

The Question of the Colonies

Paul Ricœur

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All endnotes below by Ernst Wolff

Abstract

In this anti-colonial treatise, Ricœur reflects on the responsibility of every French citizen and of the French state with respect to colonialism. He establishes five principles that should guide his readers in their reflection on this issue and expresses his support for the independence of the colonies.

Keywords: Ricœur; Colonialism; Decolonization; Nation-state; Violence; Nazism; Responsibility; Guilt.

Résumé

Dans ce traité anticolonial, Ricœur réfléchit à la responsabilité de chaque citoyen et de l'État français à l'égard du colonialisme. Il établit cinq principes qui doivent guider ses lecteurs dans leur réflexion sur cette question et exprime son soutien à l'indépendance des colonies.

Mots clefs: Ricœur; colonialisme; décolonisation; État-nation; violence; nazisme; responsabilité; culpabilité.

Resumen

En este tratado anticolonialista, Ricœur reflexiona sobre la responsabilidad que el Estado y los ciudadanos franceses tienen frente al colonialismo. Ricœur establece cinco principios que deben guiar la reflexión de sus lectores sobre esta cuestión, y expresa su apoyo a la independencia de las colonias.

Palabras clave: Ricœur; colonialismo; descolonización; Estado-nación; violencia; nazismo; responsabilidad; culpa.

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Reading the “Mémorandum colonial remis aux représentants d’Asie et d’Afrique par la délégation française à Oslo”¹ [“Colonial Memorandum Given to the Representatives of Asia and Africa by the French Delegation to Oslo”] made me clap my hands: since the revolt of the indigenous people has now begun, one wonders whether the Church still has enough spiritual vigour to speak a liberating word. It is true that a careful examination of the studies and documents published in *Temps Modernes* and *Esprit* leaves the reader with a suffocating impression which one of *Esprit*’s correspondents sums up in a damning sentence: “It is too late...”² When spiritual recovery comes too late, is there not a risk that it will contribute to resignation, which would have none of the imagination and daring that one would expect from a Christian attitude faced with current problems? But perhaps a liberating word must, in the first instance, be a will to dissolve,³ a sort of cruel burning [*autodafé*] of the prejudices and errors of the past.

This article has no other ambition than to measure, with our friends, the readers, the scale of the *responsibility* of those who are not specialists in respect of colonial questions, and to find the *climate* for a technical examination which is within our competence. It is precisely the responsibility of a non-specialist, of the human being beyond the expert [*l’homme par-delà le technicien*], that I want to awaken in myself every day in facing the colonial question, in spite of the self-interested voices that whisper to me: “You don’t know anything about the question: if you had lived in Indochina, Morocco, Algeria, or Madagascar, you would no longer give any credence to the sentimental preachings of the utopians of metropolitan France.” But I am well aware that my incompetence does not relieve me of my total responsibility as a French citizen; I am the one who sends the task force to Indochina; and I do not have the right to abdicate my judgment in favour of the colonists: the Muslims and the Annamites also live overseas, moreover with priority, so to speak. Now their claim shatters me, when it turns against us, the heart-rending themes of national liberation that our struggle has brought up against Nazism. I fear that I am a Nazi without knowing it. I hear those Germans protesting miserably when we tell them about Auschwitz: “We didn’t know.” And we condemn them victoriously: “Your fault is that you didn’t know.” I don’t know much about French oppression in the colonies, and I fear that my fault is mainly the failure to gather information.

Faced with our responsibilities, I know, at least, that the specialist is less than the moderately enlightened person,⁴ because to each original situation (Morocco, Indochina, etc.) the specialist adapts means whose ends are set by the *human* [*l’homme*] in each of us, in each citizen who is not a specialist in colonial affairs. And it is here that it is not irrelevant whether one [*cet homme*] is a Christian or not, when one seeks to orient oneself among the principles and aims of French policy. In the labyrinth of local questions and tactical difficulties – as in the difficult negotiations with Vietnam, where it would be very difficult to say, *a priori*, whether one should

deal with Ho Chi Minh or with another – there are some broad guidelines which one should not lose sight of, some big trees which the forest should not hide:

1° The aim of colonization is to abolish itself [*se supprimer*⁵]. This can never be said strongly enough. The pace and procedure by which the sovereignty of France (which was originally, and still is, in many cases, unqualified) will have to give way to the political freedom of peoples is a subordinate technical matter which requires skill. But the best civilizing work is *intended* [*destinée*] to equip ever larger areas of humanity for freedom.

2° The use of violence by peoples who yearn for freedom does not increase our right: the colonial enterprise is from the outset corrupted [*viciée*] by craftiness and violence. Even if we are not currently the aggressors – which is often unquestionable – the fact remains that, as the occupying force, we have had an indelible primacy in violence since the beginning. This violence has most often been pacifying, a kind of *pax romana*, but it has amassed reserves of liberating violence for the more or less distant future. This imperious movement which leads colonial history from pacifying violence to liberating violence forbids us to oppose *our* right to *their* guilt.

3° The trap of the spirit of colonialism is racism; the basis of the right of the indigenous peoples is universalism. This is quite abstract, but it distinguishes two neutralities [*neutralités*⁶]. One of *Esprit's* Algerian correspondents⁷ managed to remain outraged because

in Algeria racism – I mean everyday racism, that of the tram and the market – is not a right but a duty. [...] I have not yet understood that, in a trolley bus, standing is less tiring for a pregnant Moorish woman [*une Mauresque*] than for a European woman in the same situation. [...] I am not yet outraged by the fact that it has been thought of to give Muslim children the same milk as to European children. I have not [had] the wisdom to allow myself to be persuaded that the extension of the social security plan to indigenous workers would be [for the whole of Algeria and]⁸ for them in particular a catastrophe. I still do not believe that the only characteristics of the Arab are that he is degenerate, lazy and a thief. I still believe that Arabs are human beings, I still believe that they are our brothers and, idiot that I am, instead of seeing in them only “pinsous,” “ratons,”⁹ I still find it difficult to be impolite to them [*j'ai encore du mal à les tutoyer*] [...].¹⁰

4° The crazed and often premature hunger for freedom that drives separatist movements is the same passion at the origin of our history of 1789 and of Valmy,¹¹ of 1848 and of June 1940 – it is useless to say that this hunger is crazed and premature. Freedom is a bitter and dangerous passion with many sufferings and disappointments. But this is how people acquire their own existence: by first undergoing the catastrophic experience of their powerlessness when the experienced masters leave, taking with them their arbitration, together with their atrocities. Today, the English are leaving India, and 15 August¹² is both a great spiritual date and the beginning of a dreadful adventure. When an adolescent demands the freedom for which he is not yet ready, there are no longer any paternal reasons to oppose this independence frenzy. Premature freedom always outweighs paternalism. All one can say is that there is something that even outweighs nationalism, and that is the human community. But in this other transition [*passage*¹³] we are as helpless as they are. Europe has already perished from the excesses of sovereignty. The Czechs, Serbs, Bulgarians, etc., were right in the last century against the Austro-Hungarians and the Ottomans, but their freedom has precipitated the ruinous fate of Europe, because this elevated value of national

freedom must be achieved, but [it must] in turn be passed through and sacrificed to something else. We in Europe have not been able to extricate ourselves from the absurdity of nationalism; we can say nothing to the Hindus and Muslims who are tearing each other apart and, tomorrow, to other Asians and Africans who will be stuck at the stage of cherishing freedom. They are right to do as we do, to want to be free before their time; they are wrong, as we are, to want to take this useless detour of the nation-state. Another correspondent of *Esprit*, a former leader of the Comité d'action contre la déportation, brought in for a mission in Indochina, wrote:

Please, when the members of the Viet-Minh speak to you in the language of revolution, have the honesty not to answer them with arguments of conservation. Don't tell them that they are ransacking the hospitals and that we have built them roads. [...] Do you not suspect that there is no common scale of value between the benefit of a road and what the people aspire to [...]? Would you like these people to be satisfied with the venal mash [*pâtée*¹⁴ *mercenaire*] we offer them, and it is only then that you would feel capable of esteeming them? We have learned to esteem the more rebellious souls!¹⁵

5° The fact that separatist movements are minorities is not an argument that can be used against them. Phenomena of *awareness* [*prise de conscience*] always produce such a gap between the vanguard and the masses. The extreme difficulty here is rather to arrive at an *historical* assessment: is it indeed, in this particular case (Viet-Minh, the Algerian Manifesto movement), a vanguard that makes the history of its people? The great Marxist criteria of proletarian liberation are often inapplicable: thus the national consciousness of an Islamic people seems to have its own dimensions. It is always difficult to say that this or that independence movement really expresses the vocation of this people. And yet, courageous politics must take these risks, find out in which groups the awareness emerges, and play this card, without craftiness. In this respect, the case of Morocco is typical (cf. *Esprit* no. 4. "Prévenons la guerre d'Afrique: l'Indépendance marocaine et la France", by A. de Peretti¹⁶): the spiritual and political structures [*cadres*] exist already, and there is a unique opportunity to advance from the protectorate to independence, and to a treaty of friendship.

These five principles remain very general; let us summarize them: the end of colonization is the freedom of the indigenous people; the original fault of colonization precedes all unilateral aggressions by the indigenous people; the demand for freedom, even if it is premature, has more moral weight than all the civilising work of the colonising countries; racism is the vice of the French in the colonies; it is minorities who represent the emerging consciousness of colonized peoples. These principles can at most create a climate, a favourable disposition, to appreciate without anger this movement of colonial history which, at the moment, is rapidly passing into the stage of liberation before it has drawn the full benefit of the civilising process of the colonising nations. At least, these principles have the virtue of being halfway between faith and policy; such is morality itself, incapable of inspiring like a faith and lacking all the technical competence that a policy requires.

Yes, I believe that as a Christian I must say yes to a movement in history that creates freedom. Of course, this freedom is minimal if it does not in its turn sacrifice itself to a [greater] human community. But first, let us untie the captives,¹⁷ then we will seek community together and fight together against the idol of the nation, whether it is worshipped in Hanoi or Paris, against the

absurdity of the unlimited sovereignty of the nation-state. Even if this freedom is tainted by illusion and violence, it is at its root a positive value: it is that “treasure of the nations” which the book of Revelations says will be laid at the feet of the Lamb.¹⁸ The point of application of Christian love seems to me here to discern how this treasure of nations is multiplied and diversified through political liberation, and to love this dangerous ongoing creation of humanity through the movements of peoples’ liberation.

Translated from French by Ernst Wolff

- ¹ Available under the title "Déclaration de la délégation française à la conférence mondiale de la jeunesse chrétienne d'Oslo sur la question coloniale", in *Le Semeur*, vol. 46/2-3 (December-January 1947-48), 134-36.
- ² An anonymously published letter of 18 April 1947, addressed to the editor of *Esprit*, was published under the title "Il est trop tard" ["It is Too Late"], *Esprit*, vol. 16/7, July 1947 (in the dossier "France-Vietnam"), 34-9.
- ³ "Liquidation" could also be translated with the verbal expression "to settle," but the strong image of an *autodafé* that follows warrants the more intense rendering chosen.
- ⁴ I.e. the responsibility of the relatively enlightened person adds something to the restricted social function of a specialist.
- ⁵ The expression "se supprimer" could be understood in different ways, ranging from the temperate "stepping aside" to the much more forceful figurative sense of "committing suicide."
- ⁶ The exact sense of this expression is not clear.
- ⁷ André Mandouze, "Impossibilités algériennes ou le mythe des trois départements" ["Impossibilities of Algeria or the Myth of the Three Departments"], *Esprit*, vol. 16/7 (July 1947), 10-30.
- ⁸ The two editions in square brackets are in Mandouze's original, but were omitted in Ricœur's text.
- ⁹ The literal meaning of first term is obscure; the second, literally "small rat", is a racist insult for a North African.
- ¹⁰ Mandouze, "Impossibilités algériennes ou le mythe des trois départements," 13.
- ¹¹ "The question of the colonies" was published on the day of commemoration of the battle of Valmy (20 September 1792).
- ¹² On 15 August 1947, India's independence from Britain came into effect.
- ¹³ The word "passage" could be taken as a "way" or "passage" (as in rites of passage, which fits the metaphor of coming of age).
- ¹⁴ "Pâtée" refers to a form of animal food or mash, for humans.
- ¹⁵ "Il est trop tard," 35.
- ¹⁶ André de Peretti, "L'indépendance marocaine et la France" [*Moroccan Independence and France*], *Esprit*, vol. 16/4 (April 1947), 546-76. The first part of the title, cited above in the text, is the heading added in the table of contents: "Let us prevent the African war."
- ¹⁷ Reference to Luke 4:18 or Isaiah 61:1.
- ¹⁸ Probably a reference to Revelations 21:24 and 26.