

## THE INQUISITION IN LATIN AMERICA – AN OVERVIEW OF MODERN-DAY IMPACTS

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**Abstract** - The Inquisition in Latin America represented a period of time during which the Catholic Church, under influence from colonial powers in Europe – including but not limited to Spain and Portugal, attempted to influence and control religious beliefs in the colonies. These efforts took place over a period of decades during which entanglements between church and state grew and evolved along with the changing nature of colonization in the New World itself. The efforts to ensure that those in the colonies subscribed to official Church doctrine and swayed away from acts and beliefs considered to be heretical in nature coincided with the colonists' desire for increased economic, political, and social control over the colonies themselves. These actions followed a natural series of progression from colonial control over the colonies in the America through towards independence of the colonies – oftentimes occurring simultaneously or synchronously with the reform or conclusion of events of the Inquisition. Nevertheless, we see that there are lasting effects of colonization of the Americas. One clear example is language – in former colonies of Spain and Portugal, for instance, we see Spanish and Portuguese as common languages. We also see a predominance of Catholicism as a religious belief system and structure. Yet, we also see a persistence of social and political actions that can be clearly related back to the actions of the Inquisition – namely – censorship, related actions of the press and mass media as well as governmental control of same, and ongoing relations and conflicts between the powers of church and state. This paper will review events of the Inquisition as related to these areas – and provide a related discussion to modern-day events in Latin America that have roots in the events of the Inquisition themselves.

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**Keywords** - Inquisition, Latin America, censorship

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### CENSORSHIP DURING THE INQUISITION

Censorship, the state or organizational restriction on expression of ideas and beliefs, represents one of the most predominant examples of actions taken during the Inquisition. Inquisitors, acting as agents of the Inquisition, actively sought to suppress the expression (and inherently, beliefs in) ideas that were considered heretical – i.e. – in direct opposition to or in questioning of official Church doctrine and belief. Censorship during the Inquisition took varied forms – including but not limited to restriction on public speech and restriction on printed expression. Though censors during the Inquisition ultimately desired to restrain thought patterns that persisted in opposition to official teachings – the physical manifestation of censorship often took the form of punishment for expression of ideas themselves.

Nesvig (2006) notes that censorship during the Inquisition was a necessity in order to prevent the further spread of heresy. To this end, he remarks: “The theory behind the need for censorship viewed the [Index of Prohibited Books issued by the Spanish Inquisition] as one of the principal purposes of the Inquisition . . . . Heresy was viewed as a contagion and heretical books as its most effective vector” (p. 2). Yet, we must keep in mind that censorship was yet a means to an end – the end goal being control over the populace of the newly conquered lands, particularly as the Inquisition spread into newly conquered lands from Spain to Mexico as one example. While this ultimate goal may have been less pronounced in

Europe itself – control over the colonies became one end result of the methods of the Inquisition.

Nesvig (2009) provides for our consideration several examples of the censorship of print materials in colonial lands during the Inquisition:

“Censorship of print in the early modern Hispanic world was divided, in practice and by law, between pre- and postproduction regulation. Through the Council of Castile the Crown exercised preproduction control of the book trade through licenses to print books . . . . The Crown did attempt on various occasions to assert its rights and prerogatives concerning censorship of publications . . . . While the Crown regulated the licensing of print, the Inquisition laid claim to censor any book after its publication if it contained anything deemed worthy of censure.” (p. 229).

Within the context of this description, note carefully the interconnection between the Crown and the Church as one example of interactions between Church and State – a point to which we will return later in the discussion. Nevertheless, the wholesale censorship of print materials had a basis in the Inquisition as manifested in a dual role of licensing of print prior to publication and restriction of further printing and distribution after printing had taken place.

To both the colonial empires and to the Inquisition, the theory and practice of censorship represented a means by which both political and ideological control would be strictly maintained. Hart's (1999) work posits that to this end “the Spanish state favoured the use of language as a coercive device rather than a

vehicle of enlightenment” (p. 27). By controlling expression of thought, the thoughts themselves could be (theoretically) controlled. We will see this theme repeated and continued in present-day Latin America in our ensuing discussion.

## **THE INQUISITION AND RELATED POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUES OF COLONIALISM**

How persistent was censorship during the Inquisition – and how widespread was the practice? What was the relationship between the practice of censorship during the Inquisition and patterns of continued exploration, conquest, and independence among Latin American nations? A review of these factors will set the stage for our ensuing discussion of the persistence and effects of Inquisitorial actions into modern-day Latin America.

Lavrin’s (2011) analysis of these patterns is telling – in that he finds “the program of conversion and indoctrination ... survived its initial challenge, but as the frontiers of European occupation and settlement expanded beyond central Mexico and throughout the continent, it replicated itself in different geographical settings with different actors . . . . By the mid-eighteenth century, confrontation had given way to a set of religious practices and political issues that would last beyond the colonial period” (p. 183). While the battles for independence in Latin America among colonies raged on – religious beliefs and practices in the areas settled and conquered by Spain and Portugal and subject to the Inquisition would maintain their characteristics and presence in the region.

Green’s (2012) analysis of the inquisition in Latin America takes this a step further – in positing that the Inquisition in Latin America provided a method for political and economic control over the colonies – showing us one of the first examples of the strong ties between church and state in Latin America (an idea we will revisit later in the discussion). In a departure from arguments proposing that the Inquisition was an organizational structure designed to foster the spread of Catholicism and the rooting out of heresy – Green (2012) makes clear that during the Inquisition “it was financial solvency rather than matters of doctrine which drove the institutional history of the Inquisition in the overseas territories (p. 10). While, perhaps, religious doctrine provided an early impetus for the spread of the Inquisition – as colonial powers in the New World grew, a method to control these lands was needed – and while political and economic forces would be able to provide this power, the use of religion as a coercive tool provided a power that was difficult for the colonists to resist. Green’s (2012) assertion that “the dispersed nature of the Iberian dominions required ... a culture of both mobility and the collation of information and the direction of orders to those in very dispersed areas: how the

scribal and epistolary production relating to the tribunals was forced to become international, together with the tribunals themselves (p. 13). Indeed – to this end, Green (2012) asserts that “the establishment of the inquisitorial tribunal ... followed a commercial and institutional rationale as much as it did a purely religious one” (p. 11). This is one of several earlier-established patterns that we will later in our discussion be able to trace to modern-day events and practices.

## **OTHER FORMS OF INQUISITORIAL CENSORSHIP**

While a great deal of censorship during the Inquisition took the place of restriction of the expression of heretical ideas – those opposed to official Church teaching – we also see restriction of expression taking place in scientific and medical realms. These impacts were of a lesser extent than other forms of censorship – and as we will discuss – have had a lesser impact on current-day science and medicine in Latin America; nevertheless, these forms of restriction are worthy of our further discussion in this context.

In providing an analysis of the practice of medicine during the Inquisition, Newson’s (2006) discussion provides key insights into an area that had not, at the time, undergone extensive research. Her research points to several key factors, including the overarching attempts of the Spanish Crown to regulate the practice of medicine; the “low priority accorded to medical care in the Americas” (p. 375); and of particular note, the inherent cognitive dissonance between the philosophies and practices of both providing for medical care and continuing the search for new discoveries in medicine.

To this end, Spain continued to exert control over medical practices in the colonies – yet quickly realized that the failure to consider other forms of promising types of medical treatments (in conformance with several guidelines of the Inquisition) could contribute to a growing public health problem. We find an additional relevant example of the intersection between science, censorship, and the Inquisition in the lived experiences of Galileo and Copernicus, two prominent scientists whose work concerning science, and in particular, astronomy, was subject to censorship by the Inquisition and subsequent punishment. While the literature regarding their experiences is rather substantive and extensive, Tolbert’s (2003) insights into the continuing nexus of discovery and censorship shed light on the time-worn impacts of this practice. She documents the experiences of Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, a scientist of the period who was able to utilize significant political influence to open, shape, and reframe the ongoing dialogue between Church teachings and scientific discoveries. By opening the door to continued dialogue between the Church and

the scientific community, Peiresc's contributions lays the groundwork for a further conversation and collaboration between the institutions of education and religion – with modern-day impacts. As we will discuss later, the influence of the Church and Inquisition over medical and scientific practices in the colonies represents an additional, albeit relatively minor, manner in which practices during the Inquisition in the colonial era of Latin America have had impacts that continue on into modern times.

### MODERN-DAY IMPACTS: CENSORSHIP

Censorship, in the form of restrictions on free press, continues to be present in modern-day Latin America. With specific reference to Mexico (a former Spanish colony that held a central role in the Inquisition in Latin America), censorship plays a major role in the relationships between the government and the press. While censorship during the Inquisition was promulgated for the chief aim of repressing thoughts and expressions that were considered heretic in nature in violation of official Church teachings, censorship in the modern era is designed to similarly exert a degree of control over the populace – from less of a religious perspective and more of a political perspective.

Piero Stanig's (2015) analysis of the current state of censorship in the Mexican press provides further evidence of the persistence of censorship in Mexico from the times of the Inquisition into the modern-day. His extensive analysis focuses on "the 'chilling effect' of punitive regulation of speech in Mexico" and demonstrates via a quantitative and qualitative analysis of patterns of press reports (and lack thereof) of corruption in Mexico that censorship as an institution remains pervasive in Mexico (Stanig, 2015, p. 191). Note, carefully, the key comparisons and lasting effects – earlier we established censorship as a method to maintain control over beliefs and actions in compliance with church doctrine. In present-day Mexico, we now see censorship continued to maintain control – over political expressions and reporting of political events that may cause damage to those in control. In both cases, censorship is used as a method of control with a clear intertwining of issues of church and state which we will discuss.

Censorship in both cases (i.e. during the Inquisition and in modern times) served to effect a sort of protection of the power of the ruling elite. We note that the impacts of censorship on colonialists, settlers, and the indigenous during the Inquisition served to create an 'underground' of sorts via which ideas were expressed and shared in secret. We also note a certain measured degree of suspicion against the *conversos* whose true faith and ideals could not conclusively be determined. We can readily identify clear parallels between censorship during the

Inquisition in colonial Mexico and censorship during current-day Mexico: namely – censorship as a means of protection (from either exposure to heretical ideas or to protect those in power – or both) and censorship as a means of control (over thoughts, beliefs, and political actions). As we examine this phenomenon further we will also explore the Church's role in this pattern.

### MODERN-DAY IMPACTS: CHURCH-AND-STATE ISSUES

As we have alluded to in our discussion, the process of the Inquisition in colonial Latin America necessitated a degree of cooperation between the Church and the Crown in order to affect the desired ends. The establishment of quasi-religious monarchies persisted in Latin America and has had the effect of an unofficial state sponsorship of religion. Barracca and Howell (2013) provide an analysis of the modern-day status of such church and state relationships – and in so doing – note that "there are five 'continuity cases' .... These are Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay" where a church and state interrelationship remains with moderate to strong influence (p. 24).

After the period of the Inquisition had concluded, we can note a rise in Protestantism within the colonial areas including Mexico. As can be expected, resistance to this movement on the part of the Catholic church took an Inquisitional note, if only in spirit and not in action – as the Church "denounced Protestantism as a heretical sect, a vanguard of US imperialism, and destructive of faith and national unity" (Barracca & Howell, 2013, p. 27). While the scope of the conflict between Protestants and Catholics is tangential to this discussion, the temporary resolution is telling in that it demonstrates the clear persistence of a link between Church and state to promote Catholic dominance: "Under the terms of the rapprochement, the Catholic Church promised its loyalty to the government in exchange for lax enforcement of the Reform Laws, positions in government, authorization to teach the catechism in public schools, and permission to build new churches, seminaries, and schools" (Barracca & Howell, 2013, p. 28). While later events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrate that this agreement was indeed temporary in nature as events and conflicts between and among Protestants, Catholics, and the government flared up again in Mexico – we can see that the issue has not been permanently resolved and remains pertinent.

It can be posited that church-state relationship issues were inherent with the colonization of the New World by Spain and Portugal – and given the strong church and state ties in the colonial powers, along with the powers that the colonial empires gave to the Church

to conduct the Inquisition – that the stage was set for ongoing church-state issues in several nations of Latin America that have persisted to this day. These issues have had a relational impact on membership and participation in the Catholic Church, to which our discussion of impacts of the Inquisition will turn as a final discussion point.

### MODERN-DAY IMPACTS: CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Chiappari's (2007) meta-analysis provides insights into the challenges faced by the Church in Latin America in the era beyond the Inquisition and 20<sup>th</sup> century struggles. He notes a sea-change in the views of Latin America towards the Church – and while vestiges of church and state relationships that hold their inception during the Inquisition remain – a shift in philosophy is well underway. He notes:

“With its emphasis on returning to traditional culture and ethnic identity in the face of the disappointments of modernity, it is not surprising that it [a new evangelization by the Catholic Church] developed in the 1980s in Latin America, a decade in which many modernist visions and optimism were shattered on the rocks of dictatorship, spiraling debt and the rise of the neoliberal project that accompanied and aggravated these phenomena. Facing losses from both liberation theology and Protestantism, the Catholic Church was in need of a new approach to gaining and maintaining members. Nevertheless, it too came with its own burden of modernist if not colonialist baggage” (Chiappari, 2007, pp. 290-291).

In one example from the popular press, we find that this phenomenon continues, with some remaining vestige of Inquisitorial language and approach when reviewing and analyzing declines in Church membership. Note the following example:

“The Holy Inquisition held a meeting last week in Guadalajara. Of course, they do not call it the Inquisition anymore .... Nor do they burn heretics at the stake ... Nowadays it goes under other names, such as ‘indigenous theology’ and ‘ecology’, he [Cardinal Juan Sandoval Iniguez] warned grimly. For good measure, he threw in feminism and astrology. It was evils such as these, including so-called ‘new age’ cults, that the meeting was convened to discuss” (Gunson, 1996).

The ‘meeting’ in question was called to discuss waning Church membership in Latin America and steps that could be taken to stem the tide. While a full and complete discussion of this trend falls beyond

the scope of this review, it is worth noting continued Church resistance to alternative beliefs and ideas both in Latin America (as specifically referenced here) and beyond. And – while some vestiges of church and state relationships persist, the relationship is not strong enough to coerce additional followers and *conversos* in the manner that took place during the Inquisition.

### CONCLUSION

It is without debate that we realize that the Inquisition had a dramatic impact on the new European colonies of Spain and Portugal in the Americas. These impacts have been well-documented and are far-reaching. Nevertheless, we can also see where early vestiges of the Inquisition, namely, censorship, church-and-state relations, and drives to maintain Church membership, persist through to the modern day. These elements of the Inquisition remain for identical reasons – to maintain a measured degree of control over the populace.

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