

with the *Decretum Gratiani*, or a codification of Canon law made in the mid-12th century by Gratian who sought to present a coherent theory of Christian marriage which from that time on was in force in the Catholic Church and was generally accepted in the 15th century.⁵⁷ All this inscribed in the pro-family policy needed by Florence to get out of its population collapse.

Neither Savonarola nor his contemporaries were aware that all those measures and moral counsels, regardless of the fact whether they did or did not have any impact on the Florentines, could not have changed the demographic situation in their city. The condemnation of homosexuals, their punishment, could not have changed their sexual orientation. Even if some of them could have been pressured into marrying and having children (it could concern apparent homosexuals or bisexual people only), it had a minimal impact on population growth due to a small number of those people (in the 15th-century city of ca. 40,000 inhabitants, only some 400 to 1500 men – given the sex and age composition of the Florentine population and the frequency of homosexual orientation – could have been gay).⁵⁸ Also the liberation from all restrictions on sexual activity in marriage, or even urging people to have sexual intercourses and making it their duty had a similar small effect. As it has been ascertained by the shrewd researcher investigating populations of contemporary Italian towns David Herlihy, urban communities had large numbers of unmarried adults. In Florence only, in 1427, in a group of men between 18 and 32 years of age only 25 percent were married.⁵⁹ According to another historian interested in the history of Florence, Richard C. Trexler, there was in the 15th century a sudden flood of women to religious convents. As a result, about 13 percent of the female population of Florence at that time was made up of nuns.⁶⁰ This stemmed from the bad economic situation of the city, pauperisation of Florentine families who were unable to afford the dowries necessary for marriages of their daughters.

In Savonarola's times, some methods of contraception and family planning were well-known (sexual continence, delayed marriages, *coitus interruptus*, certain contraceptive drugs, used most probably not only in

57 Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, p. 242.

58 Wyrobisz, 'Sodoma i Gomora', p. 147.

59 D. Herlihy, 'Vieillir à Florence au Quattrocento', *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 24, 1969, 6, pp. 1340, 1344, 1346, 1348.

60 R.C. Trexler, *Le célibat à la fin du Moyen Age. Les religieuses de Florence*, *ibid.*, 27, 1972, 6, pp. 1329–1350, esp. p. 1377. Cf. Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, pp. 87–95.

extramarital intercourses – all these are mentioned, of course, as sinful, by medieval penitentiaries and medical treatises⁶¹). It is very probable that sensible Florentine marriages did not decide to increase their families without justification that is the right material position and prospects of their children's future prosperity and wealth.⁶²

Probably it was not without reason that the average number of children per one Florentine family in the first half of the 15th century was 0.51.⁶³ Evidently, the situation of the city did not encourage people to have more children and Savonarola's efforts could have changed nothing in this regard. It was better understood by Florence authorities who in 1431 granted the tax exemption from taxes for twenty years to all foreigners settling in the city. The size of population in contemporary cities was dependent more heavily on migration from outside than on the population growth in towns.

At the same time, in the 15th century, Florentine humanists were engaged in a discussion about the family and its social role. And although Ermolao Barbaro condemned the institution of marriage (he wrote that nothing was so harmful to scholarship as matrimonial chains, caring for children and listening to their crying), but many others were praising the family life and raising children, for instance the leading Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino, Leon Battista Alberti, the author of a treatise *Della famiglia*, Francesco Barbaro in his text *De re uxoria* and Campano in *De dignitate matrimonii*.⁶⁴ It is probable, however, that these texts were

61 *La prévention des naissances dans la famille. Ses origines dans les temps modernes*, ed. by H. Bergues et al., Paris, 1960, pp. 124–125, 140–141; J.T. Noonan, *Contraception et mariage. Evolution ou contradiction dans la pensée chrétienne*, Paris, 1969, pp. 257–295; Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, pp. 508–509; J.L. Flandrin, 'Contraception, mariage et relations amoureuses dans l'Occident chrétien', *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 24, 1969, 6, pp. 1370–1396; Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, p. 99.

62 Population studies – although for a later period (the 18th century) and different territory – have proved that the number of children in the families of craftsmen increased during long periods of good economic conditions and decreased in periods of economic recession, F. Mendels, 'Industrialization and Population Pressure in Eighteen-Century Flandres', *Journal of Economic History*, 31, 1971, pp. 269–271; H. Medick, 'The Proto-Industrial Family Economy. The Structural Functions of Household and Family during the Transition from Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism', *Social History*, 1976, 3, pp. 304–305.

63 D. Herlihy, 'The Tuscan Town in the Quattrocento. A demographic profile', *Mediaevalia et Humanistica*, New Series, 1, 1970, p. 87.

64 E. Garin, *Filozofia Odrodzenia we Włoszech*, Warsaw, 1969, pp. 60–61 (in English: *Science and Civic Life in the Italian Renaissance*, New York: Doubleday, 1969).

known only to a small circle of humanist elite, and the debate conducted among humanists did not spread out to the rest of the society, while Savonarola's sermons reached the huge masses of the Florentines.

It is important for any demagogue to indicate “scapegoats”, that is to point out individuals or social groups that could be held responsible for all troubles, disasters, failures and other problems wreaking the community.⁶⁵ This makes it possible to shift off the responsibility from himself for unfulfilled promises and vain hopes with which he fed the people. Savonarola was scapegoating homosexuals and Jews as those who were incurring God's wrath or were responsible for concrete problems of the society (the homosexuals for depopulation of the city, the Jews for ruining and tormenting their debtors). And although initially Savonarola was rather tolerant towards the Jews, with the lapse of time, when the situation in Florence was deteriorating and the preacher himself could not demonstrate any spectacular achievements, his attitude towards the Jews gradually worsened. Domenico Cecchi, a fervent supporter of Savonarola and a member of the Florentine “middle class”, craftsmen, was biting anti-Jewish. He was the author of a treatise *Riforma sancta et pretiosa*, written and published in 1497, then at the end of Savonarola's rule, in which he called the Jews the foes of Christ and Christians, and demanded that the Jews be immediately expelled from the city.⁶⁶ The Jews and homosexuals were identified as the source of all evil also by Savonarola's predecessors, Bernardino of Siena and Bernardino da Feltre, for Savonarola was neither the first nor the only demagogue who appeared in Florence in the 15th century. But he was the first one to achieve a full – although short-lived – success in seizing power. And not necessarily because he was the most talented and most ruthless demagogue. It was mainly because in the last decade of the 15th century he was met with the most favourable conditions for a demagogue: the rapid deterioration of the economic and political situation, the disappearance of the authority after the death of Lorenzo il Magnifico, the intensification of moral and ideological dilemmas within the circle of intellectual and artistic elites. There could have been another factor involved, that is the fear of replication of the terrible events of the Ciompi revolt of 1378. The memory of those events from over one hundred years ago, greatly

65 R. Girard, *Kozioł ofiarny*, Łódź, 1987.

66 Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, pp. 127–143, 174.

exaggerated by legends, was still alive and made the Florentines an easy prey to the demagogue who could protect them against a similar tragedy.

Effects of activities of a demagogue who seizes power are always tragic for society. The results of Savonarola's activity in Florence were not so fatal, for he ruled in Florence for a short period of four years. During this whole period he had to deal with the opposition, various antagonistic groups which restricted his freedom of action and restrained his demagogic aspirations. But the legend of Savonarola as the prophet, candidate to sainthood, great reformer, and morality healer, has remained alive and powerful both among the inhabitants of Florence and historians interested in the 15th-century history of the city and Savonarola. The legend – as almost all legends – is false. Let us say it openly: Savonarola was a demagogue whose certain actions were favourable for the society but who in the majority of matters he was dealing with did not achieve any success. And this was what made him fail in the end.

To return to the question posed in the title – “Golden Age” or crisis? – we can only remind the thesis put forward long ago by Roberto Sabatino Lopez, and accepted by many historians, that a magnificent flourishing of art and culture (“golden age”) does not always go together with the economic and social development, and stabilisation, on the contrary, it is often responsible for the crisis situation.⁶⁷

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67 R.S. Lopez, ‘*Economie et architecture médiévales. Cela aurait-il tué ceci?*’, *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 7, 1952, 4, pp. 433-38; idem, ‘*Hard Times and Investment in Culture*’, in *The Renaissance. A Symposium*, ed. by W. Fergusson, New York, 1953. Cf. A. Wyrobisz, ‘*Nowe koncepcje w badaniach nad historią miast europejskich*’, *Przegląd Historyczny*, 80, 1989, 1, pp. 165-66.