

# Rizal's Marxist Critique of Spanish Colonization and Religion

Christian Bryan S. Bustamante, Ph.D.

*San Beda University*

**Abstract:** *This paper analyzed the themes of Jose Rizal's critique of the Spanish colonization and religion. It works on the propositions that Rizal's writings were intended to emancipate the Filipinos from the fetters of the Spanish colonization; as such, he provides an analysis on the effects of the Spanish colonial strategies and policies to the Filipino psyche, and exposes the illnesses that these caused the Filipino nation. His analysis of the nineteenth century Philippine society and its social, economic and political situations under the Spanish colonial rule is similar to the ideas of Karl Marx on religion and the human person. Though it was never acknowledged in his writings that he read Marx's works, Rizal's criticisms of religion, education, and government showed resemblances with Marx's ideas.*

**Keywords:** *Jose Rizal, Karl Marx, Spanish Colonial Rule, Critique of Colonization and of Religion*

This paper operates on the proposition that Jose Rizal, like the 19th century philosophers of his time, analyzed the social and political problems in the 19th century Philippine society to transform the Filipino nation. Such transformation can only be realized if the root causes of all the problems are unearthed and exposed, and if the Filipino people will be enlightened about their miserable situation. In his analysis, Rizal demonstrated similarities with Karl Marx's ideas particularly on religion and the human person; this is why it is hypothesized that Rizal's critique of the Spanish colonization is similar to Marx; although, it does not claim that he was influenced by Marx.

## **Karl Marx on Materialism and Anthropocentrism**

The task of philosophy and history is to remove the veil of ignorance in the human person brought about by religion.

According to Marx, philosophy and history must “establish the truth of this world” by “unmasking self-alienation in its unholy arms.”<sup>1</sup> The task of philosophy and history is to criticize the heaven by criticizing the earth, criticize religion by criticizing rights, and criticize theology by criticizing politics.<sup>2</sup> The task of criticizing religion is a means towards a higher goal. Marx believes that religion is the cause of ignorance. There is underdevelopment, or no advancement, because of ignorance. To achieve development, it is a must to remove ignorance; and such can only be realized by criticizing religion. That is why the critique of religion is the critique of all critique, for Marx saw religion as one of the root causes of backwardness during his time.

Marx’s notion of religion is anthropocentric in the sense that it is a result of the human person’s material existence. It is a result of the human person’s desire to have a world that is perfect. Because of this, the human person longed to produce a “reversed world-consciousness,” a utopia. Such a longing can be realized through religion’s promise of eternal happiness and peace not in this world but in the next. That is why religion is an expression of real distress and a protest against real distress.<sup>3</sup> The poor and the oppressed found consolation from their woes and miseries and learned to accept their oppression and poverty, forgetting the struggle to overcome their miserable situation. Marx says:

*...religion disillusioned man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself.*<sup>4</sup>

Lauer interprets Marx’s attack on religion as an attack on the ‘belief’ in God and not on God Himself.<sup>5</sup> This belief makes “humans unwilling to take upon themselves the responsibility of changing

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Right,” in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Right,” 42.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Right,” 42.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Right,” 42.

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Lauer, “Response Occasioned by McGovern’s ‘Atheism: Is It Essential to Marxism?’” in *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. XXII, Summer 1985, no. 3, 525.

their wretched situation, and permits both the Prussian state... and the capitalist economic system to impose their own values on society.”<sup>6</sup>

Marx's idea of religion is related to the materialist notion of the human person; that the human person is influenced by his real and material condition. The study of the human person, therefore, must begin with the real situation that confronts the human person and not about the ideas concocted about his being and nature. Discourses about human existence must spring from the economic, political and social realities that surround such existence. Historically, the human person is determined by economic, political and social wants and needs. In different historical periods, civilization and institutions were established to address these wants and needs. In the process, the human person is modified in each historical epoch. Hence, he is a potential, a set of conditions, a raw material. He has to undergo transformation and change in the course of history. Aside from civilization and institutions, work has also transformed and changed the human person.<sup>7</sup> Work is his being, an expression of himself. That is why the human person's materialist existence is alienating because it constitutes work as a means to produce and to earn, and not to express and enhance one's being.

Marx's idea is significant to the development of critical theory. Critical theory is theory and praxis leading to social transformation. In critical theory, philosophy becomes a “tool of reason which, when properly located in an historical group, can transform the world.”<sup>8</sup> It is inspired by the statement of Marx, “Philosophers have always interpret the world, the point is to change it.” Marx based such idea on Hegel's philosophy of the “moving subject who through the process of self-reflection, comes to know itself at ever higher level of consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> It is a philosophy that gave rise to the relationship between theory and practice because it highlights the role of action in the process of reflection.<sup>10</sup> Hence, critical theory turned the eyes of the philosophers from metaphysical

<sup>6</sup> Lauer, “Response Occasioned by McGovern's ‘Atheism: Is It Essential to Marxism?,” 525.

<sup>7</sup> Erich Fromm, *Beyond The Chains of Illusions: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*, (New York: Continuum, 2006), 30-33, 20-23

<sup>8</sup> David M. Rasmussen, “Critical Theory and Philosophy,” in *Handbook of Critical Theory*, D.M. Rasmussen, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1996), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Rasmussen, “Critical Theory and Philosophy,” 11.

<sup>10</sup> Rasmussen, “Critical Theory and Philosophy,” 11.

to social and political analysis: to analyze the problems of the society and its institutions and provide radical solutions. Critical theory is 'applied' in the sense that: (1) philosophical ideas are used as frameworks in understanding and explaining social and political problems and (2) philosophical ideas and principles can be translated into something concrete in order to solve problems.

The aim of critical theory is radical social transformation. This transformation can only be realized if there is social emancipation carried out by critical reflection. Philosopher's task is to enlighten individuals for them to realize the shackles that hinder intellectual progress and social advancement. This realization is attained through understanding of social and political problems leading to the provision of radical solutions. That is why the solutions that philosophy offers is radical because it solves not only the problem but also the factors and circumstances that caused the problem.

Based on the foregoing discussion, Marx's ideas about religion and the human person are relevant in understanding the works of Rizal. The discourses of Rizal (on the detrimental effects of Spanish colonization particularly that of religion to the Filipino nation) show resemblances with Marx's ideas. Rizal sees colonization and religion as a hindrance to the development and progress of Philippine society. These were the causes of ignorance and backwardness in Philippine colonial society. Rizal's discourses are similar to the aim of critical theory; he wanted to transform Philippine society and the Filipino people by making them realize their defects, limitations, and weaknesses. Rizal idealized the situation of the Filipinos under the Spanish colonization. He translated such reality into words and ideas, for the Filipinos to be enlightened about their miserable situation and be induced towards action and emancipation.

The following sections are expositions of Rizal's critique of the Spanish colonization and its resemblances to Marx's ideas of religion and the human person.

### **Rizal's Works as Essentially Critical**

In defending Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* against the criticism of Salvador Font, an Augustinian friar who was a permanent member of the Commission on Censorship, Marcelo H. del Pilar

described the writing of Rizal as “essentially critical” and “pinning on the love of Spain” to achieve its objective of “betterment of the Philippines.”<sup>11</sup> Rizal was critical not only of the Spanish institutions but of the Filipinos as well. He was critical to simony and oppression practiced by the religious, the venality of the government functionaries, the theocratic-monastic tutelage over the government, and the abuses of the armed forces. At the same time, he was also critical of the masses’ venality of ignorance, egoism, hypocrisy, fanaticism, ambition, and lack of faith in the liberal spirit of Spanish policy. Del Pilar disagreed on the understanding that the primary objective of Rizal’s writings was absolute independence.

Ferdinand Blumentritt wrote that the objective of Rizal in his *Noli Me Tangere* was to give “plastic form to the abuses of the administration, to the neglect of political prisoners, accused rightly or wrongly, to the inhuman harshness and cruelty that the ore ambitious among the friars used in all their actions.”<sup>12</sup> He further explained that Rizal exposed the “faults and abuses” of the ruling class, the friars, civil authorities and employees, and including that of the ordinary Filipinos. Rizal did not single out the faults and abuses of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities and of the ruling class, he also depicted the faults and abuses of the natives. Blumentritt described Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* as “photographs whose originals in part still live.” The characters in the story were not personifications or representations. They were real; they existed in actuality. He further explained:

*But still more: Not only is the Spanish element depicted black in the Noli me tangere, but all the Indios who appear in the book are idealized. That is considered as defect. This does not need defense, because I find it natural for Rizal to depict his fellow countrymen, whom he loves, in the way he thinks just.*

In his letter dated March 5, 1887, Rizal explained that the title

<sup>11</sup> Please see the work of Marcelo H. Del Pilar, a.k.a. Plaridel entitled “Noli Me Tangere: Before Monkish Hatred in the Philippines,” in Rizal’s Correspondence with Fellow Reformists (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1992), 738-739.

<sup>12</sup> Please see Professor F. Blumentritt’s review of Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* in Jose Rizal Correspondence with Blumentritt, volume II (Manila: National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2011), 549-569.

Noli Me Tangere was taken from the Gospel of St. Luke. “Touch me not” means that the book contains things that need to be discussed but nobody dares to talk about it. These things were delicate matters that nobody dare to touch it; hence, “touch me not” or “don’t dare to discuss about it.” What were these delicate matters? Rizal narrated:

*I have described the social condition, the life there, our beliefs, our hopes, our desires, our complaints, our sorrows. I have unmasked the hypocrisy that under the cloak of religion has impoverished and brutalized us. I have distinguished the true religion from the false, from the superstitious, from that which capitalizes the holy word in order to extract money, in order to make us believe in absurdities of which Catholicism would blush if it would know them. I have lifted the curtain in order to show what is behind the deceitful and glittering words of the government. I have told our compatriots our defects, our vices, our culpable and cowardly complacency with the miseries over there.*<sup>13</sup>

These statements are consistent with the explanation of del Pilar and Blumentritt that Rizal exposed the abuses and failures of the institutions, the ecclesiastical and civil authorities, the Spaniards, and the Indios. He wanted to show what the Spaniards had done to the natives, and what the natives had done to themselves. The natives could also be blamed for the abuses committed by the Spaniards and to the backwardness of their society, because they allowed these things to happen. The indios participated in the process of colonization and allowed their colonial masters to subjugate and change them, up to the point of destroying their character, culture and civilization. The Philippine society and the Filipinos were in darkness, but they were not aware of the sorrowful state. The society and the people were sick, but they did not search for the cure; in the first place, they thought they were in a normal and a healthy state. That is why in his novel, Rizal exposed such sickness “on the steps of the temple so that each one would come to invoke the Divine, would

<sup>13</sup> “Over there” refers to the Philippines. Rizal wrote the letter in Spain, according to the translator; but in the letter, it is stated that it is written in Berlin.

propose a cure for them.”<sup>14</sup> In order to expose such illness, Rizal lifted part of the shroud that conceals the illness, sacrificing to the truth everything, even his own self-respect, for, he admits that he also suffers defects and failings.<sup>15</sup>

In his letter to del Pilar on January 1889, he stated that: “I wrote the *Noli Me Tangere* to stir the patriotism of my countrymen. I would be happy if among those I have stirred, I shall find more notable champions.”<sup>16</sup> These statements give us an idea that Rizal wanted to expose the maladies of his beloved country and people. It is not only for the world to know about the abuses and failures of Mother Spain on this group of islands on this part of the world. It is to open their eyes and minds and to touch the hearts of the Filipinos, for them to do something in order to help themselves, others and their country, to cure its illnesses and to get up from the mud of miseries.

This is true not only in his *Noli Me Tangere*; Rizal was critical to open the eyes of the Filipinos about their situation under the Spanish regime. He wanted his countrymen to realize the negative impact of Spanish colonization not only to the Philippine society but also to their psyche, attitude, and worldviews. Rizal was working on the historical scheme that the Filipino people had a glorious history until the Spanish colonization that brought the Filipinos into abyss and darkness. The Filipinos needed to be salvaged from that situation through education and reforms. Through education and reforms the Filipinos will understand themselves and their own history as a nation. They will connect themselves to their glorious past. Understanding themselves and their history will enlighten them about their situation under the Spanish colonization and give them confidence to determine their future.

Rizal wanted the Filipinos to be emancipated from the shackles of Spanish colonization. It is through emancipation that they will be transformed as a nation. In the words of Marx and the language of critical theory, Rizal wanted to unveil the Filipino ignorance brought about by colonization. He wanted to

<sup>14</sup> Please see “To My Motherland” in *Noli Me Tangere*, trans. Ma. Soledad Lacson-Locsin (Philippines: The Bookmark, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Rizal, “To My Motherland” in *Noli Me Tangere*.

<sup>16</sup> Please see Rizal’s *Correspondence with Fellow Reformists* (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1992), 252.

unmasked self-alienation and re-establish the truths about the Filipino, truths that were distorted by colonization. That is why he criticized Spanish colonization for the Filipinos to reflect about their situation and to realize their misery and woes under the yoke of Spanish authorities. Rizal's works, then, are similar to the aim of critical theory which is radical social transformation that can be realized by the Filipino's emancipation from the bondage of ignorance and backwardness. Rizal wrote his novels and essays to enlighten the Filipinos and to arouse their critical reflection.

## **Rizal's Critique of Colonization**

Three famous essays were analyzed to demonstrate the unveiling of ignorance of the Filipinos and the unmasking of their self-alienation. In these essays, Rizal deconstructed the truths about the Filipinos to emancipate them from ignorance and self-alienation brought about by Spanish colonization. The following themes are evident in his essay: (1) retrogression and backwardness of the Filipinos, (2) the role of religion in the decline of the Filipinos, (3) government policies and the discouragement to work, and (4) defective educational system. These are the recurring themes in the essays of Rizal which demonstrate his thesis that colonization brought the Filipinos into abyss and darkness, and transform them into a nation without confidence on their past and hope for their future. Hence, the Filipinos must be liberated from such miserable situation.

### **A. The Retrogressive Transformation of the Filipinos and the Backwardness of the Philippine Society**

In *The Philippines a Century Hence*, Rizal claimed that the Filipinos entered a new era when they were incorporated in the crown of Spain--the era of depopulation, impoverishment, and retardation.<sup>17</sup> It was also an era marked by their transformation to people with no more confidence on their past, without faith on their present, and without hope on their future.<sup>18</sup> This dark

<sup>17</sup> Jose Rizal, "The Philippines A Century Hence," in Jose Rizal's Political and Historical Writings, vol. VII, trans. Encarnacion Alzona (Manila: National Historical Institute, 2000), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Rizal, "The Philippines A Century Hence," 130.



transformation experienced by the Filipinos was a result of colonization or *hispanization*. Colonization disconnected the Filipinos to their glorious past and to their own history and tradition; and such disconnect was the cause of their retrogressive transformation and their fallen into abyss of meaningless existence.<sup>19</sup> Rizal explained that the Filipinos were disconnected to their past, because “they gave up their writing, their songs, their poems, their laws in order to learn by rote other doctrines which they did not understand.”<sup>20</sup> They embraced another morality and aesthetics which were “different from those inspired by their climate and their manner of thinking.”<sup>21</sup> Because of this experience of disconnection to their past and embracing a foreign culture and perspective, the Filipinos declined, degraded, and “became ashamed of what was their own;” they started to “admire and praise whatever was foreign and incomprehensible; their spirit was dismayed and it surrendered.”<sup>22</sup>

In *The Indolence of the Filipinos*, Rizal argued that the indolence of the natives was a “chronic malady” caused by the Spanish misgovernment of the Philippine colony and backwardness of the Philippine society.<sup>23</sup> Indolence in the Philippines was an evil, because it was magnified, snow-balled, and increased in direct proportion to mismanagement of the government and underdevelopment of the society. To prove his claim that it is indeed a result of Spanish colonization, Rizal cited

---

<sup>19</sup> Based on M.A. Bernad’s explanation, Spanish colonization disconnected the Filipino natives to their glorious past, history, and tradition by destroying their native towns and villages, imposing and collecting tributes, seizing lands for public use, confiscating private and personal properties, and slaving the chiefs (datu) and freemen (timawa). He further explains that the Spaniards destroyed the social fabric of the pre-colonial Philippine society, and such greatly contributed to the “death” of their indigenous culture and structure. The colonial government has broken up the civilization of the Filipinos, for them to embrace Hispanic culture and Christianity (please see Miguel A. Bernad, SJ, *The Christianization of the Philippines: Problems and Perspectives*, Manila: The Filipiniana Book Guild, 1972, pp. 173, 189, 196

<sup>20</sup> Bernad, *The Christianization of the Philippines*, 130.

<sup>21</sup> Bernad, *The Christianization of the Philippines*, 130-131.

<sup>22</sup> Bernad, *The Christianization of the Philippines*, 131.

<sup>23</sup> Jose Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” in Jose Rizal’s *Political and Historical Writings*, vol. VII, trans. Encarnacion Alzona (Manila: National Historical Institute, 2000), p. 232.

the works of Pigafetta, Morga,<sup>24</sup> and Colin<sup>25</sup> where they recorded the productive and active economic activities of the natives during the early years of Spanish colonization. The Filipinos were busy in farming, fishing, trading, manufacturing, and mining. Based on these recorded accounts by early Pigafetta, Morga, and Colin, Rizal concluded:

*All the histories of those first years, in short, abound in long accounts of the industry and agriculture of the people – mines, gold placers, looms, cultivated farms, barter, shipbuilding, poultry and stock-raising, silk and cotton-weaving, distilleries, manufacture of arms, pearl-fisheries, the civet industry, horn and leather industry...All these could be found at every step and considering the time and conditions of the Islands, they prove that there was life, there was activity, there was movement.*<sup>26</sup>

After three hundred years of colonization, the Filipinos were described by writers such as San Agustin, Velarde, Bowring, Mallat, and de Man as naturally lazy. It was in contradiction with the early accounts of Pigafetta, Morga, and Colin. That is why Rizal raised the question, “How then and in what way was the active

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Antonio de Morga was a civil official who wrote about the culture and civilization of the Filipinos during the earliest years of Spanish colonization. He wrote about the active and productive economic activities of the natives, their manner of dressing and their jewelries made of gold, as well as the weapons and the technology that they assembled and used. De Morga recorded his observations about the culture and civilization of the Filipinos in his work entitled, *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (Events in the Philippine Islands). The work of de Morga was significant to Rizal because it opened his eyes about the pre-colonial culture and civilizations of the Filipinos. In the essay, *To the Filipinos*, Rizal explained that he has written the *Noli Me Tangere* to sketch the “present states of our native land” while in his annotation and publication of de Morga, he wished to awaken the consciousness of his countrymen about their past which was “effaced from their memory” and to “rectify what has been falsified and slandered.” In Ferdinand Blumentritt’s *Prologue to de Morga’s work*, which he has written upon the request of Rizal, he states that to the Europeans the “colored man is no longer a mystery or a human curiosity; the colored man is the same man as we are...Now we regret the errors, the crimes, the miseries that stain the pages of the history of the European race. Now we confess with the frankness of a repentant sinner out guilt and, as the modern generation is not deluded generation but an active generation, we extend our arms to our brothers asking them to forgive the faults of our ancestors and we try to make up for the errors and crimes of centuries past.”

<sup>25</sup> Fr. Francisco Colin was a Jesuit missionary who also recorded his observations about the culture and civilization of the Filipino natives during the early years of Spanish colonization. He mentioned the natives’ language, dialects, and hygiene and health practices (please see Colin’s *Account of the Filipinos and Their Pre-Spanish Civilization* (1663) in *Documentary Sources of Philippines History*, Gregorio F. Zaide, ed., volume 5, Metro Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1990). Together with another Jesuit missionaries, Fr. Chirino (please see Chirino’s *Account of the Pre-Spanish Filipinos and Their Civilization* (1604) in *Documentary Sources of Philippines History*, Gregorio F. Zaide, ed., volume 3 (Metro Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1990), Fr. Colin recorded all of their observations about the social structures, norms, and practices of the natives that demonstrate the existence of culture and civilization.

<sup>26</sup> Jose Rizal, “*The Indolence of the Filipinos*,” 237.

and enterprising heathen Indio of ancient times converted into a lazy and indolent Christian, as our contemporary writers say of him?"<sup>27</sup>

Rizal explained that the causes of the indolence of the natives were a fatal combination of circumstances beyond the control of the natives, lack of will and passion, stupidity and ignorance, and false principles.<sup>28</sup> He was thinking of the wars, internal disturbances and disorders that impeded the productive economic activities of the natives. The invasion of Limahong, the continuous wars of Spain in Borneo, Moluccas, Indochina that dragged the native inhabitants of the Philippine islands, the terrible pirates of the South and the bandits in farms, and the depopulation of the Islands because of the continuous wars and useless expeditions contributed to the neglect of industry, agriculture, and commerce.<sup>29</sup>

Rizal, in other words, was arguing like Marx that the Filipinos were a product of the economic, social, and political structures established and perpetuated by the Spaniards to realize their colonial goals and protect their colonial interests. The Filipinos' material existence during the Spanish colonization created Filipinos that were backward, unproductive, and indolent. The Filipino were a product of that particular epoch in their history that brought them to the state of underdevelopment.

## B. Religion and the Decline of the Filipinos

In the *Indolence of the Filipinos*, Rizal cited the role played by religion in the retrogressive transformation of the Filipinos. The Filipinos were entertained by the religious pomp, rituals, songs, lights, and images dressed in gold; hypnotized by the mysterious language, the stories, the miracles, and the sermons.<sup>30</sup> Religion took an essential role in the colonization of the Filipinos. It transformed not only the faith or beliefs of the Filipinos, but also their worldviews and their perception of themselves.<sup>31</sup> With the

<sup>27</sup> Jose Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 237.

<sup>28</sup> Jose Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 239.

<sup>29</sup> Jose Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 239-240.

<sup>30</sup> Jose Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 239-240.

<sup>31</sup> J.L. Phelan explains that "one of the aims of the Spanish religious was to create a Catholic community consciousness in which the teachings and the spirit of the Church would penetrate into the daily lives of the converts." In other to achieve their aim, one of the religious activities that they inculcated in the natives was the praying of the Rosary. They gathered women and children every day at the foot of the large cross erected in the plaza of each village to pray the

help of religion, Rizal argued colonization destroyed totally the will-power of the Filipinos, created their dormant minds, and “converted them into brutes and beasts of burden, humankind without brains and without hearts.”<sup>32</sup> They were also insulted, because the colonial masters denied that they possess any virtue, any human quality, and any capacity as human beings.<sup>33</sup>

In particular, Rizal argued that the Spanish missionaries contributed to the three centuries of brutalization and obscurantism that influenced the psyche of the Filipino natives.<sup>34</sup> He was referring to the “insult and injure in print, in newspapers, in books with *superior permission* or *ecclesiastical licence*,” and in particular, he was thinking of the offensive works of Fr. Gaspar de San Agustin<sup>35</sup> and Fr. Murillo Velarde,<sup>36</sup> which were published and “honored with mitres or promoted to high posts.”<sup>37</sup> These two priests had forgotten that during the early years of colonization, the Filipinos occupied higher ranks in the army, fought beside the heroes of Spain, and shared laurels with them.<sup>38</sup> San Agustin and Velarde had forgotten that their predecessors sided with the Filipinos and helped them fought against the oppressive *encomenderos*.<sup>39</sup> Their predecessors defended the rights of the native Filipinos and made their complaints reach the throne of Spain. They had also forgotten that because of the high regard the Filipinos had given to friars, they followed their advice and listened to them. They replaced the kindness and generosity of

---

rosary. In other parishes, they gathered children at sunset and they walked through the streets reciting the Rosary while one of the altar boys was ringing the bell as they walked through the streets. The fiesta system and the splendid ritual and colorful pageantry of Catholic observance of Holy Week were ingrained into the cultural consciousness of the Filipinos [please see John Leddy Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1959, 74, 75)].

<sup>32</sup> Rizal, “The Philippines A Century Hence,” 131.

<sup>33</sup> Rizal, “The Philippines A Century Hence,” 131.

<sup>34</sup> Rizal, “The Philippines A Century Hence,” 136.

<sup>35</sup> Fr. Gaspar de San Agustin, a Augustinian priest, wrote all about the vices and evils of the Filipinos. In general, he describes the Filipinos as “exceedingly barbarous, living without a ruler and in a confused monarchy, have the vices of the islanders, fickle, false, and mendacious.” They were also “fickle, malicious, untrustworthy, dull, and lazy; they have little courage, and are not disposed to work.” In his work, he enumerated the vices, moral defects, and sins of the Filipinos. Please see “Father San Agustin Slanders the Filipino People (1720),” in *Documentary Sources of Philippine History*, Gregorio F. Zaide, Ed. Vol. 5, (Metro Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1990).

<sup>36</sup> In his addendum to San Agustin’s letter, Fr. Murillo Velarde, a Jesuit priest, summarized the evils and vices of the Filipinos discussed by Fr. San Agustin. He concluded that the Filipinos are “lowest degree of rational animal” (please see “Addendum to San Agustin’s Letter by Father Murillo,” in *Documentary Sources of Philippine History*).

<sup>37</sup> “Father San Agustin Slanders the Filipino People (1720),” 136.

<sup>38</sup> “Father San Agustin Slanders the Filipino People (1720),” 136.

<sup>39</sup> “Father San Agustin Slanders the Filipino People (1720),” 137.

the early friars with mocking laughter and insults.

The wrong advice, teaching of the friars, and the belief on miracles were not spared by Rizal. He believed that such had its own share to the backwardness of the Filipinos. He asked: "What is strange when we see the pious but impotent friars of that time advise their poor parishioners, in order to free them from the tyranny of the *encomenderos*, to stop work in the mines, to abandon their industries, to destroy their looms, pointing to them heaven as their sole hope, preparing them for death as their only consolation?"<sup>40</sup> He further stated that the poor natives were discouraged to work because of the teaching that "rich man will not go to heaven."<sup>41</sup> Lastly, the religious functions – the large number of fiestas, the lengthy Masses of which women spent their whole mornings, the novena, and the processions and rosaries,<sup>42</sup> according to Rizal, contributed to the unproductiveness of the Filipinos. Instead of using their money in a productive and entrepreneurial way, Filipinos spent it for the "bulls, scapulars, candles, and novena." They spent their money for Masses and prayers, because the friars taught them that it was through prayers that their fields will be irrigated and their animals that aided them in farming will be protected from illnesses.<sup>43</sup> The friars taught the Filipinos about miracles performed by saints, and they believed and relied on these miracles, for the irrigation of their fields, bountiful harvest, and salvation from poverty. Rizal argued that those who believe most in miracles were the laziest: "Whether they believe in miracles to lull their laziness or they are lazy because they believe in miracles, we cannot say; but the fact is that the Filipinos were much lazy before the word miracle was introduced into their language."<sup>44</sup>

Rizal's critique of religion did not make him an atheist. His critique was directed at the friars and not on the existence of God. That is why in his Message to the Young Women of Malolos, he reminded the women of Malolos in particular and the Filipinos in general that God's commandment is different to that of the friars and to be obedient to what is reasonable and just, not to those

<sup>40</sup> Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 243.

<sup>41</sup> Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 250.

<sup>42</sup> Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 252.

<sup>43</sup> Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 253.

<sup>44</sup> Rizal, "The Indolence of the Filipinos," 253.

who posed as little gods.<sup>45</sup> He also advised them to educate their children about the image of the true God: “the God who cannot be bribed, the God who is not avaricious, the God who is the father of all, who is not partial, the God who does not fatten on the blood of the poor, who does not rejoice at the plaint of the afflicted, and does not obfuscate the intelligent mind.”<sup>46</sup> These words of Rizal clearly demonstrate that his critique on religion was based on the abuses committed by the friars to the Filipinos. His critique was not an expression of disbelief on God but an expression of disgust to the excesses of the friars.

The friars also owned the best tracts of land and the more profitable ones in some provinces. Religious corporations have chosen the “best towns, the beautiful plains, the well-watered fields to make them very rich estates.”<sup>47</sup> Like the *encomienderos* of early years of Spanish colonization, the friars used their power and might in grabbing the lands from the natives and turning the natives into slaves and tenants in the land that they once owned. They earned money by collecting rental fee to the natives who live within their estates and those who could not pay were enslaved or thrown out of the estates.

The similarity between Rizal’s critique of religion vis-à-vis the decline of the Filipinos and the Philippine society and Marx’s critique of religion is very evident. Both of them saw it as the cause of ignorance, underdevelopment, and lack of advancement. It developed within the Filipinos the reliance to miracles and superstition and failed to development confidence in themselves and in education. It destroyed to will-to-power of the Filipinos to determine their future and to overcome the problems of poverty and illiteracy. They simply accepted everything as a matter of fate, and they relied and hoped on their faith. The worst was religion did not only transform them to colonial subjects but also to ignorant slaves that obeyed blindly the will of their colonial masters and that of the friars. The Filipinos, then, must be emancipated by the shackles of ignorance and blind obedience.

---

<sup>45</sup> Jose Rizal, “Message to the Young Women of Malolos,” in Jose Rizal’s Political and Historical Writings, vol. VII, trans. Encarnacion Alzona (Manila: National Historical Institute, 2000), 57.

<sup>46</sup> Rizal, “Message to the Young Women of Malolos,” 60.

<sup>47</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 254-255.

## Government Policies and the Discouragement to Work

The lack of productivity by the Filipinos mentioned previously is not natural but man made. This phenomenon could be blamed to government policies and to the *encomienda* system that discouraged the Filipinos to work. For Rizal, “the lessening encouragement to labor” was caused by the Spanish government.<sup>48</sup> He was referring to policies such as permit to work in farms and banning or restricting trading discouraged the natives to labor and to be productive. Because of their fear that the natives might be influenced by the Borneans, Siamese, Cambodians, and Japanese to fight for their independence and freedom, the Spanish authorities banned the trading of all natives with these peoples. The Spaniards looked at these foreign peoples with suspicion and great mistrust. The Spanish authorities also restricted the constant communication of the Filipinos living in different islands of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao by limiting internal trading. This was motivated by their fear and malice that the Filipinos might be united and might revolt against Spain if they would constantly communicate with each other. These policies resulted to the disappearance of coastwise trading that flourished before the arrival of the Spaniards and to the almost disappearance of internal trading because of restrictions, passports, and other administrative requirements.<sup>49</sup> It was also the same fear and malice that motivated the Spanish officials to impose the policy of seeking permit from government authorities to work in farms. The Filipinos were discouraged to work in the farms because of the costly and slow releasing of permit due to bureaucracy and red tape.<sup>50</sup> In addition to that, the presence of bandits or outlaws in the mountains who were waiting to kidnap farmers for ransom was also a hindrance for the Filipinos to work.<sup>51</sup> The bandits and outlaws were result of the poor peace and order situation in the Philippines during the Spanish colonization.

The *encomienda* system and the monopolization of business by Spanish *alcalde* mayor contributed to the destruction of the will and passion of the Filipinos to work. In the *encomienda*, the

<sup>48</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 245.

<sup>49</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 246.

<sup>50</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 246.

<sup>51</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 247.

Filipinos were enslaved and forced to work for free<sup>52</sup> and for the benefit of the *encomienderos*; forced to pay excessive taxes or tribute;<sup>53</sup> and compelled to sell their products at insignificant price or for nothing.<sup>54</sup> The *alcalde* mayor was also busy not in administering the government, but in engaging in business to enrich himself. Instead of “stimulating around him love of work, instead of curbing the very natural indolence of the natives,” the *alcalde* mayor was busy abusing his power and authority to protect his business interests by monopolizing all business and destroying competition.<sup>55</sup>

Aside from government policies and the *encomienda* system, Rizal also blamed gambling as one of the causes of the idleness and inactivity of the Filipinos. He admitted that gambling was already part of the culture of the natives prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. This was based on the account of Pigafetta that cockfighting already existed in Luzon and all the islands.<sup>56</sup> Rizal explained that the “passion for gambling is innate in adventurous and excitable races and the Malayan race is one them.”<sup>57</sup> However, the Spanish government exploited it by allowing its promotion and perfection,<sup>58</sup> and the Filipinos who were mired in poverty and unemployment saw it as an opportunity to earn money. Working would entail requirements, such as payment of fee for permit to go to farm and to trade and payment of taxes, and risks like being held up in the high seas by the pirates or kidnap by bandits in the mountains. Working would also mean no income at all because of free or force labor imposed by the government to the Filipinos

<sup>52</sup> According to S.K. Tan, “colonial laws and ordinances required the natives to provide either free labor or labor with nominal compensation for all sorts of Spanish needs, from domestic services at home to military services in Spanish expeditions.” The free labor or labor with nominal compensation was economically harmful to the natives. It also destroyed the balance between the obligation of the people to the State and the State’s responsibility to the people. Tan argues that, the “just sharing of responsibilities was absent in the *polo y servicios* which literally forced the natives to work against their will and interest.” The effect of that was the destruction of the precolonial communal ideal where leaders and people shared in the affairs of the community as well as in the defense against enemies” [please see Samuel K. Tan, *A History of the Philippines*, (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2009), 55.]

<sup>53</sup> The collection of taxes did not only result to the indolence of the natives but also to the breakdown of the moral foundation of the society. S.K. Tan explains that the “unjust imposition by the system of collecting taxes on the *gobernadorcillos* or *cabezas de barangay* to collect the dues as expected of them led to the breakdown of morality. Thus, through corruption, which the colonial system encouraged, the local leadership lost the moral base of their authority which they had been enjoying before the Spanish advent” (please see Tan, *A History of the Philippines*, , 55).

<sup>54</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 247-248.

<sup>55</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 248.

<sup>56</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 251.

<sup>57</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 251.

<sup>58</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 251.



who cannot pay taxes or tributes. The Filipinos did not bother to work because of the money that they have to spend and the risks that they have to face. Gambling was the best option to earn; no sweat, no risk, no payment of fees. But the downside of it, they started to rely on luck or chance. They started to rely on prayer and miracle, for them to win in gambling and hoping to get out from the pit of poverty.

For Marx, work is the being of the human person. Through work, the human person expressed and developed himself. Rizal saw the importance of work. He enumerated the reasons that caused the lack of desire for the Filipinos to work. These were government policies (such as polo y servicio), encomienda system, and gambling. These practices destroyed the will and passion of the Filipinos to work because they destroyed the meaning of work which is to be productive and to earn for living. The Filipinos were forced to work without being compensated. Hence, instead of seeing work as a means to be productive and to earn a living, the Filipinos saw it as a cause of their misery and poverty. They, therefore, decided not to work in order to earn. They turned instead to gambling and even to miracles.

### C. Defective Educational System

Education was the prevailing theme in the writings of Rizal. The defective educational system is the cause of all the factors that caused maladies in the Philippine society particularly during the 19th century. He described the educational system under the Spanish Regime as “brutalizing, depressing, and anti-human.”<sup>59</sup> It was an education that did not encourage the students to learn and to grow.<sup>60</sup> It was the desire of the Spanish teachers that the Filipinos should not learn the Spanish language, should not be separated from their carabaos, and should not have further

<sup>59</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 256.

<sup>60</sup> Education during the Spanish period was a “privileged denied to the natives” and enjoyed by those who have Spanish blood and money to pay the private and exclusive Catholic schools. The subjects taught were “catechism, reading and writing, music, the rudiments of arithmetic, and trades and industries.” Instruction was also placed entirely at the hands of the Spanish priests whose intention in teaching was to learn the dialects rather than teaching the students. Lastly, the “chief characteristics of Spanish pedagogy” was “memorization, discipline by fear, and corporal punishment” [please see M. S. Diokno and R.N. Villegas, “Chapter Six: The Making of the Filipino,” in *Kasaysayan: The Story of the Filipino People*, vol. 4, Philippines: Asia Publishing Company Limited, 116, 120].

ambition.<sup>61</sup> Instead of teaching young Filipinos to explore the wide possibilities in life, the Spanish teachers taught them to be humble and to accept the yoke.<sup>62</sup> Instead of learning about human dignity and lifting their hopes in life, the young Filipinos succumb to the “daily preaching (of the Spanish teachers) that lowers human dignity, gradually or brutally killing their self-respect.”<sup>63</sup> Instead of developing their critical and analytical mind, the Spanish teachers subjected the young Filipinos to the method of memorization, memorizing what they did not understand.

In his *Message to the Young Women of Malolos*, Rizal gave emphasis on the role of women in education and the role of education in the development of the society. He reminded the young women of Malolos as well as all Filipinos that “ignorance is ignorance and not goodness and honor.”<sup>64</sup> God created man in His image and likeness not to be fooled and blinded by others and gave him reason to be brightened and utilized.<sup>65</sup> Reason is a lamp that was given by God to be used in darkness. It is everyone’s duty to “intensify its flame, to take care of it, and not to extinguish it to depend on the light of others.”<sup>66</sup> Reason can only be intensified through education and learning. Rizal encouraged the young women to study, for one of their roles in the society is to educate their children when they become mothers. It is their responsibility to educate themselves so that they can teach and raise very well their children. According to Rizal, “the nursery of fruitful flowers, ought to accumulate riches to bequeath to its descendants.”<sup>67</sup> He pleaded to the Filipino women to be reasonable, because they are the ones who open the minds of their children.<sup>68</sup> He argued that:

*The country should not expect honor and prosperity so*

---

<sup>61</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 256.

<sup>62</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 257.

<sup>63</sup> Rizal, “The Indolence of the Filipinos,” 257.

<sup>64</sup> Rizal, “Message to the Young Women of Malolos,” 60.

<sup>65</sup> Rizal, “Message to the Young Women of Malolos,” 60.

<sup>66</sup> Rizal, “Message to the Young Women of Malolos,” 60.

<sup>67</sup> Rizal, “Message to the Young Women of Malolos,” 58.

<sup>68</sup> The influence of Enlightenment thinking is evident in this idea of Rizal. For the Filipinos to grow and to develop, for the Philippine society to advance; they must use their reason. For reason to be utilized properly, it needs to be enhanced through education. That is why Rizal gives importance to education as a means not only to development but also to emancipation and liberation. Education is the light that will open the eyes of the people to the evils and injustices in the society. It is the burning flame that will lead them to understand themselves, the truths, and their roles in the society. It is the lamp that will guide them towards the path of liberation and development.

*long as the education of the child is defective, so long as the women who raise the children are enslave and ignorant. Nothing can be drunk in a turbid and bitter spring. No sweet fruit can be picked from a sour seed.*<sup>69</sup>

The Filipinos need an education that would provide them the freedom to expand their adventurous spirit and awaken their revolutionary spirit for them to cry for change and search for new ideas, for the progress and development of their nation. Such education is not only the responsibility of academic institutions. It is the responsibility of the society as a whole that starts from the family. The Philippine society must provide an ecosystem that espouses competitive and critical spirit as well as adventurous and revolutionary in the search for new knowledge in order to realize progress and development. Rizal saw education as the means to realize emancipation. Unlike Marx who saw revolution as a means to emancipation and change, Rizal saw first a less violent and bloody revolution. That was the revolution in the mind, or in the psyche, that can be affected by education.

## Conclusion

This paper presented a different perspective of Rizal's works and ideas in order for the young readers to understand the social aspect of Rizal. Many see Rizal's works as literary pieces that expressed his love for his nation. It is indeed true that Rizal wrote about the Filipino nation. However, one should not forget that Rizal's works were critique of the colonization as well as the miseries and woes that created by it. His works were not mainly about the characters of Ibarra, Elias, Maria Clara, Sisa, or Damaso. His works highlighted the social evils and imperfections of the 19th century Philippine society, as well as their causes and consequences. These were the problems of ignorance, backwardness, lack of will-to-power, lack of self-confidence, indolence, poverty, corruption, and the lack of unity and nationalism. He would like the Filipinos to realize that the problems were not only about the institutions and structures that governed them. It was also about themselves, their psyche, their self-confidence, their love for their nation. Reading Rizal's

---

<sup>69</sup> Rizal, "Message to the Young Women of Malolos," 61.

works using the lens of Marx or of any modern philosopher will help the young readers appreciate their social relevance.

The young readers of Rizal must also see that the ideas of their national hero are at par with the European modern thinkers. It cannot be denied that he was influenced by European Enlightenment. Such claim, however, must be supported by studies that illustrate not only the influence but also the similarities between his ideas and of any modern European thinker. Aside from Marx, there are other modern thinkers that can be read alongside with Rizal's works. These are David Hume, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean Jackques Rousseau. One can see semblances of Rizal's ideas with these European philosophers. But analyzing the similarities between the ideas of these philosophers and that of Rizal is not enough. What is more important is to analyze how Rizal used European ideas to analyze the situation in the Philippine colonial society. He used these ideas to provide discourses about the Filipino nation and to deconstruct the truths created by the Spaniards about the Filipinos. It would be interesting for the young readers to realize that Rizal's works were part of a discursive war between the Filipino intellectuals led by Rizal and by the Spanish authorities led by the friars. It was a discursive war about the identity of the Filipinos and their history, culture, and civilization. Many would call it a propaganda. Yes it was. But it would be more proper to say in the philosophical context that it was part of a war of discourses about the Filipinos.

Understanding the critical Rizal would provide an understanding to the young about the relevance of his works and ideas to the present Philippine society. To cut it short, the problems identified by Rizal during his time are still the same problems in the 21st century Philippine society. The problems on lack of, or mis-, education, unemployment, unproductivity, and the problems of lack of will-to-power, confidence on their own history as a nation, and lack of unity and nationalism. Rizal's ideas transcended the 19th century Philippine society. These were also about the Filipinos in the 21st century. Rizal provided a simple formula to address these problems and that was, these must be exposed, criticized in order for the nation to ponder and to do something about them. Rizal was blunt about the ills of the

Filipinos and of the Philippine society during his time. He opened the discussion on things that no one dare to talk about in order to provide cure to the cancer that long plague the Philippine society and the Filipino self and psyche. Sad to say, the cancer still lingers and is active in the present.

### Bibliography

- "Addendum to San Agustin's Letter by Father Murillo," in *Documentary Sources of Philippine History*. Gregorio F. Zaide, ed. vol. 5, Metro Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1990.
- Bernard, Miguel A. *The Christianization of the Philippines: Problems and Perspectives*, Manila: The Filipiniana Book Guild, 1972.
- Blumentritt, Ferdinand. "Blumentritt's Review of Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*," in *Jose Rizal Correspondence with Blumentritt*, vol. II, Manila: National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2011.
- "Chrino's Account of the Pre-Spanish Filipinos and Their Civilization (1604)," in *Documentary Sources of Philippines History*. Gregorio F. Zaide, ed., vol. 3, Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1990.
- "Colin's Account of the Filipinos and Their Pre-Spanish Civilization (1663)" in *Documentary Sources of Philippines History*, Gregorio F. Zaide, ed., vol. 5, Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1990.
- Del Pilar, Marcelo H. "*Noli Me Tangere: Before Monkish Hatred in the Philippines*" in *Rizal's Correspondence with Fellow Reformists*, Manila: National Historical Institute, 1992.
- Diokno, M. S. and R.N. Villegas, "Chapter Six: The Making of the Filipino" in *Kasaysayan: The Story of the Filipino People*, vol. 4, Philippines: Asia Publishing Company Limited.
- "Father San Augustin Slanders the Filipino People (1720)" in *Documentary Sources of Philippine History*, Gregorio F. Zaide, ed., vol. 5, Metro Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1990.
- Fromm, Erich, *Beyond The Chains of Illusions: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*, New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Lauer, Quentin, "Response Occasioned by McGovern's 'Atheism: Is It Essential to Marxism?'" in *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. XXII, no. 3, Summer 1985.
- Marx, Karl, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" in *K. Marx and F. Engels, On Religion*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957.
- Phelan, John Leddy, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin.
- Rasmussen, David M., "Critical Theory and Philosophy" in *Handbook of Critical Theory*, D.M. Rasmussen, ed., Cambridge, Masschusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1996.
- Rizal, Jose, "Message to the Young Women of Malolos" in *Jose Rizal's Political*

and Historical Writings, vol. VII, Encarnacion Alzona, trans., Manila: National Historical Institute, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_, "The Indolence of the Filipinos" in Jose Rizal's Political and Historical Writings, vol. VII, Encarnacion Alzona, trans., Manila: National Historical Institute, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_, "The Philippines A Century Hence" in Jose Rizal's Political and Historical Writings, vol. VII, Encarnacion Alzona, trans., Manila: National Historical Institute, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_, "To My Motherland" in Noli Me Tangere, trans. Ma. Soledad Lacson-Locsin, Philippines: The Bookmark, 2004.

Tan, Samuel K., A History of the Philippines, Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2009.