

# Imaginative Eschatology : Benson's 'The Lord of the World'

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The advent of the end of the second millennium is unlikely to be greeted, in the historic Christian churches, with the mixture of enthusiasm and alarm which heralded the end of the first. Quite apart from the inroads of 'de-mythologising' and 'existentialising' before which traditional eschatology has lost ground, the number symbolism of biblical apocalypticism simply does not lend itself to *two* thousand years in the way believers with misplaced literalism applied it, in fear and awe, to the completion of the first thousand years of the *agôn* between the Gospel and the world. On the other hand, consider some presumptive 'signs of the times': the possibility, admittedly controverted, of eco-catastrophe; the ever-present threat of nuclear war—the more pressing as smaller powers, with less to lose and weaker traditions of rational policy-making, acquire weapons of mass destruction; the victories of secularist materialism which, it seems, only the Islamic powers will challenge—courageously as to substance, injudiciously as to mode; the creation of a medical technology that can encompass, at the ends of the life process, the manufacture of some human beings and the safe disposal of others; the new disparity between the technical means to feed the hungry, never before present, and the political will to do it. These provoke thought, and, in any case, the ending of a millennium reminds the Church of her faith conviction that, in this world, the human project is essentially limited in time. *In this world*. The transfer of representative colonies from a dying earth to the planets of other solar systems, as science fiction, may become in science fact—but, for man-in-the-world at large, nothing can chip away that massive doctrinal truth. Hence the importance of keeping alive eschatological thinking: and, since concepts here are of only limited usefulness, the importance, especially, of an eschatological *imagination*. Here there are few modern masters, or monuments. They include Robert Hugh Benson and his *Lord of the World*.

Benson was born on November 18, 1871, the son of an Anglican clergyman of moderately High Church views, Edward White Benson.<sup>1</sup> The latter was at the time headmaster of Wellington College (a royal appointment), and would become, successively, Dean of Lincoln, Bishop of Truro and Archbishop of Canterbury. Robert Hugh received the conventional education of a son in such an Establishment family: Eton,

and Trinity, Cambridge. Though at first unaware of any strong vocational compulsion, he was ordained to the Anglican ministry by his father. Gradually, however, his religious soul unfolded. He gravitated towards the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, becoming, in 1898, a member of the semi-monastic Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire. At the same time, equipped with the cultured literacy of his family circle, and his own talents, he began to acquire a certain celebrity as preacher and writer. In 1903, he underwent a crisis of denominational belonging. Convinced that Christian discipleship required one to enter into communion with a divinely given centre of unity, he accepted, under the influence of Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, the Papacy's 'Petrine claim'. It lies in the Scriptures, he wrote, 'like a great jewel, blazing on the surface, when once one has rubbed one's eyes clear of anti-Catholic predisposition'.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, he was received into the Catholic Church at Woodchester (Gloucestershire), the noviciate house of the English Dominicans. Ordained to the Catholic priesthood at the English church of San Silvestro, Rome, he made the Cambridge parish of Our Lady and the English Martyrs his base for an itinerant ministry of conferences, retreats and sermons (1903—1908), as well as a stream of novels and devotional and controversial literature. In 1908, he created his own ambience in a re-furbished house, 'Hare Street', with a personally designed chapel, in the Hertfordshire village of Buntingford, where he followed a horary originally inspired by his admiration for the Anglican community of Nicholas Ferrar, at Little Gidding, in the time of Charles I. He died in the house of the bishop of Salford, from angina complicated by pneumonia, on October 19, 1913, at the early age of 42, and was buried at Hare Street, under a slab inscribed as he had directed: 'priest of the Catholic and Roman Church, a sinner, looking unto the revelation of the sons of God'.<sup>3</sup>

*The Lord of the World* was written in Cambridge in the course of 1906—7, and it is, like Benson himself, a study in contrasts. Within Benson's own personality, the artist and the priest lived in tension. But, since both art and priesthood are gifts of God, the two vocations were eminently capable of integration. However, the world of the late twentieth century, as Benson imagined it in this novel, was divided by a conflict which, of its nature, could admit of no pacification.

The Antichrist of *The Lord of the World* is one of Benson's most brilliant literary creations—bearing in mind that in this work he wished to display not character but the incarnation of types and ideals.<sup>4</sup> Based, according to Benson's biographer, Cyril Martindale, on a combination of the personality of Napoleon I and that of a contemporary English Socialist politician (unnamed by Martindale in 1916 for obvious reasons—Philip Snowden might be in biographer's, and author's, mind), Benson's 'Julian Felsenburgh' is a personification, not of evil for its own sake, but of a human culture which has set itself up as self-sufficient, and

therefore over against God. The great theme of the novel is the defiance of the Supernatural by a purely natural civilisation. The future it describes is one where the unity of mankind is virtually achieved, without reference to the claims of a personal God. A humanistic naturalism does not need to be affirmed for it is everywhere assumed—absorbed, Benson remarks, as priests absorb God in communion. The man of the future is the crown of a world where the divine is immanent, evolving pantheistically through nature. This man of the future recognises in the Antichrist his own corporate Godhead, and falls down in adoration before the one in whom man's divinity has at last become transparent. His world is a world of high technology, where speed and precision reign, and whatever escapes the order of a rational, humanitarian socialism must be removed from view. This means, above all, the dying, the depressed, the desperately ill, all of whom are despatched by the ministers of euthanasia, the new clergy. The religion of Humanity is like a new revelation. Thus an old Catholic lady, sinking into death at the moment when the Antichrist is proclaimed as Lord of the World, is compared by an unbeliever to a Jew dying on Easter Monday.

In sharpest contrast, the Church of Benson's novel has all the supernatural novelty of authentic Catholicism in its difference from the world. Benson's Church has an acute sense of what is important: it exists so that the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity may flourish, and that, through them, human beings may enter, by obedience and sacrifice, into the very life of God. The author is equally concerned with the *interior* and the *exterior* expression of these virtues, and so of that life. Interiorly, the hero, Percy Franklin, later the last pope—his name taken from the last day of the year—Silvester III, is a mystic; indeed, the novel contains one of Benson's finest descriptions of the Prayer of Quiet. This mysticism, nourished as it was in Benson's case by the mediaeval English sources of Mother Julian of Norwich and the hermit-priest Richard Rolle, is, at the same time, warmed by a tender Christocentrism.<sup>5</sup> Exteriorly, the same inspiration, in Benson's imaginative vision, leads the last Catholics to create a particular kind of society. It is found in papal Rome, once again under the civil rule of the successors of Peter, and, along with Ireland, all that is left of the old Christendom. In this Christian Rome, human beings are allowed to live individualistically, eccentrically, picturesquely.<sup>6</sup> They are not tied up to be the State's pattern men. Compassion and generosity replace the planning of a new revolutionary man. Capital punishment, though rarely practised, is in force, since, though human life is holy, human virtue is holier still. Advanced technology is deliberately shunned, because it distracts the human imagination from its main task, the living of life in relation to God. Between the invitation of grace, and the resistance of a falsely autonomous nature, there can be no compromise, no peace. The destruction of Rome by an uncanny anticipation of nuclear power is the answer of the Antichrist to Catholic protest when Westminster Abbey,

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place of the crowning of Christian kings in the house of prayer of Christian monks, is turned into a pagan temple. But the end of Rome only presages the end of the Papacy itself, as the refugee pope, who has fled in the steps of his Master to Palestine, is finally obliterated, with his clergy and faithful, at prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, in his refuge by the plain of Megiddo — Armageddon.

The message of Benson's novel is complex. It is a plea for the internationalism of Christ over against a godless internationalism, just as Benson's earlier novels contrasted the internationalism of the Catholic Church with the nationalism of the Anglican Reformation, the patriotic ideal of Elizabethan England.<sup>7</sup> It is also the evocation of a Christianity which will take the form of an incarnate mysticism.<sup>8</sup> Hence his concern for a ritual capable of expressing divine revelation, and his pre-occupation with a spiritual power that manifests itself in service and humiliation. But, most importantly of all, it is a statement of the true relation between nature and grace. Grace builds on nature and perfects it, yet it demands from nature a profound, though gentle, transformation. According to Benson, the most successful form that evil can take is its most subtle form: opposition to grace in the name of the all-sufficiency of natural perfection. Benson's warning is that if we cease to be able to distinguish happiness from holiness, we shall have succumbed to Antichrist. However, he also faced with equanimity the prospect of a massive, neo-pagan apostasy from the Catholic Church, for he saw that the Church's only lasting victory lies in Jesus' Parousia. Thus he ends his novel with the Second Coming of Christ, a meta-historical event so super-positive that it can only be expressed in the language of negation. 'Then this world passed, and the glory of it'.

Though the idiom of *The Lord of the World*, its stylistic organisation in images and atmosphere, will vary in its appeal to different generations, it is difficult to see how its meaning can cease to be relevant to any of them. History is constructed on the basis of, fundamentally, three factors: wealth, power and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> With the Fall of man, we must expect all three to be distorted, and human beings to become parodies of him who was rich in glory and understanding. Unlike the life of the incarnate Son, our economics, politics and science do not always proceed in obedience to the Father, in the loving service of mankind. And whilst in the last decade of the twentieth century the Marxist caricature of the Kingdom of God is fading away from our gaze, there are not lacking those who proclaim a Neo-Capitalist 'end of history' in the paradisaical pleasures of an all-satisfying consumer materialism.<sup>10</sup> Benson reminds us that the Church has her own theology of history situated, like her life itself, between the lightning flashes of the Resurrection and the thunderclap of the Parousia. History is not evolving towards its own perfection; rather is it in the hands of its crucified Judge who will come at an hour that we do not know. Benson has no triumphalism save that of the Easter mystery: the Christ who

reigns from a tree; the Church who is queen because she is suffering Mother; and a Petrine ministry whose rôle reaches its climax in its last officeholder: 'vicar of Christ' *par excellence* because, like the faithful ones of the Letter to the Hebrews, — 'destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth, of whom the world was not worthy'<sup>11</sup> — he stayed loyal to God's commission, encouraging a remnant with words of hope, until the Lord's return.

- 1 For Benson's life, see C.C. Martindale, S.J., *The Life of Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson* (London 1916, two volumes).
- 2 *Confessions of a Convert* (London 1912; 1920), p. 107.
- 3 C.C. Martindale, S.J., *op.cit.*, II. p. 434.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 5 On his debt to Julian, see *Spiritual Letters of Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson* (London 1915), p. 6; Richard Rolle was the historical model for the fictional 'Raynal' in Benson's *Richard Raynal, Solitary* (London, 1906). Note also his collection of pre-Reformation devotions, *A Book of the Love of Jesus* (London, 1905) which he feared English Catholics, used to more Baroque fare, would find insufficiently warm — 'too Saxon' — but whose ethos he described as 'an extraordinary mixture of passion and restraint, strength and delicacy', *Spiritual Letters*, p. 73. For his Christocentrism, see, above all, *The Friendship of Christ* (London 1912), but also *Christ in the Church* (London 1911).
- 6 Benson's work offers a theology of the city of Rome, as 'a sort of sacrament of the New Jerusalem. You meet the four marks of the Church, incarnate, in the streets and churches', *Spiritual Letters*, p. 49.
- 7 *By What Authority?* (London 1909); *Come Rack, Come Rope* (London 1912); *The Queen's Tragedy* (London 1906).
- 8 Benson did not scruple to speak of the importance of 'the materialisation of religion', which he defined as 'the supplying of acts and images on which religious emotion may concentrate itself. Extreme definiteness seems necessary, and that, not only in the bright and impressive adjuncts of worship, but in the modes in which individual approach to God is made', *Confessions of a Convert*, pp. 37–38.
- 9 E. Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: the Structure of Human History* (London 1988).
- 10 Francis Fukiyama, 'The End of History', *The Independent*, 20/21. 9. 1989; for a Catholic response, Eamon Duffy, 'A Pot of Hubris at the Rainbow's End', *ibid.*, 3. 10. 1989.
- 11 Hebrews 11, 37–38. Benson also created, at his readers' instigation and with less enthusiasm, an alternative account of the End to this 'remnant' version: *The Dawn of All* (London 1911). But the author's heart is not in it; his conviction that salvation moves over through Cross to resurrection could not be married with such a non-dialectical view of the Church's triumph.