

## Mature Spirituality According to von Hügel: A Practitioner's Voice

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**Abstract:** Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925) is best known as a religious philosopher from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Less well known is von Hügel's work as a spiritual director, which some have suggested underlies his entire religious philosophy. This article seeks to examine aspects of von Hügel's understanding of the nature of mature spirituality as exemplified in his practice of spiritual direction: his theology of God and the necessary response of adoration; the three elements of religion, suffering well, humility, cultivating non-religious interests and leisurely spirituality.

### INTRODUCTION

"To sanctify is the biggest thing out." These words of his ring in my mind. They express what he was, what he meant, what he wished most to do. His whole life lies in them. He tried to find truth, to teach us God, to sanctify our lives.<sup>1</sup>

BARON FRIEDRICH VON HÜGEL is thus described by his niece and spiritual director, Gwendolen Greene. von Hügel's desire to nurture souls and sanctify lives was key to his life and work. Douglas Steere, one of von Hügel's foremost commentators, argues that von Hügel's "service of spiritual counselling was the central axis that...set the frames for his intellectual contribution".<sup>2</sup>

So von Hügel did not simply theorise about the nature of mature spirituality, he was a practitioner, actively involved in spiritual nurture,

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1. Gwendolen Greene (ed.), *Letters from Baron von Hügel to a Niece* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1929), viii-ix.

2. Douglas Steere, *Together in Solitude* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 45.

in helping people to respond appropriately to God. The primary vehicle for his spiritual direction was letter writing, providing us with an unusually complete record of spiritual direction and his thoughts concerning mature spirituality. His letters act as a curriculum for a school of sanctity and mature spirituality.

This essay gives a high-level overview of some of the main contours of von Hügel's spiritual direction, beginning with his teaching on the God to whom we are responding, and then exploring the nature of that mature spiritual response. In so doing I shall briefly explore the way in which von Hügel interacts with three of his main directees, the ways in which his direction is shaped to the individual history and needs of each person, and some of the main themes we find recurring in his teaching.

My conception of how von Hügel views mature spirituality is shown in Figure 1 below.

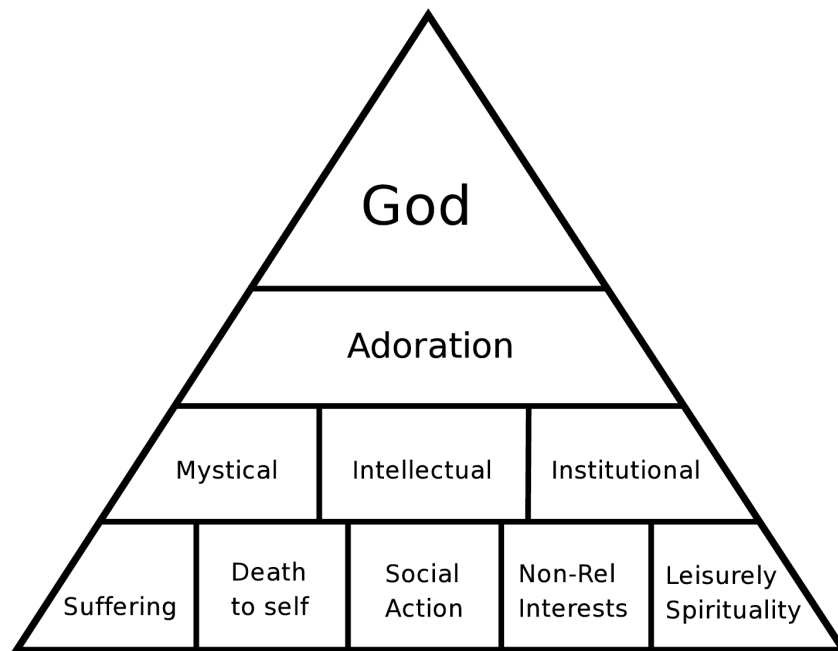


Figure 1: Overview of von Hügel's teaching on Mature Spirituality (RWC)

## 1. VON HÜGEL'S THEOLOGY OF GOD

For von Hügel, the starting point for mature spirituality is God, not us.<sup>3</sup> Mature spirituality is a life of appropriate response to God, and therefore must be grounded in an understanding of the God to whom we respond. von Hügel was adamant that God was not deducible from human selfhood – we cannot “diminish God to a man of but larger size”.<sup>4</sup> Instead, von Hügel’s spirituality started with the reality of God as God.

von Hügel presented his theology of God in a number of different forms, but one of the most frequent, highlights three aspects of who God is:

The Christian life begins, proceeds and ends with the Givenness, the Otherness, [and] the Prevenience of God – the one-sided relation between God and man – these constitute the deepest measure and touchstone of all religion.<sup>5</sup>

By these terms von Hügel means the following:

The *Givenness* of God denotes the non-contingent reality of God – God *is*. God is a reality. God exists before and apart from any human action or response. God’s givenness is the reality within which we live, and the reality that we encounter in the spiritual life. von Hügel describes his own conversion as “the successful awakening me to the fact of deep reality, encompassing me on every side, that saved me”.<sup>6</sup> Gwendolen Greene writes of her uncle, “he found the reality of God, and the entire givenness, of all our spiritual life, love and prayer. To these things his soul vibrated; they made a commotion within his whole being...”<sup>7</sup> So the beginning point for mature spirituality is the reality that God *is*.

The *Otherness* of God describes von Hügel’s insistence that God is fundamentally Other, not made in our image, not an anthropomorphic deity. Writing to his niece, he says, “I want you to hold very clearly the

3. For instance, when writing an essay on the life of prayer, he firstly describes seven truths concerning God before then discussing seven truths concerning the soul (1930, pp. 217-242).

4. Friedrich von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion, Second Series* (London: Dent & Sons, 1930) 223.

5. Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*. Volume 1 (London: Dent & Sons, 1908) xvi.

6. Bernard Holland (ed.), *Baron Friedrich von Hügel. Selected Letters 1896-1924* (London: Dent & Sons, 1926) 64.

7. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xlv.

otherness of God, and the littleness of men..."<sup>8</sup>; he emphasises "[God's] distinctness from all finite beings".<sup>9</sup>

Closely allied to this is the notion of the *transcendence* of God. Douglas Steere writes that von Hügel "recovered for the Anglo Saxon religious world the dimension of transcendence in the Christian faith and thus did much to correct a current strain of subjectively-tilted psychologism in liberal religion".<sup>10</sup> Writing to one directee, von Hügel describes the reality of God as "a gift from above downwards, not a groping from below upwards... it is more like a golden shower from above".<sup>11</sup>

The *Prevenience* of God is the third aspect of God's character highlighted by von Hügel, emphasising that God not only is, but God *does*. God is at work, God acts, and God's action always precedes us and our actions. God is the great initiator. von Hügel writes, "God loved us before we loved, or could love, Him. God's love of us rendered possible and actual our love of God."<sup>12</sup> We see this belief exhibited, for example, in von Hügel's instruction on prayer:

Our prayer will certainly gain depth and aliveness, if we thus continually think of God as the true inspirer of our most original-seeming thoughts and wishes, whensoever these are good and fruitful – as Him who secretly initiates...<sup>13</sup>

Thus God is not only Other. God is also the One who acts and who draws near. God is greatly different from us, but also close and accessible. It is a lesson that Gwendolen Greene would remark upon: "My uncle taught us the nearness of God and His great difference from ourselves..."<sup>14</sup> So von Hügel holds very deliberately and carefully the tension between the transcendence and the immanence of God. He writes, "God is near. He is no use unless he is near. God's otherness and difference, and his nearness. You must get that. God's nearness is straight out of the heart of Jesus."<sup>15</sup>

Thus von Hügel's view of spirituality begins with God – a God who *is*, a God who is fundamentally other, and yet a God who has drawn near to us and acts for us, before and apart from us. But this knowledge

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8. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xvii.

9. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 14.

10. Douglas Steere, *Spiritual Counsel and Letters of Baron von Hügel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 5.

11. Holland, *Selected Letters*, 353.

12. von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses, Second Series*, 224.

13. von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses*, 225.

14. Gwendolen Greene, *Two Witnesses* (London: Dent & Sons, 1930) 185.

15. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xxxi.

then flows into a life of response. How then should we respond to this God?

## 2. ADORATION – THE MATURE RESPONSE

Douglas Steere writes that von Hügel's "genius [lies] as a spiritual witness to the encompassing reality of God and to its power in encouraging the nurture that men and women require in order to grow in their awareness of that encompassment and to respond appropriately to it".<sup>16</sup> For von Hügel, the appropriate response can be summed up in the word *adoration*. He writes, "The first and central act of religion is adoration"<sup>17</sup> and "Religion without adoration is like a triangle with one side left out."<sup>18</sup>

The prayer of adoration always takes first place in his instruction on prayer. He writes:

We are like sponges trying to mop up the ocean. We can never know God exhaustively.... I want you to hold very clearly the *otherness* of God, and the littleness of men. If you don't get that you can't have adoration, and you cannot have religion without adoration.<sup>19</sup>

So the life of response to this God who is "overflowing Love, Joy and Delectation"<sup>20</sup> is to lift our hearts to Him in adoration. Douglas Steere summarises von Hügel's view as, "The guide of souls [knows] that a soul must adore if it is to grow."<sup>21</sup>

But true adoration involves all of who we are. The only appropriate response is a *whole* response, one that calls forth our entirety – our will, intellect and emotions.

## 3. THE THREE ELEMENTS OF RELIGION

Mature spirituality, and true adoration, involves all of who we are. One of von Hügel's great contributions to spirituality and to the philosophy of religion was his delineation of what he termed the "three elements of religion": the mystical or emotional element; the intellectual or scientific element; and the institutional or active element. von Hügel outlines these three elements in the first eighty pages of his *Mystical*

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16. Steere, *Together in Solitude*, 46.

17. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 14.

18. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xx.

19. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xvii.

20. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 132.

21. Steere, *Together in Solitude*, 46.

*Element of Religion.* Briefly defined, the mystical or emotional element is the experiential aspect of religious life, the heart. The intellectual or scientific element is the analytical and speculative, the head. The institutional and historical element is the active element of earthing our religion in church involvement and the historical Incarnation, the hands. For von Hügel, a full response to the encompassing reality of God involves the fruitful tension of all three of these – to omit one or other is to make our response to the divine initiative impoverished, resulting in an immature spirituality.<sup>22</sup>

von Hügel personally embodied these three elements in his commitment to the Catholic church, to scholarship and to personal sanctity. His impact upon his directees stemmed from who he was, not just from what he taught. Gwendolen Greene writes of her uncle:

But though we see in him very clearly the touch of the mystical being, yet he was not so peculiarly mystical as immensely rich; he contrives to contain within himself to an almost unique degree, a fragment of all the three elements that man's religious nature requires for its fullest growth... He is active, intellectual *and* mystical – neither of the three alone; so he spoke of all three in conjunction, and did not dwell only on one.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.1 *Attrait* and Spiritual Individuation

Another very important aspect of von Hügel's spirituality was his explicit recognition of individuality and spiritual individuation. Though he taught his directees about all three elements of religion, he consistently recognised that directees had individual needs, and thus required different paths to spiritual maturity:

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22. As an aside, note that this balance applies to Christian communities as well as to individuals. Omitting the mystical element in favour of a rigid intellectual formula or to preserve a set of institutional forms leaves one's religion cold and lifeless, lacking passion and vitality. Communities that emphasise the institutional and intellectual, fearing the mystical, can become moralistic, legalistic and lack adoration. However, an overemphasis on the mystical element, neglecting the historical element with its witness to the historical Jesus and the institutional element of corporate worship, can result in individualism and pantheism. Sects attempting to live only by their immediate spiritual experiences almost inevitably become self-righteous and shallow in their emotional sentimentality and often die. Similarly, neglecting the intellectual element can result in a lack of critical capacity whereby individuals and groups become fanatical, narrow-minded and superstitious. All three elements, held in creative tension, are necessary for a healthy, vibrant Christian community that is spiritually mature.

23. Greene, *Two Witnesses*, 290.

Souls are never mere dittos. The souls thus to be helped are mostly at quite different stages from our own, or they have quite a different *attrait*.... Never forget the enormous variety in souls.<sup>24</sup>

“*Attrait*” is a term used by von Hügel to mean the specific and individual path in which God leads an individual. He encouraged his directees to follow their own *attrait* and respond to God with a *unique* balancing and embodiment of the three elements of religion.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, von Hügel did not have a single recipe for mature spirituality, but tailored his direction and his counsel to the individual with whom he was dealing. Often this would take the form of emphasising and encouraging the element of religion that was most lacking in their lives, and therefore most necessary for their individual mature spirituality.

To this end, we see different emphases in the spiritual direction von Hügel gives to his directees. Though he encouraged all three elements of religion in each directee, he tended to emphasise the element most lacking in each. For instance, he highlights the institutional element with Evelyn Underhill by encouraging church membership and attendance; he encourages the intellectual element with Gwendolen Greene through the reading programme he suggests for her; and we see the mystical element more emphasised with Juliet Mansel, particularly through detailed instruction on prayer and confession.

### 3.2 Evelyn Underhill

Evelyn Underhill was an intellectual leader in the British religious circle of her day. She saw von Hügel as the deepest spiritual figure in the British scene and, in 1921, approached him asking for spiritual help.<sup>26</sup> von Hügel had read her book, *Mysticism*, in 1911 and had found her faith to be theistic and immanentist. von Hügel felt that Underhill had over emphasised the mystical element, was in danger of being too individualistic, and had little connection with the historical Jesus of the incarnation. He wanted to root her mysticism in a visible sacramental religion, an institutional base, and an encounter with the historical Jesus.

24. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xxix-xxx.

25. von Hügel had experienced the costly failure of his early attempt to throw his own pattern and concerns on his eldest daughter, Gertrud. That failure led to a deep humility before the ultimate mystery and uniqueness of the subsequent souls that he guided.

26. Underhill had von Hügel as her official spiritual director from 1921 to 1925. Letters written between them during this period provide insight into the nature of his guidance towards spiritual maturity. (15 letters from von Hügel to Underhill are held at the von Hügel archive, St Andrews University and 3 letters from von Hügel to Underhill are at the Evelyn Underhill archive, King's College, London).

von Hügel provided Underhill with a minimal institutional program for her own personal nurture – one church service on Sunday (preferably early communion) and a mid-week visit to an early convent service. Knowing that she was highly strung, he was careful not to overburden her.

The eucharist is a central advantage of Church involvement, according to von Hügel: Holy Communion “should be the very centre of a Christian’s devotional life”<sup>27</sup> as it directly affects one’s spiritual growth: “the Church through the Eucharist has trained countless souls to sanctity”.<sup>28</sup> von Hügel goes so far as to say that the Church is “the basis of all real sanctity”.<sup>29</sup> However, von Hügel was not idealistic about the Church and even describes institutional Christianity as his “hairshirt” and his “deepest pain”.<sup>30</sup> In spite of this, he consistently affirmed the necessity of involvement in the church to help curb our individualism and to train us in adoration.<sup>31</sup>

von Hügel told Underhill that mature spirituality also needed to be rooted in the historical revelation of God, and particularly in the incarnation of Christ.<sup>32</sup> von Hügel felt that Underhill’s natural inclination was towards a philosophical and theistic approach to religion and religious practice – he instead sought to ground her prayer and worship in the historical record of the incarnation and the actual person of Jesus Christ.

Underhill reports that under von Hügel’s direction, an incarnational spirituality gradually replaced her mystical theism. Gradually Christ was becoming more central in her prayer life. In 1927 she reported:

Until five years ago I had never any personal experience of our Lord. I didn’t know what it meant. I was a convinced Theocentric, and thought Christocentric language and practice sentimental and

27. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 187.

28. von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses, Second Series*, 125.

29. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xxxvii. This ‘need of some Church appurtenance’ (Church faith and practice) is further echoed to his niece (1929, p.xxxviii). He writes to Gwen about her involvement in Communion, Recollection and the Prayer of Quiet in her church: “It is in that precise environment, by means of those aids that you, Blessing, can and will become deep and darling, humble and holy” (1929, p. 95).

30. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xxxviii.

31. For example, von Hügel describes institutional rites and traditions as “seemingly narrowing, humbly obscure contacts with the visible... *religion requires some apparently unnecessary, emotionally more or less irksome contractions and attentions to visible and audibly institutional and social acts and rites*. Without some such we cannot fully capture and maintain a deep wholesome recollection and spirituality” (1951, pp. 230-31, italics original). von Hügel writes of faulty Church officials and faulty Church members, adding that “...we shall never put up with such faultiness sufficiently unless we possess or acquire so strong a sense of all we have to gain from Church membership as to counter-balance the repulsiveness of such faults” (1931, p. 267).

32. Gwendolen Greene echoes this when she writes: “He preaches Jesus” (1929, p. viii).

superstitious.... when I went to the Baron he said I wasn't much better than a Unitarian. Somehow by his prayers or something, he *compelled* me to experience Christ. He never said anything more about it – but I know humanly speaking he did it. It took about four months – it was like watching the sun rise very slowly – and then suddenly one knew what it was.... The New Testament, which once I couldn't make much of, or meditate on...all gets more and more alive and compellingly beautiful.<sup>33</sup>

The enormous impact of von Hügel on Underhill is revealed when she writes to Dom John Chapman: "Under God I owe him my whole spiritual life."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, von Hügel's insistence on the need for a Christocentric spirituality and cultivating the inner mystical life through both private and corporate prayer and worship transformed and deeply matured Underhill's spirituality.

### 3.3 Gwendolen Greene

Gwendolen Greene was von Hügel's niece and a mother of three.<sup>35</sup> For Greene's spiritual direction, von Hügel prescribed a programme of reading and discussing various classics. He sent her regular parcels of books, starting with classical history and then moving onto early Christian classics, beginning with Augustine. von Hügel desired his niece to learn about "the human heart, the human soul" through historical reading.<sup>36</sup> He told her: "I want to teach you through history.... You must get a larger experience – you gain it through history.... I want you to learn about the great souls that lived.... Religion to be deep and rich must be historical."<sup>37</sup>

Along with a larger life experience, von Hügel aimed to help her be able to reason, think and critique: to be "a discriminator", "self-trained in the fruitful art and virtue of gathering roses among thorns, and of discerning jewel eyes in a toad's head".<sup>38</sup> Critique and open engagement were important to von Hügel. He tells his niece of his intention "to do

33. Charles Williams (ed.), *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1944) 26. This growth is further revealed when Underhill writes in her "Green Notebook", "Begin to realise what the sacramental life is, and implies – that it just is, as St. Paul felt, Christ in you...the strange intimate sense of union which comes..." (20 June 1923).

34. Douglas Steere, *Gleanings* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1986), 65.

35. Letters between Greene and von Hügel were written between 1918 and 1925. von Hügel saw her as like another daughter.

36. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 17.

37. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xiv.

38. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 41.

all I can to make the old Church as inhabitable intellectually as ever I can".<sup>39</sup>

von Hügel also taught that the intellectual element needed to go beyond analysis towards synthesis and the ability to "see things in the large" – he wrote:

We live in times of such obvious transition, decline, poverty of deep, creative conviction, of such excess of analysis over synthesis – that it is in the air all around us to ask questions, to poke about, to wonder, to drift, to use the microscope; where to become and to be, to produce reality, to adore and to will, and to see things in the large and upon the whole, and at their best, is what we all require.<sup>40</sup>

Greene would report later that "My uncle never spoke specially to me of the mystical way.... he fostered the Church and intellectual side as far more necessary for me."<sup>41</sup> However, he did also have her engage in *devotional* reading, with the purpose of developing the mystical element.<sup>42</sup> So while he would tailor his instruction towards the perceived needs of the directee, von Hügel still clearly endeavoured to produce a well-rounded and balanced spirituality in those whom he mentored.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.4 Juliet Mansel

Juliet Mansel was a schoolgirl and granddaughter of von Hügel's friend, Adeline Chapman.<sup>44</sup> She stayed in the von Hügel home during holiday periods and while attending a London day school. von Hügel thought of her as another daughter. His most significant correspondence with Juliet is contained in a long letter that he wrote to her in 1910 when she was preparing for her confirmation. He laid out four religious

39. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 165.

40. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 134.

41. Greene, *Two Witnesses*, 143.

42. He wrote of how this type of reading "...should always be select, slow, ruminating... full of prayer, full of self-humiliation, full of gentle attempts gently to will whatever suffering God may kindly send us" (1929, p. 75). von Hügel himself engaged daily in 15 minutes of devotional reading, particularly of Augustine's *Confessions* and the *Imitation of Christ* and he encouraged this practice in his niece. He wrote "I have tried to live the *Confessions* at their deepest these last fifty years..." (1929, p. 45); "I cannot exaggerate the gain that I think you will derive from feeding for years upon the *Confessions*. They, more than any other book excepting the Gospels and the Psalms, have taught me..." (1929, p. 48).

43. Gwendolen Greene clearly felt herself a great beneficiary of this relationship – she describes von Hügel's impact on her spirituality as "...the greatest privilege and joy I shall ever receive. If I have learnt anything, it is from him that I learned..." (1929, p. xliii).

44. 28 letters from von Hügel to Mansel written between 1910 and 1921 are held at St Andrews University, Scotland.

principles and practices to help her grow towards mature spirituality. These principles range across the mystical and institutional elements of religion and incorporate his teaching about the nature of God.

He firstly spoke of “the reality and practice of the presence of God”. He asked her to cultivate a sense of the character of God and so develop a posture of humility: “the cultivation of the sense of his omnipresence, of his prevenience... [and] at the same time, a sense of our pathetic limitations, as against the great background and presence of the infinite and abiding”.<sup>45</sup> He suggests a daily 15 minutes of spiritual reading and reflection to help “foster and feed this sense”, and then also similar pauses throughout the day, to have God’s presence as the “background and support, a light and balm and refreshment”.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, he suggested that one should practise an awareness of one’s contingency and creatureliness. That is, we should use our reflections on the character of God and our involvement in sacraments like the Eucharist (as he also taught Underhill) to help reinforce our humility and the awareness of our smallness and our limitations.

Thirdly, he advised Juliet to practice “the examination of conscience” (i.e. deliberate and regular self-examination and reflection), but not in a way that focussed excessively upon her own human weaknesses. He suggested she make a short examination of conscience each night and pray for help at the beginning of each day. However, he encouraged a preoccupation with God, not self: “Live, Child, habitually occupied with God and his love and greatness [and]...very much occupation with others, [to]...absorb you away from all direct occupation with yourself.”<sup>47</sup>

Fourthly, von Hügel wrote to Juliet of “the reality, and the sense of the true function, of suffering”.<sup>48</sup> He tells her that “with the help of Christ’s spirit, purification, acceptance, expansion, intimate union with God and man, spiritual power, joy overflowing” can result from suffering.<sup>49</sup> This theme of suffering well is a very important one to von Hügel, and will be discussed further below.

Thus we see here, very briefly, von Hügel’s willingness and care to treat his directees as distinct persons, and to work with them in quite

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45. Friedrich von Hügel, “A Letter from Baron von Hügel” (anonymously published with a prefatory note, *The Dublin Review* 452 (1951) 1-11, see p. 9.

46. von Hügel, “A Letter from Baron von Hügel”, 6.

47. von Hügel, “A Letter from Baron von Hügel”, 9. In a similar way, he writes to Juliet in 1911 advising that her examination of conscience be a “dropping quietly all favourable comparison of self with others; indeed all unnecessary self-occupation, all self-sufficiency, all self-completeness...” (1926, p.189).

48. von Hügel, “A Letter from Baron von Hügel”, 10.

49. von Hügel, “A Letter from Baron von Hügel”, 10.

different ways, addressing their particular histories and character. Mature spirituality is thus, for von Hügel, a spirituality that is well rounded and balanced, and takes seriously the whole of who we are.

#### 4. OTHER ASPECTS OF RESPONSE

Within his three elements of religion, as we have already briefly seen, von Hügel would recommend or emphasise a number of smaller practices or themes in the direction that he gave. I wish to finish by highlighting a number of these here.

##### 4.1 "Suffering Well"

The value of suffering is constantly repeated in von Hügel's writings. Drawing from a deep reservoir of personal experience, von Hügel writes to Greene about how suffering can lead to spiritual maturity: "Were not 'costingness' and 'tension' the two great elements of growth? Was not pain his greatest teacher?"<sup>50</sup> Similarly he argues, "Suffering is the greatest teacher...suffering is the crown of life. Suffering and expansion, what a rich combination!"<sup>51</sup> von Hügel's own spiritual director, Abbe Huvelin, writes that "Sanctity and suffering, they are one and the same thing."<sup>52</sup>

"To *suffer well*" argues von Hügel, "is far more difficult than to act well."<sup>53</sup> So how are we to endure suffering? The key, says von Hügel, is coming close to God in the midst of our pain. Concerning suffering he writes:

But Christ came and He did not really explain it; He did far more, He met it, willed it, transformed it, and He taught us how to do all this, or rather He himself does it within us, if we do not hinder His all-healing hands.... In suffering we are very near to God.<sup>54</sup>

Suffering can be endured against the backdrop of God's ever-present, joyous initiative in loving us and bearing us up. Thus, he tells a woman in the midst of suffering to have "the pain well mixed up into the prayer".<sup>55</sup> He advises another, "try promptly to accept it, and gently to

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50. von Hügel, "A Letter from Friedrich von Hügel", xxxviii.

51. von Hügel, "A Letter from Friedrich von Hügel", xv-xvi.

52. Holland, *Selected Letters*, 62.

53. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 156.

54. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 228.

55. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 231.

utilize it towards loving God and man more fully and strongly than before – of course in and by prayer, by a soul's look to God."<sup>56</sup>

Along with being prayerful and accepting of God's initiative, a humble response to suffering enables God to help us through the suffering: "God is more living and real than all suffering and all sin; and He can and will, and does give concomitant opportunities and graces and growths to the sufferer, if and when the latter is humble, watchful and prayerful in such utilisations."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, humility also results from suffering well: "to suffer well is far more difficult than to act well.... Holy suffering is the very crown of holy action.... it almost invariably humbles us."<sup>58</sup>

Drawing into the healing presence of Christ through suffering can lead to joy. Christ has suffered and transforms our suffering:

But with him, and alone with Him and those who still learn and live from and by Him, there is the union of the clearest, keenest sense of all the mysterious depth and breadth and length and height of human sadness, suffering, and sin, and in spite of this and through this and at the end of this, a note of conquest and triumphant joy.<sup>59</sup>

Part of the aim of suffering is entering more closely into the Healing Presence of Christ, and this closeness leads to joy: "Suffering and joy. The final note of religion is joy."<sup>60</sup> von Hügel "aimed at kindling such a fierce love of God that only a life of sanctity would suffice. And sanctity means not only yielding to God... it means suffering and joy."<sup>61</sup>

#### 4.2 Death to Self and Humility

A second aspect of the mature response to the transcendent God is a rich sense of our creatureliness, involving death to self and humility. von Hügel's spiritual journey had been one of moving from a deep self absorption to an absorption with God, through a daily death to self. He writes: "And we can, we do, gain vivid experience of Him, if only we will die, die, day and night, to self. We can thus increasingly apprehend Him – can really know about Him."<sup>62</sup> von Hügel writes to his niece, "I

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56. von Hügel, "A Letter from Friedrich von Hügel", 11.

57. Holland, *Selected Letters*, 127.

58. Holland, *Selected Letters*, 340.

59. von Hügel, *Mystical Element, Volume 1*, 27.

60. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xvi.

61. Steere, *Together in Solitude*, 71.

62. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 135.

want you to learn to die to yourself daily; the daily death is a spiritual habit."<sup>63</sup>

As von Hügel practised death to self and encountered God, a deep sense of "creatureliness" and true double-knowledge grew: "The more holy I find God, the more wicked I feel myself to be."<sup>64</sup> Douglas Steere puts it beautifully, writing that a major goal of von Hügel's writing was to: "give a clue to the breathing space the soul requires if it is to slip the tightly knotted bands of self-serving and move into the heroic self-sending company of the servants of God".<sup>65</sup>

Humility is a result of this practice of death to self, and is essential in a mature response to God: "Be very humble, it's the only thing."<sup>66</sup> To Mansel, von Hügel tells of the need for "a cheerful humility which will learn how to learn, and be grateful for little buffets and humiliations".<sup>67</sup> Humility is even a gauge for checking whether our prayer is genuine: "such formless prayer is the right sort if, coming away from it, you find yourself humbler".<sup>68</sup>

#### 4.3 Social Action – Visiting the Poor

von Hügel believes that the institutional element of mature spirituality includes not only a social dimension in worship, but an active dimension outside of the institution itself. In the context of the Catholic church, von Hügel taught a balance between the contemplative and active life, advocating both the necessity of solitude, prayer and the Eucharist, and an outflowing of those spiritual practices into spiritual action: "Caring is the greatest thing, caring matters most."<sup>69</sup> He believed that our response to God's love was to give to others, and particularly to those with the greatest need.

He encouraged both Underhill and Greene to visit the poor. With Underhill, this was designed to thaw out the cerebral accent of her religion and to break open her heart. He writes to her:

You badly want de-intellectualising, or at least developing homely human sense and spirit dispositions and activities.... it will, if properly entered into and persevered with, discipline, mortify,

63. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xxiii.

64. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xxviii. "Creatureliness" is a term used repeatedly by von Hügel, revealing how he defines himself in the light of who God is, rather than the other way around.

65. Steere, *Spiritual Counsel*, 6-7.

66. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xvi.

67. Holland, *Selected Letters*, 176.

68. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 44.

69. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xlv.

deepen and quiet you. It will, as it were, distribute your blood – some of your blood – away from your brain, where too much is lodged at present.... For what is a religion which cannot mean anything to the uneducated poor?... I would carefully give preference to the two weekly visitations to the poor above everything else.<sup>70</sup>

Underhill writes to von Hügel of the effect these visits to the poor had upon her: “However jangled one may be when one goes to them, one always comes away mysteriously filled with peace and nearer God. You were absolutely right; they give one far more than one can ever give them.”<sup>71</sup>

#### 4.4 The Cultivation of Non-Religious Interests

Along with his directions on visiting the poor, von Hügel also emphasises the value of having non-religious interests, apparently because of the danger of becoming too intense and self-absorbed in our spiritual practices. von Hügel recognises that traces of God are everywhere and as Ellen Leonard observes, he has a “contemplative attitude toward all of life”.<sup>72</sup> He thus advises his niece:

It is the moderation of yourself in all things – especially also in your religion – and in your very prayer; your always occupying a very appreciable part of your clock-time and direct attention with not-directly, religious things; and this precisely because of, and for, God; to ensure stability, sobriety, genuine detachment also, especially in the deepest things and joys. This practice and organise, this make instinctive: and you will persevere to the end, you will grow more and more spiritual and holy; you will gain solid joy: you will become utterly true and elastic and accessible.<sup>73</sup>

His reason for this advice is that “without these not directly religious interests and activities, you – however slowly and unperceivedly – lose the material for Grace to work in and on.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, von Hügel tells Underhill that it is:

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70. Margaret Cropper, *The Life of Evelyn Underhill* (Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003) 75.

71. Cropper, *The Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 91.

72. Ellen Leonard, *Creative Tension. The Spiritual Legacy of Friedrich von Hügel* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1997) 149.

73. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 121.

74. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 62.

...important you should keep up or revive activities and interests of a not directly religious kind. It doesn't matter what these activities and interests are...provided they are wholesome, provided you have a relish for them.<sup>75</sup>

We see obedience to this encouragement with all three directees: Greene was an accomplished violinist;<sup>76</sup> Underhill enjoyed book binding, script writing and gardening;<sup>77</sup> and Mansel loved her games, dancing, hunting and music.<sup>78</sup>

Again, we see a healthy balance here. And while von Hügel encourages non-religious interests, he adds, "Do not have too many practices; the soul to grow needs quiet."<sup>79</sup> Greene describes von Hügel's teaching on this point as balancing "the need for a constant re-conversion to wake us from our habits and lethargies, yet the need to water down our intensities".<sup>80</sup>

#### 4.5 Leisurely Expansive Spirituality

von Hügel advises a similar balance in our spiritual practices themselves. He writes of the need to "practise moderation even in our prayer, even in our Quiet..."<sup>81</sup> Rather than straining in spiritual practices, he tells his directees to gently "drop" (perhaps we might say now, "relax!").<sup>82</sup> He speaks of his own "over-impressionable nature" and his own need to "drop, drop, drop all this feverishness, and to listen, as docily as I can, to think, will and pray".<sup>83</sup> He advises Greene, "I am sure you are much like that yourself, and hence may encourage you along the same path of a most necessary stillness and peace."<sup>84</sup> This theme is repeated throughout his letters to her: each soul needs "balance, sobriety, immense reverence"<sup>85</sup> and "a genial, gentle, leisurely expansion – no shaking of the nerves, no strain".<sup>86</sup>

75. Cropper, *The Life*, 100-101.

76. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 107.

77. Cropper, *The Life*, 101.

78. von Hügel, "A Letter from Baron von Hügel", 5.

79. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, xxxii.

80. Gwendolen Greene, "Thoughts from Baron von Hügel", *The Dublin Review*, Apr-June (1931) 256.

81. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 67.

82. Perhaps this continual emphasis is in part a reaction to his failed attempt at spiritually directing his daughter, Gertrud.

83. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 10.

84. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 101-102.

85. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 113.

86. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 46.

He describes this as being “leisurely expansive”<sup>87</sup> and “leading a *very full* and yet a leisurely life”.<sup>88</sup> Part of his inspiration for this lies in Catherine of Genoa’s maxim to do “one thing at a time...[and] doing this one thing always with a certain environment of peace, of non-hurry around it. I find this double practice of golden worth”.<sup>89</sup> von Hügel’s idea of dropping all bustle and fever is repeated when he writes “the soul’s health and happiness depended upon a maximum of zest and as little as possible of excitement”.<sup>90</sup> By this he is encouraging his niece to have the balance, focus, self-discipline and “natural warmth” of zest rather than the distracted, impulse-led, “fever heat” of excitement.<sup>91</sup> Alongside this warning against over-excitability, von Hügel warns against an excess of words: “at no time is over-much talking compatible with spiritual growth; to learn interior silence, the not talking to self – our little notions petted as our own, etc. – is fundamental in the attaining of the spiritual life”.<sup>92</sup>

A similar gentle steadiness is advised when experiencing spiritual dryness. It is assumed that the spiritually mature will experience dryness and darkness, and von Hügel describes such times as like riding a camel across a huge desert and being caught in a hurricane. He advises:

Dismount from the camel, fall prostrate face downwards on the sand, covering your head with your cloak. And lie thus, an hour, three hours, half a day: the sandstorm will go, and you will arise, and continue your journey as if nothing had happened.<sup>93</sup>

He writes that in the blinding sandstorm it is important

to form no conclusions, to take no decisions, to change nothing during such crises...[to] turn gently to other things, to maintain a vague, general attitude of resignation – to be very meek, with oneself and with others: the crisis goes by, thus, with great fruit...<sup>94</sup>

Rather than try to control God, we must “turn gently to other things... It is far, far more God who must hold us, than we who must hold Him.

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87. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 104.

88. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 108.

89. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 108.

90. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 96.

91. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 96.

92. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 46.

93. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 86.

94. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 86-87.

And we get trained in these darkneses into that sense of our impotence without which the very presence of God becomes a snare."<sup>95</sup>

So just as with suffering, von Hügel sees these periods of darkness both as entirely normal, and as opportunities for growth, and he encourages a faith in God that believes that God is acting and caring for us throughout. Our posture in all such trials should be one of contentment. He writes,

How greatly we add to our crosses by being cross with them! More than half our life goes in weeping for things other than those sent us. Yet it is these things, as sent, and when willed and at last loved as sent, that train us for Home, and that can form a spiritual Home for us even here and now.<sup>96</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In von Hügel's spiritual direction we see a particularly well-rounded and balanced view of what is entailed in mature spirituality. It is a spirituality grounded outside of the self, in a God who exists apart from and before us, who is Other from us, and yet who has acted towards and for us in a way that calls forth a response. That response is a life of adoration, an adoration that is embodied in all of who we are – our head, our hearts, and our hands.

And it is a spirituality with a number of unusual – and unusually balanced – nuances: the recognition that suffering is one of the primary means of our spiritual maturity; that we cannot be fully ourselves without being prepared to die to ourselves; that mature spirituality must also engender action that affects the real world in which we live; and that mature spirituality should be balanced with other interests, and should itself not be frenetic, but leisurely.

Finally, I would like to emphasise once more, that von Hügel's teachings grew out of a spirituality that was deeply lived, and not just theoretical. Greene described her spiritual director thus:

He lived in a deep interior world – where few, perhaps can follow – giving himself an interior life; tearing, as it were, out of himself great chunks of truth and bringing them to the surface.<sup>97</sup>

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95. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 87.

96. Greene, *Letters to a Niece*, 92.

97. Greene, *Two Witnesses*, 101.