MEDICAL BACKGROUND OF A DOMINICAN PREACHER

Mirela Radu
Lecturer, PhD.,"Titu Maiorescu" University of Bucharest

Abstract:The Italian Renaissance was a complex phenomenon and the unleashing factor of change throughout Europe. Beginning with Scuola medica salernitana, this period of artistic, scientific, and knowledge-based development would have as outstanding polymath representatives. The young Girolamo Savonarola, who was meant to become a doctor, would choose monastic life instead. A controversial figure of Renaissance, he was the perfect example of a full scholar of that period who would bring about major changes in society. With a modest beginning among the ecclesiastical representatives, Savonarola criticized virulently the institution whose representative he was. Having reached an oratorical speech that raised the poor population against social, religious and political structure of the time, the cleric came to hold political power in Florence and to defy the papacy. We cannot know how much of the movement he initiated had the purpose of acquiring power and satisfying his own vanity and how much was a rebellion he represented against corruption and immorality, but it is certain that he represented an important figure of the Renaissance through his influence. The Dominican preacher propagated an anti-ecclesiastical movement that would earthquake the foundations of the entire edifice meant to defend religious hegemony on the population.

Keywords: clergy, medicine, polymath, corruption, preacher

Prior to Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation, Europe was going through a moral and religious crisis. Considered by the Protestants as the promoter of this movement, **Girolamo Savonarola** (1452-1498) was born in a wealthy family in Ferrara. His grandfather and father were doctors, and it was natural for him to follow the same career after obtaining his diploma in arts. We have to remember that during the Renaissance, the doctors first went to art classes and only then devoted themselves to the actual study of medicine. Young Girolamo had been trained by his grandfather Michele-professor at the University of Padua and the one in Ferrara. Physician in his turn, Michele instilled him a special respect for moral values. The greater the impact of his grandfather's period, especially that he offered the poor medical help. Michele had signed a Practical Medicine Practice (*Pratica Maior*) describing drugs used in various illnesses, and a pediatric treaty (*De regimine pregnantibus et noviter natorum usque ad septennium*) which had been a reference work for nearly two hundred years. Another work signed by the grandfather of the future Dominican monk was *Libellus de magnificis ornamentis regiae civitatis Paduae*. It was the era in which naturalism, promoted by physician and philosopher Pietro d'Abano, started to catch ground. Another work of equally pragmatic character (*De febribus*) addresses the problem of fever and the ways to combat it and treat it. Michele seems to have had a great influence on moldings his grandson. He was also very vocal against the vices promoted by the mercantile society in which he lived which inspired the young Girolamo the same revolt towards injustice.

The correct but tough and combative nature of his grandfather had left deep traces in the formation of the young Girolamo: "such a man was calculated to excite an ardent youth to precocious development, and it would appear that even at this early period he had not only instructed the lad in grammar and the Latin language, but had also initiated him into his own

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physiological studies."[1] Medicine, art, and philosophy were part of the education of any scholar of the time. In order to be a doctor, students were supposed to have solid knowledge of psychology, ancient philosophy, Greek and Latin. His grandfather inspired his admiration for Pietro D'Abano (1250-1316) philosopher, medical theorist and physician of Padua, who had been judged as a heretic. Also from his grandfather, the young Savonarola inherited the belief that moral and intellectual rules only came to complement those of a healthy lifestyle.

Girolamo studied Aristotelian logic but had also been influenced by the writings of another mentor: Toma de Aquino (1225-1274). Dominican monk in his turn, de Aquino, wrote numerous philosophical and religious works: *Questiones disputatae de veritate* (regarding human condition), *Summa contra Gentiles* (an explanation of religious precepts); *Summa theologiae* (history of philosophy); *De virtutibus in communi* (discourse on moral qualities), *De virtutibus cardinalibus*, *De spe* (about hope). But the influence de Aquino had on Savonarola lies more in his scholastic theory based on dialectical reasoning. From this we could say that, over the years, Savonarola would borrow the technique of philosophical tribulations: "The works of St. Thomas fascinated him to an almost inconceivable extent; he would be absorbed in meditating on them for whole days at a time, and could hardly be persuaded to turn his attention to studies better adapted to his medical training."[2]

But the young man would devote himself to monastic life. In a letter to his father Savonarola tries to justify his gesture of abandoning medical studies and devoting himself to religion. He admits that he was scared of seeing the physical suffering and: "because I am made of flesh as you are, and sensuality is repugnant to reason: and so I must fight fiercely so that the devil does not jump on my back."[3] In the same letter he indicates to his father the papers written by him as an explanation. Over a century, these papers will be printed with the title *De ruina mundi* (the base of the entire edifice of the future monk's thinking). In 1475 he became a monk afterwards he studied theology and went to Florence to preach. Endowed with an outstanding intelligence, Savonarola writes during this period on various themes: philosophy, logics, politics.

This period of the young monk's life is decisive. Already, deep in his soul, a challenging perspective had been created about both society and the church. He stigmatized whenever he could the luxury of monastic institutions. However, the preached sermons in which he admonished the clerics who corrupted civil society, Savonarola did not bring practical solutions. More a utopian ideology, his diatribes had more the purpose of bringing to light vices than to actually repair. His critical spirit in search of perfection attracted the wrath of the religious superiors. The years to come find Savonarola in a mission of spreading humanistic ideals through his sermons which sustained cultural and social progress. He approached Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who, in his philosophical text (*Oration on the Dignity of Man*-1486), is considered the initiator of the Renaissance movement.

Vigilante nature, Savonarola, rejected the mercantile practices of the church. But in two poems *On the Ruin of the World* (1472) and *On the Ruin of the Church* (1475) as well as in his subsequent sermons he gained the sympathy of the population. His struggle for equal rights, for individual freedom, the stigmatization of institutions that humiliate the human spirit and, above all, the institution of the church that kept the human being ignorant attracted the antipathy of the religious representatives. Beyond the apocalyptic tone of his texts, Savonarola has the merit of revealing government corruption, within the ecclesiastical institutions, and the lack of morality of society. Born long before such ideals, the Dominican monk pleaded for individual freedom and a

[1] John Abraham Heraud, *The Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola: Illustrating the Progress of the Reformation in Italy, during the fifteenth century*, London, Whittaker and Co., Ave Maria Lane, 1843, pp. 6-7
[2] Pasquale Villari, *Life and times of Girolamo Savonarola*, Translated by Linda Villari, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., London, 1888, p. 5
[3] Girolamo Savonarola, *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*, Translated and Introduced by Konrad Eisenbichler, Victoria University Toronto, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2003, p. 37

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world based on equality: "one citizen may not have a greater respect than another, and that each might consider himself equal to the others."[4] The preacher's words seem a plea, a pro-democracy manifesto. The monk goes even further, establishing what should be the ways through which perfect social ordering can be achieved. First of all, the copying of nature, for it is sure to obey divine laws, secondly to put the common good first, thirdly to love one's neighbor and, ultimately, to ensure a legal framework that ensures equity. Although these precepts may seem utopian, especially in the socio-cultural conditions of those times, they have the merit of opening up the minds of the many and the oppressed in a society where inequality was the rule.

Years spent in pilgrimages refined his speech, making it more accessible to the masses of people. With a scrupulous morality, his eloquent speeches, however, have an impetuous character and, finally, stirred up the prelates' wrath. The intolerance of his speeches, incitement to rebellion and social justice, would bring Savonarola into obvious antagonism with religious decision-makers who would eventually execute him for heresy. In fact, what scared the representatives of the Church was the ability of this simple man to raise the masses coming by thousands to the processions he organized. Savonarola was even a commonplace person in appearance, but his direct conduct, which did not give way to interpretations, gave rise to a special charisma and his excited tone attracted like a magnet: "His manners were simple, if uncultured; his language was rough and unadorned. But on occasion his homery words were animated by a potent fervor that convinced and subdued all his hearers."[5]

In the *Prophecy* (*Octave of the Epiphany*) on January 13th 1494, Savonarola denounced several causes of the upcoming renewal that the Church must adopt. The first reason is *propter pollutionem praelatorum* in other words, the vices of the prelates. Other reasons for the need to reform the society are: *propter exclusionem iustorum* (in other words, honest men are excluded from the decision-making fora precisely because of their correctness), *propter multitudinem peccatorum* (the multitude of sinners), *propter exclusionem virtutum primarum, scilicet charitatis et fidei* (forgetting true moral values such as mercy and faith). A talented speaker, Savonarola uses parables to translate to the less educated the central idea of his speech. Although he was a monk, this learnt man does not miss an opportunity to reiterate the central idea: the Church has distanced itself from its primordial task - to address i and give an example to the human being: "although at its beginning it produced much fruit and no leaves, has today come to the point that it produces no fruit at all, but only leaves, that is, ceremonies, pomp, and superfluities, with which they overshadow the other plants of the earth; that is, with their bad example, the prelates of the Church make other men fall into many sins."[6]

Considering that tribulations are the only ones that truly bring peace of mind, Savonarola advocated for an invasion of Florence in the context in which Italy's Renaissance did not have a unitary state, and this state of division was not just political (for there were so many rulers) but economic as well (because in the conditions of lack of political homogeneity there were no well-structured social classes) was the fertile ground for a lack of even religious cohesion. Crushed by the struggle for power, by the almost constant inter-states invasions aimed at consolidating power, Italy was an uncertain realm also coveted by its neighbors: the Habsburg Empire, France and Spain. This is the context in which Savonarola's activity must be analyzed.

Ultimately, his struggle was the attempt to find a common denominator, to create solidarity, beyond political or ideological fractions. His inheritance is that of a true humanist who fights for general human ideals, for the freedom of expression of the many and poor overwhelmed by the

[4] *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence* in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola. Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, Translated and edited by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 198

[5] Pasquale Villari, *Life and times of Girolamo Savonarola*, Translated by Linda Villari, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., London, 1888, p. 20

[6] *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola. Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, Translated and edited by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 67

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abuses of the few and the rich. A possible single leadership can ensure the cohesion that the monk felt his country needed. As Savonarola stated in a sermon on 12th December 1494: "Regulation and governance by a single leader, when that leader is good, is better than any other government, or the very best, and more easily achieves unity. The reason is this: because it is more difficult to unify the many than the few, and, wherever power is more united, it has more strength, and because power is more easily concentrated and unified in one than in many, therefore, the government of one is better than that of many, when he who rules the others is good."[7]

Savonarola condemned the conceit of many people who were supposed to teach ordinary people to be better human being. The polymath urged towards the renunciation of vain vanity and starting the path towards simplicity. And this regeneration, this removal of negative elements in society must be done from the top downwards in order to give a positive example: "act and ordain that the clergy must be good, because priests have to be a mirror to the people wherein everyone beholds and learns righteous living."[8] For him who had studied not only religious precepts, but also art, astrology, philosophy and even natural sciences, especially medicine, the only way to purify society is through knowledge.

Another idea that the learned man transmits is that of the common good. For the individual to have a beautiful life, one should first place first the good of the one next to him. Change begins with us and extends to the whole body represented by society: "O citizens, if you band together and with a good will attend to the common welfare, each shall have more temporal and spiritual goods than if he alone attended to his own particular case."[9]

It is interesting how this monk who came in contact with human physical pain, during medical studies, reached to make an analogy of society with the human body. Threatened with the disease that invades the body, the man can sacrifice a limb in the interest of preserving life. So can human society also give up those parts that consume it in order to preserve its identity as a whole. In an urge addressed to his city of soul - Florence - Savonarola makes the analogy between the body and the city. As in a surgical operation, an amputation, in which the gangrened limb must be removed, the society must eliminate what is bad in order to rebuild: "the hand, which is a particular member of man's body, if it sees harm come to the head, extends itself in front and lets itself be cut off in order to conserve the whole [l'universale] of the body and its other members. O Florence, learn to conserve the whole and attend to the common good more readily than to the particular."[10] This analogy of corruption with a disease is also due to the fact that this image had a strong emotional impact: Florence had suffered losses of human lives after two epidemics: one of smallpox and one of plague.

Human society cannot exist without its individuals; the same way, knowledge needs all its cultural or scientific aspects. And all the social structure must be guarded by written ordinances: "it is necessary that people live together in order that each may help the other, some employed at one skill, others at another, and making together one complete corpus of all the sciences and arts. (…) the invention of law is necessary to check the aggressiveness of evil people so that those who wish to live uprightly are safe, for there is no animal more evil than a man without law."[11] Savonarola became the open enemy of the papacy when he began to preach against the theocracy and concentration of the whole power in the hands of a single man, advocating for civil government. Continuing the ideas promoted a century before him by Toma d'Aquino, Savonarola predicted preached for a balance of philosophy, science, and religion to create a viable social whole: "In all

[7] Idem, p. 152
[8] Idem, p. 157
[9] Idem , p.158
[10] Idem , p.159
[11] *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence* in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola. Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, Translated and edited by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 178

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the arts and sciences the first thing that matters is belief, as the philosopher states: *Oportet eum qui addiscit credere*, and anyone who does not believe never learns."[12]

In the autumn of 1495, in a letter addressed to the preacher, Pope Alexander VI asks him to give up all his steps: "we command you, by virtue of holy obedience, to abstain entirely from any preaching, whether public or private, so that in ceasing from public sermons, you might not be charged with resorting to conventicles."[13] The letter represents a more or less veiled threat. Accused of being heretical, schismatic, and violating the commandments of the Pope, Savonarola was betrayed by the population who renegaded him for refusing to obey papacy. He was tortured, hanged and burnt on pyre, and his remains were thrown into the Arno River. The monk paid with his life the courage of opposing the morals of his times and of fighting for truly humanistic values, but he is the representative of progressive ideas in a society haunted by venality.

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[13] Letter from Pope Alexander VI to Savonarola, Rome, 16 October 1495, in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola. Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, Translated and edited by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 278

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