

## Chapter Three

# The Character of the Inquisition

The first special topic which I select for examination is the character of the Spanish Inquisition and of the very similar institution long maintained by Charles and Philip in the Netherlands. Modern apologists for Catholicism are at pains to vindicate the Spanish Inquisition against the reproaches traditionally levelled against it. They view it in its proper setting as but one item in the total picture of Spanish life; and they are eager to bring out the comeliness of the whole. The slowness of Protestant governments to unlearn the persecuting habits which medieval Catholicism had taught mankind to take for granted, and certain differences as to what precisely the government of a country ought to suppress, afford opportunities for arguing that sixteenth-century Spain was a more tolerant country than England. Dr. Walsh, for instance, says: "Even the Inquisition might be called their Declaration of Independence against the domination of Jews and Moors" (p. 629); and he urges that the English censorship of books was far more severe than the Spanish (pp. 632 f.). Mr. Trevor Davies paradoxically describes Spain as a country "tolerant beyond all others yet the perfecter of the most efficient system of persecution in the world" (p. 3). "Though conservative and scholastic in its tendencies", Spanish university-life "was by no means unreceptive of new ideas" (p. 25). He adduces evidence of the prolific culture of the country, the high standard of its learning, the brilliance of its literature.<sup>1</sup> He mentions the humaneness shown to deported Moriscos (p. 170), to tramps (pp. 272 f.), and to the natives of Peru (pp. 75).<sup>2</sup>

I would not deny that in all this eulogizing of Spain during her "Golden Century" there is a measure of truth. I would only remark in passing that a good deal of the gilt comes off the gingerbread when proper account is taken of one or two features in Spanish life which are not denied even by the apologists whom we

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1. E.g., R.T. Davies, *Golden Century*, pp. 26, 289. Cf. *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 8, 1935, p. 494 (quoting Merriman).

2. This last-mentioned virtue is touched on also by S. Leathes in *Camb. Mod. Hist.*, vol. ii (1903), p. 101.

have just quoted. Thus, Mr. Trevor Davies admits that the treatment long meted out to the Moors in Spain was unwise and unjust (pp. 52-54, 164, 242-247). The cruelty exercised by the Spaniards on the American Indians was notorious.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Walsh rather grudgingly admits it: but his comment on it sheds an extraordinary light on the Catholic attitude to ethical claims. "It was not", he says, "that Spaniards were essentially any more humane than Englishmen; perhaps by nature they were less so. But Spanish Catholicism was Christian and English Protestantism was not. The real triumph was that of Christ, teaching His Gospel unto the ends of the world,..." (p. 714). Similarly striking is his bland remark about bull-fighting: he calls it "the bloody sport which Spaniards, true to their paradoxical history, loved only next to the religion of Christ" (p. 504).

Both of these authors allude to the serious financial chaos into which Spain fell in the course of this brilliant period.<sup>4</sup> They have not, indeed, overstated the magnitude of the trouble. Historians are unanimous about it. "The Spaniards could never be a great nation because they were never industrious."<sup>5</sup> In 1575 Philip was bankrupt, and in 1596 he again repudiated his debts. By the end of the century, says Mr. R.H. Tawney, "Spain, the southern Netherlands, including Antwerp, and a great part of France,... were ruined".<sup>6</sup> He describes Spain as possessed of "an incapacity for economic affairs which seemed almost inspired,..."<sup>7</sup> One is inclined to ask

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3. The Spanish reputation is reflected in the writings (1719 and 1732 respectively) of Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*, [ed. 1863], pp. 163 f., 203 ["... the Spaniards, whose cruelties in America had been spread over the whole country, and were remembered by all the nations [? natives] from father to son"], 228), and Daniel Neal (*The History of the Puritans* [ed. 1837], vol. i, p. 324), and is admitted by later writers (e.g., Froude, *Short Studies*, vol. i, pp. 462-72. E. Armstrong, *The Emperor Charles V* [ed. 1910], vol. ii, pp. 102-107).

4. See R.T. Davies, *Golden Century*, pp. 77 f., 256-260, 270-275, 280, 283, 289; Walsh, *Philip II*, pp. 270, 371, 545 f., 572-574.

5. S. Leathes in *Camb. Mod. Hist.*, vol. ii (1903), p. 100; cf. p. 101 ("... exertion, always distasteful to the Spaniards,..."); also E. Armstrong in *Camb. Mod. Hist.*, vol. iii (1904), p. 384.

6. R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Pelican edition, 1938), p. 82; cf. p. 77 ("... Spain, a corpse bound on the back of the most liberal and progressive community of the age, completed her own ruin by sacking" Antwerp [1576]).

7. R.H. Tawney, *op. cit.*, p. 78. Cf. Hallam, *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages* (ed. 1878), vol. iii, p. 418 ("... Spain, where improvement is always odious,...").

whether, after all, the term “the Golden Century” is not something of a misnomer.<sup>8</sup>

A further fact to be reckoned with is that the torpor which befell the intellectual life of Spain from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards is one of the almost unmistakable effects of the Inquisition. This judgment is one of the kind which, however plausible, it is difficult to demonstrate conclusively; hence apologists for Catholicism find it possible, without too patent absurdity, to deny it outright. A certain number of instances, for example, can be adduced in which the authorities displayed a surprising leniency in leaving men of letters unmolested; and these are contrasted with sundry manifestations of severity in other countries (including England). A contributor to *The Times Literary Supplement*, June 27, 1936 (p. 534), tries to get round the awkward objection by being superficially facetious. “Much has been written concerning Spain’s decadence”, he says, “her natural exhaustion after a Golden Age which lasted for two centuries; which is much like seeking abstruse reasons for the death of a man at the age of 150”. But it stands to reason that no country could suffer so vigilant and powerful an organization as the Inquisition comprehensively and despotically to control the public and private life of its citizens for over three centuries, with the object of extinguishing every spark of religious dissent, without eventually atrophying their intellectual vigour, even if for a time it did not prevent an outburst of literary brilliance. Henry Charles Lea, after an exhaustive study of the available evidence, concludes that “the Inquisition paralyzed both the intellectual and the economic development of Spain”.<sup>9</sup> Other historians have come to the same conclusions.<sup>10</sup>

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8. On the terrible condition of Spain, economically, morally, and in other ways, at the time of Philip’s death, see M.A.S. Hume, *Philip II. of Spain* (London, 1897), pp. 251 f.; also H.C. Lea in the *Amer. Hist. Review*, vol. ix, p. 245 (Jan. 1904).

9. H.C. Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain* (New York and London), vol. iv (1907), pp. 528-531.

10. Cf. J.R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (ed. 1881), p. 621 (“... enfeebled within by the persecution of the Inquisition, by the suppression of civil freedom, and by a ruinous financial oppression, Spain had not only ceased to threaten Europe...”); James Bryce in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. c, p. 146 (August 1907: “... the taking of Constantinople by the Turks, and the rise of the Inquisition in Spain, come pretty near to being unqualified calamities”); C. Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition* (1937), pp. 273 f. On the other hand, see the qualifications and warnings put forward by Professor Butterfield (*The Whig Interpretation*, etc., p. 74).

But it is not primarily about these things that I am now concerned to argue. I propose to concentrate on the ethical character of the attitude taken up towards religious freedom by the Spanish monarchs and by the Church to which they adhered. As I explained above (pp. II f.), I am not contending that these sixteenth-century persecutors were insincere men, that they were failing to act up to their lights, or that the persons they tormented and killed as “heretics” were in every respect wise, good, and tolerant men. But I do invite the reader to remember that persecution, objectively viewed, is morally harmful, that the evil of it is greatly accentuated when it is carried on with the ferocious cruelty customarily practised by the Spanish rulers and their agents, and that the victims, though often themselves intolerant, were less so than their persecutors, and were, by virtue of their very “heresy”, at least on the way to curing themselves of the persecuting temper.

It is impossible to deny that Charles V and his son Philip II were two of the most zealous persecutors in Christian history;<sup>11</sup> and the question we have to face is this: What judgment ought we to pass on their persecuting? Granting that we are not in a position to pronounce their inner motives dishonest, what are we to say of the quality of their deeds?

Dr. Walsh makes it clear that he approves of the persecution practised by Philip. He justifies it, despite its apparent harshness and cruelty, as the needful judicial preventative of religious strife, which would otherwise have been introduced by “the enemies of Christendom”.<sup>12</sup> He justifies it by the disparaging terms in which he regularly refers to all measures of toleration. Thus, L’Hôpital (the French Chancellor) “professed to be a Catholic. Yet one of his first acts (April, 1560) was to obtain through Catherine the Edict of Romorantin, which was the opening wedge for toleration of the new doctrines and which prevented the introduction of the Inquisition, a project of the Guises” (p. 282; cf. p. 674). “... his influence led to

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11. I confess I do not understand Dr. Walsh’s statement (p. III) about the Spain to which Philip returned in 1551, namely, that it was a country where “No man killed another for the cause of religion”. I suppose he is referring to that particular moment. But how long was it to remain true? (cf. pp. 209 bott., 232 ff.).

12. Walsh, *Philip II*, pp. 235 f.: cf. p. 234 (people “came from villages for many miles around, not only to see *the enemies of God and man* punished, but to get a first glimpse of their new King”. Italics mine).

the very violence Catherine sought to avoid, and delivered her into the hands of Coligny and the Calvinists..." (pp. 286 f.). The treaty of Amboise (March, 1563) he describes as "another humiliating surrender to the Huguenots", because it granted them an amnesty and freedom of worship (p. 294). He speaks of Catherine de' Medici and Charles IX throwing away the fruits of the Catholic victories "by the disgraceful peace of Longjumeau (March twenty-third, 1568)", by which a measure of toleration was conceded to the Huguenots (p. 463). He blithely justifies Philip for rejoicing and (as he imagines) laughing when he received news of the massacre of St. Bartholomew in 1572 (pp. 536 f.). He refers slightly to Henry IV's Edict of Nantes (pp. 684 f., 705). He blames even his hero because he "set Protestantism above the world in England" (p. 484) – apparently an allusion to his having dissuaded Mary Tudor from persecuting the Protestants and from executing Elizabeth. Toleration in Austria is referred to as "compromise on religion" (pp. 485 f.), and Philip's general policy as "his sincere refusals to compromise on any teaching of Christ and the Church" (p. 487; cf. pp. 708, 724).<sup>13</sup> When he lay on his death-bed, "he had done his best against the enemies of God, and there was little they could do to him" (p. 717).<sup>14</sup>

Mr. Trevor Davies is at pains to convince us that the real motive behind the persecuting measures of the Spanish sovereigns was political rather than religious. "The suppression of Lutheranism was indispensable for the continuance of Charles's Empire.... Even if the Emperor had been himself Protestant in sympathies, he would none the less have been compelled to put down the Lutheran princes; for their Lutheranism was the stark negation of German unification under a central government".<sup>15</sup> He contends that the real motive of Philip's efforts to extirpate heresy was a dynastic zeal for the power

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13. Yet on p. 90, when speaking of the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, he makes a curious concession regarding the futility of persecution. "Like all persecutions, it had proved of more benefit in the end to the victims than to the persecutors...."

14. The Catholic view of persecution is well illustrated by a sentence of decapitation and burning passed against a heretic at Venice in 1547. It was said to be "to the honour and glory of Jesus Christ" (W.E. Collins in *Camb. Mod. Hist.*, vol. ii [1903], p. 383).

15. R.T. Davies, *Golden Century*, p. 104. Cf. A.F. Pollard in *Camb. Mod. Hist.*, vol. ii (1903), pp. 144 f. (Charles's supreme motive was a desire to glorify the Hapsburg family).

of Spain. “Though he was by no means conscious of the fact, his policy was a completely secular one...” (p. 131) – a judgment which I regard as self-contradictory. “Philip’s aims were those which almost any ambitious statesman, given his circumstances, would have adopted.... This postulated, especially, the destruction of all Protestant and Mohammedan movements within Spain...” (p. 135). It was the almost universal belief of the time “that more than one religion in one State would bring that State to destruction. There was abundant evidence in support of such an assumption;...”<sup>16</sup>

This thesis receives some support from the facts (1) that, on the advice of his father, Philip, as Mary Tudor’s husband, dissuaded her on grounds of political expediency from persecuting the English Protestants; (2) that he saved Princess Elizabeth’s life, and long supported her as Queen of England; (3) that he urged Pope Pius V to allow the Spanish Inquisition to condemn Carranza, Archbishop of Toledo, since otherwise the reputation of the Inquisition – the main support of his regal power – would be damaged; (4) that he is said to have offered in 1573 to establish the same measures of religious toleration in the Netherlands as prevailed in Germany, by reuniting them with the Empire, if the German princes would elect him Emperor; and (5) that, notwithstanding his general loyalty to the Papacy, he was frequently at issue with individual Popes, and that at times the tension was very serious.

But this apologetic, so far from rendering the persecution of so-called heretics any less odious, renders it only more so. It is at least some slight palliation of the evil of persecuting that it is done with a desire to safeguard the truths of religion. But to let the issue of religious toleration or its opposite turn on the question which of them was the more advantageous for the political power of oneself and one’s dynasty is to deprive intolerance of even that meagre excuse. I am not forgetting here that under Queen Elizabeth Catholic priests were executed in England on

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16. R.T. Davies, *Golden Century*, pp. 134 f.; cf. p. 278. See also E. Armstrong, *Charles V* (ed. 1910), vol. i, pp. 223, 250, 262, vol. ii, pp. 135 f., 266, 344; Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation*, etc., pp. 39, 80-83; J.B. Black, *The Reign of Elizabeth* (Oxford, 1936), p. 87 (“... the rigid Spanish belief that the catholic religion was indispensable to the maintenance of civil obedience”); E.C. Ratcliff in *The Study of Theology* (1939), p. 459. (“From the point of view of the time, national unity and security undoubtedly demanded enforced conformity” – à propos of the England of Elizabeth).

what were at least largely political grounds: but this evil proceeding rested on something much broader than the desire to defend the personal or dynastic rights of a particular sovereign or royal house: it rested on the fear (warranted by what had happened under Elizabeth's predecessor) that the triumphs of the Catholic plots against her would result in the virtual enslavement of the entire nation.<sup>17</sup>

On the whole, however, I am disposed to think that Mr. Trevor Davies does Philip a little less than justice in declaring his motives as a persecutor to have been mainly political. His tenderness towards the English Protestants under Mary and his alleged offer of toleration in the Netherlands in 1573 were apparently in the nature of lapses or special concessions due to the particular political interests which happened to be then before him. Without imagining that the political and religious motives could in those days be kept entirely apart, I believe that Philip was largely actuated by purely religious considerations.<sup>18</sup>

As regards Charles, it is certain that, as a loyal Catholic, he regarded Protestantism with intense repugnance, altogether independently of the element of political danger believed to be inseparable from it. It has been claimed, however, that "he was no ferocious bigot".<sup>19</sup> The grounds alleged for this view are, first, that there was a lull in the activity of the Spanish Inquisition during the latter part of his reign;

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17. "In the eyes of statesmen like Walsingham, for whom politics were, with much justification, a contest between Protestantism and Catholicism, light and darkness, Christ and Antichrist..." (F.M. Powicke, *The Reformation in England* [1941], p. 125).

18. This is the view put by the English poet George Chapman into the mouth of the French general Biron in his play, *The Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron* (1608; Act IV, scene ii, lines 115-155), in the course of a general eulogy of Philip.

"So he, with his divine philosophy,  
(Which I amy call his, since he chiefly us'd it)  
In Turkey, India, and through all the world,  
Expell'd profane idolatry, and from earth  
Rais'd temples to the Highest: whom with the Word  
He could not win, he justly put to sword...  
... 'Twas religion,  
And her ful propagation that he sought; ..."

On the significance of this eulogy, see below, p. 146 n.

19. Armstrong, *Charles V* (ed. 1910), vol. ii, p. 344; cf. p. 70 ("until his latest years he was no fanatic"); also R.B. Merriman, *The Rise of the Spanish Empire in the Old World and in the New*, vol. iii (*The Emperor*, 1925), p. 129 ("Fanatic by nature he emphatically was not;...").

and secondly, that “in Germany his moderation excited the anger of Catholics”. In regard to the inquisitional lull in Spain, such as it was, other factors than the suggested liberality of Charles would account for it; and it is interesting to note that he steadily supported the Inquisition in Spain, and that, when he heard that the country was permeated with heresy, he wrote in concern about it to his mother (the nominal queen) and his son (the Regent), and a new spell of persecuting activity ensued (1546). As for his moderation in Germany, it is surprising that Mr. Armstrong should adduce it as evidence that he was no bigot, for it is abundantly clear that his hands there were tied, because he was only Emperor and not territorial ruler,<sup>20</sup> and he had good reason to fear that, if he attempted persecution in Germany, he would encounter such strong opposition as to disrupt the Empire, and possibly to bring about his own dethronement. It has been said that the strongest motive behind his abdication was his unwillingness permanently to tolerate schism; and he certainly impressed on his son the duty of doing all he could to wipe heresy off the face of the earth.<sup>21</sup>

The instrument which both Charles and Philip normally used for the suppression of heresy, and incidentally for the maintenance of their own monarchical power, was the Inquisition. The Spanish Inquisition had certain features of its own, wherein it differed from the Inquisition practised in the Netherlands and elsewhere; but the points of difference are not such as to affect substantially any moral judgment which we may be led to pass on either.

The popular and historical memory of the doings of the Roman Church in the sixteenth century has invested the Inquisition, as it has invested the Society of Jesus, with the blackest disrepute. This general horror with which Protestants have become accustomed to think of the Inquisition is naturally apt to find expression in exaggerated or inaccurate statements regarding the details of its procedure. Wild assertions are often made regarding the number of its victims, the ruthlessness of its sentences, the publicity of its executions, and so on. Such

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20. Armstrong, *Charles V* (ed. 1910), vol. ii, pp. 104, 109, 344.

21. Cf. Merriman, *The Emperor*, pp. 401 f.