

Ten Years after Regensburg: Religion, Violence and the Technocratic Paradigm

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An intriguing item on Pope Francis' bookshelf is *Lord of the World*, a dystopian science-fiction novel by the English priest, Robert Hugh Benson (1871-1914). Written in 1907 as a Catholic riposte to H.G. Wells, the story depicts the future coming of the Anti-Christ, no less, and the end of the world which ensues. Benson's vision of the future is, in some respects, surprisingly accurate. He predicts air-travel, though he seems to have imagined that it would take place not at 35 000 feet but rather closer to the ground. More significantly, he anticipates a culture in which the majority of right-thinking people have bought into a Weberian secular religion which makes considerable inroads among the Christian faithful; this new 'faith', whilst ostensibly installing humanity in God's place, ends up destroying human beings, by fomenting despair, by enthusiastically supporting a programme of euthanasia, and eventually by bombing to destruction whole cities from the air. Though they should not be overstated, it is not hard to draw parallels with the plight of the world today.

One detail of Benson's vision strikes the contemporary reader as particularly insightful: the appearance of religiously motivated suicide-bombers. This isn't quite the miracle of foresight it at first appears. Just thirteen years before the publication of the novel, a French anarchist had tried to blow up the Royal Observatory in Greenwich using explosives strapped to his own body; Joseph Conrad exploited the idea in another book published in 1907, *The Secret Agent*. What is puzzlingly prescient is that the terrorists in Benson's books are religious – and Catholics at that. One might have imagined that Benson, zealous apologist for the Church that he was, would have portrayed his Catholic protagonists as determined loves of peace; nowadays one is used to Muslim, Christian and atheist bloggers each laying claim to the title of "least violent worldview". But Benson, even though his writing is not averse to triumphalism, didn't care to exonerate his coreligionists from association with terror, so concerned was he with the disintegration of authentic religiosity in the face of the onslaught of the wholesale denial of God.

Pope Francis recommends the novel because it graphically depicts a situation of "ideological colonisation". This observation needs to be linked to his recent coining of the term "technocratic paradigm" to speak of the ideological colonisation of minds taking place in the real world, for he argues that it is this framing of our existence which lies at the root of the current ecological crisis, not to mention a number of other modern ills. Benson's vision and the Holy Father's diagnosis are not identical but they do share an *air de famille*; they are, after all, variations on an Enlightenment theme.

So what is the technocratic paradigm?

This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which

in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational. [*Laudato Si'*, 106]

The question of technology and its wanton deployment by finance to make more money are not the principal concern here, crucial as surely they are for Pope Francis' ecological message. What is important is a mind-set which aspires to control and exploit, to manipulate and extract what it wants from the rest of creation, which, whether it is human, animal, vegetable or mineral, it views as neutral "stuff". What is more, this mind-set can decisively condition the deep-seated attitude we modern people take towards everything we encounter. The paradigm has even colonised our very language. We now, in English at least, use the phrase "human resources" to denote our work colleagues. A subtle but profound warping of consciousness is operative here, evocative of obscene possibilities and indicative of a violent core at the heart of the technocratic paradigm. When a human life is aborted because her survival might threaten the lifestyle choices of her parents; when elderly people are made to feel they are an economic burden on society; and when young people are brainwashed into blowing themselves up to gain political advantage for a sectarian group, different as each case is, they all enact their submission to the demands of the technocratic paradigm. Even religion itself can be turned into material for manipulation and consumption and when this happens, the results can be truly horrendous.

Islam and the Technocratic Paradigm

There is no shortage of evidence for the impact of the technocratic paradigm on Christianity. Whenever the Gospel is turned into a tool, a marker of identity or an object of consumption, this is, arguably, the deep cause at work. One might fondly have imagined that Islam would have been preserved from similar contamination by its distance from the Occident. This is, alas, not the case. The recent adoption by Islamist groups of the practice of suicide bombing, despite the blatant opposition of centuries of religious and juridical tradition, is sobering proof indeed of just how thoroughly the minds of some Muslims have been colonised.

To understand how that happened, we need to go back five hundred years in time to survey the state of the world (which is to say the land mass of Eurasia) as it then was. The first thing we would notice, probably with astonishment, is that Islam was then the dominant global religion, uniting three vast empires which, between them, covered the Middle East (Sunni, Turkish-speaking Ottomans), Persia (Shi'i Farsi-speaking Safavids) and India (Sunni, Farsi- and Urdu-speaking Moghuls). The West was the only part of the world in which

Christianity held sway whilst in the East there was China, a great civilisation in which neither Islam or Christianity were dominant. Muslims would have had every reason to believe what their faith already taught them: that theirs was God's final revelation, destined to become the religion of all humanity as, one by one, the older religions, Christianity included, fell into disuse.

At the start of the nineteenth century, those backward and barbaric peoples of "the West", followers of the abrogated religion revealed to the Prophet Jesus, suddenly stormed the world's centre stage with a series of invasions. The British, French, Dutch and Russians quickly gained control of the entire Muslim world, either by annexation, colonisation or *de facto* domination. Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and others were all damaged by the experience of imperialism, but, for Muslims, it was doubly injurious for it involved not only oppression but the reversal of the arrow of time. The subjugation of Muslims to European Christianity, let alone secularism, was a religious nonsense and provoked cognitive dissonance on a grand scale.

The vast majority of ordinary Muslims struggled bravely on, as they still do to this day, striving to be faithful in spite of the impairment of their religious worldview by the new political reality. But a small elite found themselves asking a disturbing question: how could God have allowed this to happen to Muslims, those whom the Qur'an calls the "best of communities" (3:110)? The conclusion to which they came was simple: it could only be God's verdict on bad Muslims. This diagnosis came with its own remedy: the pure practice of the first generations of Muslims had to be reinstated. Islam was to be purified of the foreign elements which had contaminated it over the centuries. Then, God would favour Muslims once again and free them from European rule.

In this reforming perspective, religious *tradition* is primarily to be viewed as a source of error and contamination which must be expunged. The call to purify a corrupted religion has a familiar and disturbing ring to Catholic ears. Christianity has known its own Puritans, mistrustful of the processes of history and harking back to a time when God's revelation was truly, vividly present with no need for messy human interpretation. Muslim puritanism, the return to the practice of the pious forebears, has its own name: *salafiyya*, Salafism, and those who follow it, Salafis. Lest we tar a diverse group all with the same brush, it must be said that most Salafis are quietist, living according to a somewhat rigid and demanding standard of personal religiosity. But groups of highly politicised Salafis emerged over the course of the twentieth century whose stated goal was to enforce their brand of Islam by the apparatus of an Islamic state. Social scientists have come to call these political Salafis "Islamists".

Islamism itself comprises a highly diverse range of schools and movements, often in vicious conflict with one another, from the moderate and largely non-violent Muslim Brotherhood at one end of the spectrum all the way to the jihadi extremist such as *Al-Qa'ida* and the Islamic State group (*Daesh*) at the other. Behind all of them is a trenchant conviction: that Muslims could liberate themselves from foreign domination if only they would implement pristine Islam. They share a resentment of the power of westerners in general and an envy of the strategic advantage which technological achievement in particular has afforded them. Islamists want that advantage for themselves. It has often been noted that Islamism

attracts those with a natural science or engineering background. It is, in many ways, the perfect expression of Islam in the vernacular of the technocratic mind. Islamists are not at all the benighted medievals they are accused of being but moderns with modern instincts and appetites.

Instrumentalising Revelation

The impact of the technocratic paradigm is not limited to Islamism, however, even if that ideology incarnates it, in some sense. Western culture has gone global and so its modes of thinking have infiltrated the lives of people of all stations. The revealed book of Islam is the Qur'an, a word that literally means 'recitation'. For most Muslims throughout history, it has been an aural phenomenon, a precious sound in a foreign language, uniquely redolent of the sacred. It addresses them and they receive it. They might learn some passages by heart but not necessarily understand them. Listening to the beautiful words of God speaking to His human creatures puts them in touch with their Creator and helps them to be good. Of course, the actual contents of scripture also impinge on their lives but not customarily via their own direct reading but through mediating institutions and figures who have interpreted it and define its practical implications for Muslim life. It would not occur to an ordinary believer to interpret the text themselves, knowing that it takes years of arduous study to acquire sufficient knowledge to fathom its meaning. The true authorities, after all, had not merely an academic knowledge of the text but had memorised it, allowing their very being to be infused by its in-dwelling.

For the Muslim of the modern persuasion, the Qur'an is an accessible book (or website), translated into the vernacular and supplied with an index and footnotes. One can be forgiven for forming the impression that its meaning is transparent, accessible even at first perusal. If such a Muslim were to have a question about their religion, it might not even occur to them to seek out a learned scholar trained in the intricacies of the tradition to answer it. Instead, they might well approach the text directly themselves, forcing it to answer them, to yield to their probing. Alternatively, a quick trawl of the internet would yield a number of apparently authoritative websites eager to point their customers in whatever ideological direction they happened to champion. "Shaykh Google" has become the first, and all too often last, port of call.

The shift in the disposition of the believer to their revelation is strikingly similar to what Pope Francis observes above of the technocratic attitude towards nature. Traditional Muslims welcome the gift of the Qur'an with receptive hearts, responding to it as it calls to them in the moment. Muslims of a modern mind-set plunder it as a resource to address *their* questions and projects on *their* terms and according to *their* timetables. Thus, the technocratic paradigm turns revelation itself into "stuff" to sustain the political and other contrivances of the individual. Twisting God's word to one's own purpose is a sinful matter for Muslims and Christians alike, but it is rare in the extreme for believers to acknowledge that this is what they are doing. They see themselves as rigorists, forthrightly obeying the text as it stands without recourse to mealy-mouthed interpretation. Religious people are understandably more

flattered by the thought that they are outstandingly devout than by the voice which accuses them of perpetrating sacrilege.

Thoroughly Modern Mani

A fatally poisonous effect of the technocratic paradigm is its penchant for simplistic explanations which give pragmatic decision-makers a sense of meaning and mastery in a complex world. The technocratic paradigm always insists on decisive action. Yet, to act we need a map of reality. In a multi-dimensional world we can never hope to obtain the comprehensive information which allows us to factor in every consequence of our actions. So we make do with a persuasive narrative that will at least render our action meaningful to others.

Today's politicians tend to think in terms not so much of truth as of narrative. And their preferred narratives are not Dickensian plots but simple, stark, black-and-white stories with good guys and bad, the former to be armed and the latter bombed. Such narratives inevitably fail to do justice to the subtlety and complexity of any domain of reality, but when applied to the Middle East they are egregiously inadequate. Depending on the particular Manichean narrative in question, Muslims are *either* always innocent, because everything that goes wrong in the world, 9-11 included, is an American or Zionist plot, *or* always guilty because Islam is a uniquely violent and evil religion. The present reader would, of course, never entertain such ludicrous opinions, but all the evidence indicates that there are many millions whose education and experience (or lack of them) leave them with little option but to imbibe the propaganda of the army of well-funded lobbyists whose job it is to sustain and broadcast such narratives and to make them sound plausible.

One of these lobbies is that of Islamism, a worldview which thrives on a Manichean template. Admittedly, a superficial reading of the Qur'an itself might suggest such a narrative for it appears to view humanity as split between the believers on the one hand and God's enemies on the other. Centuries of tradition, however, have nuanced and complexified these categories so that Muslims learned long ago to deal effectively with difference and diversity, both within and without the *umma*. As a result, Islam has rejoiced in multiple interpretations and diverse hermeneutics. But modern Salafism jettisons this internal pluralism and sophistication in the name of pristine clarity and standardisation. In a world which urgently needs ways of articulating a shared humanity, the project of Islamism has doggedly pursued a sectarian and exclusive vision in which not only non-Muslims are portrayed as enemies but huge swathes of the Muslim population are deemed apostates because they do not follow a narrow Salafi ideology.

Apocalypse Now

There was clearly an apocalyptic expectation when Benson was writing just a few years before the First World War, an event which did indeed bring about the end of a world order. Judging by the way our culture represents what is taking place at this historical juncture, the sentiment has returned, and even risks saturating our experience. We are paralysed as we observe a conflict in the Middle East slowly becoming a global war. Economists and politicians, beneath the tranquil surface of the daily news reports, are dreading economic collapse, knowing that governments never resolved the problems which led to the financial crash of 2008. And the already deadly effects of climate change are played out in our media and we tell ourselves there is much more to come. Young people all over the world find the horizon of time frighteningly narrow. Where once one might have expected paid employment for the rest of one's life, quite likely in the same organisation, nowadays, it's hard even for an elite graduate to find stable employment, to secure housing in a major city, to marry or to have a family. The horizon of time seems almost to have collapsed. What are we to make of this evaporation of the future?

The apprehension of the end of the world is a complex matter. We must distinguish between two quite different phenomena. On the one hand, the cry of the oppressed is met by the conviction that history, unjust and violent as it is, nevertheless has a purpose which will be disclosed when the time is ripe, bringing vindication and reward for those who endured its agonies. This is the apocalyptic intuition at work in parts of the early experience of the Church. On the other, nihilistic fury can issue in a raging desire for the destruction of the entire world, including of the self. It is this latter trope that is manifestly active in the current situation and the hand of the technocratic paradigm is not hard to discern.

The paradigm reaches far into our experience of temporality. In a traditional world, time is to be received as a gift and its patterns and rhythms, the rising and setting of the sun and the gentle cycle of the seasons, submitted to as it stretches out into an open future. We moderns have a quite different way of handling time. Unconstrained by daylight or the weather, we can do exactly what we like when we like. Time amounts to one's waking hours and becomes yet more "stuff" to be managed, packaged and consumed. In such a regime, the horizon of the future is easily foreshortened, one day being much like any other, a fixed number of hours to be divided up. The technocratic self-plans for an abstract future, sometimes years ahead. But in the concrete experience of life, the sense of the future is fragile and can be closed down for there is little to give it structure and shape.

We should scarcely be surprised to find apocalyptic a dominant feature of Islamism, whether its moderate expression or its most extreme. Time is short. The only future that can

be imagined is violent. This is not the consequence of religious dogma but of a globalised paradigm which has colonised it and which is everywhere clamping down the horizon of the future, preventing us all from imagining a humane future. It is at work in the outlook of the Muslim Brotherhood but also an intensely disturbing component of the programme of the so-called Islamic State, which calls its newspaper *Dabiq* after a Syrian town prophesied to be the location of the final battle of “Rome” against the Muslims. Tellingly, *Daesh* not only believes in the apocalypse but is positively working to bring it about.

Mercy: Antivenom to the Technocratic Paradigm

Pope Francis’ appeal to mercy has been interpreted as indicative of a liberalism which would see Christianity adapt itself to the mores of secular culture. It is impossible to overstate how wrong-headed is such a charge, for mercy is supremely counter-cultural in a world dominated by the technocratic paradigm; it is its victim, to be sure, but also one of its most effective antivenoms.

Both Christians and Muslims attest to the fact that God’s revelation is itself a manifestation of divine mercy. It guides, orientates and interrogates us. Our part is not to occupy the seat of judgment but to let it situate and judge us. The technocratic mentality refuses this: we must judge *it*, either as “liberals”, allowing it to be nothing more than a call to reasonableness, civility and tolerance, or as “extremists”, rigorous and zealous in our execution of its ruthless demands. When we take control of revelation rather than surrendering to it, we cut ourselves off from the source of authentic divine mercy. Instead, we put our own words in God’s mouth, including our counterfeit “mercy”, either the manipulative leniency of the manager or the absolution of moral responsibility offered by those who think exclusively in terms of public policy.

Mercy is also assaulted by Manichean narratives which distort our picture of reality, reassure us that we are right and identify a culprit for us to blame. These stories breed mercilessness. Encountering another human being, Manichean blindness can make out only an agent of the enemy. An assailant in a recent attack in east London lunged his knife at a random passer-by shouting “this is for Syria!” Meanwhile, white and black Britons accost Muslims in the streets in retribution for atrocities perpetrated by people with whom they have no palpable connection. In both cases, the association of that cause with this person is not only not meaningful but betrays a kind of insanity. Technocratic Manicheanism is merciless in its madness for mercy always unveils the human face behind every malevolent generalisation.

But mercy will not be so easily defeated, for, it is crucially the enemy of apocalyptic rage. Jamming the gates open, it is God’s refusal to allow the human future to be closed down. Mercy is the gift of a new future. When a prisoner on death row receives the unexpected news that his sentence has been commuted, a future is created *ex nihilo* and the only possible response is to accept it gratefully and to be fashioned anew by the gift. For the

Holy Father to preach the mercy of God at a moment of apocalyptic foreboding is to denounce short-termism, with its knee-jerk responses and hasty tactics of violence and hatred, and to rise again to a new horizon of un hoped-for creativity, to allow grace to touch hearts where it can surprise with a fruitfulness that defies fearful nihilism.

A number of commentators read Pope Benedict XVI's "Regensburg Lecture" as an attack on Islam. Even back in 2006, it was clear that it was Europeans the Pope had in his sights, namely those anxious to uproot Christianity from the Hellenistic soil of its first inculturation. The title of the lecture, "Faith, Reason and the University", surely eliminates any doubts about the matter of his meaning. The Pontiff-theologian began that day with a wistful reminiscence of the spirit of the late 1950s, a time when educated people took it for granted that it was "necessary and reasonable to raise the question of God through the use of reason, and to do so in the context of the tradition of the Christian faith". His was and remains a poignant lament; phenomenology has indeed stealthily usurped the throne once occupied by the Queen of the Sciences, Faculties of Divinity and Theology in my own, still officially Protestant country having been almost systematically replaced with Departments of Religious Studies. We do not need Edward Said to unmask for us the influence of the technocratic paradigm in that development. Yet, if one can fully endorse Pope Benedict's nostalgia, it must be with the caveat, ironic in the circumstances, that on many university campuses, God is only spoken of at all these days because of the presence of a sizeable cohort of pious young Muslims.