

# READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES: CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTICISM AND THE CONSPIRACY OF THE COVIDIANS

**Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras**

Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana

Email: leonard\_epafras@staff.ukdw.ac.id

## Abstract

This study concerned about urban community's COVID-19 Pandemic provoked conspiracy theories and for some religionists, initiated the sequence of end time (*akhir zaman* or *hari kiamat*). The present paper delved into the meaning of pandemic for some Indonesian Christians, notably among those who understand the crisis as part of the God's eschatological scenario. Eschatology is discourse of end time (*eschaton*), prominent notably among the Abrahamic traditions. The eschatological aspiration oftentimes is overlapping with the discourse of interpreting the secret of God's mystery, which is within the purview of apocalypticism that created the academic discourse of *apocalyptic eschatology* - in short *apocalypticism*. The overlapping mostly informed by the interpretations of some biblical passages, notably the Book of Daniel (*Kitab Daniel*) and Revelation (*Kitab Wahyu*) in Christian Bible, which embraced both discourses. There are several versions of Christian apocalyptic narratives but in general incorporating the Second Coming of Christ and welcoming the messianic age. Conflation with the wide spread conspiracy theory, such as displayed by the anti-vaxx discourse and the proponents of Trump, which the conversation echoed as well among Indonesian Christians, further gravitated the narrative of the emergence of Antichrist force, as the main opposition to the "true" Christianity in the end time. The paper is focusing on the dynamic of the discourse manifesting in four cases as the representations, all to emphasize the significant contribution of digital culture in mobilizing such religious aspiration. The exploration further clarified through the interviews with the proponents of apocalyptic eschatology from two theological positions. The findings among others disclosed the subtext of the apocalypists such as through the discourse some Christians comprehend the global effect of pandemic, the appeal of the acceleration of evangelization, and the subversion toward secularism and anti-Christian forces.

**Keywords:** Christian apocalypticism, eschatology, conspiracy theory, COVID-19 conspiracy, Indonesian Christianity

*"Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" - Gospel According to Matthew, 24.3 (NIV).<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The present paper is a research report and an exploration of the meaning of *apocalyptic eschatological* narrative (*akhir zaman* or *hari kiamat*) among Indonesian Christians, first of all in the context of pandemic, moreover, in the context of digital mediatization of religious expression. This work, however, is not a biblical commentary

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<sup>1</sup> All the biblical passages are taken from New International Version (NIV)

(*tafsir Alkitab*) that assesses the subject's perception of biblical apocalypticism. Biblical commentary on the subjects is legion, though, the paper could not entirely escape from it. It may appear in the most relevant points.

To simplify the discussion and concurred with the popular understanding, the discourse of end time is understood within the term *apocalyptic* and *apocalypticism* - e.g. as per definition provided by Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2019) it means, "a doctrine concerning an imminent end of the world and an ensuing general resurrection and final judgment." A proper explanation of this choice is provided in the next part.

While the apocalyptic aspiration thus far remained at the fringe of Indonesian Christianity and the consequences are insignificant in the public space, compared to Muslim apocalypticism (cf. Fealy, 2019) and such discourse in the United States, it may be expected to contribute some insights on religious expression in the accelerated digital world during the pandemic. Firstly, it may broaden our understanding of the particular response of the religious community to the pandemic. Furthermore, it may say something on the evolvement of the discourse within the curfew of religion online, and eventually, it helps us to understand the contemporary dynamic of Christian apocalypticism as understood within two religious' modes, i.e. intellectual affirmation that is more visibly among the Ecumenical and most of Evangelical churches, and on the other hand, the emphasis on experiential appeal, displayed mostly by many Pentecostal, Charismatic, and independent churches (see the dynamic of Christian denominations in Aritonang, 2018). The discourse of apocalypticism to a certain extent heightened the denominational demarcation but on the other hand there were also fluidity beyond those lines, in which the apocalyptic appeal and urgency displayed by the interdenominational subjects. The example was the aforementioned Whatsapp message that was residing in a WAG that the members came mostly from the Protestant churches, leaning to Ecumenical outlook.

### **Methods and Methodology**

The research was initiated by a number of Whatsapp messages, appeared in my Christians' Whatsapp Groups (WAGs). Then it followed up through the socmed links appearing in those messages or having the replication from it. Furthermore, the observation was directed at several YouTube video postings, and lastly, by chance the data was sought as well from some TikTok postings.

The material objects were selected from 40 Whatsapp messages in three WAGs I am subscribed with, within the period March 2020 to January 2021. Seventeen YouTube postings were part of the observation, and additional 30 other postings in Facebook and blogs, two editions of *Bahana* Christian magazine (1997 and 2000), which published special editions on apocalypticism, and other sources. Three TikTok postings were selected among several others that might indicate certain apocalyptic aspirations. Out of those numbers and regardless of a number of topics that can be explored, I decided to probe four representations, while considering insights from other data feeds as well. Those are a Whatsapp message, one TikTok account, and two YouTube accounts.

The research also sought insights through interviews from two informers, i.e., Rev. Janni Lewi from *Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Indonesia* (STTI, Indonesia Evangelical Theological College), and Rev. Stephanes Irawan from *Gereja Masehi Adven Hari Ketujuh* (Seventh-Day Adventist Church). The importance of two informers as they came from two apocalyptic theologies, the former from Dispensational Evangelical theology, which is the most influential apocalyptic theology as we shall see. The latter

was coming from a Christian denomination that evolved from a certain version of Christian apocalypticism.

The significance of Whatsapp in this regards is because it is one of the most popular instant messaging applications - by October 2020, the third of the most-used social platforms, after Facebook and YouTube, with two billion users (We Are Social, 2020b, p. 50), and second for Indonesians after YouTube (We Are Social, 2020a, p. 43). Whatsapp provides relatively secure privatized public space, or *public sphericule* (Gitlin, 1998), through which the gossips, and other subversive talks, message reposting, either from the mainstream or partisan media outlets are running, hence expectedly provided candid discussion and religious agenda. Nevertheless, it was limited in scope as it is not easy to join WAGs without invitation from the group admins.

Literature reviews were conducted toward the most relevant books from the apocalyptists and evangelist such as from Harold Lolowang (2008, 2010), Rev. Robert Robinson (2020), those who wrote and interviewed by *Bahana* magazine (1997 and 2000 editions), and the late Morris Cerullo (2002). The references of conspiracy theory and the apocalyptic discourse and theorization appeared in the following discussions.

Apocalypticism and eschatology are two separate discourses that interrelated to each other. Among many proposals, I took the definition of apocalypticism as a “phenomenon of the disclosure of heavenly secrets in visionary form to a seer for the benefit of a religious community experiencing suffering or perceiving itself victimized by some form of deprivation” (Hanson, 1992, p. I: 279). The term derived from the Greek, *apokalypsis*, “revelation” or “disclosure.” The aforementioned definition has framed us that such aspiration is associated with the human crises, hence COVID-19 pandemic served as a perfect context for apocalypticism.

Eschatology on the other hand is teaching or discourse of “the last things” and “it refers to a time in the future when the course of history will be changed to such an extent that one can speak of an entirely new state of reality” (Petersen, 1992, p. II: 575). Both discourses are prominent in many religions, but Judaism and Christianity are distinct in developing them, in particular because historically Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity were deeply affected by the early form of apocalyptic eschatological discourses (see full discussions e.g. in McAllister, 2020). In modern times both discourses are often confused with each other, as the heavenly secret revelation might be including the nature and features of the end of human history, the discourses epitomized and simplified by the term *apocalypticism*. From this on, we testified the derivative term emerged, which is the definition not so strongly guarded, the term of “secular apocalypticism” to refer to the non-religious discourse of the natural and socio-political devastation or the vision of a perfect future. The feeling of a version of an end of history hardly a religious monopoly discourse. A score of intellectuals and political movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, preached the coming era of “reason, freedom, and progress,” hence proclaimed the culmination of human history, as a version of “secular eschaton or millennium” (Toft et al., 2011, p. 68). This version furthermore was conversed through the notion of “end of ideology” by Daniel Bell (Bell, 1988), which further manifested in the idea of “the end of history” by Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 1992; see also Derrida, 2006, p. 17) and “clash of civilizations” by Samuel Huntington (Huntington, 1993, 1996; cf. Barkun, 2006, p. 17). To the latter, “apocalyptic” vision was associated with the revival of global Islam (Lewis, 1990).

The analysis rests upon discourse analysis, notably through Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1984). Dialogism in this sense is different from the popular buzzword of public dialogue, which has a strong appeal in the interfaith encounter in Indonesia. It

is more on the acknowledgement of the interactivity of text, or utterance, and its social character. It furthermore is an interplay of mutual challenging or contesting narrative or utterance among the social agencies. Dialogism may appear as a provocative interaction and exchange that often has the effect of testing assumptions and preparing or imagining for further social transformation. In this regard, apocalyptic discourse is a subversion toward what would be a dominant narrative.

A final note. *Covidian* as a neologism related to the COVID-19 pandemic context, provided by Urban Dictionary (Urban Dictionary, 2020) and Peter McLaren (McLaren, 2020). Urban Dictionary defined it as a derogatory to “someone who has elevated COVID-19 prevention or mitigation to the point of a religious persuasion.” McLaren on the other hand, related it as a pun of the Waco-based religious extremist group, Branch Davidian. Hence, Branch Covidian, for him, is a negative effect of American Christian Conservatism in relationship with the pandemic. My usage of the term is relatively closer to McLaren to emphasize the unique apocalyptic narrative upon the pandemic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

There are two kinds of relationships between the notion of apocalypticism and eschatology, i.e. *prophetic eschatology* and *apocalyptic eschatology*. The former is referring to the understanding of historical events through the mythical (or we can say theological) language. The latter is a way around a mythical (or we can say cosmic) mindset that is exposed into the concrete historical events (Jindo, 2005; replied by DiTommaso, 2006). While apocalyptic eschatology seems dominant in the present research project, in fact both conditions were well represented among data engaged and often appeared overlapping. It means that for some the pandemic context since the onset is understood as the continuation apocalyptic drama, while for the other is a moment to respond theologically and ethically in the proper way, and indeed some others appeared in hybrid versions as well.

The famous remark by German theologian Ernst Käsemann sixty years ago still haunts Christian theology up until the present day. He asserted, “[a]pocalyptic ... was the mother of all Christian theology ... apocalyptic is the real beginning of primitive Christian theology” (Käsemann, 1969, p. 40). Beyond theological discussion, Käsemann suggested apocalypticism is part of early Christian identity hence along the course of history the aspiration would appear and reappear again.

The problem rests upon what kind of apocalyptic discourse is offered. As critically observed by Latour, Modernity to certain sense influenced the notion apocalypticism by putting the possibility to immanentize the end time (*eschaton*) (Latour, 2017) - later appeared in the struggle between futuristic apocalypticism holding by some section of Evangelical Christians and historicized apocalypticism, which with portion of spectacularism and sensationalism appeared in commodified and an easy-to-prey of conspiracy theory. Latour drew his complex idea from German American historian, Eric Voegelin who once remarked “such an immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton, however, is a theoretical fallacy” (Voegelin, 1987, p. 120), later on popularized by a conservative public intellectual, William Buckley, “don’t immanentize the eschaton.” The issue at hand then, the extent of immanentization of apocalyptic discourse by Christians in the context of pandemic.

The research on apocalypticism, in particular Christian apocalypticism, was matured. It was first of all part of biblical studies and the study of early Jewish-Christian interactions. Within theological discipline the research on the subject, notably as apocalyptic literature are legion. To name the least the works of John Collins (e.g. 1998),

two-volume collections of non-canonical scriptures, edited by James H. Charlesworth (1983, 1985), and among the younger scholar we found the extensive works of Andrei Orlov (e.g. 2017).

Beyond theology, which is more pertinent for the present undertaking, in particular apocalypticism as modern religious movements, many are justifiably focusing on the phenomena among American Christianity, or American culture at large. I found the works of Stephen Spector on Zionist Christians (2009), Michael Northcott on the apocalyptic imageries exploited by President George W. Bush in enhancing the agenda of War on Terrorism (2004), Michael Barkun on relationship between Conspiracy Theory and Christian Apocalypticism (2006), Sarah Posner on relationship between White American Evangelicalism with former President Donald Trump (2020), and Joseph Uscinski on the politics of Conspiracy Theory, including during the tenure of President Trump and its relationship with Christian apocalypticism (2020). The present research is following the aforementioned work's steps and attempting to contextualize their insights in Indonesian context, notably among the Christians.

According to Hummel, American Evangelicalism influenced not only theological landscape, but also cultural, and political lives (Hummel, 2020, p. 288). Benjamin Park observed that “[t]he United States of America was to be, beyond anything else, a Christian refuge from a fallen world. ... In a world of growing secularism, the United States is presented as a last refuge for explicit Christian devotion. The country's religious nationalism has even made possible one of the unlikeliest of alliances: the loyalty between evangelical ministers and Donald Trump” (Park, 2018; McLaren, 2020).

Among Evangelical Christianity roughly there are three positions of eschatology, i.e., Premillennialists, Postmillennialists, and Amillennialists. Premillennialist argued that Jesus Christ will return before the thousand years Kingdom prophesied by the book of Revelation. Postmillennialists understood that the church is evolving in fulfilling the coming Kingdom of God, until the coming of Christ. However, the Amillennialists argued that there is no millennium kingdom but a figurative sense. When Jesus is coming, the church will immediately usher into the new heaven and earth (Blaising et al., 1999, p. 7).

The sub-narrative includes the end of human history, great tribulation for the faithful, the emergence of anti-Christ force (Antichrist), and one thousand years of the Christ reign, which is called *millennialism*. Global catastrophe, including major wars, natural disaster and plague - epidemic and pandemic in modern sense - are mandatory for ushering the end time. For some, the prominent position of modern state of Israel is formative. While there is a huge spectrum of interpretation among Christian branches, the narrative is embedded among certain Christian theologies, such as Dispensationalism and formative for some other Christian denominations, such as Seventh-Day Adventists. The spectacular and historicism version is prominent in public space, beginning in the United States, rendered in Indonesia among, though not exclusively, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianities, and through social media immersed interdenominational among other Indonesian Christians.

### **Premillennial Dispensationalism Theology**

There were a number of end time understanding among the Christians, let alone the prophetic and apocalyptic version of eschatology, Premillennial Dispensationalism theology among the American Evangelicalism is one formative agency in shaping the discourse of apocalypticism globally, including in Indonesia. It is a complex movement with a number of branches of ideas and institutions that I could not properly address in

the present paper. However, in its traditional understanding and through the specific reading of the Bible, it understood the world history divided into seven dispensations (hence Dispensationalism): *Innocence, Conscience or Moral Responsibility, Human Government, Promise, Law, Church and Kingdom* (Scofield & Rikers, 2002, pp. 4; inset). To put simply, the Dispensationalist took biblical prophecy seriously. It “finds the historical meaning of biblical prophecy relevant for understanding God’s purpose for the earth and for its human inhabitants” (Blaising & Bock, 2000, p. 18).

Dispensationalism is a premillennialist movement that holds a belief that the second coming of Jesus Christ will take place before the promised one thousand years of the fulfilled Kingdom of God. Before the return of Christ to the world, there will be a troubled period called *Tribulation* in which the Antichrist figure appeared to make trouble with the Christians. For the true faithful they will not live under the spell of Antichrist because right before his (thus far Antichrist is male figure) appearance, they will be saved through the process of *Rapture (pengangkatan)* to the clouds, welcomed personally by Jesus Christ.

One important detail that makes this theology influential is the status of Jews and the modern state of Israel. Both played prominent roles in the apocalyptic construction, as biblical prophecies largely discuss the fate of Israel. Hence, unlike other Christians, which the attitude toward Jews and Israel are complicated, in general Dispensationalist take Jews and Israel outrightly the truest inheritor of God’s promise and prophecies, which divide clearly between prophecies to Israel and prophecies to the Church (J. Lewi, personal communication, November 29, 2020). Indeed, a large part of Dispensationalists are supporters of the modern state of Israel. Because without Israel returning to the promised land, the sequence of apocalyptic events could be initiated. Though this is not exclusively Dispensationalist, the fulfillment of prophetic promise and apocalyptic event is related as well with global evangelization, including evangelization among the Jews.

Finally, there are two versions of Dispensationalism, the futurist-progressive Dispensationalism, and historicist. The futurist holds that since the Church underwent Rapture during the Tribulation, it is impossible for Christians to identify the present events as Tribulation. They catapulted the apocalyptic event to the future and beyond the human calculation. Though, indeed they believed, considering the devastation of global quality of life that the historical process gradually is leading to the fulfillment of biblical prophecies (J. Lewi, personal communication, November 29, 2020). In contrast, the historicist holds the beliefs that we can sense the historical events that lead to Tribulation and Rapture. Such position that put the apocalyptic moment at odds as earlier mentioned, there is a tendency to “immanentize the eschaton” hence could easily slip into sensationalism, spectacularism, but at the same time popularizing religious apocalypticism (Blaising & Bock, 2000, pp. 18–19). To the latter many books translated into Indonesians, hence provided an intellectual base for Indonesian apocalypticism (e.g. Lindsey, 1977; Ryrie, 1981, 2005; Walvoord, 1996, 2003; LaHaye & Jenkins, 2010; cf. the responses to the discourse Wijayanto, 2009, pp. 105–108; Burge, 2010, p. 290; satuharapan.com, 2014).

### **Between Conspiratorial Politics and Conspiracy Theory**

Like earlier histories, COVID-19 pandemic initiated new conspiracy theories as it heightened the existing one. It prolonged the historical racism and created a new one, embodied in a group such as QAnon (Uscinski, 2020, p. 8; Žižek, 2021, pp. 151–152). The new theories targeted for instance, Chinese, not only as the origin of the spread, but also as a technological giant, evidently in 5G conspiracy (Ahmed et al., 2020), and as

cultural and ethnical denotation that impacted Eastern Asians and other “Oriental” look people in the Western countries (Kim, 2020). Historical antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Black, and anti-minorities were simply amplified during these dark hours (Cassen, 2020; Sahoo, 2020; United Nations Human Rights, 2020), in which “traditional” conspirators such as The Freemason and Illuminati, despite their mundane history, enjoyed transcendental popularities (Isbouts, 2017, pp. 56–59, 62–65).

As observed by Bale and others, in times of crises such conspiracy met the social and psychological function as it helped people to comprehend the complicated cause and effect of human affairs, through reductionism, totalizing and oversimplifying the matters. The theorists believed in the monolithic, unrepented, omnipresent, omnipotent conspirators, overlooked nuances and complex subject situations. The theory further helping them to make a comprehensible identification of the source of the problem, and finally, by personifying and contextualizing the subject of conspiracy, it gives people degree of “control” and “safer” over the situation (Bale, 2007, pp. 50–53; cf. Dagnall et al., 2015; Douglas et al., 2017).

Still, Bale differentiated between conspiracy theories with mundane political dynamics, which he termed “conspiratorial politics.” It is accordingly, a “hidden or disguised and often deleterious in their impact, simply does not correspond to the bleak, simplistic image propounded by conspiracy theorists.” He further asserted that, “Far from embodying metaphysical evil, it is perfectly and recognizably human, with all the positive and negative characteristics and potentialities that this implies” (Bale, 2007, pp. 53–54). Conspiratorial politics appeared in for instance the indication of Chinese covering up the earliest moment of COVID-19 spread that in many ways the evaluation was not based on social, cultural or religious prejudice, but from complicated and informed assessment of the case. Nevertheless, extreme political view might be a fertile soil for conspiracy theories (cf. van Prooijen et al., 2015), such as displayed by pro-Trump politicians and right wing Americans. Trump’s relationship with the Alt-right (alternative right), a predominantly White, conservative, evangelical Christian group is evident (see Posner, 2020; Uscinski, 2020), continuing the earlier history of Christian conservatism and apocalypticism (Barkun, 2006; Spector, 2009).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Immanentized the eschaton #1: Coronavirus and 666

Since March 2020, several Whatsapp messages have been circulated among Indonesian Christian Whatsapp Group (WAG), evidently attempting to relate COVID-19 with the nearing end time. A message received by April 23<sup>rd</sup> is suggestive in this regard. It was a quick summary of three subsidiary messages: one on the relationship between pandemic and the emergence of Antichrist - the ultimate anti-Christian force or figure. A longer message was on evangelism in Argentina, and lastly the prophecy (*nubuat*) on Global Pentecostalism, a projection to a new Christian revival during the pandemic. While seemingly only two relevant to our discussion, moreover all of them are interconnected and its presentation in single message was well crafted. The extent of distribution of the message cannot be gauged but presumably filled up many Christian WAGs and reshared by the enthusiasts.

The first lines of the message are crucial through the heading “Steve Ciocolanti just uploaded that NWO (New World Order) and the sign 666 (Wah13) is in fact initiated through the plague [i.e. COVID-19 pandemic]” (*Steve Ciocolanti baru sj mengupload bhw NWO (New World Order) & tanda 666 (Wah13) sebenarnya telah dimulai melalui*

wabah ini). The message was referring to Pastor Cioccolanti's YouTube posting on April 19, 2020 entitled "BREAKING: It's Happening...Total NWO Control | Anti-Christ Beast System 666" (Steve Cioccolanti & Discover TV, 2020) which disclosed the unholy partnership between Apple technology company and, of what he allegedly "Antichrist's" COVID-19 tracing technology. Steve Cioccolanti is a pastor of Discover Church and Discover Ministry, a Melbourne-based Christian institution, and also an active YouTuber. He was converted to Christianity from a Thai Buddhist family. With 55.6K, 319K and 21.4K of YouTube and Twitter followers of his personal and institution respectively, he was one of pro-Trump global Christian preachers outside the United States. He could be classified as per Ruth Graham of the *New York Times*, one of the raising "prophets" among the American Christianity (Graham, 2021); which I argued the phenomenon is not limited to United States alone but echoing throughout global Christianity as well, including to Indonesia (cf. Christina, 2020).

The following line of the aforementioned message asserted that "[t]here are countries applying vaccine cards" (*Ada negara yg sdh akan memulai penggunaan kartu vaksin*). It is interesting to read such prophecies in the present context where vaccination is already a global commitment, including by Indonesian government, which the author of the message was seemingly on the side of the anti-vaxx campaign that tried to obstruct it. The fear of body intrusive substance through vaccines is in a plane with the earlier discussion of chip injection.

The latest episode was the fear of luciferase enzyme in the vaccine, which will immerse into the human DNA, even changing the DNA structure, and in the end let the receptor to be controlled by the New World Order, the Antichrist system. Such fear has been countered by many independent churches (e.g. Real Talk with Michael Gunawan, 2021; Truth.id, 2021). Stretching period of the pandemic indeed suffered the element of spectacular and sensationalism of apocalyptic discourse, expecting abrupt and phenomenal manifestations of apocalyptic moments. Once the euphoria died out, people were returned to their daily struggle. To a certain extent, conspiracy theory served well to prolong such a sensation.

A quick note can be drawn from the aforementioned message. First, at the face value such message was simply an echo of traditional apocalyptic scenario that was already current, though undergone ups and downs, since the 1970s after the translation of apocalyptic books written by figures such as Hal Lindsey, John Walvoord, David Wilkerson, Tim LaHaye and others. The scenario in general was a contextualization, or more correctly historicizing many global events, such as Middle East wars, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, natural disasters, and notably, the emergence of European Economic Community (EEC), the harbinger of European Union (EU), and put those as the signs of the end time and specifically, the coming force of Antichrist. Those was associated to the cryptic, highly symbolized narrative of the Book of Revelation (*Kitab Wahyu*), the last book of Christian New Testament, coupled with the interpretation of Book Daniel in the Old Testament, and many other biblical passages that considered since the early of Christianity, holding the cosmic secret of the future of Christianity and humanity. The most prominent message is that Jesus Christ will come for the second time, defeating Satan and his followers, and establishing the new heaven and earth in which He will reign to eternity and perpetual peace is going to be maintained. In many versions, to that agenda the role of Jews and the state of Israel to usher to the new age were striking and formative.

Hence, eventually, the Whatsapp message forewarned the Christians that the sequence of end time has been initiated through the pandemic, by mentioning the emergence of the Beast, or the Antichrist force, buried deep behind the sign code "666."



As informed by the message, the reference was Revelation chapter 13 (*Wahyu 13*) with regards to the appearance of two beasts from sea and earth. 666 numerology might be seen as a symbol of incommensurable agency, a discontinuity of a known human realm. Internet, barcode, chip and so on, were an array of technological embodiments crucified as the Antichrist signs. Once *sabun Camay* (Camay soap) was charged by some Indonesians in the 1980s as the representation of Antichrist, because of its producer's logo, Procter & Gamble for some, could be interpreted as 666 and devil's horns, as told by the Book of Revelation. Evidently, such discourse appeared among Indonesians was simply the echo of American apocalypticism (Belkin, 1985).

Further investigation to the rest of messages on evangelism in Argentina and the prophecy of Global Pentecostalism revealed the recent tendency observed by many scholars about the stronger Pentecostal churches in South America (e.g. Jenkins, 2007). However, such information endorsed during the pandemic might be connoted to the fulfillment of one among many apocalyptic visions by some Christians, i.e., the acceleration of global evangelization.

Second, such a short message might persuade the reader to check on the original source in YouTube, but moreover, for some Christians, it also activates Christians' cultural memory on the biblical narrative of the ultimate redemption through the narrative of end time. The shortness of the message might tell the popularity of the main outline of the narrative; hence the sender did not bother to supply more information. Indeed, not all of messages were short as this one, but short message with spectacular punch line might be the manifestation of the logic of digital communication, i.e. viralized form of communication, communication that revolved on controversial and contentious topic, or "social drama" (Postill & Epafra, 2018, pp. 112–113). It attempts to drag the reader to spectacularism and sensationalism in hoping to initiate the chain of reaction and virality. Viral communication is prominent within the discourse of digital communication, notably in socmed.

Later on, such apocalyptic-nuanced messages appeared more and more, along with similar postings in socmed such as Facebook and YouTube during the pandemic, though they were not dominating much over the more urgent conversation surrounding the pandemic. The appearance fluctuated over time, and once more got fresh attention as the news of the availability of vaccines went to the mainstream media and the anti-vaxx movement caught the wind. At this moment, once again the alleged Antichrist force, which believed to attempt to control human minds through intrusive substances such as vaccines, was prominent. The controversy initiated a number of webinars and YouTube talk shows among Christians.

### **Immanentized the eschaton #2: Rapture in TikTok**

A TikTok account @ypxxxxx provided a different venue to understand the apocalyptic discourse. The observation was conducted to the account with 156.4K followers in August 2020. The scene started with an image of a young beautiful girl sitting in front of a laptop, with notebook and pen in her hands, and an open Bible next to the laptop. On the background is a fragment of Hillsong Worship, *What a Beautiful Name* (2017), written by Ben Fielding and Brooke Ligertwood. The caption started with "Online Worship" (*Ibadah Online*), followed strings of lines, "First Week" (*Minggu pertama*), corresponding with the sentence "Focus listening the sermon" (*Fokus dengerin kotbah*), "First Month" (*1 bulan pertama*), corresponding with "Jot down every God's word" (*Catat setiap firman yang didapat*). While the first part the girl displayed enthusiasm, the third string "Third Month" (*Bulan ke-3*) corresponding with "Get bored and unfocused"

(*Mulai bosan dan ga fokus*) and with the boring face and crossed hands. Further the situation is worsened, she displayed no more interest in the service, chit chat instead with her friends on the gadget. Suddenly, she was shocked when found her household members disappeared, leaving their clothes on the floor, and in the middle of the screen a word appeared “Rapture” (*pengangkatan*). The short video ended with her kneel down full of regret, with a caption over her “too late to regret” (*Menyesal ga akan ada gunanya*).

In less than a minute the video told us so much. It smartly squeezed the complex apocalyptic narrative into a more contextual and engaging way. The main message of Rapture is immediately associated with the spiritual discipline of online worship service, a practice which marked the ritual during pandemic. The video epitomized how Rapture became the primary signifier in the Dispensational-leaning apocalypticism. While the video was produced in 2020, it is in fact a fruit of historicist Dispensationalism through pop culture. It was started by Hal Lindsey with his best seller book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), translated into Indonesian by 1977. Followed by books and multimedia franchises by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins entitled *Left Behind* (1995-2007), the vivid imagery of the Rapture and those who left behind imprinted deeply to the Christian psyche and rendered it to global Christianity.

Regardless the numerous criticism and skepticism volleyed to Dispensationalism in general and to the Rapture theology in particular, as one prominent Indonesian theologian branded it as “destructive theology” (e.g. [satuharapan.com](http://satuharapan.com), 2014; [AkhirZaman.org](http://AkhirZaman.org), 2012), the adoption and repackaging the message over the socmed such as TikTok, demonstrated the power of apocalyptic narrative sown among certain Christian group.

Different performance but the same message, revolved on Rapture and Tribulation displayed as well by several other Christian’s TikTok accounts such as @axxnetwork and @draxxblessing.

How such “heavy” stuff could easily be consumed by the younger generation. An intertextual observation might suggest an answer for this. A shared message from Facebook appeared in a WAG in August 2020. A 1500-words article written by a self-styled “End-Times Observer” entitled “End Time Thanos” (*Thanos Akhir Zaman*). In short, the vicious COVID-19 was equated with Thanos from the Marvel Comics. As the ultimate destroyer of the world, the author related Thanos with passages in the Book of Revelation, i.e., 6.7-8 (NIV): “When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death (*Thanatos*), and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.” He produced complicated rationale to relate Thanatos (the Death) with Thanos, famine and plague with numerous viruses including COVID-19, wild beasts with ISIS. The imagination of a cosmic war, the battle between the *absolute* good and *absolute* evil forces, between light and darkness, deeply ingrained in the mating between Christian apocalypticism and conspiracy theory. ISIS and COVID-19 juxtaposed together might represent absolute evil.

Intertextuality and intercontextuality allowed us to understand popular culture, which is a form of modern mythology living in the same imaginative terrain with apocalyptic narrative. The doomsday or the end time with all of its proxies, i.e., hungers, famine, natural disasters, and terrorist could easily reperform through the Hollywood-like performance, and furthermore, personalized through medium such as TikTok.

Since the immediate association of the piety, religious narrative with the presentation of spectacularization of apocalypticism, hence it is to a degree a consumption of religiosity, or perhaps spirituality as well.

### **Immanentized the eschaton #3: Marketing and Consuming Prophetic Messages**

Thanos connection with end time through the presence COVID-19 confirmed by another preacher from a Revival Feraxxx YouTube channel (56.1K followers), which in tandem with Instagram account @RRS. In its video posting February 3, 2020, the same Revelation passages once again employed to explain the coming of COVID-19 in relationship with the hastened end time, and explicitly mentioned the Second Coming of Christ. The most striking features of this channel, however, is that apocalypticism as end time (*akhir zaman*), prophesy (*nubuatan*), prophetic (*kenabian*), and prophet (*nabi*), all became ministerial brands, an Indonesian version of the new layer of religious authority that christened themselves “prophets” (Graham, 2021)

Almost all of its 138 posted videos entitling with bombastic titles, such as “News from the Future,” “Prophetic Dream,” “God’s Message for 2020,” “Spiritual Warfare,” “BREAKING: Disclosing the secret of Coronavirus and the End Time’s Message,” and so on. In her preaching she repeatedly using “prophetic” as the adjective of her message, such as “doing prophetic research on virus in Wuhan,” and identified herself as “prophesy code breaker.” Thus far from my observation this is an example of Christian ministry that openly takes as its brand “prophetic” and apocalypticism. Other interesting features is that the adoption of biblical calendar and Jewish numerology (*gematria*) such as Purim holiday and *peh aleph*, which emphasize the exposure of Judaic sub-culture. Epafra argued that such exposure might give balance for some Indonesian Christians to their Muslims co-religionists with Arabic sub-culture, in the religious identity competition (Epafra, 2014). Besides that, the Mandarin translator in some of the programs might signal the global connectivity and the fulfillment of global evangelization as the pre-condition of the end time.

The urge to create a new niche in the spiritual market is straightforward. Nevertheless, aside from the visible sensationalism, many of the substance of the program aimed at encouraging the audiences to keep their hopes in the pandemic.

### **Immanentized the eschaton #4: Apocalyptic Response thru Healthy Life**

The final example is a display of different responses to the discourse of apocalypticism. A preacher-businessman, Pastor DT, renowned for his prophecy, created a new attitude of apocalypticism. In an interview with a Christian channel on vaccination, he provided an interesting insight (Real Talk with Michael Gunawan, 2021).

In 34 minutes of interview, he gave a number of interesting insights. First of all, he declared to have a vision that the Indonesian recovery will be started by 2023, and furthermore, in coming 25 to 50 years there will be a much more malicious virus. That alone positioned him departed from those who claimed on the nearing end time during the pandemic. While holding the belief of the end time, he on the other hand challenged the fear of vaccination as the means of Antichrist. To that theological position he branded “fake theology” (*teologi abal-abal*), “junk theology” (*teologi micin*), and warning the Christians to “not blindfolding subscribe to such theology” (*tidak usah ikut-ikutan*).

To the question of taking vaccination shoots, he let Christians to choose whether to take it or not. The choice for him is simple, “take the vaccination or arm wrestle with the virus” (*mau vaksin atau adu sakti*). The solution for him is to maintain healthy body. He further shared the prophecy from God to him the secret of maintaining our health is

by consuming parsley, carrot, guava, banana and other fruits. Because the coming virus will not weaken our respiratory but digestion. Among other prophetic sharing he discussed the melting of Antarctica, and the emergence of “minor” Antichrists (*antikris-antikris kecil*) such as the unifying monetary system. But over all of those developments he warned the preacher to not make commotion and deliver peaceful messages (*kita hamba Tuhan jangan bikin ribut ... bawa pesan damai*).

Among the Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, Pastor DT is probably atypical. Nevertheless, Seventh-day Adventists denomination in fact has been taking health issues as its theological posture, as part as well as its apocalyptic theological construction. Adventists movement was an offshoot of the failed apocalyptic movement by William Miller - hence it was called Millerite Movement. While maintaining the premillennialists outlook, Adventists modified and moderated their views over time, and simply maintained the Second Coming will take place “soon” (S. Irawan, personal communication, November 29, 2020; Lawson, 2000, p. 676).

Pandemic indeed entertained the Adventists to the nearing the Second Coming of Christ. Along with other apocalyptists, they also interpret the word of Jesus in eschatology and the Book of Revelation pregnant with signs of the end time, nevertheless, they prepared among others through the health service. Ellen White, accordingly already prophesied a century ago, the coming of plague and airborne disease. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic is simply a further stage to the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Adventists renowned for their healthcare system through the establishment of hospitals and the encouragement of vegetarian lives. Consequently, they never have a problem with vaccination initiatives (S. Irawan, personal communication, March 15, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Summarizing the above observations, some conclusions can be drawn.

Apocalypticism provided hope and strength to endure the dark hours. Hence, in regards of prophetic and apocalyptic modes of eschatology, both are fluidly present in the conversation. In the larger part, in fact it is irrelevant to categorize the discourse by using the two modes. Pandemic is both understood as historical reality, read through the apocalyptic eyes. It also, on the other hand, is a prolongation of the cosmic moment that has been recorded in the Bible, through which the apocalyptists merely forge an association with specific historical events such as pandemic. In some of the conversation, indeed the pragmatic approaches were combined with apocalyptic vision. In the mediatized context such as in socmed, the apocalyptic vision appeared in instrumentalized platform, hence the *immanentized eschaton* meet its fullness through the digital system.

Referring to the Hummel observation that American Evangelicalism version of apocalypticism is present in three levels, i.e., theology, culture, and politics, Indonesian chapter is having different variations. In term of cultural, in particular of digital culture, apocalypticism is also a form of consumption, through the commodification of the message, its consumptive structure (followers, likes algorithm, hashtags, and endorsement), and performative engagement, which the branding and packaging are the rule of thumb. In terms of politics Indonesian apocalyptists are overwhelmingly pro-Jokowi, hence displayed a minority-complex that tended to subscribe to the incumbent.

Premillennialism theology is prominent. The influence of Dispensationalism is apparent as many of the subjects of observation kept mentioning Rapture (*pengangkatan*),

except the Seventh-Day Adventist. Nevertheless, it seems that it is a popular version that is closer to the *historicist* Dispensationalism position, rather than the *futurist* one. The side effect of that is some of Indonesian apocalyptists fell into sensationalism and conspiracy theories, in particular in regards to pandemic as a moment of the emergence of Antichrist power, a Deep State and New World Order conspiracies, and vaccination as an intrusive agent to alter the Christian faiths. While the more futurist adherents of Dispensationalism, and in particular Adventists, pandemic is considered as a moment for faith enhancements and maintaining social solidarities. Seventh-day Adventists have a long presence in healthcare services in Indonesia and on a global scale. Pandemic, while understood as part of the apocalyptic drama, simply boosted their well-grounded theology of health and social activities. Good health as the proper response to the rapture also endorsed at least by one prominent preacher.

To push further the above observation it can be said, with cautiousness that Apocalypticism in Indonesian context evolved along with the larger exposure for Christians to align themselves into the national and global issues. To a degree, apocalypticism is a symptom of being a minority and the complicated relationship between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia. It provided theological-mythological charged language to make sense of the tension. At this juncture, apocalypticism was a symptom of tension between Christianity and Islam (cf. Chevedden, 2013).

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