FOREWORD

THIS, the second of the important, longer books published by Evelyn Underhill in her lifetime (1875-1941), stands beside *Mysticism* (1911) as an equally impressive monument to her literary and scholarly achievement. The book on mysticism, whatever its faults, has never, I think, been out of print and, despite a thorough authorial 'make-over' for the edition of 1930, has remained a land-mark and point of reference for several generations. My own sense is that it, too, could well be re-issued in its original dress of pre-1914 to remind students of the long vanished heady, more optimistic, and thoroughly 'romantic', era which crashed in ruins post-1914.

This book reflects a very different epoch and one in which the Christian world was (though it hardly grasped the fact) laying the foundations for the radical renewal of its spiritual and institutional life in the later 20th century. Evelyn Underhill, by 1935, having long related almost exclusively to Catholicism in London and abroad, and following a veritable 'conversion' to church membership in the Church of England (circa 1920), had extensive experience of her chosen church and was widely accepted as a teacher of prayer and spirituality – as we now call it. Her friendships extended beyond Britain, and in Italy, in particular, she found a kindred spirit in the *sorella* Maria, a dedicated Italian hermit, founder of a fervent contemplative community on the margins of official Roman Catholicism. Maria in fact was not in communion with Rome; but nor was she linked to any other official

Christian denomination. As an independent she shared with Evelyn a certain ecclesiastical detachment and freedom to pursue her own way. Evelyn corresponded with her in Italian and her letters are still extant.

Evelyn Underhill enjoyed a somewhat similar status, or lack of it, in what had become her own church. Although not at loggerheads with authority, she played only a marginal role in church life. Her publications were widely read and she was sought out by lay people, and some clergy, for her easily communicated breadth of spiritual vision and her unusual ability to communicate her insights in simple language. Her unofficial status, together, no doubt, with her independent social standing as daughter of one distinguished London barrister, and wife of another, gave her an enviable liberty to develop her understanding of Christian life as not only *ideally* but *essentially* built up on the life of prayer. Appreciation of her book on worship is helped by some awareness of her early explorations of the literature of mysticism, and her unashamedly personal attitude to this quest, both blending to produce a strange hybrid of empiricism *alla* William James and romanticism *alla* William Wordsworth. And yet she proved a practical help as well as spiritual adviser to her great friend, Lucy Menzies, and others, in the pioneering venture of establishing a 'purpose-built' house of retreat at Pleshey in Suffolk.

Unlikely as it must seem, she becomes in these pages of *Worship* virtually *the* best known synoptic authority in the Anglican Church on matters liturgical. Now, for decades since the end of World War II, she has been recommended, if not required, reading on this subject in Anglican theological colleges or seminaries. To what extent prospective Anglican ministers have deeply imbibed her eirenic and thoroughly grounded appreciation of the church's liturgy through the ages, it is difficult to say. Certainly, her carefully measured

style, and extensively researched text (she drew on the best available contemporary scholarship and consulted qualified representatives of the Christian communities whose worship practices she describes) offers few if any obstacles to the educated reader. Perhaps this very accessibility, and studious care for the English language, separates us from her and her age. Her literary style has a hard-won classic quality about it.

It seems worth insisting that this is a book about liturgical principle. The writer believes utterly in the objectivity of religious experience, i.e. its 'validity' as rooted in normal individual and social experience in both theory and practise. We are all innately prone to adore, to beseech, to mourn, to wrestle with fate or providence, to desire fervently and to acknowledge with gratitude the measureless and unforeseeable gifts of grace. Awe, wonder, and adoration, are, she insists, at the heart of all worship. As we pray, so she argues, we frame, an almost infinite variety of ritual, reflection and creatively articulate liturgical and quasi-liturgical forms. And when words run out, there is always the Quaker ideal of silent worship (chapter 14, section II).

For the Christian people at large need to be involved in the full richness of its inheritance if they sincerely aspire to vision. As she herself puts it, "There is nothing paddock-like or parochial, nothing individualistic or subjective, in the genuine worship of the Church" (page 142).

Nor does she forget her beloved mystical writers, who are usually close at hand, serious though she invariably is in all her historical writing. They raise their voices from time to time in lyrical interjections among the hard tack of scholarship, e.g. Ruysbroeck's "I must rejoice without ceasing, although the world shudder at my joy", which follows shortly on the quotation above. A deep and concentrated theologian such as the Jesuit Father Jean

de la Taille seems to become a veritable 'mystic' in such company in these pages.

Evelyn Underhill has been the subject of four 20th century biographies, including my own for her birth anniversary in 1975. But her best and most enduring legacy to this age is her own published work, much of it reproducing her retreat addresses and other occasional preaching. This published work, together with her letters, is still appreciated by those who have discovered her or grown up with her. Among these mature works, *Worship* is pre-eminent, and it is good to have it in print again.

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