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Dante's Family Roots: Cacciaguida, the Holy War, and True Nobility in the Age of Proto-Mercantilism

Abstract

This study explores the profound relationship between Dante Alighieri and his ancestral roots during a pivotal historical transition. Set against the decline of feudalism and the rise of a new mercantile bourgeois class, the analysis focuses on Dante's encounter in the *Paradiso* with his ancestor, Cacciaguida. It is through this heroic figure — a martyr of the Second Crusade — that the Alighieri family claims its degree of nobility. Cacciaguida serves as the poet's guide into the concept of "true nobility," which is earned through sacrifice and service in the Holy Land rather than mere inheritance. Adopting a philosophical and hermeneutic approach, the research follows the methodology of the Carla Rossi Academy — International Institute of Italian Studies in Tuscany. This critical framework interprets Dante's compositional style through "symphonic symbolism," specifically examining how the theme of authentic aristocracy is redefined. Instead of traditional class distinctions, Dante's "authentic aristocracy" is subtly intertwined with core Christian values such as humility, merciful justice, and tolerance. In dealing with the martyrdom of Cacciaguida, it is necessary to reflect on the difference between the Christian principle of religious tolerance and the violent intolerance of Islam. The study ultimately argues that Dante's vision of nobility is a sophisticated poetic discourse that remains free from rigid doctrinal or dogmatic conditioning. By connecting family history with spiritual merit, the poet establishes a model of nobility that transcends the materialistic shifts of his time, emphasizing a moral and historical identity rooted in faith and personal virtue.

Dante; Divine Comedy; Cacciaguida; nobility; tolerance



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Introduction

This study concerns the relationship between Dante and his family roots in a period when feudalism was in decline and the new bourgeois class was emerging, in a proto-mercantilistic manner. Son and grandson of merchants and bankers, in the final part of the *Divine Comedy* the poet celebrates his ancestor Cacciaguida, from whom the Alighieri family derives a degree of nobility, earned by this ancestor in battle against the Islamic infidels, during the Second Crusade. In his vision of paradise, Dante imagines communicating with the heroic member of his family martyred in the Holy Land, and is initiated by him into the idea of true nobility.

This analysis is philosophical and hermeneutic in nature. It specifically follows the critical method developed by the Carla Rossi Academy-International Institute of Italian Studies in Tuscany, which demonstrates how Dante's compositional style develops according to a symphonic symbolism¹, that foreshadows and echoes fundamental motifs and *tòpoi*² revolving around a primary theme. In this case, we will try to show how the theme of authentic aristocracy — according to a subtly ironic poetic discourse — appears closely intertwined with the Christian concepts of humility and merciful justice, tolerant and free from cultural, doctrinal and dogmatic conditioning.

1. Dante and His Fundamental Ancestors

Dante was the son of Alighiero II Alighieri, a member of the Guelph party that supported the Pope against the Ghibellines, who, at the time of the Investiture Controversy, promoted imperial interests. Alighiero II was a merchant and, together with his father Bellincione and his brothers, was active as a money dealer (Zingarelli 1939: 80–85). He was indeed an expert in those complex financial transactions that characterized the birth of modern banking, but which were also criticized as sins of usury:

¹ The hermeneutic method developed by this international research center is described and exemplified in various studies. Cf. Balducci 1999; Balducci 2021: 151–199.

² From a structuralist and formalist perspective, by 'motive' we refer to a phenomenon, an objective situation; while with '*tòpos*' we indicate a specific conceptual context. Cf. Curtius 2013; Tomaševskij 1965.

a mortal sin, according to the most rigorous medieval theology, linked to the sale of time that belongs solely to God. Therefore, usury appeared as a violent offense against practical material work, prescribed by the Creator Father as necessary to humbly purify the original Edenic sin of our progenitors Adam and Eve (Balducci 2016: 147–155).

Bellincione's father was Alighiero I. Actually, we have little information about him, but, from the *Divine Comedy*, we know that in the next world he pays for his pride in purgatory. It can be assumed that this pride is linked to the materialistic ambitions that began at a specific stage of Dante's genealogy, that is when his family began to confuse the true good of spiritual salvation with socioeconomic ambitions, tied to the fruits of trade and financial exchanges (Toynbee 2005: 32–40). Significant in this sense is that the poet, honoring his origins in his poetical masterpiece, makes no reference to his father or immediate relatives, but only to his distant ancestor who was father of Alighiero I, that is Cacciaguida, the hero who met martyrdom during the Crusades.

2. From the Heaven of the Sun to the Heaven of Mars in Paradise: The Motif of the Glory of the Body and the *Tòpos* of Freedom

A characteristic of the vision described by Dante in his poem is that the same human passions are represented in the three realms of the other world of the dead. Violence, for example, appears in hell, as uncontrolled anger (Stygian Marsh / *Inf.* VIII) and deliberate cruelty (seventh circle / *Inf.* XII–XVI), then as blindness in the third level of purgatory (*Purg.* XV–XVI), and is also beatified in paradise (*Par.* XIV–XVIII). In this last case, we find ourselves faced with violence for a just cause: it is a form of violence approved by Christianity — following St. Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*, IV, 6, 15) and St. Thomas (*Summa Theologiae*, IIa — IIae, q. 40, art. 1), in particular — as the legitimate and generous defense of men and peoples persecuted and attacked for religious intolerance and/or the desire to invade other people's territories. This violence, which is the acceptance of risk and sacrifice in defense of others, opens the gates of heaven; and Dante celebrates it through the paradisiacal description of the sky of Mars, where he recalls having met the spirit of his ancestor: the courageous Cacciaguida who, as a faithful soldier, was able to gain the esteem of the emperor on the field and, therefore, the investiture of knight³.

The heaven of holy violence is preceded by the heaven of the Sun, where the poet meets the wise spirits of the most famous theologians, arranged and rotating in three crowns of light emanating from their souls (*Par.* X–XIV). Here, the humble voice of Solomon emerges. He was considered the wisest man who ever lived, and he resolves a doubt of Dante's by going beyond canonical theology, and affirming that — after the resurrection and the final judgment — the joy of the blessed will be greater in the reunion of the spirit with the body (*Par.* XIV: 34–66). We must notice that this glorious

³ Cf. *Par.* XV: 133–141: “Maria mi diè, chiamata in alte grida;/ e ne l’antico vostro Batisteo/ insieme fui cristiano e Cacciaguida.// Moronto fu mio frate ed Eliseo;/ mia donna venne a me di val di Pado,/ e quindi il soprannome tuo sì feo.// Poi seguitai lo ’mperador Currado;/ ed el mi cinse de la sua milizia,/ tanto per bene ovrar li venni in grado.// *Mary gave me, calling with loud cries; and in your ancient Baptistry, I was both a Christian and Cacciaguida. Moronto was my brother, and Eliseo; my lady came to me from the Pado Valley, and from there your surname came. Then I followed Emperor Currado; and he made me part of his army, so much so that, through good deeds, I became worthy of him.*”

celebration of sensuality symphonically develops from the holy eroticism of the sky of Venus (*Par.* VIII–IX). Solomon, to whom the most sensual book of the *Bible* is traditionally attributed — the erotic *Song of Songs* — celebrates the body, the flesh and life of the senses as an integral part of the same joy desired by God, who created man in carnal matter, and loved him. This heretical truth precedes the appearance of the third crown of spirits — luminous with the truth of the Holy Spirit — likely indicating the third spiritual age foreseen by Joachim of Fiore, in the visions and symbols of the historical movement he described: an age of enlightened time (apparently starting in Dante's era), in which the dogmatic and inquisitorial church must gradually diminish its power. At the same time, in this third age, the humanity of Christian believers will more and more affirm the need for a free approach to the divine mysteries, directly inspired by the fruits of individual inner research. The motif of the glory of the body and the *tòpos* of freedom are presented here and prelude the subsequent developments of the conceptual poetic discourse. From the heaven of the Sun, Dante — the pilgrim of the other world guided by the soul of his beloved Beatrice — ascends to the heaven of Mars, which is seen illuminated by blood-red rays. These are two sonorous lists, singing sacred hymns and formed by the souls of fighters for faith in Christ. At the intersection of the rays in the form of a cross, now appears the face of God, who became man as Jesus for our own salvation. This symbol emphasizes the motif of the body and the idea of divine immanence in matter. At this point, from the cross emanates the voice of Dante's ancestor, who calls himself his "*radice* / root". He initially speaks in Latin, expressing his joy at this providential encounter, which will artistically and spiritually enlighten the same poet.

The ancestor comments with admiration on Dante's surprising and unusual destiny, whereby — well before his death — the gates of heaven open, introducing him to the divine secrets as a living man, in his same body. According to the spirit, Dante's poetry, which will narrate his otherworldly vision, must take on the task of directly and symbolically revealing mysteries for the benefit of the new modern age — the third spiritual age of Gioacchino da Fiore (McGinn 1985) — encouraging humanity to follow the path of Christ, whose essence is enlightening and liberating Love.

3. Florentine Corruption and the Sordid Nature of Islam

Cacciaguida is in mental contact with Dante's time, he perceives it and also remembers his own distant time of ancient feudal Florence, "*sobria e pudica* / sober and modest" in its lifestyle (*Par.* XV: 89). The blessed soul compares his past in the world with the corruption of Florence today, poisoned by the greed for riches, prestige, and power, being prey to an immorality that "*deturpa* / defaces" in the pursuit of a type of pleasure that is fleeting, unsatisfied, and illusory. He then recalls his loyalty to Emperor Conrad and the Pope in facing with faith journeys to enemy lands, battles with Muslims, and martyrdom.

Islam is defined as "*legge* / law" (*Par.* XV: 143), that is religion, and is depicted as perverse and wicked. The Crusade thus appears to the poet as a just war, willed by God against those who oppress Christians and pilgrims in the Holy Land (Brunstetter and O'Driscoll 2018; Morisi 1963; Tamer and Thörner 2021). The peaceful pilgrimage to the places of Christ, and especially the visit to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem assumed

central importance throughout the Middle Ages (Cleri 1997). It was conceived as an essential penitential and purifying journey inaugurated — in the fourth century — by the search for and discovery of the True Cross by Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine. In the seventh century, with the revelation of the Quranic teaching to Muhammad and the subsequent spread of Islam, including Palestine, Christian pilgrimages to Islamicized places became dangerous, especially at a time when local rulers were more intolerant⁴. These rulers, in addition to the common discrimination against infidels / *dhimmi* (Fattal 1958.), openly or indirectly encouraged persecution and violence, with the destruction of churches and entire neighborhoods (Frenkel 1996: 307–310). Islam flourished and spread rapidly: it encompassed Arabia, then expanded from Anatolia to southern France, occupying the lands bordering the southern Mediterranean and dominating Spain, almost entirely (Holt 1970). In the eighth century, it reached its peak, not only politically and economically, but also culturally, fostering dialogue and exchanges of knowledge among the most learned of the peoples who had accepted the Islamic faith. Muslim scientific excellence aroused admiration and wonder in Christian Europe, far more backward in the West but also in the East, in Constantinople and its increasingly small and weakened empire. Dante, in his poem, shows us an essentially balanced position towards the primary enemies of his own spiritual world: in fact, Muhammad and Ali are seen among the diabolical tortures of the lower hell (*Inf.* XXVIII: 23–54) and yet, in the noble castle of magnanimous heroes, that of the infernal limbo, illustrious Muslim representatives appear to us, in tranquil, privileged atmospheres, without physically suffering pain. They are celebrated as champions of pure excellence in the legal and political sense, the just Saladin / “*Saladino*” (*Inf.* IV: 129), or scientific and philosophical with Averroes and Avicenna⁵.

In modern times, Islam is generally described as an autonomous religion, following the Muslim theological line that affirms that Muhammad’s *Quran* is the only true message from God, eternal and pre-existing its full revelation of the seventh century. The Quranic text, in its fragments, incorporates various elements of Judaic and Christian tradition. Indeed, according to ancient Arabic sources, the prophet Muhammad himself received initial religious education from the Nestorian Christian monk Bahira (Canivet and Rey 1995: 146–174), before hearing and revealing the message of Allah, transmitted to him directly by the angel Gabriel, according to tradition.

Dante and his European cultural world considered the Arab prophet heretical and all of Islam a heresy (from the Greek *hairesis*, meaning “choice”), that is an imperfect, incomplete and fallacious vision of spiritual truth (Balducci 2018). Actually, Dante considers Christian truth as eternal and conclusive, because it is founded on an essential word-concept: Love, a definitive idea that includes all, welcomes good and forgives evil, considered a providential instrument for preparing a greater good. Therefore, this concept of Divine Love invites patience, meekness, and tolerance, while fraternally encouraging the defense of others from injustice and abuse (Balducci 2018). For Dante

⁴ Among the various episodes of Islamic violence against Christian pilgrims, the most striking occurred in Caesarea in 1065, shortly before the Appeal of Clermont. It was the massacre of approximately 10,000 German pilgrims led by Siegfried, Archbishop of Mainz. Cf. Runciman 2016: 75–82.

⁵ Cf. *Inf.* IV: 143–144: “Ippocrate, Avicenna e Galieno, / Averrois che ’l gran commento feo. / *Hippocrates, Avicenna and Galen, Averroes, who wrote the great commentary*”.

this is authentic Christianity, unfortunately not always put into practice by many self-styled Christians of his time and of all times. The Christian God is familiar, unitary and Trinitarian at the same time, in the loving inclusion of everything and everyone (Giordano 2012). The Creator Father loves the Son, that is the creature, and the created world: he is then perfectly reflected in all men, if his offering of tenderness is reciprocated with a passionate feeling, which is the Holy Spirit. Such an offering of divine tenderness is free, undeserved and disinterested. It enables the salvation of the soul in full joy, but it does not coerce: it is true love in the altruistic sense, respecting time, free choices, and diversity. There is no contempt in it, except for the arrogance and hypocrisy that threaten individual autonomy, and real justice always grounded in truth. In this, we can say that the Enlightenment principles of equality, basic dignity, fraternity, and freedom are essentially Christian foundations, and that Christianity can rightfully be considered the basis of liberalism and modern democracy. Dante's ethical and spiritual message perfectly embodies these principles, inspires them; thus, it represents the moral, aesthetic, and religious basis of all Western modernity (Croce 1959; Maritain 1977; Siedentop 2014).

4. Muslim Theology and Contempt for the Body

Muhammad, whom Dante sees in hell, is among the sowers of schismatic discord. The symbolism of his punishment is complex: he is dismembered, along with Ali, with a sword by a devil; and he displays his wound and intestines with demented pride. Dante uses for him, in a tragicomic sense, evidently vulgar words such as “*trullare* / farting” or “*merda* / shit” (*Inf.* XXVIII: 24, 27). This is a low-corporeal lexicon of an evident realism that revolves around the idea of the filthy and the disgusting (Balducci 2020). The sword wound appears as a metaphorical retaliation for Muhammad and for Islam in general, due to *jihad*, the fight for the conquest of territories that did not want to abandon their religious beliefs. For Muhammad, the last and definitive divine revelation is his own; thus, the fundamental goal for him becomes the spread of Islam, which in itself means ‘submission’ to the one God and, therefore, the submission of peoples, to free them, purifying them from the spiritual lies of other beliefs. According to the prophet, religious truth is solely absolute monotheism; for it one must fight against every type of polytheism, which is judged an offense to God and blasphemy (*kuf*). Christianity is perceived by Islam as a form of associationism (*shirk*), because it perversely associates other persons — the Son and the Spirit — with the one God. Above all, the idea of the generation of a Son in matter, that transforms and dies in filth, is unacceptable, as is clearly stated in Jerusalem within the shrine known as the Dome of the Rock (*The Arabic Islamic Inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem* 2005).

For Dante, this contempt for existence and matter — the body and all the diverse bodies of men, with the freedom of their will — appears as regressive. In fact, in its aforementioned inclusiveness, Christian love is a definitive theological concept, because it goes beyond the dualism of human rationalism, and resolves its conflict. Dualism causes agonizing struggle, within thought and practice; it is torn by an anguished sense of difference between high and low, black and white, right and wrong, clean and dirty. It does not bring peace; it generates struggle and then war, for a continuous discrimination. On the contrary, Christian love includes everything, harmonizes,

pacifies... even if it accepts going to war, because this is always for the defense of other humans from the oppression of the fundamental rights of liberty, equality, and fraternity. For Muhammad, Allah is exclusively a purely spiritual and rational principle; Man encounters it in his intelligence and, in the control of his passions, submits to God, and takes on the task of beginning the struggle (*jihad*) inspired by divine justice (Bonner 2006). He must thus purify the entire community of living beings from the various errors of materialistic paganism, and therefore spread the true faith by all means.

In the irony of infernal retaliation, Dante shows us the purifier Muhammad, obsessed with external and mental impurity, who widens his wound with his hands — in frenzy of dementia — to display his own blood, entrails, and excrement, as if they were a precious treasure conquered through his zeal⁶. The grotesque scene allows us to better understand the meaning of Cacciaguida's words, regarding his martyrdom in the Holy Land, caused by the Muslims described as the "*gente turpal* vile people" (*Par.*, XV: 145). The adjective derives from the Latin '*turpis*' and indicates 'filth', in both a physical and moral sense. The poet uses it, echoing the famous speech of Pope Urban II, to encourage the Christian princes of Europe, responding to the request for help from the emperor Alexius of Constantinople against the ever-growing threat of Islam, and to free the Holy Land from the extreme violence of the Seljuk Turks: including the destruction of churches, the contamination of baptismal fonts with blood and urine, the rape of women, and the sodomization of boys and men, both lay and clergy (*Urban II: Speech at Council of Clermont* 1905: 513–517). In this sense, the emperor's letter is even more explicit than the Pope's speech, in its concrete description of the turpitude of intolerant Muslim violence⁷.

[...] the evils which they commit are many and, as we have said, indescribable, of the many we will mention some, which are nevertheless horrible to hear, and disturb even the very air. For they circumcise the boys and young men of the Christians in the baptisteries of the Christians, and in contempt of Christ they pour the blood of circumcision in the same baptisteries, and then force them to urinate in the same; and then they drag them into the churches and compel them to blaspheme the name and faith of the Holy Trinity. Those who refuse they afflict with innumerable pains, and finally kill them. Noble matrons and their daughters, whom they have plundered [of their property], dishonor in adultery, succeeding one after another like animals. Others shamefully corrupt virgins, setting them in the face of their mothers, and force them to sing vicious and obscene songs, until they have finished their vices. [...] But what more? Let us come to worse things: men of every age and rank, boys, adolescents, young men, old men, nobles, servants, and, what is worse and more shameful, clerics and monks, and — what a sorrow! — that which has never been said or heard since the beginning of time, bishops,

⁶ Cf. *Inf.* XXVIII: 28–30: "Mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco,/ guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto,/ dicendo: 'Or vedi com'io mi dilacco!/' While I was absorbed in seeing him, he looked at me and opened his chest with his hands, saying: 'Now see how I am tearing myself apart!'".

⁷ It is not certain whether the letter was personally written by Emperor Alexius. Indeed, it seems more likely that it was drafted by a Western monk from Flanders, informed about the Byzantine politics of the time and about Syrian reports of the mistreatment of Christians by the Turks. Cf. Joranson 1950: 811.

are outraged by the sin of Sodom, and a bishop perished under this obscene sin. They defile and destroy the sacred places in countless ways, and threaten others with worse treatment. (Hagenmeyer 1901: 130)

5. Dante's Overcoming of Feudalism: Mercantile Society and the New Concept of Nobility

Cacciaguida, through fighting for his faith, earned and passed on nobility to his family. Through him and his struggle, the plebeian blood of the lineage was purified for the benefit of his successors. But what is the true nobility for Dante, that makes a man purer and more excellent than others?

Dante is not surprised that so many living people boast of their blood aristocracy, for he recalls that he actually boasted of it in paradise, during his reunion with his ancestor⁸. Knowing Cacciaguida's identity and thus the noble rank he had earned through his merits, the pilgrim poet recalls having begun to speak to the blessed soul using the reverential form "*voi*," thus honoring the social superiority of the character and of the blood he himself had inherited. Dante — as a follower of the Stilnovi and a Christian poet — believes in the nobility of the heart, not that of lineage. However, he does not hide the fact that he is not immune to certain feudal cultural conditioning: he thus compares this worldly weakness of his to the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere, and also recalls how Beatrice warned him to watch his thoughts and words, coughing like the Lady of Malehault: the one who witnessed the legendary lovers' first kiss. She encourages her protégé to beware of vain passions⁹. The Arthurian comparison is apt; Dante's admiration for nobility arises from a sincere and spontaneous passion, just like that of the ancient couple in its adultery, and like that it is destined to be purified and elevated (Balducci 2017–2018: 81–11, 33–35). Guilt, and the resulting remorse and pain, in Christian sense can always produce greater spiritual conquests. This is a new *tòpos* that fits into the overall poetic discourse, and enriches it. Cacciaguida proceeds, at this point, and indicates the inevitable changes determined by fortune (*Par.* XVI, 46–154). He knows, in fact, how his simple and tranquil Florence, loyal to the Emperor, became rebellious because of the uncivilized people from the countryside who — encouraged by the clergy — invaded his city, greedy for riches and easy gains (Davidsohn 1981; Tabacco 1994). He also remembers the contemporary wars between the Guelphs and Ghibellines and the blood shed through arrogance, which leads to contempt for others and denies the brotherhood of men, equal in dignity as children of God. Ancient Luni declines, like many other once-famous great cities and like several aristocratic families, because of fortune and human pride that inevitably favors decline (*Par.* XVI: 73–111).

⁸ Cf. *Par.* XVI: 1–6: "O poca nostra nobiltà di sangue,/ se gl'oriar di te la gente fai/ qua giù dove l'affetto nostro langue,/ mirabil cosa non mi sarà mai:/ ché là dove appetito non si torce,/ dico nel cielo, io me ne gloriarei./ *Oh little nobility of our blood, if you make people glorify you down here where our sense languishes, it will never be a wonderful thing to me: for there, where desire is not twisted, I mean in heaven, I gloried in it*".

⁹ Cf. *Par.* XVI: 14–15: "ridendo, parve quella che tossio/ al primo fallo scritto di Ginevra/ *laughing, she seemed like the one who coughed, at Ginevra's first written fault*".

Ironically, the poet recalls the naivety of his own attitude at this point, as if his ancestor's entire speech had not been understood: in fact, he had asked Cacciaguida for a definitive prediction on his political and social destiny in the world, worried about losing his prestige in Florence due to the many more or less obscure dire warnings he had previously received by the dead (*Par.* XVII: 13–27). Now, Dante the poet remembers this precise moment of his past heavenly pilgrimage, reproaching his former self for his narcissistic limitations, and thus comparing himself to the proud Phaeton of ancient myth and his fatal journey in the chariot of the sun, when he wanted to show everyone that he was a man of divine lineage (*Par.* XVI: 46–154). At this point, Dante recalls having used the familiar form ‘*tu*’ with Cacciaguida, perhaps because his requests now took on a more intimate and personal tone. Thus, without further veils, the future suddenly reveals itself: and the ancestor's prediction is crystal clear and negative. Dante will lose everything: the riches inherited from his ancestors, his family, his wife, his children, and the most coveted political power he had achieved with so much effort in Florence (*Par.* XVII: 46–69). From an earthly perspective, this is certainly the worst evil, but in paradise it surprisingly appears to Dante's prophesying ancestor as a harmonious message of the sweetest polyphony. This is because the Christian faith always encourages us to go far beyond any opposing dualism, as has been said¹⁰. The cross is horror, pain, and disgusting humiliation, on the one hand; but at the same time it opens the gates of heaven, transforming dying time into eternity and man into a God. Like the adulterous sin of Lancelot and Guinevere, Dante's exile, caused by the ill will of the Pope and a corrupt clergy, will be certainly an experience of humiliation and suffering, providing though an inspiration for a higher spiritual path. In the years to come, the poet will have to dedicate himself entirely to accomplishing his greatest work: writing the book on the divine vision, without fear and without shame, telling the truth about everything and everyone, with the courage of someone who, at this point, is no longer afraid of losing his possessions and power, because by now he has lost everything (*Par.* XVII: 124–143).

Exile will allow the poet to gain tangible proof of the most authentic nobility, not necessarily tied to belonging to a lineage of ancient fame and aristocracy. The greatest and most generous friends who will offer help to the exile will in fact be Bartolomeo and then Cangrande della Scala (*Par.* XVIII: 70–93), the dedicatee of *Paradiso* (*Ep.* XIII). They are the lords of Verona, and they are merchants, we might say bourgeois, certainly not long-standing aristocrats, but noble in their kind hearts, because they are courteous, that is generous, fraternal, Christian (Varanini 1988). Overall, Cacciaguida's speech concerns the ephemeral nature of the world's glory, and indirectly ironizes the vain pride of Dante the pilgrim, once again reinforcing the idea of aristocracy in the Stilnovistic spirit, reconfirmed within the *Convivio*¹¹. The nobility that is true and that counts is the nobility of the heart, of the most generous sentiments, of

¹⁰ Cf. *Par.* XVII: 43–45: “Da indi, sì come viene ad orecchia/ dolce armonia da organo, mi viene/ a vista il tempo che ti s'apparecchia./ *From then on, just as sweet organ harmony reaches my ears, I see the time approaching for you*”.

¹¹ Cf. *Convivio*, IV: 20, 5: “*La stirpe non fa le singolari persone nobili, ma le singolari persone fanno nobile la stirpe.*” The lineage does not make the singular people noble, but the singular people make the lineage noble”.

the enlightened intellect, as in the case of the Della Scala family in Verona or of all the great warriors who shine within the cross of Mars, and are indicated by Cacciaguida (*Par.* XVIII: 37–51). These are heroes of the ancient Jewish era before Christ, who defended the Mosaic laws and monotheism from the arrogance of pagan polytheists. Others are Christians who fought for their faith, opposing the threat of the Muslims, from the time of Charlemagne to the contemporary age of Dante, with the Norman conquests and the defeat of the Saracens in southern Italy, and also in Sicily through the ‘*terror mundi*’, as Robert Guiscard was called at the time (Loud 2000). He, together with his brother Roger, subjected the southern Italian territories to their rule. These were places where Latin culture met that of the Byzantine Greeks and the Arabs who had been influential there for nearly two centuries. Norman power was enlightened because it was tolerant, allowing everyone the freedom to pursue their own cultures and spiritual traditions, thus paving the way for the harmonious flourishing in Palermo of the multiculturalism of Frederick II and his famous court (Abulafia 1992). Thus we return to the central theme of the true nobility that does not discriminate, despising difference, and oppressing its brothers because of superficial discrepancies linked to cults, traditions, and doctrines.

6. The Surprising Salvation of the Pagans: Formal Baptism and Baptism of Desire

What matters, and what Dante gradually learns on his journey among the dead, is the profound feeling beyond words and actions, a loving, fraternal feeling that illuminates clear thoughts and encourages the best behavior. Thus, Cacciaguida’s four cantos conclude with an enlightened inspiration that symphonically (Balducci 1999) introduces us to the secrets of divine justice, explored further on in the next heaven of Jupiter. The problem addressed is that of the salvation of the soul for the unbaptized, and therefore for those who have not been initiated into the evangelical doctrine.

Hell demonstrates that pagans find themselves in its first circle, if they have succeeded in practicing justice in the world (*Inf.* IV). As we said in this spiritual place they do not suffer terrible pain, like the other damned, but only desire a complete inner joy that they feel will be denied them forever. In paradise, the poet understands a deeper truth: intimate happiness is always linked to the possibility of a complete encounter with God. God is a loving essence, and only those who are able to fully love in true, altruistic sense can welcome such joy into their hearts. The righteous pagans of hell find themselves within the earth in an honorable place, yet distant from God, because they have been too balanced, certainly respecting the laws of civilized human life, but without having fully developed in an emotional sense. The eagle, symbol of divine justice in Dante’s paradise, shows that the pilgrim rightly wonders why a holy man from India (Balducci 2021) — such as the Buddha, described in Dante’s time by Marco Polo, in his famous volume on his travels in the East (*Milione*, 1954: 154–157) — should not be found among the blessed Christians in paradise (*Par.* XIX: 67–84). What is at stake here is a possibility of salvation without faith; and Dante follows the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, thus offering a poetic voice to the complex philosophical idea of *fides implicita* (*Summa Theologiae*, IIa — IIae, q. 1–16), that is a hidden and implicit faith that emotionally develops through the influence of the theological virtues: Faith, Hope

and Charity. Every man can always instinctively rely on them, looking for another reality to reach, to completely embrace with an affection directed towards all his brothers and sisters, and towards God as the principle of Love and supreme Justice.

Such faith in Christ is a faith of Love, an abandonment to a complete embrace of the creature and the Creator. This is an affectionate energy that profoundly binds all things together and is intuited by those who truly love, just as the Divine Son who overcame the legal dualism between good and evil, right and wrong, loving all things, even the enemies who wanted him dead and killed him on a cross. And all this has a providential meaning, because even evil is recognized as a preparation for a greater good that develops through conflicts, similar to the resurrection of Christ after his death, and the promise of resurrection for all the faithful (Gaita 2000: 202–204).

Belief, in the Dantean sense, is not doctrine or organized rituals; certainly it can be expressed in them, but it is still not enough to shout the name of Christ in churches, and to pray to him and remember him in external sacraments. The true and essential baptism is that of Love. Then, whoever truly loves in the sense we have described can call himself a Christian, and is saved, passing the final judgment ahead of so many hypocritical Christians with arid and dead hearts (*Par.* XIX: 103–114). Thus, the message of Dante surprises us in a positive way; and the eagle of Jupiter's justice points us at this point to examples of just and loving men from the Islamic world of Africa and Asia, such as the Ethiopians, who one time fought against the Christians by aiding the Sultan of Egypt during the First Crusade (France 1997: 361), and also the Persians, from that land of the great Avicenna remembered in hell, in Limbo (*Inf.* IV: 143). There is no contradiction. Muhammad is undoubtedly condemned by Dante's inspiration (*Inf.* XXVIII: 23–63), for the hatred of his anger and for his contempt, considering them contaminated by not accepting the *Quran*; but certainly not all of Islam is condemned, precisely because a perfect mystical love and tolerance for other faiths can always manifest itself in that culture too, as happened and happens in Tasawwuf, the spiritual sphere of the *Sufis* (Shah 2015; Zarrabi-Zadeh 2016). And Dante's spiritual condemnation does not even affect civilizations far away from the West that know nothing of the *Gospel*, as we have noticed for the holy man of India; nor does it concern pre-Christian humanity, or in any case pagan polytheistic people. So, in the heaven of Jupiter we can see Trajan, torn from hell by Pope Gregory I who had sensed his intimate predisposition to perfect love, remembering his imperial pity for the poor widow (*Par.* XX: 43–48, 103–117). Furthermore, the perversions of paganism were also fled and punished — without knowing to be a Christian (for *fides implicita*) — by the noble Ripheus, a hero of Troy, contemporary of Hector and even of Aeneas, who lived over a thousand years before Christ, and who shines in the eagle's eye of Jupiter's justice (*Par.* XX: 67–69, 118–129).

Of course — the eagle tells us — in our world clouded by pride, division, and contempt, many struggle to believe that a pagan is the true apple of the eye that symbolizes perfect divine justice. This is a contrast that exalts the essence. It opposes the idea that baptism, understood as a sacrament administered by the clergy, is the only gateway to the salvation of the soul, confirming the saving effect of desire (Lat. *baptismus flaminis*): an implicit baptism through divine grace of the same human soul, when the latter, practicing justice, discovers the secret of Love (Bastible 1954: 311).

Here we understand the difference between the most diverse religions, founded on books and doctrine, and Christianity, which — according to Dante — is exclusively rooted in a loving, fraternal, harmonizing, and tolerant sentiment. The Christian spirit does not abolish external differences, but tends to transcend them through forgiveness of human limitations, considering our ignorance that often attempts to describe the impossible, the divine mystery that human words and thoughts can never fully explain. What is impossible in the mind can still become possible in our hearts. Thus, even polytheistic Greco-Latin pagans like Trajan and Ripheus — who lived after or before Christ — can have a right to the salvation of their souls. Then, other distant peoples — like the people of India as great spiritual souls, the Buddha and the *bodhisattvas* (previous and subsequent incarnations of enlightened ones) — can perfectly aspire to divine joy. The same can certainly be said for Islam: it burns in hell because of its rage and contempt for the supposed impurity of its enemies, but it can also shine in heaven with the Islamic mystics of *Tasawwuf*, and other people drunk with love for humanity and God. Polytheism, monotheism... what are they, compared to the unifying Force of Love? The light of the *Divine Comedy* shows us the right to spiritual salvation of the unbaptized who love, before so many hypocritical Christians imprisoned by selfish formalism.

Conclusion

At the end of this hermeneutic journey, we note how the theme of contempt is crucial in the central cantos of *Paradise*. Here, Dante, through his spiritual dialogue with his ancestor and his family roots, understands the value of the most authentic nobility: the one that is not contemptuous, naturally moving towards brotherhood and forgiveness, in the name of the divine Truth of Love that unites all created things through friendly sentiments, always striving to overcome external differences. The spirit of the *Divine Comedy* poetically expresses the foundations of those fundamental values of sodality, freedom and equality on which the modern civilization of our democratic and liberal West is deeply founded. These values are intrinsic to the original Christian message, to which Dante's verse gives full force, opposing the immoral distortions and hypocrisy of the Roman Church of his time, and also offering precious guidance for future times.

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