

Last Things: Understanding the Perceptions of Selected Filipino Youth on Eschatology

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Abstract – *This study examined the selected Filipino youth's' perceptions on eschatology, specifically, with its corollary doctrines on death, judgment, heaven, hell, purgatory, and Jesus Christ's second coming (parousia). It employed a quantitative-descriptive type of research utilizing a survey questionnaire known as Researcher-made Instrument on Eschatology (RIE) and is responded to by 844 college students. Findings reveal that the participants have a vague or uncertain understanding of these doctrines. In comparing the participants' eschatological perceptions in terms of gender, no significant differences were noted in hell and parousia. The result serves as a challenge for educators to reformulate a teaching approach about the topic backed up by new theological reflections.*

Keywords – *eschatology, theology, parousia, judgment, instruction*

INTRODUCTION

Apocalyptic visions, "the end times," and the "last things" continue to influence humanity in the twenty-first century profoundly. Eschatology is the keystone of theological thinking's edifice, holding the whole building together [1]. For centuries, eschatology was the final chapter of theology, catechism, and creed where it was known as the doctrine of the "last things."

Despite its central place in theology, eschatology, however, has not been previously accorded the importance it truly deserves. This can be seen in the old theological manuals where eschatology was either treated only in the last section of theology books or presented as merely an appendix. Eschatology has moved from the periphery of the theological discourse to the heart of theological interest [2]. This development was brought about by several reasons. The first major shift in Roman Catholic eschatology may be traced in the aftermath of the declaration of the dogma of the Assumption in 1950 [3]. This Marian dogma has brought about a reflection on the theology of death. Thus, since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), radical transformations have taken place in Roman Catholic thought and practice. More than any branch of theology, Eschatology has undergone significant changes both in content and methodology [4]. This was affirmed by Hans Urs von Balthazar, a renowned theologian who asserted that "the eschatological bureau, is now, so to speak, working overtime" [5].

Hence, this paper aims to examine the perception of selected Filipino youth's perceptions on eschatology. This also hopes to give recommendations of how to reformulate a teaching approach to deepen the youth's understanding of the last things.

ESCHATOLOGY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Eschatology is the study of that aspect of God by which God is the destiny and consummation of all reality. To "do eschatology" is to reflect on the meaning of the Kingdom of God concerning the people, the world, and history [6]. Eschatology is about the Kingdom or Reign of God, that is, God's redemptive presence, which is actualized through the power of God's reconciling spirit. A renewed interest in eschatology is by no means limited within the Catholic theological circle. For the past couple of decades, there has been an increase in the amount of attention and interest concerning eschatological topics; that is, beliefs about the end times, the end of the ages, or the end of the world [7]. For the past decades, scientists and religious leaders have warned the world about rising average global temperatures and the adverse effects of human-caused climate change [8]. This prospect has led theologians to re-evaluate the relationship between Christianity and the environment.

The renewed interest in the "end times" is further reinforced by the occurrence of natural calamities and disasters which are deemed in the Scriptures as "signs

of the end." This can be gleaned from national and international news, both print and media, which narrate horrifying stories of wars, especially in the Middle East. These armed hostilities appear to be incessant that another tension will rise after the resolution of one conflict. Earthquakes have likewise taken away thousands of lives all over the world. Haiti, Japan, Turkey, China, and the Philippines are only some of the countries devastated by severe earthquakes with unparalleled intensities and destructions. Major weather disasters have reinforced eschatological beliefs. In this aspect, Eschatology highlights the relational and evolving nature of all reality, including the divine [9]. It also emphasizes the radical openness of human history and the essential connection between humans and the environment.

ESCHATOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

Pope Francis underscored this "interconnectedness of all things" in his most celebrated encyclical *Laudato 'si*. The encyclical attempted to awaken environmental responsibility in all people of goodwill. *Laudato 'si* gives a spectrum of threats dictated by the rapid pace of change and the dynamics of technical progress imposed by a man who often contributed to the world's degradation of life. A panorama of threats includes the problems caused by rapidly changing technology and pollution, industrial fumes, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, global warming, depletion of natural resources, and the problem of clean water for drinking [10]. These showed their direct and indirect impact on the deterioration of the quality of life and social collapse of many of the earth's poorest inhabitants. The Philippines was not spared either by natural disasters. The vivid memory of the destructions brought about by typhoon *Ondoy* in 2009 is still etched in many Filipinos' minds.

Moreover, the tropical storm *Sendong* in 2011 devastated Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao. This typhoon brought massive flash floods and mudslides and killed more than 1,200 people. Also, in 2015, the most destructive and cruel super typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) hit the Philippines. Due to this devastating calamity, Filipinos united together in faith to pray for the dead and souls of the victims. Even Pope Francis had his Papal visit to show mercy and compassion among Filipino victims of this massive and disastrous super typhoon.

All these calamities have been observed to be signs of the end times. Because of the fears and anxieties spawned by the natural catastrophes and prophecies of

doom, the need to investigate the eschatological doctrine has a significant impact on addressing the issues through proper education of the youth today. Eschatology instills joy, not fear; hope, not despair; consequently, humans may be able to appreciate the wonders of creation in the innate goodness of humanity, and in the unfailing love and providence of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. The phenomenal presence of natural disasters that yield fears and anxieties and losses to humanity have given the researcher a very strong impetus to embark on this research.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

To arrive at deeper insights from the selected Filipino youth's perception of eschatology, the researcher created a survey instrument that underwent series of validation procedures, namely: content validity, construct validity, and face validity. Reliability estimates of the survey instrument were measured using Cronbach's alpha to determine its internal consistency. Content validity was established through thorough literature to determine its dimensions. Construct validity was determined by conducting zero-order correlations to determine whether the dimensions are related to one another. Face validity was established through the conduct of a pilot test among 232 college students who were not part of the final survey. The words were simplified as well as the sentence construction to reflect the intended purpose of the instrument and so that the youth can easily understand. The final form of the researcher's made survey instrument was administered to a new set of 844 college students for the main analyses. The participants of this research were selected using convenience sampling.

The researcher developed survey questionnaires on Eschatological Perception Survey Instrument on corollary doctrines in the form of a *Likert scale* [11]. There were six (6) dimensions or factors on corollary doctrines: death, judgment, heaven, hell, purgatory, and Christ's second coming that underwent validation. The final form of the survey instrument consisted of 20 items per dimensions or factors. On the other hand, the qualitative component of this study included a critical description and content analysis in the lens of outsider's point of view or *etic approach* on the eschatological perception of college student participants and an examination of the implications of the eschatological perceptions on the corollary doctrines about applied theology by derivation of instructional materials in

teaching the doctrine at tertiary level education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The exploratory centerpiece of the study is the youth’s perception of eschatology along with its doctrines. Using the most appropriate research design and procedures, the research was able to reach a certain depth of perception of the youth’s perception of eschatology. In summary, the results from statistical means treatment can be finally labeled as *uncertain* based on the set legend of this study from a total of 2.5 up to 3.4 mean values regarding the realities of death (mean = 3.6541), judgment (mean = 3.5832), heaven (mean = 4.0310), hell (mean = 3.5610), purgatory (mean = 3.0045), and *parousia* of Christ's second coming (mean= 3.9092).

Table 1. The mean and standard deviation of the dimensions of the Researcher-made Instrument on Eschatology (N=844)

Dimensions of the Researcher-Made Instrument on Eschatology (RIE)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Death	3.6541	.45574
Judgment	3.5832	.57454
Heaven	4.0310	.60618
Hell	3.5610	.74211
Purgatory	3.0045	.71051
Parousia	3.9092	.66745

Generally, a deeper analysis of the overall computed mean values revealed youth’s *uncertain* eschatological perceptions on *death, judgment, heaven, hell, purgatory, and parousia of Christ's second coming*. On the other hand, a deeper analysis of all the paired samples t-test statistics revealed that students' eschatological perceptions on *death, judgment, heaven, hell, purgatory, and parousia* or *Christ's second coming* significantly vary between males and females. In other words, this implied that even if the college students were *uncertain* in all the eschatological doctrines, males and females significantly differed in their eschatological perceptions. Besides, this study rejected the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between males' and females' eschatological perceptions on *death, judgment, heaven, hell, purgatory, and parousia of Christ's second coming* and accepted the alternative hypothesis that there is a significant difference between males’ and females’ eschatological perceptions on *death, judgment, heaven,*

hell, purgatory and parousia of Christ's second coming.

Furthermore, this study brought forth the development of Students Researcher-made Instrument on Eschatology (RIE) with 6 headings on corollary doctrines and the development of instructional materials that can direct and guide the college students its Department of Theology to a clearer delivery of the Church's teachings within the ambit of contemporary contextualization.

Moreover, the results of reliability tests implied that all the items in the RIE - Likert scale have revealed by evidence reliable and valid statistical results for adaptability of the research instrument for future utilization among Theology Professors, academic scholars, and other researchers in finding meaning practically of Church Teachings on the doctrine of eschatology.

To emphasize, the development of *Researcher-made Instrument on Eschatology (RIE)* is greatly contributory among Theology Professors, academic scholars, and researchers to determine and examine scholarly the efficiency in enforcing learning and teaching eschatology in the 21st Century tertiary level education. Also, the instructional materials derived from students' *uncertain* or vague eschatological perceptions are considered the centerpiece of research findings.

After all the data were quantitatively revealed by appropriate statistical procedures, the findings surfaced to the fore. However, to achieve a depth of understanding of these findings, the researcher had to proceed to the conventions of expository discussion of such findings. The researcher's qualitative understanding of the findings revealed by the quantitative conventions deepened and fortified his cognitive understanding of eschatology—a phenomenon existing among college students, but which may be the same or different from conceptual framework expectations.

DISCUSSION

The understanding of eschatology operating in the educational setting was fortified by the utilization of the integrated approach of the National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines [12]. In the researcher’s attempt to present the doctrinal understanding coherently and logically, the six component doctrines were presented and sequenced in this order: *death, judgment*, followed by the three possible after-death states, *heaven, hell purgatory, and Christ’s second*

coming (*Parousia*).

Death is the culminating point of a Christian life, expressing a personal act of self-surrender to the Father, after the example of Jesus' death. For Christians, the darkness of death is accepted in the light of the hope of resurrection thereafter (Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 15:6 and 18; 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and 15; 2 Peter 3:4). It is in this light that Christianity has a peaceful metaphor of falling asleep to represent death of believer. In death, that there is life beyond earthly life. Therefore, it is an opportunity to face God who is full of love. Acceptance of this opportunity of facing our loving God in effect is turning will to enter into life with God. Through this act, human experiences can be transformed into conformity with Christ. Death does not simply withdraw a person from the world and make him a-cosmic; rather, it transposes him to a new and more comprehensive relationship to the world, freed from the limitations of a single point in space and time, characteristics of his earthly existence. It is for this reason; human death is linked to the hope of resurrection to the Lord Jesus Christ. In this light then there is hope in life after death. Thus, human death is linked to the hope of resurrection. To understand death is to understand resurrection; in Christ's death and rising for the sins of the world. The hope that there is life after death finds ground in the relationship of human death and resurrection. It is this death and rising of Jesus Christ that human death is transformed by his death for the sins of the world. And because of this relationship, we are assured that the human spirit lives on even beyond death. The hope that there is life after death finds ground in this relationship. Because this relationship endures, we are assured that the human spirit lives on even beyond death.

Judgment day is the final reckoning for all the actions we have done, either good or bad. Judgment takes place at death. It determines the state of condition after death. The Day of the Lord was pictured as a Day of Judgment. In recent times there has been a renewal of the New Testament stress on Christ's saving presence, and his Second Coming as introducing the final completion not just of the individuals but of the whole world. The final destiny of the human race is ultimately in God's hands. Jesus has given us two clues, which any person, sincere in his faith, will, or can, follow. The first of this is the admonition: Judge not and you shall not be judged. The Gospel warns us, time and time again, to refrain from judging others. Making moral judgments of behavior is one thing, but being judgmental of others is something entirely

different. It is forbidden by the Gospel. For in judging others we arrogate to ourselves a power not within our capacity, since we are not privy to the innermost recesses of a person. God alone has the prerogative of judging a person because he alone sees into the heart of the person.

Heaven is the state of fulfillment and fullness of being that man is called to is nothing less than sharing in God's own fulfillment and fullness. We are drawn into the Father's infinite love for the Son by being in Christ; and with Christ reciprocate the Father's love in the Spirit which Christ has given and shared with us. The spirit is the bond that binds the Father and Son in whom he takes great pleasure, and is well pleased. Heaven is the enjoyment that infinite love gives us, and of the loving relationship we enjoy with the Father Son and Spirit, and in the communion of saints. Our relationship with God and our fellow men are energized by the Holy Spirit, the power of the resurrection. Thus, heaven is sharing in the glorified humanity of Christ, by the community of those whom he has gifted with his spirit as to be conformed to him, and incorporated, made part of him, in the building of the kingdom of God. We await the coming of the kingdom in its fullness, even as we experience how that kingdom is at hand under making transformation; and the kingdom has been with us since the Easter event, and indeed from the very beginning in the self-giving nature of God that needed to spill over into creation, in order to be shared by men in the self-surrender of the Son to the Father in the spirit. By the power of the Creator Spirit, the fullness and fulfillment of humanity, the cosmos and God are one.

Hell is the human rejection of heaven. The freedom of man is respected and he can choose this self-imposed isolation from God and the rest of humanity. Hell allows for the possibility of any individual to be terminally frozen in the choice of evil, as the sinner's self-chosen ultimate fate. Happily, the doctrine of universal salvation says hell need not be eternal. The proper understanding of hell is that it is a man-made option. No one is excluded from God's kingdom but human beings can exclude themselves from communion with God and with others. Whatever power human freedom has to reject God, it is not strong enough to prevent God from truly loving. Yet, even if one has decided to stay away from God in what is called hell, this same God in solidarity with us still continues to offer His love to the end. God saves us out of love, and love is something that cannot be imposed upon us. It is only love when it leaves the person free

to accept or reject. In the light of God's respecting human freedom, the human being is certainly capable of rejecting God forever. Since freedom is something that belongs to the very constitution of human beings, this must mean that we can make decisions that are definitive and absolute with consequences for eternity. The choice of definitive rejection – is a real possibility. It is a choice for ultimate aloneness, in which no fellow feeling or companionship is possible. It is, in the end, being stuck with one's self, in the living death of loveless isolation.

In purgatory, all who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness that is necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The church gives the name purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The need for the dead to be transformed in Christ gives rise to the process of purification we call purgatory. Purification is necessary because many die with sin. The process of purification is accompanied by a corresponding growth in Christ. Purgatorial suffering has nothing to do with a supposed cruelty or capriciousness of God; it has to do with the sinner's perceived need to deal with the effects of his sin. Those who pass through purgatory do so because they want to. They recognize imperfections in themselves that need to be corrected so that their relationship with God can be set fully right, and therefore they willingly go through a crucible. Purgatory is the necessarily painful training in the way of love. We sin and so we need to deal with the effects of sin. A way to do this is illustrated in the practice recommended by St. Ignatius of Loyola, which follows a principle of acting against. When as a spiritual seeker, one discovers a distortion in one's self one ought to act against it. If I say, it is too much sensual pleasure, one ought to fast; if ambition, one ought purposely to take the lowest place; if envy, one should praise those who awaken the feeling of resentment in him or her. Sin needs correcting. The wounds that it leaves need healing and the negative tendency that it leaves need eradicating. We make this happen through acts of penance, self-denial, fraternal correction, fasting and prayer.

Christ's Second Coming or *Parousia* teaches us that by God's design, life, humanity, history and the cosmos are inexorably moving into the culmination stage, the complete wholeness in the eternity of God to which all creation was destined for. This culmination stage of

complete wholeness is the sharing in God's divine being and life intended by God from the very beginning. It is sharing in God's own self-fulfillment; in the triumph of his self-giving purpose—a process by which God becomes—all in all. This entails a transformation of the present creation, achieved through the power of the resurrection, which has been dynamism actively present in the world since the Easter event and until the day of the Last Judgment, inducing transformation toward conformity with Christ and sharing in his glorified humanity. This is the fulfillment of God's Promise of salvation; of a new heaven and a new earth. That promise is validated at the Last Judgment. The overpowering impact of the Last Judgment is the return of all that was lost to sin and death, the restoration of communion with the divine glory in the arrival of the redeeming *Parousia*, his triumphant arrival or coming on the last day of the old creation. At the Last Judgment, the criteria for judging that will result in the division of humanity into two camps is the forthright—you did it to me! or—you did not do it to me!, referring to what one did or did not do to the least of Christ's brethren, the poor. The values of the coming kingdom are justice, mercy, peace and love. Those who would belong to the coming kingdom must live by these values in imitation of Christ. It is incumbent on all to promote the values of the coming kingdom in the structures and institutions of society. It is imperative that all live by these values on behalf of future generations. The Kingdom of God is the future state of this world and all creation.

To synthesize, *death* is introduced as the culminating point of the Christian life, expressing a personal act of self-surrender to the Father, after the example of Jesus' death. Thereafter, the second in the sequence would be *judgment* that speaks of God's verdict on history and individual lives about the realization of the plan of salvation. Followed by the after-death states or options of *heaven* (as being "in Christ"), *purgatory* (as a necessary process of purification) and *hell* (as man's rejection of God) came as ending of the logical order. By ending with Christ's second coming (*Parousia*), it would be easier to establish and understand God's plan for creation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is said that the development of the self-made instrument has the following limitations: the internal Factor structure is unknown; it only covers discriminant validity and correlation of dimensions;

and the construct for assessment is not defined as one concept but to several concepts: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and Christ's Second Coming. These make it hard to measure and the items are mostly cognitive. However, this study has contributed in Applied Theology because of the development of the Researcher-made Instrument on Eschatology (RIE) with 6 headings on corollary doctrines and the development of theological instruction for college students on the six corollary doctrines on Eschatology.

Generally, it can be concluded that in comparing the eschatological perceptions of the participants in terms of gender, no significant differences were noted in Hell and Parousia. As far as the intent of the research is concerned, namely, determining and demonstrating an approach to catechesis based on theologizing that is contemporary, contextualized, and life-giving remains faithful to the Catholic church's teachings, these conditions were faithfully carried out. Contextualization was achieved by using the themes that arose from the responses of the youth, whether agree, disagree, or uncertain, to a given set of statements which themselves were drawn from essays about how they understood a specific doctrine and how it affects or influences their behavior.

Contemporariness was achieved by using very recent material from several researchers whose works propose new ways of seeing and interpreting and contain commentary or reference to the older and very early writers. The innovations the authors propose, even the more radical ones are faithful to the general spirit of the official Church's doctrine. However, the present output still needs to undergo the additional process of designing actual topic-specific modules as prototypes for classroom use or any form of group discussion.

Because the participants have a vague eschatological understanding on judgment, hell, and purgatory, the researcher humbly advances the following recommendations that can direct and guide Catholic tertiary institutions through its Theology Department, the local church, priests, religious and professors of theology and religious education to the clearer delivery of the Church's teachings within the ambit of contemporary contextualization:

1. Workshops for the faculty to be conducted for an updated presentation of the "last things" and as a summary of Catholic doctrine and thereby replaces.
2. A formulation and creation of new reference

materials that capture and incorporate the reflections during the workshops must be the project of this workshop. What has transpired during the updating process will be useless unless it will be documented and translated into hard copies of teaching resources such as lesson guides and modules.

3. Educators should require a complementary project to be undertaken by their students through open-source collaboration. This could start from a feedback activity coming from the original participants, to be later opened to the rest of the student body. The content of the task will present first an outline that opens with Jesus Christ's second coming as expressed in the plan of salvation. Each of the other topics would then unfold as flowing from this core topic, proceeding with Judgment as God's verdict on history and lives; followed by death and the three topics after-death states, namely, heaven, purgatory, and hell. The entire process should be well-moderated by the faculty in order to ensure proper guidance. The impact of this process on the students and the faculty as well would be nothing less than to experience the relevance of one's faith/spirituality in attaining a clear grasp of personal salvation.

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