



**Sehdev
Kumar**



Dr. Sehdev Kumar, Professor Emeritus, lectures in the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto. Author of recently published, 'Matters of Life & Death: Reflections on Bioethics, Law and the Human Destiny', his forthcoming book is entitled '7000 Million Degrees of Freedom'.

Email: sehdev.kumar@utoronto.ca

www.sehdevkumar.com

“ Just two years after Columbus discovered the New World, in 1494, as a huge French army invaded Italy and 10,000 troops entered the city of Florence, Savonarola, a fiery preacher at the city's cathedral, accomplished a miracle: through political intrigue and connivance, he persuaded the King of France to leave the city unharmed and peacefully.

Dazed by the power of the friar, the citizens of Florence began to see him as a prophet who would, if they would only obey him, turn the city into New Jerusalem.

The fanatical preacher had arrived in the thriving city in 1490, and soon, through his blood-curdling sermons against earthly decadence, had gripped huge crowds. An attack by France proved to be a great boon for his religious charisma.

He raved and ranted against the corrupt and the vice-ridden citizens of flourishing Florence that gloried in such artists as Michelangelo, Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli, and where medieval superstition was being challenged by dazzling Renaissance, and where piety and licence were contesting the hearts and minds of many.

In this new firmament, the preacher warned the citizens against an approaching scourge of doom and destruction.

Savonarola wanted the citizens to repent and abandon their sinful luxuries, including their pagan art that had so enthralled them, amongst them paintings of Sandro Botticelli, in particular,

Botticelli grand paintings, Primavera (1477-82) and The Birth of Venus (1484-86) that had brought fame and fortune to the artist, were an anathema to the fiery preacher: "Repent of what you have done, repent of your sins, distance yourself from the Demon, let yourself be won over by the angels, the only ones who can bring you to the Savior."

Like the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in



China in 1960s, and the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1990s, five hundred years earlier, in 1490s, fired by the preacher's words, evangelical youth groups clad in white, and called 'little angels', went on a rampage on the streets of Florence beating prostitutes, unveiled women and anyone richly attired, and burning 'lewd' pictures, books, musical instruments, combs, mirrors and other artifacts that had any whiff of sin associated with them.

The biggest 'Bonfire of Vanities' occurred on February 7, 1497, when thousands of such objects were burned all over the city.

IT was then, in 1501-02, that the great artist Sandro Botticelli created a painting which for centuries remained shrouded in mystery. Created in the city of Florence, 'The Mystic Nativity' depicts in exquisite detail a scene of celebration and joy of earthly and heavenly delight at the birth of Christ, with angels dancing at the top of the painting, but also embracing the fallen and the deprived at the bottom.

It was a different kind of Nativity that had been the subject of hundreds of sacred paintings over millennia. There were certain dark premonitions: the sheet on which the child lies may serve as his shroud on another day; the cave in which the scene is set evokes the tomb. The birth, the death and the resurrection are all present in the same moment.

At the top of the painting, in Greek, the artist has written apocalyptic and troubling words from the Book of Revelation.

Mysteriously, like much of the city, Botticelli had fallen head and heels over the preacher's sermons. So much so that when he went on to create The Mystic Nativity in 1501, the words of the sermon of the preacher, preached on the Assumption Day, were inscribed on the ribbons held by the dancing angels.

Such is the power of zealotry that it can blind the artists, scientists and other intelligent and thoughtful people with equal fury. This is what happened in the Nazi

Faith, Politics & Corruption

Bonfire of Vanities

period in Germany in 1930s and during Stalinism in the Soviet Union.

The prophet of Florence, however, didn't fully understand the power of many other corrupting powers: heedlessly and arrogantly, he spewed his greatest venom against Rome and its corrupt popes and the cardinals. Rome was a 'city of 10,000 whores', its streets awash with 'blasphemers and sodomites', where 'the rich drink the blood of the poor'.

A cardinal's red cap was the 'red hat of blood'.

There was a head-on clash of powers. Thus it was not long before Rome concocted a coalition with dissident Florentines to find the friar guilty of heresy.

"Could the friar walk through fire to prove his holiness?" they challenged. The preacher was arrested, and under torture confessed to being a false prophet. On May 23, 1498, he was hanged with two of his lieutenants, their bodies burnt and their ashes scattered in the river Arno. But for Botticelli, Savonarola was the real prophet to the very end: in the Mystic Nativity, the three executed holy men are raised up and restored to grace.

A decade later, in 1510, Botticelli died and with him The Mystic Nativity died too, obscure and hidden away for three centuries until it arrived in London. Then in 1857, at the Art Treasures Exhibition in Manchester, a new world opened up for the painting and a few years later Botticelli emerged as a cult figure.

There is another character in this drama who too has a special place in this intrigue. As Savonarola ranted in the Florence cathedral, a young man sat at the back taking notes. He was Niccolo Machiavelli, a man whose name was to become over the five centuries synonymous with the ruthless exercise of political power.

Machiavelli's interest in the fiery preacher was not in his claim about talking to God but in his inordinate power to sway the multitudes, "because his life, his doctrine and the subjects he addressed sufficed to make them have faith in him," faith even in his prophecies of damnation.

As Machiavelli saw Savonarola hanged and burnt to death, he must have wondered how this man could be so deluded as to think that piety outranked power.

Savonarola lived at a time when religious rigour, and the infallibility of the Book, penetrated every corner of public and private life. Medieval belief in superstition, miracles and magic was very much alive. Any attempt to assert their supremacy over politics, as Savonarola did in his sermons, only provoked revenge and retribution.

It was not the sumptuaries and the whores of Florence in 1498 that did Savonarola in; it was the pikes and pyres of Mother Church.

The Bonfire of Vanities rages on!