

Interpreting Christian Symbols and Contemporary Events: The Hermeneutics of Traditional Tagalog Apocalyptic Groups

Jose Mario C. Francisco S.J.
East Asian Pastoral Institute

At the same time and in the same place – dawn of the thirtieth day of December and in what was then known as Bagumbayan – the execution of Philippine national hero Jose Rizal was reenacted in December 1996 to commemorate its centennial. The ideas and influence of this man, born into a prominent family, educated in Philippines and Europe, accomplished in the humanities and sciences, writer of political essays and the novels *Noli me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, were perceived by Spanish colonial authorities as the rallying point for the emerging nationalist movement and therefore a grave threat to Spanish interests.

As a tribute to such a worthy life, great care and expense were spent to ensure much pomp and pageantry for the faithful recreation of Rizal's execution. Immediately after the reenactment came a lavish parade featuring the hero's family and different civic groups dedicated to his memory, and highlighting dramatizations of the important events in his life.

Witnessing the celebrations from the Luneta grandstand were the highest officials of the Philippine government, the President and his cabinet among them, and distinguished guests from the diplomatic corps. All were dressed in their official uniforms or personal finery.

On the fringes of the official celebration were other groups also commemorating the deeds and words of Jose Rizal; but they were visibly different. They walked around in loosely organized clusters, with a few carrying banners of the group. Many women were dressed in white, some men had long scraggy hair, and most were barefoot. They were clearly of a different background and social standing from those on or close to the grandstand.

The difference between these two masses of people commemorating the same centennial was not only in appearance but also in their understanding of the centennial itself. Official speeches at the celebration stressed Rizal's contribution to the Filipino nation through the sacrifice of his life, and his accomplishments in various fields. They thus asked all other Filipinos to imitate him by contributing to Philippines 2000, the government program to achieve a 'tiger-economy'. Another perspective

emerged in the media interviews of those who were part of the fringe groups during the centennial celebration. They honored the legacy of Rizal by calling attention to what they perceived to be the crisis in contemporary Philippine society. They were not looking back at the past, but forward to the future.

The contrasts on this occasion are striking. While one may readily apply labels of 'high' and 'low' culture, 'elite' or 'popular' celebration, or 'great' and 'little' tradition to explain the contrasts, what is of more fundamental significance lies not in the different or even conflicting interpretations of the centennial as in how each group arrives at the meaning of the event for itself.

It is in this context that this essay analyzes how those groups on the margins of the official Rizal centennial celebration interpret contemporary events. This analysis draws from literary texts and official documents of existing groups belonging to a long line of millenarian and/or apocalyptic groups centered around Mount Banahaw, a majestic 2000 metre peak in the Sierra Madre range in southern Luzon.

In particular, this essay seeks to provide a hermeneutical key to these groups' reading of history – how they integrate events related to Philippine national history into their millenarian views. It is divided into the various aspects of the process of integration: (a) the role of the *pasyon* (the passion story) as the carrier of traditional Christian eschatology, (b) the focus on the Philippines as the locus of the Covenant of the Sacred Mother (*Tipan ng Mahal na Ina*), (c) the codification of Mount Banahaw as the New Jerusalem, and (d) the identification of Rizal as the Tagalog Christ. The essay ends with some questions regarding the inculturation of Christianity and the relation between national aspirations and millenarian views, which may have implications for other Asian contexts as well.

The Pasyon as Carrier of Traditional Christian Eschatology

Any observer of Philippine lowland life will note the overwhelming presence of Christian symbols in local culture and society. Churches dot the Philippine landscape and old towns are established on a square grid with the church and town municipal hall at the center. There are images of the Christ Child on public and private vehicles, and Marian shrines in government buildings, to name a few examples.

But this dominant presence of Christian symbols in the Philippine lowlands is not simply due to the fact of an overwhelming Christian majority. After all, more than one third of those initiated into Christianity do not have any regular contact with any of its institutions. Christian

symbols, however, maintain a presence and power beyond the hold of the institutional churches.

More crucial for understanding this powerful presence is the view underlying native perceptions of the world. This view, as many recent studies such as Iletto (1979) have shown, is indelibly shaped by the Christian story, the narrative of Jesus Christ which finds its most popular and profound expression in the Philippines in the *Pasyong Mahal*. This work is a long poetic narrative available in the major Philippine languages and said to have taken over the function of the epic in pre-Spanish local society.

This 1812 work presents the story of Jesus within cosmic history, beginning with the creation of the world and culminating in the Last Judgment and Final Coming of Christ. Drawn from medieval tradition, Spanish antecedents and an earlier Tagalog version by a native lay printer named de Belen, the narrative poem basically expresses traditional Christian eschatology which Javellana (1988), a literary scholar, describes in terms of the spatial and temporal frames of the story :

By expanding the spatial frame, the poet [of the *Pasyong Mahal*] is now able to work out his story on three levels, hence creating the impression that his story happens within eternal space – for much of the action begins in heaven, continues on earth, and ends in heaven. By expanding the temporal frame, the pasyon of Aquino de Belen, which concerned itself primarily with personal and individual salvation, now becomes an exposition of universal salvation. And so, it can be aptly said that his Passion story now assumes cosmic dimensions (Javellana 1988:33).

Because of this eschatological view, life on earth – that is, human time and space – takes on a different significance:

Because of its unique position between heaven and hell, the earth becomes the staging point for battles between Good and Evil. Hence, the Paraiso Terrenal [Earthly Paradise], which God created on earth, became the first scene of temptation. After God banished the first human couple from their paradisiacal home, their descendants continued to tread the path of transgression (Javellana 1988:33).

With the coming of Jesus, salvation has become possible but the earthly struggle for it continues until his Second Coming. Traditional Christian eschatology then shows human history to be linear rather than cyclic, imbued with divine presence but still moving toward final fulfillment.

This view was effectively propagated on account of the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the *pasyon* tradition. The poem is usually antiphonally chanted during Holy Week around makeshift altars at home or in elaborate settings in civic or even church space. In other regions, it has evolved into the *sinakulo*, a folk dramatization of choice episodes from the narrative by the entire

community and surrounded by intricate traditions. Thus it is both personal devotion and social ritual; hence its power.

The impact of this power becomes all the more evident in movements for change in the nineteenth century based on traditional Christian eschatology. In fact, many of these movements may rightly be called millenarian according to Cohn's (1970) classic description:

Millenarian sects or movements always picture salvation as

- (a) collective, in the sense that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a collectivity;
- (b) terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realized on this earth and not in some other-worldly heaven;
- (c) imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly;
- (d) total, in the sense that it is utterly to transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present put perfection itself;
- (e) miraculous in the sense that it is to be accomplished by, or with the help of supernatural agencies (Cohn 1970:15).

In his masterful analysis of these millenarian groups Iletto (1979) illustrates how the ordinary members of these groups perceived their involvement in *pasyon* terms.

The most prominent among them is the *Cofradia* (confraternity) of Apollinario de la Cruz, known to his followers as Hermano Pule. In 1832, Hermano Pule organized this religious group (which was not uncommon then), but limited it to *indios*. This was probably because he had been refused membership in a similar group in Manila where he worked in a church-run hospital. As a charismatic and eloquent leader, he was able to establish his group and carry on its rituals on the slopes of Santo Cristobal, an adjoining peak to Mount Banahaw.

Hermano Pule's *cofradia* had the characteristics of millenarian groups believing in the imminent coming of salvation. This was to take the form of an earthly paradise which he described by using a translated medieval hymn called *Dalit sa caluwalhatian sa langit na carartnan ng mga banal* (Hymn to peace in heaven that will be attained by the faithful). This hymn depicts a condition of personal equality as in the following stanza:

<i>Baguntao ma't dalaga</i>	Young men and women
<i>manga tauo mang naona</i>	and their predecessors
<i>magulang caya't bata pa</i>	parents and even children
<i>mag cacasing parapara</i>	all will look alike.

or of social equity as in another stanza:

<i>Ang mahal ma't ang mababa</i>	High-born or low
<i>ang mayaman ma't ang ducha</i>	rich or poor
<i>mag sising musing mucha</i>	all will look alike
<i>ang Dios din ang may panata.</i>	this is God's vow. (Ileto 1979:48f)

This condition can only happen in the *paraiso terrenal* of the *pasyon*, as suggested by the following stanza:

<i>Dilima cocotya cotya</i>	There will be no mockery
<i>hobo mang sa hihilata</i>	though one be lying naked
<i>con ualaman sala't sama</i>	if there is no sin or shame
<i>ualan sucat icahiya.</i>	there is no shame.
(Ileto 1979:49)	

Hermano Pule's millenarian vision is traced by Ileto to the *pasyon* tradition which

was to provide lowland Philippine society with a language for articulating its own values, ideals, and even hopes of liberation. After the destruction or decline of native epic traditions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Filipinos nevertheless continued to maintain a coherent image of the world and their place in it through their familiarity with the *pasyon*, an epic that appears alien in content, but upon closer examination in a historical context, reveals the vitality of the Filipino mind (Ileto 1979:15-6).

This vitality was to manifest itself in the following step in which divine involvement becomes focused on the Philippines.

The Philippines as the Locus of the New Covenant

As with many millenarian groups, Hermano Pule's *cofradia* waited in vain for the final intervention of the divine. What actually came was his violent death at the hands of the Spanish authorities and an end to his earthly paradise in Santo Cristobal.

But millenarian visions do not die easily. In fact, after the death of Hermano Pule and towards the end of the nineteenth century, other millenarian groups emerged to continue the tradition but with two distinct features:

- (a) these succeeding groups increasingly emphasized the Philippines as the place of the new covenant, and
- (b) this new covenant was described in terms of the relationship with a divine mother.

An example of this development in local millenarian tradition is a group called *Bathalismo* (from the Tagalog word for God, *Bathala*). It has a prayer directed to the Philippines which opens as follows:

*Oh bayan ko Filipinas magbangon ka
 Hanapin sa ngayon ang pagkakaisa
 Upang ang paglaya mithiin ng bawat isa
 At sa atin nakikibata*

Oh my country the Philippines arise
 Seek now the unity
 So that the freedom which is desired by each
 And those who suffer. (Foronda:67)

Later stanzas in the prayer describe the Philippines thus:

<i>Sa dulong silangan</i>	In the far Orient
<i>Mutyang pinapangarap</i>	Muse of our dreams
<i>Katulad mo ay Reyna</i>	You are like a Queen
<i>Perlas ka ng dagat</i>	You are the Pearl of the sea
<i>Kayat naakit mo</i>	Thus you attract
<i>Ang dayuhang lahat</i>	All the foreigners
<i>Filipinas oh Bayan kong</i>	Oh Philippines, my country
<i>Kulang palad.</i>	is unfortunate. (Foronda: 68)

These lines comparing the Philippines to an attractive pearl echo the national anthem which is appropriately called *Lupang Hinirang* (The chosen land).

The status of the Philippines as the new chosen land is further developed in the concept of the *Tipan ng Mahal na Ina* (Covenant of the Holy Mother). Many millenarian movements describe themselves as recipients of a new covenant usually identified as the third, with the Old and New Testaments as the first two. This third covenant is commonly associated with the Holy Spirit, just as the first two with the God the Father and Jesus Christ. In many millenarian groups, especially from the early twentieth century onwards, this third covenant is associated with a divine mother figure often related to Mother Philippines.

This is illustrated by an interesting poem in the possession of a group called *Sagrada Cristiana Filipina Independiente* (Holy Christian Independent Philippines). Its opening stanzas describe the Philippines as *mahiwage* (mysterious), *Paraiso sakalupaan* (earthly Paradise) and *Divinidad* (divinity). Then the poem employs word-play on 'Filipinas' by isolating 'Fili' for *Filio* (son) and 'P' for *Pater* (father). It then concludes with the Third Person being *Deus Ina* (God-mother):

<i>Hindi бага sabi rito</i>	Isn't it said here
<i>Ay Divino ang bayan mo</i>	your country is divine
<i>Mindanao, Visaya at Luzon</i>	Mindanao, Visayas, Luzon
<i>Tatlo yaon sa pagka Verbo</i>	Three in being Word
<i>Fili at Deus Filio.</i>	Fili and God-son.

<i>Filipino ang pangalan</i>	The name is Filipino
<i>Buo sa tatlong persona</i>	United in three persons
<i>Filipi ay bugtong na anak</i>	The only son is Fili
<i>P' ay Pater Deus nga</i>	'P' is God-father
<i>Ang huli ay Deus Ina.</i>	The last God-mother.
<i>Iyong ulit-ulitin nga</i>	You repeat
<i>Silang tatlo'y sama-sama</i>	These three are united
<i>Ana, Anak, at ang Ina</i>	Father, Son and Mother
<i>Tatlo sa isang Persona</i>	Three in one Person
<i>ng Sagrada Familia.</i>	of the Holy Family.

(Alaras 1988:79)

With texts such as this, the integration between traditional Christian eschatology and Philippine national history has clearly begun. The Philippines is now seen as the chosen land bound to God by a covenant with God-mother.

While this view was current only among millenarian groups, the growing nationalism promoted by the *ilustrados* (the educated natives) encouraged the propagation of this view among the ordinary people.

Codification of Mount Banahaw as Bagong Herusalem

After the election of the Philippines under the covenant of God-mother, the next logical step toward the integration of traditional Christian eschatology and Philippine history is the spatial appropriation of Mount Banahaw as the New Jerusalem.

As early as 1887, a French explorer by the name of Marche notes that Mount Banahaw was regarded as the holy land, and "one brings sick people there, in order to take a bath in the water of Jordan or at the miraculous springs, which heal all those who have faith" (Ileto 1979:86). This process of codifying the space of Mount Banahaw in terms of Israel's geography has been completed, so that every part of the terrain has been incorporated into sacred topography.

One sees in this map how many of the significant settings in the life of Jesus have their corresponding place in the mountain complex. One is shown where Jesus fasted or where Pilate washed his hands or where Jesus left a footprint as he ascended into heaven. Even settings not directly related to Jesus but connected to the economy of salvation such as Adam's burial site, are included in the sacred map.

The significance of this codification is related to the elaborate ritual pilgrimage intended for all who come to the mountain. This pilgrimage is divided into the following stages:

- (a) following the footsteps toward resurrection.
- (b) preparatory purification before viewing, and
- (c) a taste of the new heaven and the new earth (Pesigan 1992:142).

These stages are a dramaturgical ritualization of the journey that all believers are supposed to undergo.

The significance then of this ‘literal transplantation’ of locations related to the Christian salvation lies in the conviction that salvation did not happen in some faraway land but actually happens here and now to this nation that has now been divinely chosen.

Jose Rizal as the Tagalog Christ

The final step leading to the integration of traditional Christian eschatology and Philippine history is the identification of Jose Rizal as the Tagalog Christ.

The earliest record of this identification is the canonization of Rizal together with the three martyr priests – Jose Burgos, Mariano Gomez and Jacinto Zamora – by the Philippine Independent Church on 24 September 1903. Though not a millenarian group, this church opened the way toward recognition of Rizal’s life and death.

Since then, countless groups belonging to the local millenarian tradition have honored Rizal. This religious honor has taken many forms – from sainthood to identification with Jesus Christ – which attract much attention from outside commentators. One must, however, understand them within the interpretative framework of these groups.

One finds in many of the documents and prayers of millenarian groups that Rizal is given many titles such as *Amang Rizal na Santo* (Saint Father Rizal) from *Bathalismo* (Foronda: 65). Another text honors him by comparing him to Jesus Christ:

<i>Ng si Rizal naman lumitaw sa mundo</i>	When Rizal came to the world
<i>Hindi rin kinilala ng tao</i>	He was not recognized by all
<i>Dinusta ng lahat minurang tutuo</i>	He was truly scorned and cursed
<i>Nagbabala siya para din kay Kristo.</i>	He warned them like Christ.

(Foronda: 64)

In another passage, he is given the highest Christological identification:

Ang Cristo ng katagalugan ay si Dr. Jose Rizal. Ang Panginoon ng lahat dito sa Sanglibutan. Hari ng mga Hari, Panginoon ng mga Panginoon. Sapagka’t siya ang pinagkalooban ng banal na Tipan ng espiritu Santong bathalang Maykapangyarihan.

Rizal is the Christ of the Tagalog region. The Lord of the whole universe. King of Kings, Lord of Lords. Because the Almighty Bathala gave unto him the Holy Writ of the Holy Spirit (Foronda: 61).

But in another prayer he is listed with Jehovah and Jesus as the Trinity, changing names so that they will not be recognized (Foronda: 65). In an *Adamista* text, he is called Father Creator from Calamba (Foronda: 74).

These shifting descriptions of Rizal among various groups or even within a single community are understandable within their framework. One finds in many narratives of the group that holy people such as leaders or founders all have the ability to change identities. The most glaring example of this is Amang Ilustricimo, the founder of *Tres Persona Solo Dios* (Three Persons One God), who is shown not only to resurrect but also to assume many identities, especially as he travels throughout the Philippine (Marasigan 1985:129-90).

Rizal's identification with Jesus Christ appears to be the same. He is identified with the historical Jesus but is also his incarnation in the Orient. What is more important than the shifting title is the salvific value of his life and death for the Philippines. As one poem states:

<i>Jose Rizal kang pinatay</i>	You, Jose Rizal, were killed
<i>Patubos sa kaalipinan</i>	in redeeming our slavery
<i>Bayani ka nga pong tunay</i>	You are truly a hello
<i>Kristo ng KABANTUGAN.</i>	Christ of GREATNESS.

(Foronda 65)

It is the fact of his martyrdom for the nation that is the basis for the different titles with which the millenarian groups have honored him.

In the death of Rizal, then, these millenarian groups witness the actual saving deed of God. Not only had the divine chosen the Philippines and walked on the slopes of Mount Banahaw, but the actual redemption had taken place in the Philippines, and that means the perfect conjuncture of traditional millenarian views and Philippine national aspirations. It is no wonder that the Rizal centennial can be celebrated by both the representatives of the Philippine nation-state and the millenarian groups from the *Bagong Herusalem*.

Concluding Remarks

In tracing the aspects involved in the integration of traditional Christian eschatology and the trajectory of Philippine history, this essay points to the interpretative framework within which millenarian groups in the Philippines are able to interpret contemporary events and even participate in them.

Two related questions emerge, however, in the process. The first, which is properly theological, addresses what is known as inculturation in Christian vocabulary: may not the process that we discovered in the experience of Tagalog millenarian groups simply be a form of

inculturation, of incarnating 'Western Christianity' in Philippine culture? The second question deals with the relationship between millenarian views and nationalist aspirations, especially in those contexts where religion has influenced local culture profoundly.

In the light of the comment by Iletto that like other regions of Southeast Asia which 'domesticated' Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Islamic influences, the Philippines, despite the fact that Catholicism was more often than not imposed on it by Spanish missionaries, creatively evolved its own brand of folk Christianity from which was drawn much of the language of anticolonialism in the late nineteenth century (Iletto 1979:15).

it would be interesting to hear about the experience of other Asian cultures.

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