’Arcy, the problem lay with a modern willingness to take arguments that concerned themselves with the rare experiences of union with God, enjoyed by a few chosen mystics, and to apply them to the whole category of religious sentiment (D’Arcy, 1934, p. 234).

Yet interest in mysticism had roots deeper than intellectual carelessness. Traditions of interpretation, arising in France in the late nineteenth century, had made the mystical a major battle ground for clashes between the Church and the scientific method in the Third Republic (Mazzoni, 1996, p. 26). Jean-Martin Charcot – the French neurologist famous for his work on hysterics in Paris – used the diagnostic criteria he developed at his hospital, the Salpêtrière, to diagnose as hysterics, retrospectively, great saints and mystics of the Church, drawing

attention to visual similarities between artistic depictions of the sufferings of historical religious figures and the symptoms of hysterics on his wards (Noel Evans, 1993, p. 26). This gave rise to a swathe of literature initially following Charcot in his interest in the physical symptoms of the mystical life, and later taking a psychological interest through application of the theory of the subconscious, developed by Charcot's pupil, Pierre Janet, as an explanation for hysteria.⁷ This interest in abnormality marks William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, even if he refuses the reductive analysis favored by his French counterparts. And it was a reaction against this combination of the saints and the abnormal that marked important Anglo-American studies of mysticism in the first decades of the twentieth century by figures such as Friedrich von Hügel, William Inge, Rufus Jones and Underhill herself (Schmidt, 2003, 290).

The structure of Underhill's *Mysticism* and, particularly, the second part of the work in which she sets out the stages of the mystical life, is shaped by her response to James and to the French tradition. Underhill notes that her exposition of the mystical life deviates from the traditional Christian three-stage schema of a spiritual journey: purgation-illumination-union (Underhill, 1911, p. 205). Her major modification is to codify a pre-purgation step, prior to the first stage in the classic Christian model, which she calls "The Awakening of the Self". This moment, Underhill explains, "Normally [...] takes the form of a sudden and acute realization of a splendor and adorable reality in the world" (Underhill, 1911, p. 215). Such a moment afforded Underhill the warrant to act as a spiritual director and, in a letter to her spiritual directee, Margaret Robinson, Underhill recalled her own awakening: "I still remember walking down the Notting Hill main road & observing the (extremely sordid) landscape with joy & astonishment. Even the movement of the traffic had something universal & sublime in it. Of course that doesn't last: but the after-flavour of it does, & now & then one catches it again" (Underhill, 2010, p. 128). The "sudden and acute realization of a

splendor and adorable reality in the world” occurred, for Underhill, on the sordid Notting Hill main road and her description is reminiscent of the mixture of spiritual vocabulary and shabby setting in many of the epiphanies in Joyce’s *Dubliners*. What is particularly interesting, however, is the rhetorical use Underhill makes of this episode: it counters a concern that Robinson had expressed about excessive delight in beauty; for Underhill the recognition of great and transcendental beauty – a beauty that reaches out and to which one responds – marks the beginning of one’s spiritual journey. The significance of “The Awakening of the Self” episode is not, then, to be found in an argument about the importance of a religious experience – as in Lewis’s formulation or which the comparisons with Joyce might imply – but rather in the fact that this experience is positive and healthy. Underhill argues that the desire for purification or purgation, characteristic of mystics, is not a symptom of a destructive psychological disorder that can only lead to a denial of the good things in life. The purification or purgation eventually requisite for a continued spiritual journey is not to be undertaken in bitter agony but in the “after-flavour” of this sublime joy.

Of equal importance is the fact that the mystical life does not reside in this experience alone, as the literary-religious genius model might suggest: with its beneficiary now firmly ensconced in his or her superiority of insight and feeling. “The Awakening of the Self” precipitates further action; Underhill does not content herself with walking up and down Notting Hill in bliss from thereon in. It seems remarkably different from the self-enclosed spiritual enlightenment afforded by Pericles Lewis’s “modern form of spiritual text”. In this Underhill not only remains true to her own principle of discernment, used throughout her writing – that growth in love is indicative of the experiences’ veracity – but also distances herself from William James’s approach or at least from one direction in which James’s approach could be taken. Underhill is unwilling to suggest “sudden and acute realizations” are the definitive core of all religious life; she makes room in her scheme for sudden moments of

illumination but nonetheless insists upon the work requisite for a religious life. Work that, as I will show, not only includes the discipline requisite for a life on the Way but also provides opportunities for collaboration and mutual enrichment that are alien to the literary-religious genius model. In what follows I wish, first, to underline the exploration of the grey area between science and religion that characterizes *Mysticism* and in which its response to the French interpretative tradition becomes clear and, secondly, to explore the collaboration that this grey area made possible.

II. The Subliminal Spark of the Soul: *Mysticism* and the Psychology of Religion

Woolf's terminology not only avoids later conceptualizations of the relationship between spirituality and organized religion but also resists the nineteenth-century understanding of the religious crisis found in Louis Auguste Sabatier's posthumously published, *The Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit* (1904). Sabatier surveyed the seemingly intractable conflict between the emphasis that a variety of modern sciences placed upon direct experience and insistence on traditional knowledge within the institutional churches (Sabatier, 1904, p. xv-xxxii). The cultural analysis evident in the infamous 1907 anti-modernist papal bull, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, shared much with Sabatier's assessment of the problem, even if its conclusions were somewhat different. As Finn Fordham has shown, the encyclical grouped together a range of attempts to accommodate Christian theology and developments in various sciences, alongside a new experiential emphasis in religious thought: with a particular concern being historical criticism of the bible alongside the primacy placed upon mystical experience by the soon-to-be-excommunicated George Tyrrell (Fordham, 2013, 18). The intellectual and disciplinary distance between these poles is evidence that there was no single "modernist" position. And, to invoke Woolf's terminology, Tyrrell's insistence on the mystical could be

positioned as an exemplar of the “spiritual” preoccupations of the modern age, while historical biblical criticism might be interpreted as “materialistic” insofar as it evinces the characteristics that Ezra Pound, for instance, found so distasteful in university literary studies curricula (Pound, 1960, p. 16).⁸

Underhill claimed, following the encyclical and in the period immediately prior to the composition of *Mysticism*, to be a modernist (Greene, 1990, p. 29). Fordham has suggested that the initial applications of “modernist”, in the literary or cultural sense, were based upon an appropriation and reversal of the term taken from the church document, which thereafter served as a rallying cry for those who opposed or decried the condemnation (Fordham, 2013, 18-19). There is an element of this defiance in Underhill’s insistence: she decided not to enter the Roman Catholic Church as a result of the concerns to which the bull gave rise (Greene, 1990, p. 30). There is, however, a deeper intellectual undercurrent to the self-assessment. *Mysticism* – as the subtitle *A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* indicates – was an attempt to harmonize the insights of a newly-developed discipline, the psychology of religion, with various mystical traditions.

At times, this amounts to little more than a restatement of mystical themes in psychological language. A frequent stylistic tic in the work involves following a description of a religious practice taken from, or reminiscent of, a mystical text with a sentence in which the practice is discussed “from the psychological point of view” (Underhill, 1911, p. 213, p. 273, p. 458) or “in psychological language” (Underhill, 1911, p. 53, p. 74, p. 261, p. 334, p. 435). Even when this trope is absent, Underhill’s psychological descriptions sometimes add little to our understanding of the phenomena under discussion. Borrowing heavily from research in the field, Underhill describes conversion as follows: “All conversion entails the abrupt or gradual emergence of intuitions from below the threshold, the consequent remaking of the field of consciousness, an alteration in the self’s attitude to the world.” (Underhill,

1911, p. 214). The attempt to reconcile two distinct psychological models: the “field of consciousness” and consciousness “below the threshold” – a complex that Underhill takes over from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* – renders the observation at once technical and unclear. More broadly, the description fails to elucidate the significance of conversion which is to be found in the “alteration in the self’s attitude to the world”, stating (in highly metaphorical terms) the obvious: the convert enjoys a sudden moment of inspiration which re-orientates his or her life. The focus on instantaneous change underlines the debt the discipline owed to Methodist conversion narratives, much in evidence in the types of account quoted in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Taves, 1999, p. 269). The fact that these eighteenth-century developments in religion were then used to analyze a much earlier mystical tradition with different priorities leads: Grace Jantzen to treat the psychological aspects of *Mysticism* as an encouragement to misread the texts upon which Underhill’s work is based; Bernard McGinn to reassure readers that *Mysticism* becomes more theological and less psychological as it goes along; and Charles Williams to suggest that his enjoyment of *Mysticism* arose from the lengthy and frequent recourse to quotation from, often difficult-to-obtain, mystical texts (Jantzen, 1993, 87; McGinn, 2013, 20; Williams, 1943, 17-18). Underhill’s critics thus follow the pattern set by *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*: she is commended for the respect for tradition evident in her lengthy quotations but condemned for her attempts at psychological interpretation by which she distinguishes herself as a culturally modernist.

Yet, treating Underhill as a “materialist” is problematic given her sustained response to this component within the French tradition. It might instead be possible to treat her recourse to the psychology of religion not as an example of amateurish and unscrupulous excitement in the face of a new discipline, but as an attempt to re-describe the elusive, genre-bending “spiritual” that Woolf finds in Joyce. It is thus necessary to avoid locating *Mysticism* within the confines of the Christian mystical tradition and the scholarship it gave rise to – as

Jantzen, McGinn and Williams do – and to see it as a reaction to wider cultural movements. Underhill’s reaching for something that is strictly neither Christian nor scientific can be interpreted in light of Roger Griffin’s assertion that the failure to achieve progress in the manner promised by modernity’s proselytizers gave rise, at the turn of the twentieth century, to a spiritual crisis (Griffin, 2007, p. 52). Underhill’s decision to use both traditional sources and the new developments in science to understand mysticism is indicative not of intellectual naivety but an attempt to understand the decadence that surrounded her; a decadence that, in Griffin’s analysis, precipitated two mainline reactions: the political experimentation of the fascists and the aesthetic explorations of the modernists⁹. Viewed in this light, the impetus behind *Mysticism* is neither Christian revelation nor existing religious topoi but rather the sense of cultural crisis Underhill shared with her peers, Woolf among them, and the powerful combination of intellectual resources in *Mysticism* speaks to the newness of this situation.

This juxtaposition is most potent in Underhill’s treatment of the “spark of the soul”. The term enables her to bring together classic mystical themes and modern developments in psychology:

The rearrangement of the psychic self which occurs in ecstasy is not merely concerned with the normal elements of consciousness. It is a temporary unification of consciousness around that centre of transcendental perception which mystics call the “spark of the soul.” Those deeper layers of personality which normal life keeps below the threshold are active in it: and these are fused with the surface personality by the governing passion, the transcendent love which lies at the basis of all sane ecstatic states. (Underhill, 1911, p. 437).

The phrase itself is taken from the fourteenth-century mystic, Meister Eckhart, who used it to describe the point of contact between the soul and God. McGinn notes that this term is often evoked playfully in Eckhart’s writing, leaving the reader unsure where he or she is to find this spark: “[the reader is] often unsure whether the language used is meant to refer to God, or to

the soul, or to both – or maybe even to neither, at least insofar as we usually understand them” (McGinn, 2005, p. 122).

Underhill gives this ontological play a psychological twist. The idea of consciousness “below the threshold” is taken from Frederick Myers, a collaborator with William James in the Society for Psychic Research, and it appears in James’s work in the idea of “extra-marginal” consciousness (James, 1902, p. 233). In this, Myers and James engage with the psychological theories of Charcot’s pupil, Janet, who contended that the normal flow of consciousness, which he saw as a continuous chain of memories, could be broken by trauma (Noel Evans, p. 42). The traumatic break from normal consciousness led to the formation of another dissociated or sub-consciousness with its own chain of memory, creating an alternate form of consciousness that interfered with the patient’s day-to-day functioning (Taves, p. 45).

Myers takes Janet’s insights as to the potential for a multiplicity of consciousness and suggests that, *contra* Janet, such multiplicity need not always be negative (Taves, p. 279). In doing so, he avoids understandings of consciousness that rely upon hierarchical organization, although his terminology somewhat complicates this model; he invokes a “threshold” or a limen with normal consciousness above the threshold – “supraliminal” – and everything outside this termed “subliminal”. The classical suffixes “supra” and “sub” invoke the above and below dynamic at the same time as this model tries to distance itself from it (Kelly & Kelly, 2010, p. 77). Looking beyond these verbal difficulties, Myers sees consciousness as a continuum of which normal functioning accounts for only a fraction; it bears comparison to the contemporaneous discoveries of portions of the electromagnetic spectrum – radio waves in 1886 or x-rays in 1895 – and the appreciation that the human eye is only able to see a fraction of the light available (Kripal, 2010, p. 65). Unlike the eye, however, an organ that serves a single function, Myers sees two shaping forces at work in the formation of consciousness: the “naturalistic and social way via our supraliminal self” and the “spiritual or

‘transcendental’ way via our subliminal Self’, as man moves forward he might progress in either direction: the former limiting mental functioning to an even smaller portion of the spectrum, with the latter expanding it (Kripal, 2010, pp. 67-68).

Returning to Underhill, the subliminal self thus offers a powerful modern take on the “spark of the soul”. The subliminal is a dark and nebulous region, at once the source of the psychic energy with which much of *Mysticism* concerns itself and yet uncharted, known by fits and starts. It does not neatly explain away Eckhart’s deeply searching terminology but enables readers to feel at once close to and distant from the sources of mystical inspiration. The scientific and experimental basis for the “subliminal” suggests, in keeping with the reaction against the materialism of Edwardian fiction in Woolf’s essay, that a new possibility for engaging with the spiritual has been discovered or is identifiable, while, at the same time, the engagement remains just out of reach. In *Authors of the Impossible*, Jeffrey Kripal presents the subliminal consciousness as a means of enacting the “transit of the sacred out of a traditional religious register and into a new scientific one” and yet in Underhill that transit is not unidirectional; “the sacred” exists as a fusion of the two (Kripal, 2010, p. 40). It is this multifaceted understanding of mysticism, formed at once from scientific speculation and traditional religious language, that positions Underhill’s work as one of the great exemplars of modernist religion not only insofar as it represents a new way of addressing traditional themes – a way by which we may or may not be convinced – but also through its impassioned attempt to come to terms with the modernist spiritual condition.

III. A Collaborative Direction: A “Preformed” *Mysticism*

The juxtaposition of classical mystical themes and new developments in psychology had a deeply personal resonance for Underhill. As the spiritual charge of the Catholic priest, later

styled Monsignor, Robert Hugh Benson, in the years immediately prior to the composition of *Mysticism*, Underhill had expressed a fear, following in the wake of Charcot's work, that prayer was little more than self-hypnotism (Martindale, 1916, p. 261). For Benson, the concern was nothing new; he saw such habits of thought as exempla of a Puritan intellectual tradition stretching back to the Reformation and answered Underhill's concern, not with an intellectual argument, but with pastoral advice (Leslie, 1915, p. 63; Martindale, 1916, p. 262). In the difference between Benson and Underhill's understandings of the spiritual issues at stake, it is possible to detect the fault lines separating a traditional from a modernist spirituality. The latter, in the understanding of those like Underhill associated with the condemned theological modernism, attempted to engage with, rather than to overcome, developments in modern thought falling outside the purview of traditional religious discourse.

The difference between Benson and Underhill owes, however, as much to style as to substance. Where Benson sees Underhill as a particular type of would-be convert, needing to dispense with certain prejudices, Underhill, as a spiritual director, was far more willing to consider the minutiae of her charges' spiritual and emotional lives. It is this penchant for collaboration that shapes *Mysticism*.

The significance, for the work, of her role as spiritual director lies in her discovery of Eckhart's writings in anthologies of mystical texts compiled by William Inge and Henry Vaughan (Underhill, 2010, p. 139). In the absence of an English or French translation of Eckhart's works, Underhill was unable to pursue her research further without help. For this, she turned to Margaret Robinson for whom Underhill had served as an informal spiritual director for some years. Knowing that her charge both read German and was interested in mysticism, Underhill asked Robinson to translate relevant selections of Eckhart from which she could then work. To assist, Underhill provided some guidance, sending Robinson a plan for *Mysticism* and explaining that: "It's a study of mystical method and doctrine, not of

specific mystics: so that bits bearing on my points are more useful than bits showing their peculiar characteristics” (Underhill, 2010, p. 136).

The existence of this plan has been a cause of concern among historians of mysticism. McGinn has called the letter quoted above “revealing and troubling” insofar as it shows “that Underhill had already decided on what she was looking for and therefore was commissioning Robinson to hunt for extracts that she could fit into her preformed picture” (McGinn, 2013, 89). McGinn’s own historical-critical approach, combined with the history of misreading occasioned by decontextualized interpretations of mystical texts, makes him wary of approaching mysticism with “preformed” conceptions of what one should find. Nonetheless, in drawing attention to Underhill’s prior beliefs and the dangers of selection bias, McGinn presents the relationship between the two women as unidirectional with Underhill “commissioning” research and passively receiving material in return. This conception of relationship dynamics is characteristic of the coteries of modernism: Joyce, Lawrence and Pound, the modernist masters, all had their, largely male, disciples. The gendered nature of this model of behavior has been identified by Susan Stanford Friedman through reference to Freud’s relationship to his inner circle and the critic has gone on to hold up the warmer, collaborative, and playful interactions between Freud and the modernist poet H.D. as an alternative to the master-disciple dynamic (Freidman, 1987, pp. 94-95).

With Underhill and Robinson, too, considering the mixed business of their interactions, the relationship, and thereby the composition of *Mysticism*, seems more complex than McGinn would allow. In keeping with the thought processes that underwrote “The Awakening of the Self” chapter, Underhill uses the mystical material that held the interest of herself and Robinson alike as a source for an ongoing conversation about Robinson’s taste for, or concern about, the morbid in religion. In response to Robinson’s comments on the chapter on ecstasy— comments likely concerning the extreme and sometimes painful

experiences she encountered in Underhill's manuscript – Underhill warns Robinson that discomfort in one's spiritual life was something that one needed to expect and confront along one's spiritual journey (Underhill, 2010, p. 162). Likewise when at work on the next chapter Underhill writes: "Now I am doing the [the chapter in *Mysticism* called] 'The Dark Night of the Soul' for which the chief authorities seem to be that gushing Madame Guyon who spent seven years in it, & Suso whose taste for consolations & annoyance when they were withdrawn will be rather congenial to you!!!" (Underhill, 2010, p. 164). Here, she teasingly recalls Robinson's past frustration when faced with the withdrawal of spiritual favors. As a way of weaning Robinson from her worries, Underhill imagines, with hints of the ridiculous, her friend and the great German mystic Henry Suso getting together to complain about their losses. McGinn's comments miss the mark, at least in part, because they are insensitive to the ways in which mysticism has always been called upon to undertake particular kinds of work; in setting out a "preformed" picture, Underhill has the struggles of Robinson, and others like her, in mind.¹⁰ To treat *Mysticism* as a form of failed historical scholarship is to ignore the contours of its engagement with the phenomena; the collaborative dimension of the work arises from not only practical necessity but also Underhill's attempt to engage with mysticism in a way that responds to the "spiritual" dimension that Woolf considered the hallmark of the era.

IV: Alternatives and Varieties: Religious Experience in the Early Twentieth Century

One of the ironies of Pericles Lewis's account of the reorientation of religious experience at the turn of the twentieth century is that he, counter-intuitively, assigns institutional religion a privileged position in its formation. He assumes that the religious agenda was set by the churches; albeit that it asserted its influence negatively as modernists promptly turned from

the priest to the work of art. By contrast, Roger Griffin's notion of a civilizational crisis, cutting across all fields of cultural, intellectual and political endeavor, locates the origins of the modernist quest for the "spiritual" at a level deeper than Lewis is prepared to recognize and allows for a far wider set of concerns to be addressed under the heading of "religion". It provides an alternative model for understanding the combinations of psychological and religious texts to be found in *Mysticism*; not an attempt to bring traditional religion into step with modern scientific developments but rather a concerted effort to picture forth a "spiritual" urge that eludes classification in either materialist or traditional religious terms.

If *The Varieties of Religious Experience* has become a major touchstone for accounts of religion under the sway of secularization theory – with the emphasis upon personal encounter with the divine happily corresponding with a narrative in which religion retreats more and more from the public sphere – then Underhill's text serves as a challenge to this consensus. She outlines an approach to religious experience that neither insists on its private nature nor closes off the potential for its incorporation into institutional religion.¹¹ As such, Underhill avoids the elitism of James's model which, while taking religion outside the church, circumscribes its remit far more narrowly. For James, true religion is to be found among those capable of intense religious experiences: with institutional attempts to prolong this foundational moment serving only to dampen this initial spark by means of ritual accretion.

Thus:

"The essence of religious experiences" is to be sought in the emotional fizzling of the conversion experience of those rare specimens, the pattern setters of religion, whose genius, like that of the New England gentry and the faculty at Harvard, sets them apart from the coarsely physical unimaginative fidelity of the servants and disciples who constitute their environment. (Lash, 1988, p. 47)

By contrast, Underhill as both a theorist of mysticism and as a spiritual director insisted that all were capable of partaking in the mystical life, albeit to differing degrees. The religious masters of New England, in James's understanding, like Freud and the literary-spiritual geniuses of modernism, claimed unrivalled, heroic insight into humankind's spiritual condition. H.D., for instance, was aware of the power of this model – she referred to Freud as “The Master” – but refused the role of “disciple” in the manner she saw reflected in the structures of the International Psycho-Analytic Association, even sketching out – in her memoir of her analysis with Freud – an alternative creative, artistic generation of psychoanalysis as opposed to the emphasis the Association placed on scientific deduction (H.D., 2012, p. 77). Continuous with H.D.'s relationship with Freud, Underhill's correspondence with Robinson and its influence upon the composition of *Mysticism* outlines an alternative trajectory for modernist religiosity. One that is not, by any means, less intense but which nonetheless attempts to construct a collaborative and replicable approach for navigating the treacherous religious landscape of the early twentieth century.

1. Barry Spurr observes that attendance in Anglo-Catholic churches, for instance, “jumped from 13,000 in 1920 to some 70,000 in 1933” (Spurr, 2010, p. 89).

2. “The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. [...] most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” (Arnold, 1888, pp. 1-3).

3. Aaron Joffe has paid close attention to how the networks and strategies employed by artists at the turn of the twentieth century helped establish the aesthetic category of modernism, examining the ways in which “modernists and their allies, working to create and expand a market for elite literary works, transformed their textual signature itself into a means of promotion” (Joffe, 2005 p. 3). Ann Ardis, for instance, has demonstrated how Eliot's and Pound's reviews of Tarr establish a distinction between “not only two different aesthetics [modernism and realism] but also at least two different audiences for literature and two different reading practices” (Ardis, 2002, p. 99).

An important argument for the significance of cultural, as a complement to literary, studies is made by Debora Jacobs: “We could focus less on what separates the literary modernist (male or female) from his/her culture (a long-encouraged emphasis) and more on what his/her projects might have in common with other early-twentieth-century specializing enterprises such as psychoanalysis, ethnography or eugenics, project that, like literary modernism, can also be described as enterprises that advanced themselves through the creation and exploitation of needs (markets?) for their allegedly superior abilities at making distinctions”. The new modernist studies situates itself as a (partial) response to this plea (Jacobs, 1994, p. 278).

4. For a study of the crossovers between science and religion outside the psychology of religion see Vetter (2010).

5. “A second contribution Cambridge made to Bloomsbury’s intellectual formation was the strong tradition of scepticism, agnosticism, and atheism developed there in the late Victorian period” (Banfield, 2014, p. 39). There is a dedicated online community for those who feel “spiritual but not religious” – abbreviated to SPNR – most accurately captures their worldview: <http://www.sbnr.org/faq>, Website [Accessed 30 November 2014].

6. For a more nuanced version of Edwardian literature see: Maria di Battista (2009), ‘Realism and Rebellion in Edwardian and Georgian Fiction’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel*, ed. Robert L. Caserio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 40-55.

7 By way of illustration, compare Delacroix (1908) with Charbonnier (1875).

8 “‘Sources’ were discussed; forty versions of a Chaucerian anecdote were ‘compared’, but not on points of respective literary merit” (Pound, 1960, p. 16).

9. Griffin uses the terms “epiphanic” and “programmatic” (Griffin, 2007, p. 75).

10. For all its indefiniteness, the construction of religious or mystical experience was an attempt to create a dataset, equivalent to that of the sciences, for religious studies: “William James constituted ‘religious experience’ in a technical sense as an object of study, defining it as a generic “something” that informed ‘religion-in-general’ apart from any tradition in particular” (Taves, 1999 p. 271).

11. In the preface to a later edition, Underhill expressed her regret that she had not developed the institutional element more overtly (Underhill, 1930, ix). Jantzen has voiced concern about the institutional direction of Underhill’s subsequent development (Jantzen, 1993, 95).

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