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BOOK
REVIEWS

SAVONAROLA AS A MORAL REFORMER.

By Albert Sydney Gregg.

The passing of the anniversary of Savonarola's martyrdom on May 23, and the increasing emphasis that is being placed upon social and political reforms in press and pulpit, give added interest to a renewed study of the character and career of the great Florentine preacher, reformer, and statesman. He is particularly interesting to moral reformers of the present because of the comprehensive nature of his work. He fought for religious and political freedom, and for moral purity in the individual, in the church and in the state. The mystic and the practical statesman were blended to a remarkable degree in his personality. He had dreams and visions and was often wrapt in religious meditation, and then to thunder against the vices of the clergy and the Florentine court with Lorenzo the Magnificent as the leader, or to preach on the principles of a republican form of government, or the commonplace details of a system of taxation that would relieve the poor and compel the rich to pay their share into the public treasury. The times in which Savonarola lived were marked by a high state of culture and a low degree of moral degeneration. The church had become so hopelessly corrupt that it had no power to save itself, much less regenerate society. Learning took the place of religion, and in this respect there is a striking parallel between the history of Florence and other cities and nations when the time has arrived for the prophet to deliver his message. Many were versed in Latin and Greek. All admired the classics. It was not thought remarkable that women should be accomplished writers of Latin and Greek verse. Painting and the other fine arts which had declined were awakened to new life and attained unprecedented elegance and refinement of execution. Florence was the patron of sculptors and painters. It was the home of Dante, Botticelli, Leonardo, Michael Angelo and Raphael. There was a general yearning for the study of new languages and the production of new books and pictures. Architecture flourished. Stately churches, palaces and elegant buildings arose on all sides. But the artists, men of letters, statesmen, noble and people were equally corrupt in mind, devoid of public or private virtue and wanting in moral sense. The clever intellectual men of the times were incapable of real nobility of thought or action. The people were under the sway of a general passion for festivities, dances, tournaments, pride of pagan learning and an increasingly sensual turn in both art and literature.

Like all men who have stood alone in an attack upon the sins of their age, Savonarola was unique and unconventional. He was of middle height, dark and of a nervous temperament. His dark grey eyes were bright and often flashed fire from beneath his black eyebrows. An aquiline nose and large mouth with thick compressed lips declared his strength of character and stubborn firmness of purpose. Deep furrows marked his forehead. His countenance expressed a severe nobility of character and a melancholy smile endued his harsh features with a benevolent charm, and inspired confidence at first sight. His manners were simple and his language rough and unadorned. At times in his sermons he became animated by a potent fervor that convinced and subdued his hearers. In retirement and sometimes in public, he became deeply absorbed in dreams, visions and spiritual contemplation. He devoted much time to prayer and the study of the Bible, particularly the Old Testa-

ment. Worn by fasting and penance he seemed more like a spectre than a living man. He scarcely ate enough to support life. His bed was a grating with a sack of straw and a blanket. He wore clothing of the coarsest kind, but strictly clean. In modesty, humility and obedience he surpassed all the rest of the Dominican brethren, of which he was the head in Florence.

His sermons aroused amazement and indignation. They cut squarely across the wicked lives of the people. Florentines preferred refinement of gesture, expression and style, and the ability to quote copiously from ancient writers. They cared little for the gist of the sermon. Disregarding these views Savonarola with open Bible before him hurled furious diatribes against the vices of mankind, and the scarcity of faith among clergy and laity. He quoted from no book save the Bible and based all his sermons on its texts. Such a use of the Scriptures was new. Few Florentines read the Bible at all, since finding its Latin incorrect, they were afraid of corrupting their style.

Savonarola's great purpose was to purify manners, rekindle faith and reform the Church. He was compelled to enter politics by the pressure of events following the downfall of the Medici and the investment of the city by King Charles VIII. of France. Then the seer became the statesman, and surprised the politicians of Europe by his knowledge of statecraft. It was in this period of his career that he publicly discussed political themes in his pulpit. During the year that the republic was being formed and the laws codified Savonarola was supreme in Florence, although he held no office and wore no sign of authority. His was purely a moral supremacy. He was the only man in whom the people had confidence. He was stronger than an army in keeping the people within bounds. The masses revered him as a prophet and believed in him as a man. But this could not endure. Florence was not full ready for religious and political freedom. Love of self-indulgence was too strong, and after a little evil passions gained the ascendancy and the tide of popular feeling turned against the prophet. He was mobbed, arrested, tortured, and then condemned to die. His martyrdom was tragic in the extreme. In company with two faithful companions—Fra Domenico and Fra Silvestro—he was hanged and his body burned in the Piazza della Signoria, in front of the palace, at 10.30, on May 23, 1498. The square was thronged, although an old painting which has been widely copied gives the impression that only a few persons were present.

Savonarola's place in history is pivotal. He stands on the line that marks the passing of the Dark Ages, and the religious and intellectual awakening which ushered in what is known in history as "modern times." John Wycliffe in England and John Huss in Bohemia had inaugurated the attacks upon the corruptions of the Roman Catholic Church, but it remained for Savonarola to undertake the reformation on a larger and more comprehensive scale. He preceded Luther and Calvin, but unlike the German reformer he did not openly break with the Church. In personal devotion to a mystical Christ he was like St. Francis, in his denunciations of his brethren in the clergy he resembled Luther, and in politics he resembled Calvin. It may be claimed for Savonarola, then, that he is the first all round religious, moral and political reformer in the history of the Christian Church. The declension of the Church began with Constantine and the rise of papacy. The priest had so usurped the place of the preacher that the pulpit

as a factor of social betterment had become extinct. Savonarola restored preaching to its rightful place, obtained his commission directly from heaven, in place of Rome, and made his pulpit his throne. He fought for universal liberty at every point and for this reason he is very much alive to-day in spirit.

The world has moved forward a great deal since Savonarola's day, but the task of regenerating the world has only begun. Thousands have taken the place of the one reformer of four hundred years ago, and in a different environment and with different weapons are fighting in the same battle that was started by the friar in Florence and for which he gave his life. There are ways of carrying on moral crusades in these days utterly undreamed of in Savonarola's day. Newspapers, lecturers, tracts, books, conventions, personal conversations, and activity in politics by both clergy and laity give every man a chance. But whoever enters upon such a career must count the cost. "He may not be hanged and then burned, but he may be made to suffer in some other way. The death grapple is yet to come with the liquor business, and the man or woman who expects to have a hand in killing this monster must enter the fight without fear and without thought of self-interest. The same is true of corrupt politics. Let Savonarola be our inspiration, and let every one who desires to see Jesus Christ made king in the Church, king in business, king in politics, and king everywhere, resolve to do his utmost or die in the attempt.—United Presbyterian.

Dr. Alb. Mahain, professor at Lausanne University, in an article on "Mental Maladies," which appears in *Le Bien Social* says: "Empoisonment by alcohol plays a role by the side of which empoisonment by morphia and the other poisons are negligible quantities." Referring to chronic alcoholism and delirium tremens, he says: "Chronic alcoholism is more insidious, and very often unrecognized. It develops slowly under the influence of those daily doses which appear inoffensive, and as alcohol affects at first the character of the individual, this slow change of character is not traced back to its true cause by the neighbors, who take the altered character for proof of a vicious nature. Later on not only the character but the intelligence are attacked, and then is displayed to the world the great moral decadence of the alcoholic, now too indifferent to respect appearances."

The First Congregational Church of Jersey City, N.J., has just dedicated a magnificent "People's Palace." It is a splendid five-story building offering all the social opportunities that a crowded city center is felt by sociologists to demand, and it will be open to men and women on equal terms. An auditorium, gymnasium and roof garden are some characteristic features of the building, and in annex buildings soon to be opened, billiard rooms, bowling alleys and a swimming pool will be provided. The building represents the realization of a purpose long cherished by the pastor of the church, Dr. John L. Scudder. The achievement of that purpose was made possible by Mr. Joseph Milbank, a wealthy Jersey City resident, who gave \$300,000 to erect and furnish the building. The privileges of the "palace" will not be free, but an endowment will be gathered in order to not fees below cost. The church will administer the property in trust for the entire population.

The "good" people of Christ's day were the ones who did the least for him.