

The Spanish Inquisition: Fact Versus Fiction

by Marvin R. O'Connell

"Even while I breathed there came to my nostrils the breath of the vapor of heated iron. A suffocating odor pervaded the prison. A deeper glow settled each moment in the eyes that glared at my agonies. A richer tint of crimson diffused itself over the pictured horrors of blood. There could be no doubt of the design of my tormentors. Oh, most unrelenting! Oh, most demoniac of men! 'Death,' I said, 'any death but that of the pit.'" And so on for twenty pages reads the most familiar literary indictment of the wickedness of the Spanish Inquisition. Edgar Allen Poe's short story, "The Pit and the Pendulum," is, to be sure, a piece of fiction, its author a specialist in creating scenes of horror and dread, as the titles of some of his other works suggest: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Haunted Palace," "The Conqueror Worm." Yet Poe's hideous image of the red-hot poker being prepared as an instrument of torture by grinning Spanish sadists - the "most demoniac of men" - did not strain the credulity of his readers a century and a half ago, nor does it today. We may indeed express our abhorrence a little more light-heartedly - when Professor Higgins, in *My Fair Lady*, wishes to evoke the most frightful of possible alternatives, he sings, "I'd prefer a new edition/Of the Spanish Inquisition," and, with the shivers running up and down the spine, we know exactly what he means.

At a rather more sophisticated level was the picture drawn by Dostoyevsky who, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, imagines the Grand Inquisitor, with "his withered face and sunken eyes," in confrontation with Jesus on the streets of Seville, where the Savior has just restored life to a dead child. "The Inquisitor sees everything; he sees them set the coffin down at Jesus's feet, sees the child rise up, and his face darkens. He knits his thick grey brows, and his eyes gleam with a sinister light. He holds out his finger and bids the guards arrest Jesus. And such is his power, so completely are the people cowed into submission and trembling obedience to him, that the crowd immediately makes way for the guards, and in the midst of a deathlike silence they lay hands on Jesus and take him to the Inquisitor who says: 'Tomorrow I shall condemn thee and burn thee at the stake as the worst of heretics.'"

Once more, suspension of disbelief is not so difficult, because it is a given that the officers of the Spanish Inquisition were so glutted with pride and blood-lust that they would not have stopped at deicide to gain their ends. Does not the very name of Torquemada summon up visions of ruthlessness and cruelty?

And then of course there is the cinematic conception of the era of the Inquisition, brought to the silver screen in dozens of swashbuckling melodramas, in which the upright, truthful, intelligent, compassionate, handsome, brave Anglo, with his light complexion and buff-colored hair - this last constituent sends a strong ethnic message - crosses swords with the cruel, devious, lustful, foppish, superstitious, cowardly Spaniard with - please notice - his swarthy skin and greasy black hair and mustache. Needless to say, North Atlantic virtue always triumphs over Mediterranean depravity in these contests, Protestant blue-eyed heroism over intrinsically inferior Catholic dark-eyed perfidy, and the audience goes home contented, having seen the Spanish galleon, all afire, sink beneath the waves, while the gallant Erroll Flynn (or someone like him) stands coolly self-possessed on the main deck of his ship, his protective arm around the waist of the beautiful blonde lady he has just rescued from the clutches of villainous Latins.

These pulp-fiction romances seldom advert directly to the Inquisition; movie moguls make it a rule to keep their plots uncomplicated. But they do trade in a deep-seated prejudice which has been so carefully cultivated over so long a time that it has become an integral part of our culture. It was not only Poe and Dostoyevsky and even Professor Higgins who assumed that the Spanish Inquisition was wicked because it was Spanish; the rest of us, the *hoi polloi*, concluded the same. To assert that conclusion was enough to establish its truth; no evidence was required and no rebuttal allowed. In one of the most enduring public relations victories ever accomplished, the history of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Spain's Golden Age, was consciously and methodically distorted by what scholars now candidly call "the Black Legend." This collection of bitter fables, with their overtones of bigotry and racism, proves once more - if proof were necessary - that a lie told often enough and convincingly enough will in the end be accepted as gospel. "One of the great conditions of anger and hatred," the wryly cynical Thackeray observed, "is that you must tell and believe lies against the hated object in order to be consistent." The lies in this instance about the Spanish character and about the Catholicism practiced in the Spain of Queen Isabella, St. Teresa of Avila and Cervantes, were told in order to promote a Protestant and particularly an English Protestant ascendancy, which in due course crossed the Atlantic with the colonists who eventually founded the United States; the sad irony is that though any serious commitment to that cause has long

since vanished from the old world and the new, the racist and bigoted distortions put on the record in its behalf by the concoctors of the Black Legend have proved to have a life of their own.

But perhaps the Spanish Inquisition was indeed a wicked institution. If so, that judgment should be made on the basis of those discernible facts an honest examination is able to reveal, and not upon the fevered testimony of self-interested politicians, biased preachers, witless pamphleteers, or - deriving from one or more of these - naive writers of fiction. And, as is the case with any historical reconstruction of a phenomenon now passed away, to understand the contextual framework is a condition for understanding the phenomenon itself. An organization as consequential as the Spanish Inquisition could not have taken shape in a vacuum, nor could its activities have been divorced from the circumstances of its time and place. The same principle therefore holds good in its regard as it does in analyzing other events contemporaneous with the early years of the Inquisition. Thus, for example, we need to know what political and social as well as theological concerns persuaded Queen Elizabeth I of England to treat her Catholic subjects with such barbarity; similarly, we need to recognize that the fanaticism that drove Dutch Calvinists to hang all the priests and vandalize all the churches that fell under their control was not unrelated to a primitive nationalism and even to a primitive capitalism.

As far as the Spanish Inquisition is concerned, one must look for context to chronology and geography.

Chronology first. The Holy Office, as it was popularly called, was founded in 1478 on the strength of a papal rescript requested by the sovereigns of a newly united Spain, the wife and husband, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon. For precedent they cited the functioning of the Roman Inquisition during the thirteenth century when, under this rubric, the popes established special circuit courts to investigate and, when possible, to root up various heterodox movements, especially in southern France and northern Italy. These movements - lumped together under the rather sinister-sounding label "Cathari" - had alarmed the lords temporal of the time no less than the lords spiritual, because the Manichaean doctrines and life-style proposed by the Cathari were deemed as subversive of civil well-being as of ecclesiastical. Over the course of a hundred years or so the Cathari were pretty well stamped out or driven underground through the cooperative efforts of Church and State. The inquisitors' job had been to establish the juridical facts in each case, and if, as a result, an individual were judged to be an unyielding heretic, the government's job had been to exact punishment from that person, up to and including death.

Yet in many respects - and here is a truth extremely difficult for us at the end of the twentieth century to comprehend - to speak of "Church and State" during the Middle Ages, and indeed much later, is to draw a distinction without a difference. That the civil and ecclesiastical entities represented essentially separate spheres, that religion should be a strictly private matter left to the choice of each individual, that persons of conflicting religious views or with no religious views at all could live in fruitful harmony - these ideas were unknown during the time the Roman inquisitors were harassing the Albigensians in the south of France, and unknown also when, two centuries later, Ferdinand and Isabella asked for the establishment of an Inquisition unique to Spain. Pope Sixtus IV, in granting their request, explicitly testified to the principle that it was the first duty of kings to nurture and defend the faith of their people, and implicitly he professed what was for him and his contemporaries a truism, that no society could exist without religious uniformity, that - to appropriate a celebrated statement of another era - "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Here was a conviction fully appreciated, incidentally, by the likes of Elizabeth I and the Dutch Calvinists, who gave it full rein in their own persecution-policies.

The organization of the Spanish Inquisition differed markedly from its Roman predecessor. The former, with its emphasis upon centralization and royal control, reflected the emergence of the nation-state and the responsibility the monarchy now assumed to guarantee religious orthodoxy. Thus the Grand Inquisitor was appointed by the king and answerable to him, with only the nominal approval of the pope. The Inquisitor in turn appointed the five members of the High Council over which he presided; this body, with its swarm of consultants and clerical staff, exercised ultimate power within the Inquisition's competence. It decided all disputed questions and heard all appeals from the lower inquisitorial courts, which by the middle of the sixteenth century numbered nineteen scattered across Spain and several more in Spanish-occupied territories in Italy and America. Without the permission of the High Council no priest or nobleman could be imprisoned. An *auto-de-fe*, the religious ceremony which included the punishment of convicted heretics and the reconciliation of those who recanted, could not be held anywhere without the sanction of the High Council. Control was also enhanced by the requirement that the lower courts submit to the Council yearly general reports and monthly financial ones.

As far as procedure was concerned, the Spanish Inquisition pretty much followed the precedent established in the thirteenth century and the models provided by secular tribunals. The legal machinery was put into motion by sworn denunciation of an individual or, on occasion, of a particular village or region. In the latter instance, prior to the formal inquiry a "term of grace" of thirty to forty days was routinely issued, during which period

suspected dissidents could recant or prepare their defense. Once accused, a defendant was provided the services of a lawyer, and he could not be examined by the officers of the court without the presence of two disinterested priests. The identity of the witnesses of his alleged crime, however, was not revealed to him, and so he could not confront them. This was a severe disadvantage, even though harsh punishment was meted out to those revealed to have been false accusers. Judges, not juries, decided questions of fact as well as of law, and in effect the Spanish Inquisition combined the functions of investigation, prosecution, and judgment. Indeed, anyone arrested by the Inquisition was presumed guilty until proven innocent, a circumstance very unsettling to us who have enjoyed the blessings of the English common law tradition. Torture, a commonplace with secular jurisdictions, had been forbidden at first in the old Roman Inquisition, but then it had gradually come into use, with the provisos that it be applied only once and that it not threaten life or limb. In Spain these rules were adopted from the start, but early on Sixtus IV, deluged with complaints, protested to the Spanish government that the Inquisition was employing torture too freely. Unhappily the pope's remonstrances fell on deaf ears.

But to return to the chronological consideration, with a bit of geography thrown in for good measure. In 1478, at the moment the Inquisition was set up, the Christians of the Iberian peninsula had been engaged in a crusade for nearly seven hundred years. The fighting had not been constant, to be sure - it took our enlightened epoch to develop the fine art of total war - but ever since the eighth century, when the Arab Muslims had stormed across the straits of Gibraltar from Africa and with fire and sword had subjugated the peninsula as far north as the Ebro River, the native resistance to their occupation had been constant. And, by fits and starts, with frequent intervals of inactivity, resistance had gradually evolved into counter-attack, into a growing determination to win back what had been lost to the alien invaders. Little by little this relentless process of reconquest - *la reconquista* - drove the descendants of those invaders, the Moors, ever farther into the south until, in 1478, they had left to them only a small enclave around the city of Granada. The end of the crusade was in sight.

It would be difficult to exaggerate how profound an impact this extraordinarily long and all-consuming *cruzado* had upon the formation of Spanish public policy. Comparisons are impossible to draw, because no other Christian people had experienced anything even remotely similar. As suggested above, a Europe-wide consensus had indeed developed during the Middle Ages that religious dissidents could not be tolerated if true religion and harmonious society were to endure. Add to this the universal conviction that heretics adhered to their objectionable opinions not out of conscience but out of bad will, and it comes as no surprise that increasingly stringent laws were enacted throughout Christendom against those who refused to conform. Since such a refusal was judged the worst possible crime, the ultimate penalty for it everywhere was the worst form of capital punishment imaginable, burning at the stake. Though this ferocious sentence was carried out relatively rarely, the prospect of it did act as a deterrent and did induce all except the most stout-hearted to disavow their heterodoxies once brought to light by a judicial process. Still, the troublesome possibility remained that those who had formally recanted might have done so out of fear rather than conversion of mind, and that they continued to practice their subversive heresies in secret, waiting for a more propitious day.

In the Iberia of the *reconquista* a scenario of this kind presented a danger profoundly more serious than elsewhere. As the Christians slowly reestablished their hegemony over the peninsula - expressed in the two distinct political entities, Portugal and Spain - the potential antagonists of religious uniformity they were determined to impose were not indigenous eccentrics, as was the case in other European countries (bear in mind that the Protestant Reformation was at this moment still forty years in the future), but a conquered population linked by ties of race and religion to the Muslims living in the principalities of North Africa, which at Gibraltar lay only sixteen watery miles away. Even more ominous from the Spanish point of view was the fact that these so-called barbary states - the modern nations of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia - formed part of a vast imperial system established by the Muslim Turks, a system as powerful and menacing to western Europe as the Soviet bloc was conceived to be in our day. As the *reconquista* proceeded, therefore, and especially after Granada and the last remnant of Spanish Islam fell to the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, policy-makers had to decide how to treat the Moors and the relatively small but influential Jewish community which, in marked contrast to what our century has witnessed, had flourished within a larger Islamic society. The Christian victors, fearful of Muslim sympathizers in their midst, offered no compromise: Moors and Jews had to accept baptism or face expulsion from the country now defined as entirely Catholic.

What this decision amounted to, of course, was a policy of forced conversion, something quite incompatible with traditional Catholic teaching. This fact was pointed out by several popes and numerous Spanish theologians over a long period, but the sentiment expressed by one of Ferdinand of Aragon's royal predecessors was the one that prevailed: "The enemies of the cross of Christ and violators of the Christian law are likewise our enemies and the enemies of our kingdom, and ought therefore to be dealt with as such."

Predictably, however, the stark choice between conformity and exile invited pretense and hypocrisy on the part of those dragooned into a faith not of their own choosing. The Jews and Moors who conformed rather than depart the land in which they and their ancestors had lived for hundreds of years did so with varying measures of reluctance, merging often into downright dissimulation. And this is precisely why the Inquisition was created by the Spanish monarchs: as the etymology of the word implies, the first task of this new judicial body was inquiry, specifically inquiry into the authenticity of the conversion of the Moors and Jews who had come under the sway of those monarchs.

But once again we must stress the chronological track, because the bloody reputation of the Spanish Inquisition - though it formally existed for more than three centuries - was earned during its first decade and a half, even before, that is, the capture of Granada. During this unhappy period perhaps as many as 2000 persons were burnt as heretics. Though this number is only a small fraction of what the Black Legend routinely alleged, it is nevertheless sobering enough. Almost all those executed were *conversos* or New Christians, converts, that is, from Judaism who were convicted of secretly practicing their former religion. It should be borne in mind that the Inquisition, as a church-court, had no jurisdiction over Moors and Jews as such. But, ironically, once such persons accepted baptism they became capable of heresy in the technical sense of the word. Thus the early savagery of the Spanish Inquisition contributes another chapter to the sad history of anti-Semitism, motivated on this occasion, however, more by politico-religious expediency than by racial hatred. It was in any event an enormous and unforgivable miscalculation. Far from constituting a danger to the nation, the Jewish *conversos* of previous decades had already been admirably blended into the larger community. As Professor William Monter has pointed out, the New Christians "represent the first known large-scale and long-term assimilation of Jews into any Christian society. Although the process included many painful adaptations, some severe backlash and even a decade of brutal persecution under the Inquisition, it ended with their general integration into Spanish society. Their descendants quietly flouted racist codes and contributed to the vibrant Catholicism of Golden Age Spain; St. Teresa of Avila was the granddaughter of a New Christian penanced by the Inquisition."

It seems as though the violence with which the Spanish Inquisition began its tenure exhausted or perhaps shamed it into a moderation which the purveyors of the Black Legend stonily ignore. But the facts cannot be gainsaid. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Spanish sovereignty extended from Italy to most of Latin America, on average less than three persons a year were executed by the Inquisition, which was formally constituted in all those places as well as at home. Or, to give the Spaniards the benefit of the doubt, perhaps as the bitter struggle of the *reconquista* gradually faded from their collective memory, even as the Muslim threat itself receded, they exercised a restraint consistent with their principles. However that may be, for my part I am glad there is no longer in existence an Inquisition that might have me arrested on the basis of charges lodged by persons unknown to me, as happened to St. Ignatius Loyola. Yet as one who has lived through most of a century in which cruelty and atrocity and oppression have reached a pitch, quantitatively and qualitatively, inconceivable to our ancestors - inconceivable even to Torquemada - I think a measure of discretion would be appropriate when bemoaning the wickedness of the Spanish Inquisition, more discretion anyway than that exercised by Poe and Dostoyevsky.

Marvin R. O'Connell is professor emeritus of history at the University of Notre Dame and a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul. The author of a prize-winning biography of the redoubtable John Ireland, he is currently at work on the life of Edward Sorin, the founder of Notre Dame. Readers responded enthusiastically to Father O'Connell's contribution to our Modernism issue.

Marvin.R.O'Connell.1@nd.edu.