

Fully Divine: Evelyn Underhill's Mysticism



Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) was an Anglican writer known for her numerous works on religion and spiritual practice, drawing upon hundreds of different sources to formulate her own version of a universal scheme of spiritual experience. Her groundbreaking book *Mysticism* (a term defined by Underhill as “the direct intuition or experience of God”) is still held as a classic treatise exploring the individual’s journey to God, second only to Aldous Huxley's 1946 classic *The Perennial Philosophy* in terms of its impact and influence upon early 20th-century thinkers.

Underhill characterizes the spiritual path as unfolding through five broad states of consciousness—awakening, purgation/purification, illumination, dark night, and unification.

Awakening:

One begins to have some consciousness of absolute or divine reality for the first time and the spiritual identity begins to emerge. This experience is often abrupt and fairly dramatic, and is typically preceded by a period of existential crisis or sense of longing.

"That which the Servitor saw had no form neither any manner of being; yet he had of it a joy such as he might have known in the seeing of shapes and substances of all joyful things. His heart was hungry, yet satisfied, his soul was full of contentment and joy: his prayers and his hopes were fulfilled." – Henry Suso (disciple of Meister Eckhart)

Purgation:

Conscious for the first time of the Divine reality and the immeasurable distance separating it from finite existence, one attempts to bridge the gap with focused discipline and practice—purifying the mortal self to prepare for the emergence of the spiritual Self.

"We must cast all things from us and strip ourselves of them and refrain from claiming anything for our own." - *Theologia Germanica* (14th-century mystical treatise, often attributed to Meister Eckhart)

Illumination:

Intimate knowledge of Reality, a certain apprehension of the Absolute—but not a true union with it; awareness of a transcendent order and a vision of a universe infused with the love of God.

"Everything in temporal nature is descended out that which is eternal, and stands as a palpable visible outbirth of it, so when we know how to separate out the grossness, death, and darkness of time from it, we find what it is in its eternal state.... In Eternal Nature, or the Kingdom of Heaven, materiality stands in life and light; it is the light's glorious Body, or that garment wherewith light is clothed, and therefore has all the properties of light in it, and only differs from light as it is its brightness and beauty, as the holder and displayer of all its colours, powers, and virtues." - William Law (English cleric and theologian)

Dark Night of the Soul:

Borrowing the language of John of the Cross, this state is one of final and complete purification and is often marked by confusion, helplessness, stagnation of the will, and a sense of the withdrawal of God's presence. It is the period of final "unselfing" and the surrender to the hidden purposes of the divine will.

"Lord, since Thou hast taken from me all that I had of Thee, yet of Thy grace leave me the gift which every dog has by nature: that of being true to Thee in my distress, when I am deprived of all consolation. This I desire more fervently than Thy heavenly Kingdom." Mechthild of Magdeburg (medieval mystic and Cistercian nun)

Unification:

Nondual union with God, the timeless beloved, Absolute Reality—the spiritual Self has been permanently realized, and the finite self liberated for a new purpose. Filled with the Divine Will, it immerses itself in the world of appearances in order to incarnate the eternal within time, becoming the mediator between humanity and eternity.

“When love has carried us above all things into the Divine Dark, there we are transformed by the Eternal Word Who is the image of the Father; and as the air is penetrated by the sun, thus we receive in peace the Incomprehensible Light, enfolding us, and penetrating us.” – John of Ruysbroeck (13th-century Flemish mystic)

"Further, these mystics see in the historic life of Christ an epitome—or if you will, an exhibition—of the essentials of all spiritual life. There they see dramatized not only the cosmic process of the Divine Wisdom, but also the inward experience of every soul on her way to union with that Absolute 'to which the whole Creation moves.' This is why the expressions which they use to describe the evolution of the mystical consciousness from the birth of the divine in the spark of the soul to its final unification with the Absolute Life are so constantly chosen from the Drama of Faith. In this drama they see described under the veils the necessary adventures of the spirit. Its obscure and humble birth, its education in poverty, its temptation, mortification and solitude, its 'illuminated life' of service and contemplation, the desolation of that 'dark night of the soul' in which it seems abandoned by the Divine: the painful death of the self, its resurrection to the glorified existence of the Unitive Way, its final re-absorption in its Source – all these, they say, were lived once in a supreme degree in the flesh. Moreover, the degree of closeness with which the individual experience adheres to this Pattern is always taken by them as a standard of the healthiness, ardor, and success of its transcendental activities." -Evelyn Underhill

Just as there are dozens of parallels to James Fowler's stages of faith among developmental psychologists, Underhill's states of awakened spiritual experience can be seen reflected in nearly all the world's religious traditions. Though the texture, tone, symbolism, and general flavor of these spiritual states vary greatly from culture to culture, there is an abundance of deep-rooted similarities found in the descriptions of life, reality, and God as reported by history's most profoundly realized mystics. When viewed as a whole, these similarities reveal a remarkable snapshot of the heavenly estate, spiritual realities that mirror the broad states of consciousness we experience every single day. Though we can certainly classify these states with much more granularity than we shall use here, we can group the wide variety of state experiences into a minimum of four categories:

Purgation is largely concerned with the fleshy instincts and compulsions found in gross states of everyday waking consciousness

Illumination reflects the inner light and visions found in subtle states of dreaming consciousness

The Dark Night of the Soul is a silent echo in the empty causal state of deep dreamless sleep

Unification symbolizes the somewhat more elusive—but never eclipsed—nondual state, recognizing emptiness as form, form as emptiness, and the radical “not-two-ness” of all things.