Rizal’s Ideas on National Liberation: The Three-Phased Discussion in El Filibusterismo

MIGUEL A. BERNAD
XAVIER UNIVERSITY
PHILIPPINES

It is perhaps not without significance that Rizal has placed the expression of his own political and social ideas in the mouth of a priest. He could have chosen a different spokesman, for instance, the “Philosopher,” or the school teacher, in the earlier novel. Instead he uses as his mouthpiece a priest whom he is at pains to portray as a model of rectitude and of the austere and unworldly life befitting a “man of God.” In the first two chapters of the novel, Rizal draws a sharp contrast between this humble and spiritual-minded Filipino (indio) secular priest and the Spanish friars whom he portrays as arrogant and pleasure-loving.

Whether or not there is justice in that ironic contrast between the unworldly “secular” Filipino priest and the worldly “religious” Spanish friars and whether or not that portrayal was true to life does not concern us here. What concerns us are the ideas expressed through the mouth of this humble and wise Filipino secular priest.

The ideas are expressed in the last chapter of El Filibusterismo. The wounded Simoun, fleeing from the Spanish authorities who had been his “friends” and now his bitter enemies, takes refuge in the priest’s house situated in a remote place by the sea. There, with only a few hours left of life, he makes “a long and painful” confession in which he reveals his real identity and recounts his entire life and what he has been trying to do.

After a prolonged stay abroad, Crisostomo Ibarra had come home to marry the girl he loved and to use his knowledge and skills in the improvement of his people. He was resolved to forgive and forget all the injuries that had been done to him and his family. His good intentions, however, were soon frustrated; he lost everything, including the
woman he loved, and in a frame-up in which he was cast as a seditious person, he almost certainly would have lost his life, had it not been for the heroic intervention of a friend. He vowed revenge. Returning overseas, he built up a small fortune, assumed a new identity as “Simoun,” re-entered the Philippines, deployed his wealth to buy his way into the confidence of the colonial officials, and proceeded to use his power over them to attain his country’s liberty. The means he chose for this, however, while possible to characterize as machiavellian, were in fact diabolic. They consisted in goading the officials on his payroll to steadily worsening acts of tyranny and cruelty. This way he hoped to be able finally to force an extremely tolerant and long-suffering Filipino people to rise up in a bloody revolt that would throw off the colonial yoke. His aim was nothing short of national liberation. His plans, however, were all frustrated, and we encounter him at one point in the novel a fugitive and a dying man.

It is after this confession and after the utterance of the priest’s words concerning God’s mercy and forgiveness that they enter into a discussion of political aims and strategies.

To properly understand the ideas thus expressed, it is important to review how they are expressed in the novel. The following summary in the form of dialogue is a translation *ad sensum* that tries to adhere faithfully to the ideas, although somewhat simplified *ad verba*.

The discussion may be divided into three distinct parts or phases. The first deals with the question of the country’s liberty and how it is not to be achieved. The discussion then shifts to a second phase, namely the consequences of government corruption. Finally, a third point is raised, the crucial role of the people themselves in any attempt at political reform or political liberty.

The priest uses an odd example of God’s mercy. God has been merciful (he says) in frustrating all of Simoun’s plans. This of course would sound to Simoun (and possibly to the reader) extremely odd. The fact that the very persons whom Simoun had been inciting to evil were now the instruments of his own death would look to anyone as an example of poetic justice. But this priest whom Rizal invests with deep spiritual wisdom sees it differently. He sees in it not poetic justice but the merciful hand of God. That gives the cue for the discussion that follows. In the following discussion “S” stands for Simoun, “PF” for Padre
Florentino. Simoun’s words are in bold letters, the priest’s in italics, our comments in unindented roman.

Phase 1: Liberty and How Not to Achieve It

S. So, according to you, it is God’s will that these Islands should –
PF. Continue to groan under oppression? I don’t know. I cannot read the designs of Providence. I do know that God does not fail those who, in moments of crisis, turn to Him for help and ask him to be the judge of their oppression. I also know that, when justice is trampled upon and there is no other recourse, God has not failed those peoples who take up the sword to fight for home, wife, children, and those inalienable rights which (as the German poet puts it) shine in the skies like the eternal stars.

S. Then, why did He not support my plans?
PF. Because you have chosen means that He cannot approve. The salvation of a country cannot be achieved by using the very means used to destroy it. You have believed that what has been stained and depraved by crime can be purified by another crime. How mistaken you are! Hate can produce nothing but monsters. Crime begets criminals. Only love can produce marvelous results.

It is in this context that Rizal puts into the mouth of Padre Florentino his much-quoted dictum:

PF. If our country is ever to be free, it will not be through vice and crime, corrupting her sons, deceiving some, bribing others. No. Redemption requires virtue, virtue demands sacrifice, and sacrifice, love.

Phase 2: The Results of Corruption

The noble sentiments thus uttered by the priest bring to a close the first part of the dialogue. The conversation turns to a second phase, a discussion of corruption and its consequences.

S. I accept your explanation. I have been wrong. But, just because of my error, will God deny liberty to an entire nation? And will God grant success to those who are worse criminals than I? What is my crime compared to the crimes of those in power? Will God pay
more attention to punishing the wrong I have done, and pay no heed to the groans of the innocent people suffering under oppression? Why not punish me alone, instead of punishing an entire nation, including the just and the innocent, while at the same time dealing tolerantly with those who oppress them?

PF. The just and the innocent must suffer so that their ideas can be spread and known. The jar must be broken so that the perfume can be poured out. The flintstone must be bruised so that sparks may be produced.

S. I know that, and that's why I induced those in power to exercise greater and greater tyranny.

PF. But that results only in more bloodshed. From that fomentation of vices, nothing can grow except fungus. Only fungi are born from garbage. It is true, vice will eventually destroy a government, but it will also destroy the society in which that government has developed.

At this point in the discussion Rizal introduces a new idea — new, that is, to this discussion. It is actually not a new concept. Others have expressed something similar, like the oft-quoted saying that people always get the government they deserve. Rizal's Padre Florentino puts it this way:

PF. Where the government is immoral, the people are demoralized. Where the administration is without conscience, there will be rapacious citizens in the towns and bandits in the hills. As the master, so the slave. As the government, so the people.

This idea that ends the second phase of the discussion is elaborated in the third phase.

Phase 3: The Price of Liberty

S. Then, what is to be done?

PF. Suffer. And work.

S. Suffer and work! Ah, how easy it is to say "suffer" when one does not have to suffer! How easy to say, "Work", when work is well rewarded. If your God demands so much sacrifice from a man who can hardly cope with the present and has nothing for the future — if you had seen what I have seen — wretched, miserable people
suffering unspeakable tortures for crimes they never committed; murders perpetrated to cover up the crimes and mistakes of others; fathers of families dragged away from their homes to work on roads that break up the next day, enterprises apparently undertaken merely to keep the people under subjection! Suffer? Work? That is the will of God? What kind of God is that?

PF. A just God. A God who punishes our lack of faith, our vices, our disregard for human dignity, our low regard for civic virtues. We tolerate vice, even connive at it. We even applaud a man for his vices. Is it not just — indeed totally in conformity with justice — that we and our children should suffer the consequences?

Here follows a long speech by Padre Florentino that will end the discussion. In it Rizal, through the mouth of the priest, explains his idea of what a people must be in order to deserve liberty. For him, national independence is not worth having if it is immediately lost to new tyrants, exchanging one form of tyranny for another much worse.

PF. God is the God of liberty, and He makes us love liberty by placing a heavy yoke on our shoulders. He is also a God of mercy, of righteousness, who improves us while chastising us. He grants national well-being only to a people who merit it by their efforts. The school of suffering tempers the soul. The field of combat invigorates it.

The priest continues:

I am not saying that liberty must be won by the sword. The sword counts for little among modern nations. But liberty must be earned by meriting it. Liberty can be achieved by elevating the intellect and the dignity of the individual. Liberty is won by loving what is good, what is just, what is great; loving liberty to the extent of dying for it. When a people reaches such a height, God will provide the weapons, and the idols will fall, tyranny will collapse like a house of cards.

The priest then elaborates the idea stated earlier, that a people is responsible for its own fate.

PF. Our ills are due to ourselves. Let us not blame others. If Spain saw us less tolerant of tyranny than we are, if Spain saw that we were prepared to fight and suffer for our rights, Spain would be the first to grant
us liberty. When the child in the womb is ready for birth, wretched is the mother that would keep it in the womb.

As long as the Filipino people does not have the energy to proclaim, with head raised and breast bared, our right to social life, guaranteeing it with our sacrifices and even our blood—why give us liberty?

In private we condemn injustice, in public we keep silent, perhaps we even join in the chorus of praise for those who commit the injustice, cynically making fun of the victims. In our selfishness, we praise with forced smile those guilty of corruption, lusting with our eyes for part of the loot. As long as these things happen, why give us liberty? With or without Spain, we would remain the same, perhaps even worse.

What good is independence if the slaves of today become the tyrants of tomorrow? And they will surely be tyrants: because those love tyranny who submit to it.

As long as our people are not prepared for independence, as long as they fight for it because they are deceived or are compelled to do so, the best attempts will fail. And it's just as well that they fail: why give the bride to the groom if he does not love her enough to be willing to die for her?

That ends the discussion. Simoun does not answer. He — the idealist who has lost his way — is dead. Rizal then puts in the priest's mouth the words which Rizal himself must have wanted to address to the youth. The priest murmurs it, but Rizal himself would probably have wished to proclaim it from the housetops:

"Donde está la juventud que va a consagrar sus rosadas horas, sus ilusiones y entusiasmos al bien de la patria?"

Where are the youth who will consecrate their precious hours, their ambitions and enthusiasms for the welfare of the country?

The main ideas brought out in that discussion may be reduced to the following points:

1. The people are responsible for their own fate. If they are oppressed, it is because they submit to oppression. "Tal gobierno, tal pueblo."
2. Therefore true national redemption and liberty can be achieved only if the people are improved — intellectually, morally and in other ways. Independence obtained without improving the people would result only in a change of masters: "Today's slaves will be tomorrow's tyrants."

3. National redemption and liberty must be earned. It is earned by suffering and work. The people must be willing to pay the price of liberty, even with their lives.

4. National redemption and liberty cannot be achieved through vice and crime. "Hate produces monsters, crime begets criminals." Only virtue can achieve real liberty: "virtue requires sacrifice, sacrifice demands love."

5. Good government is impossible without respect for justice, and justice is impossible without respect for human dignity.

Rizal had studied ethics as part of the philosophy course at the Ateneo. A basic principle of social ethics is that the individual does not exist for society; society exists to promote the people's good. It is in keeping with that basic principle that Rizal looks upon independence not as an ultimate goal but as a means — the ultimate goal is the welfare of the people, the common good. Independence is hollow if it does not promote the people's welfare.

In this regard Rizal is at the opposite pole to President Quezon's famous boast: "I would rather live in hell run by Filipinos than in heaven run by Americans." A young Ateneo graduate, who had gone to another institution to study law, delivered a speech at the Ateneo Auditorium where, in Quezon's presence, he pointedly asked, "Why should anyone prefer to live in hell, no matter by whom hell is run?" Quezon angrily retorted, "You have no right to be a Filipino. Become an American citizen."

Shorn of the rhetorical exaggeration, Quezon's brag expresses an attitude shared by many whose patriotism cannot be doubted but whose statesmanship is open to question. For them, the ultimate goal is independence, no matter how much the people suffer under the new governors.

Another basic principle of the ethics that Rizal had studied in his youth was that every human being possesses an innate dignity which is the basis for his inalienable rights. Those rights are inalienable because
they come from human nature itself and are not concessions from any government. Any government that does not respect and protect those rights is a bad government.

A third basic principle of the ethics Rizal had studied is that man has not only rights but duties. He has responsibilities. Human welfare and good government don’t just happen. They must be made to happen by everyone fulfilling his responsibilities.

Was Rizal against the use of arms to achieve national liberation? From the foregoing dialogue it is clear that he did not consider an armed revolt as the appropriate means. On the other hand he did not condemn it if it was the only means to achieve justice. But on this point, Rizal’s thinking came out more clearly when, as an exile in Dapitan, he was consulted by the Katipunan regarding the advisability of an armed revolt.

During the time of Rizal’s exile in Dapitan, he received a visit from a fellow physician who had brought along a patient, ostensibly to consult Rizal’s more expert opinion. The real reason was something else. This was Don Pio Valenzuela, one of the triumvirate at the top of the Katipunan. There had been a heated disagreement among members of that secret society: Andres Bonifacio insisted on immediate armed revolt, everyone else was against it. It was decided that Rizal’s opinion would be canvassed, which explains Valenzuela’s visit to Dapitan.

Rizal’s reply to Don Pio is on record. This was no time (he said) for wild adventures. They had no arms, no ships. And the people were not prepared.

Later, when Rizal was a prisoner in Fort Santiago undergoing interrogation, the interrogators took Rizal’s reply as meaning merely military preparedness: no arms, no ships. They did not advert to one part of Rizal’s reply: “The people were not prepared.” Had they read the last chapter of *El filibusterismo*, they would have understood what that meant.

A people’s “preparedness” for independence, in Rizal’s view, did not mean merely military preparedness. It meant being in a position to live an independent life responsibly; otherwise independence would result only in a change of masters and the people would remain slaves.
That is where Rizal differed from the Revolutionists of 1896. They believed in armed revolt without a clear idea of what would happen if they won it. Rizal had no objection to armed revolt as such, if there was no other recourse. But his focus was on what would happen afterwards: would the people be able to maintain independence, or would they soon lose their liberties to new and worse tyrants?

Those who have gone through two decades of despotic rule under martial law and who continue to feel its effects, can appreciate the real statesmanship that Rizal was expressing.

This explains Rizal’s repeated emphasis on the need for education. By education he meant not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the cultivation of civic virtues, including the willingness to sacrifice one’s personal interests for the good of the country. Moreover, his concept of knowledge was broad. It included the acquisition of practical skills. In Dapitan he ran a school for boys in which, in lieu of money, the students paid for their board, lodging and tuition by means of the work which they did on the farm.

Not mentioned in this last chapter of El Filiibusterismo was Rizal’s insistence that preparedness for independence meant raising the economic level of the people. This was one of the aims of his Liga Filipina. It was also the aim of the farming and fishing cooperatives he had founded in Dapitan.

This kind of “preparedness” that Rizal considered necessary for independence would not appeal to hotheads who wanted things to go their way immediately. Fight now, even if one did not have the weapons for fighting; and even if one did not know what would happen afterwards if they won the fight. Wisdom and prudence were Rizal’s virtues, as unappealing as they were to hotheads.

To be sure, there are flaws in Rizal’s reasoning. His statement that arms count for little with modern countries was devastatingly shown to be false by the First World War that broke out a scant eighteen years after Rizal’s death. It has been disproven many times since. His ideal of an educated valiant and unselfish citizenry is probably utopian. Merely to look at the people in Malacañang, those in Congress, in the bureaucracy, and in the country generally, is enough proof that the ideal has not been attained and may be unattainable. It is the measure of Rizal’s heroic stature that what was unattainable for others he attained himself.
Many years ago, in a public lecture delivered at the Ateneo de Manila on Padre Faura Street, I quoted Rizal’s statement:

_If our country is ever to be free, it will not be through vice and crime, corrupting her sons, deceiving some, bribing others. Redemption requires virtue, virtue demands sacrifice, and sacrifice, love._

I also quoted Padre Florentino’s murmured challenge:

_Where are the youth who will consecrate their most precious hours, their ambitions and enthusiasms, to the country’s good?_

After the lecture a friend of mine (a professor in another university) came up to me and said, “Those are clichés!”

Perhaps that is the measure of the ultimate failure of Rizal’s campaign for national regeneration: that to modern-day educated Filipinos, Rizal’s most cherished ideas appear to be a collection of mere clichés.