

Response

by

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I wish to thank Professor Julca for his stimulating essay. His reflections arising within the context of South America are applicable to the wider Christian community. Further, he solidly stands within the Wesleyan theological tradition of the Church of the Nazarene, as evidenced in his emphasis on realizable eschatology combined with social aspects of Christian mission.

The magnitude and complexity of the social/economic situations in Latin America are not unique to this world region. The so-called “developing” nations of Asia, Africa, and the former Soviet Union face similar situations marked by the accentuation of social disparities. Within Western European/North American cultures the social disparities, while reflecting a different reality, are displayed in economic and cultural dislocations. The continuing conflict in Palestine, war against terrorism, numerous insurrections and rebellions worldwide all reflect a global dissatisfaction with existing allocations of wealth, power, respect, and liberty.

Julca recognizes that theological reflection is both conditioned by social realities and functions to interpret social reality. The linkage between theological reflection and social reality is a dynamic one. The social realities that lead to “frustration and disenchantment” create an openness for a “proliferation of religious offers that have seduced many Latin Americans in recent years” and, paradoxically, for reflection on the Christian understanding of hope.

There is much in Julca’s essay with which I agree including: His rejection of escapist eschatology commonly found among North American conservative evangelicals and widely disseminated by their missionary activities; his relating eschatology with Mission and the missionary impulse; his dynamic relating of the Christian concept of hope with the immediate cultural context; and his repudiation of the theologies of prosperity.

I wish to raise several questions for further conversation and dialogue. These relate both to the nature of his presentation and his theological method. These questions are raised to clarify his thinking on the subject of Christian eschatology and hope, rather than as criticism or a critique.

In the opening paragraph he refers to theological reflection achieving “its purpose only when it keeps itself closely linked to the being and doings of the church and is converted into a tool that gives direction in the fulfillment of God’s mission.” What does the second clause (converted into a tool ...) mean? Does Julca have a particular manifestation of this instrumentalism in mind? I assume that this instrumentality is expressed in his understanding that our theology influences the way we live and develop our ministry. Does the manner in which we live our lives determine, at least in part, our theology?

In discussing the mission of the church as it lives with the tension between the inauguration and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, he states that the church “is to embody the values of the Kingdom and be an agent for change in society.” In outlining the content of this living out, Julca rejects a strictly (or only) futuristic view. He then proposes that “through the various ministries of compassion and mercy ... we can demonstrate the redeeming love of God and give a testimony about Christ.” Is this what he has in view as being “an agent for change in society?” Other Christian theologians, especially in Latin America, have called Christians and the church to participate in the restructuring of the social fabric to address the hopelessness of the current social reality. How does his call for various ministries of compassion and mercy relate to those who have called for the church to participate in social reconstruction?

In Julca’s essay there is a recognition of an obligation to participate in social reconstruction when he relates it to the integral mission of the church. The integral mission is the “reconstruction of all of human life and the restoration of all relationship affected by sin.” He also notes it is “God’s purpose is to transform that situation” [referring to “the raw reality in which persons are living”].

Is hope the center of a Wesleyan eschatology? Usually the center is characterized as the restoration of the Image of God both in the individual and creation. Thus understood, hope is a real but intermediate Christian value. Hope is necessary for the hopeless, but for the Christian it refers to a reality beyond itself. Hope is the anticipation and confidence that God in Jesus Christ has and will bring about the restoration of the image of God in humanity and all of the created order. This is the reality to which Christian hope is a referent. If the mission of the church is understood to be an active agent through the Spirit in the restoration of the image of God, then the church is called to a ministry of transformation rather than coping in its relationship with the world. Such a view calls the church to do more than provide an alternative model of community. It calls for the church to be fully engaged in promoting the wholeness (holiness) of the image of God. In this regard holiness may be seen as the central concept of a Wesleyan eschatology.

This ministry of transformation is the ministry of the Spirit. It is not one of social engineering or ideology, but it is one that is engaged with social, cultural, economic, and political realities and entities. The holiness we are called to is bold, not timid, in its engagement with personal and systemic sin.

Again, I wish to thank Professor Julca for his essay. I trust that our conversation will enrich our understanding and actions.