

Spain's Black Legend

Written by Msgr. Ignacio Barreiro

The Black Legend against Spain is part of a vast movement started by the enemies of the Faith to destroy the Catholic religion. It is not an isolated case; other Catholic countries like Italy, Ireland and Poland have had their reputations smeared for their adherence to the Faith. The Black Legend seeks to throw discredit upon the Faith by building biases and prejudices against Catholicism. A current example of these attacks is Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code*, a malevolent cocktail of fake scholarship, lies and half-truths. It seeks to instill in Catholics a sense of embarrassment and shame about the way in which their ancestors lived and practiced their faith. The effect is subtle but too often ends by Catholics then doubting the truth of the Faith.

The Black Legend was fanned largely by Protestant and liberal ideology and, particularly in the twentieth century, the Marxist re-interpretation of history. Even in Latin America, the influence of the so-called "Enlightenment" movement (largely directed against the Catholic faith) led to a type of Black Legend that was used to justify the aspirations of political independence from Spain. In that region political "adulthood" in the early nineteenth century was grounded in a rationalist ideology that repudiated the Hispanic heritage.¹ Regrettably, even today many priests and religious of the Church have accepted totally or partially the Black Legend against Spain. They have led protest movements against the celebrations of the Fifth Centennial observing the discovery and conquest of America. They evidently believe it would have been preferable to leave the indigenous paganism with its idolatrous and bloody cults undisturbed and without the preaching of the Gospel.

The Black Legend is "an atmosphere created by the fanatic accounts of Spain which have been published in almost all countries; grotesque descriptions which are constantly being made of the character of Spaniards as individuals and collectively; the negation, or at least, the systematic ignorance of whatever is favorable and worthy of honor in the various manifestations of culture and art; the accusations which are always being launched against Spain are based upon events which are exaggerated, badly interpreted, or totally false."² This has created all sorts of negative stereotypes that have been reinforced by the media — particularly Hollywood. It is useful to consider those aspects of the history of Spain that have been the focus of the Black Legend.

The Reconquest

The efforts of Christians in Spain to free themselves from Islamic domination (which began in the eighth century) have been denounced and distorted by revisionist liberal historians. Some have stated that both the Crusades in the Holy Land and the reconquest in Spain were anti-Christian because they entailed the propagation of religious faith by the violence of arms. That is a total misstatement of the facts, since those wars were not meant to convert anyone by force, but rather to recover lands that had been unjustly taken over by Muslims. The Spaniards were engaged in a crusade, which is a just war in which the participants receive spiritual benefits, a war sanctioned by ecclesiastical authority that

granted remission of sins to those taking part in it. The different Spanish Kingdoms had indeed a right and obligation to recover the lands that had been unjustly taken by the Arab invaders.

Isabel of Castile and the Expulsion of the Jews

When Isabel was proclaimed Queen in Segovia on December 13, 1474, she consecrated her Kingdom to God. In the forty years of her reign with Ferdinand of Aragon magnificent achievements were attained. They are overshadowed, in the estimation of revisionist historians, by her decision to expel the Jews from Spain. This decision, however, must be viewed in its proper context.

In 1290 King Edward I of England issued an edict banishing the Jews. A few years later there was a massive Jewish emigration out of France. Portugal had also expelled the Jews. Though the Church had frequently protected the Jews against the animosities of Catholic citizens, by the end of the fourteenth century the coexistence of the Christians with a very large Jewish minority had become more difficult. The causes of this strain were many, but the most fundamental was religious.³ Those religious reasons were united to a strong sense of national unity that became crystallized after the recovery of Grenada, which completed the reconquest. Also, during the Muslim occupation of Spain the Jews were perceived as acting in concert with the Muslims to oppress the Christians.⁴ In many cases Jews had been the tax collectors of the different Muslim kingdoms. As a result, according to Cardinal Rouco Varela, the Jewish monopoly in banking, commerce and tax collecting created great resentment.⁵

For years the possibility of the expulsion of the Jews was considered. To avoid it the Church launched an important missionary activity among them. But tensions only increased, and on May 31, 1492, the decree of expulsion was promulgated. The Jews were given the choice of converting or leaving the country, taking with them their movable properties. During the time in which they were preparing their departure all Jews were under royal protection, which appears to have kept exploitation through thievery to a minimum. Some did accept baptism, but a large majority refused. The contemporary historian Bernaldes estimates that about 170,000 people left Spain.

The expulsion of the Jews was not racist. The converts were integrated into the Spanish population. If we study the genealogy of Spaniards we will find not a few with Jewish ancestry. Ferdinand (Isabella's husband), through his mother, had Jewish blood. St. Teresa of Avila had a Jewish grandfather. Jews were expelled from many countries of Europe, but Spain tends to be singled out as the main culprit. Perhaps the main reason is that many Jews who left Iberia moved to Protestant countries where their voice was added to the Protestant propaganda against Catholic Spain.

The Spanish Inquisition

The reason for the establishment of the Inquisition was the problem of false conversions. It was necessary to determine if many conversions to Christianity of former Muslims and

Jews were sincere or merely expedient. What caused particular popular indignation were the false conversions done to achieve social and economic status or later, when the expulsion of the Muslims and the Jews was decreed, to remain in the country. There is historical evidence that thousands of these false "new Christians" continued to live secretly by the teachings and rites of their former religions. The loyalty of these false converts to the nation was questionable, but far worse was the sacrilege of every false conversion. To a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Spaniard, the notion that someone would receive communion in a sacrilegious way was inconceivable and reprehensible.

On November 1, 1478, Pope Sixtus IV issued the bull *Exigit sinceræ devotionis affectus* authorizing the Kings of Spain to establish courts that became known as the Inquisition. During the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella about fifteen thousand persons were found guilty of falsely professing Christianity. The vast majority repented and were reconciled with the Church and forgiven. A small minority was executed. The Inquisition had no jurisdiction over non-Catholics — except for those who had been baptized under false pretenses. It was also competent in cases of heresy, blasphemy, witchcraft and cases of public morality (such as bigamy and homosexuality).

Father Thomas of Torquemada was appointed Inquisitor General for Castille in 1483. He was a just, devout and careful administrator, who took seriously his responsibilities to both the accused and the accuser. Inquisitorial tribunals were fair and followed a clearly established juridical procedure. The declaration of three witnesses was necessary to arrest a person. Those questioned were not allowed to know the names of their accusers due to the danger of revenge. However, one of the many guarantees that were offered to the accused was the permission to draw up a list of personal enemies, whose testimony was immediately discarded. Any anonymous testimony or denunciation was prohibited. The Spanish Inquisition was a joint Church-State institution. It was mainly a Church court (only the Church had the authority to decide the veracity of a religious conversion) established by a papal bull with religious objectives. The penalties were applied by the state. It was later used to impede the propagation of Protestantism in Spain, sparing Iberia the ravages of the wars of religion that became so prevalent in other countries of Europe.

Expulsion of the Moriscos

The Moriscos were an unassimilated minority of Arabs of North African descent who had remained in Spain after the end of the Reconquest. Many were nominally Catholic but a large number secretly practiced the Islamic religion. They were the remnants of the people who had been conquerors of Spain and who had treated Christians in a harsh and violent way. As Rouco Varela points out, the presence of the Moriscos was considered a risk for the persons of Arab extraction who had authentically converted to Catholicism.⁶ It was feared that the Moriscos would try to pressure the new converts to return to Islam or, worse, encourage them to practice the Islamic religion in secret and wait for a favorable occasion to show their true colors. They were considered a dangerous fifth column ready and willing to collaborate with a possible Turkish invasion.

In fact, during the reconquest of Grenada in 1491, Turkish assistance was sought by the Moors of Grenada. The Moors in Grenada and Valencia were in constant contact with their religious compatriots in North Africa. During the rebellion of 1568 the Turks sent a special secret envoy to coordinate the assistance that was sent from North Africa. In that rebellion several small groups of North African pirates disembarked, reinforced the rebels, and provided them with ample military supplies. During the summer of 1570 a Turkish fleet was operating in the western Mediterranean, waiting to establish a link with the rebels. By the second half of the sixteenth century both the French Protestant Huguenots and the Turks were plotting a rebellion of the Moriscos to weaken King Philip II. Most alarming was the fact that the Moorish population in the rest of Spain was clearly showing their support for the rebels.

In 1609 it was decided to expel the Moriscos. It was done through a well-planned and prepared military operation. The number of those expelled has been grossly exaggerated by the promoters of the Black Legend, such as Llorente, who stated that they were more than a million. At most 375,000 Moriscos were expelled. Saint John of Ribera, Archbishop of Valencia, did everything possible to obtain their conversion and assimilation, but in the end he, too, concluded that expulsion was the only solution. It should be noted that the Moriscos eventually suffered far worse treatment from their fellow Muslims in North Africa than from anything meted out by the Spaniards.

The Discovery and Conquest of America

One of the main components in the arsenal of the Black Legend is the alleged extermination and enslavement of the native Indians in the Americas. Seldom mentioned, however, is that the main Indian empires were perpetually disposed toward conquest and usurpation. The Aztecs were constantly launching raids to capture prisoners for the enormous number of human sacrifices they conducted. There is important archeological evidence showing that several Indian civilizations suffered violent ends at the hands of other Indian cultures long before the arrival of the Europeans in America.⁷ The massive and even surprising victories of the small Spanish armies were not achieved through technological superiority, but rather by the assistance they received from the different Indian tribes that were oppressed by both the Aztecs and the Incas.

Demography in Latin America proves that the Spaniards did not exterminate the Indians. There are many countries in which the persons of Indian origin or mixed parentage are nearly ninety percent of the population. The decrease of the Indian population was mainly due to the entrance of new viruses for which the Indians did not have an appropriate immune system. At the same time thousands of colonists died of tropical diseases against which they were defenseless.

Isabel forbade, under strict penalties, the enslavement of native Indians.⁸ In her instructions for the second voyage of Columbus she established that the Indians should be evangelized and treated with honor and Christian charity. In her later instructions we can see how she considers the Indians as persons capable of becoming Christians and enjoying all the rights and duties that belong to the human person.

Father Bartolome de las Casas accused his compatriots of exterminating the Indians in the Caribbean islands. His book, *A Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies*, for centuries has been a quarry for material with which the Black Legend would be built. He describes the Indians in such idyllic terms that one doubts if they were affected by original sin. The Spaniards were described as the cruelest beasts of prey that came to rob, exploit and exterminate the Indians. His evidence is unreliable. In some cases he quotes his own experience, or the testimonies of five other missionaries, but his sources are mostly vague and imprecise. His observations are so extreme that they lead to legitimate doubt about his mental stability. Spanish author Ramon Menendez y Pidal, in a historical study, reveals de las Casas to be a dual personality (for instance, he promoted African slavery), suffering from megalomania, possessing an intolerant disposition with those who did not agree with him, and an evident paranoid.

On November 17, 1526, Emperor Charles promulgated ordinances requiring the good treatment of the Indians and regulating the methods used in future conquests. In 1530 another royal decree forbade all future enslavement of Indians. That many moral theologians were allowed to express openly their doubts concerning the conquest of the Americas demonstrates the serious conscience of the Spanish crown. In 1542, the Emperor convened the Council of Indies and added additional guarantees for the Indians. A proof that the Indians did not feel particularly oppressed by Spain was that over the course of more than three hundred years the rebellions by the natives were very limited in number. The rebellions that separated the different Latin American lands from Spain were always led by colonists. Interestingly, the rank and file of some of the Spanish armies that fought the rebels were formed by Indians.

In this brief summary of the Black Legend against Spain, I have presented some of the many historical events distorted by our enemies to discredit our past and undermine our confidence in the legitimacy of our Catholic heritage. An authentic understanding of the achievements of our ancestors in the Faith will assist our hope in a Catholic future.

Notes

1. Antonio Caponetto, *The Black Legends and Catholic Hispanic Culture*, Central Bureau of the Catholic Central Verein of America, St. Louis, MO, 1991, p. 43.
2. Julian Juderias, *La Leyenda Negra: Estudios acerca del concepto de Espana en el extranjero*, 13th ed., Editora Nacional, Madrid, 1954, p. 161.
3. Fernand Brauedel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, v. II, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p. 825.
4. Vittorio Messori, *Legendas Negras de la Iglesia*, 9th ed. Planeta, Barcelona, 2000, p. 31.
5. Antonio Maria Rouco Varela, *Estado e Iglesia en la Espana del Siglo XVI*, BAC, Madrid, 2001, p. 30.

6. Rouco Varela, *Estado e Iglesia en la Espana del Siglo XVI*, o.c., p. 35.

7. Mauro Calamandrei, *Addio al buon pellerossa*, Il Sole-24 Ore, Sunday Octobre 12, 2003,p. 30.

8. Vidal Gonzalez Sanchez, "*El Testamento de Isabella Catolica, esponente de una vida al servicio de la Iglesia.*," in *Isabella Catolica y su Causa de Beatification*, Obra Pia Establecimientos Espailoles en Italia, 2003, p. 40.

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