
“Ethics & Empire” and Free Speech – some home truths

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In the week before Christmas, fifty-eight graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and post-holders, overwhelmingly at Oxford and mostly historians, published an Open Letter criticising to the point of denunciation the “Ethics & Empire” project that I run.¹ I published an Open Reply in the *Times* on Christmas Eve.² Since readers can find a record of the controversy on the website of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics, and Public Life, I shall not belabour the pros and cons here.³ Suffice it to say that I found the Letter, by turns, opaque, equivocal, confused, and—given the false targets—somewhat careless. If that seems a very severe judgement, my Reply makes plain why. Quite what has driven the signatories’ hostility so far ahead of their reasons is a puzzle.

At this point, there remain outstanding a couple of observations to be made, one further criticism to be answered, and two lines of reflection to be developed. The first observation is this. The critics, standing on their professional authority as historians, pronounce that “Ethics & Empire” is “bad history”. What this reveals is that, rushing to judgement, they’ve failed to grasp what the project is about. Its aim is to analyse and reflect on the moral terms in which empires have been evaluated from ancient times to the present day. In other words, it’s essentially an exercise in ethics, not history. And ethics is not a matter on which historians can claim any special professional authority.

Dr James McDougall, the Letter’s principal author, inadvertently confirms this point in his *Guardian* article of 4 January.⁴ There he tells us that the moral evaluation of empire is, “for most historians, irrelevant as well as inadequate”. The first part of that is true, insofar as historians have no particular professional competence in the art of moral evaluation. But, given that, how is Dr McDougall in a position to judge how ‘adequate’ or not an attempt at moral evaluation is? Earlier in the article he lets the cat out of the bag, when he protests against the “rehabilitation of imperialism as a morally justifiable enterprise”. Now we see that, in fact, historians *do* do ethics. They just don’t own up to it and they certainly don’t want any one else to do it instead. Even if Dr McDougall and his comrades are correct and the “Ethics & Empire” project is quixotic and daft, and this moral theologian is about to make a fool of himself, why are they so terribly exercised about it? The answer is surely that they’re worried that we ethicists will come to the *wrong* moral conclusions.

Of course, for “Ethics & Empire” to succeed, the ethicists involved will need historians to help them understand the historical matter. This brings us to the second observation: the Open Letter omits any mention of John Darwin, who is listed online as my co-leader. Darwin is one of the world’s leading historians of empire, who is well aware of its varieties and complexities. Therefore the fact that he backed the project is *prima facie* evidence that it makes good and worthwhile sense to some historians of repute. Whether or not the authors of the Letter intended

to obscure this fly in their narrative ointment, that is certainly its effect. (I say that John ‘backed’ the project, because, sadly, he felt the need to resign on 18th December. The reasons he gave were emphatically personal.)

Now let’s turn to the one outstanding criticism. In their Letter my critics complain that participation in the “Ethics & Empire” project is by invitation only, implying that it ought to be open to all-comers. There are two good reasons why it is not. The main one is this. From its inception ten years ago the McDonald Centre has followed a practice of holding small-scale research colloquia, involving no more than about twenty-five people, carefully selected for the relevance of their expertise to the topic at hand. The purpose of this arrangement is to achieve a focus of attention, a continuity of dialogue, and a quality of engagement that is impossible in larger, more amorphous gatherings. Nevertheless, we have taken care to include postgraduate students where they have relevant interests. At last November’s colloquium on Chinese ‘Just War’ Ethics, for example, half-a-dozen master’s and doctoral students were invited and took part, several of them historians.

But there is a subsidiary reason for being discriminate about participation, and it’s one that the recent controversy has served to strengthen. There is a view among a zealous minority of students that people with views like mine are not to be reasoned with, but only to be silenced. And judging by Dr Priyamvada Gopal of Churchill College and the Faculty of English at Cambridge, that’s a view that senior colleagues are now quite capable of holding. At the beginning of a string of contemptuous and abusive tweets last month, she remarked of the “Ethics & Empire” project, “this is serious shit We need to SHUT THIS DOWN” (13 December 2017, 8.45 am). A few minutes later she issued a call to arms to “Oxford postcolonial academics” (8.49am). Among those who responded were Max Harris (5.08 pm, “totally agree—more needs to be done”; 14 December, 2.30 am, “working on a response”) and Jon Wilson (16 December, 12.39 am, “we need a big well-argued letter signed by everyone who writes on Empire &ca”; 2.14 am, “I’ll be in touch with James [McDougall]”).⁵ When the Open Letter appeared on 19 December, Max Harris and Jon Wilson were among its signatories, and James McDougall was listed as its senior co-author.⁶ So, given such repressive tendencies on the part of some students and colleagues, if “Ethics & Empire” were to open its doors to all-comers, there is a risk that some participants would do their best to make sure that respectful, rational, give-and-take discussion never takes flight. The truth is that while the University has been reassuringly swift and robust in asserting the right to freedom of speech in principle, we still don’t always have it in practice. As a consequence, open discussion of some topics at Oxford can only happen behind closed doors.

Now let me move from my back foot onto the front one, and develop the first line of reflection. Is the publication of an online denunciation an appropriate mode of

academic exchange, and one that we want to recommend to our students? When I first heard of the Open Letter, my immediate, stung reaction was to wonder why none of the fifty-eight signatories had taken the trouble to raise their objections with me directly, face-to-face. After all, we do all inhabit the same institution, we have pretensions to being collegial as well as collegiate, and at least one of my critics knows me to speak to and has his office on the other side of St Aldates. But then I thought that I was being too thin-skinned. After all, I have made my views on the ethics of empire very public—initially, in the last chapter of *Between Kin and Cosmopolis* (2014), then in articles on Rhodes in the *Times* newspaper (December 2015) and *Standpoint* magazine (March 2016), and most recently in another *Times* article on *l'affaire Gilley* (November 2017) and in the McDonald Centre's notice about the "Ethics & Empire" project (December 2017). The signatories to the Open Letter said that they felt "obliged" to make clear to the world that my views are not "representative of Oxford scholarship". While it's flattering to suppose that some people might mistake the views of a single moral theologian for a ruling orthodoxy among historians, this seems to me unlikely. Still, I accept that, if that's really what they feared, an Open Letter could have been an appropriate response.

However, the Letter was not merely a declaration of dissent; it was something much closer to a declaration of war. Certainly, it was in no way an invitation to discussion. It was neither addressed to me nor sent to me—I only learned of its existence through the press. It asks not a single question, being entirely preoccupied with laying down its own answers. And it both announces and imposes a boycott.

This last point requires some explanation. What the Open Letter says in its closing paragraph is this:

"Neither we, nor Oxford's students in modern history will be engaging with the 'Ethics and Empire' programme, since it consists of closed, invitation-only seminars".

This is equivocal. The statement could be a description of fact. It could be saying, "Since the "Ethics & Empire" project is by invitation only, and since we haven't been invited, as a matter of fact neither we nor our students will be taking part in it". The problem with this reading is that it does not reflect the true position. The project has held only one of its projected five annual colloquia, as its online description makes clear. The first one on ancient empires, which took place in July, involved colleagues and students from within Oxford (Theology, Oriental Studies, and History) and without. We have not yet decided whom to invite to participate in the next four meetings. It is possible, therefore, that some of the fifty-eight signatories and some history students would be invited, if their expertise were suited to the topic. As a description, therefore, the signatories' statement runs ahead of what they can know. Neither we nor they know whether they will be invited, whether they will accept, and so whether they will be engaging with the project.

Alternatively, if the statement is one of intent, not description, then what they're saying is that, since participation in the project is by invitation only, and since participation ought (morally?) to be open to all-comers, they will boycott it on principle. Or, to use Dr Gopal's words, they will do what they can to "shut it down". Of course, it's within the legal right of the signatories to withhold their collaboration. But since when did it become

their legal or moral right to determine what "students in modern history" will do? Is it just me, or isn't there a whiff of dictatorial presumptuousness in the air?

If so, its reach appears not to be limited to students. Oxford's Centre for Global History has taken its cue, almost verbatim, from the Open Letter and now announces on its website that the Centre "is not involved" in the "Ethics & Empire" project headed by me and "other scholars at Oxford". (Again, note the strange silence about John Darwin, who was, until very recently, the Centre for Global History's director.) That this is a statement of intent, not merely of fact, is evidenced by the Centre's obliquely critical claim "to move beyond the problematic balance-sheet of empires' advantages and disadvantages" and to "shun imperial nostalgia". When this notice was first posted, one member of the Centre reported to me that no one had consulted him about it.

To be fair, the Open Letter is loud in affirming my freedom of thought and speech. But what it gives with its right hand, it undermines with its left. By mounting a boycott, it seeks to starve "Ethics & Empire" of collaborators. So indeed, I'm entirely free to think my heretical thoughts and talk to myself; but as far as the signatories can help it, historians will go on strike and the "Ethics & Empire" project will not run. So one issue raised by the recent row, and which bears reflection, is how appropriate it is for academic colleagues to resort to political lobbying and boycotting, in order to 'shut down' a discussion.

The second issue arises from this: namely, the treatment of students. If some Oxford academics can treat a senior colleague in this illiberal fashion, what does this imply for their handling of applicants and students? Would an applicant who expresses views like mine be admitted? And would any student who harbours thoughts like mine be able to survive only by retreating into inner exile? So far, so speculative.

However, in addition to the Open Letter's presumptuous direction of "students in modern history", there is further empirical evidence that gives substance to the above concerns being relevant in academia more widely. Since the beginning of the "Ethics & Empire" controversy I have received a number of emails from students in various part of the world. A doctoral researcher reports from New Zealand that he and his wife have suffered death threats because of his collection of data that might challenge "the authorised heritage discourse". An apparently native-born Nigerian researcher who has documented the positive impact of colonialism upon her country, asks: "Am I allowed to say this? Will I find my balanced assessment of colonialism banned? Will I ever be able to publish my research? This is the fearful state that outraged mobs have put myself and others in". A student from Bristol University attests, *contra* the Open Letter, that in courses he took on British colonialism no attempt was made to give voice to its positive aspects. An Oxford postgraduate reports how (as an undergraduate at another university) her advocacy of "a more rounded view of Imperial History" provoked her professors to describe her as a "victim of imperialist propaganda" and her class-mates to subject her to *ad hominem* attacks, accusations of racism, and "even shouting in seminars". And a further email provides evidence of a prospective student being turned away from study at Oxford because of their moral-political perspective. This proves nothing, of course, and I accuse no one. But against the backdrop of the Open Letter's runaway convictions and apparently

repressive and dictatorial impulses, the above gives reason for concern.

It's quite true, of course, that all of us who admit and teach postgraduates have more or less definite ideas about what good work looks like, and we admit and teach accordingly. I, for example, much prefer the clarity and precision of Anglo-American analytical philosophical method to what I tend to see as the rhetorical indiscipline and manipulation of much 'continental' philosophy. It follows that those applying to enter postgraduate studies in Christian Ethics who warm to the philosophical tradition of which I am sceptical may be at a certain disadvantage. Nevertheless, I am entirely confident that I have admitted students, and helped to appoint colleagues, who disagree with me on a wide range of ethical issues—abortion, euthanasia, war, immigration, the nation-state, economic inequality, religious establishment, etc. Therefore it seems fair to put to the signatories of the Open Letter and colleagues in imperial history this question: "Is there a place among you for students who, like me, don't think they already know the answers to all the questions about the ethics of empire, and who might even be inclined toward answers you don't like?"

After all, diversity in ethics is good, too.

¹The project's ultimate aim is to develop a more discriminate set of ethical terms for evaluating imperial phenomena than usually prevails in academic discourse. Toward this end, it will analyse and test critiques of empire from ancient times to the present day. For further information, see: <http://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/ethics-and-empire>.

²See: http://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/sites/mcdonaldcentre.ox.ac.uk/files/content/heres_my_reply_to_those_who_condemn_my_project_on_ethics_and_empire_comment_the_times_the_sun.pdf

³See: <http://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/news/ethics-and-empire-response-critics>. The McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics, and Public Life was opened in 2008, straddling Oxford's Faculty of Theology & Religion and Christ Church. Three years later it was endowed in perpetuity by the McDonald Agape Foundation, established by the Hon. Alonzo McDonald, former CEO (Worldwide) of McKinsey & Co. and former Deputy Chief of Staff in President Carter's White House. Every year it holds an annual public conference, public lectures, and invitation-only colloquia. Those who have contributed to its events so far include Oxford colleagues from Philosophy, Law, History, Politics, Economics, English, as well as Theology; scholars from Cambridge, Copenhagen, Köln, Berlin, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Notre Dame and the University of Virginia; two former Presidents of the British Academy; and journalists from the *Times*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Guardian*.

⁴James McDougall, "The history of empire is about truth, not pride", *Guardian*, 4 January 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/03/history-empire-pride-guilt-truth-oxford-nigel-biggar>

⁵Readers can no longer verify this correspondence for themselves on Dr Gopal's Twitter account, without her approval. On New Year's Eve, the day after I viewed it, she caused it to be 'protected' against access by anyone except 'confirmed followers'. Nevertheless, the correspondence can still be seen on the accounts of Max Harris and Jon Wilson, which remain open to public view (as of 4 January).

⁶Twitter correspondence indicates that McDougall was already organising the Open Letter before Gopal made her appeal to 'Oxford postcolonial academics'. One may not claim, therefore, that she was his original inspiration to write the Letter. Nevertheless, one may claim that she was the original inspiration for others to sign it.