

Robert Hugh Benson's Utopian Paradigm of Science. A study on the Relations between Science and Religion in Robert Hugh Benson's *The Dawn of All* (1911).

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1 Abstract

This paper examines some aspects of the utopia depicted in the novel *The Dawn of All*, by Robert Hugh Benson, which is a bold tale of a future world almost fully converted to Catholicism. The whole of that society is structured on this religion, or what is more accurate by an ideology based on it. The paper focuses on one of the aspects of this utopian society: the relation between science and religion, and its implications. Robert Hugh Benson explains how Psychology discovers that there is a force at work behind physical phenomena, itself not physical. Science then stops developing as a materialistic discipline and acquires a whole new horizon of possibilities. As a consequence of this, theologians and scientists, monks and doctors work together to make science advance and attain the truth in the highest level. Medicine becomes more psychological, and thus, according to this view, more spiritual. Doctors in their offices inspect the patients' mind with modern and adequate technological means and provide psychological treatments to cure physical illnesses. These treatments consist basically on mental suggestion. The paper tries finally to draw some ideas from this utopian view of science, and above all medicine, trying to get a glimpse of different a paradigm of science: an eventual scientific horizon which might take into account other aspects than matter in its daily work, thus becoming more human and true.

2 Introduction

This paper examines how science developed to a new paradigm in a utopia depicted in the novel *The Dawn of All*, by Robert Hugh Benson, which is a bold tale of a future world almost fully converted to Catholicism. The whole of that society is structured on this religion, or what is more accurate on an ideology based on it.

First of all, I will identify the theoretical assumptions without which it would have been impossible for this paradigm of science to develop. Then, I will explain the meeting points where the paradigm shift is triggered. And, finally, I will provide some conclusions.

3 Theoretical assumptions

3.1 There is a world beyond the material world

The first theoretical assumption is that there is a world that is beyond the world we see. This world is spiritual and is intermingled with the material world: they are completely

mixed. This is what he tries to explain in his supernatural short stories, compiled in two volumes: *The Light Invisible* (1903) and *A Mirror of Shalott* (1907). These two books talk of possessions, ghosts, terrifying presences, near death experiences... The presence of the supernatural is also a constant idea in his works. He talks directly about this in many works, but this idea always underlies his novels, lectures and preaching ... We may think that this is the proper way to behave for a priest, but the wonder is that he is not showing a devotional imaginary to the faithful. He tries to portray a metaphysical worldview of two interlinked worlds: material and spiritual. There is an "Infinitely mysterious void that lies beyond the veils of sense." (Benson 1909:289), he wrote in *The Necromances*. The world we see is just a small part of the whole world, as he says in *A Mirror of Shalott*: "Here is this exceedingly small earth, certainly with a very fair number of people living on it, but absolutely a mere fraction of the number of intelligences that are in existence. And all about us -since we must use that phrase- is a spiritual world compared with which the present generation is as a family of ants in the middle of London." (Benson 1907:13-14)

3.2 There is a knowledge beyond scientific standards

Secondly, Benson assumes and tries to demonstrate that there is knowledge beyond the scientific standards. At the beginning of *The Dawn of All*, he says that "Physical science had settled one-half of the matter, and psychology the other half. It was all accounted for." (Benson 1911a:5)

So he thinks that science in his time dominates despotically human intelligence, because it does not allow us to know anything worth beyond what it has established that can be known. "Up to that period, so-called Physical Science had so far tyrannized over men's minds as to persuade them to accept her claim that evidence that could not be reduced to her terms was not, properly speaking, evidence at all." (Benson 1911a:39)

Science draws unreasonably a line in the world and in human intelligence beyond which it is forbidden to try to know anything; and this is something that Benson does not accept at all.

3.3 The value of pure observation

According to this, he gives a high value to *pure observation*, keeping scientific prejudices out, because there is an evidence other than scientific. In *Phantasms of the Dead* he wrote: "In religion, in art, in music, in human relationships of all kinds, a certain disposition to believe and to appreciate actually confers a power of perception which the critic is deprived of. In fact, the nearer we draw to the higher planes of life, the more essential become the will and the desire of the powers of perception, and the less essential becomes what is called the 'scientific attitude.'" (Benson 1912:54).¹

¹ "As regards the value of evidence, I am convinced that popular and unscientific observation is, in very many instances, of more evidential value than the cold and cautious observation of scientists [...]. I am convinced that a state of expectation and violent personal interest is more favorable to accurate observation than detached and impersonal attitude. For instance, a lover is more likely to notice details in his beloved than even a detective. There are some kinds of things that require for their perception a

But there are two places where these assumptions are realized. One of them is a physical place: the French town of Lourdes, and the other one, human psychology. These two are meeting points where the metaphysical encounter between matter and spirit takes place, and as a consequence, both are meeting points for the encounter of two human ways of interpreting reality, science and religion.

4 Psychology: Anthropological common ground of science and religion

Psychology deals with the psychic phenomena, in the broad sense of the word. But who produces these phenomena?

For most of current psychologists it is worthless the question of the subsistent self behind the psychic phenomena. But Benson believes that it is unconceivable to think of psychic phenomena without a subject, that is, a metaphysical entity behind them. He conceives the human personality as one consisting in two parts: the outer or objective self and the inner or subjective self. The outer self has to do with daily life, is the conscious self, and its activities are directly connected to the functions of the brain. But the inner self is a mostly unknown place and, when he is describing it in his article entitled *A Modern Theory of Human Personality*, ends up finding out that he is describing the soul. It “Is not this image which we have formed of the subjective self after all a very fair though wholly untheological description for what we mean by the soul; namely, that part of our being which wakes when the rest sleeps, which is at the mercy of our will for good or evil, which takes the imprint of our actions and forms them into first habits and then ineradicable character?” (Benson 1907b:91)

According to Benson, then, the inner self links the material with the spiritual world. Martindale, Benson's biographer, says that “Benson claims at least that we have, in this theory, a neutral terrain on which Science and Religion may meet, inspect, and finally embrace each other.”(Martindale 1916:282) Benson himself in *A Modern Theory of Human Personality* says: “In psychology, science and religion are very near to one another, for its subject is nothing else than the soul of man.” (Benson 1907b:95).

In Benson's time, many psychologists were engaged in the study of telepathy, hypnotism, clairvoyance and the like. These mysterious phenomena were seen by Benson as manifestations of the inner self, that is the soul.

When psychology gets to know these phenomena, she will have to recognize that religion was already familiar to them and dealt with them.

comparative unscientific mind” (Benson, 1912, pp. 51-53) This idea can be also found, for instance, in Ernst Cassirer a few years later: “In this regard the savage very often proves his superiority to the civilized man. He is susceptible to many distinctive features that escape our attention.” (Cassirer 2006:90). It is also interesting to read the short story *The Blood-Eagle* from *The Light Invisible* (1903) which cannot be explained in this paper for the sake of brevity

The awareness of this is one of the reasons why the world begins to develop towards a new paradigm of science in *The Dawn of All*. So, it is not by chance that he wrote in the novel: “First there was Psychology. Even at the end of the nineteenth century it was beginning to be perceived that there was an inexplicable force working behind mere matter. This force was given a number of names — the ‘subliminal consciousness,’ in man, and ‘nature’ in the animal, vegetable, and even mineral creation; and it gave birth to a series of absurd superstitions... But the force was acknowledged and it was perceived to move along definite lines of law... Now it must be remembered that even this marked an immense advance in the circles called scientific; since in the middle of the nineteenth century, even the phenomena so carefully recorded by the Church were denied. These were now no longer denied... since the inquiries were made along purely ‘scientific’ lines — lines which in those days were nothing other than materialistic — an attempt was made to account for the phenomena by new anti-spiritual theories hastily put together to meet the emergency. But, little by little, an uneasy sense began to manifest itself that the Church had already been familiar with the phenomena for about two thousand years” (Benson 1911a:35-36)

That means that these phenomena that have their source in the soul are beginning to be known and dealt with. And they begin to be used for the benefit of humankind, in such a way that the power of the soul, behind the psychic phenomena, well managed, is able to produce effects such as healing through mental suggestion², as Benson describes in *The Dawn of All*.

All this, together with a revival of a certain kind of Protestantism³, the conversion or profession of faith of some public figures, like Pasteur or H.G. Wells⁴, leads Benson to imagine a new whole world in which society, politics, science, etc. take up Catholicism to build up a new paradigm of life in general and of science, above all medicine, in particular. In this new paradigm religion, psychology and science cannot be separated, because man's dimensions cannot be separated, either. There is continuity between the material, the psychological and the spiritual both in man and in the world. That's why science, psychology and religion are to be considered as a whole, too.

² According to Thomson Jay Hudson, in his *The Law of Psychic Phenomena*, there are three laws applicable to all psychic phenomena. The second one of them is that the “SUBJECTIVE MIND IS CONSTANTLY AMENABLE TO CONTROL BY SUGGESTION.” (Hudson 1892:26)

³ “The revival of Protestantism in England, he urged, had led the English people back to a recognition of some profound religion, and of justification by faith and works. Thus a door was being opened for the return of Catholicism, to which social study and even science were beginning to show themselves favourable.” (Martindale, 1916, pg. 169)

⁴ “It is usually assumed by the members of this school that the Catholic Church is the discredited Church of the uneducated. It appears to be their opinion that Catholics consist of a few Irish in America and a small percentage of debased Latins in Europe. They seem to be entirely unaware that a movement is going forward amongst some of the shrewdest and most independent minds in all civilized countries, which, if precedent means anything, implies as absolutely sound the prediction of Mr. H. G. Wells that we are on the verge of one of the greatest Catholic revivals the world has ever seen.” (Benson, 1910, pg. 3 Catholicism and the future)

4.1 Medical practices in *The Dawn of All*

At this point of the explanation, this next quotation from Benson's article entitled *Christian Science* written in 1906, can be easily understood: "There is that truth [...] which the Christian religion has taught for nineteen centuries; namely that spirit is superior to matter, and the original cause of it, and that under certain circumstances spirit can control matter. [...] It is this that underlies every miracle that God has ever wrought; it is by this that the Saints have lived; and it is this that modern psychologists are at last beginning to verify by scientific methods. It is the vast and all-dominating principle on which we resist temptation, namely that spiritual interests are better worth securing than carnal; it is on that principle that the madman can perform feats impossible to the sane, and that the hypnotist can banish a nervous headache, and can, under certain circumstances, modify the ravages of organic disease." (Benson 1906:11)

It is remarkable how Benson mixes the idea of the spirit working through miracles, as we may consider this God's direct action over matter, and also the idea of healing through the direct action of man's personal soul over man's personal matter, which is his body, through psychological means. And it is amazing to realize that he thought of these two possibilities together. It seems that he is mixing up, as Wittgenstein would say, two language games, the religious and the scientific, which cannot be mixed. In our contemporary mind they cannot be dealt with together. One is the language of religion: miracles, symbolism, God's action... and another one the language of science: measurement, inductive reasoning, testable facts... Benson thinks of both together both in his life and in the novel. The superiority of spirit over matter, as has been said, is not for Benson a matter of devotion, but metaphysical. So it has to do with resisting temptations, but also with performing extraordinary acts and with controlling the body in order to modify it aiming to heal it. This is the starting point of what the author describes in *The Dawn of All*.

In this new paradigm, in which the body of man is treated in conjunction with his psychology and therefore also with the soul, science gets a big boost, and it is able to classify almost exhaustively everything that nature can do. In the old paradigm a part of the world was hidden for science, because not all of it was taken into account.

The most common treatment of diseases, then, is through suggestion. Mental and religious suggestion falls on the soul and the psychology and this one acts on the body. "We know, for instance, for certain that in certain kinds of temperaments body and mind are in far greater sympathy than in other; and that if, in such a temperament as this, the mind can be fully persuaded that such and such a thing is going to happen – a thing within the range of natural possibility, of course – it will happen, merely through the action of the mind upon the body." (Benson 1911a:145)

In *The Dawn of All* some diseases, like hysterical ones, can be cured instantaneously, while others, very closely related to the nervous system, in which there have been changes of tissue in the organs or the limbs, can be cured too by mere natural suggestion, though not instantaneously. In cases of this kind there is always needed a

period in a proportion of at least two thirds of the time is required for recovery by suggestion as was occupied by the growth of the disease.⁵ In the cases where the nervous system had nothing to do with the disease, let's say a broken bone, mental or even hypnotic suggestion may attain a faster recovery, because the growth of the tissues is directed by suggestion.

It is man's mind, as the link between the physical and the spiritual worlds, that should be treated in order to heal sick people. So the best way to heal is to apply the appropriate suggestion and to foster the best possible environment in order to get that this suggestion may be most effective.

4.2 Monsignor Masterman's case

Right at the beginning of the plot, Monsignor Masterman, the main character of the novel, suffers from amnesia. He goes to the doctor. The physician uses an instrument to measure the patient's mental state. This instrument consists of a box containing a sphere with several cables that have to be attached to the patient. The sphere changes color according to the mental state of the patient. This instrument is based on the fact that "All mental disturbance has, of course, a physical side to it, and that is how we are able to record it physically." (Benson 1911a:64) This curious instrument has a certain resemblance with what we know nowadays as encephalogram that, as a matter of fact, was invented by the German physiologist Hans Berger, chief of the Psychiatry Unit in the University of Jena, in 1924.⁶

Monsignor Masterman traveled to Ireland in order to recover from his amnesia. Ireland had become an island full of monasteries, which were also mental hospitals. Only Dublin and Belfast were normal cities, "only rather quieter"⁷. The monasteries have become the perfect places to recover from a disease. The *system*, as mgr. Masterman names it consists of putting himself under the order of the guest-master and let himself be led. The monks use atmosphere and personality to heal, not drugs nor diet. "And of course enclosed Religious naturally become experts in interior selfcommand, and therefore can apply these things better than any one else." (Benson 1911a:253)⁸

⁵ "Take *lupus*. That certainly belongs to the class I'm speaking of. Well, lupus has been cured in mental laboratories, but never instantaneously." (Benson 1911a:146)

⁶ "Quien después de una prolongada serie de estudios en 1902 efectuó el 6 de julio de 1924 el primer registro de la oscilaciones rítmicas del cerebro de un joven de 17 años, a través del orificio de una trepanación decompresiva utilizando un galvanómetro de cuerda" (PALACIOS 2002:104)

⁷ "I know it's the Contemplative Monastery of Europe," he said. // "Just so. It's also the mental hospital of Europe. You see it's very favorably placed. None of the great lines of volors pass over it now. It's entirely secluded from the world. Of course there are the secular business centers of the country, as they always were, in north and south — Dublin and Belfast; they're like any other towns, only rather quieter. But outside there you might say that the whole island is one monastic enclosure" (Benson 1911a:252).

⁸ In fact, the monk that visited Monsignor Masterman had an absolute dominion of himself: "Monsignor perceived by now, even through his fierce agitation, that this man never moved except for a purpose; he made no gestures when he spoke; he turned his head or lifted his eyes only when it was necessary." (Benson 1911a:271) After his stay a lay brother tells Monsignor Masterman that a monk only can do the work of visiting patients after fifteen years of profession in contemplative life. Those who have spent years in prayer, according to Benson, have acquired a special insight into ordinary affairs of common life. As he himself says in another place: "That time spent in prayer is the most economical investment of a

There would be a great deal to be said about Masterman's stay in Ireland, but that would be the topic of a whole new paper.

5 Lourdes: Physical common ground of science and religion

A very important part of the book takes place in Lourdes, France. Actually, a few years before Benson wrote *The Dawn of All*, he himself visited Lourdes. He published all his impressions in a booklet entitled precisely *Lourdes* in 1914. Lourdes is mostly famous because of the miracles that people explain to happen there. Upon his arrival in town, Benson explains that “my attitude even up to now had been that of a reverent agnostic – the attitude, in fact, of a majority of Christians on this particular point.” (Benson 1914:2) But he recognized to be greatly impressed for what he saw there. A mysterious power operates in that small city in the French Pyrenees. And this can be verified in two different places: the *Grotto*, where the Mother of God appeared, and the Office of Medical Verifications (also known as *Bureau des Constatations*). While faith (represented by the *Grotto*) may come to admit the presence of some divine power acting upon a disease, reason (represented by the Office of Medical Verifications) deals with the bare facts and ends up explaining how the cures happened naturally or admitting they have no explanation. Benson says that perhaps “the most startling miracle of all is that the Bureau and the Grotto stand side by side, and that neither stifles the other.” (Benson 1914:46)

While in real life the Grotto and the Office of Verifications are side by side, in *The Dawn of All* they become the same place.⁹ “For here religion seemed to have stepped down into an arena hitherto (as he fancied) restricted to the play of physical forces” (Benson 1911a:162). Religion “Had flung off her robes of state and authority; and was competing here on equal terms with the masters of natural law — more, she was accepted by them as their mistress. For there seemed nothing from which she shrank. She accepted all who came to her desiring her help; she made no arbitrary distinctions to cover her own incapacities. Her one practical desire was to heal the sick; her one theoretical interest to fix more and more precisely, little by little, the exact line at which nature ended and supernature began. And, if human evidence went for anything— if the volumes of radiophotography and sworn testimony went for anything, she had established a thousand times over during the preceding half-century that under her aegis, and hers alone, healing and reconstituting forces were at work to which no merely natural mental science could furnish any parallels.” (Benson 1911:162-163)

So in *The Dawn of All* religion is not afraid of what science could discover, and, on the other hand, scientists accepted a certain superiority of religion, in the same way that spirit is superior to matter. And he adds that under this paradigm in which the powers of

working hour, and that meditation on supernatural things confer an insight into ordinary affairs of common life that can be obtain in no other way.” (Benson 1913:51)

⁹ There is a curious fragment about the French writer Emil Zola in the novel. First of all, in the book *Lourdes*, Benson talks about one of his novels, named *Lourdes*, which he describes as dishonest. In *The Dawn of All*, Monsignor Masterman on his arriving to the small town in the Pyrenees, asks about Zola and his book, and nobody knows about him. History has lost Zola's track.

the supernatural are taken into account, and religion has descended to work with the masters of the natural law, "healing and reconstituting forces were at work." The supernatural, then, becomes an effective power to heal, and thus of common use in medicine.

6 Conclusion

Benson is above all an apologist. He is a defender of Catholic faith since his conversion in 1903. But he has the conviction of the presence of the supernatural amidst the natural world. His intention is not merely pious, but metaphysical. The world is made up like this. If science does not realize it, she does not account for it all in the world. Science has grown up materialistic, and has forced human minds to think as she does. Benson considers this is wrong, and proposes another way of looking at the world and science.

The problem is that this conviction of the existence of the supernatural, may actually be a real conviction to him, but that does not imply that it exists. Well, that's why he tries to find objective meeting points between matter and spirit. He saw one of them in those psychic phenomena of his time that a newborn psychology had begun to discover. Another meeting point is Lourdes. Both meeting points could become also common grounds for a new relation between religion and science, because their object coincides. That's why it is most important and startling for Benson to realize the presence of a scientific office in the middle of the Sanctuary in Lourdes. In Lourdes, science and religion are side by side, that is, the real Lourdes is almost a common ground for religion and science. In order to be a real common ground they need to be not side by side, but both should be the same place.

These are Benson real thoughts, but in *The Dawn of All* he dares to go a step further thanks to some assumptions and his imagination. The powers of the spiritual world, every once in a while manifest themselves, for instance in a Spiritualistic séance, or in a miraculous healing in Lourdes, etc. The amazing thing in *The Dawn of All* is that these powers become part of a new way of scientific research, which also is interested in knowing the laws of the supernatural in order to use them. Medicine in *The Dawn of All* uses the powers of the soul to heal.

According to Benson in *The Dawn of All*, the best medical practices would be: to retire to a silent place, find oneself, make inner life grow through silence, practice psychological therapy, seek suggestion sessions and spiritual direction with a monk, who has a complete dominion of himself after several years of monastic life.

Now, is there a possibility that *The Dawn of All* could enlighten us in the path of finding a new paradigm of science and medicine? What really wonders me, is that inner self that is amenable to suggestion. The inner self, the unconscious, the subjective mind... whatever the name we give it, is that part of ourselves that pours out when the objective self sleeps, and works silently inside us. It is a fact that when our psychology suffers, our body ends up suffering too. Psychic strain could lead easily to physical ailments or even diseases. There is really a power inside us that can provoke that we become sick.

There is no doubt about this nowadays. Is it not like an auto-suggestion that we apply to ourselves unconsciously provoking physical ailments, like headaches, heartburn, dizziness, fainting or even an angina pectoris?

But, could it not happen all the way around? Could we not submit to positive suggestion so that our unconscious could act positively on ourselves, causing wellness or healing in our own psychology and in our body?

A few days ago an interview appeared in "La Vanguardia", a newspaper from Barcelona. A doctor specialized in holistic medicine asserted that he had cured myopia through psychological treatment. (cf. Amela 2012:72)

There would still be a lot to be said about the topic. Time is short, so let this be only an appetizer in order to raise the desire to read the book. I would be happy if I have managed to arouse the curiosity to think of another kind of science, a science less materialistic and more human.

7 Bibliography

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