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Public mysticism

By Justin K.H. Tse

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In 1980, gothic romance novelist Susan Howatch bought two flats in the Salisbury Cathedral Close, “one for living in and one for working.” Having moved back to England from America after a failed marriage, she found herself in a mid-life crisis, torn between her career success and her personal turmoil. Though not a Christian, she was “systematically seduced” by the dominating architectural structure in her neighborhood, the historic Salisbury Cathedral. As she went in for a few minutes every day, she “began to go through the religious section of the Salisbury public library like a vacuum cleaner,” which not only led to her conversion to Anglican Christianity, but the production of six long novels that have developed somewhat of a cult following in Anglican circles. Known as the Church of England series, the novels revolve around the lives of clergy ministering at the pseudonymous Starbridge Cathedral, digging deep into the theology, booze, and sex lives of bishops, priests, lay people, and monks from across the Anglican theological spectrum. The novel titles themselves reflect Howatch’s feelings toward the edifice of Salisbury/Starbridge Cathedral, with names like *Glittering Images* (1988), *Glamorous Powers* (1989), *Ultimate Prizes* (1990), *Scandalous Risks* (1991), *Mystical Paths* (1993), and *Absolute*

Truths (1996). As if peeling back the cathedral’s image to reveal the politics and poetics that constitute the place, Howatch’s exploration of her characters’ private lives ploughs right over their clergy façades and makes them spill the beans. (The quotes above come from her 1994 lecture, *Salisbury and the Starbridge Novels*.)

You could say that Howatch is saying that what we pray for is what we get, especially when we pray the Collect for Purity at Holy Communion: “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name, through Christ our Lord. Amen” (1662).

Howatch likely never intended to merge the Collect for Purity with Starbridge/Salisbury Cathedral. But one can’t help being reminded that the prayer became known in the English Church because of Salisbury. Before the English Reformation, the forms of the Mass had more local variety, and by the fourteenth century, Salisbury Cathedral – or Sarum in Latin – had a liturgy known as the Sarum Rite that became fairly influential in England. It included one of the private preparatory prayers from the Sacramentary of Alcuin of York that priests would say in the sacristy before services, the *Deus cui omne cor* that is now known as the Collect for Purity.

That the prayer originates from Alcuin and was a part of the Sarum Rite makes it uniquely English. That the people now get to say it publicly makes it uniquely Anglican.

In other words, Anglican lay people get to be public mystics.

Once upon a time in the *ecclesia Anglicana*, that wasn’t so. The prayer on the prologue of the fourteenth-century English mystical classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* is this Collect for Purity translated from Sarum’s Latin into Middle English. Taken this way, *The Cloud*’s instructions for contemplatives to suppress their natural intellects and physical senses as they “lift up their hearts” to God, who is hidden in the “dark cloud of unknowing,” is a long commentary on what the Collect for Purity is about. The cleansing of the heart’s intentions and private things takes place through the *via negativa*, the negative way, the mystical practice of denying sensory images and intellectual formulations of God in order to be more perfectly united in love with God’s pure being.

But *The Cloud of Unknowing* wasn't written for everyone. The contemplatives were not the general Christian public; in fact, "just as then Martha complained of Mary her sister, so to this day do actives complain of contemplatives" (*The Cloud*, ch. 18). Mirroring the clergy reciting the preparatory prayer in the vesting room before saying mass for the people, *The Cloud* refers to the contemplatives' "private prayers, of course, not those laid down by Holy Church" (*The Cloud*, ch. 37). It also had a limited readership:

I do not want the loud-mouthed, or flatterers, or mock-modest, or busybodies, or talebearers, or cantankerous to see this book, for it has never been my intention to write all this for them. I would rather that they did not hear it ... and also those learned (and unlearned) people who are merely curious. Yes, even if they are good men judged from the active standpoint, all this will mean nothing to them. (The Cloud, ch. 74)

Granted, *The Cloud*'s prologue says that the book "will mean something to those who, though 'active' according to their outward mode of life, are, by the inner working of the Spirit of God—his judgements are unsearchable—disposed towards contemplation," and fellow fourteenth-century mystic Walter Hilton encourages such people to pursue the "mixed life" of contemplation and action. But the point is that the negative mysticism of the Collect for Purity was never meant for the general Christian assembly.

Thomas Cranmer changed that. Adjusting the wording slightly (he replaced a reference to "human merit" with "worthily magnifie thy holy name"), *The Book of Common Prayer* in its 1549, 1559, and 1662 versions all have the priest publicly saying the Sarum preparatory prayer at the beginning of the Communion service. As John Jewel, the Bishop of Salisbury, argued in *The Apology of the Church of England*, this kind of thing suggested that the English church hadn't lost its continuity with the historical church.

But there really was a change. Dom Gregory Dix puts it like this in *The Shape of the Liturgy*: "... in the sixteenth-century Anglican rites, the supplementary devotions invade the liturgical action and become formal parts of it."

That is to say, "the only change is that they are no longer private and supplementary prayers, but public and prescribed, and have been made a part of the liturgical action itself" (Dix, p. 525).

Which means: Anglicans think that mysticism forms the Christian public.

By the early twentieth century, Anglicans shaped by this public declaration of the Collect for Purity were arguing that members of the public—everybody—should be practicing mysticism. The works of Evelyn Underhill are a case in point. In 1920, Underhill translated *The Cloud of Unknowing* "for the general reader and lover of mysticism" (p. 10). Defining Mysticism as "that love of truth which ... leaves the merely intellectual sphere" so that it can be united with the truth of ultimate reality and being (*Mysticism*, p. 24), she concludes: "Every person, then, who awakens to consciousness of a Reality which transcends the normal world of sense—however small, weak, imperfect that consciousness may be—is put of necessity upon a road which follows at low levels the path which the mystic treads at high levels" (p. 533). As she puts it in *Practical Mysticism*, this means that ordinary, practical people should be encouraged to practice *The Cloud of Unknowing*'s negative way. Writing at the beginning of World War I, she declares that mysticism will save the soul of a nation wracked by modern warfare:

No nation is truly defeated which retains its spiritual self-possession. No nation is truly victorious which does not emerge with soul unstained. If this be so, it becomes a part of true patriotism to keep the spiritual life, both of the individual citizen and of the social group, active and vigorous; its vision of realities unsullied by the tangled interests and passions of the time. This is a task in which all may do their part. The spiritual life is not a special career, involving abstraction from the world of things. It is a part of every man's life; and until he has realized it he is not a complete human being, has not entered into possession of all his powers. It is therefore the function of a practical mysticism to increase, not diminish,

the total efficiency, the wisdom and steadfastness, of those who try to practise it. (Practical Mysticism, p. x-xi).

Debate as we may about Underhill's nationalistic (and occasionally imperialistic) sentiments, the point is that Anglicans think of mysticism as a public good. The Collect for Purity is everybody's prayer, calling into being a mystical public. Indeed, Underhill can't think of a public without mysticism—that would be a nation that has lost its soul and is hell-bent on war and devastation.

That's precisely what Howatch is saying with Salisbury Cathedral. She peels back the layers on her clergy characters' private lives, making their hearts open and desires known, exposing all of their secrets. With the glittering image of Starbridge Cathedral always in the background, she shows how necessary it is for her characters to practice The Cloud of Unknowing's negative mysticism. It's not an option. It's a matter of emotional, psychological, and ontological survival. As Anglican priests, it's as if they stand before Sarum's altar to publicly pray the Collect for Purity before the people, the readers. We, the public, are invited into their mystical journey. The hope, of course, is that we too will become mystics, sorting out the mess of our lives by denying our unrealities in order to unite with God's very being. By Anglican definition, that is a public good.

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