

Eschatology Applied in a Relational Framework

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Introduction

Recently, there has been a surge of interest regarding the end times.¹ Public awareness has ensued from recent newspaper reports. Apparently, an 89-year-old American religious leader/preacher, Harold Camping, made a calculation of the *Judgment Day* based on his reading of the Bible. He claimed that such day would take place on May 21, 2011. Camping's followers, the likes of Marie Exley, have tried to spread this idea. In order to spread the word about Camping's calculation, the so-called "disciples" are reported to be doing the following:

To get the word out, they're using billboards and bus stop benches, traveling caravans of RVs and volunteers passing out pamphlets on street corners. Cities from Bridgeport, Conn., to Little Rock, Ark., now have billboards with the ominous message, and mission groups are traveling through Latin America and Africa to spread the news outside the U.S.²

In light of these events, the doctrines of eschatology and *eschata* need to be clarified amongst the faithful. So I have decided to make a little contribution to the effort. To even dare to talk about what is beyond death, one must start with the right attitude. Even much more is called for when a formal attempt of a treatise/discourse about it is made. And since none of us have the privilege of dying and coming back to life afterwards, I have to accept that I am dealing with something beyond my ken. As such, I need to treat this research with reverence and humility.

In Roman Catholic theology, eschatology is traditionally understood as "the study of the last things (*Eschata*), namely death, judgment, heaven, hell and the second coming of Christ."³

¹ Frank Lake wrote, "Technically, May 21st is Judgment Day, or The Rapture, so the world won't end that day, it's just the beginning of the end... But, don't worry, it will end VERY soon after probably by October 21st of this year - at the latest." Harold Camping has calculated based on his reading of the Bible. See "End of the World: October 21, 2011" available online: <http://weeklyworldnews.com/headlines/26946/end-of-world-may-21-2011> (accessed 7/7/2011) The Web carries a lot of news about this, some headings include: "How to Sell your Soul to the Devil"; "End of World: October 21, 2011"; "Alien Spaceships to Attack Earth on 2011." A single click in Google about this topic shows 355,000,000 results in just 0.21 seconds!

² Ibid.

One observes that Eschatology is always placed at the end in the order of Christian doctrines, not only in the ordering of their respective themes. This is also true in the arrangement of the courses in theological seminaries where a candidate to Holy Orders would take eschatology as the last course. Richard McBrien, in his book *Catholicism*, still puts the subject matter of eschatology at the end. Karl Rahner also does the same in *Foundations of Christian Faith*. As a consequence, people tend to see eschatology as having little relevance to the rest of the Christian doctrines. D. Lane asserts that this treatment of eschatology has made it an appendix to the rest of theology.⁴ Because of this, it does not function as the light that can illuminate other realities of the Christian faith.

The emphasis seems centered on the eternal fate of the individual person and the end of history. Such tendency is both misleading and unfortunate. This has come about because “(t)he God of eschatology...who is personally co-present and co-active in creation and the Christian community..., the living God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, a God of historical covenant and incarnation: Emmanuel... is allowed to become an *outsider* God, as has happened in the Christian tradition from time to time.”⁵

Eschatology’s message ought to center on the hope for the consummation of God’s purposes for all creation. It ought to focus on the completion of the creative and redemptive activity of God in Christ and the Spirit, i.e., for the coming of God’s Kingdom in its eschatological fullness. It ought to focus on the living relationship of God to humanity in his promised salvation, in his coming kingdom, in his indwelling in his creation, so that he becomes “all in all”.⁶

A progressive understanding would show that eschatology is the deepening of the revelation of God’s life and love as fully concretized in Jesus (see 1 Jn. 1: 1-4; Heb. 1: 1-4). If people want to understand life and love, they ought to seek the core --- Jesus. Vatican II reminds people that it is Jesus who is “the key, the centre and the purpose of the whole of human history” (GS 10). It is the person of Jesus who is the true model that we have of being human. Hence, if believers would want to truly experience the fullness of life, they could make it possible only through Jesus: “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17: 28).

³ Dermot A. Lane, “Eschatology” in Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul Publications, 1991), 329.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 342. Emphasis added.

⁶ See Colm McKeating, *Peace at the Last: A Christian Theology of the Last Things* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2009), 93. See Richard Bauckham ed., *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 11.

If Jesus is the clue to what life and its meaning is all about (Jn. 10:10), then creation - eschatology is *Christological*. If life is to be lived in love, in communion, and in solidarity with others, then creation - eschatology is *Ecclesiological*. If life is a relationship between God and His people, then creation - eschatology is *Theological-Anthropological*. "Hence, a sound eschatology can only be derived from a solid theological anthropology which is in turn dependent upon Christology. Christology is in fact the unifying link between a theology of the human being and a theology of the last things."⁷ Creation-eschatology finds its fulfillment in Him.⁸ Eschatology then, may be said to be nothing more than an interpretation of the future human and cosmic fulfillment in the light of Christ.⁹ As Karl Rahner puts it, "Christ himself is the hermeneutical principle of all eschatological assertions. Anything that cannot be read and understood as a Christological assertion is not a genuine eschatological assertion."¹⁰ Peter C. Phan, a Vietnamese-American theologian has more to say on the role of Jesus in eschatology:

*As the formal principle of eschatology, Christ is both the **cause** and the **model** of our own resurrection and eternal life. Christ is the cause of our resurrection and eternal life insofar as, thanks to him and because of him, what God has done for his Son in his resurrection and glorification God will also do for us, God's adopted children and Jesus' sisters and brothers. Christ is also the model of our eternal life because in order to know what will happen to us in the afterlife, we must look to what has happened to the risen Jesus.*¹¹

For a more biblical understanding, eschatology must be founded on the Christ event in four phases, namely (1) the announcement of God's reign, (2) the public ministry of Jesus, (3) the death and resurrection of Jesus, and (4) the outpouring of the Spirit.¹² As J. Moltmann contends: "The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith.... Hence, eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine.

⁷ McKeating, *Peace at the Last: A Christian Theology of the Last Things*, 29.

⁸ This idea came from Dr. Jose M. de Mesa in the class Creation-Eschatology. This researcher used to be a member of his class as a student. See also Col. 1:15; 17: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

⁹ Peter C. Phan, *Responses to 101 Questions on Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 30.

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," In *The Theological Investigations*. Vol. 4 Baltimore: Helicon (1966): 342-43.

¹¹ Phan, 30.

¹² Lane, "Eschatology," 329.

Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence.”¹³

Thus, eschatology’s offer of eternal life must be freely acknowledged and enhanced in human existence. This must be a lived eschatology. It must be deeply ingrained in the life experiences of people. As Lane says, “The God of creation is the God of consummation. What God has set in motion in creation, God brings to fulfillment in the *eschaton*. Within creation, God calls all human beings to communion” (LG13; GS19).¹⁴

Another unfortunate thing is that the study of Eschatology has been confined within the fold of scholars and well-known theologians. It has always been the topic in the academe, and reserved for erudite scholars. Hence, it did not become a concern of the faithful in general. To them, eschatology has been presented and perceived like a “pie in the sky”.¹⁵ Moreover, there has been little effort to come up with a fresh interpretation and presentation of the Last Things within the context of the consciousness and historical experience of the Filipino people.

The researcher is convinced that the understanding of Eschatology, needs to be redirected and refined to make it relevant to everyday life. He now has the task of showing how eschatology might be propounded and applied in the context of Filipino contemporary experience. In other words, contextualized theologizing. For this purpose, he will apply a relational framework, along the Translation Model¹⁶ of Bevans, and using the Gospel of Matthew as the lens.

¹³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 16.

¹⁴ Lane, 341-342.

¹⁵ The expression *pie in the sky* was first coined in 1911 by Joseph Hillstom, a labor activist and radical songwriter. His lyrics to “The Preacher and the Slave,” sung to the tune of the hymn “In the Sweet Bye and Bye,” read: “You will eat, bye and bye, /In that glorious land above the sky. Work and pray, live on hay./You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.” *Pie in the sky*, means belief in the promise of a celestial reward while continuing to suffer in this life. In other words, it is the justification of present suffering by the promise of a transcendental deliverance that has no direct implication for historical existence. See Vitor Westhelle, “Liberation Theology: A Latitudinal Perspective,” *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 313.

¹⁶ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2003), 37-53, 141. Here the message of the eschatology of the early Christian community is adapted or accommodated to the Philippine culture. This model has the insistence on the message of the Gospel as unchanging message. What applied to the Christian community during Matthew’s time also is applicable to the present Philippine context. We would, however, opt more for the dynamic equivalence of translation rather than the formal correspondence. In this way, we can see more clearly the mutual interaction of the Gospel message, particularly Matthew’s eschatology, and the present Philippine context. We should, however, know the Philippine context in order to effectively apply the message of the Gospel. The translation model, while certainly taking into account experience, culture, social location and social change, puts more emphasis on fidelity to what it considers the essential content of scripture and tradition.

The Philippine Context

One does not have to go very far to see the real situation of our country today. We just have to open our senses, and we can have right before our eyes the dehumanizing situations and experiences our people undergo daily. In my twenty-two (22) years of experience as a faculty member in San Beda College, I have witnessed many rallies and demonstrations big and small at the Mendiola bridge. This scenario occurs almost everyday and it seems an abnormal day if there is no rally or demonstration going on. Different kinds of people gather at the bridge to air out their grievances, hoping that changes to uplift their miserable conditions will happen. These poor people want changes in our present society.

We can see the ranks of the poor, the oppressed, the disenfranchised and the marginalized in our society. There are the street children, the slum-dwellers, the peasants, and the workers who could hardly make both ends meet because of the escalating prices of basic commodities and the uncontrollable oil-price hikes. Then, there are the endless armed conflicts between the government and the Muslim secessionist groups and the Communist movement. We also have the great disparity between the few rich and the many poor people. These situations are the many faces of poverty, inequality, injustice and immorality in our society. Yet this scenario is a small picture within a bigger picture.

The bigger picture is that of the powerful countries continuing to dominate the poor ones, which continue to be imprisoned in poverty and oppression. The powerful countries continue to soar high while the poor ones try to lift their feet from the ground and raise their hands to heaven, hoping for mercy. The growing gap between the powerful countries and the poor countries is a major concern. Here we can deduce that "poverty was not just the result of ignorance, lack of skills, or moral and cultural factors, but rather that it had to do with global structural relationships."¹⁷ One can only wonder when these wicked global structural relationships are going to end. Sometimes I begin to lose hope and think that the coming days would get worse, and I cannot but ask myself these questions: Are these events signs of the end times? Is there still hope for this country in the face of these odds and the exodus of many Filipinos to different parts of the world? Can life be still fully lived and enjoyed by Filipinos? Is there still hope in this seemingly hopeless situation?

¹⁷ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 434.

My educational training in Applied Theology helps me to stay on the ground. I must do my share to shed light on these life experiences so that people would not give up but be strengthened and have collective faith and effort to beat the odds. These forms of oppression and injustice must be stopped, if not eradicated. That something must be done should not be just the battle cry of a few but the task and responsibility of the whole people of God. Doing mission is a job of the whole people of God. Although those in authority and the experts have their part, the greater role is that of the majority.

Vatican II clearly stated the role of the laity in the church, particularly in respect to its missionary task.¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium* 33 (Dogmatic Constitution of the Church) states: “The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the church. Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself.” And it adds that the laity have “the exalted duty of working for the ever greater spread of the divine plan of salvation to all people of every epoch and all over the earth”.

Ad Gentes 28 urges every member of the church to “collaborate in the work of the Gospel, each according to his opportunity, ability, charism and ministry.” The document even states categorically (AG 21), “[t]he Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy.”

Realized Eschatology

Like the early Christian community who was in transition and confronted by problems and conflicts both internal and external, the Philippine society is also undergoing a long period of transition from a dominant Catholic religion while confronted by different religions. We are also confronted by social problems and conflicts both internal and external. Matthew addressed his Christian community through his Gospel and urged them that eschatology must be a realized eschatology (having an element of the “already” and the fulfillment of the “not yet”). In the same manner, we can say Matthew is addressing today’s Philippine church to understand the same eschatology and implement a realized eschatology. Matthew is encouraging us to be hopeful, despite the bleak and gloomy situation we find ourselves in our country. He enjoins us not to become complacent but to utilize fully well what we

¹⁸ In this section, the quotes from *Lumen Gentium*, and *Ad Gentes* are taken from Bosch, 471-472.

have “already” while waiting for the “not yet.” We should comfort one another and live in solidarity as one closely-knit community.

Through the person Jesus, who lived and loved like us, I now consider God as a God of relationships. He relates with us, identifying Himself with His people and always acting as their liberator and deliverer. God is not merely transcendent, for He is one with us, wanting to liberate us from our exile which is marked by injustice, oppression, poverty and hardship. All that God wants is the well-being of His creation. He observes, He hears, He knows and He comes to rescue His people. He cares for and suffers with us. God’s revelation to His people is an on-going process. He is a God of History who is very much involved in the way we live. All these became possible because of Jesus incarnate.

Since we are baptized Christians, we belong to God’s family called the Church. We have the privilege as well as the responsibility of active participation in the Church’s mission. I believe a realized eschatology must be responsive to the people’s real needs. It must be expressive of their hopes and aspirations. Eschatology must not be a “*pie in the sky*” nor a “*set of abstract ideas and essences*” confined in the spiritual world and viewed by the people who are reduced into mere spectators. It must become a realized eschatology that gives strength to the masses to overcome the hardships and poverty envelop them, liberating them from oppression, marginalization, injustice and inequalities. Therefore, eschatology must get out from its confinement of static waiting. It must be an endeavor that fosters community life, demands community involvement and nourishes interpersonal relationships. It must respond to the needs of Filipinos and capture love’s real essence: that is, loving the “least, the last and the lost” and in doing so, loving God. It is only by loving them that we can say we really and truly love God.

As New Agers (NAM)¹⁹ put it, “We are now living in a Post Modern World where we meet the riches of the Human Person in our planetary village.” We should now break out from the confinement of traditional society and Church. We should be aware that nobody holds the whole truth and that knowledge can be learned in fragments and can be enriched by recognizing its relativity and the need to dialogue with a plurality of other experiences-interpretations. We become human

¹⁹ The New Age Movement (NAM) is a *new spirituality* of people convinced that they have arrived at a *turning point* in history, triggered off by a new understanding of the world and the universe in *holistic terms* (holism). This is made possible by an awakening *new consciousness* of individuals who link up together into all kinds of groups, organizations and communities, gradually developing *networks*. For further reading, see Lode L. Wostyn, *A New Church for A New Age* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 35.

not only in the “cathedrals” or “Spanish churches,” but also in our encounters with our fellow humans in their true circumstances. We become human in our interrelatedness and interconnectedness with our neighbors, with emphasis on the “little ones.”

Since the Holy Eucharist is the main source of Christian life wherein we partake of the bread and the wine offered by the Father who is in Jesus Himself, the Eucharistic celebration becomes meaningful, relevant and life-giving if we who partake at the Lord’s table share what we have in life with the least of our brothers and sisters. Just as in the Holy Eucharist the bread who is Jesus is chosen, blessed, broken and given, so we too who have been chosen and blessed must be willing to be broken and be given. Just as we get to enrich our life from the Eucharistic celebration, so we too must be the source of true life to other people, especially to the least of our brothers and sisters.

Relationships and Christian Spirituality

Thus, Spirituality should be understood as a constant search to be fully alive and to develop oneself through living with others and immersing oneself in relationship with others. Indeed, we become true persons through relationships. Spirituality must be an incarnated spirituality. It must have flesh in order to be grounded in reality. This relationship is a lived experience and a love experience. Revelation, truth and life’s meaning are found through creative interaction with our fellow humans and with realities outside ourselves. Becoming human must flow from our constant relationship with our neighbors. It is acknowledging that we are part of a global village and a network of relationships where the sustainability of life depends on our care and love for each other. Spirituality is not mainly prayer and God relationship. It is about becoming human in relationship with our fellow human beings.

There is indeed a relationship between eschatology and spirituality and real life, not only in the context of the Christian community during the time of Matthew, but also during our time and in the Philippine setting. We could say that whatever happens in real life would necessarily affect the understanding of eschatology and spirituality of the people. On the one hand, people who have not experienced love would not appreciate the love offered by the Father to us through His son, Jesus Christ. On the other hand, people who claim to have deep spirituality because they always pray and are regular churchgoers, but act differently outside the four walls of the church,

are not really what they claim to be. Our Faith should have flesh in our actions. Action and praxis should be the fruits of our own belief. They must go hand in hand.

We Christians, by virtue of our being baptized, become members of the One Body of Christ, called the Church. We must live and make eschatology alive, meaningful, and life-giving through our full, active, conscious and faithful participation in the mission of the Church and in our discipleship. Likewise, we must celebrate life and spirituality as we live and relate with our neighbors in our pilgrimage to life. The challenge of spirituality is that, if we who partake at the Lord's table would work for the creation of new jobs, reform of the economy, enactment of just laws, good governance, public accountability, rehabilitation of the victims of floods, typhoons and other natural and man-made calamities (not just dole-outs to meet their needs on a daily basis), and education for the street children in the jungle cities, then and only then can spirituality become alive, relevant, meaningful and life-giving.

Mathew's Eschatology Applied to our Situation

It is in this light that we will use Matthew's eschatology as a lens to see clearly the possible solutions to our present situation. We have noted earlier that eschatology must be a "realized eschatology." Christian eschatology envisions Christians as not only awaiting the Savior's coming and His salvation. Rather, Christians are invited to be committed and learn to live with *change*, knowing that God travels with His people. Just like the God in the Old Testament²⁰ who acted as the liberator and deliverer of His people, Jesus will also come to liberate us from the bondage of injustice, oppression, poverty and hardship. It is our responsibility as God's people to do something concrete to change this miserable situation in which we are caught. We cannot just ignore the sufferings and needs of the poor. We need to do what we can to alleviate them.

²⁰ Exodus 3: 7-8 reads: "I observe the misery of my people, I have heard their cry, I know their suffering, I come down to deliver them." (Italics mine).

CONCLUSION

The essential content and message of eschatology for us today is summarized in how we as a community conduct ourselves while vigilantly waiting for the fulfillment of the “not yet” but guided by the “already” for which Jesus has lived and died. Jesus exemplified love for the Father by loving His neighbor. Just like the early Christian community, we too must not only concentrate on the fulfillment of the “final things” to come, for only God knows when. Instead, we are encouraged to live our everyday life responsibly and meaningfully. The Christian’s preparation for death is not limited to sacramental celebrations; it includes the whole of life.²¹ Karl Rahner summarizes this preparation well: “Christian vigilance, remembrance of the Last Things, waiting for the Lord, joy at his nearness, the groaning of the creation for redemption, for the glorification of the body as it perhaps begins even in this life, through a slow approach to the ideal of Paradise, of freedom from concupiscence by means of an ascetical life”²²

Eschatology must be applied in our daily lives, for otherwise we are only fulfilling half of it (“not yet”). We have to start with what we have (“already”). The very core to understand life and its meaning is Jesus (Christological). This life in order to be meaningful must be lived in communion and in solidarity (*koinonia*) with others (ecclesiological). We can understand meaningfully our relationship with God and His relationship to us through His “*pagpapadama*” (theological-anthropological). Hence, eschatology will have its relevance and meaning in Filipino theology only in so far as it is applied in a relational framework (that is, more at the affective level or “feeling” rather than at the cognitive level).

Eschatology does not have to be a form of escape from our everyday tasks of this world, nor it need be a concentration on individual salvation to the exclusion of all else. Rather, eschatology finds its meaning and relevance in our good relationship with our fellow humans grounded in the God of truth, justice and love. This gives us the courage to place ourselves with radical seriousness at the service of truth, justice and love.

Thus a key change in the understanding of eschatology is herein proposed: that focus should be the transformation of one’s self and the

²¹ Phan, 57.

²² Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 72.

surrounding world as the tangible impact of one's belief. This would involve an assessment of how one lives and has lived as a Christian, of one's experience of goodness that needs to be expanded, or of the many things that need to be transformed and how one strives to make that transformation in one's self and in the surrounding world. From action and assessment one comes to a better understanding and a better way of explaining what one believes in. The new way of understanding is one that will lead us to ask: "How has my understanding of eschatology transformed me and the world around me?"²³

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²³ See Jane Shaw, *A Practical Christianity: Working On Transforming Our Lives* (London: SPCK Publishing Co., 2012).