

# Is Contentment Possible in the Midst of Calamity?

Chesterton, the multi-biographer, intended to write many more biographies than he did. One of his intended subjects was the 15<sup>th</sup> century Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498). The grandson of a wealthy Florentine physician, Savonarola abandoned his own plans for a medical career to become a “knight of Christ” at 22. Thus began what would become a highly controversial knighthood at war with a corrupt Renaissance world and the especially corrupt papacy of Rodrigo de Borja (Pope Alexander VI, 1492-1503).

Trained to teach logic to novices, Savonarola would instead become an itinerant preacher in Florence and beyond, attacking an increasingly corrupt Church hierarchy. He achieved particular notoriety in a 1495 sermon which described his own mystical journey to the Virgin Mary in heaven. Shortly thereafter he led a campaign to rid Florence of all sorts of vices, chief among them adultery, “sodomy,” and public drunkenness.

Roughly two years later, Savonarola was excommunicated. Refusing to recant, he was arrested, tortured, condemned as a heretic, and sentenced to death.

Was Savonarola a crazed fanatic or at least a relentless demagogue? Chesterton weighed in on the matter with an essay on the Dominican friar, published in a collection of mini-biographies titled *Twelve Types*.

Chesterton might have been tempted to portray Savonarola as a type of religious fanatic. Instead, Chesterton used Savonarola to examine a different sort of type entirely, namely the “type of people who need a Savonarola to shock them into reality . . .”

He begins his brief essay on a curious note: "Savonarola is a man whom we shall probably never understand until we know what horror may lie at the heart of civilization. This we shall not know until we are civilized. It may be hoped, in one sense, that we may never understand Savonarola." Or at least never need to understand him.

Of course, it was Chesterton's point that it was high time, or perhaps past time, for civilized England to come to terms with Savonarola. After all, the civilized England of Chesterton's age had produced a troubling sense of "satisfaction," not to mention a steady supply of new "luxuries." The same might have been said of Savonarola's Florence—or today's America.

Chesterton, the historian, then turned to the civilization which "surrounded Savonarola on every side," a civilization which had "already taken the wrong turn," a turn that had resulted in "endless inventions (but) no discoveries." Worse than that, it was a turn toward a time when "new things grow old with confounding rapidity," as well as a time when "no old things ever grow new." Hmm, might that be our time as well?

Sounding like Savonarola himself might have sounded, Chesterton then zeroed in on the "monstrosity of the crimes of the Renaissance." And what was the particular monstrosity that Chesterton had in mind? Or, better yet, what wasn't it? It was "not a mark of imagination, (but) a mark, as all monstrosity is, of the loss of imagination."

For Chesterton, Savonarola undertook the "hardest of all earthly tasks," namely that of helping "man turn back and wonder at the simplicities they had learned to ignore."

Civilization, then and now, had reached a point when it was possible to grasp the "horror" at the heart of it all. Chesterton suggested that a similar point may well have been reached in his England: "We are surrounded on many sides by the same symptoms as those which awoke the unquenchable wrath

of Savonarola . . . .” In his England there was a “hedonism that is more sick of happiness than an invalid is sick of pain . . . .” One can only imagine what Chesterton would say about the England—or America—of today.

Savonarola saw himself as a knight. To be sure, Chesterton acknowledged that this knight has been called a “madman,” as well as a “charlatan” and an “enemy of human joy.” But to Chesterton he was none of the above. To Chesterton, Savonarola was the opposite of a kill-joy. His goal was to save people from the “calamity of contentment,” which calamity marks the “end of joys and sorrows alike.”

Was Savonarola wrong in thinking that civilization can be a time of contentment amid calamities, horrors, and monstrosities? Or was Chesterton right in suggesting that we have something to learn from this inflammatory Dominican friar?

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