

THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF SAVONAROLA

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SAVONAROLA has been called the first Christian social reformer of modern times. It is as such only that I speak of him.

Social Christianity was for him the work which awaits both the body and the member, a vocation for all rather than the specialised task of a few; not so much a struggle or a decisive battle, but a never-ending journey in which the traveller now slackens, now increases his pace, often retraces his footsteps, is ever watchful to the right and to the left of him, endures much hardship and meets strange travellers, but 'in peace of mind makes always for the shore where he will embark upon the Eternal Sea'.

Writing nearly five hundred years before the secularist State and the Iron Curtain, Girolamo Savonarola reminded his generation that the time had come for words to give place to deeds, vain formula to real feeling. 'Purify the spirit', he said, 'give heed to the common good, forget private interests. . . . Your reform must begin with spiritual things, for these are higher than material things, of which they are the Rule and the Life. And likewise all temporal good must be subordinated to the moral and religious good upon which it depends. And if you have heard it said that States cannot be governed by Paternosters, remember that this is the maxim of tyrants, of men hostile to God and the common weal, a rule for the oppression and not for the relief and liberation of cities.'

Not uncommonly, the Christian view is expressed by paradoxes or seeming contradictions. Thus, while on the one hand, the Christian knowing that he has not here an abiding city, does not hope for the perfectibility of human conditions nor suppose that human nature will of itself ever be absolutely perfect, yet, having faith, he does not regard the social and economic situation as beyond salvation. He believes in God, that is to say, and he also believes in original sin. He cannot shut his eyes to the fallen nature of man,

but he is assured of the infinite nature, the love and omnipotence of God. And because he believes in God as revealed by the God-Man Christ, his is the effective faith called Christianity.

For the so-called theocratic State envisaged (if never actually realised) by Savonarola, was rather a Christocratic State, endowing, with the freedom wherewith Christ hath set men free, a welfare State clothing its citizens in such fashion that not even Solomon could array either himself or the lilies. Nor will a careful study of Fra Girolamo's programme leave us in much doubt as to its practicability. A graver issue has been the fundamental soundness of his *rationale*. 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' Stern moralists, wise with the wisdom of this world and the next, have pointed with pious contempt to the demagogue's pulpit in Florence and with unction to the platform and the gibbet and the fires and the dangling bodies of Savonarola and his companions in the Piazza on that calamitous afternoon in 1498. You shall judge for yourselves, as the Florentines came, in the end, to judge for themselves.

In his sermon on Amos and Zachariah he gives us an anatomy of beauty, of its economy in things created; but only that he may trace it to the Source: 'The beauty of simple things is in their light. . . . Behold God is light! He is beauty itself. I sought thee everywhere, but found thee not. Of the earth I asked, Art thou my God? And the earth made answer: Thales is deceived: *I am not thy God*. Of the ether, which answered: *Higher must thou go*. Of heavens, stars and sun; and all replied: *He that created us from nothing, he is thy God: he filleth heaven and earth and he dwelleth in thy heart*. Thus, O Lord, I sought thee afar when thou wert near. I asked mine eyes whether thereby thou hadst entered, but answered they that only colour could they know: and of mine ear which nothing but sound could tell. Wherefore thou that the senses know not, O Lord, yet dwellest in my heart and workest in me what charity I do.'

Charity: love: There is the operative word in all Savonarola's teaching. As a youth he adopted as his motto: *Tanto sa ciascuno quanto opera*.

'This love', he tells us, 'is likewise a gift of the Lord;

it is a fire that kindleth all dry things, and whoever is disposed unto it shall forthwith find it descend into his heart and set it aflame. Earnest love is truly a great might, for it can do all things, overcome and conquer all things. . . . Nought can be done save by the impulse of love. . . . And inasmuch as charity is the greatest love of all, therefore charity worketh great and marvellous things. Charity easily and sweetly fulfilleth the whole law of God, being the measure and rule of all measures and of all laws. For, in fact, every individual law is the measure and rule of some special action and of no other; but it is not thus with charity, which is the measure and rule of all things and of all human acts. And therefore he that hath this rule of charity ruleth well both himself and others, and interpreteth all laws rightly.'

Christ had no patent remedies to offer. In the desert he rejected the temptation to be the universal provider, to settle forever the economic problem. He refused to turn stones into bread. He was invited to become a nation's saviour, and he became so on the cross of anguish and shame. His miracles of healing and provision were tokens of his pity and his power; they solved no problem for the doctor and the legislator. The sum of human sin and suffering confronted him, and in his person he bore it.

What then is our pattern? Not a lofty indifference as to the sufferings of our neighbour, nor yet in an otherworldliness which conveniently postpones the entire problem of human pain and inequality to compensation hereafter. Nor in an escapism which can be indulged only by the sound in body and purse. For the pattern is surely Jesus himself in whose Body we fit: fit, that is to say, as members, confident of the Father's benevolent wisdom, content to do his will. Fitting, too, as members one in another; recognising (as St John bids us) each in his brother the Lord whom he cannot see. Thus visualised, the duty of each member becomes increasingly clear—that of maintaining, in Savonarola's sense, a cell of good living, radiating life, arresting in no negative sense the collapse and decay about him. He neither wants nor waits for organisation; it is already his.