

# The Inquisition

## Millions killed? Really?

By A Catholic Apologist

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Objection: "Millions of people were killed by the Catholic Church through inquisitions because they believed in Jesus and the Bible. Therefore, it is anti-Christ!"

Edward Peters, from the University of Pennsylvania, is the author of *Inquisition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Henry Kamen, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, wrote *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Neither author is a Catholic.

These two books are in the forefront of an emerging, very different perspective on the Inquisitions: an understanding that they were exponentially less inclined to issue death penalties than had previously been commonly assumed, and also quite different in character and even essence than the longstanding anti-Catholic stereotypes would have us believe.

On page 87 of his book, Dr. Peters states: "The best estimate is that around 3,000 death sentences were carried out in Spain by Inquisitorial verdict between 1550 and 1800, a far smaller number than that in comparable secular courts."

Likewise, Dr. Kamen states in his book: "Taking into account all the tribunals of Spain up to about 1530, it is unlikely that more than two thousand people were executed for heresy by the Inquisition. (p. 60) It is clear that for most of its existence that the Inquisition was far from being a juggernaut of death either in intention or in capability... It would seem that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fewer than three people a year were executed in the whole of the Spanish monarchy from Sicily to Peru, certainly a lower rate than in any provincial court of justice in Spain or anywhere else in Europe." (p. 203)

When most people today hear the word 'inquisition' automatically images of unjust trials, torture, persecution and burnings at the stake are conjured up. Not only is the Inquisition attacked for its various abuses, but also the very concept of inquisition itself is lampooned as contrary to the modern, democratic and indifferent attitude towards religion that we all supposedly should possess today.

It can be said that the first religious inquisition was conducted by Moses after he descended from Mount Sinai and found that the Hebrews had made to themselves a golden calf to which they sacrificed and bowed in adoration. Moses, illuminated by God, shattered the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments, destroyed the calf and beat it to powder, and then made the Hebrews drink water containing the dust of it. Afterwards, he assembled the sons of Levi and said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, Put every man his sword on his side, and go to and fro

from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor" (Exodus 32:27-28).

In his zeal to preserve the true religion of God and prevent all the Hebrews falling into the degradation of idolatry Moses had 23,000 of his fellow race killed that day. Further, God specifically authorized Moses to act as an inquisitor on a continual basis among the Jewish people and punish severely offenses against the law of God: "If there is found among you, within any of your towns which the Lord your God gives you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, in transgressing his covenant, and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden, and it is told you and you hear of it; then you shall inquire diligently, and if it is true and certain that such an abominable thing has been done in Israel, then you shall bring forth to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones. On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses he that is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness" (Deuteronomy 17:2-6).

To understand the various Catholic inquisitions it is necessary to place them in their historical contexts. It is still universally recognized that the State has the right to protect itself and its citizens from external and internal enemies that seek to either undermine or destroy it. Therefore, no reasonable person questions the need for any State to maintain an appropriate army, police force, civil emergency force, etc. Nor is it questioned when a State erects and maintains a just court system to enforce the law of the land in order to secure public order and protect the common good.

Medieval European societies were Christian societies. They were, despite their deficiencies, wonderful fruits of the redemption of Our Lord Jesus Christ. To quote Pope Leo XIII, the Medieval age was "a time when the philosophy of the Gospel governed the states... The influence of Christian wisdom and its divine virtue penetrated the laws, institutions and the customs of the people. Then the religion instituted by Jesus Christ... flourished everywhere, thanks to the favor of princes... Then the priesthood and the Empire were united by a happy concord." *Immortale Dei*, 1885, no 21.

Therefore, unlike today Medieval European states were not indifferent to religion, but rather, like individuals, possessed a religion themselves. They saw it as their duty to promote the common good by supporting the true religion of God both within and without their borders. In such societies, to promote a religion contrary to the State religion was considered not only an offense against God but also treason against the State. The creeds of certain heretical groups, if put into practice, would have undone the whole feudal and hierarchical fabric of society. Laws were put into place prohibiting proselytism and propaganda in favor of such religions and these laws were enforced and offenders punished. Hence, the establishment of either religious or secular courts of inquiry, or inquisitions.

## THE MEDIEVAL INQUISITION

During the 12th and 13th centuries, violent Gnostic sects appeared in southern Europe, attacking the church and encouraging revolt against civil authorities. These sectarians claimed to possess a secret source of religious knowledge, considered the material world to have been created by an Evil Principle and hence believed all matter to be evil, scorned marriage, encouraged suicide, and forbade the taking of oaths which bound the fabric of Feudal society. Modern Fundamentalists claim an affinity with these Gnostics simply because they possessed a vernacular translation of the Scriptures. They conclude from this fact that the Catholic Church was persecuting them because they were "Bible-Believers." One such person is Dave Hunt who in recent years has written: "It is

quite clear that the Vaudois, Albigenses, Waldenses, and other similar groups were heretics to Rome only. In fact, their beliefs were much like those of the Reformers, of whom they were, in a sense, the forerunners." Dave Hunt, *A Woman Rides the Beast*, Harvest House, 1994, p.257. Henry C. Lea, the most anti-Catholic writer on the Inquisition had to admit that "the cause of orthodoxy was the cause of progress and civilization. Had Catharism become dominant, or even had it been allowed to exist on equal terms, its influence would have been disastrous."

The Church, together with secular governments, established the Medieval Inquisition in 1184. Its object was to try charges of heresy. If the person charged was prepared to repent his errors, a public penance was imposed on him; if he remained obdurate he was declared guilty of heresy and handed over to the State for punishment. Its punishments were severe and ranged from loss of property, imprisonment or death. The Church approved the severe repression of heresy and believed that in the circumstances it faced, was justified in her approval.

In 1232, Pope Gregory IX appointed the newly formed Dominicans and Franciscans as specialist and permanent inquisitors. These religious were dispassionate, unselfish, highly popular, fearless beyond corruption and motivated solely to serve the interests of the Church and the salvation of souls. In appointing such men Pope Gregory was motivated by various factors, including stemming the encroachment of secular-courts into religious affairs. However, his chief desire was to protect the children of God from error while insisting that the misguided heretic be brought back into the grace of God. Court procedures and rules were also improved and unjust inquisitors removed and punished. See William Thomas Walsh, *Characters of the Inquisition*, TAN Books and Publishers Inc. 1987, pages 47-48.)

It was deemed a failure for an inquisitor if he could not convert a heretic and had to hand him over to the secular arm to be burned at the stake. One popular myth about the Inquisition is that the vast majority of those who appeared before it were sentenced to death. In fact, extant records indicate dramatically otherwise. For example, out of the 930 cases that appeared before the tribunal in Toulouse, France, only 42 were abandoned to the secular arm to be burned, 307 imprisoned, while 271 were released from punishments. (William Thomas Walsh, *Characters of the Inquisition* p.55.) Other penalties included the confiscation or destruction of property, to hear Mass and religious services, to abstain from manual labor, to receive Communion, to forsake soothsaying and usury, to give alms, or to go on pilgrimage or crusade.

Torture was sanctioned by Popes Innocent IV, Alexander IV and Clement IV not as punishment but to elicit the truth. It was to be used once only and with the consent of the local Bishop. It was not to cause "loss of limb or imperil life." It is true, however, that restrictions were not always heeded and its application was in many cases extreme. The activity of the Medieval Inquisition contributed greatly to the restoration of order and repression of violence that had plagued Europe for over two hundred years.

## THE SPANISH INQUISITION

The Spanish Inquisition was established in 1478 and is the most famous, or infamous, of all Inquisitions, depending on which version of history one may read. In 1492, Spain was finally united as a single country after nearly eight centuries of struggle against the Moors. Queen Isabella knew that Spain's unity depended upon a strong Church. She set about halting many abuses, reforming the Church by raising educational and moral standards. One of the more serious problems faced by Isabella was the number of Jews and Moors who had pretended to convert to the Catholic religion

without really believing in it. These false converts had risen to high positions in government and Church, and many were secretly plotting the downfall of Isabella, Spain and the Church.

The method chosen by Isabella to find these agents was the Inquisition. What is often overlooked is that the Spanish Inquisition was instituted for persons who professed to be Catholics and not for practicing Jews or Moslems. It also aimed to unearth and bring to penance bigamists, adulterers, heretics, blasphemers and other baptized men and women who violated the teachings of the Church.

At first there were abuses, with many people being falsely accused, tortured and imprisoned. Popes Leo X, Paul III, Paul IV and Sixtus IV condemned these abuses. Pope Leo X, for example, excommunicated the Catholic tribunal at Toledo and ordered the arrest of the witnesses who appeared before it for perjury. New judges were appointed, headed by the Dominican Thomas de Torquemada. He reformed procedures, making them more lenient, improved prison conditions and personally heard appeals. Torquemada was pious and just, and certainly does not deserve the reputation foisted upon him by slanderers who have an "axe to grind" against all things Catholic.

The 16th Century was a brutal period. The use of torture and execution by burning at the stake was common in Catholic and Protestant Europe. In the Elizabethan courts of Protestant England people were hung, drawn and quartered for hearing Mass in their own homes. Contemporary English propaganda would have us believe that Elizabeth I was "good Queen Bess" and that Mary Tudor was "Bloody Mary" for executing Protestant leaders after she became Queen. In fact, Elizabeth's reign of 44 years and 4 months was one of repression and persecution. The Protestant historian Hallam asserts that "the rack seldom stood idle in the Tower for all the latter part of Elizabeth's reign." Further, not only was the Mass illegal in Elizabethan England but anyone who did not attend Anglican services was fined. Anyone who refused to take the Oath of Supremacy after two refusals was executed. Bringing Catholic religious items into the country was punished by confiscation of property. To convert to Catholicism was high treason; priests could be executed if caught; informers roamed the country reporting on priests and Catholic activity.

The Spanish Inquisition, in fact, was perhaps the most just court system established before the modern period. Only 3,000 of the 100,000 put on trial were executed in the Inquisition's 340 year history. By keeping Spain Catholic, that country avoided the religious wars that racked the rest of Europe. In addition, the witchcraft hysteria that swept through Germany and England (which saw 130,000 women executed on flimsy or no evidence) was found to be baseless by the Inquisition, saving many innocent lives.

## THE ROMAN INQUISITION

The Roman Inquisition was established in 1542 and was the least active of the three Inquisitions, yet this fact has not spared it from criticism due mainly to the celebrated case of Galileo Galilee. Since this case, the Church has had to suffer the accusation of being anti-scientific and bent on keeping humanity in the darkness of its superstitious beliefs.

Galileo was born in 1564 and was an Italian Catholic working in physics, mathematics and astronomy. In 1610 Galileo published his book *Siderius Nuncius* in which he attempted to defend the "Copernican System." Copernicus had decades earlier proposed a heliocentric solar system with the sun rather than the earth at the center of it. When still a student in Rome Copernicus defended his thesis with the approval of ecclesiastical authorities. He even had permission to dedicate his book to Pope Paul III. Copernicus later became a highly respected clergyman. In 1616, Galileo drew attention from the Roman Inquisition. The opinion of theological experts working for the Holy

Office was that the heliocentric view of the Solar System was dangerous and that the assertion of the immobility of the sun was formally heretical, being at least apparently inconsistent with Joshua (10:12-13) which infers the motion of the sun: "Sun, stand thou still at Gibeon, and thou Moon in the valley of Aijalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies."

Galileo asserted that it was "a fatal and very common mistake to stop always at the literal sense." In this he was correct, but where he erred was in his scientific proofs in support of the Copernican system, which were demonstrably wrong and inadequate. The Church drew support against Galileo from the works of other scientists such as Clavius and Francis Bacon. In light of the opinion of consulting theologians the Pope directed Cardinal Bellarmine to convince Galileo to cease holding and supporting the heliocentric system.

In 1632, Galileo was brought before the Inquisition again for publishing his Dialogue on the Two Great World Systems. The 1616 theological opinions were reiterated and Galileo was condemned as a heretic. Galileo again renounced his views, the sale of his book was stopped and he was placed under house arrest. It is patently untrue that he was ever tortured or placed in prison. He was confined to the castle of a cardinal, one of the better residences in Europe! The Pope at the time remained friendly towards him and actually granted him a lifetime pension from 1632 and his blessing on his deathbed in 1642.

Since neither the Pope or any Church Congregation promulgated the theological opinions of the Holy Office experts as official Church teaching the infallibility of the Pope or the Ordinary Magisterium cannot be impugned. Neither, in justice, should the Catholic Church be attacked for being unscientific, especially by Protestants, for their forefathers were even more radically opposed to the Copernican System.

Martin Luther declared: "People gave ear to an upstart astrologer who strove to show that the earth revolves, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun and the moon... This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy, but sacred Scripture tells us (Joshua 10:13) that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth." See Kuhn, Thomas, *The Copernican Revolution*, NY: Vintage Books, 1959, page 191. The Luther quote is from *Table Talk* (edited by William Hazlitt, London, 1884), p.69 (June 4, 1539).

"Some think it a distinguished achievement to construct such a crazy thing as that Prussian astronomer who moves the earth and fixes the sun. Verily, wise rulers should tame the unrestraint of men's minds." Quoted in Kesten, Hermann, *Copernicus and His World*, NY: 1945, p.309 / Letter of October 16, 1541. See Durant, Will, *The Reformation*, (volume 6 of the 10 volume set *The Story of Civilization*, 1967, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1957, p.859. Philip Melanchton stated: "Certain men, either from the love of novelty, or to make a display of ingenuity, have concluded that the earth moves....Now, it is a want of honesty and decency to assert such notions publicly and the example is pernicious. It is the part of a good mind to accept the truth as revealed by God and to acquiesce in it....The earth can be nowhere if not in the center of the universe." Kuhn, Thomas, *The Copernican Revolution*, p.191. His Melanchthon quote is from *Initia Doctrinae Physicae*, (*Elements of Physics*), 1549.

John Calvin answered Copernicus with a line from Psalm 93:1: "The world also is stabilized, that it cannot be moved"- and asked, "Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?" Durant, Will, *The Reformation*, p.849.

As a final point, it is noteworthy that the conclusive proofs for the Copernican System were actually developed by Jesuit scientists, free from any form of harassment or discouragement from the Church.

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