

# Pointed Questions

Reviewed by James Reston Jr.

THE HISTORY OF VATICAN CITY STRETCHES back to the first century AD, and it is a story filled with more heroes and villains, saints and sinners, high-minded visionaries and lowbrow crooks, than Hollywood's morgue of B-movie scripts. Everyone who has done research in the exquisite Vatican Library comes away with a few experiences that can enthrall any dinner party. When, in 1991, I was researching the life of Galileo, I was escorted by a bloodless German priest, the head of the Vatican Archives, through the narrow corridors of the stacks, up serpentine staircases, past multiple locked doors and glass cases filled with the golden gifts of kings to popes over the centuries, into an inner sanctum. There, I would be shown the transcript of the Inquisition's four withering interrogations of Galileo. The priest removed a strap lock across a steel cabinet and reverently opened a middle drawer,

## GOD'S JURY:

The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World.

By Cullen Murphy.  
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reaching for the leather-bound record. Next to it was another volume.

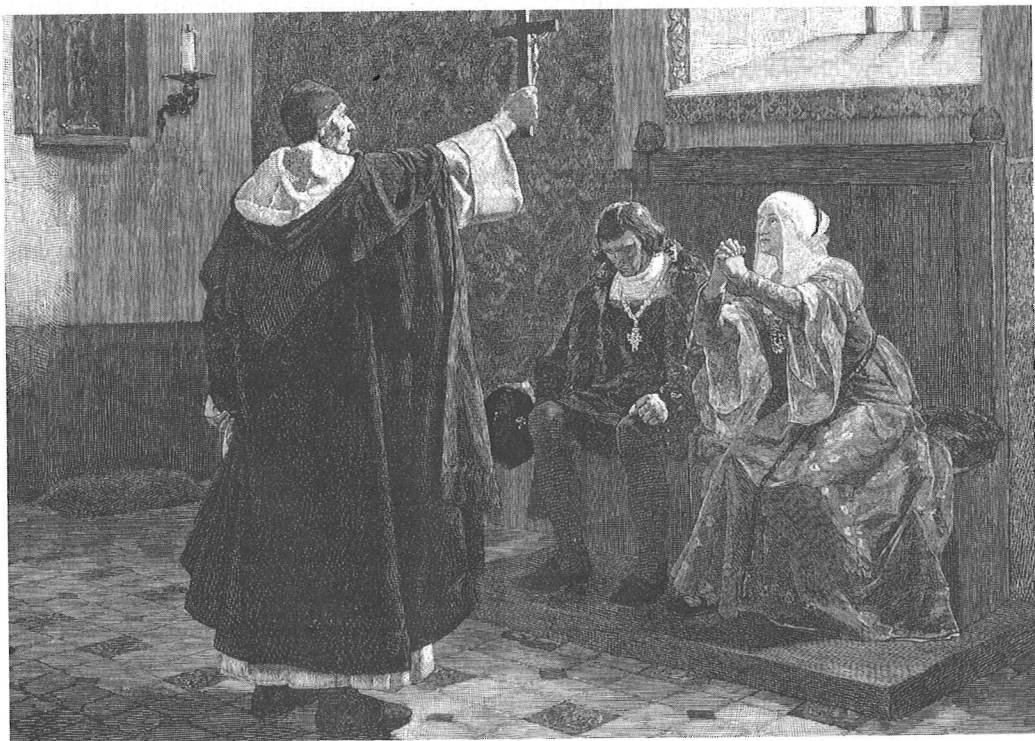
"What's the other book?"

I asked.

"Oh, those are the letters between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn," he answered.

Like me, *Vanity Fair* editor Cullen Murphy is a member of the Vatican Archives fraternity. In *Are We Rome?* (2007), he plumbed the history of the ancient empire for parallels to modern America. His provocative new book, *God's Jury*, examines the Catholic Inquisition for insight into our own time.

Early in *God's Jury*, Murphy introduces himself as a Catholic and an American. This suggests that perhaps his book will be a personal journey into the moral center of his faith



Tomás de Torquemada, chief architect of the Spanish Inquisition, put the fear of God into King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella.

and his citizenship. "I ventured into the world of the Inquisition and its offspring in the 1990s, motivated at first by the Vatican's attempts to silence or censor a significant number of prominent theologians, some of whom I had come to know," he writes. Issues of torture and domestic surveillance surfaced after 9/11. And so, he thought, the Inquisition offered a "lens" through which to view—or a "template" against which to contrast—issues of our time.

He divides the historical Inquisition into three major categories—the Medieval, the Spanish, and the Roman—and analyzes its later globalization. For Murphy, an authentic inquisition must consist of five elements: a bureaucratic machine, secret monitoring and surveillance, censorship, paranoia about an enemy operating secretly within, and, perhaps most important, moral certainty. "Moral certainty," he writes, "ignites every inquisition and then feeds it with oxygen."

The machinery of the Inquisition was established in the early 13th century, when the Roman Catholic Church was confronted with the so-called Cathar heresy in southern France. (The Cathars deviated from official doctrine with their belief in a Manichaean world of good and evil, in which God could be responsible only for the good, not the evil. They viewed Rome as the offspring of the Whore of Babylon and regarded its priests as licentious and corrupt.) After the assassination of a papal legate in Languedoc, Pope Innocent III initiated a bloody holy war called the Albigensian Crusade. When agents of the Church massacred all the residents of a town to rid it of the few heretics in its midst, the mantra was, "Kill them all. Let God sort them out."

With this anecdote, as with many sprinkled throughout the book, Murphy leaps from the past to the present, linking episodes of medieval history to current reality. In this instance, he points out that the same rallying cry appears on bumper stickers and T-shirts at U.S. military installations.

After the violence subsided and the here-

tics moved underground, the Dominican Order came into existence, named for its founding father, St. Dominic. The Dominicans were to be the Church's policemen, charged with defending and protecting official doctrine by rooting out the wayward. These militant priests became known as the Hounds of God.

In the decade that followed the end of the Albigensian Crusade, the rituals, procedures, and punishments of the Medieval Inquisition were codified. At the Council of Tarragona, in 1242, the varieties of heresies were given definition and graded for severity. Record keeping and data collection became a central element of the Inquisition. This could be pushed to absurd lengths, such as accounting for the cost of wood and straw for burning the worst heretics, along with the fee for the civilian executioner. Burning convicted heretics at the stake, a procedure known as "auto-da-fé" (in Portuguese, "act of faith"), was delegated to a secular arm, for a priest was forbidden to shed blood. And so the culprits were "relaxed" to laymen for the dirty work. Hence begin the euphemisms for aberrational punishment. Peering through his lens, Murphy cites "extraordinary rendition" in our time as one such modern euphemism for an act that really means kidnapping, spiriting away to secret prisons, and, usually, torture.

The infamous Grand Inquisitor, Tomás de Torquemada, presided over the Spanish Inquisition, which has become synonymous with the most hideous and perverted extremes of this system for enforcing doctrinal purity. In each case before the tribunals for the Holy Office, precise notes were kept, including a record of everything said or screamed during interrogations. In 1998, the Vatican opened its Inquisition records to scholars. This new access is partially responsible, Murphy asserts, for the golden age of Inquisition scholarship. In a number of rooms in the Vatican Archives, millions of pages await perusal.

One of the more intriguing interviews Murphy conducts is with the preeminent In-

quisition scholar, Henry Kamen. Together they focus on the most profound question in this undertaking, at least as it applies to America after 9/11: "What turns a society, any society, from one thing into another? What combination of factors—economic distress, ethnic hostility, physical threat, moral fervor, latent envy, political manipulation—can alter the historic character of a people or place?" But we do not get an answer.

Murphy's bold purpose is to link the past and present and suggest their relationship. Suggest he does, but occasionally the links can be breathtaking. After briefly treating the Spanish Inquisition's methods of torture, for example, he jumps to George W. Bush's methods. "The Bush administration's threshold for when an act of torture *begins* is the point at which the Inquisition stipulated that an act of torture must *stop*." Earlier, we were told that Torquemada burned 2,000 people at the stake.

When Murphy turns to his brief overview of the Roman Inquisition, the focus shifts to censorship. The Index of Forbidden Books was established in 1542 as a response to the challenge of Martin Luther. Luther is mentioned only briefly in *God's Jury*, and this seems like a missed opportunity. Luther's wrangles with Rome over his many deviations from Catholic doctrine are among the most dramatic examples of pushing back against this awe-inspiring, fear-inducing institution. That rebellion, of course, was a turning point in Church history.

Murphy misses another opportunity for drama as well as explication with the trials of Galileo a century later, first in the examination by Cardinal Robert Bellarmine over the nature of scientific proof, but more important, in the four interrogations of the scientist by the Grand Inquisitor, before Galileo's humiliating recantation on the altar of the Basilica di Santa Maria sopra Minerva in 1633. The transcripts of these crushing interrogations were released in the early 1990s as part of the Church's re-examination of the Galileo case.

As a prelude to the onset of the third mil-

lennium of Christianity, Pope John Paul II announced that the Church would engage in a process he called historical purification, forthrightly addressing the darkest aspects of its history. This bid for renewal began unsteadily with the Galileo case; the re-examination took 13 years before the Vatican feebly admitted that errors were made without saying who made them. The next case was supposed to be that of Jan Huss, the 15th-century Bohemian reformer whose offenses included challenging the hierarchical power structure of the Church and questioning the use of papal indulgences. Huss refused to abjure his beliefs and was burned in 1415. But the Huss case has not been formally reopened.

Roman Catholicism maintains a "ban" or excommunication on Luther and all his followers, even to this day. When two years ago I asked the provost of the Cathedral in Worms, Germany (where Luther was examined for his disobedience at the Diet of Worms in 1521), whether, after 500 years, the Church shouldn't, in the spirit of ecumenism, scrap its anti-Luther stance, he replied, "The time has not yet come to lift the ban."

But the elephant in the room remains the Inquisition. The most the Church could muster by way of apology was John Paul II's pastoral letter in 1994 admitting that some "children" of the Church may have "departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel," and a penitential Mass at St. Peter's in the Jubilee Year of 2000 in which the pope asked for forgiveness for all the transgressions committed by sons and daughters of the Church. Murphy leaves it to the Vatican scholar Carlo Ginzburg to provide the response: "What I didn't hear the pope say today, and what I haven't heard anybody in this discussion say, is that the Catholic Church is *ashamed* of what it did. Not *sorry*. Sorry is easy. I want to hear the Catholic Church—I want to

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hear the pope—say he is *ashamed*.”

Cullen Murphy has written a wonderfully interesting and courageous book. His command of Inquisition literature is impressive, as are his interviews and the literary and biblical connections he makes in his argument. The questions he raises about repression, torture, censorship, corruption, and contrition are profound. If *God's Jury* is also a frustrating book, perhaps it is because, as a Catholic and an American, Murphy cannot quite bring himself to argue pointedly what this link between past and present means for his church and his country. Is it fair to talk about an

American Inquisition after 9/11? Did the repressive measures that were brought to bear after that devastating attack fundamentally change the nature of the land? With the abuses of Abu Ghraib, enhanced interrogation, and extraordinary rendition, has America lost the moral high ground? And did America ever really occupy that lofty perch? Murphy does not ask these questions, much less answer them.

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