

Postcolonial Pragmatism? Ethno-Religious Conflict and Education in Postcolonial Spaces

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One consequence of the disturbing chain of events since September 11, 2001, is the growing realization that what happens in the rest of the world matters to us in the affluent West. The collapse of society under a fundamentalist tyranny in Afghanistan matters to us. The failure to resolve ethnic and religious tensions in the Balkans matters to us. What is taught and how in Pakistani or Saudi or Philippine *madaris* matters to us. And because these things matter, they demand our attention and engagement. But it cannot be the neo-imperialist militarism of the current U.S. administration. Nor should it ignore the ways in which our prior colonial and neocolonial engagements with the developing world have helped to create some of the very problems we face today. This colonial past, rather than an argument for disengagement is in fact a powerful ethical argument for finding ways to work in solidarity with citizens of other countries to redress both the problems we helped to create as well as those we did not, but whose solution, we now understand, matters deeply to us. Education has a role to play in this international engagement, though it, too, carries colonial and neocolonial baggage that must be critically interrogated and shed.

This moral challenge to engage in international educational development while eschewing neo-imperialist domination sets, as Dewey taught us, a problem for philosophy of education, an invitation to consider “what the known demands of us...[by] defining difficulties and suggesting methods for dealing with them.”¹ Answering this invitation, however, requires of philosophy of education an effort analogous to the scientists’ search for extraterrestrial intelligence: How do we hear philosophies of education that are not only likely to be articulated in unfamiliar languages but also, perhaps, unlikely to be articulated in discourses we would recognize as philosophy? At the very least it requires attending to the experiences in which such tensions arise.

In this essay, therefore, I propose to explore some of the challenges for education in contexts, like those mentioned above, marred by ethno-religious conflicts. To do so I will briefly examine the tension between U.S. imposed colonial and postcolonial educational values in the Philippines and the cultural values of a Muslim minority, the Maranao people of Mindanao. I will attempt to illustrate these tensions through the establishment and history of Mindanao State University, a public institution of higher education established in 1955 to facilitate the peaceful integration of Muslim Filipinos into the mainstream of Philippine society. I will argue that the difficulties the university has faced in its mission are due, at least in part, to an uncritical acceptance of institutional models founded upon American approaches to higher education and an inability to hear local voices articulating quite different conceptions of education more consistent with indigenous values and

experience. I will then examine Duncan Ivison's recent conceptualization of *postcolonial liberalism* as a philosophical framework for resolving such tensions, a framework that seems to suggest a Deweyan approach to education in such contexts. I will conclude by considering where Dewey's philosophy of education may provide useful resources and where it may be lacking as a more inclusive plan of operations for educational development in postcolonial spaces marred by ethno-religious conflict.

EDUCATION AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

In a contemporary American political climate some have described as neo-imperialist, it is, perhaps, useful to recall that we have been here before.² After a controversial invasion and bitter resistance the U.S. ruled the Philippines as a colony from 1898 to 1946. That colonial rule included a significant Muslim population in the southern Philippines that had long resisted assimilation by Spain and continued to resist American assimilation for at least two decades after U.S. military occupation. The U.S. responded to that resistance in two ways: military repression and public education. American colonial rule was peculiarly pedagogical.³ In fact, one academic observer at the time described it as "a notable example of colonization that gets its theory and justification from the principles of modern pedagogy."⁴ Thus was born an abiding faith in successive colonial and postcolonial governments that the values and structures of Western education were the key to solving centuries of conflict with local Muslim communities.⁵

One manifestation of this faith occurred in 1955 with the passage of legislation establishing Mindanao State University, in the heart of Muslim Mindanao, in response to violent uprisings by Muslims against the government. The university was assigned the task of facilitating the integration of Muslims into the Philippine body politic through higher education. Funded by the Ford Foundation and staffed largely by Filipino Christians and U.S. Peace Corps volunteers, M.S.U. reflected, however dimly, the values and assumptions of modern, American, secular universities with which its founders were familiar: individualism, hierarchies based on intellectual merit, the superiority of modernity over tradition, and the marginalization of religious belief in favor of reason and science.⁶ And the whole enterprise was legitimated by a metanarrative of liberation: education would lift the Muslims out of the ignorance that perpetuated their backwardness and fueled their mistrust of their Christian fellow citizens.

In 1961, this university was set down in the heart of the most traditional, deeply Islamized, and oppositional ethno-linguistic community in the country, the Maranao. In contrast to the individualistic ethos of the university, Maranao conceptions of identity tend to be collective, founded upon kinship ties recorded in *tarsila* — name chains — that constitute a metaphorical umbilical chord linking each individual to the other members of his clan and to the other clans that constitute the four encampments of the lake. Traditionally, political units comprised of clusters of interrelated extended families were governed by *datus*, whose status was in part dependent upon their ability to maintain loyalty by acquiring and redistributing wealth and power among their followers. Social relations were governed by a

combination of customary law — *adat* — and Islamic law — *sharia*. Power and prestige within Maranao culture was claimed, measured, and sustained by *maratabat*, a value system that places the honor and wealth of one's family above all other considerations and sanctions the use of violence to sustain it. Overlaying and reinforcing this collective orientation to identity is Islam, with its own notions of collective identity in the concepts of the *ummah* and *dar-ul Islam*. While the offices and machinery of Western-style democratic politics took firm root among the Maranao during U.S. colonial rule, political power still depends upon one's ability to marshal traditional and religious power structures.⁷ Thus traditional and Islamic conceptions of identity underlay the profound gulf between Christianized and Islamized Filipinos that M.S.U. was supposed to help heal.

The university and Maranao society represented, in effect, two distinct and contradictory language games. The introduction of the university constituted a move designed to change Filipino Muslims, to persuade them to accept the rules of the game established by the Philippine government. Maranaos responded with their own moves, moves which had the effect of turning the university to the benefit of traditional Maranao cultural politics. Ironically, the institution charged with the assimilation of the Maranao was itself partially assimilated by the Maranao. As the largest economic enterprise in the province, control of the university became an important political prize, giving those with such control access to the resources necessary to enhance the *maratabat* of themselves and their families. Consequently, no one but a Maranao could ever be seriously considered for the presidency of the university. And whether he liked it or not, the president was often forced to operate like a *datu*, distributing largess in the form of positions from vice presidencies to security guards to political supporters and members of his extended family, thus ensuring the political loyalties necessary to stay in the position and move on to others afterwards.

This turn of events quite naturally inspired the criticism and resentment of those — most often Christian Filipinos outside the cultural protection of *maratabat* — who espoused the liberal values upon which, they believed, a university is supposed to function. Thus, instead of fostering more understanding and tolerant attitudes between Muslims and Christians and thus diffusing tensions, the university tended, in many respects, to exacerbate them, to justify Christian suspicions of and contempt for Muslims, and thus to perpetuate divisions between the Christianized mainstream and Islamized minority. While the university is not without its accomplishments, it has arguably failed in its primary mission to foster the integration of the Muslim minority and thus defuse the ethno-religious tensions that plague Philippine society. Less than a decade after its founding a secessionist movement in which Muslim M.S.U. graduates figured prominently broke out in Mindanao, claiming more than 100,000 lives over the next three decades.⁸ Today, the conflict in Mindanao is seen as one of the key fronts in the so-called war on terrorism.⁹

So what happened here? Does the M.S.U. case simply represent one more example of the willful rejection of modernity and democracy by backward, especially Muslim, ethnic communities? Or does it represent, as postcolonial critics

might suggest, yet another example of neocolonial oppression and marginalization of the powerless in the interests of the powerful? Whatever else it is, the M.S.U. case seems to be yet another manifestation of the tension between liberalism and communitarianism, a tension for which Duncan Ivison's conception of *postcolonial liberalism* is meant as a framework for "articulating a space within liberal democracies and liberal thought in which these Aboriginal perspectives and philosophies can not only be heard, but given equal opportunity to shape (and reshape) the forms of power and government acting upon them."¹⁰ The goal is to seek a mutually acceptable path between assimilation and separatism, a reconciliation between the two that enables indigenous peoples to feel at home in a world that is no longer alien to them.

POSTCOLONIAL LIBERALISM

Ivison starts with a broad conception of liberalism as a "complex of evolving discourses" that nevertheless shares some common concerns: the search for appropriate moral limits on the authority of governments and the need to deal with the fact that people disagree on many aspects of what constitutes a good life. Reconciling these concerns has given rise in liberalism to ideals such as the notion that state authority should rest upon some agreed upon justification, that the state should be neutral in treating the claims of different constituents, the equality of individual members of society, and the freedom of those individuals to pursue their own well-being as they understand it. Liberalism, however, has come under severe attack by postcolonial critics, who charge liberalism with complicity in colonialism, arguing that it contributed to the assumptions of cultural superiority underpinning the colonial civilization discourse and that economic liberalism lay at the heart of capitalism and thus imperialism (*PL*, 24). Ivison sums up postcolonial theory's challenge to liberalism in four areas: First, liberalism's appeal to abstract principles simply obscures the ways those principles serve the interest of some at the expense of others. Second, its appeal to moral individualism makes it incapable of adequately understanding the rights of groups as intermediate levels of association between the individual and the state. Third, because of this individualistic focus liberalism's conception of justice is too narrow to account for historical injustice or differing conceptions of rights. And finally, liberal conceptions of pluralism underestimate the complexity and fluidity of individual and social identities. Thus, the structures, procedures, and values liberalism proposes to respond to that diversity are inadequate (*PL*, 47–48).

Ivison argues, however, that at the very same time postcolonialists dismiss liberalism, they appeal to liberal ideals such as individual freedom, democracy, justice, and equality (*PL*, 30). Ivison's postcolonial liberalism attempts to reconcile these liberal ideals with what he sees as the justifiable postcolonial criticisms of liberalism. The first step in this reconciliation is the acknowledgement of historical injustice and the recognition that such injustices are not merely historical events but ongoing influences on the nature of contemporary experience for indigenous and nonindigenous peoples. Therefore, we have a moral obligation to address historical injustice not simply for what happened in the past but for the problems it engenders in the present (*PL*, 105–106).

Iverson's vision of postcolonial liberalism eschews the notion that liberal democracy can only take shape around values to which all members of society agree in advance and upon which social institutions and the machinery of government can be erected. He takes seriously the postmodern challenge that any such consensus is inevitably partial and self-interested and that claims otherwise are simply attempts to hide that fact. Instead of placing an imaginary consensus or illusory neutrality at the center of society he places the inevitability of disagreement and positionality at the heart of postcolonial liberalism. The emphasis, then, shifts from the achievement of some final consensus to the nature of ongoing dialogue and debate and the revisable, contingent agreements as a *modus vivendi*, a way of living or conducting oneself that enables complex, mutual coexistence in postcolonial democracies (*PL*, 84–88). Rather than determining what the outcome of such dialogues will be, postcolonial liberalism focuses on members' rights to develop the capabilities necessary to engage as full and equal participants in social debates (*PL*, 140).

Viewed through the lens of Iverson's postcolonial liberalism the implicit values and the explicit goals of the establishment of M.S.U. were problematic, for they represented the state's attempt to assimilate Filipino Muslims to a conception of modernity and Filipino national identity — a *modus vivendi* — which they had had no hand in shaping and which they were invited to shape only on terms dictated by the state or embodied in the implicit liberal values of the American universities on which M.S.U. was modeled. This was assimilation rather than integration, as an authorized history of the agency charged with integration policy made clear in 1969.

If the minorities are to become active members of the national community, they should abandon, as the price they have to pay, their backward ways and adopt those that are in consonance with modern living...in the process of helping them attain a higher degree of civilization they have to discard some of their traditional values and customs. It is suggested that they retain those that do not constitute an irritant to their relations with one another or with the members of majority groups.¹¹

To the extent that the university's goal was to facilitate the integration of Muslim Filipinos the still widespread sense of alienation from the mainstream and ongoing separatist aspirations suggest M.S.U. has failed. However, the partial assimilation of elements of the university to Maranao social values and its continuing ability to attract Maranao students does not suggest an outright rejection of the university and its mission but rather an ongoing attempt to adapt it to their needs. This suggests not the irrelevance of education for efforts to mitigate tensions across ethnic and religious differences in this case, but rather the necessity of conceiving educational structures and practices in light of the experience of those to be educated, rather than the purposes of those in power. Iverson's conception of postcolonial liberalism suggests that these structures and practices must, at the very least, acknowledge the legacy of historical injustice and develop the capabilities of marginalized groups to participate effectively in a society characterized by ongoing dialogue and debate about the terms of contingent, revisable agreements rather than any false consensus on national values or identity. In this later respect, at least, it is reminiscent of John Dewey's philosophy of democratic education, albeit applied within a context of postcolonial power relations to which Dewey devoted relatively little attention.

POSTCOLONIAL PRAGMATISM?

Iverson develops his notion of postcolonial liberalism in the context of relations between Aboriginal communities and the liberal state in Australia where the parties' claim on participation in social debates rests, at least in part, on common citizenship. This context is, of course, analogous in certain respects to relations between Muslim minority communities and the government in the Philippines; however, it differs in important ways from the relationship, asserted above, whereby I claimed a moral obligation to contribute to educational development across national boundaries. What right does an outsider have to participate in such domestic debates? More importantly, what differentiates this call to act on that presumed moral obligation from the well-intentioned paternalism that provided much of the rationale for colonialism in the first place? If it can be different, how can we ensure that efforts to contribute to educational development and reform across postcolonial boundaries avoid falling into well-worn colonial patterns? Moreover, does Dewey's philosophy of education — a philosophy that emerged at the height of American imperialism in the Philippines — contain resources helpful in avoiding those colonial ruts?

Participation in educational development across national boundaries rests, if not on as firm a footing as common citizenship, at least on a common humanity that recognizes, to paraphrase John Donne, that we are involved in mankind and, therefore, any child's miseducation diminishes not only that child but us as well. Postcolonial theory has been an indispensable analytical tool for understanding how and where that common humanity has not only been ignored but also deliberately perverted in the interest of colonial and neocolonial domination. It forces us to be cognizant of the possibility that the turn to pragmatism explored here may constitute yet another imposition of an alien ideal on third-world realities. It is unclear to me, however, how pragmatism is any more or less alien to such realities than the Marxist and poststructuralist philosophies underpinning postcolonial theory. The key question should not be the source of a philosophical idea but whether or not it contributes to a better understanding of particular problems and the search for acceptable solutions. What conceptual resources, then, does Dewey's philosophy offer attempts to educate across internal colonial boundaries like that represented in the case of M.S.U. or the postcolonial boundaries that confront our concerns about education in the Muslim world?

Dewey's concept of experience is one of these important resources. According to Dewey, we learn through experience, through the perpetual doing and undergoing of our interaction with the environment. The result of this interaction, our memories of previous experience, is the knowledge that is brought to bear in the intelligent direction of future experience. Our environment, of course, includes others in families and communities, so our experience includes interactions with others, which itself produces learning and knowledge. This is the means by which communities sustain themselves over time (*DE*, 1–22). There can be, therefore, no end to education other than more education, no externally imposed purpose other than to keep open the possibility of continued learning and growth. The external imposition of predetermined ends constitutes an impediment to experience and thought likely

to serve the interests of those designing the ends rather than the interests of the learner (*DE*, 100–101).

This does not mean, however, that all experiences are educative. Some are miseducative. They lead the learner down dead ends that block the possibility of future growth. One might, for example, see the adoption of a fundamentalist religion or the acquisition of expertise in carrying out terrorist acts as experiences that produce learning. However, they would be, in Dewey's view, miseducative in that they would tend to block future growth. Educative experiences, on the other hand, can be distinguished by two criteria: continuity and interaction. Continuity refers to the fact "that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those that come after" (*DE*, 35). An educative experience, therefore, is one that is sufficiently familiar to the learner to be meaningful, yet sufficiently novel that it requires the learner to use thought — the method of intelligence — to resolve the perplexity embodied in the experience. If it fails the first half of this criterion, it is meaningless to the learner; if it fails the second it is mere routine that does not open onto new experience. The criterion of interaction draws attention to the fact that any experience is shaped by internal, psychological factors, and external, social factors (*DE*, 38–42). For an experience to be educative, therefore, it must also account for the individuality of the learner as well as the social context in which the learner has his experience.

In order to elicit thought, an educative experience must involve ends that are of interest to the learner. And these ends are inevitably influenced by the prior experience of the learner and the social context in which those experiences have taken place. The achievement of those ends poses a problem for the learner, a problem that requires her to reflect on previous experience, to draw on what she has learned about the experience of others, to mentally rehearse likely solutions to the problem, to put one possible solution into effect, and to evaluate the consequences of that experiment. If that solution does not achieve the desired end, she repeats the process. If it does, she stores that experience away and moves on until she encounters other problems. This is the method of intelligence. This is "the only freedom of enduring importance...freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while" (*DE*, 61).

The ends-in-view of the learner cannot be ignored without sacrificing internal motivation for external imposition. The task of the educator is to make use of the ends-in-view of the learner to help him achieve the ends-out-of-view that the educator, on the basis of different experience, knows are essential to participate fully in the life of a wider community (*DE*, 61–65). Traditional education, according to Dewey, has been characterized by the imposition of ends derived from the experiences or interests of the powerful rather than the interests of the powerless. It requires, therefore, the exercise of power, coercion, and control in order to secure conformity to purposes that are different from or contrary to those of the learner (*DE*, 17–23). In short, traditional education is a form of violence. Dewey's approach to education, on the other hand, was not focused on the achievement of some predetermined ends, but rather emphasized the development of the individual's

capacity to utilize her own intelligence in the interest of shared purposes and thus participate fully and freely in the ongoing discourses of democratic community.

Seen in the light of Dewey's philosophy of education, the education of Muslim Filipinos as enacted in the creation of Mindanao State University represents yet another instance of this traditional education. It imposed ends, in the form of conceptions of modernity, development, and integration into a narrow conception of Filipino identity, which represented the interests and goals of those in power rather than the interests and goals of Muslim Filipinos. While M.S.U. attempted to be more inclusive of Muslim Filipinos' histories, cultures, and contemporary lives in its curricula, it did so within the institutional value structures of a Western-oriented, liberal university. Thus Muslim Filipino cultures were represented more as objects of orientalist voyeurism rather than a potential framework for institutional values and structures. In doing so it violated the principles of continuity and interaction that Dewey argued are necessary for educative experience. The knowledge and intelligence the learner has acquired through her experience with her local environment and community are less likely to be useful in a setting defined by the experience and goals of others. Thus she is immediately handicapped in the full use of her intelligence. The imposition of externally defined goals, no matter the benevolent intentions, sets up a tension between the purposes of those in power from the purposes of local communities. Thus the Muslim Filipino learner is robbed of some of the motive power of interest. Cut off from local experience and local purposes, education becomes alien and alienating.

CONCLUSION

I do not want to suggest here that Dewey's philosophy of education is an off-the-shelf recipe for the problems endemic to education in internal colonial contexts — like that represented in the case of M.S.U. — or postcolonial contexts like those that confront any effort to attend to educational development and reform in the Muslim world. Dewey's apparent focus on the individual — despite the criterion of interaction and the focus on democracy — may yet prevent his educational thought from fully accounting for the significance of collective identities like that of the Maranao. His frequent dichotomization of civilization and savagery as a metaphor for social progress suggests a conflation of developed with civilization and so-called underdevelopment with the lack of civilization, a dichotomy common to colonial discourse. And his deep mistrust of supernatural religion as an impediment to thought represents a significant barrier to applying his philosophy in a community rooted in Islam or a world where, as Cornel West reminds us, "the wretched of the earth is deeply religious."¹²

However, his analysis of the nature of experience as the heart of a theory of education which eschews both the tradition of external imposition as well as the non-involvement that rejection of that tradition often inspires represents an important resource for education across national boundaries in a postcolonial world. It resonates with Ivison's call for a postcolonial liberalism that attends to historical injustice while developing in individuals and groups the capacity to engage fully in debates over contingent, revisable social goals. It shifts the focus of attention from

the interests and goals of social, cultural, or religious elites to the interests and goals of individuals that grow out of and are inevitably shaped by their experiences as members of cultural communities. His concept of experience alone, therefore, makes Dewey's educational thought an indispensable resource for rethinking education in internal colonial and postcolonial contexts.

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1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 326. This work will be cited as *DE* in the text for all subsequent references.
 2. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).
 3. Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, "Democratization or Neocolonialism? The Education of Muslims Under U.S. Military Occupation, 1898–1920," *History of Education* 33, no. 4 (2004): 451–467.
 4. Arthur F. Torrance, "The Philippine Moro: A Study in Social and Race Pedagogy" (PhD diss., New York University, 1917), preface.
 5. Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, "Faith in School: Educational Policy Responses to Ethno-Religious Conflict in the Southern Philippines, 1935–1985," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 67–86.
 6. See Antonio Isidro, *Muslim-Christian Integration at the Mindanao State University* (Marawi City: Mindanao State University Research Center, 1968).
 7. See Mamitua Saber and Abdullah T. Madale, *The Maranao* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing, 1975).
 8. See Marites Danguilan Vitug and Glenda M. Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000).
 9. Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2003).
 10. Duncan Ivison, *Postcolonial Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1. This work will be cited as *PL* in the text for all subsequent references.
 11. Leothiny Clavel, *They Are Also Filipinos: Ten Years with the Cultural Minorities* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1969), 71.
 12. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 233–234.