

FABIO SCIALPI

PROFESSOR GIUSEPPE TUCCI *

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Indian and Italian Friends, twenty years ago Prof. Giuseppe Tucci passed away, leaving the earthly existence essentially characterised by pains and sorrow to go, as the Bṛhadāranyaka upaniṣad reads, “to the world free from grief, free from snow. There he dwells eternal years”. In the day His venerated external body was visible for the last time, I was in His house to give Him a last farewell. I still remember the dramatic emotions I felt in that moment which seemed most solemn to me. Therefore, I am particularly honoured today and grateful to the President of the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient for his entrusting me with the task of commemorating the Master here, in the land He had so much loved and considered His second Homeland. I would also like to express my gratitude to the faithful companion of His life, Signora Francesca Bonardi Tucci, for granting her approval about my participation in this ceremony dedicated to Him.

So much has been said and written on Prof. Tucci that apparently it seems quite difficult to think of something which does not sound as mere repetition of what has already been listened to again and again. But I dare to say this is not probably true as great men like Him have always something new to suggest even to the last comer, since Their teachings often can be profoundly appreciated only after many years;

* Commemorative address on the occasion of the “Seminar on Professor Giuseppe Tucci” – Italian Embassy Cultural Centre, New Delhi, 19th October, 2004.

furthermore they, independently on the will of the Master, develop and produce always new fruits. I, therefore, shall try here to give you some brief remarks about Him aiming at underlining what seems to me, after so many years, really essential regarding His personality and His teachings.

First of all I think it is important to say that Prof. Giuseppe Tucci loved India as much as nobody else in Italy, and probably in the Western World, had ever done before. In one of His most read books, *La via dello Svat* ("The Route to Swat") published in 1964, He reveals that His encounter with Sanskrit commenced when He was just about twelve, but in His speech on receiving the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding, which was conferred on Him in 1976, Prof. Tucci dates back His special relation with India to even earlier years and so declares: "India has been my spiritual guide to which, out of ineffable karmic connections, I turned my mind since my childhood. And she always welcomed me like a lost and wandering son who seeks refuge in her mother's lap." (*Premio Jawaharlal Nehru per la Comprensione Internazionale*, Roma, Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1978, p. 1). Often to His Indian friends He jokingly used to say that in a past life He must have been a brahman and then, due to some sin committed, He was born again in a barbarian land, "*mlecchadeśe punarjāto' smi*" (R. Gnoli, "L'India nell'opera di Giuseppe Tucci", in *Giuseppe Tucci. Nel centenario della nascita*, a cura di B. Melasecchi, Roma 7-8 giugno 1994, p. 23).

"*Sabār upar manush tahar upar koi nai*", "Above everything is man; and above him there is no one". This quotation from *Candidās*, by which the Bengali poet declares that man is the most noble and dignified of beings, recurs a great many times in the writings of Prof. Tucci, so assuming the significance of one of His highest values. Let me then dwell for a while on this side of His lofty figure and speak of Him simply as a man living and working in historical time.

I shall start with a few brief notes on His physical appearance, which seem very important to me as the body is but for the mirror, so to speak, of the soul, and no photograph could do justice to the clarity and strength of His look. I am now availing myself of the words the President of our Institute, Prof. Gherardo Gnoli, used in the public commemoration about a month after the passing away of Prof. Tucci, which

occurred on 5th April 1984. “[...]Recalling together the figure of Giuseppe Tucci to our minds, one image of his will come to the fore. Not that of a brilliant scholar or an enterprising organizer, but the image of a strong and a noble man, to whom whoever had the good fortune to be near him felt bound by ties of love and devotion. Because this is the first thing we must admit: Giuseppe Tucci was a man who certainly did not leave one indifferent, whose eternally youthful and fresh enthusiasm gave him a remarkable fascination. His eyes, lively and transparent, often filled with child-like ingenuity, were the reflection of a mind that always aimed at reaching higher goals, either through the study of unedited manuscripts, or through the exploration of places hitherto unreached: in either cases through an intensely felt spiritual experience. This enthusiasm never failed him, nor did it weaken, not even when his tired and fragile body began to be painfully and relentlessly consumed: his eyes were still as lively as ever, the expression of a sparkling wit and unyielding spirit.” (*East and West*, 34, 1984, p. 12).

Such a description needs no more words. But let me add a few recollections from my own experience or the one of people who worked under His guidance and occasionally would convey their feelings towards Him to me. He was an extremely generous person, always ready to help, encourage, support. His most eminent pupil, Prof. Raniero Gnoli, a world-wide renowned scholar of Sanskrit and Indian studies, in his recollections often speaks of the visits he used to pay to the house of his Master where he would receive advice, talk with foreign, prestigious indologists and be entrusted with the publication of rare and difficult manuscripts. “*In manus tua commendo*”, “I commit it to your hands”, was the solemn formula pronounced for the investiture which was meant to prove the complete trust of the Teacher in the young student, at the same time underlying the importance of the task which demanded effort and sacrifice and, therefore, required responsibility and great care.

But Prof. Tucci did not reserve this attitude to students of His courses at the University of Rome or people of his scientific circle. For instance, Father Toscano, who once had sent Him his translation into Tibetan of a work of Ippolito Desideri, received, to his great surprise, a precious statuette of Padmasambhava, if I properly remember, simply wrapped in common paper and accompanied by a few words of appre-

ciation. In so many years of association with the Institute I have met several persons who, even after a long time, remembered they had obtained scholarships and various forms of assistance through His personal good auspices. One of them, an Indian painter, Yagneshver Kalyangi Shukla, once repaid His generosity by giving Him nine beautiful works produced with different techniques (xylography, etching and aquatint), dated 1939, out of gratitude for a year of study spent in Italy thanks to Prof. Tucci's recommendation. They were recently discovered in the Library of the Institute as the result of careful researches of the present librarian, Prof. Francesco Darelli. Last but not least, regarding His openness to the world of studies and detachment from money, I shall here only say, not to do wrong to Him, that on receiving a large amount of money as an official prize in recognition of His studies, He wanted it to remain in the country that had conferred it to be used to promote new researches and help young students.

However, one could see in all of this only a form of solidarity towards a restricted elite of individuals whose life, entirely devoted to the world of studies, commanded special sympathy from a man inspired by the same principles. But he would be wrong. As Gherardo Gnoli says again, Prof. Tucci "had no great esteem for intellectuals and did not care much for those who spent too much time bent over their books and kept too far from the poetry of nature. He recalled with manifest pride his experience as a soldier in the first World War. And, above all, he did not fail to boast of his nomadic life as a traveller and explorer." (*ibid.*). In His books we often find nostalgic recollections of His long marches along the Asian routes, suggestive reminiscences of peaceful conversations of the caravan at night, around the fire of the camp, together with a profound love for the solitude of the Himalayan heights and the clarity of that blue sky which He so intensely could transmit to His companions of adventure as well as to His fascinated readers.

This mystic communion with nature, experienced in a sort of sacred atmosphere of solitude and silence which could take Him in direct touch with the divine essence of the universe, accompanied His whole life. Once Prof. Tucci left home for a solitary walk towards a mountain not too far from the village where He lived. He fell down, broke His leg and remained helpless and seriously injured for quite

some time. Yet He often recollected the day of such a dramatic event as one of the best of all His life because of the extraordinary experience He had enjoyed all alone in front of the magnificent spectacle offered to Him by the serene and imperturbable beauty of the mount.

At the same time He could appreciate the good company of colleagues, friends and pupils. His house was always open to everybody had a serious reason to wish to meet Him. He received visits from kings, heads of states, influential figures of national society and international environment. But he would not disdain the company of simple and humble people as well. Signora Tucci told me lots of times how happy He was when, after many hours of untiring work, He would join farmers busy in the occupations of the fields to drink a glass of good wine and perhaps sing together with them a folk song. For this genuine attitude of mind and His inborn generosity He was not only revered but also most loved.

A picture of His personality, even though necessarily short like the present one, would be incomplete, if I did not mention His love for animals. For instance, notwithstanding a deep respect for cultural customs and practices He would observe while crossing so many Himalayan regions, His disapproval of animal sacrifices, like those of buffaloes during the Dassehra in Nepal, is most evident in the book *Tra giungle e pagode* ("Between Jungles and Pagodas"). The death, even of an animal, Prof. Tucci notes, is something mysterious and terrible which the solemnity of rites and religious beliefs can hardly justify. Sometimes animals, like two puppies as tiny as chicks were adopted out of human pity and welcomed into the family of the caravan. The death of one of them, devoured by a panther at night, was a misfortune which ruined the joy of the return. Cats often sought and found sure refuge at Tucci's. "They are gentle, little souls and one should protect them", once He said to His wife who meant to give three of them lastly arrived to His home to a family of friends for their children. He feared they might be insecure in their new home and refused to part from them. They well repaid the good care of their master: in the last painful days of His life one could often see them playing with Him on His bed and so giving Him solace in their own way.

A life-long dedication to studies and scientific researches, unselfishness, generosity, great empathy with people of any position

in the social ladder, keen mind, capacity for ecstatic contemplation of nature, love towards every living being – all these innate qualities, further developed day by day through constant meditation on the sacred scriptures of major cultures of mankind, were naturally conducive to investigating the world of religion by which He was strongly attracted. He managed to know in depth, by reading texts in original language, all the main religions of Asia, from Iran to India, Tibet, China and Japan. But one could say that He was able to compare religious facts of other civilisations as well since the cultures of the classical antiquity (Rome and Greece) and the ancient Near East (Egypt and Mesopotamia) were certainly known to Him as a great many references and comparisons in His writings widely prove.

However, it was the Indian culture that most attracted Him and that He chose as His favourite field of scientific inquiry. Whether this was due to karmic connections, as He liked to say, it is difficult to establish. But surely the complexity of the Indian religious panorama was to challenge His masterly capacity of historical reconstruction and acute interpretation of an arduous and extremely powerful symbolism. On the other hand, religion constitutes the essence of Indian culture. As He clearly remarks in a small book published long ago but still most valuable, “[...] the development of Indian civilisation coincides with the evolution of [her] religious attitude, with the clarifying and intensifying of it. It is so profoundly rooted in the spirit of her people that it moulds every aspect of life, stimulates, guides and supports the efforts of thought, inspires the highest creations of art and poetry, has been the strongest incentive to thinking so that theology and philosophy in India have never been separate [...].” (*Asia religiosa*, Roma 1946, p.16).

The result of this challenge that He had been ready to accept was a thorough investigation of every single facet of Indian culture – from history to art, from literature to language, from society to folk lore, nothing was excluded. I even read some interesting essays on the Indian cinema and the agrarian reform. And, of course, religion, the inexhaustible source from which every other cultural creation sprouted. He could clearly perceive the historical continuity between old traditions and new developments, and, thanks to His great insight, could resolve the apparent contradiction of opposites into a couple of complementary aspects of the same and sole reality. Think, for instance, of

death and life combined and interdependent on each other into the figure of the Great Indian Mother. In her figure Prof. Tucci identified one of the most complex themes of Indian religion and the highest points of the Indian mystic poetry so often beautifully expressed by great poets into lofty verses like the ones of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*: “O Mother, who removest the sufferings of thy suppliants, be gracious!/ Be gracious, O Mother of the whole world! [...]. O Goddess, be gracious! Protect us wholly from fear of our foes [...]. And bring thou quickly to rest the sins of all the worlds.” (G. Tucci, “La Gran Madre”, in *Id.*, *Forme dello spirito asiatico*, Milano-Messina 1940, p. 152).

However, of all the Indian religions Buddhism was that to have the strongest appeal for Him. I think this was perhaps due to a twofold reason. On one side, the ethical view of Śākyamuni, centred on values such as respect, compassion and love for every living being, was perfectly in accordance with Prof. Tucci’s nature and personal convictions. This point can be easily understood if we only remember a quotation from (antideva reported by Him in a lecture delivered at the Institute on the occasion of the celebration of the *Buddha Jayanti*, on 30th May, 1956. “As all creatures – Śāntideva sings – share my same grief and my same joys, I must protect them as I protect myself (VIII, 90). I must end the sufferings of others because it is as though their sufferings were mine and all must be loved by me because they are creatures like myself (VIII, 94).” (*East and West*, VII, 1957, p. 303).

On the other hand, unlike other Indian doctrines, whose attention to the social hierarchy or elaboration of a complicated mythological and philosophical structure seem to have primary importance, the teaching of the Buddha places man at the very centre of its system. At least at the beginning of its historical spread throughout every Asian land, it simply aims at liberation of men from sorrow and desire by means of true knowledge of the drama of life and the coexistence of its two values, “for it is at one and the same time light and darkness, truth and illusion, mortality and immortality. But the bridge between being and non-being is always love, loving care for those who like us wish to wake from the night to the dawn of a limpid sky, impassive with motionless light.” (*ibid.*). To note here His remark on the bright sky, such as the one He must have admired numberless times during His long marches along the Himalayan routes.

From this love and concern for every creature enchained by its *karma* to a conditioned life in the insubstantial and painful world of *samsāra* “arises the humanism of Buddhism, which – He writes – started on its triumphant pilgrimage in the days of Aśoka, crossed the Himalayas and traversed the seas, spreading from one end of Asia to the other, the message of Śākyamuni and the treasures of Indian spirituality [...]” (*ibid.*). Here, however, Prof. Tucci’s academic lesson becomes higher as His ethical teaching gains ground on the historical analysis in order to correct old prejudices and promote new ideas in the Italian public opinion no less than amongst the young generations of students attending His courses in the University of Rome.

He, therefore, goes even further by asserting the contribution of Buddhism to the creation of a humane culture inspired by its moral values. And here His criticism towards the Western world is not only significant for the time it was declared – exactly fifty years ago –, but also prophetic of new relations between East and West. He writes: “I have used the expression ‘Asian humanism’, and I already hear many in the West think this word ‘humanism’ is misapplied. I am not surprised. We Westerners, full of self-conceit and unfortunately still ignorant or suspicious of Asia, pride ourselves on certain conquests as though only in this Europe of ours have the great adventures of the spirit been run. And yet, side by side with our European humanism, there is that of Asia which precedes ours, and has its *raison d’être* and its foundation in the message of the Buddha [...]” (*ibid.*).

Ladies and gentlemen, dear Indian friends, I could easily go on for a long time speaking on Prof. Giuseppe Tucci. So many are the aspects of His multifaceted human and scientific personality I have not even touched upon. For instance, His extraordinary capability of stimulating new projects meant to spread knowledge about Asia, especially India and Tibet, beyond the narrow circle of the specialists of Asian cultures. He thought this, then relatively little known and yet so rich, heritage should be shared with everybody interested in history of mankind. The Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient and the National Museum of Oriental Art with their multifarious activities are only the most important fruits of His untiring and long-sighted initiatives.

He firmly and constantly believed in the dialogue amongst countries through mutual knowledge of cultures and interchange of ideas in order to promote a renewed understanding of peoples. In His mind, this would finally bring them to recognise the unity of the human family as well as the interdependence of their destiny.

How greatly Indian thought influenced this view can be judged from the following reflection on Ramakrishna that He wrote in 1950 and which sounds particularly appropriate in the present time: “[...] He experimented three religions: the one in which he was born, the Muslim and the Christian. By following all three, he had visions, ecstasies and spiritual raptures. After having divested religions of their doctrinal and dogmatic structures, and cleared them of schemes which were a fatal adaptation to those historical and social events in which they had developed, he discovers a common element that permeates them all: [...] the unity of inspiration which underlines them and finds in it the fundamental identity of the souls. While religious beliefs have had the unhappy privilege of dividing men, Ramakrishna going back to their principle, welcomed them all as a means of understanding and fraternisation.” (*East and West*, I, 1950, pp. 69-70).

