

Liberty Theological Seminary

The Medieval Inquisition

A Paper
Submitted to Dr. Howard Foreman
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Course
Church History II
CHHI 525

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July 8, 2011

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Introduction and Thesis

The four major historical Inquisitions: Medieval, Spanish, Portugal, and Roman, spanned over a period of six centuries (1231 – 1860). During this extensive time: multiple Catholic nations became involved, entire classes of people were persecuted, countless properties were legally seized by the church, and innumerable hardships were experienced. How can such a horrifically devastating thing be attributed to the church in which Christ so selflessly died? The inquisitional atrocities were conducted by those claiming it was in the name of God. Ferguson defines the Inquisition as, “an ecclesiastical institution to search out heretics and bring them to punishment.”¹ The purpose of this researcher is to evaluate the Medieval Inquisition by: defining the Catholic Churches historical and theological supports, consider the functions of the inquisitor, explore the interrogative methodologies, describe the common tortures, and remark on the ultimate sentences. The hunted were referred to as heretics. Webster defines a heretic as: “A person under any religion, but particularly the Christian, who holds and teaches opinions repugnant to the established faith, or that which is made the standard of orthodoxy.”² It will be noted in this paper, the inquisitional process did have: ecclesiastical, governmental, theological, historical, and moral credentials; at least in the minds of those stepping forward in faith and making the Inquisition a realistic nightmare.

The Inquisitional Process

The problem of heretics was becoming a major concern to the Catholic Church by the mid-eleventh century. The local bishops had much difficulty dealing with these hapless renegade

¹ Everett Ferguson. *Church History Volume One; From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) 507.

² Noah Webster. *American Dictionary of the English Language; 1828 Edition* (San Francisco, CA: Foundation for American Christian Education. 1989) 100.

souls who were infecting the purity of the church. The answer to their problem was found in the inquisitional process. The mentality of how to deal with heretics was asserted in a statement by the inquisitor of Toulouse France, Bernard Gui: “For heretics are destroyed in two ways: in one way when they are converted from heresy to the true Catholic faith, according to *proverbs* 12 [7], *Turn the impious, and they will be no more*; in another way when, having been handed over to secular judgment, they are bodily burned.”³ This inquisitional process was established through the oversight of several popes. Ferguson states, “Innocent III issued a decretal in 1199 that for the first time equated heresy with the crime of treason under Roman law.”⁴ The Dominican Order, the primary overseers of the Inquisition, was designated by two papal bulls issued by Pope Gregory IX, on April 20, 1233.⁵ Furthermore, a synthesis between church and state is bolstered by Gregory IX’s adoption regarding Emperor Frederick II’s equivalent equation of heresy with treason; thus, making both worthy of death by burning.⁶ Though complex in its enormity, the inquisitional process can be compacted into two broadened categories: secular and theological.

Secular

As aforementioned, the Inquisition cannot be understood in its totality unless the relationship between church and state is duly recognized. In the Middle Ages: church was community, community was church, and both bled over into the political arena. Jones emphasizes such an amalgamated nature: “During Medieval times, it was often difficult to distinguish between the

³ Christine Ames. *Righteous Persecution; Inquisition, Dominicans, and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2009) 182.

⁴ Everett Ferguson. *Church History Volume One; From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 507.

⁵ Henry Charles Lea. *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages; Volume I*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. 1888) 328.

⁶ Everett Ferguson. *Church History Volume One; From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 508.

secular and the ecclesiastical – Catholic bishops installed emperors and kings . . . To rebel against the church (either in matters of theology or matters of organizational hierarchy) was to question the legitimacy of the whole social, political, economic, and (of course) religious medieval society.”⁷ When accounting for the consolidation of church and state, the secular involvement is obvious; however, theological involvement is more convoluted. This abstraction leads to an obvious question. How could these heinousness crimes have been attributed to the doctrine of God?

Theological

Regarding the diverse expressions the Inquisition advanced; theological support seems to be the most insufficient. It is recognized most of the participants believed their functions regarding the inquisitional machine of misery were in fact to the glory of God; but, theologically the justification is minuscule. The theological doctors of the Catholic Church depended heavily upon Old Testament doctrine for their justified injustices. Ames gives a substantial listing of pope’s Innocent II and Gregory IX’s Old Testament supporting texts: “Exodus 32:25-29; Judges 15:15-17; Joshua 7:20-26; Numbers 16; 1 Kings 18:40; I Maccabees 2:24-26.”⁸ Most historians read by this writer, emphasize that justification for the Inquisition relied heavily upon Mosaic Law principles. Furthermore, proponents of the Inquisition strengthened their case through reinterpretations of Old Testament passages where God judges; or, uses his worldly representatives to apply punishments or vindicating judgments. Jones notes the inconsistency of their justification, “now in the thirteenth century ‘reasonable justification’ was found for torching heretics” yet, their conforming to “the Mosaic dietary laws were ignored since from the earliest

⁷ Robert C. Jones. *The Crusades and the Inquisition; A Brief History*. (2010) 57.

⁸ Christine Ames. *Righteous Persecution; Inquisition, Dominicans, and Christianity in the Middle Ages*. 191.

of times.”⁹ Though more difficult to find, New Testament texts were also used to support the cause of the Inquisition; the most notable is John 15:6: “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast *them* into the fire, and they are burned.”¹⁰ Other noteworthy passages included the accounts of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10); and, Peter cutting off the ear of a servant (John 18:10). Lastly, the Inquisition found support in the greatest Catholic theologian of that day. Thomas Aquinas goes on record as stating, “. . . wherefore if forgers of money and other evil-doers are forthwith condemned to death by the secular authority, much more reason is there for heretics, as soon as they are convicted of heresy, to be not only excommunicated but even put to death.”¹¹ As previously stated, the biblical and theological supports are weak and lack any contextual meaning. The fruit of the Spirit, mentioned by Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 seems to be missing: “. . . love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” With the inquisitional process firmly examined; it necessitates an evaluation on the men who gave these horrific process’ teeth, better known as the inquisitor.

The Inquisitor

The medieval position of inquisitor was one of power; because, it included the interlacing duties of judge and interrogator. Lea provides an insightful description of the trench warfare involved between the inquisitor and his unfortunate heretical prey: “Master of the art of playing upon the human heart, the trained inquisitor left no method untried which promised victory in the

⁹ Robert C. Jones. *The Crusades and the Inquisition; A Brief History*. 59-60.

¹⁰ All Bible passages quoted from the KJV unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ Robert C. Jones. *The Crusades and the Inquisition; A Brief History*. 62.

struggle between him and the helpless wretch abandoned to his experiments.”¹² Ultimately, the inquisitor was seeking either the repentant salvation of the heretic’s soul, through confession and conversion; or, the destruction of the heretic, by burning the physical body and damning the soul to hell.

Judge

The magisterial role of the inquisitor was unique in that it answered to no ecclesiastical body; but, only to the pope directly. To obtain a proper perspective on the inquisitor’s role as judge, the medieval backdrop must be evaluated. Givens describes the Medieval Inquisition as: “. . . no single inquisition, with a Grand Inquisitor, supervising the holy office from Rome. Instead, there were simply a number of inquisitorial tribunals, staffed by papal judges delegate, some Dominicans, some Franciscans, scattered across Europe.”¹³ The fundamentals of Roman law were studied; and, reinterpreted into a unique system of inquisitional law. Lea adds: “. . . he acted with an authority far higher than that of an earthly judge” . . . “whose function in the salvation of souls should be fettered by no rules.”¹⁴

Interrogator

When studying the interrogative methodologies utilized by the inquisitional interrogator; it amazingly mirrors, though in a far subtler fashion, techniques employed by today’s military interrogators. The methods include: sleep deprivation, hunger, and imprisonment. In contrast, the severe tortures discussed later in this paper are not “knowingly” being imposed legally by

¹² Henry Charles Lea. *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages; Volume I*. 418.

¹³ James B. Given. *Inquisition and Medieval Society; Power, Discipline, and Resistance in Languedoc* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) 15.

¹⁴ Henry Charles Lea. *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages; Volume I*. 399, 405.

modern democratic societies, due to human rights policies; but, have, and continue to be, used in radical cultures such as: Nazism, Communism, radical groups, and coups.

Development

The Inquisition's interrogative techniques were studied, documented and handed down in the form of formal handbooks. Development is refined by: exposing the methods to repetitious trial and error, making periodic adjustments; thus, establishing a more efficient technique. Lea describes, "The inquisitorial process as thus perfected was sure of its victim. No one whom the judge wished to condemn could escape."¹⁵ Lea adds, "Trained through long experience in an accurate knowledge of all that can move the human breast; skilled not only to detect the subtle evasions of the intellect, but to seek and find the tenderest point through which to assail the conscience and heart; relentless in inflicting agony on the body and brain."¹⁶ Therefore, the training and development ultimately led to a highly trained and prepared inquisitor, prepared to fulfill their divine task of ridding God's holy church of its heretical disease.

Methodologies

The extraction of heretical information was no simple process. It became a cat and mouse game between the heretic and interrogative inquisitor. Lea describes it as an "impossible task" because they were attempting to extract "the secret thoughts and opinions of the prisoner."¹⁷ Though a heretic may appear orthodox on the exterior, through prescribed religious duties, they may yet be heretical in heart and thought. For the inquisitor, this could be agonizing; most inquisitors thought it better to send an innocent person to the stake than to set free a contagious heretic who would infect the fold of God with their diseased doctrine. Therefore, a process of

¹⁵ Ibid., 429.

¹⁶ Ibid., 414- 415.

¹⁷ Ibid., 400.

effective methodologies were designed over a period of years to efficiently obtain confessions. Lea categorizes the methodologies as: usage of spies, sympathy in place of harshness, utilization of family members, unduly delay of time, harsh imprisonment, and eventually various tortures.¹⁸ The spies used by inquisitors can be somewhat equated to what modern day investigators call “informants” or “snitches.” The spy’s job was to gain the confidence of a victim with one primary goal in mind; to obtain a confession of guilt. The second technique, sympathy in place of harshness, is what modern day interrogators term as “good-guy/bad-guy.” In this method, the first interrogator is harsh while the second is sympathetic; so, the intent is to befriend the victim in hopes of gaining a confession. The third technique, utilization of family members, today, is a modern day form of mental manipulation; designed to play on the victim’s emotions. Fourthly, time and imprisonments are simple; yet, effective tools for gaining the desired results. While locked away: for long periods of total seclusion, on diminished rations, in a dreary dungeon, resistance can be slowly diminished. Lea provides an example, the account of a lawyer named Guillem Garric who confessed “at Carcassonne in 1321” as a result of a nearly thirty year detention.¹⁹ When discussing such depressing situations the idea that these inquisitional victims could be subjected to these manipulations on the slimmest accusations of just one witness is disheartening. The victims had no legal rights or counsel such as are mandated by today’s law. Though these methodologies were quite effective, in 1252, Pope Innocent IV published the papal bull *Ad extirpada*, which authorized the use of torture to extract heresy from a suspected heretic. Webster defines torture as: “To pain to extremity [extreme measures]; to torment.”²⁰

Tortures

¹⁸ Ibid., 417-421.

¹⁹ Ibid., 418-419.

²⁰ Noah Webster. *American Dictionary of the English Language; 1828 Edition*. 95.

Torture, based on the sparse study of this writer, seemingly was: devised, characterized, fabricated, utilized, and limited only by the measurement of the degenerative mind of humanity. It is even more perplexing that the most pietistic of the Catholic Church cultivated torture into one of the most terrorizing and perfected methodologies ever used. Kirsch, in *The Grand Inquisitor's Manuel*, gives some vividly conservative descriptions of some standardized tortures utilized during the Medieval Inquisition. Before looking at the more extreme tortures, it is beneficial to reiterate some preparatory steps having already taken place: coercion, interrogative methodologies, imprisonment, and terroristic intimidations. Kirsch heightens the misery of the mind by introducing the torture chamber: "Once inside the torture chamber, the victim was first stripped of his or her clothing, both to facilitate the work of the torturer and his assistants and to further abase, disorient, and terrorize the victim."²¹ Another form of intimidation, usually taking place in the torture chamber, was for the inquisitor to display to the victim the tools of torture and make falsified promises of granted mercies if confession was made. The tortures were graduated to begin with subtleness with the assurance of increase severity for those refusing to confess.

Kirsch notes the most common methods of torture were fundamentally basic, involving only the simple elements of water and fire. Kirsch describes, "The so-called ordeal by water consisted of binding the victim in a horizontal position and forcing water down his throat . . . thus creating the sensation of drowning. The ordeal by fire consisted of binding the victim with ropes of manacles in front of a well-stoked fire and placing his or her feet in close proximity to

²¹ Jonathan Kirsch. *The Grand Inquisitor's Manuel; A History of Terror in the Name of God* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008) 104.

the flames.”²² One thought needing emphasis is that none of these would have been condoned by Jesus Christ.

The assortment of tortures, having taken place over the sphere of mankind’s habitation on earth, is beyond the scope of this paper; yet, the Medieval Inquisition had their distinctively particular favorites. The tortures analyzed in this paper include: the strappado, the wheel, the rack, and other miscellaneous tortures. Kirsch describes the strappado as, “a rope-and-pulley mechanism affixed to the ceiling of the torture chamber. The ankles and hands of the victim were bound with ropes or shackles, and iron or stone weights were attached to the feet. The rope dangling from the roof was attached to the victim’s wrists, which were fixed behind his or her back. . .”²³ The idea was to raise and drop the victim; thus, pulling their joints out of socket. Secondly, the wheel is described as “a simple wooden wagon wheel to which the accused heretic was bound and then beaten with clubs or hammers as the wheel was turned. . .”²⁴ Thirdly, the rack is described as: “a device consisting of a wooden frame with rollers at each end.”²⁵ The idea was to bind the hands and feet to the rollers and then stretch the victim; ultimately, tearing ligaments, dislocating joints, and breaking bones.

Some other miscellaneous tortures were easily accommodated and required very little preparation; such as: forced inhalation of onion fumes “or sulphur until they retched” and placing heated boiled eggs under the armpits.²⁶ Lastly, there was a device called the pear, specially designed to fit into the orifices of the human body. Once the pear was inserted into the orifice, it

²² Ibid., 104-105.

²³ Ibid., 105.

²⁴ Ibid., 106.

²⁵ Ibid., 106.

²⁶ Ibid., 108.

was designed to be expanded; thus, stretching and tearing “the tender flesh of the victim from the inside.”²⁷ So, it is with the introduction of torture during interrogative methodologies; confessions became substantially more successful.

Goals

The inquisitor had three primary goals in mind while performing his duties: conversion, confession, and delation [to inform against]. To bring a heretic’s soul back into the mother Catholic Church is what the Inquisition was about; though full communion could never again be regained. It should be emphasized that the idea of conversion during the Inquisition encompassed confession and delation. A conversion without confession and delation was considered less than sincere and normally not acceptable.

The second primary goal of the inquisitor was to secure a confession from the accused heretic. It is here, the inquisitor returns to the “cat and mouse game” with the souls of the condemned heretic hanging in the balances between restoration and damnation. Lea points out why a confession was everything to the inquisitor; “. . . most heretics were willing to subscribe to anything, and that they had been trained by persecution to conceal their beliefs under the mask of rigid orthodoxy. Confession of heresy thus became a matter of vital importance, and no effort was deemed too great, no means repulsive, to secure it.”²⁸ Pointedly, confession left no doubt in anyone’s mind; and, this is why inquisitors vigorously labored for it at any cost. In 1252, Pope Innocent IV gave a tremendous boost to the inquisitional interrogative process, by authorizing “the use of the rack in the examination as a way of securing confessions.”²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 108-109.

²⁸ Henry Charles Lea. *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages; Volume I.* 399, 410.

²⁹ Everett Ferguson. *Church History Volume One; From Christ to Pre-Reformation.* 508.

Lastly, deletion was mandated for a conversion experience to be branded as true. The inquisitor mastered this through utilization of a rewards/punishment system. Today, the concept of deletion is still an effectively efficient tool being utilized by law enforcement detectives. Normally, if a suspect turns over evidence on another suspect a lighter sentence can be obtained. To show the effectiveness of delation, Lea gives the following account: “How useful this was is seen in the case of Saurine Rigaud, whose confession is recorded at Toulouse in 1254, where it is followed by a list of one hundred and sixty-nine persons incriminated by her. . .”³⁰ This is unbelievable, considering the primitive communication network existing back in 1254.

Sentencing

Due to the scope of this paper, sentencing will not be given a detailed explanation. Let it suffice to say that this could include: publically carrying attached crosses, various penances and pilgrimages, lifetime imprisonment, and in its severest form, extradition to the secular law to be burned on the stake. Lea gives a very graphic account of the condemned heretic’s demise as they approached the stake: “Some victims of the Inquisition went courageously to their deaths as true believers and willing martyrs. . . Yet the fact remains most of the victims suffered terribly in the flames, and the sound of groans and screams rose above the roar of the fire and the taunts or guffaws of those in the crowd who took pleasure in this horror show.”³¹ Diemer adds, “When a person was burned at the stake they called it *auto de fe* (an act of faith). . . It was believed to be an act pleasing to God” a form of worship.³² On a side note, if one repented at the scene of the stake they were offered “the courtesy of being garroted to death before being burned.”³³

³⁰ Henry Charles Lea. *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages; Volume I.* 409.

³¹ Jonathan Kirsch. *The Grand Inquisitor’s Manual; A History of Terror in the Name of God.* 129.

Conclusion

The Medieval Inquisition was the Catholic Church's remedied response for heretical infection plaguing the church, community and society. Justification for the Inquisition was sought both secularly and theologically. To the Catholic Church this was considered justified vindication; yet, today it is viewed as nothing less than terroristic tyranny. The Inquisition encompassed: interrogative methodologies, acceptable tortures, ungodly punishments, and even the savagery of burning other human beings on the stake. What was their crime? Was it heresy? What can be said to help the modern reader understand the sinfulness of doing these tyrannical acts in the name of a God who embodies love in its fullest manifestation? Jones summarizes the appalling panorama of such a historical tragedy: "When it was finally brought to a halt in 1834, thousands of lives had been lost, and tens of thousands of lives ruined through imprisonment and confiscation of property."³⁴ Perhaps it is befitting to end such a perplexing paper with the words of the Apostle Peter, found in 2 Peter 1:4-8: "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make *you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

³² Carl Diemer. Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary; CHHI 525: *History of Christianity II; The Counter Reformation and the Thirty Years War. Inquisition. 4.1 Pg. #3.* Video Lesson 10.

³³ Robert C. Jones. *The Crusades and the Inquisition; A Brief History.* 89.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

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