

MONSIGNOR ROBERT HUGH BENSON

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The clerical novelist is scarcely a latter-day phenomenon. Not only priests but Princes of the Church have turned to fiction. In the last century, both Newman and Wiseman wrote novels, as in this did Cardinal Spellman (*The Foundling*), though with somewhat less effect. One of the most gifted and energetic of priest story tellers was Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson.

Benson was born in 1871, his father was to become Archbishop of Canterbury and Hugh himself took Anglican Orders but eventually was drawn to the Roman Catholic Church. At first disdainful of Rome, he followed a route that had been charted earlier by Newman and the scores of converts who came in his wake. Newman and his fellows in the Oxford Movement sought to see the English Church as part of the Catholic Church, emphatically not a Protestant sect, but, for many, history and theology eroded this position until there was nothing left to do but turn to Rome. Half a century later, Robert Hugh Benson began with the same conviction about the Anglican Church as Catholic, but in his case too, gradually

and painfully, he gave it up. He became a Roman Catholic in 1903 and was ordained a priest a year later, in Rome.

Any appreciation of Benson as a writer must take into account his devotional and apologetic works, but it can be said that the single motive of all his writing was to put the Roman Catholic faith compellingly before his reader.

Of his fiction, many, perhaps most, readers will prefer the historical novels which vividly evoke the England of the Reformation and the Recusants who sought to keep the old faith alive. *The King's Achievement* has stirred the pulse of generations of boys and girls and, thanks to the Neumann Press of Long Prairie, Minnesota, will continue to do so. *Come Wrack, Come Rope* was read avidly where I went to school, its popularity insured by that most effective of advertising, word of mouth.

One of Robert Hugh Benson's most amazing novels is *Lord of the World*, published in 1907; in it he takes on the ultimate subject, the end of the world. Projecting ahead to the year 2000, the novel presents a thoroughly secular society. The Enlightenment dream has been realized, a more or less benign humanism dominates, the final touches are put on a global government thanks to the charismatic efforts of a mysterious American named Julian Felsenburgh. At long

last, man has taken control of his own destiny.

A first sign of this in the novel is the acceptance of euthanasia as the only sane and humane way to end not only illness but any despondency a person is unwilling to bear. But the genius of Benson is to depict as reasonable and humane a civilization that is the antithesis of Christianity. Of course some sort of religion is needed, and this is supplied by a civic cult of naturalistic pantheism. The whole thing is enormously plausible.

There is a Catholic remnant, and the pope, English as it happens, still resides in Rome. The fading tolerance for such a reminder of the past disappears when some London Catholics act against the pagan rites at which former priests officiate. Felsenburgh reacts by wiping out the English Catholics and reducing Rome to a pile of ashes. Out of these ashes, arises the Church in its final phase.

Percy Franklin, an English cardinal, traveling between Rome and London at the time of the massacre, survives and is elected pope. With a small band he moves to the Holy Land. Julian Felsenburgh, it is now clear, is the Anti-Christ. The novel culminates in Armageddon.

It is a great read. Many readers were depressed by the novel, however, and Benson unwisely responded with another, *The Dawn*

of All, which depicted the triumph of Catholicism in a near future. In every way it is a lesser book than *Lord of the World*. It is not just that, dramatically speaking, success is less interesting than failure, but the author clearly relishes the idea of a return to the Holy Roman Empire, with Augustine's two cities reconciled. The novel is in its way an instance of that "immanentizing of the eschaton" that characterizes the triumphant humanism of *Lord of the World*.

Robert Hugh Benson himself is an enigmatic figure. The Jesuit C. C. Martindale published a two volume life of Benson in 1916, only two years after the death of the young monsignor at forty-three. An official biography, written under the eye of the subject's mother and brothers, it is nonetheless a fascinating and frank account. In Benson we do not find the intellectual acumen of a Newman nor the learned sophistication of a Ronald Knox. There is something superficial and freelance about him, something 'enthusiastic.' Once in the Church and ordained, he managed somehow to avoid most aspects of the priestly life. The pastoral role repelled him; he was simply no good at it. His preaching was acclaimed, though its theology was sometimes shaky. The writing of novels was for him a kind of extension of his preaching. The wonder is that so many of the novels are as good as they are. Taken all for

all, Robert Hugh Benson is one of most interesting turn of the century converts.

It is plain that *Hadrian VII*, Frederick Rolfe's story of an English pope influenced Benson when he wrote *Lord of the World*, different as the two novels are. Benson claimed to have read Rolfe's novel many times before he wrote to its author. He struck up a friendship with Rolfe -- who styled himself Baron Corvo -- with disastrous results. Befriending Corvo was always risky but his vendetta against Benson was epic in its dimensions. This is a story in itself, to be taken up in another essay. Most of those who write on their friendship, take the view that Benson treated Rolfe badly. But this is to accept as good money the word of Baron Corvo, a notorious counterfeiter of the truth. Father Martindale is to be trusted on this. His life puts before us a chainsmoking, novel-writing man of God, incapable of treachery.

Robert Hugh Benson wrote out of the ebullient confidence of his recovered Catholicism, addressing Catholics as fellow possessors of the truth and everyone else as potentially Catholic.