The Real Inquisition: Investigating the popular myth.
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When the sins of the Catholic Church are recited (as they so often are) the Inquisition figures prominently. People with no interest in European history know full well that it was led by brutal and fanatical churchmen who tortured, maimed, and killed those who dared question the authority of the Church. The word "Inquisition" is part of our modern vocabulary, describing both an institution and a period of time. Having one of your hearings referred to as an "Inquisition" is not a compliment for most senators.

But in recent years the Inquisition has been subject to greater investigation. In preparation for the Jubilee in 2000, Pope John Paul II wanted to find out just what happened during the time of the Inquisition's (the institution's) existence. In 1998 the Vatican opened the archives of the Holy Office (the modern successor to the Inquisition) to a team of 30 scholars from around the world. Now at last the scholars have made their report, an 800-page tome that was unveiled at a press conference in Rome on Tuesday. Its most startling conclusion is that the Inquisition was not so bad after all. Torture was rare and only about 1 percent of those brought before the Spanish Inquisition were actually executed. As one headline read "Vatican Downsizes Inquisition."

The amazed gasps and cynical sneers that have greeted this report are just further evidence of the lamentable gulf that exists between professional historians and the general public. The truth is that, although this report makes use of previously unavailable material, it merely echoes what numerous scholars have previously learned from other European archives. Among the best recent books on the subject are Edward Peters's Inquisition (1988) and Henry Kamen's The Spanish Inquisition (1997), but there are others. Simply put, historians have long known that the popular view of the Inquisition is a myth. So what is the truth?

To understand the Inquisition we have to remember that the Middle Ages were, well, medieval. We should not expect people in the past to view the world and their place in it the way we do today. (You try living through the Black Death and see how it changes your attitude.) For people who lived during those times, religion was not something one did just at church. It was science, philosophy, politics, identity, and 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.

The Inquisition was not born out of desire to crush diversity or oppress people; it was rather an attempt to stop unjust executions. Yes, you read that correctly. Heresy was a crime against the state. Roman law in the Code of Justinian made it a capital offense. Rulers, whose authority was believed to come from God, had no patience for heretics. Neither did common people, who saw them as dangerous outsiders who would bring down divine wrath. When someone was accused of heresy in the early Middle Ages, they were brought to the local lord for judgment, just as if they had stolen a pig or damaged shrubbery (really, it was a serious crime in England). Yet in contrast to those crimes, it was not so easy to discern whether the accused was really a heretic. For starters, one needed some basic theological training — something most medieval lords sorely lacked. The result is that uncounted thousands across Europe were executed by secular authorities without fair trials or a competent assessment of the validity of the charge.

The Catholic Church's response to this problem was the Inquisition, first instituted by Pope Lucius III in 1184. It was born out of a need to provide fair trials for accused heretics using laws of evidence and

presided over by knowledgeable judges. From the perspective of secular authorities, heretics were traitors to God and the king and therefore deserved death. From the perspective of the Church, however, heretics were lost sheep who had strayed from the flock. As shepherds, the pope and bishops had a duty to bring them 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.

As this new report confirms, most people accused of heresy by the Inquisition were either acquitted or their sentences 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 left the flock, there was nothing more that could be done. Unrepentant or obstinate heretics were excommunicated and given over to secular authorities. Despite popular myth, the Inquisition did not burn heretics. It was the secular authorities that held heresy to be a capital offense, not the Church. 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.

During the 13th century the Inquisition became much more formalized in its methods and practices. Highly trained Dominicans answerable to the Pope took over the institution, creating courts that represented the best legal practices in Europe. As royal authority grew during the 14th century and beyond, control over the Inquisition slipped out of papal hands and into those of kings. Instead of one Inquisition there were now many. Despite the prospect of abuse, monarchs like those in Spain and France generally did their best to make certain that their inquisitions remained both efficient and merciful. During the 16th century, when the witch craze swept Europe, it was those areas with the best-developed inquisitions that stopped the hysteria in its tracks. In Spain and Italy, trained inquisitors investigated charges of witches' sabbaths and baby roasting and found them to be baseless. Elsewhere, particularly in Germany, secular or religious courts burned witches by the thousands.

Compared to other medieval secular courts, the Inquisition was positively enlightened. Why then are people in general and the press in particular so surprised to discover that the Inquisition did not barbecue people by the millions? First of all, when most people think of the Inquisition today what they are really thinking of is the Spanish Inquisition. No, not even that is correct. They are thinking of the myth of the Spanish Inquisition. Amazingly, before 1530 the Spanish Inquisition was widely hailed as the best run, most humane court in Europe. There are actually records of convicts in Spain purposely blaspheming so that they could be transferred to the prisons of the Spanish Inquisition. After 1530, however, the Spanish Inquisition began to turn its attention to the new heresy of Lutheranism. It was the Protestant Reformation and the rivalries it spawned that would give birth to the myth.

By the mid 16th century, Spain was the wealthiest and most powerful country in Europe. Europe's Protestant areas, including the Netherlands, northern Germany, and England, may not have been as militarily mighty, 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.

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 there anyway in the guise of various medieval heretics. 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.

In time, Spain's empire would fade 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 philosophes 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.

Now a bit more of the real Inquisition has come back into view. The question remains, will anyone take notice?