

## THE REASSERTION OF FUNDAMENTALISM: A CASE STUDY OF SAVONAROLA

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### ABSTRACT

*The history of the Renaissance in Europe is on the one hand, one of the great periods of human civilization in which art and architecture reached an apogee. On the other hand, the grandeur of this art brought about a reaction because material culture was being patronized by the guardians of the soul. The Pope and the higher clergy were patronizing art when they should have been addressing the religious and spiritual needs of their flock. The art was highly impressive and the artists of the Renaissance are counted among the greatest artist of the world: Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci, but they could have been patronized by kings and emperors instead. Religion meant spirituality, and spirituality meant austerity and simplicity. When the Roman Catholic Church deviated from that purpose, Savonarola came out in protest gathering followers to his cause. He came to rule Florence as a republic and all the impulses he gave expression to were fundamentalist in nature. Thus it is evident that the coming and the going of Savonarola has cast its shadow over later manifestations of Fundamentalism, most notably the current times, yet his contribution has not been adequately acknowledged.*

### Introduction

“Fundamentalism” had raised its head first when the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox Church underwent division and its appearance during the Renaissance was not a novel phenomenon. At the height of the Renaissance, the whole of Europe was celebrating the advancement of material culture in painting, sculpture, architecture etc. What was lost sight of was that the guardians of religion and morality were behaving like temporal rulers, and even religious themes were valued more for their aesthetic appeal than for any theological reason. In fact, the patronization of material culture by the Roman Catholic Church was the rule of the day. It goes without saying that the artworks the clergy oversaw remain spiritually imperishable. The biblical renditions on the walls of the Sistine Chapel, the

architecture of St. Peter's dome and the magnificence of the Stanza della Segnatura have bestowed immortality to artistic giants like Raphael and Michelangelo.<sup>1</sup>

Now, had these same masterpieces been commissioned by temporal rulers, emperors, kings and dukes it would not have outraged the Christian idea of the fitting. The clergy's imprudent attempts to attain glory, splendor and celebrity created unrest in conservative circles. Although the society at large was in awe of these artistic endeavours, a zealous and puritan minority deprecated this extravagance and preferred, instead, simplicity and austerity. Hence, it was only a matter of time before a reaction was mobilized in the personality of Girolamo Savonarola.

Savonarola came forward to purify the Roman Catholic Church and the Italian society. However, despite the piousness of his cause, he was unable to impress the religious establishment. His conflation of the Church with society under his brand of fundamentalism ultimately resulted in his demise.

#### **The Roman Catholic Church and its patronage of material culture**

Notwithstanding the grandeur of their artistic achievements under the patronage of Pope Leo X, there was also a side effect other than moral outrage. The patronage of art was a very expensive affair due to which the Papal treasury suffered losses. Thus apart from the immediate moral crisis, the practice of selling indulgences would set off the Reformation.

In fact, the Roman Catholic Church started increasing its financial profit in three ways. First, it introduced relics. They were parts of 'straw, hay, white feathers from a dove, and fragments of cross etc' that was to be disposed of to masses as if it was something closer to 'Jesus on Earth'. That amount was given to the 'church' and to the 'Vatican'. The religious 'relics' were bought in order to make God happy. It further displayed that the man worships God by donating 'money' on something i.e. 'relics' that has closeness with his son. The next step was the introduction of 'certificates' or Indulgences, which were issued in huge amount and were approved by the 'Pope' to forgive errors of people, and to grant them entry into paradise. Actually, if a person acknowledged that he made a mistake he

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<sup>1</sup> R. Spickard, M. Cragy-Kevin & William Carlson Gordon, *A Global History of Christians* (USA: Baker Academic, 1994), 164.

had to wait for the Pope's arrival to come and give him indulgence by accepting payment. The Pope was deemed as 'God's representative on Earth' and only he had the power to forgive a person. The people, as mentioned above, were also asked to buy 'indulgence' for their blood relations who were deceased and were in hell to ask pardon from God. This was considered a religious practice and was thought of increasing their status 'in the eyes of God'. Third, the Catholic Church used 'pilgrimages'. It earned by selling 'badges, holy water, and certificates' to show that a person has completed his/ her 'journey'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Roman Catholic Church was misrepresenting religion as a material rather than a spiritual quest. It was almost as if the Church fathers had forgotten how Jesus had overturned the tables at the Temple in Jerusalem.

In order to exercise its power over weaker entities the Roman Catholic Church tried to preserve its preferable culture. The Roman Catholic Church was very strong in Western Europe during that time. There was no higher institution. The Catholic Church zealously protected its space, and any opposition was considered heresy. It never accepted divergence from its doctrines because it could give an impression of its fragility. The strength of the clergy increased enormously. The masses took the local priest as their 'passport' to paradise. In fact, that was something inculcated by the church preachers. It was reiterated to innocent laymen after their church duties. Therefore, in order to enter into paradise it was mandatory to make the priest happy. It was obvious that 'power', denigrated as a 'secular ideal', was part of the clerically sanctioned material culture.

Through uplifting finances the Roman Catholic Church put efforts to fulfill its 'secular' ideals. 'Money' became the key source of interaction between the Church and masses. Those who were wealthy secured main posts for their sons inside 'Catholic Church' by giving 'money'. This convinced them that they would be pardoned. Nevertheless, a farmer provided money so that his infant can be 'baptized' otherwise entering in Paradise would be impossible. Also, people had to lend money to wed or to entomb their loved ones 'in holy ground'...taxes were to be given i.e. tenth part of yearly earning had to be given to the 'Church' in the form of 'money, seed or animals'. Furthermore, people were asked to work on 'church land' without

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<sup>2</sup> Trueman CN, The Roman Catholic Church in 1500, <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/the-counter-reformation/the-roman-catholic-church-in-1500/> , accessed on 11 February 2018.

wages for particular days in a week. Due to this practice, farmers were unable to give time to their own fields and could not grow enough for their needs. The people were told by the Roman Catholic Church that if and only if there is no entry to paradise then it means that the 'soul' of that person would be fated to eternal hell. 'Heretics' were burnt alive publicly. For example, John Huss was accused of 'heresy' and was given a secure channel to fix in 'modern Switzerland' to justify his punishment. He was not at all tested because he was detained despite church's assurance of secure entrance and was blistered publically. In addition, an alteration from 'patronage' to 'open market' was observed after 1600 in Europe. This transformation came with the downfall of 'sacral' and 'courtly art' which were to be accomplished on interest. For instance, in 1601 'Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin', 'an altarpiece' charged 'for the church of Santa della Scala in Rome'. In that transaction, the words in which 'the painter' portrayed the individual and the imperfect handling of the characters defamed the abbots who were accountable to the church. The canvas was set up for 'sale' provoking competition between 'artists, dealers and collectors'. The Duke of Mantua upon recommendation of Rubens purchased it at a high price. Later Rubin was appointed the 'court painter'. Hence, useful ecclesiastical antiquity was changed into a 'secular' piece. It was praised like a respected work of art by a renowned 'artist' and was taken by a royal representative, for whom such ownership was a matter of prestige. On the other hand, the change in works of court in reaction to the 'market' was to be depicted through citation of other painting rapidly removed from the position for which it was 'painted'.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, even though the successor of Leo named 'Dutch Pope' Adrian VI' was harsh towards weak ethics and excessive expenditure of his followers, a huge loss occurred. The shifting of economic and political conditions of the age assisted in the dwindling of previous relations. In the ten years period following Pope Leo X's demise many kings in power loosened their material and holy relations with Popes and as a result many followers came out of the Roman Church. In the year 1527 when Giulio de' Medici as Pope Clement VII gave address, the time in which the authority and 'patronage' was cruelly dismissed [it is important to note that] painters like Michelangelo, Benvenuto Cellini and Sebastiano del Piombo were best-loved by Medici. The corps of Charles V, 'King of Spain', 'Holy Roman

<sup>3</sup> Art and visual culture: Medieval to modern, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/view.php?printable=1&id=17161>, accessed on 14 February 2018.

Emperor' and devoted 'son of church' occupied the 'city' and looted its praiseworthy valuables. Those who were serving in Charles's army on remuneration then converted themselves towards Luther's creed. They considered that the 'Renaissance sculpture' inside Church of Rome was like 'idolatry' chapels in tented to be defiled and thus, demolished them... . The despoliation of Rome left a severe impact on Popes, and the repercussions for 'Roman Renaissance art' were severe. When outsiders seized the land, there were many painters, sculptors, and architects who left the region along other natives. Some secured a position within the 'Renaissance in Venice'; few went to France or Austria taking successful 'sixteenth century Italian art' with them.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Roman Catholic Church was propagating the 'secular' model and not the spiritual model.

### **Girolamo Savonarola**

This practice of the Roman Church and its support of material culture caused a man named Savonarola to emerge on the scene. He started speaking against the Roman Catholic Church because of its divergence from real religious duty of purifying 'souls'. Fundamentalists are by temperament puritans and zealots, who denounce worldly pursuits, and Savonarola, did exactly that. He protested against these activities of the church and had to pay with his life.

Savonarola (1452-1498) who was born in Ferrara was known as 'Italian Christian preacher, reformer, and martyr'. He became famous because of his struggle against rulers, their ministers and 'a corrupt clergy'. Following the downfall of the Medici in the year 1494, it was Savonarola who became the dominant ruler of Florence and established a free republican government. The Duke of Milan and Pope Alexander VI turned into his foes and put various obstacles in his ways.

This was because Savonarola was far from being an isolated figure who protested against the decadence of the church. Preachers like him had harangued crowds and had cast items of 'vanity' like cosmetics in to the bonfire. Why Savonarola became more prominent is that in his sermons, apart from exhortations to morality, he was prone to political discussion and even political predictions, which fascinated his audience.

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<sup>4</sup> Renaissance Art in Rome, <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/renaissance-in-rome.htm>, accessed on 14 February 2018.

Another reason for his success was that he was preaching in Florence, which was the city where Renaissance art was most refined. He often flattered his congregation by saying that God has chosen Florence as His instrument'. Although they accepted the truth of the morality preached by Savonarola, after a time they became tired of it, because what he denounced included works of un-surpassing beauty.

After the death of Medici, Savonarola became the ruler in Florence. He was responsible for producing a free republic. He was indicted, ultimately, for meddling in political affairs. He was not an oppressor or a conspirator, but these traits and the outcome of his policy made both the church and the temporal rulers his enemy. His purpose was only to establish his 'city of God i.e. Florence' as a properly standardized 'Christian' government that could start the 'reform of Italy' and the Roman 'church'. He transformed the rich yet 'corrupt Renaissance' capital, which appeared in his day as a supposed heaven.<sup>5</sup>

As the power of Savonarola increased, the Pope tried to appease him by proposing for him a 'cardinal's hat', which he refused and instead asked for a 'hat of blood'. Under the influence of the League and Arrabbiati, the Pope decided to attack him through other ways. In 1496, the Pope joined both San Marco among whom Savonarola was a pastor in one, and a weak figure in other. It was found that in case of his acceptance, he would be left with no transformations and in case of his denial he 'would be excommunicated'. During the criticism Savonarola did not misbehave. Thus, he went to Advent and Lent in 1496 and 1497 respectively. He delivered many sermons there. At the time of 'carnival season' his power got a 'symbolic' honor in the form of "burning of the vanities" like putting to the torch private accessories, vulgar photos, 'cards and gaming tables' all of which were insignificant.<sup>6</sup>

All the gentry in Italy opposed Savonarola. Also, his authority in Florence was reduced due to financial and political instability. On the day of 'Ascension' the governing bodies of Arrabbiati circumscribed Savonarola from giving sermons. Although the 'bull of excommunication' was carried by Arrabbiati from the Roman Court to oppose their foes, practically, the

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<sup>5</sup> Ridolfi Roberto, Girolamo Savonarola, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Girolamo-Savonarola>, accessed on 16 February 2018.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

'Excommunication' edict proved to be inaccurate and ineffective and therefore, the Pope repudiated it. It quieted Savonarola and then 'Florentine' republic also disavowed it officially. This was however a short reprieve. The Papacy could not countenance his Puritanism for long and his enemies brought trumped up charges against him, hanged him and burnt him along his friends.

The charge of heresy was trumped up since Savonarola had opposed the papacy for the weakness of its zeal and not for any item of belief.<sup>7</sup> The success and the ultimate failure of 'Savonarola' are both characteristics of religious history. Puritanism is more of a mentality than a creed. What was the overarching faith, Christianity or Roman Catholicism, became prominent in rhetoric but typical in behavior.

In every system of belief, we encounter militancy and fundamentalism. This phenomenon has been noted by different scholars, but here only a few examples shall suffice. Jonathan Webber, even though he argues forcefully against the application of Fundamentalism as a term to Judaism, still concedes:

The fundamentalist is merely re-iterating the traditional mode of explanation, namely that Biblical commands are timeless and eternally valid. The Fundamentalist does not perceive discontinuity at all, or, if he does become aware of it, he will shrug of its relevance or importance.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, Jonathan Webber does not mention the militancy or the violation of human rights by Israel as being sanctioned by the Old Testament. As far as Hinduism is concerned, Bal Gangadhar Tilak had protested against the administering of anti-plague vaccine, and challenged the very idea that infectious diseases are caused by germs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98): Influence on Florentine Art, <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/savonarola.htm>, accessed on 10 February 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Webber, "Rethinking Fundamentalism: The Re-adjustment of Jewish Society in the Modern World", in Lionel Caplan (ed.), *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism* (London, Macmillan, 1987), 95.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley A. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991), 139.

Simultaneously, we can cite the frequent news that lady health workers were killed for administering Polio vaccines; the latest being on 9 March, 2018. Islam, the iconoclast religion, and Hinduism the idolatrous religion are poles apart in their beliefs, yet so similar in their fundamentalism.<sup>10</sup>

And in the United States itself, which is today leading the battle against Fundamentalism, a teacher John Thomas Scopes was convicted on 21 July 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee for teaching Evolution according to Darwin and against Genesis in the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup>

That is why the 'art' that was considered as distasteful, was scorched by the Nazis. In the time 'Afghanistan Taliban' and 'ISIS Caliphate in Iraq' demolished precious and antique 'sculpture and artistic treasures'. Here it must be recalled that these were basically created in the West in order to win the Cold War against U.S.S.R.

As Larry Pressler candidly admits:

They now needed Pakistan to bolster the resistance fighters trying to oust the Soviets in Afghanistan. These resistance fighters were Islamic Fundamentalists---- the same fundamentalists we are fighting all over the World today in the War on Terror. But at that time, because they were fighting Communists, the Islamic Fundamentalists were our allies.<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion

To sum up, taking everything in mind from the above discussion it can be deduced that the time when the Roman Catholic Church was involved in bolstering material culture and when its people were busy in taking Humanism as an ideal, they were actually violating the rules of a true 'Christian' for which they were appointed. In such hard situation there was only one man (Puritan and a zealot) who showed his concern for attacking

<sup>10</sup> "Gunmen in Pakistan kill Women who were giving children Polio Vaccines", *New York Times*, 18 December 2012; Gunmen shot dead 5 female health workers who were immunizing children against Polio, *Independent* (London), 19 March 2018. These are just random examples.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.brittanica.com/event/Scopes--Trial>

<sup>12</sup> Larry Pressler, *Neighbours In Arms* (New York: Penguin / Viking, 2017), 121.



the decadence and the loose morals associated with the Renaissance. But the rise and fall of Savonarola both have a relevance to the battle against fundamentalism today. Savonarola was exempted when it suited the papacy and the regional rulers, but when he lost his popularity, his promotion of Puritanism and republicanism was an experiment neither the church nor the rulers could allow to succeed. Just as Muslim scholars are shouting at the top of their voice that Terrorism is un-Islamic; their enemies do not listen to them because it does not suit them to do so.

What distinguishes Savonarola from other zealots and militants is that they challenged temporal authority, Savonarola attacked the church itself. This he did for the sake of making religious values prevail over worldly values. A *fundamental* moral sense was pitted against religious authority, showing that just as fundamentalism is a trait common to most religions, a core moral sense is also common to them.