



## Inquisition

**JAMES HITCHCOCK**

**The subject of the Inquisition illustrates one of the paradoxes of the "information age"—the availability of accurate information on a subject by no means guarantees that such information will affect public perceptions.**

The subject of the Inquisition illustrates one of the paradoxes of the "information age" — the availability of accurate information on a subject by no means guarantees that such information will affect public perceptions.

The image of the Inquisition needs no elaboration. According to traditional views, it was a kangaroo court operated by possibly psychotic fanatics with a taste for blood, who tortured innocent people to obtain false confessions, then sent them off to be burnt at the stake.



Even that stereotype has always contained an unresolved ambiguity — were the defendants innocent of the charges against them, hence victims of malign hysteria, or were they heroes of free thought, hence in a legal sense guilty as charged? Depending on their purposes, those who write about the Inquisition emphasize either one or the other, although the two are obviously contradictory.

The modern historiography of the Inquisition, most of it by non-Catholic historians, has resulted in a careful, relatively precise, and on the whole rather moderate image of the institution, some of the most important works being; Edward Peters, *Inquisition*; Paul F. Grendler, *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press*; John Tedeschi, *The Prosecution of Heresy*; and Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*.

Some of their conclusions are:

- The inquisitors tended to be professional legists and bureaucrats who adhered closely to rules and procedures rather than to whatever personal feelings they may have had on the subject.
- Those roles and procedures were not in themselves unjust. They required that evidence be presented, allowed the accused to defend themselves, and discarded dubious evidence.
- Thus in most cases the verdict was a "just" one in that it seemed to follow from the evidence.
- A number of cases were dismissed, or the proceedings terminated at some point, when the inquisitors became convinced that the evidence was not reliable.
- Torture was only used in a small minority of cases and was allowed only when there was strong evidence that the defendant was lying. In some instances (for example, Carlo Ginzburg's study of the Italian district of Friulia) there is no evidence of the use of torture at all.
- Only a small percentage of those convicted were executed — at most two to three percent in a given region. Many more were sentenced to life in prison, but this was often commuted after a few years. The most common punishment was some form of public penance.
- The dreaded Spanish Inquisition in particular has been grossly exaggerated. It did not persecute

millions of people, as is often claimed, but approximately 44,000 between 1540 and 1700, of whom less than two per cent were executed.

- The celebrated case of Joan of Arc was a highly irregular inquisitorial procedure rigged by her political enemies, the English. When proper procedures were followed some years later, the Inquisition exonerated her posthumously.
- Although the Inquisition did prosecute witchcraft, as did almost every secular government, the Roman inquisitors by the later sixteenth century were beginning to express serious doubts about most such accusations.

The Inquisition has long been the *bete noir* of practically everyone who is hostile to the Church, such as Continental European anti-clericals. But its mythology has been especially strong in the English-speaking lands, including America.

Much of this is due to John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (commonly called his *Book of Martyrs*), which for centuries was standard reading for devout Protestants, alongside the Bible and John Bunyan. Foxe, an Elizabethan, detailed numerous stories of Protestant martyrs, especially during the reign of Queen Mary. Ironically, in view of the ways the book has been used, Mary's persecution of Protestants had nothing to do with the Inquisition, which did not exist in England.

But the English-speaking hatred of the Inquisition also stems from the unfamiliar legal system that institution employed. "Inquisition" of course means merely "inquiry," something which in itself is hardly sinister. But most Continental legal systems, in contrast to English common law, were derived from Roman law and used not the adversarial system but one in which the judges were not neutral umpires of the proceedings but were charged with ferreting out the truth.

Foxe's work, along with other Protestant accounts of the Inquisition, ignored the fact that Catholics were not alone in inflicting religious persecution. Elizabeth I burned heretics, as did her successor James I, as did virtually every Protestant government in Europe until the middle of the seventeenth century. What did give the Inquisition greater impact was that it was well organized and at least in theory universal throughout the Church, whereas Protestant persecution of heresy tended to be spasmodic and dependent mainly on local conditions.

The Enlightenment, as everyone knows, condemned religious persecution, which in Western Europe finally ceased in its traditional form during the eighteenth century. But the Enlightenment also spawned the Committees of Public Safety during the French Revolution, and the irony is that those bodies indeed fit the stereotype so long attached to the Inquisition — they were in fact kangaroo courts often run by unbalanced fanatics, and they did indeed condemn people wholesale without regard for guilt or innocence. Had the Committees of Public Safety functioned for as long as the inquisition (roughly 1230-1530), their death tolls would have been incalculable.

Some traditional Catholic apologetics about the Inquisition is untenable, for example, the claim that the Church did not put heretics to death, the state did. Yes, but the Church urged the state to do so, and churchmen hardly escaped responsibility through this legal maneuver.

The reason why accurate information about the Inquisition fails to penetrate the popular mind is not such a mystery after all. Numerous people have a vested interest in keeping the traditional image alive, and unhappily some of them are Catholics. Those who resent the Church's claim to moral authority use as their most effective weapon the allegation of hypocrisy — how can this Church which has the blood of millions on its hands dare to condemn abortion? For some Catholics the good news that the Inquisition was not as bad as they thought is really bad news, and they refuse to hear it. Post-conciliar Catholicism

has spawned in many people a permanent attitude of obsequiousness before the secular world, and they know no other stance except that of continuous apology. Their view of the present Church requires them to believe that the Church of the past centuries was really a nightmare from which we are finally waking up.

The Inquisition can only be understood within the framework of the centuries of its existence, when religious uniformity and orthodoxy, and obedience to authority, were enforced by almost all political and religious institutions, considered essential for the very survival of society. The Second Vatican Council's decree *Dignitatis Humanae* once and for all put an end to the mode of thought which would revive the Inquisition, or see it as having eternal validity. However, the Inquisition should also cease to be the shibboleth it has long been. Why not say "Committees of Public Safety" the next time somebody wants a short-hand term for sinister proceedings?

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

Hitchcock, James. "Inquisition." *Catholic Dossier* 2, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 1996): 44-46.

Reprinted with permission of Catholic Dossier. To subscribe to Catholic Dossier call 1-800-651-1531.

### **THE AUTHOR**

Dr. James Hitchcock is a widely published author on many topics and Professor of History at St. Louis University. James Hitchcock is on the Advisory Board of The Catholic Educator's Resource Center.

Copyright © 1996 [Catholic Dossier](#)