

Noli Me Tangere:
A Call for Social Reform through Education

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Although little known in America, the book Noli Me Tangere by Dr. Jose Rizal is highly esteemed in the Philippines and because of it Rizal became the national hero of the Philippines in modern times. Every student in college there is required by legislation to read it before graduation, and statues of Dr. Rizal are common even in small towns. Noli Me Tangere is so revered because of the role it played in awakening the Filipino people and inspiring them with courage to revolt against Spain.

Like many other countries in Asia and the Americas, the Philippines had fallen victim to colonization from European powers. The first European contact in the Philippines happened in 1521 when Ferdinand Magellan and his crew landed there on their journey around the world. Magellan was killed by Filipinos who resisted them, but his crew continued on and eventually returned to Spain. In the late 1500's the Spaniards returned to the Philippines and conquered the many independent tribes that had lived there for many centuries uniting them as a colony of Spain.

Unlike other countries that were colonized by Europeans the Philippines remained isolated from the world and did not experience intellectual or industrial growth. The distance to Spain made travel to and communication with mainland Spain very difficult. Spain also passed laws preventing trade with local Asian countries. While the rest of the world advanced through increasing trade and knowledge, the Philippines remained the same. Many of the Spaniards who had been appointed to rule the Philippines, both civic and religious, took advantage of the isolation and established great wealth and power for themselves at the expense of the local people. Corruption grew more and more prevalent, but because of ignorance and lack of unity the Filipino people did little to resist the abuses they were suffering.

Noli Me Tangere exposed the corruption taking place in the Philippines and awakened the Filipino people to their own condition. In 1896, nine years after its publication, the people of the Philippines rose up in rebellion against Spain.

The author of the book, Jose Rizal, had at an early age dedicated his life to the betterment of his country. After receiving the best education available in the Philippines—lucky to be among the few that had the opportunity—he traveled to Europe where he pursued a degree in medicine. While in Spain he participated in efforts to increase European sympathy for the Philippines and encouraged other Filipinos to do the same. In 1887, while still studying in Europe, he published his first novel: *Noli Me Tangere*. His purpose in writing the novel was to open the eyes of the Filipino people, and also the world's, to the truth of the conditions there. The publication sparked intense reactions immediately, both good and ill. As a result Jose Rizal was excommunicated from the Catholic Church and viewed by many as a subversive and heretic. Others, who recognized the truth of Rizal's words, rallied around his ideas seeking freedom from oppression.

Eventually, on his second visit to the Philippines after the publication of *Noli Me Tangere*, Rizal was arrested and exiled to a remote island. While he was in exile Andrés Bonifacio used Rizal's name and writings to build a secret organization with the intent of throwing off the Spanish government. In 1896, when violence broke out and the secret organization was discovered by Spain, they took immediate action against the man whom they thought was the leader and cause of the rebellion; convicted of treason, Jose Rizal was executed by a firing squad on December 30th. The rebellion eventually

The great irony of Rizal's death is that he never supported the idea of rebellion. Upon

learning that war had begun and that the insurgents were using his name, he wrote a declaration that included the following:

Fellow countrymen: I have given many proofs that I desire as much as the next man liberties for our country; I continue to desire them. But I laid down as a prerequisite the education of the people in order that by means of such instruction, and by hard work, they may acquire a personality of their own and so become worthy of such liberties. In my writings I have recommended study and the civic virtues, without which no redemption is possible. I have also written (and my words have been repeated by others) that reforms, if they are to bear fruit, must come *from above* [meaning the government], for reforms that come *from below* are upheavals both violent and transitory. (qtd. in Coats)

This declaration clearly shows Rizal's ideals. He wanted the people of the Philippines to seek education to improve their situation and seek to influence the government to make positive changes. Noli Me Tangere, his first and most important novel, is not a call to arms—as many people suppose—but an exposition on how reforms must begin with and ultimately rely on education.

Noli Me Tangere uses the story of a fictional character, Crisostomo Ibarra, to show the many problems of Filipino life under Spanish rule. The novel begins as Crisostomo Ibarra returns to the Philippines after studying in Europe for seven years because he has received news of his father's death. He learns that his father died in prison accused of heresy and subversion; although, he had been guilty only of making enemies in high places through providing funds for the local school and other similar good actions. When he returns to his village and tries to visit

his father's grave he learns that the Friar had had the grave exhumed and his father's remains had been tossed into a lake. Not desiring to bring up more contention he decides to not seek revenge but to fulfill his father's dreams of helping the local school. He begins to build a school and receives praise from many people in authority, but in secret they fear him and don't want the common people to be educated. At the cornerstone ceremony there was a plot to kill Ibarra, but a friend of his, Elias, discovered the plot and warned him. The corner stone fell when Ibarra was placing mortar on it, but he avoided getting caught.

The Friar who had been responsible for Rafael Ibarra's imprisonment continued to persecute his enemy through his living son, making references to him over the pulpit during sermons and alluding to him often in conversations. During a lunch this friar, Father Damaso, says that Rafael Ibarra died in prison by the hand of God because he sent his son to Europe. In anger Ibarra struck Father Damaso, who fell to the ground, and defended his father's memory before fleeing the scene. The Church responds by excommunicating him.

Once again Ibarra acts calmly and with the help of the Governor General of the Philippines is able to have the excommunication withdrawn and continue the work on the school. Everything seems to be working out until he receives word from his friend Elias that men are being hired in his name to stage an attack on the local barracks. The attack is actually being orchestrated and paid for by the Friars. They use Ibarra's name so they can arrest him afterward. The night before the attacks on the Friars goes to the Ensign, the highest local military authority, and warns him of the attack. He claims to have gained the information from a confession and because of the sacred nature of the confession cannot reveal who told him.

The attackers meet well prepared and warned ahead guards and are defeated easily.

Despite a lack of evidence the Ensign orders Ibarra's arrest. Deciding that resistance would prove his guilt Ibarra complies with the guards who arrest him. In the trial Ibarra was convicted with only a single letter he had written over seven years earlier that the prosecution claimed had anti-government sentiments as evidence. Before he is sentenced Elias returns and helps him escape from prison. Ibarra expresses a desire to rebel against the government to Elias. Elias tells Ibarra he is against rebellion and seeks reform. They are discovered and split ways. Elias dies leading away the guards, and Ibarra successfully escapes.

Because the two main characters discuss the subject of rebellion and cannot come to an agreement, many readers are unsure what stance Rizal is recommending. His objection to the way Filipinos are treated is clear, but his ideas on how to bring about the desired changes are not as clear. After carefully considering the text, the fact that Rizal agrees with Elias, who is against rebellion, becomes clear.

One of the first things Rizal did to promote a theme of education was to choose a highly educated Filipino as the main character. Don Crisostomo Ibarra grew up in the Philippines and was sent by his father to Europe to receive an Education where he studied for seven years. The villains of the story condemn his education in Europe over and over, but because the characters saying so are the antagonist it is clear that Rizal supports it.

Many times throughout the book Rizal reminds the reader that Ibarra is educated. In one particular scene his private study is described as “both library and chemical laboratory” (Rizal 219). Another time, in the same study, Elias finds him conducting a experiments on pieces of bamboo where Ibarra remarks, “I've made a great discovery. This cane can't burn . . .”(Rizal 352) before Elias interrupts him with urgent information about the Frier's plot. These and other subtle

references to his education serve to show that he is not only highly educated, but dedicated to further learning.

Another way Rizal promotes education is through one of the side characters, Don Anastasio, who is commonly called Tasio the Madman or Tasio the Philosopher. He is an oddity in the town of San Diego where most of the novel unfolds. Highly educated and intelligent he is mistrusted and thought ill of by the general populace. Rizal paints him as an outcast condemned to isolation because of the ignorance that surrounds him. When Ibarra asks Tasio why writes even though he writes in code and admits he doesn't want anyone to read his writings, he says, "I'm not writing for this generation, I'm writing for the ages. If they could read these, I would burn my books, my life's work. On the other hand, the generation that can decipher these characters will be an educated generation. It will understand me and say, 'In the nights of our grandparents, not everyone was asleep'"(Rizal 162). Tasio's sorrowful state exposes a major problem that was in the Philippines. Unlike Ibarra who was respected because of his wealth, Tasio is rejected despite his intelligence and wisdom. In that society the ignorant were respected and thought well of, and wise people were seen as troublemakers and heretics.

Later when Ibarra tells him of the school he plans to build Tasio is filled with joy. "His eyes wet with tears, Old Tasio examined the plans in front of him.

'What you are going to create has been my dream, the dream of a poor madman,' he exclaimed, clearly moved. "(Rizal 164)

The point Rizal makes through Tasio, that educated people were being persecuted and ignored, is driven home when near the end of the story he dies and "the righteous" (Rizal 413) burn his books destroying the vision he had of being revered by future generations. Through this

tragic figure Rizal argues that intelligent men should be honored, respected, and remembered, unlike Tasio who represented the suffering such men faced at the time.

Much of the story's plot hinges on the building of a school, which serves as another argument for education. Both the dedication of the respected characters and the resistance of the corrupt ones emphasize the importance of education. At the occasion of laying the corner stone the Captain-General of the Philippines, who represented the King, was present and gave this dedication:

“Citizens of San Diego!” he said in a serious tone, “we have the honor of presiding over a ceremony of great importance, which you will understand whether I note it or not. A school is being established. A school is the basis of a society, a school is the book in which one writes the future of a people. Show us a school and we will tell you who you are.” (Rizal 214)

This declaration, that “A school is the basis of society” is one of Rizal's main ideas in the book. The fact that Rizal voices this point through the Captain-General shows that he is not against Spain, but that he is against corruption in the local leaders Spain has appointed. His call to action is reform, not war. Here the Captain-General along with Ibarra, Elias, and Tasio hopes for a better Philippines.

Education in the Philippines at the time was very minimal and had many problems. One of his biggest was the use of the ignorance by the local leaders to maintain their power over the Filipino people. In the very first chapter a few Spaniards are at a party and a newcomer to the Philippines proposes that perhaps the Filipinos are only viewed as ignorant because of their cultural difference. The Spaniards who have been in the Philippines for many years disagree with the man saying,

“As I believe in the Gospel. Indios are incredibly lazy!. . . 'Ask Senor Laruja, who also knows the country well. Ask him if the indio's ignorance and indolence are equaled anywhere!'

'In fact,' answered the little man, who was in the man in question, 'nowhere else in the world will you find anyone lazier than indios, nowhere else!’”(Rizal 10-11)

Indio was the derogatory term used by many Spaniards at the time for Filipinos. This attitude manifested in the opening scene of the novel continues for its duration. Spanish leaders, mostly the catholic friars, openly condemned education. Repeatedly implying that the more a Filipino learned the more likely he was to become a heretic and criminal. They even reprimanded a school teacher who, in compliance with the current laws, had begun to teach Spanish to his students. On the Friar's orders the school teacher visited with the Chief Sexton. When the schoolteacher arrived he greeted the sexton in Spanish who laughed at him and said,

“So it's 'buenos dias' now, eh? Buenos dias. What a joke! Now you speak Spanish!’. . . “When you come to see me, it should not be in borrowed clothes. Be content to speak your own language, and don't ruin Spanish, which is not for you. Do you know the schoolmaster Ciruela, a schoolmaster who did not even know how to write, yet he taught school?” (Rizal 110)

The actions of these leaders are not only oppressive to the Filipinos, they are contrary to Spanish laws coming from the mainland. In order for education to succeed the attitude of local leaders needed to change. This first reform would facilitate make the way for other improvement, but as long as the cause of education remained openly persecuted no progress

could be made.

In the book the main character Ibarra is led to the watery grave of his father by a man who reveals himself to be the local school teacher. He mentions that Ibarra's father had helped support the school. Curious, Ibarra ask the man the condition of teaching to which the school teacher replies,

“Do you want to know the stumbling blocks to teaching? Well, in our current situation, without powerful assistance, teaching will never amount to anything, in the first place because childhood itself contains neither incentive nor stimulation, and in the second place, when they do exist, just finding the means to live and other similar concerns kills them.” (Rizal 108)

This pessimistic response brings up one of the greatest problems behind education: motivation. Children are more interested in playing games and exploring the world than sitting in a classroom listening to a teacher. Motivation to learn is hampered even more by poverty, the child is more likely to turn to some endeavor which brings immediate relief, such as work or theft, than invest his time in learning. The teaching methods of the time made the situation worse. Class was mostly taught from Spanish books, having the students memorize passages, even though they didn't understand it. Beatings were common and school teachers were feared by their students. Real learning cannot happen in this setting.

Rizal, through the school teacher, proposed that beating and memorization need to be replaced with positive teaching methods that inspire real learning.

“Lashings, for example, which since time immemorial had been the province of schools and which before I had seen as the only effective way to make

children learn (that is how they have accustomed us to believe), began to seem far removed from contributing to a child's progress, completely useless. I became convinced that when one keeps the switch or the rod in view reasoning is impossible. Fear and terror upsets the calmest person, and a child's imagination can be livelier, and more impressionable.”(Rizal 111)

This school teacher recognized that although a student may preform under the pressure of punishment they will not learn effectively making their education worthless. He presents a better way of motivating students.

“And in order to mold ideas into a person's mind tranquility, both inside and out, was utmost, along with a peaceful soul, moral and material serenity, and a good spirit. I began to think that the best thing I could do for these children was to develop confidence, security, and self-esteem.” (Rizal 111)

“I took the whips home and replaced the with emulation and belief in oneself. If someone could not do a lesson, I ascribed it to a lack of will, not a lack of ability. I made them believe they had a greater aptitude than they possibly could have had, and that belief, which they then made every effort to uphold, forced them to study, in the way that confidence leads to heroism.” (Rizal 112)

Sadly this reform was repealed by the Friars who forced the teacher to resume using the whip and memorization of Spanish under threat of losing his job.

Rizal also speaks of the need of a licensing program to prevent professional fraud. In Noli Me Tangere Rizal uses a false doctor, Tiburcio de Espadana, to make this point. Doctor Espadana was a Spaniard who spent all his money traveling the world. While in the Philippines

he lost his job, leaving him broke and stranded. Not wanting the image of Spaniards to be compromised the local countrymen forbade him to earn an honest living by hard labor, despite the fact he was willing. After living off other Spaniards for a time he became a doctor at their advice. His only qualification being that he worked in a hospital for a few months in his youth cleaning benches and stoking fires.

He became a doctor when his wife ordered a plaque with “Doctor” in front of his name. Shortly thereafter he began seeing patients. “Doctor de Espadana was amazed at the powers of the mallow syrup and the lichen brew, prescriptions he did not vary.”(Rizal 290) Yet because he was a Spaniard he was considered a doctor for only the wealthy.

Not completely ignorant of the problem a few of the local women discussed the problem of knowing whether to trust doctors:

“The one who stitched up Dona Maria's belly charged a lot, so he must have been smart.”

“Idiot!” Sinang exclaimed. “Not everyone who charges a lot of money is smart. Look at Doctor Guevara: after not knowing how to attend at childbirth and cutting off the child's head, he charged the widower fifty pesos. . . what he know is how to charge a lot.”(Rizal 277)

Such malpractice would certainly be punished in a good society: both the child and mother died because of the Doctor's ignorance. A better solution would be to prevent the man from acting like a doctor in the first place. Rizal most likely uses the field of medicine as an example because it is also his area of expertise. He studied in Europe, earning a doctorate in medicine, then continued on in Paris and Germany to become a specialist in eye surgery. After

seeing the growing sophistication of the medical profession in more developed countries, the primitive methods in the Philippines where anyone could practice medicine with or without qualifications must have bothered him immensely.

The subject and idea of rebellion comes up often in the course of the book, which is not surprising considering the persecution the characters receive. Each time a character considers it Rizal carefully places another character with them who advises against it. When Ibarra realizes that he must bow to the whims of local leaders to even begin his project of building a school he considers ignoring them and pressing onward in defiance of their objections. Although this isn't outright armed rebellion it is the same attitude that would eventually lead to warfare. Tasio advises him against it:

“Why can't we be like that frail stem, laden with roses and rosebuds ?” the philosopher said, pointing at a beautiful rosebush. “The wind blows, it shakes, and it bends, as if it were trying to protect its precious charge. If the stem were to remain upright, it would break, the wind would scatter the flowers, and the buds would rot. The wind passes by and the stem straightens anew, proud of its treasures. Who would accuse it of folding in the face of such need?” (Rizal 169)

The message in Tasio's simple analogy is clear; open confrontation against their persecutors is more likely to destroy their hopes of change than fulfill them, but if they bend to the will of current leaders and seek change in more peaceful ways then they can survive and bring about change with their treasures intact.

Later Elias meets with an old man, Pablo, who is set on rebellion and has gathered a group of followers bent on taking revenge on the government and Friars. In a mountainous cave they

discuss the revolution the man plans to lead. Elias try to dissuade him.

“But look,” Elias said after a moment of silence, “look at what a terrifying conflagration you're going to unleash on our poor people. If you carry out your revenge by your own hand, your enemies will make terrible reprisals, not against you, not against those who are armed, but against the people who are always accused, and then, how many injustices will there be!”(Rizal 299)

Pablo who has lost everything acknowledges that many will be hurt, but because of his loss—his sons, family, fortune—he doesn't care and is set on fighting. Still hoping to change his mind Elias proposes using Ibarra, who is wealthy, respected, and has friends in Madrid to voice their problems to the government and fight their battle politically so that blood doesn't have to be shed (Rizal 300).

Later when Elias discusses the ideas of reform with Ibarra, Elias changes his mind and sides with rebellion. Ibarra agrees to write a letter to friends in Madrid, but acknowledges they are in no position to help and that his complaints will have no effect. Elias asks him to join in the effort of rebellion, but Ibarra disagrees.

“Never! I will never be the one to lead a multitude to get by force what the government does not think opportune, no. If someday I see this multitude armed, I would place myself on the side of the government and fight it, because I cannot see my country in this type of chaos. I want good for it, which is why I built a school. I seek it in education, for forward progress. Without light there is no path.” (Rizal 332-3)

Ibarra, however, does not hold to this conviction. After spending time in jail and being

convicted in a mockery of a trial he decides that armed rebellion is the only way to bring about change. He expresses this change of ideas to Elias as Elias is helping him escape from prison, only to discover that Elias has also changed his stance.

“You are the master of your own will, senor, and your future,” he said to Crisostomo, who was silent. “But if you allow me an observation, I will give it to you. Look well to what you are going to do. You are going to set off a war. you have money and brains and you will quickly find many to help you, since unfortunately there are many malcontents. Worse, in this fight you intend to undertake, the defenseless and innocent will suffer most. The very sentiments that a month ago made me come to you seeking reform are the same ones that motivate me now to tell you to think this over. This country, senor, is not about to separate itself from the mother country. It seeks only a bit of freedom, justice, love. I'll support the malcontents, the criminals, the desperate, but the people will back off. Seeing everything so darkly, you are wrong if you believe this country is desperate. The country is suffering, yes, but it still has hope, it believes, and it will rise up only when it has lost all patience, that is, when those who govern it want it that way, which is still far off. I myself will not follow you. I will never accede to those measures as long as I see men hope.” (Rizal 401-2)

It is understandable that readers are easily confused as to whether or not Noli Me Tangere is a call to armed rebellion. The characters themselves are often in disagreement and change opinions throughout the book. Rizal's stance becomes more clear when considered in light of the overall messages of the book. Violence and force are continually depicted as bad and

problematic. Education is continually triumphed as the way to lasting change.

Rizal avoided saying that rebellion is always wrong. His opinion is adequately voiced through Elias who said contritions where he would rebel are “still far off” and he would never rebel “as long as [he saw] men hope” (Rizal 402). Rizal recognized that it was possible that a time might come that armed rebellion became the only way to establish freedom, but he looked to it as a last resort, one that would only come if years of attempts of peaceful reform failed leaving the people with no hope. This message especially becomes clear when viewed in light of Jose Rizal's own actions and other writings, such as the declaration mentioned earlier.

Jose Rizal firmly believed that reforms would come as the result of greater knowledge about the problems in the Philippines reaching the right people in society. The dedication of Noli Me Tangere clearly expresses his purpose:

To My Country

Recorded in the history of human suffering are cancers of such malignant character that even minor contact aggravates them, engendering overwhelming pain. How often, in the midst of modern civilizations have I wanted to bring you into the discussion, sometimes to recall these memories, sometimes to compare you to other countries, so often that your beloved image became to me like a social cancer.

Therefore, because I desire your good health, which is indeed all of ours, and because I seek better stewardship for you, I will do with you what the ancients did with their infirmed: they placed them on the steps of their temples so that each in his own way could invoke a divinity that might offer a cure.

With that in mind, I will try to reproduce your current condition faithfully, without prejudice; I will lift the veil hiding your ills, and sacrifice everything to truth, even my own pride, since, as your son, I, too, suffer your defects and shortcomings. (Rizal 3)

The book itself is a testament to his belief that reforms would come as the result of education. He had two main audiences to which he desired to “sacrifice everything to truth”: first the Filipino people and second the honest leaders in government.

The dedication is not an accusation that Spain is mistreating the Philippines. Rizal calls the problems a social cancer, a growth from within. He doesn't speak of freeing the Philippines, but curing it. Much of the injustices and flaws in the Philippines came because of traditions and attitudes that stunted growth, for example the extravagant fiestas that are held yearly wasting the towns money when so many other long term projects for growth are set aside indefinitely. Through Tasio Rizal remarks, “There are good ones [government leader], and if they are unable to do anything it is because they come up against an inert mass. The population that barely participates in the things that concern them” (Rizal 168). Noli Me Tangere lays out the current situation hoping to inspire the people of the Philippines to acknowledge the problems that have been so long ignored or silenced. This purpose is also expressed through his choice of the title Noli Me Tangere. Austin Coats explains:

“He explained his choice of title—Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene at the Resurrection—as implying that the book contained 'things that nobody in our country has spoken of till now. they are so delicate that they cannot be touched by anyone. . . .' but in the way the cover was designed, the title also reads as a

warning against picking up an explosive.” (Coats 108)

He was saying the hard words that need to be said to awaken the people to their own condition and give them the courage to try and change it.

His second audience was the honest leaders of Spain. Because of the great distances involved people in mainland Spain had very little knowledge of what happened in the Philippines. Rizal believed that many of the problems would be addressed if only the government was aware of them. In the dedication Rizal said, “and because I seek better stewardship for you.” When understood correctly this means a removal of corrupt leaders within the government and not removal of the government itself, for corrupt leaders was one of the biggest barriers to reform.

“Reforms from on high are undermined at lower levels thanks to vice everywhere, like the strong desire to get rich in a short period of time, and the people's ignorance, which lets anything happen. A royal decree doesn't correct abuses if a jealous administrator doesn't oversee its practice,” (Rizal 166)

In the end, both of his audiences misunderstood him. The people of the Philippines, awakened as he intended, rose up in arms despite his warnings. The government of Spain, guided mostly by the corruption he spoke against, declared him a traitor and executed him. One of his biographers Austin Coats remarked, “He was also, Ironically, the most understanding, patient, and influential friend Spain possessed in the Islands” (xviii). By killing him Spain rejected the peaceful educational reform he proposed and further provoked the violent revolution that had just begun.

Works Cited

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