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Rizal the Revolutionary and the Ateneo

JOHN N. SCHUMACHER, S.J.

Perhaps the title of this article may evoke a bit of skepticism. Is Rizal to be depicted as a revolutionary, Rizal who rejected Bonifacio's invitation to head the Revolution, who issued a statement condemning the revolt when it took place? Rizal has been depicted in so many ways and as champion of so many causes and ideological positions that a certain skepticism is perhaps inevitable. The Americans found him an ideal patron for their regime, put his statue in every town plaza, and made the anniversary of his death a national holiday. So much did they encourage the belief in Rizal as a peaceful reformist in search of precisely those blessings they conceived were being bestowed by the American regime, that in recent years some have insisted that Rizal was an American-made hero and unsuited to an independent Philippines. They are wrong, of course; Rizal had been chosen by the Filipinos long before the Americans used him, even as early as December 1898 when his death was commemorated in the territory of the Revolutionary government.¹ In spite of his judgment that the revolt of the Katipunan was premature, Bonifacio would nonetheless make the Revolution in his name and paraphrase his writings in the clandestine Tagalog newspaper *Kalayaan* to stir up the Katipuneros.² So too, preparing for an American invasion in Albay on 30 December 1898 the Filipino parish priest, Fr. Juan Calleja, would explain Rizal's ideals to the congregation as the expression of the national cause.³ And yet in the years to come the man who had been denounced

1. *La Independencia*, 31 December 1898, cited in Jesus Ma. Cavanna y Manso, *Rizal's Unfading Glory* (Manila, 1952), p. 138.

2. See, e.g., Bonifacio's "Ang dapat mabatid ng mga Tagalog," in *The Writings and Trial of Andres Bonifacio*, ed. Teodoro A. Agoncillo (Manila, 1963), pp. 68-69. It is almost a Tagalog summary of the ideas contained in Rizal's notes to Morga's *Sucesos* and in his historical essays.

3. Elias Ataviado, *Lucha y libertad* (Manila, 1941), 1:30.

as a socialist by Spanish friars would be rejected as a bourgeois reformist by Marxists; the Mason who had never gone beyond the third degree, while his fellow-nationalists in Spain were all 33rd degree, would become a Masonic hero, celebrated annually in the lodges, at the same time as Masses were annually offered in his memory in Catholic churches, and his old Jesuit mentor and close friend, Father Francisco de Paula Sanchez, was urging another generation of Ateneans to be "bueno como nuestro Pepe Rizal."

It has become the fashion recently to speak of Rizal as a reformist. Sometimes the words are spoken deprecatingly, — he was a *mere* reformist who had to be supplanted by Bonifacio, the man of direct action — sometimes in praise, by those who do not want to see too much of a shaking up of the status quo, and find in Rizal a sanction for their position. In the title of this article he is called a revolutionary — perhaps a special kind of revolutionary — but in any case, certainly not just a reformist. In his writings he did call for reforms, to be sure, a whole series of them — reforms in the government, reforms in the Church, reforms in the friars, reforms in the attitudes of Spaniards, and above all, reforms in the Filipinos themselves. But what makes Rizal a revolutionary is the fact that he wanted not only to reform, repress, do away with, the abuses from which his people suffered; he wanted to change the Filipinos themselves, the very structure of the society in which he lived.

Reforms alone would never satisfy Rizal; neither would independence alone; that is why he not only parted company with those Filipinos who thought that lobbying with Spanish politicians and publishing fiery newspaper articles in Madrid would bring about the happiness of the Filipino people, but he likewise refused to let himself be persuaded to lead an armed revolt which he knew, even if it should by some chance succeed militarily, would not essentially change the situation in which the Filipinos found themselves. What then did Rizal want? Two key ideas run through his writings — freedom and justice. Spanish promises of reform were impotent to bring these about, but without obtaining them independence would only be a dubious acquisition. Let us look at them both more closely.

The clearest statement of Rizal on the importance of freedom as he understood it is his report on his discussion with the Ateneo Jesuits who were chagrined at Rizal for having put them at the rear of the chariot of progress in the *Noli me tângere*. In a letter to his

Austrian friend, Ferdinand Blumentritt, Rizal reported his discussion with his former professors on his return to Manila in 1887:

Their greatest reproach was the passage in which I had put the Jesuits at the rear of the chariot of progress; they told me that the Jesuits stood in the vanguard of progress. I replied that this could not be, for the Jesuits dare not accept its principles, the liberal principles of progress, for example, freedom of the press, freedom of thought, freedom of religion. Padre Faura observed that his order had many learned scientists; I agreed, but observed in turn that science is not progress itself, but only its material component. It is only the acceptance of its principles which actually constitutes progress.⁴

No doubt Padre Faura felt chagrined at the neat scholastic distinction of matter and form with which his old pupil turned back his argument. But Rizal was not merely looking for a facile rebuttal. These liberties were at the core of his aspirations, because he saw them as rooted in the very dignity of the human person, and therefore beyond the right of any government to deprive its citizens of them.

Much effort has been spent and a great deal of ink poured out the last few years to persuade us that these freedoms are not so terribly important after all, that they need to be curtailed in the name of economic progress, etc. We have been told at times that they are a part of the American system and ill-suited to the Philippines; or alternately, that they are the fruit of a superficial nineteenth-century liberalism concerned only with freedoms and not with responsibilities. The first assertion I think has been effectively disproved by Fr. Joaquin Bernas in his paper on "Filipino Consciousness of Civil and Political Rights."⁵ In it he showed that in spite of American contributions to sharpening the consciousness of these rights, the Filipino tradition on civil rights not only antedated the coming of the Americans, but in certain respects later went beyond what the nervous American colonial officials ever ventured to concede. With regard to the second assertion, I think it must be conceded that a good number of the Filipino liberals of the nineteenth century did draw their inspiration from a Spanish liberalism which denied any limitation of freedom to man, and

4. *Epistolario Rizalino*, ed. Teodoro M. Kalaw, 5 vols. (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1930-1938), 5:533-34.

5. "Filipino Consciousness of Civil and Political Rights," *Philippine Studies* 25 (1977): 163-85.

based itself on a superficial individualistic philosophy. To whatever extent that may be true, however, it cannot be said of Rizal. The roots of Rizal's passion for man's liberty may be found precisely where Father Jose Burgos, the man who most influenced his nationalism, grounded human freedom — in man's human dignity and his spiritual nature. He expressed it clearly, though in satirical form, in an article written in 1887:

If there were not what are called the rights of man, we would almost understand the belief that we have a soul, if to possess one only meant to suffer the tortures which others who possess one do. Unfortunately some idealists believe that the soul's existence creates an exigency for certain rights. At this point the Government is no longer in agreement . . . When it has to ask us for something, it puts a human nature in our bodies, but takes it away when we ask for representation in the Cortes, freedom of press, rights, etc.⁶

As Rizal puts it, it is man's soul, man's spiritual nature, which is the source of his right to the essential freedoms, and hence these cannot be given nor taken away by any government; they belong to man's nature because he is man. In this respect Rizal stood much closer than did the Spanish friars and even Padre Faura and the Ateneo Jesuits to Pope John XXIII, who insisted in his encyclical *Pacem in terris*:

. . . every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. By virtue of this, he has rights and duties of his own, flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature, which are therefore universal, inviolable, and inalienable.⁷

Those rights Pope John goes on to enumerate, among others, as the right of every man to freedom in searching for the truth and in expressing and communicating his opinions, to be informed truthfully about public events, to worship God according to his own conscience, to freedom of assembly and association, and numerous others not named specifically by Rizal. One can understand in part, though not defend, the fear with which the nineteenth-century Church looked on that liberalism which had appeared in the French Revolution of 1789, and whose immediate effects had been not freedom, but the spoliation of the Church and the persecution of her priests wherever so-called liberal governments had come to power. In Spain itself, the liberal revolutions

6. J. R., "Dudas," *España en Filipinas* (Madrid), 28 May 1887, pp. 3-4.

7. *Pacem in terris*, no. 9.

had meant the expulsion of the religious orders, and the confiscation of the property of the Church — in 1820, in 1836, in 1854, in 1868. Not unnaturally, each new round of attacks had made the Spanish clergy even more hostile, not only to the concrete “liberalism” that they had experienced in Spain, but to the very idea of liberty, in spite of its roots in the whole Catholic concept of the human person. It is to the credit of Rizal that on the one hand, unlike his professors, he did not stop short of drawing the conclusions which flowed from the scholastic philosophical principles on man’s spiritual nature which they had taught him, and on the other, he did not let himself be greatly influenced by the superficial naturalist philosophy which formed the foundation for much of European liberalism. Unfortunately, there was no ear for his ideas in the Philippine church of his day. It would take another half-century when the bitter experience of the Japanese occupation had shown how precious those liberties were, that they would begin to be really treasured and their intimate connection with the whole Catholic concept of man would be clearly perceived. And even today, in spite of John XXIII, Paul VI, and Vatican II, there are not a few in high places who prefer the security of tangible benefits to the less comfortable freedoms for which God has placed an exigency in the human person.

The argument has often been raised that the liberties sought by nineteenth-century liberalism — and it is sometimes added, those civil liberties whose loss is lamented today — are bourgeois liberties, luxuries desired by those who have an abundance of material wealth, but of small consequence to the little man, the worker or peasant in search of social justice. There is a certain amount of truth to the argument, a truth which has often been taken advantage of by governments to distract the attention of the poor by means of the promise of material benefits. Unfortunately such material benefits do not always materialize for the workers themselves, as those who have been deprived of their right to organize and to strike well know. In Rizal’s mind, at any rate, liberty and justice were not alternatives, but closely linked together in his thinking. In a typical expression of this link, he wrote in a letter to the Filipinos in Barcelona:

God or Destiny is with us because we have justice and reason on our side, and because we fight not for any selfish motive but for the sacred love of our country and our countrymen . . . We fight that justice may prevail,

we fight for liberty, for the sacred rights of man; we ask nothing for ourselves, we sacrifice all for the common good.⁸

To be sure, it would be unhistorical to credit Rizal with fully modern notions on a living wage, land reform, etc. In his time, a pre-industrial society, many of the social problems which have become so acute had scarcely begun to surface yet. Nonetheless, the concern for justice, not just for those of his own class, but for all Filipinos, was there. Among the purposes of his Liga Filipina, that concrete embodiment of his ideas on national community founded in 1892, were included: "mutual protection in every want and necessity," and "defense against all violence and injustice." These were further specified in the statutes of the Liga to include coming to the aid of any member in need, of giving aid to those who had suffered misfortune, and especially, of defending their rights against the powerful.⁹ To the Spaniards who arrested Rizal, the Liga was a subversive organization and nothing more; they failed to appreciate the breadth of vision which was behind it, which looked not merely, or even primarily, to independence, but to the creation of a just society in which the rights of all would be respected. Of course, in the long run, such a just society was certainly subversive of that Spanish regime, just as it is subversive of other regimes which have succeeded it. That is another reason why Rizal was a revolutionary, and one can even say a radical revolutionary, even though he never did anything that could legally be qualified as subversion of the Spanish regime. For in spite of the fact that Spanish law enshrined a promise of justice to all men, the existing Spanish regime was incapable of making that promise good by the end of the nineteenth century, and it was, therefore, in the premises of Rizal, condemned. That is why as long as the writings of Rizal continue to be read, and Filipinos continue to reflect on the kind of society their forefathers wanted to create, Rizal's thoughts will continue to be subversive of all societies which fail to bring justice and freedom to the Filipino people.

He did not rule out revolution in the last resort; as Padre Florentino put it in the *Fili*:

I know that [God] has not forsaken those peoples that in times of decision have placed themselves in His hands and made Him the Judge of their

8. *Epistolario Rizalino*, 2:201.

9. W. E. Retana, *Vida y escritos del Dr. José Rizal* (Madrid, 1907), pp. 236-41.

oppression; I know that His arm has never been wanting when, with justice trampled under foot and all other recourses at an end, the oppressed have taken up the sword and fought for their homes, wives, children, and those inalienable rights . . . No, God is justice and He cannot abandon His own cause, the cause of freedom without which no justice is possible.¹⁰

But whether or not revolution will come is in the end not what is important to Rizal. What is important, Padre Florentino goes on, is to "endure and work." And he adds, "I do not mean to say that our freedom must be won at the point of the sword . . . but I do say that we must win our freedom by deserving it, by exalting the mind and enhancing the dignity of the individual, loving what is just, what is good, what is great, even to the point of dying for it."¹¹

Rizal, then, does not offer a blueprint or a timetable for Filipinos to obtain justice and the freedom without which there is no justice. Rather he points out what must be the precondition if they are to be won — that men love justice and freedom, that they demand them, that they do not permit that they be deprived of them, even if it means to endure and to suffer, because they believe in a God who is freedom and justice.

THE REVOLUTIONARY AND THE ATENEO

In what way, we may ask then, was the Ateneo connected with Rizal the revolutionary? If one were to ask the Ateneo Jesuits of the 1890s, undoubtedly the answer would not have been greatly different from that which Rizal puts in their mouth in the *El Filibusterismo*, when their former student Isagani was arrested: "We want it clearly understood that he did not pick up his ideas here." To which the novelist added: "The Jesuits did not lie, no. Those ideas God alone gives, by means of Nature."¹² One can perhaps sympathize with the Spanish Jesuits, who were frantically engaged in refuting the accusations of their fellow Spaniards that their school was a hotbed of subversion and ought to be closed, as the Ateneo and the Escuela Normal almost were in 1897.¹³ But it was not only Spanish obscurantists who attributed to the

10. *El Filibusterismo*. First edition (Gent, 1891), pp. 281–82. Translation mine, as elsewhere in this article.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

13. Pablo Pastells, S.J., *Misión de la Compañía de Jesús en Filipinas en el siglo XIX* (Barcelona, 1916–17), 3:283–85.

Ateneo subversive tendencies. Filipino nationalists saw the Ateneo too as a source of their nationalist aspirations. In an article entitled "El Ateneo Municipal," in the Revolutionary newspaper, *La República Filipina*, for 3 December 1898, one of them, no doubt an ardent alumnus though we do not know his name, wrote concerning the movement which had led to the Philippine Republic:

Let us make a mental comparison between the intellectual movement of the time of our grandfathers and this movement of our own day which is giving life and splendor to Filipino society. We are forced to conclude that the extraordinary change has taken place since the sons of Loyola . . . founded the Ateneo Municipal and the Escuela Normal.¹⁴

The answer, I think, to the discrepancy between what the Jesuits asserted and what others thought can perhaps best be explained by Rizal's own words in 1887, speaking of the young Filipino nationalists in Madrid:

These friends are all young men, criollos, mestizos, and Malays; but we call ourselves only Filipinos. Almost all were educated by the Jesuits; truly the Jesuits have not intended to teach us love of country, but they have showed us all that is beautiful and all that is best.¹⁵

In other words, in spite of their intentions to teach their students to be loyal subjects of Spain, in opening their eyes to the good, the beautiful, and the true by means of a humanistic education, the Spanish Jesuits ensured that their pupils would look beyond what their professors explicitly stated, to the implications of that humanistic view for the Filipino people. The principles of Catholic philosophy on the dignity of the human person and the equality of all men did not remain merely on the level of abstract principle for a man like Rizal. Even if his professors did not dare draw the conclusions, as he asserted in the letter we have cited earlier, he would make explicit what they did not — that because of that dignity and equality, there was due to the Filipinos, as to all men, freedom and justice; that the Spaniards who deprived them of these rights with which God had endowed human nature, forfeited all right to exercise sovereignty over the Filipinos; and that the new Filipino society must be constructed only on the foundation of freedom and justice, if it was not to be as worthy of rejection as its predecessor.

Finally, it must be in his Ateneo education, and in that of his

14. "El Ateneo Municipal," *La República Filipina*, 3 December 1898.

15. *Epistolario Rizalino*, 5:111.

Catholic home, that we find the source of his firm belief in God as the ultimate foundation of that freedom and justice he worked for. Spanish liberalism of the nineteenth century was generally not only anticlerical but antireligious in its philosophical underpinnings. To say that man should be free was to say that he was bound by nothing, even God, that only his own conscience, independent of any law of God, was his guide. Without examining here in detail the religious beliefs of Rizal, clearly his liberal convictions had nothing to do with such an agnostic concept. Not only was the freedom he sought a freedom under God, but it was from God that he had confidence it would come. As he had Padre Florentino put it, "When a people reaches these heights, God provides the weapon, and the idols and the tyrants fall like a house of cards, and freedom shines in the first dawn."¹⁶ Or in less lyrical terms, as Rizal himself said it at the conclusion of a prolonged discussion by letter with Blumentritt on the right of the Filipinos to revolt against Spain:

We desire the happiness of the Philippines, but we want to obtain it by noble and just means . . . If it were impossible to overcome our enemies now, another day will dawn, another day will come, for there must be a God of justice; otherwise we would turn atheists.¹⁷

And ultimately that is why Rizal would neither embrace nor totally reject armed revolution as the final solution. That was not the most important thing; what must come first was to prepare a people who loved justice and freedom enough to demand them, enough to be able to stand up and face those who denied them to the Filipino people, enough, ultimately, to be ready to die for them. Then God would provide the weapon.

It would be a caricature to say that Rizal was just the product of the Ateneo Municipal. He was also a product of the thought of Burgos, of the nationalist traditions of his own family, of his experience in Europe, and above all of his own genius and dedication to his fellow Filipinos. But the Ateneo did make its contribution to his stature as the seminal thinker of the movement that created the nation, and a perennial source of inspiration to his people. That contribution, as we have tried to show, is to be seen in Rizal's placing the foundation for his demand for liberties in the very nature and dignity of the human persons, and his hope of justice in

16. *El Filibusterismo*, pp. 283-84.

17. *Epistolario Rizalino*, 5:394.

the God of justice. It is understandable that the Spanish Jesuits of the Ateneo did not share Rizal's nationalism; it is less defensible that they did not appreciate the foundation that it had in the very principles which the Ateneo had dedicated itself to impart. Nonetheless, they did impart those principles, and neither the Filipino nationalists nor their Spanish opponents were wrong in seeing the Ateneo Municipal as a major force behind the Revolution.

To be sure, not all the Filipino nationalists by any means fully comprehended the vision of Rizal with its philosophical and theological foundations. In the years to come, many would be satisfied with merely political liberties, which were in fact of benefit only to the few, would be content with *independencia* and not real *kalayaan*.¹⁸ Many too were content with a justice which was not available to all, but only to the rich and educated. Others of course were not so content, and many Ateneans have distinguished themselves in the pursuit of freedom and justice for every Filipino. It is the fond hope of every true teacher that his students may make their own personal synthesis, their own personal appropriation of what is taught in class. Rizal surely accomplished that, even if his teachers did not recognize it. It seems that his synthesis still has something to say to us today, that may serve other Ateneans who are seeking to make the God-given dignity of the human person and his inalienable rights — among them those freedoms on which the Republic was founded — prevail among all Filipinos today.

18. Reynaldo Ileto has called attention to the importance of this distinction in his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "*Pasión and the Perception of Change in Tagalog Society (ca. 1840–1912)*," Cornell University, 1975.