

THE ENIGMA OF SAVONAROLA

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FOR my part, I am not sure; my mind is not made up one way or the other . . . but to conclude, I say this: if he was good we have seen in our day a great prophet; if bad, a very great man. . . .¹

So wrote Francesco Guicciardini, the Florentine who, as a boy of fifteen, may have seen Savonarola hanged in the Piazza della Signoria. Guicciardini was one of the cleverest Italians of his time and one of the most cool-headed of all time, and his mind was never cooler than when he penned his judgment on Savonarola. The dilemma it expresses can hardly be avoided unless one entirely disbelieves in 'prophecy'. Certainly Guicciardini, for all his cool detachment, believed that God could still send prophets into the world; he used the term seriously; which may not have been the case with his near-contemporary and fellow-citizen Machiavelli who wrote off the 'unnamed prophet' as a failure. But even Machiavelli said 'of such a man one should speak with reverence'; which, coming from such an observer, is a notable, if perhaps ironical, compliment to Savonarola, and is also valuable evidence of his reputation, in undevout circles, with the generation which followed his own.

A great prophet or a very great man: the Church has so far not resolved this dilemma by allowing or disallowing, finally, and officially, the first alternative. Certainly the name of Savonarola has been largely restored to favour. Nobody now calls him a heretic. His works are not on the Index.¹ He has had public and recent praise from high authorities in the Church, for example from the Cardinal Archbishop of Turin² and from the late Master General of

¹ Though his *name* is; but that is Tommaseo's fault; cf. the Index, *in loco*.

² Cardinal Fossati's tribute, to which I refer, takes the form of a Preface to the *Atti della Settimana per Cristo Re e Savonarola*, ed. by Serafino Dezani, S. Domenico, Turin, 1950. This Preface is printed at the end of the Accademia d'Oropa's publication, *Alessandro VI e Savonarola*, Turin, 1950: cf. note (3) below. For Archbishop Gillet's tribute see *ibid.*, p. 204, or *Analecta Ord. Praed.*, S. Sabina, Rome, 1934, pp. 418-20.

the Dominican Order. We all know of the veneration paid to him by canonised saints, particularly St Philip Neri and St Catherine de' Ricci; a veneration reflected in the lively enthusiasm which his name can still excite among Catholics, especially in Italy, and of which the centenary celebrations in Florence are only the most recent sign. The man who inspired the Florentines to take Christ as their king is likely to be mentioned whenever the kingship of Christ is spoken of.

None the less Savonarola remains a perplexing figure. For many Catholics the adverse judgment of Ludwig Pastor still represents more or less the truth about him, or at least a very plausible opinion. The fact that Pastor was not really familiar with Savonarola's writings or sermons has been made the most of by Italian *piagnoni*, but the latter are often inclined to talk as if the only cause of the misgivings felt by many students of the case (and admirers of the Friar) were either ignorance or culpable prejudice. It should not be difficult to refute this view, but it is curiously prevalent. An example comes to hand in Roberto Ridolfi's recent, ample biography of Savonarola³: the fruit of twenty-five years' study of the documents, yet so coloured through and through by the author's scorn and detestation of the Friar's opponents, from Pope Alexander VI downwards, that an equitable discussion of the rights and wrongs of the conflict never even begins. And of course Savonarola's *post mortem* opponents come off no better. They are 'those who know little of his life and writings', lukewarm children of the lukewarm he castigated, 'modern Pharisees concerned about a disobedience which was non-existent and which, had it existed, would have been holy; enemies of the Christian religion', etc. This is all very fine, but to be concerned about even an apparent disobedience to the Holy See on the part of so great a man is not pharisaical, unless it has been demonstrated that there was no disobedience or that it was justified. Savonarola himself maintained that the scandal caused by his public defiance of the sentence of excommunication passed on him was 'pharisaical scandal'. He could hardly have said otherwise, once he was resolved on defiance. But it was not obvious that he was right; nor does Ridolfi even begin to

³ *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola*, 2 vols., Rome (A. Belardetti), 1952.

prove that he was, because he does not begin to discuss the issue calmly. This would not much matter—his book is an historical narrative, not a theological argument—if he did not so evidently assume all through that the moral issue is settled once for all, and that those who still have any doubts are either ignorant or perverse.

As a narrative indeed Ridolfi's work is very good—though one needs to resist his bias in the account of the Ordeal by Fire, which is cruelly unfair to the Franciscans. But he has the light touch and high spirits that one expects from a Florentine; dangerous if endearing qualities. What is more important, Ridolfi knows all the facts; there is no greater expert on what actually happened. It is his mordant judgment that needs to be watched. His bias makes him, as a like bias made Villari, greatly stress (I do not say exaggerate) the political element in the motives which led Alexander VI to try to suppress Savonarola. This stress is in itself perfectly justified; everyone admits that the chief and probably the only persistent motive of Alexander's vacillating and rather uncandid proceedings against Savonarola was his desire to detach Florence from the French alliance and attach her to the League; for which purpose he had either to silence Savonarola or get him out of Florence. But to stress this fact has its dangers; it is to risk not taking into sufficient account one of the governing factors in the situation, the principle, namely, that a subject is bound, and in that Catholic world was more or less consciously assumed to be bound, to obey his lawful superior (in matters that are not sinful) without enquiring into his superior's motives (provided the order is sufficiently clear). Authority is distinct from moral goodness; a bad man may have the right to demand obedience. In fact, if not in intention, Savonarola's revolt against Alexander VI came very near, to say the least, to a rejection of that principle; but it took place in a moral atmosphere which assumed it, and it cannot begin to be rightly assessed, even historically, unless that principle is taken seriously; and one is not likely to take it seriously if one brands those who do as Pharisees.

But Ridolfi, like Villari before him, is spellbound by the eloquence of Savonarola, an eloquence of deeds as well as

words, and in this matter a dangerous eloquence: dangerous because of its very powerful moral appeal. For just as the main drift of the Friar's preaching was emphatically moral in character, so his resistance to the Pope in the three capital matters of his suspension from preaching,⁴ of the suppression of the Congregation of S. Marco and of the excommunication, was a predominantly moral resistance too: that is to say, it consisted first and foremost in protesting that the Pope's commands, if obeyed, would have morally evil consequences; and, in the case of the excommunication, that it was unjust because it penalised this protest and so ran counter to the great norms of the moral life, conscience and charity. Moreover, Savonarola, especially after the Brief abolishing the independence of S. Marco (7 November, 1496), became more and more critical of the *motives* of the Court of Rome in his regard, thus particularising and completing, so to say, his life-long warfare against the morals of that Court in general.

As to the excommunication, it may be objected that Savonarola based his defiance of it not on such considerations of motive or effect, but on a plain fact: that he said he had not in fact incurred excommunication, because he had not in fact disobeyed the Brief, imposed on pain of excommunication, which abolished the independence of S. Marco; as prior he had simply put the matter before his community, and his community had then protested to the Pope, as it had a right to do. It is true that this was Savonarola's defence; and one is bound to add that it is not really so cogent as it may seem. But without looking further into that defence, it can hardly be denied that the great pulpit-attack on the excommunication (February and March, 1498) was, by and large, a sustained denunciation of the motives and moral implications of the sentence, regarded as the instrument of a corrupt government for maintaining corruption in the Church.

⁴ It is true that after the Brief of October 16, 1495, forbidding him to preach, until the Lent of the following year, Savonarola did keep silence; and before he began again, in the Duomo on Ash Wednesday 1496, he had declared that he had the Pope's leave. But the opening passages of that Ash Wednesday sermon are clear evidence that he had not considered himself bound in conscience to keep silent *because of the order from Rome*; he had his own, quite distinct, reason.

In the history of the visible Church there is no episode more enthralling than this three-year duel of Friar and Pope, and there is none that calls for more delicate handling on the part of the historian. It is the classic example of conflict between conscience and law: and a most pathetic and tragic example; the conscience was so noble and the law so evidently, in this case, became an instrument of worldly expediency. The Church languished for want of reform; the Reformer was silenced by the Head of the Church. 'If I am to be a martyr, you will be the tyrant!', cried Savonarola from his pulpit, and everyone knew whom he was addressing, though no name was uttered. Yet the tyrant also, whatever his motives, had a case. We still need a good unbiased survey of their conflict—theologically profound as well as historically accurate. Most, I believe, of the modern work on Savonarola has been done by laymen, and is rather wanting on the theological side. In English we have, it is true, the balanced and weighty study by Fr Herbert Lucas, S.J., written more than fifty years ago; but it has been largely ignored, and fifty years is a long time.

Meanwhile the great preacher remains a hero, and will remain one whatever our final view of him. If he erred he erred magnanimously, and there is nothing in the records of history more moving than the story of his last days on earth. Tortured repeatedly through Holy Week and Easter Week of 1498, he broke down, denied his prophetic mission, then denied his denials; the official records were vilely falsified but the victim's mental as well as physical agonies show through them. To the last, however, he kept his tongue clean from recriminations; to the last he professed the Faith. And nothing is more characteristic than his final words. Standing stripped of his habit before the great crowd that filled the Piazza he heard the nervous Bishop separate him 'from the Church militant and triumphant'. 'From the Church militant, yes', said Savonarola quietly, 'not from the triumphant; that is not your affair.' Then he mounted the gallows reciting the Creed.