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## **The Inquisition: Looking into the Human Soul**

Many people complain that courts turn too many criminals loose because of technicalities. For example, the police search a house without a warrant, or the police get a confession without explaining the right to silence. And as a result, someone who might be a burglar or a murderer goes free.

This may seem unjust, but each of those "technicalities" has been developed as a protection for everyone. One of the best ways to see this is to look at a world where these protections didn't exist. In the Middle Ages in Europe, investigators brutally hunted down people they thought might be witches and heretics -- those who oppose an established religion. People were secretly accused and had no protections at all. Many thousands of people were imprisoned or even burned alive. These events left a scar on Western European history that affects us even today. And they may provide lessons for our own time.

### **The Church in Medieval Europe**

By the year 1200, Roman Catholicism had been the dominant religion of Europe for over 800 years. In Greece and the Middle East, people had split away from the Catholic Church to form the Orthodox Church, and Muslims controlled all of North Africa. But in most of Europe, the pope in the Vatican remained the undisputed religious leader. Heresies did not seem a large problem. The church tolerated some small groups with opposing views. Others were suppressed by local bishops or even angry mobs.

In the 1100s, however, a serious challenge to the Roman Church developed in southern France. No one feared a heresy when only a handful practiced it, but now thousands were following a belief called Catharism or Albigensianism. Cathars believed in a strong division between good and evil. They thought a good God created our souls, but a bad God imprisoned our souls inside bodies. They believed physical bodies were always evil. The leading Cathars, who called themselves "perfects," tried to live without property, marriage, or sex. Some of them became so extreme that they gave up food and starved to death.

The Cathars believed they were the true Christians and the Catholic Church was a false church, founded by the devil. Many dukes and local leaders in southern France protected Cathar believers. The new religion began to attract a large following. This threatened not only the pope but the French government in Paris.

In 1209, Pope Innocent III declared a crusade against the Cathars. This led to a long war of northern French nobles against southern French nobles. The north

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won, but many thousands of people remained secret Cathars. Church leaders felt something stronger had to be done.

### **The Coming of the Inquisition**

In 1232, Pope Gregory IX decided to end this heresy once and for all. He set up a system of special religious courts called the Inquisition. Gregory authorized the leaders of the Dominican religious order to send out friars to find and question heretics. Bernard Gui, an inquisitor in France described the purpose of the Inquisition this way:

Heresy cannot be destroyed unless heretics are destroyed and . . . their defenders and [supporters] are destroyed, and this is effected in two ways: . . . they are converted to the true Catholic faith, or . . . burned.

Those who refused to recant, which means give up their heresy, were burned alive. The Inquisition completely wiped out the Cathars over the next 200 years. And the religious courts became a permanent system of religious control. The Inquisition dominated the thinking of much of Europe until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

### **How Did the Inquisition Work?**

When the Inquisition came to a suspected area, the local bishop assembled the people to hear the inquisitor preach against heresy. He would announce a grace period of up to a month for heretics to confess their guilt, recant, and inform on others.

During this period, the Inquisition would collect accusations. If two witnesses under oath accused someone of heresy, the accused person would be summoned to appear. Opinions, prejudices, rumors, and gossip were all accepted as evidence. The accused was never told the names of the accusers, nor even the exact charges.

Inquisitors examined the accused in secret. Anyone who refused to confess immediately was assumed to be guilty. Inquisitors were trained only in religion, and they would try to trap the accused with religious questions. For example, an inquisitor might ask, "Do you believe what the holy church believes?"

"I am a faithful Christian," the fearful suspect might reply.

"So!" the inquisitor might shout. "We already know you believe in heresies! You're saying *your* beliefs are the true Christianity and the church is false!"

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No lawyers were allowed, because it was considered heresy to defend a heretic. The only possible escape was to recant as quickly as possible and name the names of other heretics.

Government authorities worked closely with the Inquisition. They would deliver the accused to the inquisitors, and, when asked, they would torture those who refused to recant. During torture, the religious inquisitors would stand by as witnesses to record confessions or take down the names of other heretics. The government also carried out the final sentence of imprisonment or death.

Those who recanted immediately might receive a fairly light sentence -- saying prayers, fasting, being whipped in public, or making a pilgrimage. Some who recanted were forced to wear a yellow cross of felt sewn on all their clothing. The cross marked them as a former heretic, and many people would stay away from them in fear.

Many who refused to recant right away were sentenced to prison for life. If they refused to recant at all, the Inquisition turned them over to government authorities to be burned alive. Some inquisitors were so thorough that they went after the dead. If a dead person was accused of heresy, his or her bones could be dug up and burned.

For most accused heretics, there was no appeal. A few rich or powerful people might beg the pope to change a sentence, but for most of the condemned, the sentence was final. The families of those sent to prison or to the stake lost their property.

### **The Inquisition Spreads**

Peter Autier, the last active Cathar minister in southern France, was burned at the stake in 1311. He defied the Inquisition to the end, crying out to the crowd, "If it were lawful for me to preach, you would all accept my faith!"

After completely wiping out the Cathar heresy, the Inquisition spread to other parts of Europe. Inquisitors hunted down people accused of witchcraft, scholars who read banned books, and Jews who had converted to Catholicism but still secretly practiced Judaism.

In Italy, the Inquisition often went after nationalist movements in regions like Lombardy in the north, Venice, or Sicily. It was used to suppress these political movements as well to attack heretics. In northern France and Germany, the Inquisition persecuted small mystical sects. In Germany, however, local princes

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often refused to cooperate. They insisted on maintaining their own power and didn't like outsiders from Rome holding court on their territory. In Spain, the Inquisition made almost no headway for two centuries. Spain had been conquered by Muslims and largely reconquered by Christians in the 1200s. As a result, Spain was religiously heterogeneous, and a tolerance had developed so Muslims, Christians, and Jews could live together in relative peace.

Toward the end of the 1400s, however, Spanish tolerance changed abruptly. Spain saw the rise of a form of the Inquisition more ruthless and disruptive than anywhere else in Europe.

### **The Spanish Inquisition**

Thousands of Jews and Muslims had settled in Spain. To take part in business and government, many of them had been forced to convert to Christianity. In fact, the converts, or *conversos* in Spanish, made up a large part of the wealthy and influential class of Spain. This produced jealousy and anti-Semitic prejudice in many Spaniards. In the 1400s, rumors spread that most *conversos* continued to practice their Jewish beliefs. Anti-*converso* riots erupted in Toledo and other cities.

By the late 1400s, King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castille had united all of Spain into a single kingdom. But the rioting was upsetting their unified kingdom. The king and queen decided to act. Instead of attacking the rioters who were causing religious bigotry, however, they decided to attack the *conversos*. Pope Sixtus IV gave the Spanish rulers permission to set up their own Inquisition. In Spain, the search for heretics was to be controlled by the crown, not the pope.

In 1483, Isabella and Ferdinand established a council to direct the activities of the Inquisition throughout Spain. They appointed Tomas de Torquemada inquisitor-general. He was a Dominican friar who had preached for years against the *conversos*.

The Inquisition in Spain was ferocious in dealing with heretics, especially in the early years under Torquemada. In 1485, after *conversos* assassinated an inquisitor, the full fury of the Spanish Inquisition was unleashed. Within 10 years, over 2,000 people had been burned at the stake, with another 15,000 suffering other penalties.

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### **An Auto-da-fe**

The final public ceremony of the Spanish Inquisition was called an auto-da-fe, which means an act of faith. Crowds would gather in a public square, often facing a cathedral. In the center of the square, there were a dozen wooden stakes where the heretics were to be burned.

A bishop came out and shouted out the names of the condemned. Then the heretics were led out, wearing black robes decorated with red demons and flames. Officials of the government tied them to the stake.

"Do you give up your heresy against the holy church?" a priest would challenge.

Anyone who repented would be strangled to death before the fires were lit. Most, however, stood silent or defiant. The fires were lit, and the square echoed with the screams of the heretics and cheers from the crowd.

### **The Spanish Inquisition Comes to an End**

In 1492, the same year that Columbus discovered the New World for Spain, Isabella and Ferdinand expelled from their country all Jews who refused to convert to Catholicism. These attacks and expulsions against Spanish Jews paralyzed all of Spanish commerce. A hundred years later, the same resentment and fury turned against the Muslim population. Spain never recovered as a commercial power.

In northern Europe, the pope tried to use the Inquisition against the growing Protestant movement of the 1500s, but the Protestants were much too strong. They were allied to the leaders of powerful commercial nations and city-states. The new Protestant religions were protected by British, Swedish, German, Dutch, and Swiss governments. A single Europe had come apart.

The Inquisition had begun in a Europe united by religion as an attack on a few sects of heretics. Three hundred years later, the Inquisition could no longer hold Europe together. Religious and national wars were to last centuries and take hundreds of thousands of lives.

Today the Roman Catholic Church still wants its members to follow church doctrine, but it punishes dissenters with nothing more severe than official excommunication -- and even that does not occur very often. The church has had to reconsider its past actions. In recent times, Pope John Paul II had a church commission review what was perhaps its best known Inquisition case. The

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commission decided that the church was wrong when it punished Galileo in 1633 for declaring that the Earth was not the center of the universe.

### **For Discussion and Writing**

1. What was the purpose of the Inquisition in the eyes of the church? What other purposes did it serve?
2. This article only discussed the persecution of heretics by the Roman Catholic Church. Have other religions also persecuted heretics? In what ways?
3. The Inquisition was very similar to the Salem witch hunts in New England before the American Revolution. People would anonymously inform on their neighbors, and suspected "witches" would be tried and sometimes tortured. What do you think would lead to someone informing on a neighbor? If you were accused, how would you prove you are not a witch?