



Heaven or Heresy: A History of the Inquisition

Thomas F. Madden

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For many, the Inquisition conjures Gothic images of cloaked figures and barbarous torture chambers. So enmeshed is this view of the Inquisition in popular culture that such scenes play out even in comedies such as Mel Brooks' *History of the World* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. But is this a fair portrayal? And how was the Inquisition perceived in its own time? Professor Thomas F. Madden of Saint Louis University delivers a stimulating series of lectures exploring all facets of the Inquisition, including the religious and political climate of its time and the Inquisition's relationship to heresy and reformation. With a scholarly eye and infectious enthusiasm, widely published author and noted expert on pre-modern European history Thomas Madden imparts an understanding of the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions while dispelling popular myths associated with the subject.

Course Syllabus

Lecture 1 The Organization of the Catholic Church

Lecture 2 Heresy and Orthodoxy

Lecture 3 Roman Law and the Church

Lecture 4 Birth of the Medieval Inquisition

Lecture 5 Medieval Heresies

Lecture 6 Centralizing the Medieval Inquisition

Lecture 7 The Working of the Medieval Inquisition

Lecture 8 Birth of the Spanish Inquisition

Lecture 9 "Poisonous, Offensive, Misleading": The New Heresies of the Protestant Reformation

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Lecture 12 Crafting the Myth of the Inquisition

Lecture 13 The Inquisition and Enlightenment

Lecture 14 The Inquisition in Popular Culture

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From Reader Review Heaven or Heresy: A History of the Inquisition for online ebook

Rodney Harvill says

In this lecture series, Professor Madden challenges modern perceptions and beliefs about the Inquisition, arguing that they are a product of historical revisionism in our past. Our current perception of the inquisition is a caricature of a certain phase of the Spanish Inquisition. In support of this end, he does the following:

- Defines heresy
- Discusses the incorporation of Roman law into the church following the conversion of Constantine
- Discusses the different inquisitions that were in effect
- Discusses the impact of the Protestant Reformation on inquisition efforts
- Discusses how modern perceptions of the inquisition developed

This last point takes up three of the fourteen lectures, a prudent approach since he has to go against the grain of popular culture and overcome modern prejudices.

Heresy had been a problem since the early days of the church, even documented in the New Testament. New converts from different regions and pagan backgrounds brought with them a variety of worldviews that resulted in divergent doctrines. Furthermore, the frequent persecutions by the Roman government and by various local governments had adversely impacted the ability of churches to communicate with each other and maintain a consistent set of doctrines. The conversion of Constantine allowed such coordination and was followed by the council of Nicea and other councils in which orthodoxy was clearly defined. Furthermore, the laws of Rome were changed to make heresy a crime against the state. Another impact of the conversion of Constantine and the end of persecution was the conversion of the upper crust and the educated classes, resulting in the melding of church doctrine with Roman law in the management of church affairs.

Following the fall of the western Roman empire, the near constant wars, invasions and other upheavals in western Europe resulted in disorder in the church. Sometimes bishops and other church leaders were appointed as vassals by feudal lords on the basis of their loyalty and not their spiritual maturity and understanding of doctrine. As a result, many laymen were completely misinformed about church doctrine, and pastoral care was not necessarily a priority. Over time, reform movements arose to place the clergy under the authority of the church and to restore its mission to spiritual matters. It was in this context that the first inquisitions took place.

The first inquisitions were more about pastoral care and due process. The secular lords outlawed heresy but might not have known enough church doctrine themselves to distinguish heresy from a hole in the ground. A simple accusation of heresy might be sufficient to get someone burned at the stake by secular leaders. Inquisitions consisted of clergy educated in church doctrine and due process such as rules of evidence who investigated heresy by questioning laity. Most often, heresy was a result of incorrect teaching and was corrected by providing corrective teaching of church doctrine. The objective of the inquisitors was the spiritual health of the church and restoration of the wayward, not punishment. Only defiant holdouts were considered to be heretics and turned over to the secular lords for criminal prosecution. The church did not have authority to impose secular punishment. While this may still offend modern sensibilities, it was clearly an improvement over burning the misinformed at the stake.

Because of the sheer number of acquittals by the church inquisition, it gained a bit of a “soft on heresy”

reputation, and there was a push by various kingdoms to institute their own royal inquisitions. One of these was the Spanish Inquisition. It was instituted to address a specific problem. Spain had a substantial Jewish population, and there had been some forced conversions. A Jew who had been forced to convert but subsequently recanted was considered not a Christian and not subject to church law. Those who didn't recant, conversos, were considered Christian and were subject to church law. They also had enemies. Other Jews resented their conversions, and non-Jewish Christians resented their prosperity and influence. As a result, they were often accused of maintaining a Christian facade while actually practicing Judaism. The Spanish Inquisition was instituted by Ferdinand to investigate these accusations. The sheer number of accusations convinced inquisition leaders and Ferdinand that this was a really big problem, and the inquisition got out of hand, largely by the relaxation of due process requirements.

The Protestant Reformation changed the nature of the inquisition. Its ideas weren't new, but their rapid spread was aided by the use of the printing press and the protection of reformers by various secular rulers who accepted reform doctrine and resented the church inquisitors who were not subject to their authority. As a result of these dynamics, the inquisition as it stood was inadequate to stop Protestant heresy (I am a Protestant and hearing Protestant teachings referred to as heretical took some getting used to.). At this time, the Roman Inquisition was instituted to maintain doctrinal purity in the papal states. The Index, a list of banned books with heretical teachings that was promulgated by the inquisition, proved to be effective in keeping Protestant teachings out of Spain and possibly the Italian peninsula.

To summarize the history of the inquisition, it helped to bring pastoral care and due process to those accused of heresy. It was only during the hysteria of the early Spanish Inquisition that due process and rules of evidence were relaxed, producing the abuses we now associate with the inquisition.

The modern view of the inquisition is that it was a suppression of dissent by means of harsh and sadistic methods. Several dynamics over the past four centuries contributed to this perception.

First of all, during the Reformation, there was a propaganda war between Protestants and Catholics. Both sides were targeting heresy. For the Catholics, Protestant teachings were heretical. For Protestants, Catholic teachings were heretical but so were the teachings of rival Protestant sects. For example, Lutherans would have considered Calvinists heretical and vice versa. Catholics were executing Protestants, and Protestants were executing Catholics and rival Protestants. There were efforts by Protestant propagandists to connect the Catholic Church and its inquisitions with the persecutions of Christians by the Roman Empire. Likewise, there were efforts by Catholic propagandists to label Protestants as the un-Christian persecutors. The Protestants won the propaganda war.

Second, religion blended with nationalism. Spain and France were Catholic; the British and the Dutch were Protestant. Many of these nations were geopolitical rivals who used their propaganda machines to paint rivals as evil. The Spanish Inquisition became synonymous with the evils of Spain.

Third, during the Enlightenment, religious toleration rose to prominence. Protestant nations had a variety of coexisting Protestant sects, and the doctrinal uniformity of Spain and the Italian peninsula appeared to Protestants a result of oppression by the inquisition. Increasingly, the inquisition was viewed as representing an intolerant past.

Fourth, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Gothic novels and various plays popularized a view of the inquisition as a sadistic oppressor. In the twentieth century, it was parodied in comedies and was used interchangeably with "witch hunt."

If Professor Madden is right about the history of the inquisition, and I suspect he is, our modern view of the inquisition forcibly demonstrates the shear power of polemic to shape popular opinion. I fear that we Protestants may owe the Catholic Church an apology. I unhesitatingly contend that some of its teachings are unbiblical, but we should criticize a person or organization for his or its reality, not our fantasy of that reality. Professor Madden's objective in this lecture series was clearly to teach the history of the inquisition based on the most current scholarship, but I also learned a lot about the power of rhetoric.

Brad says

Excellent. Prof. Madden is excellent.

Surveys the history of the inquisition as understood by actual and legitimate historical discovery. Really opened my eyes to the truth of what the inquisition actually was - as distinct from what our common culture regards it as. It is much more complicated than what we commonly think of (surprised?). The last hour or so also explored how the myth of inquisition came about.

Mark says

Interesting series of lectures by professor Thomas F. Madden of Saint Louis University on the history of the Inquisition. He lays out the history of inquisition beginning in the Medieval church up to the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. Madden discusses how inquisition started as an attempt stamp out heresy and actually helped to bring legal process to the Middle Ages. He then talks about how the Protestant Reformation helped to turn inquisition to The Inquisition, exaggerating the abuses of the Spanish Inquisition and how it became the historical face of the Inquisition.

Skuli Saeland says

Heaven or Heresy eru fyrilestrar um tilurð rannsóknarréttar kirkjunnar í Evrópu á miðöldum. Mér fannst sérstaklega skemmtilegt að kynnast mörgu nýju sem hér var sett fram. Madden heldur því m.a. fram að rannsóknarréttur kirkjunnar hafi oft á tíðum sýnt vandaða starfsemi og verið hvað mest umhugað um sálarhjálp þeirra sem voru rannsakaðir. Hins vegar hafi verið margar útgáfur af rannsóknarréttinum og oft hafi þeir heyrт undir staðbundin yfirvöld sem voru sérstaklega gjörn á aftökur. Pyntingar voru aftur á móti hluti af réttarkerfi miðalda, háðar sérstökum reglum og ættaðar frá réttarfari Rómverja. Slæm orðspor rannsóknarréttarins hefur verið endurskoðað síðustu ár, sérstaklega eftir að opnaður var aðgangur að skjölum Vatikansins, og Madden rekur hér t.a.m. ástæður þess að almenningsálitið varð jafn slæmt og raun ber vitni með umfjöllun um þjóðtrú, áróður og bókmenntir svo eithvað sé nefnt.

Peter Bradley says

Please give my Amazon review a helpful vote - <https://www.amazon.com/review/R11HID8...>

If you are looking either for horror stories or to confirm what you've always been told by Hollywood, then

give this a miss.

On the other hand, if you want a clear, lucid and comprehensive survey of contemporary scholarship, this is an excellent source.

Professor Madden takes his time in developing the origin of the Inquisition from its Roman precedents before tackling the histories of the various Inquisitions - Spanish, Roman, and papal - that most people have conflated when they talk about "The Inquisition." Along the way, Madden shares insights into the Inquisitions that often run counter to conventional wisdom. For example, the Inquisitions had broad popular support, limited the use of torture and appointed lawyers for the defense. That last surprised me. In addition, the numbers of people brought under inquisitorial scrutiny was always very small and the inquisitions had an acquittal rate exceeding that found in modern democratic legal systems, suggesting that the system was not rigged and that the judges were trying to reach an objective conclusion.

One of the negative reviewers says:

"Did the Inquisition burn 20,000 or was it 50,000? Did the Inquisition destroy the lives of 200,000 Jews or was it only 90,000 Jews? All of this is a distinction without a difference."

To the contrary, Madden pointed out that over its more than 400 year history, the number for the Spanish Inquisition was closer to 3,000. The difference is that this proves the leniency of the Inquisition and the effectiveness of its system for defending the accused. This is particularly true, as Madden points out, when the secular states were using far more torture without defense counsels and killing ten or a hundred times as many.

In addition, the Inquisition had no jurisdiction over anyone but baptized Catholics. Thus, inquisitors did not see themselves as persecuting "Jews" but punishing Catholics for heresy. (This is not to say that in the Spanish Inquisition there was an element of racism against "New Catholics," or that, in fact, some of the Catholics punished for "Judaizing" were Jews who did not want to convert and had no intention of actually converting. It is, nonetheless, anachronistic to accuse the inquisitors of destroying the lives of "Jews" since that was not what they thought they were doing. In addition, in many cases, it was not what they were doing at all, since there were many cases of bona fide conversions where Jewish family traditions placed the New Christians under suspicion of "Judaizing.")

Madden also pointed out the significance of the notion of "relaxing" a convicted accused to the state. The state carried out punishment. Until the accused was given to the state, punishment could not be carried out. Thus, during that time, the Inquisition was free to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused under a fairer and more humane system than the state would have provided, which is why accused people often tried to get the inquisition to take jurisdiction over their case.

Anti-Catholics of whatever persuasion will find these lectures to be disappointing, but the facts are the fact.

A good companion text for seeing the kinds of cases that the Spanish Inquisition actually dealt with is "Inquisitorial Inquiries" - <https://www.amazon.com/Inquisitorial-...>

Bruce Wiley says

I find Madden explains things in a way that is easier for me to understand than many authors. He does seem to downplay the brutality of the inquisitions a bit too much although he does put it very much in perspective to the times.

Ellis says

Yes, the inquisition was, according to Dr. Madden, a different thing than I have always heard it portrayed to be. Yet, people were tortured and killed simply for holding different beliefs from the church/state. Here is another example of the disastrous coupling of religion and politics.

Todd Martin says

Heaven or Heresy is an audiobook produced by The Modern Scholar and as such structured as a lecture given by a professor (Thomas F. Madden of Saint Louis University in this case) and is not a book on tape. As one might suppose from the title, the topic is that of a history of the inquisition – a process the Christian church used to rout out heretics and eliminate dissenting elements of the population.

Today, the inquisition is looked back upon as a time when the church extended their power by stifling dissent of those with beliefs that differed from orthodox teaching through the use of torture and slaughter.

One quickly comes to the realization, however, that Madden is a church apologist and as such attempts to white-wash events in a way that absolves the Catholic Church from the horrors meted out to those deemed to hold heretical beliefs. In fact, he even alludes to the fact that Monty Python was historically accurate and that the comfy chair and soft pillow were the real techniques used to bring the lost lambs back into the fold (note: he didn't really, that was a joke).

What Madden does do, though, is argue that it was the big bad secular authorities (to whom the church turned over those individuals deemed to be heretics) that tortured people and burned them alive. He seems to, in fact, believe that this absolves the church of all responsibility concerning the matter. Of course, this is absurd. As Wikipedia points out “the inquisitors generally knew what would be the fate of anyone so remanded {to the state}, and cannot be considered to have divorced the means of determining guilt from its effects”. Madden’s attitude is simply a reflection of the common hypocritical attitude one has come to associate all too closely with religious institutions.

But why would Madden choose to polish this turd? Well … a quick search of the web reveals that Madden is a member of Catholic Answers. And what is the stated purpose of this organization? “*Catholic Answers is one of the nation’s largest lay-run apostolates of Catholic apologetics and evangelization. Its mission statement explains its purpose: Catholic Answers is an apostolate dedicated to serving Christ by bringing the fullness of Catholic truth to the world. We help good Catholics become better Catholics, bring former Catholics “home,” and lead non-Catholics into the fullness of the faith.*”

He's a Catholic apologist, pure and simple.

Ray says

The book changed my pre-conceived notions about the Inquisition. I was especially surprised to hear details which ran counter to the popularized movie version of the Spanish Inquisition. Interesting.

A says

If your depth of understanding of "The Inquisition" is limited to Monty Python's version, do the world a favor and realize you are an idiot on the subject. Listen to this to get a better idea of the different ways inquiries happened and where, and there were a lot of them. Helpful to learn protestants had inquisitions as well and it was not just a Catholic situation.

Ray says

Thomas Madden's book had some surprises in it for me, specifically in the idea that the Spanish Inquisition, as we've come to know it, was far from being as horrible as commonly understood. This is based on more modern historical research into papers and writings from the era, as opposed to the Hollywood version most of us are familiar with. The book has a number of interesting insights in it, and certainly gave me a new outlook on the Inquisition, and the history of Christianity.

Christina says

I am very fond of Thomas Madden's lectures and typically he covers topics that hold a great deal of interest for me. This time I picked this course based only on the fact that he was the lecturer without regard for the topic. He did a nice job covering a long time period and dispelled many myths of the inquisitions throughout history. I also appreciated that he explain how the myth of the inquisition came to be in modern times. I wish he would have discussed why the inquisition really never took hold in the eastern or russian orthodox churches. If you are interested in this topic you will find his discussion of it interesting. If you are more like me, and are only slightly interested, it does tend to drag a bit in the middle. However, with only 14 30 minute lectures it is not a huge a time investment so you might as well give it a try.

Melinda says

Another solid lecture series from Professor Madden. Full of great content and easy to listen information and ideas. I learnt a few things and like the relatively balanced view this series gave.
