EVOLA ON BUDDHISM: DHARMA FOR FASCISTS

“…what example can history furnish as the best suited for examination as a comprehensive and universal ascetic system that is clear and undiluted, well tried and well set out, in tune with the spirit of Aryan man and yet prevailing in the modern age?

“…Buddhism, in its original form—the so-called Pāli Buddhism—shows us, as do very few other doctrines, the characteristics we want: (1) it contains a complete ascetic system; (2) it is universally valid and it is realistic; (3) it is purely Aryan in spirit; (4) it is accessible in the general conditions of the historical cycle to which present-day humankind also belongs.

“…Buddhism, as the Doctrine of Awakening, offers us those very traits of severity and nudity that characterize the monumental, and features of clarity and strength that may be called, in a general sense, ‘classical’; a virile and courageous attitude that would seem Promethean were it not indeed essentially Olympian.”

It has been said that as Herbert Marcuse is to the alternative left, so is Julius Evola to the alternative right. He is one of the most influential thinkers and writers of 20th century fascism—real fascism, mind you, not whatever feminized leftists disapprove of and call by that name. He may be best known nowadays for his occasional mentions by fellows like Steve Bannon and Milo Yiannopoulos, and the left’s consequent furious attempts to vilify them, and President Trump through association, by dredging up Evola’s extremist politics, racism, misogyny, and whatever else is deemed monstrously heretical, evil, and non-PC.

Baron Giulio Cesare Andrea Evola (1898-1974) was an artist, social philosopher, “esotericist,” and devout fascist (though not officially a Party member). He knew Mussolini personally and was publicly praised and supported by him, and was known as the leading fascist philosopher in Europe for a time, especially during the 1930s. He eventually broke with the Italian version of the far right, considering it to have no spiritual basis…whereupon he moved to Nazi Germany! There he was friends, or at least acquaintances, with Heinrich Himmler, and had at least met with Hitler. (He was, however, opposed by the SS for ideological deviance.) After the war he was accused and put on trial for promoting fascism in Italy; although he pointed out that he had never been a Party member and disagreed with the official version of the system, and claimed that he was not a fascist, but a “superfascist,” which I assume indicates that he had gone beyond mere fascism into something more intense. He was acquitted of all charges.

Evola at the Wolf's Lair

Evola’s political philosophy was influenced by the works of Nietzsche, and resembles them in his glorification of the superman and contempt for the feminine, more or less Christian, egalitarian desire to uplift “inferiors” such as peasants and non-Aryans. However, he criticized Nietzsche for not being tough enough. His thought more strikingly resembles that of René Guénon; and it is not surprising that Evola knew Guénon and cites him repeatedly in his writings. Both men deplored feminized modernity and considered the world to have degenerated from a kind of masculine Golden Age. Evola considered the primordial Indo-European “Aryan” race to have been a race of heroes, of aristocratic, initiated warrior-priests whose greatness of spirit rendered all they did and experienced spiritual, including the shedding of blood on the field of battle. The men of past ages were Olympian, godlike. Evola had some appreciation for the more austere contemplative sects of Christianity, such as the Carthusians and Carmelites; but he yearned for a revival of a truly Aryan form of religion, such as the paganism practiced in classical Rome, especially in the mystery cults.

Evola promulgated a return to “Aryo-Mediterranean” values—and it must be acknowledged that early Rome, and early Indo-European civilization in general, clearly represented a vital, vigorous, powerful, and ultimately very successful form of society. In Italy, a Vatican-supported Catholic journal declared that he was a satanist.

Bearing all this in mind, it is very ironic that, of all his prolific literary output, the first book to be translated into English was La dottrina del risveglio ("The Doctrine of Awakening"), a text on Theravada Buddhism. The book even received the endorsement of the Pali Text Society. To increase the irony, he wrote the book in the midst of a crowd of Fascists and Nazis during the height of the Second World War.

(Fascists and Nazis are commonly assumed, with no questions allowed, to be pure evil, so it is interesting to note that they, or many of them anyway, were actually more interested in contemplative spirituality and “higher truths” than the REALLY spiritually dead Marxist materialists at the other end of the political spectrum. Leftists conveniently overlook this, unless maybe they are so atheistic as to consider any sign of spirituality to be blameworthy. I’m certainly not trying to claim that historical Fascism has been more good than bad, but in this particular case I figure, hell, give the devil his due. Also, I’ll overlook for the time being claims by some right-wingers that the Nazis were actually political leftists.)

So Evola is of interest to me not only because he was (and still is) opulently, magisterially politically incorrect, but because he was also, among many other things, a Buddhist scholar of sorts. It is written that when he was in his 20s, shortly after the first World War (in which he served as an artillery officer), he became depressed and borderline suicidal, and it was an insight inspired by reading an ancient Buddhist text that moved him to take a new lease on life and dedicate himself to a quest for “absolute transcendence.” In other words, he adopted the Buddhist ideal of dedicating this individual life to the transcendence of any mere individual life. Nevertheless, he could hardly be called a Theravada Buddhist, and never claimed to be one, as far as I know. He seems to have been more interested in more esoteric fields like hermeticism and Tantra; in fact, strangely, his writings on the occult and “sex magic” are currently popular among some of the more intellectual New Age types.

Why oh why would a self-proclaimed superfascist study and endorse Theravada Buddhism? Isn’t Buddhism pacifistic, compassionate, egalitarian, and just about everything else that is alien to Fascism and the far right? Well, I’ll tell you. It appears that the three main reasons why Julius Evola admired and respected early Buddhism more than, say, Christianity, are that it is 1) “virile,” 2) aristocratic, and, of course, 3) Aryan.

With regard to early Buddhism’s “virility,” one shouldn’t be deceived by the soft, gentle, feminized form it has mutated into in the modern west. Early Buddhism was emphatically a masculine system, created by and for tough, head-oriented male ascetics who avoided women like the plague. Women, up until Theravada was transmuted into a branch of politically correct leftist elitism, have been strictly peripheral to the system—supporters and a few outlying, tolerated nuns (who eventually became extinct anyhow, at least in the Theravadin Sangha). The homeless wandering of early Buddhism required fearlessness, unflinching determination, and the toughness of wood. Evola placed much emphasis on “Prince Siddhattha” being an elite member of the Kshatriya warrior caste of India; and he stressed the heroic, military ethos to be found in the oldest Buddhist texts—there really is quite a lot of military simile and metaphor in the Suttas (for example the well-known “Better to die in battle than to live in defeat” from the Sutta Nipāta). One is reminded of William James’s idea of religious asceticism being a non-violent means of fulfilling one’s masculine nature. According to Evola, early Buddhism, like primordial Aryan (i.e., Indo-European) spirituality in general, equated the truly heroic with the truly spiritual, and vice versa.

One also should not be deceived by the professed all-inclusive egalitarian nature of the western forms of Buddhism: Buddhism began as a system for a small minority of the population, a kind of highly trained spiritual elite, to strive for enlightenment, transcendence—a goal that strikes the common worldling with fear and dread. The community of Buddhists proper was the Sangha of renunciants, with laypeople mainly providing material support from the outside. Thus early Buddhism was initiatory (a word often used by Guénon, declared essential to any true spirituality), and thus, in a sense, truly aristocratic. It wasn’t for everybody—only for the best, or for those striving to be the best anyway. He says, “It is evident that this path is only suited to a very small minority, gifted with exceptional interior strength.” And again, the idea that the Buddha was a royal prince before he renounced the world was emphasized by Evola as a kind of symbolic evidence of Buddhism’s spiritual nobility. (Evola points out that, according to Buddhist tradition, although a man of any race or class could join the Sangha, only a man of the highest caste could become a Buddha.) The enlightened Buddhist renunciant is portrayed by Evola as a majestic, godlike hero whose dignity and greatness of spirit spontaneously overflow to bless all around him.

No doubt one big reason why Evola favored Buddhism is that he was eager to find a more Aryan replacement for the perceived sickness of Christianity (now largely replaced by the greater sickness of so-called Social Justice), which was not only founded by Jews but glorifies weakness: “The meek shall inherit the earth,” and all that. He considered “Aryan” to be more a matter of spirit than of body; although he considered each physical race to have its own hereditary ethos, so he was definitely a racist in that regard. And of course he considered the Indo-European race (if it can really be called a race) in its pure, ancestral form to be gloriously virile, heroic, and superior. It appears that Evola dearly loved the fact that the word generally used for “noble” in the Pali language is Ariya, the Pali equivalent of Sanskrit (and English) Arya. The four ariya-sacca, almost universally rendered as the four Noble Truths, Evola calls “the four truths of the Ariya”; with similar translations for “the eightfold path of the Ariya,” “the doctrine of the Ariya,” etc.

Evola was under no illusions that western civilization would convert to Theravada Buddhism, just as he certainly couldn’t have expected Europeans to convert en masse to ancient Roman style paganism. He didn’t care all that much what beliefs the debased and un-Aryan masses followed anyway. He offered Buddhism to those few spiritual aristocrats who could appreciate it; to allow the true Aryan “elite” suffering the indignity of a decadent, feminized, “telluric” modernity to retain their self-respect and their sanity—and through that, perhaps, even to help bring about a better, greater, more glorious, more fascistic world. (←written with tongue in cheek)

His book on Theravada, and his theories concerning the original form of Buddhism, are almost universally ignored these days, especially by Buddhists. Even so, it appears that he has made a significant impression on western Theravada Buddhism through one peculiar fact: One of the most famous and influential of all western bhikkhus, venerable Nyanavira, was allegedly inspired to become a monk after reading Evola’s The Doctrine of Awakening, while he was hospitalized in Italy in 1945. But more on ven. Nyanavira, and on the book which inspired him, next time.

“The fact is, and we must state it categorically, that every moral system, in itself, is completely void of any spiritual value….We must speak, then, of stupidity or foolishness, and not of ‘sin’; of knowledge, and not of ‘good’ and ‘evil.’….That the world of true spirituality has nothing to do with ‘good and evil’ was also, moreover, a basic concept in the preceding Indo-Aryan tradition.”

“The strength and sureness of those who know no more anguish or fear is described as something that has a vertiginous and fearful effect on others, both human and superhuman; when they are faced by those who have conquered, and when they hear their truth, they become aware of their own unsuspected contingency, and the primordial anguish bursts forth unchecked. They see the abyss.”