

Inquisition

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By James A. Haught

Christians killed Muslims in the Crusades. Christians killed Jews in many massacres. Meanwhile, another dimension was added: Christians began killing fellow Christians as “heretics.”

During the first millennium of the church, execution for doctrinal deviation was rare. In A.D. 385 at Trier, Germany, bishops put to death Priscillian and his followers for doubting the Trinity and the Resurrection. At Alexandria in 415, the great woman scientist Hypatia, head of the Alexandria library, was beaten to death by monks and other followers of St. Cyril, who viewed her science much as the church later viewed Galileo’s. At Constantinople around 550, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian killed multitudes of non-conformists to impose Christian orthodoxy. Otherwise, heresy was a minor issue.

After the turn of the millennium, a few prosecutions occurred. King Robert the Pious burned 13 heretics at Orleans in 1022. At Goslar, Germany, a community of Christians - deviants whose beliefs made them unwilling to kill chickens - were convicted of heresy and hanged in 1051. In 1141, priest Peter Abelard was sentenced to life imprisonment because he listed church contradictions in a book titled “Yes and No.”

Then, in the 1200s, a storm of heretic-hunting burst upon Europe. The first victims were the Albigenses, or Cathari, centered around Albi, France. They doubted the biblical account of Creation, considered Jesus an angel instead of a god, rejected transubstantiation (belief that the wine and host wafer miraculously become the actual blood and flesh of Jesus during communion), and demanded strict celibacy. Bishops executed a few Albigenses leaders, but the sect continued growing. The Third Lateran Council in 1179 proclaimed a military crusade against them, but it was a minor expedition with little success.

In 1208, Pope Innocent III declared a major crusade to destroy the Albigenses. Some 20,000 knights and peasants answered the call, forming an army that scourged southern France, smashing towns where the belief was strong. When the besieged city of Beziers fell, soldiers asked papal legate Arnald Amalric (or Arnaud Amaury) how they could distinguish the

infidel from the faithful among the captives. He commanded: "Kill them all. God will know his own." Thousands were slaughtered - many first blinded, mutilated, dragged behind horses or used for target practice. The legate reported to the pope: "God's wrath has raged in wondrous wise against the city."

This was the beginning of numerous "internal crusades" against nonconforming Christians and rebellious lords.

Another group targeted for extermination were the Waldensians, followers of Peter Waldo of Lyon, lay preachers who sermonized in the streets. The church decreed that only priests could preach, and commanded them to cease. They persisted. The Waldensians had been excommunicated as heretics at the Council of Verona in 1184, and the Albigensian crusade was directed at them as well. Executions ensued for five centuries. The lay preachers fled to Germany and Italy, where they frequently were caught and burned. Some hid in caves. In 1487, Pope Innocent VIII declared an armed crusade against Waldensians in the Savoy region of France.

Also condemned were the Amalricans. French theologian Amalric of Bena preached that all people are potentially divine, and that church rites aren't needed. After his death in the 1200s, his followers were burned alive as heretics, and his body was dug up and burned.

A similar fate befell the Apostolic Brethren, who preached and sang in public. Leader Gerhard Segarelli was burned as a heretic in 1300. His successor, Dolcino, led survivors into fortified places to withstand attacks and wage counterattacks. Troops of the bishop of Milan overran their fort and killed nearly all of them. Dolcino was burned in 1307.

In 1318 a group of Celestine or "Spiritual" Franciscan monks were burned because they refused to abandon the primitive simplicity of Franciscan garb and manners. Others executed as heretics were Beghards and Beguines, who lived in Christian communes, and the Brothers of the Free Spirit, a mystical order of monks.

The Knights Templar, religious warriors of an order that originated in the Crusades, were accused in France in 1307 of spitting on crucifixes and worshiping the devil. They were subjected to extreme torture, which killed some of them; others "confessed." About 70 were burned at the stake.

Killing heretics was endorsed by popes and saints. They quoted Old Testament mandates such as "He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death." St. Thomas Aquinas declared: "If coiners and other malefactors are justly doomed to death, much more may heretics be justly slain."

Efforts to stamp out heresy led to the establishment of the Holy Inquisition, one of mankind's supreme horrors. In the early 1200s, local

bishops were empowered to identify, try, and punish heretics. When the bishops proved ineffective, traveling papal inquisitors, usually Dominican priests, were sent from Rome to conduct the purge.

Pope Innocent IV authorized torture in 1252, and the Inquisition chambers became places of terror. Accused heretics were seized and locked in cells, unable to see their families, unable to know the names of their accusers. If they didn't confess quickly, unspeakable cruelties began. Swiss historian Walter Nigg recounted:

“The thumbscrew was usually the first to be applied. The fingers were placed in clamps and the screws turned until the blood spurted out and the bones were crushed. The defendant might be placed on the iron torture chair, the seat of which consisted of sharpened iron nails that could be heated red-hot from below. There were the so-called ‘boots’ which were employed to crush the shinbones. Another favorite torture was dislocation of the limbs on the rack or the wheel on which the heretic, bound hand and foot, was drawn up and down while the body was weighted with stones.

“So that the torturers would not be disturbed by the shrieking of the victim, his mouth was stuffed with cloth. Three- and four-hour sessions of torture were nothing unusual. During the procedure, the instruments were frequently sprinkled with holy water.”

The victim was required not only to confess that he was a heretic, but also to accuse his children, wife, friends and others as fellow heretics, so that they might be subjected to the same process. Minor offenders and those who confessed immediately received lighter sentences. Serious heretics who repented were given life imprisonment and their possessions were confiscated. Others were led to the stake in a procession and church ceremony called the “auto-da-fe” (act of faith). A papal statute of 1231 decreed burning as the standard penalty. The actual executions were performed by civil officers, not priests, as a way of preserving the church's sanctity.

Some inquisitors cut terrible swaths. Robert le Bourge sent 183 to the stake in a single week. Bernard Gui convicted 930 - confiscating the property of all 930, sending 307 to prison, and burning 42. Conrad of Marburg burned every suspect who claimed innocence. He met his downfall when he accused a count of riding on a crab in a diabolical rite, whereupon an archbishop declared the charge groundless and Conrad was murdered, presumably by agents of the count.

Historically, the Inquisition is divided into three phases: the medieval extermination of heretics; the Spanish Inquisition in the 1400s; and the Roman Inquisition, which began after the Reformation.

In Spain, thousands of Jews had converted to Christianity to escape death in recurring Christian massacres. So, too, had some Muslims. They were, however, suspected of being insincere converts clandestinely

practicing their old religion. In 1478 the pope authorized King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to revive the Inquisition to hunt “secret Jews” and their Muslim counterparts. Dominican friar Tomas de Torquemada was appointed inquisitor general. Thousands upon thousands of screaming victims were tortured, and at least 2,000 were burned.

The Roman period began in 1542 when Pope Paul III sought to eradicate Protestant influences in Italy. Under Pope Paul IV, this inquisition was a reign of terror, killing many “heretics” on mere suspicion. Its victims included scientist-philosopher Giordano Bruno, who espoused Copernicus’s theory that planets orbit the sun. He was burned at the stake in 1600 in Rome.

The Inquisition blighted many lands for centuries. In Portugal, records recount that 184 were burned alive and auto-da-fe processions contained as many as 1,500 “penitents” at a time. The Inquisition was brought by Spaniards to the American colonies, to punish Indians who reverted to native religions. A total of 879 heresy trials were recorded in Mexico in the late 1500s.

The horror persisted until modern times. The Spanish Inquisition was suppressed by Joseph Bonaparte in 1808, restored by Ferdinand VII in 1814, suppressed again in 1820, and finally eradicated in 1834.

Lord Acton, himself a Catholic, wrote in the late 1800s: “The principle of the Inquisition was murderous.... The popes were not only murderers in the great style, but they also made murder a legal basis of the Christian Church and a condition of salvation.”