

Can Pragmatism Assuage Ethno-Religious Conflict?

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Jeffrey Milligan has situated his philosophical questions within a specific time and place. This is particularly useful in light of the way liberalism and cultural identity are typically abstracted from the complexities of real lives and socio-political contexts. The case he considers — that of the founding of Mindanao State University in the Philippines — is most illuminating, owing to its particular complexities and ironies.

From the description Milligan provides, Mindanao State University (M.S.U.) exemplifies a colonial macrostructure that exploits education to achieve oppressive ends. M.S.U. has largely failed (1) to “integrate” the Muslim minority Maranao into the Christian majority, and (2) to defuse ethno-religious tensions. At first glance, the Maranao appear to be victims whose cultural fidelities are being ruthlessly trampled. But we learn they express their identities collectively through strong kinship ties and extended family networks, as well as ethnic hierarchical power structures associated with *dar-ul Islam*. There are, in other words, oppressive elements in the Maranao culture itself, including violence, that privilege some of its members at the expense of others.

Building upon postcolonial liberal theory of Ivison, Milligan develops a Deweyan approach to the conditions at M.S.U. He suggests a significant tension exists between liberal-modern and traditional conceptions of identity that renders the goal of a “mutually acceptable path between assimilation and separatism” elusive. I agree with Milligan that the assimilationist goals upon which M.S.U. was founded are imperialist and thus morally troublesome.¹ Yet it seems a misstep to conflate Western colonialism and its “forms of violence” with philosophical liberalism. The four (mis)characterizations of liberalism that Milligan borrows from Ivison are deeply flawed and set up a false opposition between liberalism and the goods that culture provides.

Liberals recognize that cultures bestow upon persons a sense of belonging and enhance personal agency and development. Because liberals characteristically recognize a universal code of human rights, however, they also insist that members of cultures not face internal restrictions imposed upon them; that is, they must have the basic freedoms necessary to leave their cultures or to revise their views if they are so inclined. So while liberals are prepared to defend culture as central to a person’s well being, they reject the idea that we are fixed and determined by our cultures. Seen in this way — and not in the caricatured way that postcolonialists routinely depict liberalism — it hardly seems fair to portray liberalism as a unilateralist effort to impose nonconsensual values on the unwilling. Milligan fails to sufficiently challenge the misrepresentation and allows the false opposition between cultural identity and a liberal concern for freedom and autonomy to stand.

This brings me to the central challenge of Milligan's paper: how can the tensions between liberal-modern and traditional conceptions of the mission of M.S.U. be reduced? I tend to agree that Dewey's philosophy provides some interesting conceptual resources for reconfiguring the goals of M.S.U. by informing a discussion concerned with the "intelligent direction of future experience." I also agree that postcolonial theory has provided a useful analytic framework for examining and critiquing colonial domination. Nevertheless, I find contentious the claim that "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."

I join Milligan in denouncing an imposed set of predetermined ends that ignore local customs, religious sensitivities, and cultural norms. Yet there *are* externally imposed educational aims that open up possibilities for reflection in communities bent on preserving the status quo.² For instance, how is imposing the educational ideal of gender equality in a context in which girls and women do not enjoy anything close to opportunities of boys and men an "impediment" to the "interests of the learner?"³ Similar considerations apply to antiracist or antihomophobic education in school contexts where the experiences of the learners are in the main *unfamiliar* with such thinking and *unaware* of alternatives.

Provided that the educational goals are well conceived and thoughtfully implemented, liberal objectives like autonomy and critical reflection are likely to advance the interests of the learner with or without a preexisting set of experiences. This is entirely consistent with the criteria of continuity and interaction that Milligan appeals to; for in introducing — or imposing — educational egalitarianism, one need not repudiate all previous traditions and practices. Liberal education well conceived (which requires a multicultural emphasis) can provide the learner with ideas that draw upon analogous strands within the Maranao or Muslim tradition that are being silenced or ignored. Liberalism may challenge and possibly uproot beliefs (read, prejudices) and practices that conceal injustice in the name of "collective identity." The fact is that some beliefs and practices that resonate with the experiences of the learner may be oppressive.⁴

The challenge remains of determining what role the state of Mindinao ought to play in helping to preserve Maranao culture. Suppose the policy that calls upon the Maranao to abandon their "backward ways" were to be completely rescinded. Would this preclude educational reform efforts from falling into "well-worn colonial patterns?" Alternatively, a policy reorientation might include recruiting the Maranao themselves to head up this mission. The problem with this is that state involvement in cultural preservation favors the expression of culture favored by its leaders. Hence, the Maranao culture expressed in M.S.U.'s curriculum is likely to reflect the hierarchical interests of the ruling elite. This seems at least as coercive as the policy that seeks to "integrate" the Maranao into the Filipino majority. Moreover, the government will have to be guided by some highly contested position on what cultural components are deserving of state protection. How well will the

socially underprivileged Maranao fare under the *maratabat*, or an imported version of Islam?⁵ Not very well, I suspect.

Furthermore, how will an education that preserves and promotes a particular reading of culture prepare its students to survive or adapt *outside* of that culture? At the very least we would want to ensure that such a culture-preserving education helped to facilitate traffic between the minority culture and the dominant culture. And if we truly cared about the economic prospects of the Maranao, we would make cross-cultural competence a priority. I don't wish to minimize the effects of colonization and acknowledge its deleterious effects on education and social mobility. Hence, those who cultivate a "method of intelligence" unsanctioned by the Maranao cultural gatekeepers will doubtless face some level of alienation from them.

I agree that M.S.U. epitomizes colonialist violence. Nonetheless, I believe that the Maranao are capable of reflecting critically upon their situation and galvanizing resources for change.⁶ Culture and religion can and ought to be disentangled.⁷ Not doing so starves opportunities for growth and reform. To be both Muslim and Maranao seems a mutually reinforcing hybrid identity. This same hybridization, however, with regard to imported Islamism⁸ or the *maratabat* is an invitation to cultural annihilation for the Maranao.

1. Milligan notes elsewhere that the U.S. colonization had a "deeply pedagogical character." See Jeffery Milligan, "Teaching Between the Cross and the Crescent Moon: Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Public Education in the Southern Philippines," *Comparative Education Review* 47, no. 4 (2003).

2. By no means would I limit this habit to non-Western contexts.

3. Milligan also puts it another way: learners must draw upon their own experience with the local environment or else be "handicapped in the full use of [one's] intelligence."

4. The literature on adapted or distorted preferences speaks incisively to this.

5. The question has particular resonance given the spread of the Jama'at al Tabligh and the growing number of Islamic schools (modeled on a very conservative approach to Islamic education), particularly when these expressions of Islamic identity very often run counter to the cultural interests of the Maranao. Indeed, to the extent that the Maranao come to believe that an imported version of Islam is "purer" than its local expression, one can expect an increasing number of Maranao Muslims to be facing a forced choice between Islam and their native culture.

6. Though the state has a larger responsibility, we also must not forget the questionable role that parents sometimes play in limiting their children's prospects in the interest of cultural and religious preservation. I may be wrong but I get the impression that many Maranao parents resist the (albeit limited) opportunities available to their children in the interest of remaining apart. I am partly sympathetic to this thinking, but it is the children who typically bear the social and economic costs. In other words, resistance to assimilation has its own problems.

7. See Milligan, "Cross and the Crescent Moon," 476–477.

8. The difficulty, of course, is in knowing to what extent imported Islam is being imposed and to what extent it is being *solicited*. Similar questions arise in relation to structural adjustment policies in the Third World by way of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.