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Medici Florence

Twisted Visions

“No one joins a cult,” states a survivor of the Jonestown massacre. Organizations recruit members through their highest values and promises of a better life. They turn sour with time, and noble causes become dangerous cults. The forces that destroyed Savonarola’s regime in Florence and The People’s Temple of Jim Jones are bastardized versions of their original visions of reform. This tragic pattern will be revealed through an analysis and contrast of each group’s foundational *values* and destructive *actions*. While Savonarola’s regime and The People’s Temple are separated by 500 years, the gradual mutilation of each group’s values into monstrous actions indicates a common phenomenon.

Girolamo Savonarola was more than the hellfire preacher imagined by popular history. He was a devout Domincan Friar concerned with political and religious corruption. He was also a prolific writer on issues like the relationship between church and state and the nature of mankind. He was well educated in his homeland of Ferrara. He argued for the expansion of voting rights and greater civic involvement for common people. While some of the apocalyptic prophecies were present in his early writings, his thoughts were much more diverse than those that would later define his regime. Savonarola wrote about fighting tyranny, while insisting on the need for a limited government to allow mankind to reach their potential. His writing style was even built around being accessible: he wrote with an extreme economy of words and insisted on eliminating all unsupported claims within his writings (McCumbers 4). Overall, Savonarola’s character was defined by a commitment to keeping careful watch over his personal conduct, including vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the priesthood.

Savonarola’s writings indicate a desire for a world that allows for greater political participation, God as a primary source of governmental policies, and the use of government to improve the natural state of man. While Savonarola’s criticism of corruption in the Catholic Church harmed his relationship with the Vatican, it was his actions after the ousting of the Medici family from Florence that secured his papal excommunication and death at the hands of Florentines. In order to have a dramatic fall from power, however, he needed a meteoric rise. This occurred when he was selected as a delegate to speak with King Charles VIII of France on behalf of Florence and beg for the city to be spared by his invading army. When the city was spared, not only was Savonarola seen as a savior, his previous predictions about the coming of an outside reckoning seemed to be coming true. The decadent Medici regime, with pagan art flourishing and decadence in the nobility, was seen as having brought the ruinous invaders upon the city. Savonarola saw an opportunity to take power and create the society he had envisioned in his writings. A political party was made to push forward Savonarolan legislation and make his ideal society.

When most history students learn about Girolamo Savonarola, they learn about what was to follow. With his legislation being passed by a specialized political party, a new type of Florence formed in direct opposition to the Medici vision. A specialized “army” of child soldiers called White Shirts carried out Savonarolan will in the city. Austerity like jewelry and pagan artwork was destroyed, and the owners assaulted. The death penalty was expanded to include crimes like sodomy, which were previously punished with fines or other lesser punishments. The historically significant Bonfire of the Vanities is the most salient example of violence coming from a noble vision. Artworks considered not in line with Savonarolan teachings were burned, including several Botticelli paintings. As time went on, the increasingly violent regime of Savonarola was excommunicated. With enough people considering him a savior, however, he eventually came to claim that he had begun performing miracles; when asked to prove his divine mission by walking through fire and denying the challenge, the vision was finally broken. Savonarola and his allies were killed by hanging, with a bonfire lit beneath them for good measure.

The connection between Savonarola’s vision for a just society and the violent legacy he left behind is a simple case of ideas working better in theory than in practice. The idea of greater political involvement was bastardized with the military involvement of children in Savonarola’s White Shirt enforcers. Brutality and home invasion was likely not the intended effect of giving political participation to young people. The economy of words that allowed for Savonarola to make his philosophy more accessible later translated to deriving his power from the populace. This large public support lead to opportunities for mob violence and chaos (reidsitaly.com). The origin of expanding the death penalty to include sodomites is difficult to trace directly, though the insistence of God as the final arbiter of government may to be blame. When God’s text can be interpreted in many ways, so can it be “adjusted” to fit the whims of his messengers. Perhaps the most shocking bastardization of Savonarola’s high-minded ideals is his later insistence on being a kind of messiah figure that was capable of performing miracles. There is little to no evidence that Savonarola believed himself capable of such acts in his earlier writings, though he did claim to have prophecies. His apocalyptic writings coinciding with the ruinous forces of France could have boosted his confidence, as well as the masses of Florence continuing to put him on a pedestal. While speculative, it is likely that the power went to Savonarola’s head and changed the friar’s visions of the second coming to delusions of grandeur.

The People’s Temple of Jim Jones did not begin as an isolated cult in Guyana. Originated in Indiana, it was a small congregation infatuated with the tenets of social justice, Marxism, and passionate preaching in the tradition of Evangelicalism. From the beginning, Jim Jones showed a charismatic personality that drew people into his flock. Jones himself quickly distinguished himself as siring the first mixed-race family through adoption in Indiana (Wunrow); Jones’ passion for integration was present in The People’s Church from the beginning, and was a component of its vision of social justice. The Church was involved in community service and provided services for the disabled. Due to these high-minded ideals, The People’s Church had an extremely close-knit community with a strong sense of cohesion. Jones was extremely vocal about the “abuses, disgraces, and contradictions of American capitalism” (Wunrow). Jones presented himself as a charismatic father figure that lead the Church to national success. Over time, the cause became large enough to set up a camp in northern California (PBS). Within the California community, there was an effort for self-sufficiency and special housing for elderly members. Living arrangements were provided for individuals who sold off assets like houses and cars for the cause.

The dramatic end of Savonarola’s regime is mirrored in the tragedy that was Jonestown. Leading up to the infamous mass suicide, Jim Jones leveraged his image of omnipotent father figure to abuse his followers. Jones was reported as saying the following: “If you want me to be your father, I will be your father. If you want me to be your God, I will be your God.” Mirroring Savonarola’s claims of performing miracles, Jones orchestrated fake healings to increase the emotional control he had over his followers. Both men and women were subjected to his sexual desires, with one report indicating that a male in the congregation insisting that men should begin using enemas to make Jones’ sexual experiences better for him (PBS). When a news article threatened to reveal what The People’s Church looked like on the inside, The People’s Temple rapidly finished plans to relocate to Guyana. It was in this final location that Jim Jones revealed the full extent of his darker side. In the last days of Jonestown, one member of the Church described his returns to the community after trips elsewhere as a dark cloud falling from above (PBS). Announcements declaring the inevitable end of the world (another connection with Savonarola) played constantly, with intermittent messages about the terrifying threats of the outside world. When Senator Leo Ryan was shot dead by members of the Church, Jones knew that the end was near and ordered for a cyanide/Flavor Aid mix to be prepared for the residents of Jonestown. The final nefarious act connected to Jim Jones and his Church was the mass suicide, where over 900 people lost their lives (history.com).

The horrifying descent of The People’s Temple from something of a utopia project into one of the most infamous mass suicides in recent memory is hard to comprehend. The force that likely lead to this dramatic transformation was likely the control Jim Jones had on his members, as well as sociopathic tendencies that materialized themselves from a young age; Jones was reported to have killed small animals in his youth, and had a mock mass suicide session during a New Year’s Eve party while his Church was in California (PBS). The communal forces that allowed for so many to find a sense of purpose at the communes in California and Guyana would later lend themselves to groupthink: a mass reluctance to challenge the status quo due to a belief that all others are accepting of the group’s current trajectory. A sense of cohesion is good for the social dimension of group interaction, but not for its overall success in achieving its goals (Ellis and Fischer). The gradual incorporation of members’ personal assets like homes and cars made it so that they had nothing outside of the Church, making them more dependent on Jones and his cause; this psychological entrapment of members reached its peak in Guyana, with members being physically trapped in the camp, unable to leave even if they wanted to. Two common themes emerge; the first is as Jones gained control over his members over time, he used this power to exploit his flock; the second is that as a sense of cohesion was built among members through the ideas of external threats like news publications and false stories of “them” being sent through the PA system in Guyana, members became more susceptible to groupthink and less able to express dissent (Ellis and Fischer).

The thread that connects the Savonarolan government in Florence to Jonestown is the gradual bastardization of both group’s original values into the actions that caused their destruction. In the case of Savonarola, the notion that God should be the final arbiter of governmental decisions fell apart when biblical justifications could be expanded to fit nearly any political desire. Jonestown is a testament to the power of groupthink and the dangers of a group becoming *too* cohesive. Both leaders faced the corrupting force of power and chose to abuse it. In both cases, a passionate desire for social reform lead to actions that undermined the ideas they tried to advance. What is interesting about Jim Jones and Girolamo Savanarola is neither of them was completely evil. It is tempting to dismiss them as rotten apples and claim that their rise and fall has little to teach the average citizen. While Jones did exhibit dangerous tendencies as a child, he was also a powerful force for Civil Rights. Savonarola was a man of God who truly believed the end of was nigh and decadent tyranny needed to be passionately fought. The cautionary tale is put best by eminent psychologist Phillip Zimbardo, previous president of the American Psychological Association: “The line between good and evil is permeable and almost anyone can be induced to cross it when pressured by situational forces.” Savonarola and Jim Jones were seduced by their own success, and were willing to cross the line to achieve the just world they both desperately desired.

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