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Grand Inquisitor's Manual

*A History of Terror
in the Name of God*

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THE PIETÀ AND THE PEAR

Christendom seemed to have grown delirious and Satan might well smile at the tribute to his power in the endless smoke of the holocaust which bore witness to the triumph of the Almighty.

HENRY CHARLES LEA,
A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages

Let us imagine a traveler arriving in the city of Rome when the Renaissance was in full flower, a pilgrim or a merchant or a diplomat. He seeks out the chapel near St. Peter's Basilica where the *Pietà* of Michelangelo is now on display, and he spends a few moments admiring the sublime depiction of the body of the slain Jesus in the lap of his grieving mother. *Pietà* means "pity," and the scene is rendered with exquisite tenderness and profound compassion. Like Michelangelo's frescoes on the ceiling of the nearby Sistine Chapel—the finger of a very fleshy God touching the finger of an equally fleshy Adam—the *Pietà* celebrates the beauty, dignity, and grace of the human body and the most exalted emotions of the human heart.

At the very same moment, however, and not far away, hooded men in dungeons lit only by torches—henchmen of what would come to be called

the Roman and Universal Inquisition—are applying instruments of torture to the naked bodies of men and women whose only crime is to have entertained some thought that the Church regarded as heretical. The victims' cries, faint and distant, reach the ears of the traveler who gazes in prayerful silence at the *Pietà*, or so we might permit ourselves to imagine. Yet the torturers are wholly without pity, and they work in the sure conviction that the odor of the charred flesh of heretics is “delectable to the Holy Trinity and the Virgin.”¹

The scene allows us to see the Renaissance and the Inquisition as a pair of opposites, the highest aspirations of human civilization coexisting with its darkest and most destructive impulses at the same time and place. Tragically, the genius that Michelangelo applied to the celebration of the human body is matched by the ingenuity of the grand inquisitors in their crusade to degrade and destroy their fellow human beings. Consider, for example, the contrivance known simply and even charmingly as *La Pera*—the Pear.

Fashioned out of bronze, richly and fancifully decorated, and cunningly engineered to open and close by the operation of an iron key-and-screw device, the Pear was the handiwork of a skilled artist and craftsman with a vivid imagination and a certain measure of wit. The first examples of the Pear date back to roughly the same era as the *Pietà*. But unlike the scene depicted in Michelangelo's statuary, the diabolical faces and demonic figures that embellish *La Pera* are the stuff of nightmares, and the object itself was designed as an instrument of torture to afflict the bodies of accused heretics who refused to confess, whether because they were wholly innocent of the accusation or because they were true believers in their own forbidden faith.

Exactly how the Pear was used to insult and injure its victims is a gruesome topic that we will be compelled to examine in greater detail a bit later. For now, let *La Pera* serve as a symbol of the willingness, even the eagerness of one human being to inflict pain on a fellow human being. None of us should be surprised, of course, that otherwise ordinary men and women have always been capable of heart-shaking and heartbreaking atrocities, but the fact that a man with the soul of an artist and the hands of a craftsman should apply his gifts to the creation of something as fiendish as the Pear

reveals something dire and disturbing about how we use the gifts we have inherited from our distant art- and toolmaking ancestors.

An even more sinister irony is at work here. What the men in black did to their victims with such tools was *not* a crime. To the contrary, when they tortured and killed countless thousands of innocent men, women, and children, they were acting in obedience to—and, quite literally, with the blessing of—the most exalted guardians of law and order. Significantly, the official seal of the Inquisition carried the Latin phrase *MISERICORDIA ET JUSTITIA* (“Mercy and Justice”), and all the atrocities of the friar-inquisitors were similarly veiled in pieties and legalisms.²

Here begins something new in history, an international network of secret police and secret courts in the service of “Throne and Altar,” a bureaucracy whose vast archives amounted to the medieval version of a database, and an army of inquisitors whose sworn duty was to search out anyone and everyone whom a pope or a king regarded as an enemy, sometimes on the flimsiest of evidence and sometimes on no evidence at all except the betrayals and confessions that could be extracted under torture and threat of death. The worst excesses of the agents of the Inquisition—priests and monks, scribes and notaries, attorneys and accountants, torturers and executioners—were excused as the pardonable sins of soldiers engaged in war against a treacherous and deadly enemy.

The strange story of the Inquisition begins in the distant past, but it cannot be safely contained in history books. The inquisitorial apparatus that was first invented in the Middle Ages remained in operation for the next six hundred years, and it has never been wholly dismantled. As we shall see, an unbroken thread links the friar-inquisitors who set up the rack and the pyre in southern France in the early thirteenth century to the torturers and executioners of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia in the mid-twentieth century. Nor does the thread stop at Auschwitz or the Gulag; it can be traced through the Salem witch trials in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, the Hollywood blacklists of the McCarthy era, and even the interrogation cells at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo.

Another instrument of torture, far less ornate but no less effective than *La Pera*, provides the best evidence that the inquisitor’s tools are still in use

today. Among the first and favorite forms of torture used by medieval inquisitors was the so-called ordeal by water, that is, pouring water down a victim's throat to simulate the sensation of drowning and thereby extract a confession. As far as the Inquisition was concerned, the ordeal by water was an ideal method of interrogation: it required only a bucket of water and a funnel, it left no telltale marks and no bloody mess to clean up, and yet it produced such agony and terror that the victim would readily tell the torturer whatever he wanted to hear. That's why the ordeal by water was favored not only by the medieval inquisitors but also by their successors in the Gestapo and the Soviet secret police. And the same form of torture is still in use today, although we are asked by its modern users and defenders to call it "waterboarding."

Nowadays, we tend to regard the Inquisition as an object of parody. Indeed, when the Inquisition is recalled at all, it is in the guise of the chorus line of step-kicking Dominicans in Mel Brooks's *History of the World: Part I* or the Monty Python sketches in which the setup line—"Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!"—is the occasion for sly but bloodless buffoonery. For that reason alone, a glance into the real face of the Inquisition is not merely surprising but shocking.

The first stirrings of the Inquisition can be traced back to a specific time and place in history. Faced with competition from the abundance of new ideas that appeared in western Europe in the aftermath of the Crusades, so rich and so strange, the Roman Catholic church resolved to impose a theological monopoly by fiat and force of arms. The thoroughly human tendency toward diversity in religious belief and practice had troubled Christianity since the first century of the common era—"For there must also be factions among you," observed Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians—but the so-called lawyer-popes of the Middle Ages resolved to root out heresy once and for all by devising and deploying the new and terrible contraption that came to be known as the Inquisition.³

The first target of the Inquisition was a community of dissident Christians known as the Cathars, who were hunted down, tortured, and burned by the thousands in the thirteenth century. To the modern eye, the Cathars appear to be exotic but inoffensive; the Church, by contrast, slandered

them as plague-bearing vermin and servants of the Devil.* The Cathars were soon exterminated, but the Inquisition never ran out of victims. Indeed, as we shall see, the inquisitors were perfectly willing to imagine or invent new heresies where none existed to feed the fires of the auto-da-fé. Thus the Inquisition continued to function in fits and starts over the next six centuries—not only in Europe but also in the New World and a few far-flung outposts in Asia and Africa—and its last victim was not put to death until 1826.

Strictly speaking, a vestige of the Roman Inquisition still exists within the bureaucracy of the Church, although it has been renamed several times over the centuries and is now known as the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Although the ordeal by water is no longer used at the Vatican, the essential function of the Sacred Congregation is the same as it was among its more fearful predecessors: the detection and elimination of what the Church regards as false belief. The cardinal who until recently directed its affairs was elevated to the papal throne as Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, but he was hardly the first or only inquisitor who went on to serve as the Supreme Pontiff.

The long history of the Inquisition can be conveniently divided into three phases. The medieval Inquisition, which functioned across western Europe for a couple of hundred years starting in the early thirteenth century, finished off the Cathars and then expanded its scope of operations to include a miscellaneous assortment of accused heretics, ranging from radical Franciscan priests to women accused of witchcraft. The Spanish Inquisition was franchised by the pope in 1478 to detect and punish Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity (known as *conversos*) who were suspected of secretly clinging to their former faiths, and remained in formal existence through 1834. And the Roman Inquisition, which aspired to universal jurisdiction but operated mostly in Italy, was created in 1542 as the papal weapon of choice in the crusade against the Protestant Reformation as well as the freshening winds of secularism and scientific inquiry that accompanied the Renaissance.

*“The Church,” as the phrase is used here, refers to what is generally called the Roman Catholic church, which regarded itself as the sole and absolute religious authority in Christendom. As we shall see, the Eastern Orthodox church, too, claimed to be the sole source of religious truth, and the two churches regarded each other as heretical.

Some figures and episodes in the history of the Inquisition have a special claim on our imaginations. Joan of Arc is surely the most famous victim of the medieval Inquisition, for example, and Galileo was among the last victims of the Roman Inquisition. But the doomed grandeur of imperial Spain has attracted the most attention in both scholarship and arts and letters, which may explain why we are tempted to think of the Spanish Inquisition as *the* Inquisition. From Goya's heartrending drawings of inquisitorial victims to Dostoyevsky's dreamy account of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*—"I shall burn Thee for coming to hinder us," says the imaginary Grand Inquisitor to Jesus Christ, whose second coming at Seville is treated as the ultimate act of heresy—the Inquisition has been made to serve as a symbol of the arrogance, brutality, cynicism, and hypocrisy of an authoritarian regime that drapes itself in the veils of both law and piety.⁴

The reach and sweep of the Inquisition have discouraged historians from treating it as a single institution. That's why an overview of the medieval, Spanish, and Roman Inquisitions in a single volume like this one is rare. The fact remains, however, that the inquisitors of every nationality and in every age were deputed under the same body of canon law, inflicted the same tortures and punishments on their victims, and devoted themselves to the same terrible mission—the arrest, torture, and execution of any man, woman, or child whom they regarded as a heretic, a term sufficiently elastic to reach *any* victim who happened to excite their anxieties or greed. Thus, for example, the manuals and handbooks composed in the Middle Ages to instruct the first inquisitors in their day-to-day work were still being consulted by the last inquisitors six centuries later.

Then, too, the Inquisition seems almost quaint when compared to the industrial-scale carnage of the twentieth century. Far more ink has been expended in chronicling the events that took place in Germany and Russia between 1917 and 1945 than in telling the story of the Inquisition, a saga that spans a period of six hundred years. Yet, ironically, the moral and cultural DNA of the grand inquisitors can be readily detected in Hitler and Stalin and their various accomplices and collaborators, and the inner workings of the Inquisition help us understand the goals and methods of the Great Terror and the Holocaust. The similarities are so striking that when the Jewish historian Cecil Roth published *The Spanish Inquisition* in 1937,

he felt obliged to warn his readers that the book was a work of history and not merely a satire on current events.

As we unpack the inquisitorial toolkit, we will find a set of interlocking ideas, values, and techniques that link all phases of the Inquisition into one great engine of persecution. Moreover, and crucially, we will see how the crimes of the first inquisitors came to be repeated in the twentieth century and even in our own benighted age.

“Fanatic zeal, arbitrary cruelty, and insatiable cupidity rivaled each other in building up a system unspeakably atrocious,” writes Henry Charles Lea (1825–1909) in summing up the verdict of history on the Inquisition, “It was a standing mockery of justice—perhaps the most iniquitous that the arbitrary cruelty of man has ever devised.”⁵

Henry Charles Lea is to the Inquisition what Edward Gibbon is to the Roman Empire, a self-invented historian who was also a gifted phrasemaker and relentless polemicist. The scion of a Quaker publishing family from Philadelphia, Lea set himself to work on a definitive study of the Inquisition after a breakdown confined him to his home and library. More than a century after Lea wrote a three-volume history of the medieval Inquisition and a four-volume history of the Spanish Inquisition, his vast body of work remains the starting point for any conversation about the meaning and effect of the Inquisition. Today, even as the history of the Inquisition is being revised by a new generation of scholars, Lea is still invoked to remind us why and how the Inquisition came to be regarded as an ineradicable symbol of the crimes that are committed when absolute power works its corruptions.

Revisionist historians, for example, have engaged in lively debate over how many men and women were actually tortured and burned alive by the Inquisition. Even though the precise body count remains undetermined, the hard evidence for the suffering of its victims was created and preserved by the Inquisition itself. We have the manuals, treatises, ledgers, and transcripts in which the inquisitors and their minions recorded every detail of their daily labors. We can read for ourselves the questions they asked, the punishments (or as the Inquisition preferred to call them, the “penances”) that were prescribed for convicted heretics, and even the precise formulas to be spoken aloud by an inquisitor in Rome or Toulouse, Cologne or Madrid, when sending a condemned man or woman to prison or to the stake.

“The accused are not to be condemned according to ordinary laws, as in other crimes,” explains Bernard Gui (ca. 1261–1331), author of one of the most influential and enduring of the inquisitor’s manuals, “but according to the private laws or privileges conceded to the inquisitors by the Holy See, for there is much that is peculiar to the Inquisition.”⁶

It reveals something crucial about the inquisitor’s cast of mind that the Inquisition maintained such meticulous and even boastful records. Every word uttered during interrogation, torture, and trial, every gasp and cry of the victim, were dutifully transcribed by a notary. Bookkeepers toted up the income from confiscations and fines as well as the expenditures for ropes, straw, and wood with which to burn those from whom the treasure had been taken. Since the inquisitors were utterly convinced that they were doing God’s work, they collected and preserved the smoking-gun evidence of their own brutality and greed with unmistakable pride as well as an obsessive attention to detail.

The whole point of the Inquisition was to achieve a critical mass of terror by making examples of the men and women who dared to think for themselves, and thereby frightening the rest of the populace into abject compliance. Interrogation, torture, and trial were conducted in strict secrecy, and the inquisitors emerged into daylight only to sentence and punish the victims at the great public spectacle known as an auto-da-fé. But the whispered rumors about what went on in the cells and dungeons of the Inquisition—and the private fears of those whose loved ones had been seized, shackled, and taken away—amounted to a powerful weapon in the war on heresy. “When the Inquisition once laid hands upon a man, it never released its hold,” writes Lea. “The Inquisition had a long arm, a sleepless memory, and we can well understand the mysterious terror inspired by the secrecy of its operations and its almost supernatural vigilance.”⁷

So we will come to see that the Orwellian future described in 1984—“Big Brother Is Watching You”—is actually rooted in the distant past. “Naming names,” a hateful feature of both the Moscow show trials of the 1930s and the Communist witch-hunt in McCarthy-era America, actually began with the inquisitors, who regarded the confession of an accused heretic as unacceptable unless it included the names and whereabouts of fellow believers. Even the black dunce’s cap used to humiliate prisoners at Abu Ghraib bears

an unsettling resemblance to the *coroza* that was placed on the heads of the condemned before they were burned alive by the Spanish Inquisition.

So, too, did the Inquisition teach its successors how to use language to conceal their crimes and, at the same time, to inspire terror in their victims. Just as the inquisitors used the ornate Latin phrase *judicium secularum* (secular justice) to refer to torture on the rack and the wheel—and just as *auto-da-fé* (act of the faith) came to signify burning at the stake—mass murder in the Soviet Union was called “liquidation” and the extermination of six million Jews by Nazi Germany was called “the Final Solution.” Even today, kidnapping a suspected terrorist and spiriting him away to a secret prison where he can be safely tortured is known as “extraordinary rendition” by our own intelligence services. When George Orwell coined the word *New-speak* to describe a vocabulary of euphemism and misinformation—“War Is Peace, Love is Hate, Ignorance is Strength”—he was recalling yet another invention of the Inquisition.⁸

Who were these so-called heretics, and exactly what were their misdeeds? The men, women, and children who suffered and died at the hands of the Inquisition, as it turns out, did not do anything that we would recognize as a crime; they were guilty (if at all) of wrongful thoughts rather than wrongful acts. *Heresy*, after all, is derived from the Greek word for “choice,” and one could be condemned as a heretic for choosing to believe something that the Church regarded as impermissible. Perhaps the best way to understand the function of heresy in the workings of the Inquisition is to borrow again from George Orwell’s *1984*: heresy is the original “Thought Crime,” and the agents of the Inquisition were the world’s first “Thought Police.”

“You are accused as a heretic,” the inquisitor was instructed to say to the accused in Bernard Gui’s handbook, “[because] you believe and teach otherwise than the Holy Church believes.” Since the official dogma of the Church was still being fine-tuned by various medieval popes, it was sometimes damnably hard for ordinary Christians to avoid heresy. Christian rigorists, apocalyptic theologians, cloistered women, and church reformers—all of whom thought of themselves as perfectly good Christians—were always at risk of arrest, torture, and death. “Nobody can understand

the Middle Ages who has not clearly realized the fact," observes historian G. G. Coulton, "that men might be burned alive for contesting publicly and impenitently *any* papal decretal."¹⁰

The Inquisition slapped the deadly label of heretic on so many of its victims that the word ceased to have any real meaning. Women were tried and burned as witches simply because of their age, appearance, or personal eccentricities; the evidence against Joan of Arc, for example, included the fact that she dressed in men's clothing. The warrior-monks of the Knights Templar were denounced as heretics and persecuted by the Inquisition because, among other things, their vast wealth provoked the envy and avarice of a French king. Eventually, as we shall see, the maw of the Inquisition would be fed with the bodies of Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity who were accused of lapsing into their old faiths. And Galileo was famously condemned as a heretic merely because he doubted that the sun revolved around the earth. "Even doubt was heresy," explains Henry Charles Lea. "The believer must have fixed and unwavering faith, and it was the inquisitor's business to ascertain this condition of his mind."¹¹

The frantic search for heretics, as we shall see, took on the symptoms of collective paranoia. A woman of North African descent who had converted from Islam to Catholicism was denounced to the Spanish Inquisition as a false Christian merely because she was observed eating couscous at a family meal, and a young woman who had converted from Judaism suffered the same fate because she put on clean underwear on Saturdays. A woman with a facial mole, a bad temper, or no husband—or one who had the misfortune to live next door to someone whose household supply of beer had gone bad—was a likely candidate for arrest, torture, and burning as a witch. At certain ludicrous moments, a text rather than a human being—the Talmud, for example, and the writings of a Christian theologian—was put on trial on charges of heresy and then put to the flames in place of its long-dead authors.

Nor was death itself a refuge from the Inquisition. If an inquisitor had exhausted the local supply of living heretics, he might turn to the graveyard in search of new victims. Charges of heresy were brought against long-deceased men and women whose rotting corpses were dug up, put on trial, and then put to the flames. Since confiscation of a condemned heretic's

land, goods, and money was a standard punishment for heresy, the Inquisition would seize the dead man's possessions from his children or grandchildren, which is doubtless what inspired the inquisitors to put defunct heretics on trial in the first place. The fact that the heir of a dead heretic was himself a good Christian was wholly irrelevant to the Inquisition; indeed, if he happened to serve the Church as a monk or priest, he would be stripped of his church offices as well as his inheritance.

The appetite of the inquisitors for new victims was so insatiable that they invented heresies where none existed. The so-called heresy of the Free Spirit, a fifteenth-century cult whose adherents were said to engage in all manner of sexual adventure because they regarded themselves as sinless, is now thought to have been a figment of the inquisitorial imagination rather than a real religious community. Precisely because the inquisitors relied on manuals and handbooks that included lists of leading questions to be put to accused heretics, they suggested the answers they wanted to hear from their exhausted, brutalized, and terrified victims. How many women under torture, when asked whether the Devil had ever appeared to them in the guise of a black cat, conducted them to a nighttime orgy, and demanded that they kiss his private parts, were quick to answer yes, thus telling their torturers exactly what they expected and wanted to hear?

Here we find what is arguably the single most dangerous idea that the medieval Inquisition bequeathed to the modern world. "Heretics were not only burned," writes historian Norman Cohn, "they were defamed as well." And these two acts were intimately linked. As the inquisitors grasped, and as history has repeatedly proved, it is far easier for one human being to torture and kill another if he has convinced himself that the victim is not really human at all.¹²

The war on heresy was a total war, and no weapon in the arsenal of the Inquisition was left unused. Among the ugliest was a psychological ploy that the inquisitors used with unmistakable zeal and a certain relish. Lest the accused heretics be viewed with pity and compassion as good Christians who had been wrongly condemned by the Inquisition, they were officially denounced as the vile and wretched minions of Satan, far beyond sympathy

or salvation. Thus, for example, the victims were charged not only with the crime of false belief but also with every act of wretched excess that the human imagination is capable of conjuring up.

Ironically, the very same charges that had been laid against the first Christians by their persecutors in imperial Rome were now applied to the Christian rigorists who caught the attention of the Inquisition. Their sober religious services were falsely characterized as “erotic debauches” in which fathers coupled with their daughters and mothers with their sons. The babies who were conceived at such orgies, it was said, were tortured to death and then eaten in a ritual meal that was a diabolical imitation of the Eucharist. Such outrages and excesses existed only in the perverse imaginations of certain friar-inquisitors, but they eventually found their way into one of the papal decrees that served as the charter of the Inquisition.¹³

Sexual slander against accused heretics was so common that we might conclude that the friar-inquisitors protested too much when they charged their victims with sexual excess. The incestuous orgy was a favorite theme, used indiscriminately against heretics of both genders and all religious persuasions, but the accusers' imaginations wandered to even darker corners. Women charged with witchcraft were assumed to kiss the backside and private parts of the Devil before engaging in sexual acrobatics with him. The pious members of the Knights Templar were accused of engaging in homoerotic rituals of initiation and acts of organized homosexuality. *Bugger*, a word still used today to refer to anal intercourse, is derived from a term used in the Middle Ages to identify the Cathars, who were wrongly believed to prefer any kind of sexual activity that did not lead to conception.

Imaginary sexual perversion of various kinds may have titillated the inquisitors, but the routine and unrelenting slander of accused heretics served another purpose as well. The Inquisition understood the danger that its victims might be seen by their friends, neighbors, and relations as pitiable rather than hateful. So the inquisitors sought to convey the impression that they were engaged in a life-and-death struggle against “a monstrous, anti-human conspiracy” under the control of “a devoted underground elite,” and that the Inquisition itself had been “called into existence to meet a national emergency,” all of which will strike a shrill but familiar note to contemporary readers. Heretics were nothing less than “traitors to God,” according to Pope Innocent III (1160/61–1216), and “thieves and murderers

of souls,” according to Pope Innocent IV (d. 1254). Once the war on heresy was understood as an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, God and Satan, then the end plainly justified the means—and no means were ruled out.¹⁴ “When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality,” declared the Bishop of Verden in a tract published in 1411. “[T]he use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, treachery, violence, simony, prison, death.”¹⁵

So the dehumanization of accused heretics, which provided a theological rationale for their extermination, was an early and constant theme of inquisitorial propaganda. Heresy, according to Innocent III, “gives birth continually to a monstrous brood” that “passes on to others the canker of its own madness.” The men and women accused of “heretical depravity,” according to the cant of the Inquisition, were not human beings at all but rather “harmful filth” and “evil weeds,” and it was the duty of the inquisitors to cleanse Christendom by eliminating them as one would dispose of other forms of waste or infestation.¹⁶ “[They] were the wolves in the sheepfold,” a Spanish priest wrote of the Muslim *conversos* in 1612, “the drones in the beehive, the ravens among the doves, the dogs in the Church, the gypsies among the Israelites, and finally the heretics among the Catholics.”¹⁷

Here is yet another linkage between the Inquisition of the distant past and the crimes against humanity that have taken place within our living memory. The better angels of our nature inspire us to look into the eyes of another human being and see a kindred spirit and, according to both Genesis and Michelangelo, the face of God. “When you visualized a man or woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity—that was a quality God’s image carried with it,” writes Graham Greene in *The Power and the Glory*. “Hate was just a failure of the imagination.”¹⁸

It is also true, however, that some men and women are capable of acting with appalling cruelty once they convince themselves that their victims are filth or vermin or, at best, miscreants with some incurable disease or congenital defect that compels them to serve the Devil rather than God. That’s how the Inquisition instructed good Christians to look on those it condemned as heretics, and it is the same moral and psychological stance that has always served as a necessary precondition for crimes against humanity. Not coincidentally, Zyklon B, the poison used to kill Jewish men, women, and children in the gas chambers at Auschwitz, was the brand name of an insecticide.

Strictly speaking, the Inquisition exercised its authority only over professing Christians who had deviated from whatever the Church defined as its current dogma. This explains why the only Jews and Muslims who fell into the hands of the Spanish Inquisition were those who had formally converted to Christianity after Ferdinand and Isabella offered them the choice between conversion and expulsion from Spain. Jews who refused to convert were expelled from Spain in 1492, the year that the same monarchs famously sent Columbus on his fateful voyage across the Atlantic. Since the inquisitors followed the conquistadores, however, a Jewish or Muslim *converso* who managed to escape the Inquisition in the Old World was at risk of torture and burning in the New World, too. The first Jews to reach North America, in fact, were some two dozen refugees from Brazil who were fleeing the long reach of the Inquisition.

Accused heretics who confessed to their crime, recanted their false beliefs, and managed to survive the “penances” imposed by the Inquisition would be welcomed back into the arms of the Mother Church, or so insisted the pious friar-inquisitors. The official theology of the Inquisition held that the inquisitors never actually punished anyone; they merely corrected the errors of repentant Christians who had strayed from the Church and then freely returned to its maternal embrace. Thus, for example, a convicted heretic who had managed to escape from an inquisitorial prison is described in an inquisitor’s handbook as “one insanelly led to reject the salutary medicine offered for his care.” By contrast, the truly repentant Christian was likened to a patient who took his medicine by performing without protest all the penances that had been prescribed by the “good doctors” of the Inquisition.¹⁹

The Inquisition in practice was never as benign as it advertised itself to be. Confession was required before the sin of heresy could be forgiven, for example, and yet confession alone was never enough. The confession had to be abject, earnest, and complete, which meant that it had to include the betrayal of others, including spouses and children, friends and neighbors. That’s why the naming of names was rooted in both the theology and the psychology of the Inquisition—the will of the victim to resist had to be utterly crushed, his or her sense of self eradicated, and the authority of the

interrogator acknowledged as absolute. The best evidence that an accused man or woman has been utterly defeated, then as now, is the willingness to betray a loved one or a trusting friend.

At its darkest moment, the Inquisition developed a new and even more dangerous notion: an obsession with “purity of blood” rather than “purity of faith.” With the adoption of a Spanish law that distinguished between those who had been born into Christianity and those who had converted to the faith, it was no longer sufficient or even possible for an accused heretic to merely confess and repent the sin of heresy. Under the Spanish Inquisition, the *conversos* were regarded as ineradicably tainted by their Jewish or Muslim origins, a fact that could not be changed by confession, no matter how many names were named. Thus did the Strictures of the Purity of Blood, as a Spanish decree of 1449 was known, prefigure the Law for Protection of German Blood and Honor of 1935, Nazi Germany’s formal declaration of war on its Jewish citizenry. The “machinery of persecution,” as the Inquisition has been called by historian R. I. Moore, was now driven by race rather than religion.²⁰

The Spanish Inquisition marked the zenith of the inquisitorial enterprise and thus the beginning of its long and slow decline. But it also signaled a sea-change in the inner meaning of the Inquisition and its significance in history. Once the Inquisition began to condemn people to death because of the blood that ran in their veins, the groundwork was laid for crimes against humanity that would be committed long after the last inquisitor had donned his hood and uttered the tortuous Latin euphemism—*debita animadversione puniendum* or “he is to be duly punished”—that translated into burning at the stake. By the mid-nineteenth century, the last grand inquisitor was dead and gone, and his successor in the twentieth century was the nameless and faceless man in a field-gray uniform who dropped the canisters of Zyklon B into the gas chambers at Auschwitz.²¹

Remarkably, the Inquisition has always had its defenders and its deniers, then and now. The most stubborn among them insist that it is more accurate to speak of *two* inquisitions, “one uppercase and one lowercase,” as historian Henry Ansgar Kelly puts it. The lowercase inquisition consisted of a random assortment of persecutors who were at work at various times

and places across six centuries, sometimes as freebooters under papal commission and sometimes as apparatchiks in a fixed bureaucracy like the notorious one in Spain. By contrast, they insist that the uppercase Inquisition is purely mythic, the collective invention of Protestant reformers, Enlightenment philosophers, Russian novelists, and English propagandists, all of whom contributed to the fanciful notion that the Inquisition was, according to Kelly's sarcastic description, "a central intelligence agency with headquarters at the papal curia."²²

The apologists also urge us to make a lawyerly distinction between the way the Inquisition was designed to work on paper and the atrocities that took place behind the closed doors of its tribunals and torture chambers. They correctly point out that the workings of the Inquisition were subject to canon law and papal oversight; indeed, the men who designed and ran the Inquisition were obsessed with rules and regulations, and that's why the inquisitors consulted the handbooks and manuals in which standard operating procedures were prescribed in meticulous detail. The duration of torture was carefully measured out by degrees: the second degree of torture, for example, was to be applied no longer than it took to recite an Ave Maria. If a sadistic or overzealous inquisitor sometimes disregarded the rules and tortured a victim to death, the apologists insist, we should regard any such incident as an aberration—a crime against the Inquisition, in other words, rather than a crime of the Inquisition.

Finally, the apologists caution us against imposing our values on the conduct of men and women who lived long ago. Criminal defendants enjoyed few rights and privileges in the Middle Ages, they point out, and torture was a commonplace in the secular courts. Why, then, should we be surprised to find that the ecclesiastical courts were no less brutal when it came to those accused of the crime of heresy? They ask us to overlook the question of whether it is ever morally defensible to punish someone for holding a private belief, and they encourage us to credit the Inquisition for following its own dubious rules. Thus, for example, some modern scholars are willing to argue that the victims of the Inquisition were afforded "legal justice" by their tormentors even if the friar-inquisitors failed to supply any measure of "moral justice."²³

To this day—and, in fact, never more so than in recent years—a state of tension exists between "the Inquisition" as it was chronicled by historians

like Henry Charles Lea and “the inquisition” as it has been reinterpreted by the revisionists who came after him. As we confront the crimes that were committed in the name of God, and as we look beyond the friar-inquisitors to their more recent imitators, we will come to see that the Inquisition with a capital *I* is not only a fact of history but also an urgent moral peril to the American democracy.

“It’s a remarkable piece of apparatus,” says a character in Franz Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, a boastful prison official who is describing a machine for torture and execution supposedly still in use in some nameless tropical backwater at the turn of the twentieth century.

The condemned men in Kafka’s story are never told what crime they are accused of committing. “There would be no point in telling him,” explains the official to a foreign visitor. “He’ll learn it on his body.” Nor are they afforded an opportunity to defend themselves against the accusation: “My guiding principle is this: Guilt is never to be doubted.” Once the prisoner is strapped into the elaborate machine, the crime is literally inscribed into his flesh by the mechanical operation of a set of long, sharp needles. A man who defies the authority of the jailors, for instance, is marked with the words “Honor Thy Superiors.” The inscription is so ornate in its calligraphic flourishes that it requires six hours to complete and inevitably costs the man his life, but not before he finally realizes what words are being carved into his flesh and thereby learns why he was condemned in the first place. “Enlightenment,” the prison official concludes in a moment of unwitting self-parody, “comes to the most dull-witted.”²⁴

The artful device on display in Kafka’s story is an appropriate symbol of the Inquisition, as Kafka himself surely intended it to be, and for reasons that will become increasingly clear as we move forward in history from the origins of the Inquisition to its reverberations in our own world. Like the bewildered defendant whose ordeal is depicted by Kafka in *The Trial*—“You can’t defend yourself against this court, all you can do is confess”—the victims of the Inquisition were subjected to the workings of an all-powerful tribunal that operated with “an Alice-in-Wonderland arbitrariness.” Indeed, Kafka can be regarded as the poet laureate of the Inquisition, if only because its absurdities and grotesqueries—as it was conceived in the febrile

imaginings of the first inquisitors, and as it actually operated in the here and now—can aptly be described as “Kafkaesque.”²⁵

“[T]he story of the Inquisition reads,” observes G. G. Coulton, “sometimes like a tale from a madhouse.” Yet we cannot dismiss the Inquisition as a figment of anyone’s imagination. It is not merely a myth fabricated by parlor propagandists and the writers of bodice rippers, as its modern apologists argue, nor can we comfort ourselves with the argument that the flesh-and-blood inquisitors never really succeeded in carrying out the master plan for persecution that is writ large in the inquisitor’s handbooks. Men, women, and children in the thousands and tens of thousands suffered and died at the hands of the pious friar-inquisitors, and the death toll is immeasurably greater if we include the latter-day inquisitors who followed in their footsteps, and still do.²⁶

The Inquisition has imprinted itself on the history of Western civilization in ways that are sometimes overlooked but can never be eradicated. To be sure, it was not the first or only tribunal that acted cruelly and capriciously in the name of “Mercy and Justice,” but the routine use of torture under the imprimatur of the Church has been blamed for encouraging the secular authorities across western Europe to do the same. The fact that England and the Netherlands far outpaced Spain, Portugal, and Italy in commerce and technology has been explained by some historians as yet another unintended consequence of the Inquisition; after all, enterprise and invention proved to be more vigorous in places that were beyond the reach of the inquisitor and “the power of fanaticism to warp the intellect of the most acute,” according to Henry Charles Lea.²⁷

The story of the Inquisition, however, is also the story of flesh-and-blood human beings who suffered at the hands of men whose fears and fantasies were acted out in real life. We know them by name: Jerónima la Franca is the woman who was condemned as a heretic because she ate couscous, Arnaud Assalit is the bookkeeper who added up the cost of ropes, straw, and wood for burning a heretic alive, and Arnauld Amalric is the abbot who, when asked by the soldiers under his command how to tell a Christian from a heretic, answered by issuing the chilling command: “Kill them all; God will know his own.”²⁸

Into the world where they lived and died, we now go.