# The Truth about the Spanish Inquisition

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Because it was both professional and efficient, the Spanish Inquisition kept very good records. These documents are a goldmine for modern historians who have plunged greedily into them. Thus far, the fruits of that research have made one thing abundantly clear — the myth of the Spanish Inquisition has nothing at all to do with the real thing.

The scene is a plain-looking room with a door to the left. A pleasant young man, pestered by tedious and irrelevant questions, exclaims in a frustrated tone, "I didn't expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition." Suddenly the door bursts open to reveal Cardinal Ximinez flanked by Cardinal Fang and Cardinal Biggles. "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!" Ximinez shouts. "Our chief weapon is surprise… surprise and fear…fear and surprise…. Our two weapons are fear and surprise…and ruthless efficiency…. Our three weapons are fear, surprise, and ruthless efficiency…and an almost fanatical devotion to the pope…. Our four…no…. Amongst our weapons…amongst our weaponry…are such elements as fear, surprise…. I'll come in again."

Anyone not living under a rock for the past 30 years will likely recognize this famous scene from Monty Python's Flying Circus. In these sketches three scarlet-clad, inept inquisitors torture their victims with such instruments as pillows and comfy chairs. The whole thing is funny because the audience knows full well that the Spanish Inquisition was neither inept nor comfortable, but ruthless, intolerant, and deadly. One need not have read Edgar Allan Poe's The Pit and the Pendulum to have heard of the dark dungeons, sadistic churchmen, and excruciating tortures of the Spanish Inquisition. The rack, the iron maiden, the bonfires on which the Catholic Church dumped its enemies by the millions: These are all familiar icons of the Spanish Inquisition set firmly into our culture.

This image of the Spanish Inquisition is a useful one for those who have little love for the Catholic Church. Anyone wishing to beat the Church about the head and shoulders will not tarry long before grabbing two favorite clubs: the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. I have dealt with the Crusades in "The Real History of the Crusades." Now on to the other club.

In order to understand the Spanish Inquisition, which began in the late 15th century, we must look briefly at its predecessor, the medieval Inquisition. Before we do, though, it's worth pointing out that the medieval world was not the modern world. For medieval people, religion was not something one just did at church. It was their science, their philosophy, their politics, their identity, and their hope for salvation. It was not a personal preference but an abiding and universal truth. Heresy, then, struck at the heart of that truth. It doomed the heretic, endangered those near him, and tore apart the fabric of community. Medieval Europeans were not alone in this view. It was shared by numerous cultures around the world. The modern practice of universal religious toleration is itself quite new and uniquely Western.

Secular and ecclesiastical leaders in medieval Europe approached heresy in different ways. Roman law equated heresy with treason. Why? Because kingship was God-given, thus making heresy an inherent challenge to royal authority. Heretics divided people, causing unrest and rebellion. No Christian

doubted that God would punish a community that allowed heresy to take root and spread. Kings and commoners, therefore, had good reason to find and destroy heretics wherever they found them — and they did so with gusto.

One of the most enduring myths of the Inquisition is that it was a tool of oppression imposed on unwilling Europeans by a power-hungry Church. Nothing could be more wrong. In truth, the Inquisition brought order, justice, and compassion to combat rampant secular and popular persecutions of heretics. When the people of a village rounded up a suspected heretic and brought him before the local lord, how was he to be judged? How could an illiterate layman determine if the accused's beliefs were heretical or not? And how were witnesses to be heard and examined?

The medieval Inquisition began in 1184 when Pope Lucius III sent a list of heresies to Europe's bishops and commanded them to take an active role in determining whether those accused of heresy were, in fact, guilty. Rather than relying on secular courts, local lords, or just mobs, bishops were to see to it that accused heretics in their dioceses were examined by knowledgeable churchmen using Roman laws of evidence. In other words, they were to "inquire" — thus, the term "inquisition."

From the perspective of secular authorities, heretics were traitors to God and king and therefore deserved death. From the perspective of the Church, however, heretics were lost sheep that had strayed from the flock. As shepherds, the pope and bishops had a duty to bring those sheep back into the fold, just as the Good Shepherd had commanded them. So, while medieval secular leaders were trying to safeguard their kingdoms, the Church was trying to save souls. The Inquisition provided a means for heretics to escape death and return to the community.

Most people accused of heresy by the medieval Inquisition were either acquitted or their sentence suspended. Those found guilty of grave error were allowed to confess their sin, do penance, and be restored to the Body of Christ. The underlying assumption of the Inquisition was that, like lost sheep, heretics had simply strayed. If, however, an inquisitor determined that a particular sheep had purposely departed out of hostility to the flock, there was nothing more that could be done. Unrepentant or obstinate heretics were excommunicated and given over to the secular authorities. Despite popular myth, the Church did not burn heretics. It was the secular authorities that held heresy to be a capital offense. The simple fact is that the medieval Inquisition saved uncounted thousands of innocent (and even not-so-innocent) people who would otherwise have been roasted by secular lords or mob rule.

As the power of medieval popes grew, so too did the extent and sophistication of the Inquisition. The introduction of the Franciscans and Dominicans in the early 13th century provided the papacy with a corps of dedicated religious willing to devote their lives to the salvation of the world. Because their order had been created to debate with heretics and preach the Catholic faith, the Dominicans became especially active in the Inquisition. Following the most progressive law codes of the day, the Church in the 13th century formed inquisitorial tribunals answerable to Rome rather than local bishops. To ensure fairness and uniformity, manuals were written for inquisitorial officials. Bernard Gui, best known today as the fanatical and evil inquisitor in The Name of the Rose, wrote a particularly influential manual. There is no reason to believe that Gui was anything like his fictional portrayal.

By the 14th century, the Inquisition represented the best legal practices available. Inquisition officials were university-trained specialists in law and theology. The procedures were similar to those used in secular inquisitions (we call them "inquests" today, but it's the same word).

The power of kings rose dramatically in the late Middle Ages. Secular rulers strongly supported the

Inquisition because they saw it as an efficient way to ensure the religious health of their kingdoms. If anything, kings faulted the Inquisition for being too lenient on heretics. As in other areas of ecclesiastical control, secular authorities in the late Middle Ages began to take over the Inquisition, removing it from papal oversight. In France, for example, royal officials assisted by legal scholars at the University of Paris assumed control of the French Inquisition. Kings justified this on the belief that they knew better than the faraway pope how best to deal with heresy in their own kingdoms.

These dynamics would help to form the Spanish Inquisition — but there were others as well. Spain was in many ways quite different from the rest of Europe. Conquered by Muslim jihad in the eighth century, the Iberian peninsula had been a place of near constant warfare. Because borders between Muslim and Christian kingdoms shifted rapidly over the centuries, it was in most rulers' interest to practice a fair degree of tolerance for other religions. The ability of Muslims, Christians, and Jews to live together, called convivencia by the Spanish, was a rarity in the Middle Ages. Indeed, Spain was the most diverse and tolerant place in medieval Europe. England expelled all of its Jews in 1290. France did the same in 1306. Yet in Spain Jews thrived at every level of society.

But it was perhaps inevitable that the waves of anti-Semitism that swept across medieval Europe would eventually find their way into Spain. Envy, greed, and gullibility led to rising tensions between Christians and Jews in the 14th century. During the summer of 1391, urban mobs in Barcelona and other towns poured into Jewish quarters, rounded up Jews, and gave them a choice of baptism or death. Most took baptism. The king of Aragon, who had done his best to stop the attacks, later reminded his subjects of well-established Church doctrine on the matter of forced baptisms — they don't count. He decreed that any Jews who accepted baptism to avoid death could return to their religion.

But most of these new converts, or conversos, decided to remain Catholic. There were many reasons for this. Some believed that apostasy made them unfit to be Jewish. Others worried that returning to Judaism would leave them vulnerable to future attacks. Still others saw their baptism as a way to avoid the increasing number of restrictions and taxes imposed on Jews. As time passed, the conversos settled into their new religion, becoming just as pious as other Catholics. Their children were baptized at birth and raised as Catholics. But they remained in a cultural netherworld. Although Christian, most conversos still spoke, dressed, and ate like Jews. Many continued to live in Jewish quarters so as to be near family members. The presence of conversos had the effect of Christianizing Spanish Judaism. This in turn led to a steady stream of voluntary conversions to Catholicism.

In 1414 a debate was held in Tortosa between Christian and Jewish leaders. Pope Benedict XIII himself attended. On the Christian side was the papal physician, Jerónimo de Santa Fe, who had recently converted from Judaism. The debate brought about a wave of new voluntary conversions. In Aragon alone, 3,000 Jews received baptism. All of this caused a good deal of tension between those who remained Jewish and those who became Catholic. Spanish rabbis after 1391 had considered conversos to be Jews, since they had been forced into baptism. Yet by 1414, rabbis repeatedly stressed that conversos were indeed true Christians, since they had voluntarily left Judaism.

By the mid-15th century, a whole new converso culture was flowering in Spain — Jewish in ethnicity and culture, but Catholic in religion. Conversos, whether new converts themselves or the descendants of converts, took enormous pride in that culture. Some even asserted that they were better than the "Old Christians," since as Jews they were related by blood to Christ Himself. When the converso bishop of Burgos, Alonso de Cartagena, prayed the Hail Mary, he would say with pride, "Holy Mary, Mother of

God and my blood relative, pray for us sinners…”

The expansion of converso wealth and power in Spain led to a backlash, particularly among aristocratic and middle-class Old Christians. They resented the arrogance of the conversos and envied their successes. Several tracts were written demonstrating that virtually every noble bloodline in Spain had been infiltrated by conversos . Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories abounded. The conversos, it was said, were part of an elaborate Jewish plot to take over the Spanish nobility and the Catholic Church, destroying both from within. The conversos, according to this logic, were not sincere Christians but secret Jews.

Modern scholarship has definitively shown that, like most conspiracy theories, this one was pure imagination. The vast majority of conversos were good Catholics who simply took pride in their Jewish heritage. Surprisingly, many modern authors — indeed, many Jewish authors — have embraced these anti-Semitic fantasies. It is common today to hear that the conversos really were secret Jews, struggling to keep their faith hidden under the tyranny of Catholicism. Even the American Heritage Dictionary describes “converso ” as “a Spanish or Portuguese Jew who converted outwardly to Christianity in the late Middle Ages so as to avoid persecution or expulsion, though often continuing to practice Judaism in secret.” This is simply false.

But the constant drumbeat of accusations convinced King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella that the matter of secret Jews should at least be investigated. Responding to their request, Pope Sixtus IV issued a bull on November 1, 1478, allowing the crown to form an inquisitorial tribunal consisting of two or three priests over the age of 40. As was now the custom, the monarchs would have complete authority over the inquisitors and the inquisition. Ferdinand, who had many Jews and conversos in his court, was not at first overly enthusiastic about the whole thing. Two years elapsed before he finally appointed two men. Thus began the Spanish Inquisition.

King Ferdinand seems to have believed that the inquiry would turn up little. He was wrong. A tinderbox of resentment and hatred exploded across Spain as the enemies of conversos — both Christian and Jewish — came out of the woodwork to denounce them. Score-settling and opportunism were the primary motivators. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of accusations overwhelmed the inquisitors. They asked for and received more assistants, but the larger the Inquisition became, the more accusations it received. At last even Ferdinand was convinced that the problem of secret Jews was real.

In this early stage of the Spanish Inquisition, Old Christians and Jews used the tribunals as a weapon against their converso enemies. Since the Inquisition’s sole purpose was to investigate conversos, the Old Christians had nothing to fear from it. Their fidelity to the Catholic faith was not under investigation (although it was far from pure). As for the Jews, they were immune to the Inquisition. Remember, the purpose of an inquisition was to find and correct the lost sheep of Christ’s flock. It had no jurisdiction over other flocks. Those who get their history from Mel Brooks’s History of the World, Part I will perhaps be surprised to learn that all of those Jews enduring various tortures in the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition are nothing more than a product of Brooks’s fertile imagination. Spain’s Jews had nothing to fear from the Spanish Inquisition.

In the early, rapidly expanding years, there was plenty of abuse and confusion. Most accused conversos were acquitted, but not all. Well-publicized burnings — often because of blatantly false testimony —

justifiably frightened other conversos. Those with enemies often fled town before they could be denounced. Everywhere they looked, the inquisitors found more accusers. As the Inquisition expanded into Aragon, the hysteria levels reached new heights. Pope Sixtus IV attempted to put a stop to it. On April 18, 1482, he wrote to the bishops of Spain:

In Aragon, Valencia, Mallorca, and Catalonia the Inquisition has for some time been moved not by zeal for the faith and the salvation of souls but by lust for wealth. Many true and faithful Christians, on the testimony of enemies, rivals, slaves, and other lower and even less proper persons, have without any legitimate proof been thrust into secular prisons, tortured and condemned as relapsed heretics, deprived of their goods and property and handed over to the secular arm to be executed, to the peril of souls, setting a pernicious example, and causing disgust to many.

Sixtus ordered the bishops to take a direct role in all future tribunals. They were to ensure that the Church's well-established norms of justice were respected. The accused were to have legal counsel and the right to appeal their case to Rome.

In the Middle Ages, the pope's commands would have been obeyed. But those days were gone. King Ferdinand was outraged when he heard of the letter. He wrote to Sixtus, openly suggesting that the pope had been bribed with converso gold:

Things have been told me, Holy Father, which, if true, would seem to merit the greatest astonishment. … To these rumors, however, we have given no credence because they seem to be things which would in no way have been conceded by Your Holiness who has a duty to the Inquisition. But if by chance concessions have been made through the persistent and cunning persuasion of the conversos, I intend never to let them take effect. Take care therefore not to let the matter go further, and to revoke any concessions and entrust us with the care of this question.

That was the end of the papacy's role in the Spanish Inquisition. It would henceforth be an arm of the Spanish monarchy, separate from ecclesiastical authority. It is odd, then, that the Spanish Inquisition is so often today described as one of the Catholic Church's great sins. The Catholic Church as an institution had almost nothing to do with it.

In 1483 Ferdinand appointed Tomás de Torquemada as inquistor-general for most of Spain. It was Torquemada's job to establish rules of evidence and procedure for the Inquisition as well as to set up branches in major cities. Sixtus confirmed the appointment, hoping that it would bring some order to the situation.

Unfortunately, the problem only snowballed. This was a direct result of the methods employed by the early Spanish Inquisition, which strayed significantly from Church standards. When the inquisitors arrived in a particular area, they would announce an Edict of Grace. This was a 30-day period in which secret Jews could voluntarily come forward, confess their sin, and do penance. This was also a time for others with information about Christians practicing Judaism in secret to make it known to the tribunal. Those found guilty after the 30 days elapsed could be burned at the stake.

For conversos, then, the arrival of the Inquisition certainly focused the mind. They generally had plenty of enemies, any one of whom might decide to bear false witness. Or perhaps their cultural practices

were sufficient for condemnation? Who knew? Most conversos, therefore, either fled or lined up to confess. Those who did neither risked an inquiry in which any kind of hearsay or evidence, no matter how old or suspicious, was acceptable.

Opposition in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to the Spanish Inquisition only increased. Many churchmen pointed out that it was contrary to all accepted practices for heretics to be burned without instruction in the Faith. If the conversos were guilty at all, it was merely of ignorance, not willful heresy. Numerous clergy at the highest levels complained to Ferdinand. Opposition to the Spanish Inquisition also continued in Rome. Sixtus's successor, Innocent VIII, wrote twice to the king asking for greater compassion, mercy, and leniency for the conversos — but to no avail.

As the Spanish Inquisition picked up steam, those involved became increasingly convinced that Spain's Jews were actively seducing the conversos back into their old faith. It was a silly idea, no more real than the previous conspiracy theories. But Ferdinand and Isabella were influenced by it. Both of the monarchs had Jewish friends and confidants, but they also felt that their duty to their Christian subjects impelled them to remove the danger. Beginning in 1482, they expelled Jews from specific areas where the trouble seemed greatest. Over the next decade, though, they were under increasing pressure to remove the perceived threat. The Spanish Inquisition, it was argued, could never succeed in bringing the conversos back into the fold while the Jews undermined its work. Finally, on March 31, 1492, the monarchs issued an edict expelling all Jews from Spain.

Ferdinand and Isabella expected that their edict would result in the conversion of most of the remaining Jews in their kingdom. They were largely correct. Many Jews in high positions, including those in the royal court, accepted baptism immediately. In 1492 the Jewish population of Spain numbered about 80,000. About half were baptized and thereby kept their property and livelihoods. The rest departed, but many of them eventually returned to Spain, where they received baptism and had their property restored. As far as the Spanish Inquisition was concerned, the expulsion of the Jews meant that the caseload of conversos was now much greater.

The first 15 years of the Spanish Inquisition, under the direction of Torquemada, were the deadliest. Approximately 2,000 conversos were put to the flames. By 1500, however, the hysteria had calmed. Torquemada's successor, the cardinal archbishop of Toledo, Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, worked hard to reform the Inquisition, removing bad apples and reforming procedures. Each tribunal was given two Dominican inquisitors, a legal adviser, a constable, a prosecutor, and a large number of assistants. With the exception of the two Dominicans, all of these were royal lay officials. The Spanish Inquisition was largely funded by confiscations, but these were not frequent or great. Indeed, even at its peak the Inquisition was always just making ends meet.

After the reforms, the Spanish Inquisition had very few critics. Staffed by well-educated legal professionals, it was one of the most efficient and compassionate judicial bodies in Europe. No major court in Europe executed fewer people than the Spanish Inquisition. This was a time, after all, when damaging shrubs in a public garden in London carried the death penalty. Across Europe, executions were everyday events. But not so with the Spanish Inquisition. In its 350-year lifespan only about 4,000 people were put to the stake. Compare that with the witch-hunts that raged across the rest of Catholic and Protestant Europe, in which 60,000 people, mostly women, were roasted. Spain was spared this hysteria precisely because the Spanish Inquisition stopped it at the border. When the first accusations of witchcraft surfaced in northern Spain, the Inquisition sent its people to investigate. These trained legal scholars found no believable evidence for witches' Sabbaths, black magic, or baby roasting. It was also noted that those confessing to witchcraft had a curious inability to fly through keyholes. While

Europeans were throwing women onto bonfires with abandon, the Spanish Inquisition slammed the door shut on this insanity. (For the record, the Roman Inquisition also kept the witch craze from infecting Italy.)

What about the dark dungeons and torture chambers? The Spanish Inquisition had jails, of course. But they were neither especially dark nor dungeon-like. Indeed, as far as prisons go, they were widely considered to be the best in Europe. There were even instances of criminals in Spain purposely blaspheming so as to be transferred to the Inquisition's prisons. Like all courts in Europe, the Spanish Inquisition used torture. But it did so much less often than other courts. Modern researchers have discovered that the Spanish Inquisition applied torture in only 2 percent of its cases. Each instance of torture was limited to a maximum of 15 minutes. In only 1 percent of the cases was torture applied twice and never for a third time.

The inescapable conclusion is that, by the standards of its time, the Spanish Inquisition was positively enlightened. That was the assessment of most Europeans until 1530. It was then that the Spanish Inquisition turned its attention away from the conversos and toward the new Protestant Reformation. The people of Spain and their monarchs were determined that Protestantism would not infiltrate their country as it had Germany and France. The Inquisition's methods did not change. Executions and torture remained rare. But its new target would forever change its image.

By the mid-16th century, Spain was the wealthiest and most powerful country in Europe. King Philip II saw himself and his countrymen as faithful defenders of the Catholic Church. Less wealthy and less powerful were Europe's Protestant areas, including the Netherlands, northern Germany, and England. But they did have a potent new weapon: the printing press. Although the Spanish defeated Protestants on the battlefield, they would lose the propaganda war. These were the years when the famous "Black Legend" of Spain was forged. Innumerable books and pamphlets poured from northern presses accusing the Spanish Empire of inhuman depravity and horrible atrocities in the New World. Opulent Spain was cast as a place of darkness, ignorance, and evil. Although modern scholars have long ago discarded the Black Legend, it still remains very much alive today. Quick: Think of a good conquistador.

Protestant propaganda that took aim at the Spanish Inquisition drew liberally from the Black Legend. But it had other sources as well. From the beginning of the Reformation, Protestants had difficulty explaining the 15-century gap between Christ's institution of His Church and the founding of the Protestant churches. Catholics naturally pointed out this problem, accusing Protestants of having created a new church separate from that of Christ. Protestants countered that their church was the one created by Christ but that it had been forced underground by the Catholic Church. Thus, just as the Roman Empire had persecuted Christians, so its successor, the Roman Catholic Church, continued to persecute them throughout the Middle Ages. Inconveniently, there were no Protestants in the Middle Ages, yet Protestant authors found them anyway in the guise of various medieval heresies. (They were underground, after all.)

In this light, the medieval Inquisition was nothing more than an attempt to crush the hidden, true church. The Spanish Inquisition, still active and extremely efficient at keeping Protestants out of Spain, was for Protestant writers merely the latest version of this persecution. Mix liberally with the Black Legend, and you have everything you need to produce tract after tract about the hideous and cruel Spanish Inquisition. And so they did.

The Spanish people loved their Inquisition. That is why it lasted for so long. It stood guard against error and heresy, protecting the faith of Spain and ensuring the favor of God. But the world was changing. In time, Spain's empire faded away. Wealth and power shifted to the north, in particular to France and England. By the late 17th century, new ideas of religious tolerance were bubbling across the coffeehouses and salons of Europe. Inquisitions, both Catholic and Protestant, withered. The Spanish stubbornly held on to theirs, and for that, they were ridiculed. French philosophers like Voltaire saw in Spain a model of the Middle Ages: weak, barbaric, superstitious. The Spanish Inquisition, already established as a bloodthirsty tool of religious persecution, was derided by Enlightenment thinkers as a brutal weapon of intolerance and ignorance. A new, fictional Spanish Inquisition had been constructed, designed by the enemies of Spain and the Catholic Church.