WHEN THE SAINTS …

15th of JUNE EVELYN UNDERHILL

16th of JUNE RICHARD of CHICHESTER

 JOSEPH BUTLER

17TH of JUNE SAMUEL & HENRIETTA BARNETT

19TH of JUNE SUNDAR SINGH of INDIA

EVELYN UNDERHILLL [1875-1941] was an absolutely remarkable woman: an Anglo-Catholic, and a novelist who underwent some mystical experiences when she was young, which caused her some angst, and led her, eventually, to become the most important writer on mysticism in the first half of last century. Her best known book on mysticism, [1911] went into 12 editions, and remains in print today. Educated mainly at home, she read History and Botany at Kings College London, and was awarded an honorary doctorate in divinity by Aberdeen University, and was made a fellow of King’s College.

She became prominent in the Anglican Church as a lay leader; a spiritual director for hundreds of people; guest speaker, radio lecturer, and proponent of contemplative prayer.

She was the first woman to lecture to the clergy of the C of E; the first woman to conduct spiritual retreats for the church; first woman to establish ecumenical links between churches, and one of the first woman theologians to lecture in English colleges and universities.

Evelyn was also a practical woman; fulfilling the role and duties of a barrister’s wife, including charitable work: she was well-travelled throughout Europe, but well organised, having a daily routine including prayer, reading and research. Neither her parents nor her husband were interested in her spiritual researches, but supported her writing. She was a pacifist, and was distressed at the coming of World War II. She made some very distinguished friends, including Baron von Hügel, who was her spiritual director for three years until his death in 1925. Another important friendship was with the Indian poet and mystic Rabindranath Tagore, who opened up the world of eastern mysticism to her.

These bare facts about her life are taken from a very long article on Wikipedia, which you are strongly recommended to consult, and read to the end. …

The 12th edition of her book on mysticism was published in 1931, and doesn’t have much of a biographical introduction: there are recent editions that would, hopefully, contain a critical introduction as well. Classics such as this one, and, for example, Dix’s tome on liturgy, need historical perspective to assist the reader in getting the best out of them.

The Wikipedia article suggests that Evelyn was none too impressed with the view taken by William James on mysticism, in his equally seminal book ‘Varieties of religious experience;’ a series of lectures written up somewhat more succinctly, covering aspects of religion such as conversion, though both books have in common a philosophical and spiritual culture that 21st-century readers would probably need to have explained.

Evelyn’s book is long, written in dense, somewhat over-ripe prose, and contains many longish quotations in Latin and Italian that are not always translated. The first few chapters are in the nature of apologetics, and the second part of the book covers various aspects of mysticism with examples from Sufi and Indian traditions. Seemingly buried in all of this verbiage there are, indeed, some useful rules of thumb and principles, but what is by far the most valuable part of the book is the appendix, which offers a potted history of Christian mysticism up to the death of William Blake, although it’s important to bear in mind that her frequently blunt judgements are her own.

The book was ground-breaking, but very much of its time and culture, and a far clearer and more concise study of Christian mysticism, though with far more limited scope, is David Knowles’ ‘What is mysticism, published in 1967.

Evelyn states that the purpose of her book was to pull together various insights and opinions found in other writings, in which difficult enterprise she certainly succeeds; and whatever reservations readers of her epoch-making spiritual literature may have today, nothing should detract from the importance of her work to Anglican spirituality.

The prayer of hers that can be found at the end of this document shows Evelyn Underhill to have been a wise, conscientious spiritual director with a very courageous bent for self-examination.

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ST RICHARD of CHICHESTER [1197-1253] is probably best known as the author of part of a prayer that was set to music in the 70’s as the song ‘Day by Day’: the full prayer can be found at the end of the document.

Richard was born near Droitwich, and worked on his yeoman father’s farm for some years to restore the family fortune. A studious boy, he studied canon law at Oxford, then Paris and Bologna universities. In time Richard was made Chancellor of Oxford University, and his tutor, St Edmund, on his becoming Archbishop of Canterbury, took Richard as his Chancellor, joining him in exile at Pontigny and being with Edmund when he died in 1240. At this point Richard studied theology with the Dominicans and was ordained priest.

Returning to England after 1242, Richard served briefly as parish priest in Kent, before the new Archbishop reappointed him as chancellor. In 1244 he was elected bishop of Chichester, but the king refused to confirm the election, and put forward his own candidate, who was, in turn, refused. Both sides appealed to Pope Innocent IV, who consecrated Richard at Lyon in 1245. Returning to take up his appointment, the king had confiscated the property, but in the meantime Richard lived humbly in a parish house, attending to his flock and travelling around his diocese on foot. The property was eventually restored to Richard much dilapidated, and only after the threat of excommunication.

Richard was very strict with his clergy, enforcing residence; ensuring that the sacraments were given without pay, and in appropriate dignity. He was known to have been extraordinarily charitable to the poor, and to have been particularly generous during a famine.

As priest, bishop and canon lawyer, Richard supported Archbishop Boniface in suppressing simony [the buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices], and nepotism, [helping relatives to well-endowed and sinecure positions.] In this and other matters he was associated with the better-known Bishop of Lincoln and leading philosopher Robert Grosseteste, who comes up in the calendar during the year.

Near the end of his life Richard was deputed to recruit volunteers to fight a crusade, not for political motives, but so that the Holy Land and its sites could be open to pilgrims: He raised many unemployed sailors from the south-east, but died at Dover, having, the previous day, dedicated a church to his former patron St Edmund.

Ralph Bocking, one of his clergy, wrote a biography of Richard, who was canonised in 1261. The author is careful to portray Richard’s last hours as an ideal and exemplary death, but his loyalty, courage; his charity, humility and willingness to stand up for the highest ideals of the church mark him out distinctly as rather more than a mere diocesan bishop.

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Bishop JOSEPH BUTLER [1692-1752] was raised in a Presbyterian family, and trained in the dissenters’ academy in Tewksbury, but it soon became evident that he had a gift for very clear reasoning, and after writing to the philosopher Samuel Clarke, pointing out two errors in his work, a friendship developed. Butler converted to Anglicanism, and was ordained in 1718, and also took a law degree.

Appointed preacher at the Rolls Chapel, which served the legal profession, his sermons went down so well that fifteen of them were published in 1726, which made his reputation.

His friend and fellow student Thomas Secker, procured him the post of Clerk to the Closet, and he was in attendance on Queen Caroline until her death in November 1737. She had commended Butler to her husband, George II on her deathbed, as a result of which he was presented to the rather poor See of Bristol in 1738, where he ran into fierce opposition from John Wesley and George Whitefield.

To supplement his income Butler was created Dean of St Paul’s in 1740, and finally, in 1750 he was ‘translated’ from Bristol to become Bishop of Durham.

His most famous work is his ‘Analogy of religion’ in 1737, and it appears that ordinands during the nineteenth century found his writings helpful. It should encourage Butler’s wraith that there were ordinands at all to read his work, since he is [apocryphally] quoted, when offered the See of Canterbury in 1747, as saying: that ‘it’s rather too late to try to support a failing church.’

Whilst butler’s life is one of a fairly ordinary eighteenth-century clergyman who was lucky with his friends, his intellectual achievements were such that even his opponents admired his reasoning. Some modern moral philosophers would even argue that his conclusions do not actually need the support of theology at all; and although Butler often quoted from the bible. If clergy of the stature of J H Newman found his writings helpful, it is also the case that modern philosophers are still engaging with Butler’s writings.

A more detailed summary of Butler’s opinions can be found online at Stamford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

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SAMUEL and HENRIETTA BARNET were a very dynamic couple who, on the day before their marriage, when they could have had a comfortable parish in Oxfordshire, chose the poorest and most run-down one in London, St Jude’s in Whitechapel.

Samuel was born in Bristol in 1844, and after studying law and modern history at Oxford, he was ordained deacon in 1867, having worked with Octavia Hill, as had Henrietta. In 1869 he founded the Charity Organisation society, in 1873 the couple were married and Samuel became vicar of St Jude’s until 1894.

They started evening classes and entertainments, which attracted criticism at first, until their care and concern for parishioners’ spiritual and cultural well-being became obvious. Henrietta persuaded Samuel to set up a ‘worship hour,’ with service sheets in gaudy colours, unrobed clergy, and the church kept dim so that the poor might not feel self-conscious about their appearance.

Samuel helped to found the Reform League, and became a promoter of the Artisans’ Dwellings Act. From 1884 he was the first warden of Toynbee Hall. In 1893 he became a canon at Bristol Cathedral, and in 1906 was made a canon of Westminster.

After a sermon he preached in Bristol, a woman was heard to say: ‘I thought sermons were supposed to make us feel comfortable, and you seem to want to make us feel uncomfortable,’ so he was doing his job! Although he publicly aligned himself with the Christian Socialist Movement, one of his writings was entitled ‘Practicable Socialism,’ and it’s clear that he did everything within his power to assist and support social reform projects.

Henrietta is described as possessing ‘robust energy and an assertive personality,’ and she wrote of Samuel:

‘As soon as Samuel was shown a more excellent way he immediately adopted it. Thus he grew more than anyone I have ever known … It was of no consequence by what channel the suggestion came, be it lovingly by the voice of a friend, or rudely from the impersonal press.’

Lorraine Blair, the couple’s biographer, writes ‘A more excellent way came to life as Toynbee Hall, the world’s first university settlement. Here students would live in the midst of the poor, each group challenged to learn from the other. Samuel hoped that the wealth of inheritance and opportunity stored up in Oxford would meet the poverty of life lived amid the mean streets and monotonous labour of East London.’

He wrote:

‘Anything which mars the grandeur of human life must be brought under a converting influence. Such influences are the culture that opens to men’s minds the enjoyment of art and literature, knowledge that makes the whole world alive, and binds together the human family by ties of common interest. It is small links of friendship that binds classes together.’

Hampstead Garden Suburb was a project of Henrietta’s.

Lord Beveridge said of her: ‘The canon had with him another creature of equal force. We young people of the canon’s house often spoke irreverently of Henrietta, but our irreverence was a cloak for profound respect.’

Another alumnus wrote of her;

‘Mrs Barnett is … Prior and prioress of this place – the noble head – a fine, bright-eyed vigorous woman she appears, and one that will have her own way and not be sparing of her own opinions.’ [Clearly somewhat better loved and respected than Trollop’s Mrs Proudly.]

Henrietta’s own contribution to the couple’s legacy is Hampstead Garden Suburb, where ‘she created a community for people of all classes to live together in beauty and peace.’

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SADU SUNDAR SINGH was born in Punjab of Sikh parents, and was first educated at the local Anglican college to learn English. At age 14 his mother died, and the Anglican priests he spoke to were unable to answer his questions in a satisfactory way. He resolved to throw himself under a train, but first asked that if there was a true god it might present itself; and he immediately experienced a vision of Jesus.

At age 16 Sundar was baptised, despite parental opposition, into the Anglican Church at Simla in 1905. His brother, Rajender Singh, attempted to poison him several times: snakes were thrown into his house by people in the area, until he was rescued by a British Christian. He was cared for under the auspices of the Anglican diocese of Lahore.

He was known as ‘the apostle of the bleeding feet, because he devised a way of evangelising that he hoped Indians would understand, by donning the robes of a holy man; a SADU, and travelled around India, Nepal and Tibet. He said:

‘I am not worthy to follow in the steps of my lord; but, like him, I want no home; no possessions. Like him I will belong to the road, sharing the sufferings of my people, eating with those who will give me shelter and telling all men of the love of God.’

He began his travels, through Kashmir, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, the north-west frontier, infested with brigands. He suffered arrest and stoning for his beliefs. In 1908 he visited Tibet and was appalled at the wretched living conditions of the people. He travelled to Bombay, hoping to get a passage to Palestine, but was refused a permit, and returned to the north.

Despite having been cared for by Anglicans, Sundar Singh had little or no notion of Anglican ‘proprieties,’ and even less so in 1909 when he enrolled for training for ministry at Lahore. He was ostracised and only met his peers at mealtimes and for prayers. After eight months, in July 1910, he emerged from training, having been instructed to wear Anglican clerical dress, sing English hymns and not to preach outside his parish without permission!!! He was horrified that his Christian compatriots adopted all the trappings of Anglican worship and felt that the church’s way of going on to be in total opposition to the message of Jesus. He wrote:

‘What is truth? Not a doctrine or dogma, but Jesus Christ himself. Some friends once asked me what I thought of western civilisation. I told them I did not see real civilisation, but animalism. People do not know Christ; do not live with him. They have learned how to dress, eat and be punctual. They are trained animals.’

During his 20’s, however, Sundar became something of a celebrity, having his picture on newspapers all over the Christian world. His father, who became a convert, paid for him to travel to England, and by the time he was 30 he had visited America, Australia, the Far East and Europe. People remarked that he looked and talked like Jesus must have; there are books of his writings and he often taught in parables.

Towards the end of his short life, Sundar’s health deteriorated, and, against all advice, he made one last journey into Tibet, where he disappeared; whether dying of exhaustion or being murdered is completely unknown.

If you remember the light-handed oversight of Ini Kopuria in the Solomon Islands, it is enlightening to compare Sundar’s experience with his; and the two very different models of mission.

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The PRAYER of St RICHARD:

Thanks be to thee, O Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits thou hast given us; for all the pain and insults thou hast borne for us. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may we know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly; for thine own sake.

 [Nothing about ‘Day by day!’ But it was a good insertion...

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EVELYN UNDERHILL’S PRAYER FOR WHOLENESS

Lord, penetrate those murky corners where we hide memories and tendencies

On which we do not care to look, but which we will not disinter and yield freely up to you,

That you may purify and transmute them: the persistent buried grudge,

The half-acknowledged enmity, which is still smouldering.

The bitterness of that loss we have not turned into sacrifice;

The private comfort we cling to; the secret fear of failure that saps our initiative

And is really inverted pride; the pessimism which is an insult to your joy, Lord;

We bring all these to you, and we review them with shame and repentance

In your steadfast light.

This is a tool, as well as a prayer: if you pray it, work it!