

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Friedrich von Hügel as Spiritual Guide

DURING THE FIRST QUARTER of this century Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852–1925) acted as a spiritual guide for a number of persons, both members of the Roman Catholic Church and of other communions.¹ Von Hügel is known for his important intellectual activity as well as his role as ‘networker’ during the movement for renewal which has been labelled ‘Modernism’.² His work as spiritual director is often seen as separate from these activities. To understand von Hügel it is necessary to situate his role as spiritual director within the context of his life, including his involvement with Modernism.

A basic insight of von Hügel’s was that our growth is facilitated by one another. He himself was grateful, and continued to acknowledge his gratitude, for the direction which he had received from two priests. The first, Father Raymond Hocking, was a Dutch Dominican who helped him at a critical time in his life, when at eighteen he was sick with typhus fever, an illness which left him deaf, and he was mourning the death of his father. The second was the Abbé Henri Huvelin, a Parisian diocesan priest whom von Hügel met when he was thirty-two. Huvelin’s wisdom and holiness supported von Hügel for many years, encouraging him in his search for truth. It was Huvelin’s understanding of the role of spiritual guide which von Hügel made his own.

God who might have created us directly, employs, for this work, our parents, to whom He joins us by the tenderest ties. He could also save us directly, but He saves us, in fact, by means of certain souls, which have received the spiritual life before ourselves, and which communicate it to us, because they love us.³

Von Hügel in his direction of others continued that loving care for those who sought his assistance. Each relationship was unique for, as von Hügel realized, ‘Souls are never mere dittos’.⁴ Of the many people whom von Hügel influenced, I will consider three women, Maude Petre, Evelyn Underhill, and Gwendolen Greene, as examples of how he carried out his role as spiritual guide. But before looking at these relationships it is helpful to consider briefly von Hügel’s approach to religion.

‘Mystical Element’ as key

A key to understanding von Hügel, the scholar and spiritual guide, may be found in his great work, *The mystical element of religion as studied in St*

Catherine of Genoa and her friends.⁵ Von Hügel was fifty-six when this work finally appeared in December 1908, the fruit of thirty years of research. As a layperson, von Hügel took seriously his vocation to live the Christian life fully and to help others to do the same. The way that he understood his vocation within the Catholic Church is carefully laid out in the Preface of *The mystical element* dated Easter 1908, just a few months after the condemnation of Modernism. Von Hügel described himself as 'a proudly devoted and grateful son of the Roman Church', but he recognized many different kinds and degrees of light both within and without the Christian and Catholic Church.⁶ He situated his own work as a layperson within the Church, acknowledging that the official Church has 'the exclusive right and duty to formulate successively, for the Church's successive periods . . . normative forms and expressions of the Church's deepest consciousness and mind'. But this does not take place in a vacuum. It is the role of what he calls 'the Church's unofficial members' to do the 'tentative, and preliminary work'. He strove for 'a layman's special virtues and function: complete candour, courage, sensitiveness to the present and future . . .'.⁷

Von Hügel expressed his deep commitment to the Roman Catholic Church but recognized the restraints of post-Tridentine Catholicism 'with its regimental Seminarism, its predominantly controversial spirit, its suspiciousness and timidity . . .'.⁸ For this reason he had turned to 'one of those large-souled pre-Protestant, post-Mediaeval Catholics'. It is interesting that Catherine was a laywoman with family responsibilities. But Catherine was only a vehicle for bringing together 'a treble interest and spirit: historico-critical, philosophical, religious'.⁹ Central to this massive work, and to all von Hügel's activities, no matter what form they might take, is his presentation of the three elements of religion: the external, authoritative, historical, traditional, institutional; the critical, speculative, philosophical; the intuitive, volitional, mystical. Von Hügel insisted that all three must be present, although one or other may predominate in individuals and at different times in a person's life.

Von Hügel's sensitivity to human development is obvious in his invitation to his readers to reflect on their own religious life in order to discern how the three elements successively appeared. While recognizing variations, he traced the child's apprehension of religion through sense and memory, the youth's through question and argument, the adult's through intuition, feeling and volition. The transition from one stage to the next is both necessary and difficult. He described these transitions as crises. In the first the person moves from an external religion to an intellectual one. In the second an emotional-experimental dimension is added to the external, intellectual religion.¹⁰ He encouraged this development within all whom he directed and insisted that each element continued to be essential for a full religious life.

The way that von Hügel integrated the three dimensions of religion in his own life may be seen in his writings, both published and unpublished. Many

of von Hügel's studies focused upon the place of history as a science and of the physical sciences within the search for truth. He saw these disciplines as possessing a purifying and deepening role. Equally important were the philosophical and mystical aspects of the search. Each realm must be respected. It is this broad vision and balance that seems most characteristic of von Hügel. His critical studies of religion, his efforts to bring about renewal within the Catholic Church, his concern for the life of the Spirit, all contribute to this vision of religion as a rich and varied reality.

Three women of faith

The letters which von Hügel wrote to his friends and acquaintances reveal his own struggles to live this reality, as well as his advice to others. Among his many correspondents I have used his letters to Maude Petre, Evelyn Underhill, and Gwendolen Greene as a way to meet von Hügel, the spiritual guide.¹¹

Von Hügel's relationship with each of these women was quite different. Maude Petre was an old family friend whose association with von Hügel went back to her childhood, and continued in spite of disagreements until the Baron's death in 1925. Evelyn Underhill was a distinguished author when she first met von Hügel in 1911 and she chose him formally as her director in 1921. This relationship continued until 1925 and it profoundly influenced Underhill's writing and her own guidance of others throughout her life. Gwendolen Greene was a 'spiritual child' of von Hügel. Like Maude Petre she remembered him from her earliest years but her formal relationship with him as her 'spiritual father' began in 1918 when she was thirty-eight and herself the mother of three children.

Von Hügel, who had three daughters, took women's intellectual development seriously, although he had certain stereotypical views of women as well as of different races. In *The mystical element* he writes of the distribution of the three elements:

... women generally tend either to an excess of the external, to superstition; or of the emotional, to fanaticism. Men, on the contrary, appear generally to incline to an excess of the intellectual, to rationalism and indifference.¹²

He warned his niece to avoid 'lopsidedness', a fault that he saw in women.¹³ He even discouraged her from reading some of his own works which were the writings of 'a masculine mind', and as such 'contain far more sheer thinking than is suited to a woman—even a woman with as rarely much intellect as yourself, Child'.¹⁴ Such stereotypes and condescension would be unacceptable today. While these attitudes are present in von Hügel's relationships with women, they did not determine his approach to the women we are considering. He treated each one as an individual. At the same time his relationships with these three highly intelligent women do not seem to have challenged his stereotypes.

Maude Petre and Von Hügel as spiritual liberator

In her memoirs Maude Petre acknowledged that von Hügel had been for her as for countless others “‘a great liberator’” opening the door to many imprisoned souls’.¹⁵ Her relationship with him was one of mentor and friend. Both Petre and George Tyrrell recognized von Hügel’s influence on their intellectual development. The relationship among the three was that of partners in a common enterprise.

As a young woman Maude Petre wrote to von Hügel for advice, particularly concerning mysticism. Throughout her life Petre was an avid reader and for many years von Hügel served as a mentor in her selection of works.

Following Tyrrell’s death in 1909 Petre’s relationship with von Hügel changed. She identified closely with Tyrrell who had been excommunicated in 1907, and continued his work by editing his writings and by writing his life. Von Hügel, on the other hand, seemed to Petre to distance himself from Tyrrell. He shared with Petre the attitude which he believed they should adopt:

It is then not necessarily cowardice or trimming, but may come from the deepest, wisest love of souls, if we look well around us before each step, if we plant our feet, very deliberately and slowly, alternately on the stepping-stones, between and around which roars a raging, deep, drowning stream.¹⁶

While insisting that they must both follow their consciences, whatever the risks, he urged that they might ‘very largely mark time, and when we do act, act with an almost provocative reticence’.¹⁷ Such prudence annoyed Petre who was more inclined to plunge into the middle of the raging stream than to stand on the side marking time.

When von Hügel died Petre reflected on her relationship with him: ‘It is, to me, like a piece of life hacked out. My feeling for von Hügel proves its strength by its survival of so much deep disagreement—even disappointment.’¹⁸

Von Hügel’s reluctance to incur excommunication proceeded from his conviction of the importance of the institutional aspect of Christianity. He willingly endured its limitations in order to share in the richness of the tradition. It was his way of maintaining the external historical element of religion which he considered essential for his own spiritual life and for his work as a director of others.

Evelyn Underhill and Von Hügel as spiritual teacher

For Evelyn Underhill, von Hügel was a great teacher, the one whose ‘power of holding, and practising together (in all their fullness and variety), the pastoral and the philosophic sides of the spiritual life’ made him ‘the most influential religious personality of our times’.¹⁹ His enduring influence

on her life and on her work may be seen in her many references to him in her published works. Her debt to him was expressed in a brief tribute first published anonymously in the *Guardian* the week following his death, 'Baron von Hügel as spiritual teacher', and in her essay, 'Finite and infinite: a study of the philosophy of Baron Friedrich von Hügel'.²⁰

Von Hügel's relationship with Evelyn Underhill was more formal than the friendship and common thrust of his relationship with Maude Petre. It began, as did many of von Hügel's friendships, with von Hügel reading a book and then making contact with the author. His diary notes that three days after he began Underhill's *Mysticism* she visited him for the first time to discuss it.²¹ Von Hügel made a number of suggestions which Underhill incorporated into her subsequent writing. Even before meeting the Baron, she had noted the influence of his classic *Mystical element of religion on Mysticism*. 'This book, which only came into my hands when my own was planned and partly written, has since been a constant source of stimulus and encouragement.'²² In her preface to the twelfth edition written in 1930 she spelt out how she would plan the book if she were writing it again. She referred to the 'twin doctrines emphasized in all von Hügel's work':

First, that while mysticism is an essential element in full human religion, it can never be the whole content of such religion. It requires to be embodied in some degree in history, dogma and institutions if it is to reach the sense-conditioned human mind. Secondly, that the antithesis between the religions of 'authority' and of 'spirit', the 'Church' and the 'mystic', is false. Each requires the other.²³

This was a lesson which she had learned from von Hügel.

It was not until 1921 that Evelyn Underhill requested that von Hügel direct her. She credited von Hügel with leading her from a disembodied mysticism to a more integrated spirituality. Underhill had been strongly attracted to the Roman Catholic Church but had been discouraged from joining by the condemnation of Modernism. Gradually she had seen the need for some institutional affiliation and had returned to the Anglican Church. Von Hügel wrote to express his joy that she had taken this step, noting:

I quite realize how difficult (how dangerous unless definitely called) such a change to the Roman Catholic Obedience has become for many educated minds. And though I certainly should love to see you simply and completely one of us; and though again I am not going to be sure that you will never be given that special call, I mean *that* was not what so far made me wistful at the thought of you.²⁴

Von Hügel believed that Underhill needed to root her mysticism in a visible sacramental religion. He added an assurance of his willingness to help her in

whatever way he could. In a second letter he made some practical suggestion for institutional practices, recognizing that she would find the institutional difficult but that it would be beneficial for her.²⁵

The advice that von Hügel offered in reply to Underhill's questions affirmed her own religious experience and built on it. In response to what he perceived as her need for 'de-intellectualizing, or at least developing homely, human sense and spirit dispositions and activities', he suggested music, painting and gardening. He also encouraged her to get herself, 'gently and gradually, interested *in the poor*', visiting them, 'very quietly and unostentatiously'.²⁶ While respecting the way that the spirit was guiding her, von Hügel nevertheless insisted on his role as director, chiding her for making a retreat without consulting him.²⁷

Von Hügel believed that it was important for Underhill to develop an incarnational spirituality which would complement her mystical theism. He understood her difficulties with Roman Catholicism, but urged her to acquire a 'Catholic mind'. Not only did von Hügel encourage Underhill to root her spiritual life in the Church, but he also led her to a greater Christocentric faith. Von Hügel provided Underhill with a philosophical framework which allowed her to move from her earlier monistic worldview to one in which the spiritual was rooted in the material. For this she was grateful to von Hügel with his insistence on the concrete as the 'sacramental utterance of God'. In his relationship with Underhill we can see von Hügel drawing the mystical element back into creative tension with the historical and institutional. In spite of its shortcomings, the Church was a necessary base for a religion which was to avoid individualism and be rooted in the community, past and present. Along with church membership went corporate worship, an important element of religious response. Through external practice one joined the communion of saints past and present. For von Hügel such external practice was a necessary expression of religion.

Gwendolen Greene and Von Hügel as spiritual father

'I sat beside him, always on the same little low chair . . . I always felt like a child with my uncle, and I never attempted to be anything else.'²⁸ Thus Gwendolen Greene described her formal talks with her uncle which began in 1919, shortly after the death of her own father. If von Hügel led Maude Petre toward mysticism, and Evelyn Underhill toward the institutional, with Gwendolen Greene he seems to have been especially a guide to the intellectual. His direction of his niece included suggested reading and discussion of the classics. He wanted her to become a 'sober, persevering, balanced, genial, historical Christian'.²⁹ For von Hügel history was a way of enlarging one's personal experience by entering into contact with the past. Few people would have been willing to undertake the rigorous programme of reading and study carried on for six years by Gwendolen Greene.

The letters of von Hügel to his niece provide the opportunity to watch the perceptive director at work. He gently led her step by step, responding to

her questions, making suggestions, sharing his own journey with her. As with Evelyn Underhill, von Hügel led Greene to a recognition of the need for a church and he encouraged her to be faithful to her own Anglican communion. For him the Church was the form of our interconnectedness with one another and with all Christians past and present.

And, *it is the Church* (which, imperfectly understood, ‘dumbs’ my bewildered Child)—it is the Church which, at its best and deepest, is just *that*—that interdependence of all the broken and the meek, all the self-oblivious, all the reaching out to God and souls, which certainly ‘pins down’ neither my child nor this her old groping Father—which, if it ‘pins down’ at all, does so, really only—even taken simply intellectually—as the skeleton ‘pins down’ the flesh.³⁰

Although von Hügel emphasized the historical, social, institutional aspect of religion, he also encouraged Greene in her own form of prayer and warned her against being ‘churchy’.³¹

Von Hügel was conscious of the need to respect God’s action in his niece’s life. This was particularly the case as she became interested in joining the Roman Catholic Church. In a long letter he shared with her the problem which he had experienced with his eldest daughter Gertrude, one which made him cautious in his relationship with this spiritual daughter. He himself had educated Gertrude in the faith but in a way that ‘so strained and perplexed that very sensitive young soul that her very love of me and her natural openness to all impressions from me, bereft her for years of all faith’. In his colourful language he accused himself of ‘having *put out my True’s spiritual eyes*’.³² After this painful experience with his daughter, von Hügel did not want to make a similar mistake with his niece. ‘My chief prayer has been that I might never strain, never complicate, never perplex you . . . I might just simply help and feed and carry you, if and when and where you require it—to let God lead’.³³ Their discussion had centred on liberty and freedom in the Roman Catholic Church. Von Hügel admitted that he had been thinking of his own case rather than hers. In honesty he wrote:

I deliberately admit *some* difficulty, *some* complication for such as myself; but I do not cease, thank God, to see and experience that the gain of my Roman Catholic appurtenance is, even simply for the solidity of my freedom, for the balance and reality of my outlook—*just simply even to my life of scholarship and thinking IMMENSE*.³⁴

Gwendolen was not to understand this as a plea for her to enter the Roman Catholic Church. ‘Only deep, strong, most clear calls of conscience would make it right for you to think of such a change.’³⁵

For Gwendolen Greene this change did not occur until after her uncle’s death. In her Introduction to *Letters to a niece*, she blamed herself for not saying more certainly that she had found her home in the Catholic Church.

He knew I had never seen the need for any Church till I knew him, nor did I know the possibility of loving any Church till I found his. But this was not enough. I had to show him more—and this I could not do. I was so used to listening and accepting, not explaining.³⁶

The last sentence is revealing, and points to one of the limitations of von Hügel's direction.

Von Hügel always tried to keep the large picture, 'to see things in the large and upon the whole, and at their best . . .'.³⁷ He encouraged his niece in her various activities:

At one moment packing; at another silent adoration in church; at another, dreariness and unwilling drift; at another, the joys of human affections given and received; at another, keen, keen suffering of soul, of mind, in an apparent utter loneliness; at another, external acts of religion; at another, death itself.³⁸

All of these occupations were means of loving. 'But it is for God to choose these things, their degrees, combinations, successions; and it is for Gwen, just simply, very humbly, very gently and peacefully, to follow that leading.'³⁹ It was advice that von Hügel strove to follow in his own life.

Von Hügel as spiritual guide

We have seen how von Hügel skilfully led those who turned to him for help on their spiritual journey. For Maude Petre, who had been brought up in an old Catholic family and who had a strong institutional identity, he opened up the intellectual and mystical elements of religion in a way that was truly liberating. For Evelyn Underhill, who had a strong intellectual and mystical understanding of religion, he insisted on the institutional in order to ground her mysticism. For Gwendolen Greene, who had a mystical sense, he opened up the intellectual and the institutional. He served as spiritual liberator for Petre, as spiritual teacher for Underhill, and as spiritual father for Greene.

Von Hügel was respectful of those whom he directed, urging them to accept only what was helpful for them. His words to Greene in his very first letter, April 25, 1918 were to accept only what fitted her, although

such things ought always to feel, at first, as just a size or two too big for us—as what gently stimulates us to a further growth and expansion; but they should always be quietly ignored, if, and in so far as they come before our quiet look at them as conundrums simply imposed on us from without.⁴⁰

Can von Hügel still provide guidance on the religious quest? I personally would not like to have Friedrich von Hügel for my mentor or my spiritual

director. He seems to have been both overpowering and chauvinistic. Much of this may have been his personality and his cultural context. He was a Victorian gentleman whose style belongs to a different age.

In spite of the cultural differences between von Hügel and late twentieth-century Christians, there is still wisdom to be gleaned from his writings. His conviction of our inter-connectedness with all of reality—God, the material universe, one another—is particularly timely for us who live in the last decade of the twentieth century. His insistence on the three elements of religion continue to challenge us. The temptation to abandon the historical institutional expressions of Christianity may be even stronger for us than for persons at the beginning of the century. Von Hügel reminds us that this loss of contact with the richness of the past as well as the present would be impoverishing. The need for careful intellectual work continues to be a purifying experience as scholars struggle to articulate ‘the old Faith and its permanent truths and helps—to interpret it according to what appears the best and the most abiding elements in the philosophy and science of the later and latest times’.⁴¹ Von Hügel’s insistence that mysticism is not something reserved for a few privileged persons, but the vocation of all who strive to live a religious life, needs to be heard.

Von Hügel did not deny the oppressive aspects of religion which needed to be critiqued. He courageously undertook this task. As he explained to his niece, he tried to make the Roman Catholic Church ‘inhabitable *intellectually*’—not because the intellect was the most important thing in religion

but because the old Church already possesses in full the knowledge and aids to *spirituality*, whilst, for various reasons which would fill a volume, it is much less strong as regards the needs, rights and duties of the mental life.⁴²

The task of making the Catholic Church ‘inhabitable intellectually’ continues to be necessary in the late twentieth century.

Von Hügel believed in an expansive Catholicism but lived during a time in which Catholicism was narrowly interpreted. The support of his director, Abbé Huvelin, helped him to find peace within the tension of this situation, encouraging him to seek truth rather than orthodoxy. Von Hügel in turn was able to help others to do the same. He can continue to provide a view of life and of religion that is liberative as well as challenging. In all of his writings, including his letters, we meet a great spiritual guide.

Ellen Leonard

NOTES

¹ For a brief history of the ministry of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition see Leech, Kenneth: *Soul friend: the practice of Christian spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977),

especially pp 34–89. Leech does not include von Hügel in his survey. This ministry has been carried on by men and women, clergy and laypersons.

² The term 'Modernism' is ambiguous. It refers to what was condemned by *Pascendi* in September 1907 as well as to a wider movement within the Church. In a letter to Maude Petre, March 13, 1918, von Hügel distinguished between two 'distinct subject-matters which could be described under the term "Modernism", the first the 'permanent, never quite finished, always sooner or later, more or less, beginning set of attempts to express the old Faith and its permanent truths and helps—to interpret it according to what appears the best and the most abiding elements in the philosophy and the scholarship and science of the later and latest times'. The second 'Modernism' was 'a strictly circumscribed affair, one which is really over and done . . .'. *Selected letters 1896–1924* ed Bernard Holland (London: Dent & Sons, 1927), p 248.

³ Von Hügel quoted this passage from Huvelin's *Conferences on some of the spiritual guides of the seventeenth century* in *Eternal life* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), p 376.

⁴ *Letters from Baron Friedrich von Hügel to a niece* ed with an introduction by Gwendolen Greene (London: Dent & Sons, 1928), p xxix; hereafter *LTN*.

⁵ This two-volume work was published in December 1908 (London: Dent & Sons). The second edition appeared in 1923. Hereafter *ME*.

⁶ *ME*, vol 1, pp xxv–vi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p xxvii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p xxi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p xxiii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 50–5.

¹¹ The Von Hügel Archives are in St Andrew's University Library (SAUL). For the letters of von Hügel to Underhill written between 1921 and 1924 see MS 5552. The letters are included in Margaret Cropper's *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Green and Co., 1958). For letters to Greene, see *Letters from Baron Friedrich von Hügel to a niece* (London: Dent & Sons, 1928). The von Hügel—Petre Correspondence is in the British Library (BL), Add. MSS 45361, 45362.

¹² *ME*, 1, p 58.

¹³ *LTN*, p 97.

¹⁴ *LTN*, p 87.

¹⁵ Petre, Maude: *My way of faith* (London: Dent & Sons, 1937), p 255.

¹⁶ BL, Add. MS 45361, vH to MP, September 14, 1909. This letter is included in *Selected letters*, pp 168–70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ BL, Add. MS 52376, January 30, 1925.

¹⁹ 'Baron von Hügel as a spiritual teacher', *Mixed pastures*, p 230.

²⁰ 'Finite and infinite: a study of the philosophy of Baron Friedrich von Hügel', followed by an additional note, 'Baron von Hügel as a spiritual teacher', *Mixed pastures*, pp 217–33.

²¹ Kelly James J.: *Baron Friedrich von Hügel's philosophy of religion*, p 103.

²² *Mysticism: a study of the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness* (London: Methuen and Co., 1911; reprinted 1930), p xiv.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp ix–x.

²⁴ Cropper, Margaret: *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958), p 69. This first letter is dated October 29, 1921.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p 71; letter of November 5, 1921.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 94.

²⁸ *LTN*, p xi.

²⁹ *LTN*, p xii.

³⁰ *LTN*, p 25; emphasis is von Hügel's.

³¹ *LTN*, pp 62–63.

³² February 22, 1921, *LTN*, p 122. Tyrrell advised von Hügel at the time, 'If you want your daughter's company you must shorten your steps and walk slowly, else she will lose her breath in her desire to keep up with you' (*Von Hügel and Tyrrell*, p 17). This book has a number of letters to and from von Hügel which concern Gertrude. See pp 10–27. Gertrude died in 1915.

³³ *LTN*, p 123.

³⁴ *LTN*, p 128; emphasis is von Hügel's.

³⁵ *LTN*, p 129.

³⁶ *LTN*, p xl.

³⁷ *LTN*, p 134.

³⁸ *LTN*, p 59.

³⁹ *LTN*, pp 59-60.

⁴⁰ *LTN*, p 3.

⁴¹ See note 2 above.

⁴² *LTN*, pp 165-66; emphasis is von Hügel's.