

Umberto Eco, Fascism and Tradition

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It is the very heart of fascism to think that what matters is not what is true, but what one holds to be true. What one holds to be true is important because it can produce that resolute will tuned to its own triumph.

George Grant: from *'The Triumph of the Will'*

Handle a large kingdom with as gentle a touch
As if you were cooking a small fish.

Tao Te Ching, Stanza 60

This is the freedom of the universe;
Unfolded still the more, more visible,
The more we know; and yet is revered least,
And least respected in the human Mind,
Its most apparent home.

William Wordsworth: from *'The Excursion'*

In an essay titled “Ur-Fascism” (or ‘Primordial Fascism’) in his book, “Five Moral Pieces” (Harcourt, 2002), Umberto Eco castigates “the cult of tradition” as one of the causes of fascism. As “the truth has already been announced once and for all”, there can be no advancement of learning: “all we can do is continue interpreting its obscure message”. Eco notes that “Nazi gnosis” (an oxymoron, by which he apparently means “Nazi ideology”) “fed on traditionalist, syncretic, and occult elements”, and he cites the example of the influence of Julius Evola and Rene Guenon on the new Italian right. He also censures tradition for its rejection of the modern world, finding in its disapproval of Enlightenment thought the seeds of fascist irrationalism and the rejection of all critical thinking. Finally, among the various other characteristics that he cites as typical of fascism, Eco singles out its hierarchic “elitism” as “a typical aspect of all reactionary ideologies, insofar as it is basically aristocratic”, promoting a “cult of heroism”, where everyone is “impatient to die”, death being seen by the convert as a passage to “supernatural happiness”.

These criticisms of tradition and of certain elements of its thought highlight two important points: first, that distinctions within traditional thought are subtle, and its doctrines are therefore capable of being misunderstood, particularly by the superficial reader, to whom they will appear as obscure or, worse, perfidiously alluring; and second, that traditional doctrines, being nuanced and textured, are easily susceptible to manipulation and abuse. In fact, the history of religions down to the present day (with its many examples of economically-shunted and politically-driven fundamentalist misreadings of religious literature) has shown both these tendencies at work, with offenders all-too-often appearing from within the fold, thereby proving the adage about the devil’s ability to “cite scripture for his own purpose”.

At its core, the misunderstandings of traditional doctrine arise from a basic misreading, whether superficial or abusive, of the traditional view of reality. The authentic Self in tradition is spiritual, which is to say that it is one with the substance of all reality. All spiritual questing is at once a search for an Origin (to which one returns) and a Center (in which one reposes), which are in substance identical. These correspond to the Heart of oneself, the genuine Self which is in essence the One Spirit that subsists in all reality. It is this Self that must be understood as the *Übermensch* (the Nietzschean “Superman”), as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy noted in his essay on Nietzsche, not the psychic or sensational self of common parlance or of the ill-termed “Nazi gnosis”. The Nietzschean “Will to Power” or its Blakean equivalent of “Energy” (symbolized by the “Tyger” whose “immortal symmetry” cannot be framed) are thus to be understood strictly as faculties of the authentic Self or the “Inner Man”, and not as the personal cravings or lower impulses of the “Outer Man”. Mistake the source and it is easy then to misunderstand the impulse emanating from it. It is this misreading that informs the view of those who mistake licentiousness for freedom and amorality for virtue. Coomaraswamy chose to interpret Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as an embodiment of virtue, not as a proponent of “selfishness” but of being “true to Self”, one who is “commanded from within”, beyond the dictates of rules (like Blake’s Jesus, who acted “from impulse, not from rules”), beyond good and evil. Thus he quotes Nietzsche’s formula of virtue with approval:

“That ye might become weary of saying: ‘that an action is good because it is unselfish.’ Ah! My friends! That your very self be in your action, as the mother is in the child: let that be your formula of virtue.”

Clearly, this endorsement of virtue as spontaneity is greatly susceptible to abuse by the hypertrophic self, whose political counterpart is either the elitism of fascism (as evidenced by the Nazis’ philosophical endorsement of Nietzsche’s “natural aristocracy” of the *Übermensch*) or the atomization of anarchy (whose more extreme postmodernist versions deconstruct all rules as agenda-driven and imperialistic exploitations). This form of hypertrophy, as we have argued, is to misunderstand the traditional view of Self – a misunderstanding which plays out in terms of how authority is perceived.

According to its critics, tradition, like fascism, is premised on the authority of the ‘elite’. It would appear to those who misread tradition that the traditionalist is like the fascist in that it is his world-view that must be imprinted on society. It is the program of the aristocracy, the patrician’s view of the world that must be brought to the plebeians, with the hierarchic structure of society being necessary to maintain the graduated distinctions between the scornful elite and the weak masses. As Eco states: “In the course of history, all forms of aristocratic and militaristic elitism have implied scorn for the weak. Ur-Fascism cannot do without preaching a ‘popular elitism’”. This is reminiscent of the argument of the Grand Inquisitor to Jesus in the narrative from *The Brothers Karamazov*:

“We have corrected Your work and have founded it upon miracle, mystery and authority. And men rejoiced that they were again led like sheep and that the terrible gift that had brought them such suffering was at last lifted from their hearts. Were we right in teaching them this? Speak! Did we not love mankind when so meekly acknowledging their

feebleness, lovingly lighting their burden, and permitting their weak nature even sin with our sanction?”

Eco's fascist and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor both justify their elitism in terms of their superior knowledge of what is good for the masses. Their 'authority', unlike that of the traditionalist, is based in fact on their temporal power. They are in truth opposed to the spiritual liberation of the masses, whose existence serves to validate their role. The Grand Inquisitor would in fact deliberately mislead the masses to keep them happy.

By contrast, the traditional view of authority is based on the concept of hierarchical order, that connects nobility (the privilege of rank, an emblem of outer order) to profundity (compassionate wisdom or piety, an emblem of inner order). There is no outer order (or Beauty) without inner order (or Virtue), no legitimacy of hierarchy unless premised upon the spiritually-ordered structure of reality, which proceeds from the subtle to the gross, from spiritual substance to material form, in a "great chain of being" (to use Lovejoy's celebrated phrase). According to this view, reality is hierarchical because (as the etymology, hiero-arche, of divine origin, implies) it is spiritually ordered, that is to say, ranked according to the degree of its spiritual luminosity which manifests in our primordial natures as piety. It is this ordering that confers social cohesiveness and preserves natural order. And by "untuning that string", as Shakespeare observes, "hark! what discord follows"(Triolus and Cressida, Act 1, Scene 3). The degrees of reality are not to be understood in an outward or superficial sense as, for example, by equating rank with any external badge or emblem of affiliation such as race, temporal power or ideology. Instead, rank corresponds to inner states and spiritual stations, and the authority that rank confers is related to the spiritual sensibilities inherent in that rank. These sensibilities relate to the vertical dimension of reality that connects nobility to profundity, the need for freedom to the desire for union. This is the foundation of the key principle of "noblesse oblige", an aspect of the Islamic principle of Amanah or Trust. It is the subordination of human governance to the divine law that establishes the ruler's right to be obeyed. There is a reciprocity between governance and obedience, between authority and its due. Authority resonates as inner beauty or virtue, as sacred knowledge or "gnosis", and as the wisdom of compassion or love. This resonance is what enables the spiritual receptor within each of us to authenticate authority and to attune us to its harmony that we identify as sacred. This respect for one's innate abilities (contrast Eco's suggestion that tradition implies critical stagnation or irrationalism) is implied in traditional scriptures that eschew coercion in matters of faith ("There is no compulsion in religion": Qur'an: 2, 256), but this is counterbalanced by a necessary appreciation of the legitimate role of spiritual authority ("He who has no Shaykh has satan for his guide": Bayazid Bistami). Here, tradition does not advocate a blind adherence to anyone claiming authority. True authority is to be recognized by intellectual discernment, and exudes its own perfume, of rigor and compassion, found in all the great spiritual messengers and teachers. If traditional doctrines can be easy to misinterpret, traditional practices can be even more difficult to implement appropriately, hence the necessity of a guide. While fascist misreadings of tradition tend to emphasize the role of blind adherence to authority and correspondingly diminish the role of the intellect, tradition in fact teaches that the intellect is the spiritual receptor which can perceive (in Frithjof Schuon's well-known

phrase) “the metaphysical transparency of things”. It is thus the criterion of discerning the sacred and of intuiting authority. In the traditional view, the intellect is the lamp that lights our world, that perceives created reality as “charged with the grandeur of God”, from whence it springs. The intellect is akin to an eye which becomes aware of itself through its seeing. Knowledge is therefore experiential, not merely discursive. In the words of Antonio Machado: “The eye you see is not an eye because you see it. It is an eye because it sees you.”

His misunderstanding of traditional intellectualism is reinforced by Eco’s depiction of traditional culture as “syncretic”, having to necessarily tolerate a combination of different forms of beliefs, practices and contradictions, because “all the original messages contain a grain of wisdom, and when they seem to be saying different or incompatible things, it is only because they all allude, allegorically, to some original truth”. Eco argues that a consequence of this syncretism is the intellectual stagnation necessary for fascism. While it is true that traditional doctrine espouses Aristotle’s dictum that “There is nothing new under the sun”, it is wrong to conclude that this implies intellectual stagnation. To understand why this is so it is useful to examine why tradition in fact opposes syncretism. Tradition distinguishes between the principial level and the formal level of metaphysical reality. Truth, whatever its formal articulation, is principally transcendent, which is why one can speak in traditional terms of “the transcendent unity of religions”. However, tradition is opposed to the reductionist tendency inherent in syncretism, of locating identity at merely the formal level. Each revealed religious tradition is unique in the forms of its revelation, symbols and practices, and each constitutes a unique, divinely-gifted and integrated spiritual pathway to Truth. The ability to benefit from the practices and spiritual means of a particular pathway requires an intellectual receptivity that allows its symbols and practices to work their alchemical transformation upon the practitioner. The “symbolist spirit” of this intellectual receptivity calls for a degree of awareness in the adept that is in marked contrast to the mindless offerings of the New Age spirituality or syncretisms of their “designer religions”. Traditional thought advocates not a syncretism of forms but a principled pluralism premised on the metaphysical transcendence of Truth. This distinction implies a respect for other religious traditions, not because all formal differences must be tolerated in a society, but because formal differences are perceived to dissolve where their diverse forms point to the same underlying Truth.

Eco notes that tradition implies a rejection of the modern world. Guenon’s writings undoubtedly influenced Evola. Both were outspoken critics of modernity, but unlike Evola, Guenon never lost sight of the central criterion of his traditional heritage – the metaphysics that tethered transcendence to immanence, freedom to compassion, the divine order to the created world. It was not feasible, according to the traditional world-view to reject any aspect of the created order except to the extent that it rebelled against the divine order, that is to say, to the extent that it distanced itself from the sacred. Thus fascism, which was profane in its Promethean attempts to divinize the egoic self and in its wanton disregard for the sacred, as evidenced by the horrors that it bred in the name of the end justifying the means, could never take root in the soil of tradition. Fascism opposed modernity because it opposed creative thought, while tradition opposed the eclipse of the sacred, not of creative thought per se, but the deracinated rationalism of

nominalist scientism and the grotesqueries of de-spiritualized imagination. In critiques of tradition, the kinds of criticism voiced by Eco of tradition's rejection of modernity are often accompanied by the statement that tradition is premised on a nostalgia for the glories of the past. The appeal of this in fascist ideology is clear: the fascist ideologue can seek to return society to its Golden Age, ruled by superior men. This is a message often found in messianic movements of fundamentalist revivalism. Eco alludes to this in a different work (*Belief or Nonbelief? A Dialogue between Umberto Eco and Cardinal Martini*, Arcade Publishing, NY, 1997), in which he decries the nostalgia for "a timeless and archaic Tradition" that is opposed both to "the world and history". However, here too we find a vital misreading of tradition. While it is true that some traditional doctrines speak of cycles of time, tradition itself is not opposed to the temporal or created realm. Rather, tradition advocates a "cleansing of perceptions" so that we can perceive this realm as the sacred effusion of the divine. It is not a particular age that tradition opposes but a particular blindness or insensitivity. As Shakespeare notes in *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 5, Scene 1):

Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

It is not the glories of the past that tradition pines for, rather its nostalgia is for the sense of the sacred.

This brings us to Eco's criticism regarding the "cult of heroism". Tradition seeks to sacralize man's perception through awakening within him the knowledge of his true Self, which is one with the spiritual substance of all reality. The traditional references to death (such as the hadith, "Die before you die"; or the Biblical "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?": 1 Corinthians, XV) are not intended to create an impatience for martyrdom for an ideological cause or for escape from the physical world. They are intended rather to promote a transcendental consciousness of metaphysical reality, so that one can "be in the world, yet not of it". The heroic struggle is an inner struggle against the egoic self, culminating in the heroic death of detachment, whose counterpart is the heroic rebirth of compassion. Death and birth, detachment and compassion, nobility and profundity – these are the marks of the spiritual hero. We return again to the principle of "noblesse oblige", referred to earlier. The traditional hero bodhisattvically journeys back to the physical world, knowing that each blade of grass is sacred and worthy of salvation. The hero's sacrifice is based on the knowledge that it is only by planting deep roots within the soil of earth that the tree of life can hope to reach the heavens. Unlike Eco's example of the fascist hero who craves a heroic death as a means to attain "supernatural happiness", the traditional hero combines compassion with detachment and attains happiness by hearing the celestial harmonies in his immortal soul and by seeing the divine radiance in the sacredness that surrounds him. It is by dissolving into the sacred that the soul is born into eternal life.