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History and Myth: The Inquisition

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History and Myth: The Inquisition

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Commentary

“Let us pray that each one of us, looking to the Lord Jesus, meek and humble of heart, will recognize that even men of the church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending the truth.” -- Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Jubilee Request for Forgiveness, March 12, 2000.

The Inquisition resulted in the torture and murder of millions of Christians whose only crime was a rejection of Catholic heresy and a commitment to follow the Bible as their sole authority for faith and practice. John Paul II has not confessed the Inquisition; he has failed to label his fellow popes the murderers they were.” -- Jerry Kaifetz.

Among the many difficulties in addressing the issue of anti-Catholicism are the cultural assumptions, historical canards and conventional wisdom that fuel the prejudice. Many Americans, Catholics as well as non-Catholics, have an understanding of history, as well as a way of thinking, that carries the baggage of post-Reformation propaganda or 19th century Enlightenment prejudices. Myths created in anti-Catholic passions have become part of the cultural *corpus* and accepted as undeniable truths. (1) We all know, for example, that the astronomer Galileo was tortured and imprisoned for years by the inquisition. He then recanted his scientific theory on the rotation of the earth around the sun, but bravely muttered aloud as he left the trial chamber, *Eppur si muove!* (“And yet it does move”). The historical reality, however, is that Galileo was never tortured, lived in comfort at the Florentine embassy during his trial, and the defiant quote was a legend created nearly 125 years after his death. (2)

Common to these myths are an invented history meant to portray Catholicism as the enemy of free thought, an alien presence in a democratic society, and as a perverse form of medieval superstition that survives on the ignorance of believers and the Church’s own violent will to power. Just as these myths served a purpose in the Reformation and were perpetuated in the 18th century Enlightenment and the 19th century world of progress and scientism, they serve a purpose in today’s secularist climate. Though developed in a war of propaganda between Catholicism and the dissenting churches of the 16th century, the theological trappings of the myths have been stripped away in many cases. They are now simply historical assumptions used to undermine and dismiss Church positions, particularly in the public arena, without the necessity of analyzing or addressing those positions. They are common rhetorical tools useful because they are universally understood and accepted.

In our own time we are seeing the creation of such a myth in allegations of silence and collaboration with the Nazis of Pope Pius XII during World War II. Though the allegations contradict clear historical evidence, they are becoming conventional wisdom regurgitated by columnists and commentaries with no need for substantiation. (3) Of the many historical myths about Catholics and Catholicism, however, perhaps the most pervasive are those centered on the inquisition in general and the Spanish Inquisition in particular. From the 16th through the early 20th Century, the legend of the Inquisition grew larger than its history. This legend of the inquisition persists today in the imagination, well after its debunking by historians.

A good summation of that legend as it persists today was in the May 20, 2000 edition of *The Times*, a regional newspaper in Northwest Indiana and suburban Chicago. Written by Jerry Kaifetz, the owner of a chemical manufacturing company with a doctorate from Bethany Theological Seminary in Alabama, it is a response to the papal Jubilee “Request for Forgiveness” in March 2000. Kaifetz wrote: “The pope has not confessed the bloody

and horrible 600-years inquisition against humble Bible-believers, which was instigated by Pope Innocent III (11981213). Some of the devices and inventions used to torture the “heresy” out of those rejecting the

Catholic Church’s authority included “The Iron Maiden,” “Hanging Cages,” “The Judas Cradle,” “Skinning the Cat,” “The Head Crusher,” “The Heretic’s Fork,” “The Barrel Pillory,” “The Rack,” “The Knee Splitter,” “The Breast Ripper,” and other devices too numerous to mention or too heinous to describe in any detail. The inquisitor was commissioned directly by the pope and acted directly on his behalf. The trials were held in secret and the inquisitor acted as judge, jury and prosecutor. The accused was never represented. The Inquisition resulted in the torture and murder of millions of Christians whose only crime was a rejection of Catholic heresy and a commitment to follow the Bible as their sole authority for faith and practice. John Paul II has not confessed the Inquisition; he has failed to label his fellow popes the murderers they were.(4)

Kaifetz, writing on the cusp of the New Millennium, neatly summarizes the falsehoods, exaggerations and myths of the inquisition established in the religious wars of the 16th Century. While he approaches the inquisition from the perspective of a more traditional form of religious anti-Catholicism, the image he presents would be shared by many today, including some Catholics.

What, in fact, were inquisitions? Generally defined, inquisitions were ecclesial investigations, meaning that investigations were conducted either directly by, or under the auspices of, the Church. The investigations were undertaken at certain times in certain regions under the authority of the local bishop and his designates, or under the auspices of papal-appointed legates, or representatives from Religious Orders delegated the task from the papacy. The purpose of the investigations was peculiar to the local circumstance. They usually involved a judicial process aimed to obtain the confession and reconciliation with the Church of those who held heretical views or engaged in activities contrary to Church teaching and belief. The goal was to secure a person’s repentance, and to maintain the unity of the Church. These investigations were conducted with the cooperation and involvement of the temporal authorities. If these investigations resulted in finding serious doctrinal heresy and an unwillingness to abjure from heresy, it was the responsibility of the secular authorities to undertake punishment. The uniqueness of the inquisitions was that the Church conducted the investigations, and that the Church worked closely with civil authorities. In Protestant states after the Reformation, the distinct role of the religious congregation did not necessarily exist, and the investigation, trial and punishment of dissenters were primarily the responsibility of the state.

The common assumptions about the inquisition -- the myths of the inquisition -- are neatly summarized in the Kaifetz opinion piece, and could be outlined as follows:

The inquisition was a single, unified court system directly responsible to the pope and controlled solely by the papacy.

The inquisition existed throughout Europe for nearly 700 years, founded in the 12th century and continued to the early 19th century. Prior to the Reformation, it focused on a “secret” and “hidden” church, similar to that of the Reformation churches.

The inquisition was primarily aimed at the early Protestant reformers of the 16th century and the Spanish Inquisition alone killed and tortured hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Protestant reformers.

Vicious and unique tortures were routinely used, particularly in the Spanish Inquisition

The Spanish Inquisition existed independent of Spanish royal authority and existed solely as an arm of the Church, as did all other inquisitions.

The inquisition was a means for the Church to exercise its authority over science.

Persecution of religious dissent was unique to the inquisition and to the Catholic Church in Europe.

These assumptions about the inquisition and how it operated are part of the cultural baggage of Western civilization. They are far more myth than history. Yet, it would be very wrong to whitewash the inquisition, or to attempt to explain away its historicity. In the words of the papal apology, Catholics should understand that there were events in the past where “men of the church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending the truth.” The inquisition existed and it remains an unsettling part of Catholic history. However, the caricature of the inquisition that most of us have come to know and that is often utilized in anti-Catholic polemics has little to do with the reality of the inquisition.

Prelude

In its simplest summary, the Church after the death of the Apostles had a faith that “united scattered congregations: that Christ was the Son of God, that He would return to establish his Kingdom on earth, and that all who believed in him would at the Last Judgment be rewarded with eternal bliss.” However, very soon the Christian community needed to give better definition to its beliefs as conflicts and disputes arose. From very early (as noted in Scripture (6)) the Christian community was forced to confront how to deal with those people who persisted in teachings contrary to the Apostolic Faith. For the most part, the early Church settled on admonishment, avoidance and, if a person persisted in error, expulsion from the community. This also led the early Church to an increased understanding of the universal authority of the See of St. Peter at Rome as the defender of the “deposit of the faith.” As the Christian faith grew throughout the Roman Empire and Church authorities settled controversies over essential teachings, statements of faith were developed. These Creeds (statements of fundamental beliefs) came in response to various teachings that were seen by Christian leaders as fundamentally erroneous.

With the victory of Constantine in the second decade of the Fourth Century, followed by the conversion of most of the Roman Empire by the end of the century, Christianity became the faith of the Empire. While this ended the age of martyrdom under intermittent Roman persecution, it created its own difficulties. Most prominent was the relationship of the Church -- particularly Church authority -- to the Christian emperors. It was a problem that, in certain respects, would plague Church relationships with government until the dramatic changes of the late nineteenth century and early 20th centuries. Government wanted to control the Church within its borders, seeing the faith as inextricably linked to societal stability, identity, and as foundational to royal power. At the same time, the Church wanted to be seen as separate and above this “City of Man,” while also seeing in the secular arm the means to assure orthodox belief.

It was a troubled period of confusing -- and at times obscure -- doctrinal controversies after the legalization of Christianity and as the faith became the official religion of the Roman Empire by the end of the Fourth Century. Roman imperial power would insert itself into doctrinal controversies, at times with the support of Church leadership, at other times with the Church standing in opposition. With the disastrous effect of doctrinal heresies on both Church and social unity, however, there was a growing consensus that use of the “secular arm” was necessary, with even St. Augustine arguing in favor of it. (7) With Christian emperors occupying the imperial throne, heretical views came to be seen as not only a violation of Christian unity, but as an act of treason against the State. This is essential to an understanding of how heresy came to be viewed, particularly in Western civilization. It was not a matter of arbitrary enforcement of ecclesial discipline, or doctrinal conformity. Heresy was seen as an evil that threatened the unity of the community, as well as threatening the salvation of souls. Heresy was not merely an individual act -- it was an attack on the state itself. This would become an ingrained part of European thinking, inherited by royal authority and the Church ecclesiastical leadership, as well as by the 16th Century Protestant reformers. (8) It was during this early period that both canon and civil law were developed dealing with heresy that would become the sources for addressing religious dissent in the Second Millennium.

After the breakdown of Roman imperial authority in the Fifth Century, heresy, perhaps a luxury of wealth and leisure, lessened within the more vital concern of the evangelization of non-Roman Western Europe. While theological disputes rose from the Sixth through the 10th Century, the Church struggled to establish independence from the interference of the Eastern emperors and domination of petty local rulers while at the same time developing

ecclesial structures and clerical discipline. (9) With the renewal of the papacy and the conversion of Europe accomplished, powerful reform movements began in the 11th Century that reaffirmed the need for unity of belief and the means to address doctrinal dissent that threatened both Church and society.

The Medieval Inquisition

“Through the early Middle Ages belief had been taught through the use of simple creeds, and behavior had been regulated by a series of penitential regulations and by the rich liturgy performed by trained specialists. These rules had achieved the conversion of most of northern Europe to Christianity by the year 1000. They had depicted the world as a place of temptation and the prospects of salvation in it as slender. But during the course of the eleventh century a spirit of religious reform argued that the prospect of salvation in the world would be greatly increased if the world were reformed. With the reform of the papacy itself at the end of the eleventh century the Latin Church began to devise its grand program of sanctifying the world.” (10) The reform of the papacy involved the freedom from its domination by Italian aristocrats that had taken place in the tenth century. (11) Led by a stronger papacy, the “grand program of sanctifying the world” was a combination of the Church’s need to reform its institutional life, free itself from control by secular lords, and to build a Christian society. This required a clearer understanding of the essentials of the faith among believers and a more incessant demand to proper Christian behavior. There was also the growing fear that “Those who dissented from belief or behaved in a manner that was explicitly defined as un-Christian appeared no longer as erring souls in a temptation-filled world, but as subverters of the world’s new course....” (12)

Christian rulers and the common people themselves shared the same perspective. The “Inquisition” as a formal process of the Church would not be codified until the 13th Century. But in the two centuries prior, there was a strong movement to forcefully address religious dissent. To be a “heretic” meant facing possible mob justice and certain trial by secular courts.

The two heresies of the 12th and early 13th centuries that gave birth to the medieval inquisition were that of the Cathars (or Albigensians) and the Waldensians. The Cathars essentially held that the “evil god” of the Old Testament created the material world and saw the Church as the instrument of that material world. The Waldensians preached against wealth, clericalism and rejected the sacramental nature of the Church. Both these movements coalesced to a certain degree, and would become somewhat popular in Southern France, Northern Italy and parts of Germany. (13) (Protestant reformers in the 16th Century would often point to these movements as part of an alleged “silent” Church that existed since the Apostolic Age, as Kaifetz suggests. In reality, the Cathars and the Waldensians had a decidedly non-Christian “dualistic” perception of God, the source of which was essentially pagan philosophy. Their views were unique to the times and would have horrified the 16th century Protestant Reformers.)

Up to the late 12th Century, such heresies were considered the responsibility of the local bishop. It was assumed that secular rulers (as well as the mob) would take action. The Church response had remained primarily an attempt to persuade and, if necessary, excommunicate heretics. But an evolution was taking place. “The Third Lateran Council of 1179 produced several canons condemning heretics -- chiefly to excommunication and denial of Christian burial -- and several widely circulated condemnations of heresy, with specific descriptions of heretical beliefs and practices, as well as privileges comparable to those of crusaders for those who fight against heretics and their defenders. In 1184 Pope Lucius III issued the decretal *Ad abolendam* ... called ‘the founding charter of the inquisition.’” (14) Pope Lucius’ decree called for those found by the local church to be heretical to be turned over to the secular courts. In 1199, Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) identified heresy with treason. As part of his singularly strong reform movement, including encouraging of popular devotions, increased emphasis on catechesis, and the eradication of clerical abuses, Pope Innocent III viewed heresy as a destroyer of souls. When Albigensians in Southern France killed a papal representative in 1208, Innocent called for a “crusade” against the heretical sect. The violence of the subsequent “Albigensian Crusade” was not in keeping with the reforms and plans of Innocent, who stressed education, confession, clerical reform and preaching to counteract heresy. (15) Yet, under the control of mobs, petty rulers and vindictive local bishops who cared little for Innocent’s

interventionist reforms, armies from northern France swept through the heretical strongholds for over 20 years. The Albigensian heresy effectively disappeared.

The uncontrollable fanaticism of local mobs of heresy hunters, the indifference of certain ecclesiastics, the violence of secular courts and the bloodshed of the Albigensian crusade led to a determined effort by the papacy to exercise greater control over the determination and prosecution of heresy. This would allow for some measure of persuasion and conversion, rather than simply prosecution by secular courts that emphasized punishment rather than salvation. Beginning a trend started earlier in the century, papal legates from the curia, or local judges appointed by the popes began to exercise courts of inquisition. The papacy also began to use the Mendicant Religious Orders, especially the Dominicans (founded 1220) and, later the Franciscans (founded 1209) to combat heresy by serving as confessors, preachers and judges. (16) In 1231, Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) specifically commissioned the Dominicans as papal judges of heresy. (17)

Over the next 20 years there grew up a very specific state of canonical legislation for dealing with heresy. Though not as severe as the secular courts of Europe at the time, the penalties for heresy -- including confiscation of property and the formality of turning persistent heretics over to the secular courts for punishment -- became codified within ecclesial courts. (18) This was, then, the formal establishment of the medieval inquisition. It consisted of a mix of local episcopal courts, as well as papal-designated judges and legates. It had close ties to the secular rulers who, in effect, enforced the judgments of ecclesial courts as heresy had become equated with treason. There was no central office in the medieval inquisition, no overarching authority. Local bishops, or members of the Mendicant orders assigned over a period to a certain area, established ecclesial courts for the investigation of heresy. They used procedures common to contemporary European legal procedures. By the late fourteenth and most of the fifteenth centuries, the work of such ecclesial courts was “intermittent and occasionally non-existent.” (19)

The medieval inquisition courts often functioned like circuit courts of the more recent past. Codes and manuals were developed that detailed how an inquisition was to function. It began with the arrival in an area of the inquisitors, possibly members of the Dominican order. They would preach a sermon to the clergy and laity of an area on the dangers of heresy. A “period of grace” would then be extended to allow for confessions of dissenting practices without subsequent trial. Trials were held for those who refused to confess under the period of grace. For those who returned to the Church, forgiveness was granted and some form of penance imposed. Those that did not reject their heresies were excommunicated and turned over to the secular authorities.

For the most part, these courts functioned similarly to their secular counterparts at that time though generally, their sentences and penances were far less harsh. The investigations were held in secret and names of witnesses were not given to the accused, generally out of fear of retaliation. (The names of witnesses were known to the inquisitors and were kept in the written records. Judges were given detailed instructions in the manuals on how to detect false witness. Those accused were also allowed to list their known enemies and witnesses appearing on such a list were often discounted.) At the conclusion, the decrees of the trial were made public. (20)

A number of questions arise concerning these medieval inquisitions. First and most important to the myth of the inquisition, concerns the use of torture in obtaining confessions. Proof was necessary in order to convict and in the absence of such, confession was necessary. As Peters explains at length:

The tradition of Roman and medieval criminal law had made torture an element in the testimony of otherwise dubious witnesses, and a procedure could be triggered by enough partial proofs to indicate that a full proof -- a confession -- was likely, and no other full proofs were available. The procedure of torture itself was guarded by a number of protocols and protections for the defendant, and the jurists rigorously defined its place in due process. A confession made after or under torture had to be freely repeated the next day without torture or it would have been considered invalid. Technically, therefore, torture was strictly a means of obtaining the only full proof available... Their tasks were not only -- or even primarily -- to convict the contumacious heretic, but to save his soul if possible and to preserve the unity of the Church. In this their interest often ran counter to those of lay people (who simply wanted the heretic destroyed

before the whole community suffered), and of judicial officers of temporal powers, who sought only to punish. (21)

The guidelines from the manuals were extremely strict and torture was not used to punish, as was common in the secular courts. The gruesome lists such as Kaifetz' were an invention of post-Reformation propaganda in regard to the Spanish Inquisition rather than the reality of the medieval inquisitions. Such actions cannot be justified in our own age, but they can at least be understood as part of accepted judicial procedure at that time. In any case, the use of torture in inquisition courts was far less extensive, and far less violent, than the norms of secular courts.(22)

The question also arises concerning the beliefs that were prosecuted. The general accusation made by 16th Century reformers were that alleged "heretics" were simple bible-believing Christians, precursors of the Protestant revolt. As will also be seen in the Spanish Inquisition, this was usually not the case. The Albigensian heresy was the most extensive religious dissent in the period of the medieval inquisitions. Albigensianism was an essential denial of a Christian understanding of God that led to a host of strange beliefs and practices (such as the non-sinfulness of fornication). But for the most part, "heretical views" were hardly organized in a systematic theology, particularly prior to the 16th Century. Those prosecuted were usually the ignorant, the troublemaker, the braggart and, at times surely, the drunkard in his cups professing blasphemy. Those prosecuted rarely held a deeply contrary belief system. (While those alleged to be witches would become a major concern of the Reformers, this was far less so in the inquisition trials. Sporadic trials for witchcraft by inquisition judges would take place in different areas at different times, though it was generally considered the business of the secular courts and such activities the product of a deluded mind rather than a heretic.)

Additionally, actions contrary to the faith were commonly prosecuted, rather than beliefs as such. Common fornication, refusal to attend to the Sacraments, disregard of religious practice and devotion were often prosecuted by inquisition trials. Clergy living a dissolute lifestyle or speaking out in ignorance against commonly accepted moral teachings were a major focus of the inquisitions, as well as those who spoke out against the inquisitions. The concept of a rigid thought police searching out a reformed "underground church" was the wishful thinking -- and propaganda -- of later centuries.

The final question concerns the extensiveness of the inquisition prior to the 16th century, as well as its uniformity and its continuity through the centuries and in different regions. After the suppression of the Albigensian heresy in Southern France in the 13th century, inquisitorial trials waxed and waned in the face of local needs. In France itself, trials were primarily in the hands of secular authorities. In some areas -- such as England -- heresy was a smaller problem, and ecclesial courts to judge heresy were utilized intermittently. While there were inquisitorial courts, they were under the supervision of local Church authorities and worked closely with the secular arm. The most notable example of its use in England prior to Luther's revolt in the 16th Century was aimed at the Lollard followers of John Wycliff in the last quarter of the 14th Century and beginning of the 15th Century.

John Wycliff was a priest and instructor at Oxford where he developed his theology of predestination -- that people were "predestined" to be saved or lost and the good works they do are signs of their election, not a means toward salvation. Inevitably, this theology led to the conclusion that sacraments, the priesthood and the Church were unnecessary. Wycliff's views became popular, particularly as they meant that the English Parliament -- cash-strapped and preparing for war with France -- need not forward a tribute to the pope. Wycliff was summoned before a council of bishops to explain his position, but the meeting ended when a fight broke out between his armed retinue and members of the audience. Wycliff's views were forwarded to Pope Gregory XI who issued a condemnation and ordered the bishops to hold an inquisition. If Wycliff still maintained those views, he was to be excommunicated and turned over to the secular authorities. As his trial by the bishops was about to begin, royal intervention -- and a mob outside -- convinced the bishops to call a halt to the proceedings. Pope Gregory XI then died and a resulting papal schism let Wycliff proceed in his studies. However, when he launched an attack on the Eucharist, many of his previous supporters abandoned him. A revolutionary uprising by peasants and workers was seen as a result of his work, and his royal support ebbed as well. He was summoned to appear in Rome, but died

on New Year's Eve, 1384.(23) His remaining followers, called Lollards, would face local inquisitions.

In the German states, inquisition trials were few and far between. Additionally, those that were conducted fell under the authority of the local bishops who were often identified with the secular authority. As in many cases, the secular authorities often conducted trials as well. A notable exception was the case of John Hus in Bohemia. Hus had absorbed elements of Wycliff's teachings, as well as a rising Bohemian nationalism. Attacking a host of Church teaching -- and the pope as the Anti-Christ -- Hus was ordered to appear at the Council of Constance in 1414, where the Church was attempting to resolve disputed claims to the papacy and enact ecclesiastical reform. Hus was condemned by the Council and turned over to the civil authorities who executed him in 1415.(24) Pope John Paul II would state that the execution of Hus was a mistake.

By the mid to late 14th century, papal commissioned inquisitors had disappeared from many parts of Europe. Inquisitorial courts, such as they were, were conducted under local episcopacies working closely with local temporal authorities and dealing with local circumstances. Regional control of the inquisition process -- and regional concerns -- would become dominant. (25) A vast, papal-controlled, grand and singular inquisition never really existed in Europe. The closest approximation of that was in the mid to late 13th century, but did not last very long. (26)

The Spanish Inquisition

Most of the myths surrounding the inquisition have come to us wrapped in the cloak of the Spanish Inquisition. Traditional anti-Catholic presentations will discuss the papal decretal of 1184, Pope Innocent III and the Albigensian crusade beginning in 1208, then leap ahead to the Spanish Inquisition in the mid 16th Century. It is with the Spanish Inquisition that the lurid myth of the inquisition truly developed. It is the world of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, with vivid descriptions of burning heretics in *auto-de-fes*, ghastly engines of torture, innocent Bible-believers martyred for their faith, and a once vibrant economic and social power hurled back into a papal-dominated "dark ages" from which it has yet to truly emerge. In many ways, the reality of the Spanish Inquisition has its own human tragedies, but it is not the tragedy presented in the common caricatures.

It is a curiosity of history that the medieval inquisition of the 13th and 14th centuries was little utilized in Spain or Portugal. It was only after the mid-fifteenth century that the Spanish Inquisition would develop, and its target would not be heretics in the traditional sense, but rather Jews who had converted to Christianity and were accused of secretly practicing their old faith. To many contemporary historians of the Spanish Inquisition, the story unfolds not as a "religious" persecution, but rather a racial pogrom. Additionally, the Spanish Inquisition had very little involvement with trials and punishments of Protestants, even with centuries of propaganda to the contrary.

Spain was unique in Western Europe for the diversity of its population. In addition to a large segment of Muslims, medieval Spain had the single largest Jewish community in the world, numbering some one hundred thousand souls in the 13th Century. (27) For centuries Jews and Christians had lived and worked together in a rather peaceful though generally segregated coexistence. In the 14th Century, anti-Jewish attitudes were on the rise throughout Europe. In 1290, England expelled its Jews and France followed in 1306. Spain began to experience an increasing anti-Jewish sentiment. It exploded in the summer of 1391 with angry anti-Jewish riots. More religious than racial -- though this has been disputed (8) -- these riots led to major forced conversions of Jews to Christianity. These Jewish converts would be called *conversos* or New Christians, to distinguish them from traditional Christian families. The *converso* (or the more scornful term, *marrano*) identity would remain with such families for generations.

To the *converso* families, such conversions were not without benefit (not including the benefit of saving their lives in the 1391 riots). They were welcomed into a full participation in Spanish society not available to Jews and they would soon become leaders in government, science, business and the Church. Though it was legislated in certain areas that those forced to convert could return to their own religion, many did not. These *converso* families obviously faced the scorn of those who remained Jews. At the same time, however, over the years the Old

Christians saw them as opportunists who secretly maintained the faith of their forefathers. It was a strong mixture of racial and religious prejudice against the *conversos* that would stir up the Spanish Inquisition.

Spain in the 15th century was in the process of unifying the two traditional kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, while engaging in the final defeat of the Muslim stronghold of Granada. Isabella of Castile had married Frederick of Aragon in 1469. She came to the throne in 1474. When Ferdinand became king of Aragon in 1479, the two kingdoms were effectively united. War was waged with Granada beginning in 1482, with its final defeat coming 10 years later.

Isabella succeeded to the Castilian throne upon the death of her stepbrother, Henry IV. Henry had long protected both the Jews and the *conversos*. Upon his death, there was a widespread outbreak of anti-Jewish and anti-*converso* protest and violence. “From the mid-Fifteenth Century on, religious anti-Semitism changed into ethnic anti-Semitism, with little difference seen between Jews and *conversos* except for the fact that *conversos* were regarded as worse than Jews because, as ostensible Christians, they had acquired privileges and positions that were denied to Jews. The result of this new ethnic anti-Semitism was the invocation of an inquisition to ferret out the false *conversos* who had, by becoming formal Christians, placed themselves under its authority.” (29) In 1478, Ferdinand and Isabella requested a papal bull establishing an inquisition, a bull granted by Pope Sixtus IV. In 1482 the size of the inquisition was expanded and included the Dominican Friar Tomas de Torquemada, though Pope Sixtus IV protested against the activities of the inquisition in Aragon and its treatment of the *conversos*. The next year, Ferdinand and Isabella established a state council to administer the inquisition with Torquemada as its president. He would later assume the title of Inquisitor-General. This was a major development as it would allow the inquisition to persist well beyond its initial intention, and to be extended to wherever Spanish power existed, including the New World. (30) The papacy would continue to complain about the treatment of the *conversos*, but the unity of the Spanish Inquisition with the State would remain a distinguishing characteristic, and a primary source of post-Reformation European hatred.

Why did Ferdinand and Isabella establish the Inquisition in Spain? Ostensibly, the reason was to investigate the allegations of Judaizing among the *conversos*. Historians have pointed to other reasons: as a means to consolidate power, as a source of revenue from the confiscation of *converso* wealth, as a means to eliminate the *conversos* from public life, and as part of the *Reconquista* of a united Spain to the faith. The stated reason for the inquisition was to root out “false” *conversos*. There seems to have been an allure to the claim that many *conversos* secretly practiced their old Jewish faith and, as such, were undermining the Faith. For centuries, such legends would persist in Spain, though most evidence shows that there were few “secret” Judaizers and that most *conversos*, particularly after the first generation of forced conversions, were faithful Catholics. This is why many historians have concluded that at the center of the inquisitorial storm was a racial, rather than a religious prejudice at work.

In March, 1492, Isabella and Ferdinand ordered the expulsion -- or conversion -- of all remaining Jews in their joint kingdoms. The intent of the declaration was more religious than racial, as Jewish conversion rather than expulsion was certainly the intent. While many Jews fled, a large number converted, thus aggravating the popular picture of secret Judaizers within the Christian community of Spain. Up through 1530, the primary activity of the inquisition in Spain would be aimed at pursuing *conversos*. The same would be true from 1650 to 1720. While its activities declined thereafter, the inquisition continued to exist until its final abolition in 1824.

The Spanish Inquisition had been universally established in Spain a few years prior to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. Records show that virtually the only “heresy” prosecuted at that time was the alleged secret practice of the Jewish faith. In all, between the establishment of the Inquisition in Spain through 1530, it is estimated that approximately 2,000 “heretics” were turned over to the secular authorities for execution. (31) Many of those convicted of heresy were *conversos* who had fled. These were burned in effigy.

The most famous period of the Spanish Inquisition, under the legendary Torquemada, had little to do with the common caricature of simple “bible-believing” Protestants torn apart by ruthless churchmen. The true picture is unsettling enough: it was a government controlled inquisition aimed at faithful Catholics of Jewish ancestry.

The motivations seemed far more racial than religious, if not in Ferdinand and Isabella, then certainly among those who carried it out. The papacy, under Sixtus IV (1471-1484) and Innocent VIII (1484-1492), rather than controlling the Spanish Inquisition, protested its unfair treatment of the *conversos* with little result.

Reformation Response

Under Charles V, successor to Ferdinand and Isabella, the Inquisition became an established part of Spanish justice. With the outbreak of Luther's Reformation in Europe and the spread of its ideas in the 1520s, it was entrenched as a means to both protect the faith in Spain from infiltration of this new heresy, and as a further means to buttress royal power.

The Reformation would have little impact in Spain. One on the one hand, the existence of an active State-sponsored inquisition can be viewed as one reason it never took hold. On the other hand, however, Spain's traditional Catholicism so identified with the *Reconquista* of the late 15th Century surely played a strong role. "Unlike England, France and Germany, Spain had not since the early Middle Ages experienced a single significant popular heresy. All its ideological struggles since the Reconquest had been directed against the minority religions, Judaism and Islam. There were consequently no native heresies (like Wycliffism in England) on which German ideas could build." (32) Humanism itself also had a rather weak impact in Spain. Scholars and essayists such as Erasmus had only a minimal following. (33) The small number of humanists with an understanding of Erasmus were viewed suspiciously, however, and Erasmus would eventually become equated with Luther in Spain.

The image of a Spanish Inquisition burning hundreds of thousands of Protestant heretics has no basis in historical fact. There were so few Protestants in Spain that there could be no such prosecution, no matter how strong the inquisition and no matter how much anti-Catholic propagandists tried to create such an image in the 16th Century and thereafter. During the Reformation period, the inquisition in Spain certainly searched for evidence of Protestantism, particularly among the educated classes. Contemporary trends were viewed suspiciously, even though those involved were clearly Catholic in practice. Mystical spiritual movements were investigated, leading to persecution of a small group of illuminists, or *alumbrados*. This was an interior spiritual movement based on a passive union of the soul with God. While its condemnation in Spain affected only a few, it did impact on a generation of spiritual writers, including St. Theresa of Avila who would be questioned for alleged illuminist leanings. (34) "The Lutheran threat, however, took a long time to develop. In 1520, Luther had probably not been heard of in Spain... However, a full generation went by and Lutheranism failed to take root in Spain. There was, in those years, no atmosphere of restriction or repression. Before 1558 possibly less than 50 cases of alleged Lutheranism among Spaniards came to the notice of the inquisitors." (35)

The discovery of a small cell of Protestants in Seville and Valladolid in the late 1550s, however, generated concern in the highest quarters in Spain. The Seville group "totaled around one hundred and twenty persons, including the prior and members of the Jeronimite convent of Santa Paula. The group managed to exist in security until the 1550s, when some monks from San Isidro opportunely fled. The exiles ... played little part in Spanish history but were glories of the European Reformation." (36) The Seville Protestants were discovered in 1557, which led to the arrest of the Valladolid group as well in 1558. Spain reacted in horror to the discovery, and Charles V from his monastery retirement wrote in an infamous letter to his regent daughter Juana in Spain that so "great an evil" must be "suppressed and remedied without distinction of persons from the very beginning. (37) Though Spain braced for a tidal wave of revelations and discoveries -- with finger-pointing and accusations of pseudo-Protestants everywhere -- in all, just over 100 persons in Spain were found to be Protestants and turned over to the secular authorities for execution in the 1560s. In the last decades of the century, an additional 200 Spaniards were accused of being followers of Luther. "Most of them were in no sense Protestants... Irreligious sentiments, drunken mockery, anticlerical expressions, were all captiously classified by the inquisitors (or by those who denounced the cases) as 'Lutheran.' Disrespect to church images, and eating meat on forbidden days, were taken as signs of heresy." (38)

One aspect of the Spanish Inquisition that played into the hands of the Reformation propagandists was when it

claimed jurisdiction over foreigners on its soil. Sailors and traders from foreign countries made up the bulk of the accusations of “Lutheranism” in Spain, leading to clashes with these governments. (Well into the 20th Century, all nations outside of Spain were referred to as *tierras de herejes*, or the “heretical countries.”) Tales from these people who had faced the Spanish Inquisition were a favorite form of anti-Catholic literature and provided an unreliable source for the whole “black legend” that surrounded it.

In many ways, the inquisition in Spain mirrored the structures of the medieval inquisitions. An inquisition began with the arrival in a community of its officers who would announce it at a Mass with all the community assembled. As in the medieval inquisition, an “edict of grace” was usually given to self-confess offenses without serious penalty. An “edict of faith,” was often read that listed the heresies under investigation. By the 16th Century, inquisition trials were not public. The names of accusers were kept secret from the accused. Evidence was collected and presented to theologians for assessment. If proof were deemed sufficient, an arrest would take place (a rule often violated, as some arrests seemed to take place before any proof was established). Arrest was followed by immediate seizure of the property of the accused, which would be held until the case was settled.

As in the medieval Inquisition, torture was used to elicit confessions when there was insufficient proof. Torture was common throughout Europe in judicial actions and Spain was no exception.

Torture could only be used in cases of heresy, which meant that it was not used for the minor offenses that made up the majority on inquisitorial activity. After 1530, however, torture appeared more frequently when the inquisition was specifically investigating alleged Judaizers and Protestants. However, the “scenes of sadism conjured up by popular writers on the inquisition have little basis in reality, though the whole procedure was unpleasant enough to arouse periodic protests from Spaniards.” (39) Those conducting the tortures were not clergy, as often portrayed in artistic representations, but were professionals normally used in the secular courts. The torture could not cause bloodletting or result in loss of life or mutilation. The purpose of the torture, unlike in secular tribunals, was to gain either information or confession, not punishment. It was used only in a minority of cases, and normally as a last resort. (40)

Since evidence and witnesses were gathered before the arrest, the inquisition did not see its function as a trial to determine guilt or innocence. The accused was arrested with the goal of gaining a confession. The accused was usually given three opportunities to admit to the wrongs after which, the prosecutor would read the charges and the accused had to respond immediately. Unlike the medieval inquisition, the accused was allowed legal counsel, though these counselors were officers of the inquisition and not terribly helpful or trusted. The accused could then muster a defense based on witness testimony, or pleas of extenuating circumstances, such as drunkenness. A body called the *consulta de fe*, made up of inquisitors, a representative of the local bishop and theological consultants would then issue a ruling.

Those found guilty were sentenced to varying degrees of penances that could go from donning the *sanbenito*, a yellow penitential garb to be worn at all times in public, to servitude on a Spanish galley. As in the medieval inquisition, most cases did not involve heresy. Charges such as bigamy, adultery, lewd living and blasphemy were the majority of cases. Only unrepentant heretics or relapsed heretics could be “relaxed” -- turned over -- to the secular authorities to be burned at the stake. After the bitter persecution of the *conversos* in the first 20 years of the inquisition, in the 17th and 18th centuries fewer than three people a year were executed throughout Spain. (41) In fact, most condemned were burnt only in effigy, having previously died or fled the country.

The *auto de fe* that followed trials is the most infamous, and misunderstood, part of the Spanish Inquisition. An *auto de fe* was a unique aspect of the Spanish Inquisition, a public, liturgical “act of faith.” Usually held in a public square, an *auto de fe* involved prayer, a Mass, public procession of those found guilty and a reading of their sentences. The event could certainly take the entire day and the public was encouraged to witness it. Artistic representations of the *auto de fe* by propagandists usually involved images of torture and the burning of the accused. As such, they became a major source for creating the image in the popular mind of the Spanish Inquisition. However, no such activities took place during what was essentially a religious act stressing the “reconciliation” of

those accused with the Church. There was no torture as trials had been concluded, and if executions were to take place, they were separate from the *auto de fe* and conducted less publicly after the fact. (42)

The Spanish Inquisition was unique. Wrestled early from the papacy, it was controlled by the Spanish monarchy. Its aim, certainly, was to maintain a Catholic Spain, but its use was primarily centered on Catholic *conversos* of Jewish and, later, Muslim ancestry. It was certainly a force that kept Protestant -- and, to a degree, Enlightenment -- thought out of Spain, though the number of those actually prosecuted for such activity was very small. It would persist with various flare-ups in activities through the 17th and 18th centuries, though the *auto de fe* became less frequent. The last major outburst in activity was aimed once again at alleged Judaizing among *conversos* in the 1720s. It was formally ended by the monarchy in 1834, though it had effectively come to an end years prior. (43)

The Inquisition In Italy

Unlike the inquisition in Spain, the inquisition in the Papal States and in various Italian cities had no *conversos* to be targeted. (Many Spanish conversos would find refuge in Rome and other Italian cities where they were never bothered.) By the mid-sixteenth century and the publishing of the reforms of the Council of Trent (1563), the inquisition in Rome focused on keeping out Protestant thought. "Like the Spanish Inquisition, the Roman Inquisition and its subordinate tribunals appear to have been generally successful in keeping any substantial Protestant influence from spreading widely in the peninsula ... once the immediate problem of Protestantism was reduced, (the inquisition) turned the bulk of its operation to the question of internal ecclesiastical discipline and to offenses other than Protestantism." (44)

The early inquisition in Rome also focused on the so-called "popular religion," the superstitious practices, including witchcraft, that were survived in the fifteenth and 16th centuries. The Spanish Inquisition would also flirt at times with these practices. Unlike the Protestant reformers, however, the inquisitions in both Italy and Spain eventually began to see these difficulties as the result of poor catechesis, rather than active heresy and took less interest in its prosecution. After early rather intense prosecution, the inquisitions generally turned skeptical toward accusations of witchcraft and sorcery and established rigorous rules of prosecution and evidence. In most cases in Catholic countries in the 17th century and beyond, the inquisitions had less and less to do with prosecution of superstition. (45)

The inquisitions as they existed in the Papal States and the cities and kingdoms throughout Italy were never viewed with the same approbation as the Spanish Inquisition. For the most part, these inquisitions focused on clerical abuses and, outside the Papal States, had a strong mix of political intrigue. However, three famous cases that contributed to the myth of the Inquisition took place in Italy. They were the trials of Savonarola (1498), Giordano Bruno (1593-1599) and Galileo (1633).

"Savonarola was the Middle Ages surviving into the Renaissance, and the Renaissance destroyed him." (46) A Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola was a firebrand speaker who denounced the immorality of his time, and did not spare Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503). Preaching in Florence, he formed his own renewed monastic order, as well as becoming an influential leader in the new Florentine Republic proclaimed in June 1495. Poor statesmanship -- as well as a populace that grew tired of his puritanical reformation as seen in the "bonfire of the vanities" where worldly items were burned -- led to his downfall. Pope Alexander VI was little concerned about Savonarola's personal criticism. But when his friends proclaimed him a prophet from God, and he attempted to convince the French king to call a general council and depose the pope as "an infidel and a heretic," he was summoned to Rome to explain himself. Savonarola claimed ill health and Alexander ordered an investigation of his sermons. A Dominican reviewed them favorably and convinced the pope that not only should he not be tried, but that he should be named a cardinal. The offer was made and was rejected in a thunderous series of Lenten sermons denouncing the Church and the papacy. He issued letters to the kings of Europe demanding a council to overthrow what he saw as a corrupt papacy.

Florence was being torn apart by the controversial friar. He was soon abandoned by Florentine leadership and arrested along with two others from his order. The pope asked that they be sent to Rome for an ecclesial trial, but Florentine authorities, tired of the meddling friar, wanted him killed. He was tried under the local inquisition on charges of schism, heresy, revealing confessional secrets, false prophecies and visions, as well as causing civil disorder. He was found guilty and executed on May 23, 1498. Though seen by some as a pre-Reformation martyr, his meddling in Florentine politics, rather than his call for moral reforms and his attacks on Pope Alexander VI caused Savonarola's downfall. Though certainly tried with the approbation of the pope, his death was more a civil act than an inquisitorial judgment. (47)

Giordano Bruno was born near Naples in 1548. He was ordained a Dominican in 1572, but he quickly came to doubt most fundamental Christian belief. Unlike the Protestant reformers, Bruno saw himself as a philosopher. He left the monastery, ending up for a time in Geneva where he was tried for citing heresy by a Calvinist theologian. He apologized and was freed. Bruno wandered Europe, where he was recognized in various courts as a masterful philosopher as well as a common nuisance. Vain, arrogant and a misogynist, he would be denounced a heretic by the reformed churches as well as the inquisition. His philosophy, as disorganized as it was, identified God with an infinite universe. (48) After 16 years of wandering, Bruno decided to return to Italy thinking "should [he] be questioned by the Inquisition, he could (as well he might) quote enough orthodox passages from his works to deceive the Church into thinking him her loving son." (49) In 1592, the Venetian inquisition had him arrested. He was arrested not only for his heretical views, but also as a priest who had abandoned his vocation. In 1593, he was sent to Rome. After years of imprisonment and questioning, he was condemned in 1599 for his writings on the Trinity and the Incarnation. He was ordered to recant. He appealed to the pope who judged the propositions heretical. Bruno refused to recant and he was turned over to the secular authorities. He was burned on February 19, 1600.(50) Bruno was an excessive character -- and a bit of a charlatan -- who rejected fundamental beliefs of Catholicism and was condemned by the reformers as well. A man who abandoned the priesthood, in the difficult days of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation, he was certain to be prosecuted and seemed to court his own martyrdom.

The Galileo affair entered the mythological corpus of Western secularism as symbolizing the Church as anti-science. Galileo was tried by the papal inquisition in 1633 for publishing in defiance of a mandate he was allegedly given in 1616. Galileo taught as fact that the earth rotated on its axis and orbited the sun. Both views appeared to violate Scripture. His 1633 trial is most often portrayed as Galileo the scientist arguing the supremacy of reason and the tribunal judges demanding that reason abjure to faith. The trial was neither. Galileo, a firm and orthodox Catholic, and the tribunal judges shared a common view that science and the Bible could not stand in contradiction. If there appeared to be a contradiction, such a contradiction resulted from either weak science, or poor interpretation of Scripture. In context, the trial exhibited both faults. Galileo's technology was far too limited at the time to scientifically prove his assertion of the earth's double rotation. At the same time, the tribunal judges were at fault for a literal interpretation of biblical passages and making scientific judgments never intended by the Scriptural authors. Galileo was sentenced to a comfortable house arrest after he recanted his views. He died in 1642.(51)

In each of the above cases, a myth grew that became useful to anti-Catholic propagandists. Savonarola symbolized the "debasement" of the papacy and the Catholic world prior to the Reformation. He was seen as a symbol of moral reform in the alleged moral squalor of the world of the Renaissance popes. Bruno became the martyr to "free thought"; Galileo to science versus religious superstition. All were seen as the victims of an inquisition that came to be seen as the driving force of papal power, the creator of "millions" of Protestant martyrs, and the enemy of Enlightenment and Progress. It was this myth that persists today.

The Creation of The Myth of the Inquisition

"The Inquisition was an image assembled from a body of legends and myths which, between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries, established the perceived character of inquisitorial tribunals and influenced all ensuing

efforts to recover their historical reality. That body took shape in the context of intensified religious persecution as a consequence of the Reformation of the sixteenth century and of the central role of Spain, the greatest power in Europe, in assuming the role of defender of Roman Catholicism.” (52)

Edward Peters in *Inquisition* explains how the myth of the all-embracing inquisition developed in European thought. Protestant reformers used the inquisition -- which they presented as a unified, papal-dominated event from the 13th century through the 17th century -- as a source for creating centuries of alleged Christian martyrs and a hidden, Bible-believing Church that they claimed had always existed. It also served as a means to generate anti-Catholic sentiment, particularly during the Revolt of the Netherlands against Spain. The creation of the myth of the Inquisition was tied to the creation of an image of Spain in the consciousness of the West. “An image of Spain circulated through late sixteenth-century Europe, borne by means of political and religious propaganda that blackened the characters of Spaniards and their ruler to such an extent that Spain became the symbol of all forces of repression, brutality, religious and political intolerance, and intellectual and artistic backwardness for the next four centuries. Spaniards and Hispanophiles have termed this process and the image that resulted from it as ‘The Black Legend,’ *la leyenda negra*.” (53)

The building of the myth of the Inquisition, particularly the Spanish Inquisition, had nothing to do with the actual racial persecution of the conversos. That critical aspect of the Inquisition would not be rediscovered until historical studies of the actual documents of the Spanish Inquisition late in the 19th Century, study that continues today. The crucial element in the 16th Century was the inquisition in Spain of a small number of Protestants from 1559 to 1562. In Germany in 1567, two Spanish Protestants under the pseudonym Reginaldus Gonzalvus Montanus published *Sanctae Inquisitionis Hispanicae Artes*. Though a basic propaganda tract, it would be reprinted throughout Europe and be considered the definitive source on the inquisition for over 200 years. Most inquisition “histories” written thereafter, virtually until the late 19th Century, would rely on Montanus, which became a primary source, though written by anything but an unbiased eye.

Curiously, another source for the myth of the inquisition was Catholic Italy. Italian Catholics --the papal representatives included -- had a dislike for the Spanish whom they considered rural racist bumpkins. The attacks in Spain on the *conversos* were viewed as despicable in Rome. Italians “felt that Spanish hypocrisy in religion, together with the existence of the Inquisition, proved that the tribunal was created not for religious purity, but simply to rob the Jews. Similar views were certainly held by the prelates of the Holy See whenever they intervened in favor of the *conversos*. Moreover, the racialism of the Spanish authorities was scorned in Italy, where the Jewish community led a comparatively tranquil existence.” (54) Another Catholic source was Bartolome de las Casas. Las Casas was writing to condemn Spanish governmental policies in the New World and the use of slavery. His work was used by anti-Spanish propagandists to paint a portrait of evil Spain despoiling innocent natives, as they would surely do in any land over which they ruled, Old World or New.

The true explosion in inquisition rhetoric was in the period just prior to and through the revolt in the Netherlands from Spanish control. That revolt involved a fragile alliance of Catholic and Calvinist leaders against Catholic Spain. Beginning in 1548, the “printing press and propaganda turned to the service of political reform, with the inquisition as a major focus, on such a wide scale and with comparatively devastating effects.” (55) Though the Dutch themselves were trying heretics with their own state-run inquisition, it was argued that King Philip II of Spain (who succeeded Charles V) would introduce specifically a Spanish Inquisition in the Netherlands, not only crushing Protestants but denying Catholics their own freedoms as well. Popular literature created a horrific picture of an all-encompassing Spanish Inquisition that dominated the king and controlled every aspect of Spanish life. The inquisition became the fundamental instrument of Catholic oppression, not only of Protestants, but also of free thought and free men of any faith.

As the Calvinist element began to dominate in the Dutch revolt, one of the most famous documents in the creation of the myth of the inquisition was published in 1581, the *Apologie of William of Orange*. Written by a French Huguenot, the *Apologie* detailed a horrific inquisition, generated by Spaniards who “are of the blood of the Moors

and Jews.” (56) “With the *Apologie*, all of the anti-Inquisition propaganda of the past 40 years was enshrined in a political document that validated the Dutch revolt.” (57) When the English under Elizabeth I prepared to defend themselves against the Spanish armada, and the pope called for an English crusade, nationalistic fervor was fueled in England by anti-Catholic propaganda. Central to the propaganda campaign are a series of books and pamphlets detailing the horror of the Spanish Inquisition. The inquisition would become a hallmark of English anti-Catholic literature for 200 years, and be passed on to the popular anti-Catholic mythology in the United States.

Relying on these histories, fantastic accounts of alleged survivors and pure propaganda, an image of the inquisition was created that persists today. Fueled as well by the 18th Century Enlightenment and 19th Century Age of Scientism, the myth was created of “the universal oppressor of those who sought political liberty as well as true religion. In a series of specific circumstances and the articulation of local experience, the instruments of the Roman Church and the Spanish Empire merged into a single awesome institution: The Inquisition. Serving the diverse purposes of many sixteenth-century thinkers well, the Inquisition became a common object of reference in the debates over the problem of religious and civil toleration. Many people who found it difficult to agree with each other on many issues found it easy to agree upon The Inquisition.” (58)

Conclusion

Historical studies of the archives of the inquisitions in the 20th Century have created a different picture beyond the steamy rhetoric of Reformation polemics. At the beginning, a number of common assumptions concerning the inquisition were outlined. In conclusion, they should be briefly revisited:

- The inquisition as a singly, unified court system directly responsible to the pope and controlled solely by the papacy.

Even within the Papal States in the 16th century, the papacy had difficulty maintaining effective control over local inquisitions. Inquisitorial courts were usually controlled by the local church in alliance with local secular authority. Though it began in the 13th century as a papal- designated juridical system to remove “heresy- hunting” from control of the mob or secular authorities, it evolved rather quickly as a device of the local church and secular authorities to address local, and later national or dynastic goals. There were many inquisitions, rather than a singular “Inquisition.”

- The inquisition existed throughout Europe for nearly 700 years and focused its efforts on a “secret” and “hidden” church, similar to that of the Reformation churches.

The many inquisitions that took place existed sporadically in different regions, at different times, and to meet different local needs. The medieval inquisition barely existed, for example, in Spain and Portugal. For hundreds of years, the inquisition in many places existed only sporadically, if at all. In the 16th century, it existed primarily in Spain, Portugal, the Papal States and other Italian cities. It existed -- dominated by the State -- in France and, early in the century, in England. It did not exist as a single continuous entity, nor did it prosecute a “secret” church that was a precursor of Protestantism. Early heresies -- such as the Albigensians -- held doctrinal positions that were essentially unchristian that would have horrified the Protestant reformers.

- It was primarily aimed at the early Protestant reformers of the 16th century and the Spanish Inquisition alone killed and tortured hundreds of thousands of Protestant reformers.

The Spanish Inquisition was aimed primarily at Catholics of Jewish ancestry. In total, it is unlikely that even a thousand, let alone hundreds of thousands, Protestants suffered at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition. While those alleged to be Protestants were inquisitorial victims in England and Europe, there numbers were small and most were protected by Protestant or sympathetic rulers. Much of the focus of the various inquisitions were clerical abuses and what was considered scandalous behavior. Most cases in the inquisitions involved adultery, drunkenness, failure to attend to religious devotions, sacrilege, verbal abuse of clergy, etc.

- Vicious tortures were routinely used.

Torture was utilized, but under rules far stricter than the norm in secular courts of the time. Torture was never used for punishment. Exotic torture mechanisms were the creation of propagandists. Torture could only be used in cases involving a charge of heresy or a relapsed heretic. As the far majority of inquisitorial cases did not involve such issues, torture was a rare occurrence and a last resort.

- The Spanish Inquisition existed independent of Spanish secular authority and existed solely as an arm of the church, as did other inquisitions.

Though established with papal mandate, the Spanish Inquisition was an office of the Spanish government and existed so long because of that support. The crown and the Church in Spain, not the papacy that often took issue with its activities, controlled it. For the most part, inquisitions in Spain and elsewhere were under the control of the local church working with local secular authorities.

- The inquisition was a means for the Church to exercise its authority over science.

Inquisitions rarely involved themselves in the area of science, despite the well-known case of Galileo. Even in the Galileo case, the concern of Church authorities was not in the discussion of the theory of the orbit of the earth around the sun -- a theory that appeared to contradict Scripture -- but teaching what was then scientifically unverifiable as scientific fact.

- Persecution of religious dissent was unique to the inquisitions and to the Catholic Church in Europe.

Religious dissent was punished in all Protestant lands throughout the Reformation period, whether of Catholics or Protestants dissenting from the majority Protestant viewpoint. The difference was that this was considered solely a judicial activity of the state, rather than involving an ecclesial court.

In popular culture -- particularly in the United States -- the legend of the Inquisition thrives. Utilized as an image in political debates and the cultural wars, the inquisition remains an effective club. While the Church has acknowledged the errors in the past associated with the inquisition, no apology is necessary for the false and unhistorical caricature that remains part of the popular consciousness.

Recommended Resources

Two books cited extensively within this paper provide excellent overviews of the inquisition based on modern historical studies.

Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (1988) is available in paperback from University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 94720. Peters book is a fascinating account of the development of the myth of the inquisition and how polemics, art and literature enhanced this myth. Peters is the Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the University of Pennsylvania.

The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision (Yale University Press) by Henry Kamen is the best available study on the origins, methods and history of the Spanish Inquisition. Kamen is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a professor of the Higher Council for Scientific Research in Barcelona, Spain.

Summary Points

Of the many historical myths about Catholics and Catholicism perhaps the most pervasive are those centered on the inquisition in general and the Spanish Inquisition in particular. From the 16th through the early 20th Century, the legend of the Inquisition grew larger than its history. This legend of the inquisition persists today in the imagination, well after its debunking by historians.

- Inquisitions were ecclesial investigations, meaning that investigations were conducted either directly by, or

under the auspices of, the Church. The investigations were undertaken at certain times in certain regions under the authority of the local bishop and his designates, or under the auspices of papal-appointed legates, or representatives from Religious Orders delegated the task from the papacy.

The inquisition existed and it remains an unsettling part of Catholic history. However, the caricature of the inquisition that most of us have come to know and that is often utilized in anti-Catholic polemics has little to do with the reality of the inquisition.

From very early days (as noted in Scripture) the Christian community was forced to confront how to deal with those people who persisted in teachings contrary to the Apostolic Faith. For the most part, the early Church settled on admonishment, avoidance and, if a person persisted in error, expulsion from the community.

With the disastrous effect of doctrinal heresies on both Church and social unity there was a growing consensus that use of the “secular arm” was necessary, with even St. Augustine arguing in favor of it. With Christian emperors occupying the imperial throne, heretical views came to be seen as not only a violation of Christian unity, but as an act of treason against the State.

With the renewal of the papacy and the conversion of Europe accomplished, powerful reform movements began in the 11th Century that reaffirmed the need for unity of belief and the means to address doctrinal dissent that threatened both Church and society.

The “Inquisition” as a formal process of the Church would not be codified until the 13th Century. But in the two centuries prior, there was a strong movement to forcefully address religious dissent. To be a “heretic” meant facing possible mob justice and certain trial by secular courts.

The two heresies of the 12th and early 13th centuries that gave birth to the medieval inquisition were that of the Cathars (or Albigensians) and the Waldensians. They had a decidedly non-Christian “dualistic” perception of God, the source of which was essentially pagan philosophy. Their views were unique to the times and would have horrified the 16th century Protestant Reformers.

- The uncontrollable fanaticism of local mobs of heresy hunters, the indifference of certain ecclesiastics, the violence of secular courts and the bloodshed of the Albigensian crusade led to a determined effort by the papacy to exercise greater control over the determination and prosecution of heresy in the 13th century.

In 1231, Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) specifically commissioned the Dominicans as papal judges of heresy. Over the next 20 years there grew up a very specific state of canonical legislation for dealing with heresy. Though not as severe as the secular courts of Europe at the time, the penalties for heresy -- including confiscation of property and the formality of turning persistent heretics over to the secular courts for punishment -- became codified within ecclesial courts. This was the formal establishment of the medieval inquisition.

- By the late fourteenth and most of the fifteenth centuries, the work of such ecclesial courts was intermittent and occasionally non-existent.

Torture was not used to punish, as was common in the secular courts. The gruesome lists of instruments of torture were an invention of post-Reformation propaganda in regard to the Spanish Inquisition rather than the reality of the medieval inquisitions. Such actions cannot be justified in our own age, but they can at least be understood as part of accepted judicial procedure at that time. In any case, the use of torture in inquisition courts was far less extensive, and far less violent, than the norms of secular courts.

For the most part, those prosecuted for “heretical views” in the medieval inquisition were hardly organized in a systematic theology, or could be considered a “hidden church.” Those prosecuted were usually the ignorant, the troublemaker, the braggart and, at times surely, the drunkard in his cups professing blasphemy. Those prosecuted rarely held a deeply contrary belief system.

By the mid-to-late 14th century, papal commissioned inquisitors had disappeared from many parts of Europe. Inquisitorial courts, such as they were, were conducted under local episcopacies working closely with local temporal authorities and dealing with local circumstances. Regional control of the inquisition process -- and regional concerns -- would become dominant. A vast, papal-controlled, grand and singular inquisition never really existed in Europe.

It was only after the mid-fifteenth century that the Spanish Inquisition would develop, and its target would not be heretics in the traditional sense, but rather Jews who had converted to Christianity and were accused of secretly practicing their old faith. To many contemporary historians of the Spanish Inquisition, the story unfolds not as a “religious” persecution, but rather a racial pogrom.

- There seems to have been an allure to the claim that many *conversos* secretly practiced their old Jewish faith. For centuries, such legends would persist in Spain, though most evidence shows that there were few “secret” Judaizers and that most *conversos* were faithful Catholics. Up through 1530, the primary activity of the inquisition in Spain would be aimed at pursuing *conversos*. The same would be true from 1650 to 1720. While its activities declined thereafter, the inquisition continued to exist in Spain until its final abolition in 1824.

Under Charles V, successor to Ferdinand and Isabella, the Inquisition became an established part of Spanish justice. With the outbreak of Luther’s Reformation in Europe and the spread of its ideas in the 1520s, it was entrenched as a means to both protect the faith in Spain from infiltration of this new heresy, and as a further means to buttress royal power.

The image of a Spanish Inquisition burning hundreds of thousands of Protestant heretics has no basis in historical fact. There were so few Protestants in Spain that there could be no such prosecution, no matter how strong the inquisition and no matter how much anti-Catholic propagandists tried to create such an image in the 16th Century and thereafter.

As in the medieval Inquisition, torture was used to elicit confessions when there was insufficient proof. Torture was common throughout Europe in judicial actions and Spain was no exception. Torture could only be used in cases of heresy, which meant that it was not used for the minor offenses that made up the majority on inquisitorial activity. The scenes of sadism conjured up by popular writers on the inquisition have little basis in reality.

In all, just over 100 persons in Spain were found to be Protestants and turned over to the secular authorities for execution in the 1560s. In the last decades of the century, an additional 200 Spaniards were accused of being followers of Luther. Most of them were not actually Protestants. Any anti-religious sentiments, drunken mockery, anticlerical expressions were all classified by the inquisitors as “Lutheran.” Disrespect to church images, and eating meat on forbidden days, were taken as signs of heresy.

Only unrepentant heretics or relapsed heretics could be “relaxed” -- turned over -- to the secular authorities to be burned at the stake. After the bitter persecution of the conversos in the first 20 years of the inquisition, in the 17th and 18th centuries fewer than three people a year were executed throughout Spain. In fact, most condemned were burnt only in effigy, having previously died or fled the country.

The Spanish Inquisition was unique. Wrestled early from the papacy, it was controlled by the Spanish monarchy. Its aim, certainly, was to maintain a Catholic Spain, but its use was primarily centered on Catholic *conversos* of Jewish and, later, Muslim ancestry. It was certainly a force that kept Protestant -- and, to a degree, Enlightenment -- thought out of Spain, though the number of those actually prosecuted for such activity was very small.

Like the Spanish Inquisition, the Roman Inquisition and its subordinate tribunals appear to have been generally successful in keeping any substantial Protestant influence from spreading widely in the peninsula. Once the immediate problem of Protestantism was reduced, (the inquisition) turned the bulk of its operation to the question of internal ecclesiastical discipline and to offenses other than Protestantism.

- Though seen by some as a pre-Reformation martyr, his meddling in Florentine politics, rather than his call for moral reforms and his attacks on Pope Alexander VI caused Savonarola's downfall. Though certainly tried with the approbation of the pope, his death in 1498 was more a civil act than an inquisitorial judgment.

Giordano Bruno refused to recant his strange views and he was turned over to the secular authorities. He was burned on February 19, 1600. Bruno was an excessive character -- and a bit of a charlatan -- who rejected fundamental beliefs of Catholicism and was condemned by the Protestant reformers as well. A man who abandoned the priesthood, in the difficult days of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation he was certain to be prosecuted and seemed to court his own martyrdom.

Galileo's 1633 trial is most often portrayed as Galileo the scientist arguing the supremacy of reason and the tribunal judges demanding that reason abjure to faith. The trial was neither. Galileo, a firm and orthodox Catholic, and the tribunal judges shared a common view that science and the Bible could not stand in contradiction. If there appeared to be a contradiction, such a contradiction resulted from either weak science, or poor interpretation of Scripture. In context, the trial exhibited both faults. Galileo's technology was far too limited at the time to scientifically prove his assertion of the earth's double rotation. At the same time, the tribunal judges were at fault for a literal interpretation of biblical passages and making scientific judgments never intended by the Scriptural authors.

"The Inquisition was an image assembled from a body of legends and myths which, between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries, established the perceived character of inquisitorial tribunals and influenced all ensuing efforts to recover their historical reality. That body took shape in the context of intensified religious persecution as a consequence of the Reformation of the sixteenth century and of the central role of Spain, the greatest power in Europe, in assuming the role of defender of Roman Catholicism."

An image of Spain circulated through late sixteenth-century Europe, borne by means of political and religious propaganda that blackened the characters of Spaniards and their ruler to such an extent that Spain became the symbol of all forces of repression, brutality, religious and political intolerance, and intellectual and artistic backwardness for the next four centuries. Spaniards and Hispanophiles have termed this process and the image that resulted from it as 'The Black Legend,' *la leyenda negra*."

Another source for the myth of the inquisition was Catholic Italy. Italian Catholics -- the papal representatives included -- had a dislike for the Spanish whom they considered rural racist bumpkins. The attacks in Spain on the conversos were viewed as despicable in Rome. Italians felt that Spanish hypocrisy in religion, together with the existence of the Inquisition, proved that the tribunal was created not for religious purity, but simply to rob the Jews. Similar views were certainly held by the prelates of the Holy See whenever they intervened in favor of the conversos.

The true explosion in inquisition rhetoric was in the period just prior to and through the revolt in the Netherlands from Spanish control. That revolt involved a fragile alliance of Catholic and Calvinist leaders against Catholic Spain. Beginning in 1548, the printing press and propaganda turned to the service of political reform, with the inquisition as a major focus, on such a wide scale and with comparatively devastating effects.

When the English under Elizabeth I prepared to defend themselves against the Spanish armada, and the pope called for an English crusade, nationalistic fervor was fueled in England by anti-Catholic propaganda. Central to the propaganda campaign are a series of books and pamphlets detailing the horror of the Spanish Inquisition. The inquisition would become a hallmark of English anti-Catholic literature for 200 years, and be passed on to the popular anti-Catholic mythology in the United States.

Religious dissent was punished in all Protestant lands throughout the Reformation period, whether of Catholics or Protestants dissenting from the majority Protestant viewpoint. The difference was that this was considered solely a judicial activity of the state, rather than involving an ecclesial court.

While the Church has acknowledged the errors in the past associated with the inquisition, no apology is necessary for the false and unhistorical caricature that remains part of the popular consciousness.

ENDNOTES

1. See *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2000) pp. 15-53.
2. For the best contemporary research on the trial of Galileo see *Galileo's Daughter*, by Dava Sobel (Walker & Co., NY, 1999).
3. "Is It Enough to be Sorry?" Lance Morrow, *Time*, March 27, 2000.
4. Dr. Jerry Kaifetz, "Pope John Paul II's apology falls way short by Catholic standards, *The Times* newspaper (May 20, 2000).
5. *Caesar and Christ*, Will Durant (Simon & Schuster, 1972) p. 603.
6. See 2 Cor 11: 3-4; Titus 3: 10-11.
7. St. Augustine, "Letter to Boniface."
8. See *Medieval History*, by Norman Cantor (Macmillan, 1970 Second Edition) pp. 45-57
9. For a brief outline of the difficulties of the papacy in Rome in the 10th century see *The Age of Faith*, by Will Durant (Simon & Schuster, 1978) pp. 537-540.
10. *Inquisition*, by Edward Peters (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1989) p. 40.
11. *Saints and Sinners*, by Eamon Duffy (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 82-83.
12. Peters, p. 40.
13. *Encyclopedia of Catholic History*, by Matthew Bunson (Our Sunday Visitor, 1995) p. 43.
14. Peters, p. 47.
15. *ibid*, p. 51.
16. *ibid*, p. 54.
17. *Ille humani generis*, Pope Gregory IX.
18. Peters, 53.
19. *ibid*, 70.
20. The best known manual for inquisitorial judges was *Directorium Inquisitorum* by Nicolau Eymeric, collected in the late 14th century. The manual would be a fundamental resource in the 16th and 17th centuries.
21. Peters, p. 65.
22. *ibid*, p. 65.
23. *Age of Faith*, Durant pp. 33-37.
24. 24. *ibid*, pp. 164-166.
25. 25. Peters, 74.

26. 26. However, as noted in the case of Wycliff, the papacy was often called on to review the theological positions involved. Particularly in such high profile cases such as Wycliff and Hus, bishops would request papal review of the positions being espoused.
27. *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, by Henry Kamen (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 8.
28. See *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain*, B. Netanyahu (Random House, 1995).
29. Peters, p. 84.
30. *ibid*, p. 89.
31. Kamen, p. 74.
32. *ibid*, p. 92.
33. Erasmus (1466-1536), who served for a short time as counselor to Charles V, was a Dutch humanist and scholar. Though a harsh critic of the Church he would not join the Reformation and was friendly with St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, both martyrs to the Reformation in England. Though he was offered a cardinal's hat in 1535, his writings were eventually condemned in the Catholic Counter Reformation.
34. Peters, p. 89.
35. Kamen, p. 91.
36. *ibid*, p. 93.
37. *ibid*, p. 95.
38. *ibid*, p. 98.
39. *ibid*, p. 189
40. For a full outline of the Spanish Inquisition and the use of torture see Kamen, pp. 174-192.
41. Kamen, p. 203.
42. See Kamen, pp. 192-213.
43. Kamen, p. 304.
44. Peters, p. 111.
45. *ibid*.
46. *The Renaissance*, by Will Durant (Simon & Schuster, 1981) p.161.
47. *ibid*, pp. 143-162.
48. *The Age of Reason Begins*, by Will and Ariel Durant (Simon & Schuster, 1989) pp. 620-621.
49. *ibid*, p. 621.
50. In the late 19th century funds were raised internationally to place a "spike" commemorative at the site where Bruno was burned. Demonstrations -- usually anti-Catholic -- are held there annually on the anniversary of his death.
51. See Catholic League research paper on Galileo www.catholicleague.org

52. Peters, p. 122
53. *ibid*, p. 131.
54. Kamen, p. 309.
55. Peters, p. 144.
56. Kamen, p. 310.
57. Peters, p. 153.
58. *ibid*, p. 154

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