

RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIONS OF POLITICAL POWER: THE AUTO DE FE OF THE SPANISH INQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

Meaning “act of faith,” the *auto de fe* was a public spectacle through which the Inquisition announced the sentences of those it condemned. Although ostensibly a religious ritual, the *auto de fe* strengthened the Inquisition’s political authority. Indeed, it became a ritual machine for persecuting the Inquisition’s religious, racial, and political enemies. The *auto de fe* combined imperial politics with religious fanaticism in a public theater that exploited fear to impose the will of the Inquisition on the populace.

INTRODUCTION

When Jose Diaz Pimienta was burnt alive in a monumental *auto de fe* in Seville, in 1720, it was not because he was an obstinate heretic beyond the reach of the Catholic church. The night before his execution, he repented his sin – the practice of Judaism – and accepted Roman Catholicism as the only means of salvation. However, despite his penitence and the blessings he received from priests and other holy men after accepting Christ as his savior, he was still so disgraced by past faults that he climbed the platform where the *auto de fe* was to take place and, holding a crucifix in his hands, voluntarily asked to give his life for the Catholic faith. Led into a large theater filled with nobleman and clergy, he stood before a great throne occupied by the Bishop of Licopoli. Pimienta mounted the stage. The bishop, his cheeks wet with tears, stripped Pimienta of his sacred garments and cried for the condemned soul. The Tribunal of the Inquisition then handed Pimienta over to the secular authorities, begging that they treat him with pity. Hauled to another theater, the condemned man was presented to the Lieutenant Mayor who, based on Pimienta’s sinful past, sentenced him to be strangled with an iron collar and then burnt at the stake.¹

Paradoxically, Jose Diaz Pimienta was glorified by the enormous public audience and ecclesiastical officials for an act of heroic contrition, and punished by the Inquisition for his self-condemnation.² The sorrowful admission of guilt during an *auto de fe* – the ritual’s most dramatic event – was considered a spiritual victory. As Jose Diaz Pimienta was burnt, because he expressed remorse, his soul was believed to have escaped the terror of eternal damnation.³ Corporal punishment alone did not satisfy divine justice; the heretic’s repentance was necessary for the ‘triumph’ of the Catholic Church over heretical depravity. Conversely, watching an impenitent sinner burn at the stake was a spiritual catastrophe because the soul was destroyed by the flames of eternal justice.⁴ Pimienta’s life and death were the products of a hostile religious culture that forced him to convert back and forth from Judaism to Catholicism, and his story illustrates the persecutory climate of Inquisitory Spain.

How did the Inquisition use religious and political persecution to encourage such self-sacrificing acts, and how was the ritual of the *auto de fe* (“act of faith”) an expression of the Inquisition’s divine power? Henry Charles Lea in his four volume *History of the Inquisition of Spain* argues that the *autos* were extravagant ceremonies designed to appeal to the populace and spread religious fanaticism and hostility toward heretics. But he did not fully consider the ceremony’s religious significance.⁵ Recently, Maureen Flynn has described the *auto* as a ritual performance symbolically re-enacting Christ’s Final Judgment and resembling biblical depictions of infernal punishments.⁶ They have also been called imperial political rituals used by inquisitors and monarchs to enforce civil obedience that represent the expanding dominance of the Spanish Crown.⁷

Despite many passing scholarly references to the *auto*, the ritual phenomenon that so dramatically concluded the inquisitorial proceedings has been largely neglected. It is crucial that we

begin to understand exactly what the *auto de fe* represented and how its ritual performance legitimized the authority of the Holy Office of the Inquisition and the Spanish Monarchy. As we do so, we will better understand how the ceremony influenced the public and private spheres of Spanish daily life. Inquisitors filled the ritual with religious imagery that evoked the public's fear of divine judgment and enforced social conformity through the Catholic Faith. The Spanish Monarchy legitimized its desire for absolute political power by cloaking it in the religious imagery of Christ's victory over Satan. As the public watched the punishments of enemies of the faith, it remodeled its behavior in accordance with the aims of the Inquisition and Monarchy. Entranced by the spectacle's religious representation and their devotion to Christ and fearful of eternal judgment, Spaniards willingly submitted to the power of the King.

The *Auto de Fe* and its Impact on Spanish Society

*King's banners are advancing,
Cross's mysteries gleam:
In it Life suffered death
With which He made us live.*⁸

The *auto de fe* was the ritual ceremony the Inquisition used in Spain, Portugal, Mexico, and Peru to judge and punish prisoners for defying the Catholic faith. The public reading of the sentences of the accused, it was fraught with religious imagery evoking the Last Judgment when all humankind would stand before the throne of God to feel the hammer of divine justice.⁹ *Autos* were pedagogical – designed to inspire awe and obedience to the social ideals of Spanish-Catholic culture by warning of the eternal fate that awaited those who acted against the will of God, and God's representative, the King.

The large public *autos* that have captivated popular imagination in which sinners were hung from a cross and burnt alive were actually rare. Many were held without setting fire to a single twig, as there was no need; the mere evocation of infernal flames in the minds of the audience was enough.¹⁰ In judicial terms, the *auto de fe* was the ritual in which inquisitors assess the delinquent's transgressions and announced their punishment. The elaborateness of an *auto* depended on the number of accused heretics; if there were not enough to justify the cost of the spectacle, it would be held inside a church, and referred to as an *auto particular de fe*, a private act of faith.¹¹ During the sixteenth century, public *autos* were celebrated quite frequently, but much less so in the seventeenth century and, in eighteenth-century Spain, there was only one.¹² Instead, *autos particulares* became standard because the Inquisition and Monarchy were financially strained. Still, the Inquisition's Spanish tribunals made every effort to celebrate dramatic *autos generales de fe* by consolidating *autos particulares*.¹³

Whether a grandiose public spectacle or a solemn private ceremony, the *auto* expressed the Inquisition's a social model of a society that embraced Christ's victory over Satan.¹⁴ Faith in Christ became the inquisitors' means of enforcing political, religious, and social control. Ostensibly religious, their ultimate object was political. These ceremonies reflected fears that Catholic Spain's "socio-religious fabric" had been contaminated and by the conviction that the Spanish monarchy had a duty to manipulate the behavior of its subjects.¹⁵ In order to understand how the Inquisition asserted its authority through religious symbolism, we must first consider the ritual's victims and punishments.

VICTIMS

The Inquisition was authorized to persecute only baptized Catholics because it took a renunciation of the Catholic faith to make a heretic. Therefore Jews, Muslims, and Protestants who strictly abided by their religious customs were outside the jurisdiction of the Inquisition and could not be forced to convert.¹⁶ Regardless, the Inquisition employed techniques to compel conversions or gain legal precedence through the headstrong preaching of Dominican friars or by inventing new types of heresies for new kinds of transgressors. For instance, when witchcraft became prevalent in northern Spain in the mid sixteenth century, inquisitors had no defined assessment of its criminality, but they knew that it was not Catholic, so they classified witches as apostates.¹⁷ Indeed, the Inquisition differed greatly in theory and practice.

The targets of the Inquisition and victims of *autos de fe* changed over time. From about 1480 to 1530, the primary suspects were *conversos* (baptized Jews). The early sixteenth century was relatively quiet, but from 1560 to 1614, inquisitorial activity picked up with extensive persecutions of *moriscos*

(baptized Muslims) and Protestants. During the seventeenth century, most of the victims were neither Jewish nor Muslim, but “moral” offenders or Protestants.¹⁸ Baptized Jews and Muslims, “New Christians,” were steeped in generations of old religious beliefs and practices. Having been forcibly converted, it was difficult for them to renounce the customs and convictions of their ancestors to worship a new God. Thus, many *conversos* and *moriscos* continued privately to practice Judaism or Islam while publicly professing Christianity. Such “secret” Jews, or *marranos*, became very common in Spain after the Great Expulsion of 1492. These heretics, subject to the Inquisition’s harsh penalties, often suffered secret, even unexplained, imprisonment before the verdict of their case was revealed.

PUNISHMENT

If suspects had committed serious offenses such as practicing Judaism, Islam or Protestantism, but had confessed their crime, they would be freed from excommunication, reconciled back into the Church, and called *reconciliados*. If suspects acknowledged a lesser “moral crime,” such as witchcraft, sodomy, blasphemy or bigamy, they, too, would be reconciled into the Church, and called *penitenciados*. Both reconciled and penanced heretics were forced into public acts of contrition and humiliation in an *auto de fe*, sometimes followed by further imprisonment or domestic confinement.

Death at the stake was reserved for obstinate sinners who previously had been convicted of heresy and failed to reform, or who refused to confess despite “concrete” evidence; their execution was performed after the *auto* at a separate location. Prisoners sentenced to the stake were called *relajados* because they were to be “relaxed” – handed over to the secular authorities and taken to outskirts of the city for execution. Criminals who repented after the reading of the death penalty, such as Jose Diaz Pimienta, were garroted, or strangled, and then burnt because burning someone alive who accepted Christ was sacrilegious. Heretics who refused to repent were burnt alive.

Since renunciation of wrongdoing was central to Catholic triumph, condemned heretics were approached by priests, theologians, and other holy men weeks before the *auto de fe*. These men tried to persuade the accused to repent, through tears and passion, and to prepare their souls for eternal hellfire should they remain recalcitrant.¹⁹ Confessors stayed with victims during the *auto de fe*, accompanying them down from the scaffold and out of the city to the *quamedero*, the platform for executions, pleading for an admission of remorse.²⁰ On the first day of the *auto general de fe* in Madrid of 1680, 21 prisoners were transported from the *auto* to the *quamedero*, surrounded by throngs of spectators eager to glimpse the condemned before their incineration. Jose Vincente del Olmo, a lay functionary of the Spanish Inquisition charged with escorting prisoners, claimed he could distinguish the *relajados* from the repentant: “The obdurate went with a horrible color on their countenances, with disturbed eyes which almost seemed to gush flames . . . [T]hey seemed possessed by the devil. But the converts went with such humility, conformity, and spiritual cheerfulness, that it seemed that God’s grace was almost revealed to them.”²¹

This struggle between faiths captivated the crowds. To watch an obstinate heretic burn alive was to witness the torments of hell – a spiritual catastrophe in which as the flames consumed both body and soul.²² By contrast, watching the confession of a sinner about to be burnt was regarded as a spiritual victory. When Pimienta expressed remorse and requested to be burnt, he placed his fate in the hands of God; even before he died, his soul was believed to be resting in peace.

“PROCESSIONS OF INFAMY”²³

The earliest *autos de fe*, from the later fifteenth century, were celebrated in large cities and small towns to teach and enforce a “social model” and eradicate heresy. A month before the *auto*, a minor prefatory celebration was held, followed by threats of excommunication to anyone who dared miss it. Punishments for absence could be inflicted on nobles and commoners alike, which explains King Ferdinand’s 1486 reprimand of several Valencian officers for failing to attend an *auto*.²⁴ Such compulsory attendance forced all Spaniards to consider the grim reality of disobedience.

Autos began early in the morning with a sermon and a loyalty oath by inquisitors to defend the Catholic faith. Afterwards, the condemned, accompanied by clergy members, secular authorities, and inquisitors left the church and processed through the host city toward the public scaffold in the central

square. The route, carefully chosen, passed through the major streets of the city, whose houses were decorated with elegant tapestries. Inquisitors virtually ran the city on the day of an *auto de fe*.²⁵ Houses within sight of the stage were controlled by inquisitors; prime viewing seats were meted out to noble guests, a policy which caused much protest.²⁶

The prisoners' arrival in the square was spectacular. The accused walked barefoot and wore no hats or veils. In an age when personal prestige was expressed through such garments, their absence left victims feeling exposed and humiliated. They carried unlit candles to make it known that the light of faith no longer burned in their hearts.²⁷ Most importantly, they were dressed in *sanbenitos*, "costumes of infamy," which symbolized their crime.²⁸ *Sanbenitos* for the *reconciliados* were yellow tunics draped over the shoulders, with slashes of colored bands across the front and back, the width of which illustrated the severity of the crime. The *relajados'* *sanbenitos* had to be distinctive to individuate them. Their black *sanbenitos* were adorned with flames and apocalyptic symbols of demons to illustrate the eternal hellfire that awaited them. Criminals who repented after hearing the death sentence wore *sanbenitos* with flames pointing downward.²⁹ These costumes of infamy and degradation, which often included tall cone-shaped dunce caps, represented the victims' shame and degradation.

RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION OF POWER

The physical configuration of an *auto de fe* also symbolized divine judgment. The large stage, upon which *autos generales* were celebrated, erected in the most public square and usually in front of the city courthouse, embodied the shift from temporal to eternal justice.³⁰ The presence of all local magistrates, *familiares*, church clerics, friars, and of course, the inquisitors, was meant to admonish members of the local parish. The scene was informed by Matthew's description of God's judgment seat: "When the son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he shall sit on the throne of his glory; and before him shall be gathered all the nations."³¹ Biblical verses alluding to the Day of Judgment frequently were read during *autos*. Once the victims, humiliated and panic-stricken, reached the site of the *auto*, they climbed the tiered "benches of infamy" upon the stage to await sentencing. The most serious offenders, who had Judaized or practiced Islam or Protestantism, were seated at the top of the bleachers with the lesser "moral offenders," the sodomites, blasphemers, bigamists, and thieves, seated below in heretical hierarchy.³² The inquisitors brought up the rear of the procession, followed the *familiares*, clergy members, and secular elites. Their power was revealed to the public in more ways than one. They climbed to their exalted seats on the stage only after entering through a hidden door directly from the palace so they would not have to follow the same route as the prisoners. The stage, frequently designed by a renowned architect, was imbued with religious and social symbolism that illustrated hierarchies of power and sin. For example, some of the largest and most complex late seventeenth-century stages contained hidden rooms in which inquisitors could eat and wash during the ceremony and special exits through which the condemned could be brought to the *quamedero* for execution.³³

Upon the stage, seating arrangements for the condemned, the inquisitors, and lay and secular authorities conformed to representations of the Last Judgment. At the front, center of the stage the inquisitors sat on a raised platform under a royal canopy. To their right, beneath them were the local authorities and to their left, the delinquents, seated in tiered bleachers. This seating arrangement legitimized the role of the inquisitors as distributors of divine justice by reflecting Christ's position at the Last Judgment. Just as Jesus is described as condemning sinful souls to hell at his left, so the inquisitors dispensed to their left unrepentant sinners to the secular authorities for execution. The public, familiar with this apocalyptic iconography from Counter-Reformation preaching and representations, perceived the Holy Office of the Inquisition as Christ's earthly equivalent. Symbols of the Supreme Judge, the inquisitors offered crowds the opportunity to feel God's mercy in the reconciliation of those who repented and His wrath in the punishment of those consigned to eternal flames.³⁴

The inquisitors issued penitential sentences to each contrite soul, the performance of which would release them from the pains of divine judgment. These acts of penance evinced the power of the Inquisition to dictate the fates of the condemned. One such sentence dictated that "for the next six Fridays, the penitents should promenade through the city streets wearing neither shoes nor hats, scourging bared shoulders with cords of hemp . . . and [that] they should fast on Fridays, and for the rest

of their lives, they should hold no public office . . . nor wear silk, nor fine scarlet cloth or any colored fabric, nor gold or silver, nor pearls or coral or any other jewels."³⁵

Such punishments denied the body material pleasures in order to cleanse sin and avoid hell. As Maureen Flynn explains, repentance was synonymous with Catholic triumph; sinners consciously chose to admit guilt and promise never to repeat the offense in order to live. For this reason, the most dramatic scenes at *autos de fe* occurred when sinners confessed at the last moment; they would still be executed, but their soul would be saved.³⁶

Therefore, the tragic death of Leonor Maria Enriquez in Cordoba in the summer of 1655 undoubtedly shocked and terrified the public. Enriquez, a young woman accused of Judaism, was not one of the repentant sinners whose soul was absolved from the terrors of hell. She remained steadfast in her beliefs, determined to die a "sinner" rather than conform to the laws of the Inquisition. After repeated attempts by dozens of holy men and secular authorities to persuade her to convert, face to face with the flames of eternal justice, Enriquez "remained blind in her obstinacy and was left to burn. It was a scandalous, horrendous, and hair-raising sight for the public," according to a Franciscan friar in his report of the *auto*.³⁷ To watch an obdurate sinner burn was like staring directly into hell to witness a spiritual catastrophe, since the flames symbolized both purification of the repentant soul and eternal punishment for the damned.³⁸

RITUAL EXPRESSION OF POWER

Michel Foucault used the term "guarantors of punishment"³⁹ to describe the role of the public in ritual expressions of power, such as executions, in compelling obedience to the sovereign. Although Foucault never wrote about the Spanish Inquisition or the *auto de fe*, his insightful work on public punishment sheds light on the power relation between ruler and ruled in *autos de fe*. Public executions, such as the *autos generales*, were ritual manifestations of political power in which legal transgressors were punished, not because of the damage their offense produced, but because they offended the rectitude of those who abide by the laws. Even if there was no harm done to any individual, the offense that was committed attacked the dignity of the superior man and the sovereign himself because the force of the law symbolized the will of the sovereign.⁴⁰

The public made ritual demonstrations of punishment meaningful; without them, the punishments would have had no impact on social behavior. Executions that took place in private, such as *autos particulares*, had little social impact. For the sovereign to meet his or her objective of social harmony, provoking fear of punishment was a most pragmatic resource. For the people to know the punishment for breaking the law, they must see its manifest consequence in the lifeless bodies of the executed; "they must be made afraid. . . . [T]hey must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment . . . and they must to a certain extent take part in it."⁴¹ To frighten the people, the sovereign had to make examples of criminals that would arouse widespread personal feelings of terror. The Spanish Monarchy and Inquisition were able to evoke such terror through symbolic evocations of the apocalyptic Final Judgment.

The Spanish Monarchy attempted to create an early modern "theater state" through ritual performances of power that were believed to strengthen its sovereignty.⁴² Power, however, comes in many forms and expressions. Traditionally, it was seen and felt; its force was measured by its impact on those who experienced it. However, disciplinary power, such as that present in the *auto de fe*, is invisible. Instead of witnessing the power itself, one saw it represented in the victims. *They* demonstrate the authority of the sovereign; the visibility of the victims illustrates the grip of power that is exercised upon them.⁴³ Thus, in the *autos de fe*, the degradation and humiliation of the accused heretics embodied power itself. These unholy wretches were the objects of power because when the public watched them in awe, it conformed to the social order to avoid a similar fate.

The *auto de fe*, as a ritual performance of religious representations, expressed the Spanish Inquisition's divine goal of unlimited political power. By freighting the ceremony with apocalyptic iconography and religious symbolism, inquisitors and monarchs were able to exploit the populace's fear of eternal damnation to cement their power. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, the *auto de fe* forced conformity to the prescribed social model. Ostensibly religious, it was more a political ritual

because it used religious imagery and symbolism to legitimize the Inquisition's power. The Spanish Inquisition used the ritual to achieve absolute authority. It was by far their most pragmatic resource for persecuting difference.

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Notes

- ¹ For the story of Jose Diaz Pimienta, see *Am. Jew. Hist. Soc.*, Trans. IX (1901), taken from, E. N. Adler, "Auto de Fe and Jew," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (July 1902), 701-09.
- ² Maureen Flynn, "Mimesis of the Last Judgment: The Spanish Auto de Fe" *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXII, No. 2, (1991), 289.
- ³ Alejandro Caneque, "Theater of Power: Writing and Representing the Auto de Fe in Colonial Mexico" *The Americas*, 52: 3 (January 1996), 327.
- ⁴ Flynn, "Mimesis of the Last Judgment," 293-94.
- ⁵ For his analysis of the *auto de fe*, see Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, 4 vols. (New York: American Scholar Publications, 1966), vol. III, chap. 5.
- ⁶ See Maureen Flynn, "Mimesis of the Last Judgment," 281-297. For her brief criticism of H. C. Lea's view of the *auto de fe*, see 293-94.
- ⁷ Caneque, "Theater of Power," 323.
- ⁸ Vagaggini, *Sentido teologico*, 407 ff. Editor's translation. Taken from Miguel Aviles, "Auto de Fe and Social Model," 258. The verse comes from a hymn sung during an *auto de fe* procession which, Aviles argues, sums up its meaning.
- ⁹ Maureen Flynn, 281-297.
- ¹⁰ Henry Kamen, *Inquisition and Society in Spain in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 194.

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- ¹¹ Maria Victoria Gonzales de Caldas, "New Images of the Holy Office in Seville: The Auto de Fe," in *The Spanish Inquisition and the Inquisitorial Mind*, ed. Angel Alcalá (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 267.
- ¹² Gonzales de Caldas, "New Images of the Holy Office in Seville," 268, claims that the only *auto* held in the eighteenth century was celebrated in Madrid in 1720, but E. N. Adler, "Auto de Fe and Jew," 707-709, clearly notes that Jose Diaz Pimienta was executed in a Sevillian *auto* in 1720.
- ¹³ Lea, *History of the Inquisition of Spain*, Vol. 3, 223.
- ¹⁴ Miguel Aviles, "The Auto de Fe and the Social Model of Counter-Reformation Spain," 251.
- ¹⁵ David Graizbord, "Inquisitorial Ideology at work in an Auto de Fe, 1680: Religion in the Context of Proto-Racism," *Journal of Early Modern History*, Vol. 10, 4, (2006), 331-360. Here, 336.
- ¹⁶ Homza, *The Spanish Inquisition*, xiv.
- ¹⁷ William Monter, *Frontiers of Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 36.
- ¹⁸ Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 198.
- ¹⁹ Maria Victoria Gonzales de Caldas, "New Images of the Holy Office in Seville: The Auto de Fe," in *The Spanish Inquisition and the Inquisitorial Mind*, ed. Angel Alcalá (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 267.
- ²⁰ Alejandro Caneque, "Theater of Power," 328.
- ²¹ Excerpt taken from David Graizbord, "Inquisitorial Ideology," 332. For a depiction of the *quamedero*, see figure 4, page 31.
- ²² Maureen Flynn, "Mimesis of the Last Judgment," 293.
- ²³ Lea, *The History of the Inquisition of Spain*, Vol. III, 212.
- ²⁴ Lea, *The History of the Inquisition of Spain*, Vol. III, 212.
- ²⁵ Francisco Bethencourt, "The Auto de Fe: Ritual and Imagery" *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. Vol. 55, (1992), 155-168. Here, 158.
- ²⁶ Lea, *History of the Inquisition of Spain*, Vol. 3, 213.
- ²⁷ Flynn, "Mimesis of the Last Judgment," 283, 286.
- ²⁸ For a depiction of the *sanbenito*, see figure 7, page 31.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 283, 287.
- ³⁰ Flynn, 282.
- ³¹ Matt. 25: 31-32, in Flynn, 282.
- ³² Bethencourt, "Auto de Fe: Ritual and Imagery," 158.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 161.
- ³⁴ Caneque, "Theater of Power," 325.
- ³⁵ *Auto de fe*, 12, Febrero 1486, in Fita, *La Inquisicion*, 295-296, in Flynn, "Mimesis of the Last Judgment," 292.
- ³⁶ Flynn, 292.
- ³⁷ *Auto General de Fe*, Cordoba 1655, in Gracia Boix, *Autos de fe*, 479, in Flynn, 293.
- ³⁸ Flynn, 294.
- ³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1977), 58.
- ⁴⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 47.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ⁴² Alejandro Caneque, *The King's Living Image* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 120.
- ⁴³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 187.