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**THE CONVERSOS AND THE MEXICAN INQUISITION**

**An Historical - Critical Interpretation**

**JAMES LEE KESSLER**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the Degree of Master  
of Arts in Hebrew Letters and Ordination**

**Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion**

**1972**

**Referee, Professor Ellis Rivkin**

## DIGEST

This thesis is a study of the Mexican Inquisition and the conversos of Nueva Espana. It begins with a brief history of Spain and the Holy Office of that country. Included in this section are: a) a history of Spain and her church; b) the Spanish economy; c) the Spanish Inquisition; and d) Spain's colonization of the New World. The second chapter considers the colonization of Mexico and includes: a) the conquest of Mexico; b) the secular government; c) the economics of the colony; and d) the role of the Catholic Church. In the third chapter, which deals with the Holy Office in Mexico, the following is considered: a) the early Inquisition under Cortes; b) the background to the establishment of the Holy Office; c) the operation of the tribunal; d) the conflict between the Santo Oficio and the secular authority; and e) the relation of the Inquisition to the economics of Nueva Espana. The fourth chapter considers the converso in Nueva Espana and his relationship to the Santo Oficio, as well as his role in the economics of the colony. The conclusion centers in on the three basic hypotheses which course through the considerations of the thesis.

Basically this thesis deals with the economic aspects of the Mexican Inquisition and concludes with a different interpretation of the historical events.

## PREFACE

Fear and terror have been tools to boggle the mind of man since the dawn of humanity. Torture, its right-hand accomplice, has been the key to open the flood gates of spurious statements. Such is an appropriate description of the activities of the Mexican Inquisition. When in 1519, Cortes presented Spain with her largest colony in the New World, the perfidious Santo Oficio stretched forth its tentacles into another area of man's settlement. Due to the expulsion of practicing Jews from Spain in 1492, this new territory also became a homeland for conversos and entrepreneurs.

It is in light of these facts that this study is being made, for Mexico represented an area of settlement by those of Jewish lineage and a good specimen for a study of the Inquisition. However, it must be borne in mind that the subject of this study is like a diamond with many facets. One sees different things depending on how one looks at the topic. Since it is impossible to deal with all the aspects of the conversos and the Holy Office, only those which seem the most pertinent to ascertaining a clear understanding will be considered.

It now pleasantly befalls my lot to express my gratitude to certain individuals for all their help.



In Sefer Hasidim (130, #820, p.208), it is written, "there are three teachers: parents, instructors, and comrades".

"Man should revere his father and mother as he reveres God", (Kiddushin 30b). No truer words were ever spoken for there are no words to sufficiently express one's gratitude to his parents for everything. Let it suffice to say that the completion of this thesis and my ordination could never have been possible without all that they have done.

Albert Einstein said in 1934 (The World As I See It, p.243), "academic chairs are many, but wise and noble teachers are few". These words aptly describe Dr. Ellis Rivkin. Not only has this enlightened professor been a source of guidance and help in the writing of this thesis, but he has opened to me an entirely new perspective on history. His diligence and inspiration have served to provide food for thought to an inquisitive mind, while his infectious love of history has spurred me on to unknown areas. For this, and for much more, I shall be eternally grateful.

"Get thee a friend", (Avot 1:6) is one of the first ethical statements the Mishnah makes in regard to study. In Rabbi Lewis Richard Bornstein, I have truly fulfilled this requirement. His assistance and support have made the writing of this thesis much simpler, while his and Pam's amity have made the past five years betide with ease. Friendship is a thing to be cherished, and I shall always do so with ours.

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**To My Father**

**Dr. Harry Samuel Kessler**

**איש צדיק תמים היה בדרתיו**

**and**

**To My Mother**

**Mrs. Ruthe Aron Kessler**

**אשת חיל מי ימצא**

## CHAPTER 1

### SPAIN AND THE SPANISH INQUISITION

In 1588 King Philip II sent out the ill- fated Spanish Armada and with this fiasco, the disintegration of the Spanish Empire began. Thus the nation which opened the New World to massive settlement, began the long descent from the pinnacle of world supremacy. Closely inter-related with the history of this nation were the people of the Book. Almost one hundred years before, Spain had made another blunder and expelled the Jews from her shores, an event which followed shortly after the establishment of the Inquisition. So closely intertwined are the histories of these two peoples during this period, that it is necessary to view them in tandom in order to gain a clear understanding of Spain, her colonies, the Inquisition and the Jews.

The objective of this chapter is to delve briefly into the history of Spain in order to erect a foundation from which to view the Mexican Inquisition. Since the New World colonies were so dependent on the mother country, it is only possible to examine one in light of the other. Admittedly, Spanish history contains many facets and it would be impossible, within the scope of this chapter, to



cover them all. An attempt will be made, however, to present enough pertinent material from which a firm foundation can be constructed.

There are four aspects from the annals of Spain which will provide the basis for the contents of this chapter. They are: a) the history of Spain and her church; b) the Spanish economy; c) the Spanish Inquisition; and d) Spain's colonization of the New World. In each of these aspects, the role of the Jew will be integrated. For after all, "the history of the Jews is a history of involvement. It cannot be separated from the larger context from which it is part."<sup>1</sup>

The history of Spain is indeed an old one, but for the purposes of this thesis, we will pick up the threads in 1479 with the marriage of King Ferdinand V of Aragon (1474-1516) and Queen Isabella I of Castile (1474-1504). It was, of course, during the reign of these two monarchs that Columbus opened the New World to colonization. Thus the sixteenth century was to see Spain as mistress of the greatest empire in the world. However, Spanish history reflects a strange phenomenon in that she seemed to take one step backward for every step forward Europe took. Almost as soon as she assumed her prominence she began her decline. 1588 marked not only the year of the Armada but also a slow two century decay until Spain was the feeblest of the European powers.

During the height of her prominence, Spain experi-



enced such financial problems that Charles V (1516-1556) resorted to a loan from a Portuguese bank owned by the Jewess Dona Garcia Mendez Nasi even though the Jews had been expelled from Spain in 1492.<sup>2</sup> Philip II (1556-1598) in 1591 felt obliged to abolish the fueros or the rights of the nobility, in order to consolidate this weakening authority.<sup>3</sup> The seventeenth century saw Spain involved in the Thirty Years' War from 1620 to 1659. Eleven years before she expelled her Moorish inhabitants which produced disastrous consequences for the economy.<sup>4</sup> In addition, of course, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the establishment and rise of the Spanish Inquisition. These facts, though they may be brief and scattered, reflect turmoil and instability underneath despite serenity and security on the surface.

Within this unstable background lived the Jews of Spain. In order to better understand the status of this people, we must go back to the seventh century. From that period until the tenth century, northern Christian Europe was involved in large scale trade and the Jews were intimately involved in this aspect of commerce. They provided the mechanism by which trade was carried on between countries particularly through the contacts with Jews in Islamic lands through the use of Hebrew as an international language of communication. The tenth through the twelfth centuries saw great towns built and the Jews living in relative security with typical freedoms

characteristic of privileged groups in feudal society. From the twelfth century until the beginning of the fourteenth, the Jewish people were involved in large scale money lending. The reason for this lay in the fact that the Christian nobility of Spain were not possessors of financial ability and squandered their resources as soon as they obtained them. Commerce and agriculture were left solely in the hands of the Jews and when funds were needed for churches, castles and the like, it was the Jew who provided them. Due to their wealth and usefulness, the Jews held a place in court and much power, but limited to the financial field.

It has been pointed out that it is structural collapse that generates intolerance and harassment.<sup>5</sup> The feudal state under which Spain existed was challenged in the middle of the fourteenth century with the civil war between Pedro the Cruel and Henry of Trastamara. This first attempt at monarchical centralization culminated in pogroms against the Jews in 1390. The friars began preaching anti-Jewish sermons at that time as they saw the Jews as a religious and economic threat. At the same time the Jews of Spain were living under a papal bull which launched a major ideological attack against them.

Despite Spain's rise in international prestige, she was still greatly influenced by the power of the Catholic Church. The monarchs of Spain were not only heads of state but were also head of the Church and in this way, the

Church was an instrument of royal despotism. The churchmen saw, in the exercise of public office by Jews, a clear violation of canon law. Because of this bias and also because the Church was operating under anti-Jewish legislation which began in 1215 with the Fourth Lateran Council, the Jews felt they had to do something to insulate themselves against this harassment. Following on the heels of the 1390 pogroms, massive conversions took place between 1415 and 1449 as an attempt on the part of the Jews to protect themselves. This move was received well by the Old Christians and the New Christians were accepted as a welcomed part of Spanish society. Before conversion, the church positions and noble status were not available for the Jews, but after they adopted the Christian faith, every door was flung open.

The greater, however, the influence of the New Christians and Jews became, the more determined were the clergy upon their fall. In 1460 more pogroms were launched against the remaining Jews and the king stepped in to take charge in order to preserve his leadership position among the nobility and the Church. The New Christians too, experienced trouble due to their role in the economy. In 1449 these recent converts were engaged in tax farming which resulted in heavy mortgaging on the part of the Church and the nobility. This phenomenon, which will be dealt with later, produced much animosity and ultimately played a key role in the establishment of the Inquisition.

On May 31, 1492 the Jews of Spain were expelled by Ferdinand and Isabella. The reason given for this act was to protect the people from the nefarious influence of the Jews and to establish religious unity within the country. It also erased, of course, great debts and mortgages of the Church and nobility. It is interesting to note that "whether religious unity was the principle motive may be judged by the fact that they (the Spaniards) still continued to tolerate within their realms a large minority of practicing Muslims."<sup>6</sup> The Catholic king was not so much blinded by religious fanaticism as he was by self-preservation. The economics of his country were such that if drastic measures had not been taken, almost all of the property in Spain would fall into the hands of the Jews -- an intolerable alternative. The consequences of this action, however, were not foreseen and proved disastrous for the entire Spanish Empire.

There arose around the time of the expulsion a new anti-Jewish concept known as limpieza de sangre or purity of blood. Since all openly practicing Jews were expelled in 1492, the only remnants left were the conversos or New Christians who were of Jewish ancestry. These recent converts not only maintained a great financial influence in Spain but now found their way into the Church and the royal court. The issue of limpieza de sangre was raised in order to keep the Church free of any who had Jewish blood in their veins. It was another attempt on the part



of the indebted Church and nobility to do away with their creditors and keep rivals out of important offices.

Despite Spain's great martial and legalistic qualities, she "had not developed the economic type."<sup>7</sup> The Spaniard had "a tendency to be rather than to do."<sup>8</sup> It was above the level of the nobility to handle such menial tasks as land management and tax collection. This inherent quality in the Spanish monarchs and elite serve as ample proof for the theory that economics determine ideology. Since the serfs and common man were incapable of managing the royal finances, the king turned to the Jews. Even though the Jew and later the conversos were hated villains, they were a necessary evil for the elite. At times the king and noblemen found themselves unavoidably defending these people.

With this economic system in mind, it is evident that the most important cause of hostility to Jews lay in their financial activities. The nobility disliked them because the Jews were their creditors and the serfs disliked them because they were the tax collectors. Yet despite this abhorance, the Jew presided over the financial enterprises as a talented fiscal agent and skillful technician. By the end of the twelfth century the elite found themselves without resources to build their churches and castles, while the Jews found themselves in possession of capital. This mutual supply and demand resulted in great money lending and heavy indebtedness. The nobility were



deceived into thinking that they could raise the necessary funds to pay off their creditors at any time and hence did not mind the debt. The problem arose when they found that the churches and castles which they built brought in no revenue and the land could only produce so much for a given year. With this realization plus the realization that the Jews had a right to foreclose on these debts under Christian law, the elite began to regret their former actions.

In order to help solve this financial predicament Pope Innocent III declared that the Jews were not entitled to repayment because they killed Jesus. The bishops, who themselves needed money and had urged the king to farm out the taxes to the Jews, now preached openly against the Jews. The Church and nobility were successful in displacing on to the Jews the animosities which the common man held against them. This condemnation resulted in bankruptcies among leading financiers and in a contraction in the size of the group of bankers on whom the Crown could ultimately rely.

"The Jews became vastly enriched and acquired to large an amount of power that it would have been well-nigh impossible to have dispensed with their services."<sup>9</sup> Yet in 1492 the monarchy expelled the Jews which represented a victory for the feudalistic nobility over the class most identified with urban, commercial and fiscal activities. "The disappearance of the Jews and the persecution of the conversos created a void in the world of capital which was never satisfactorily filled by the Spaniards."<sup>10</sup> The vast

sums which were owed to the Jews and still larger amounts which they were forced to leave, found their way partly into the hands of their debtors or still more into those of the king and Church. Hence a solution was found for the monies owed to the Jews and for the indebtedness of the elite.

All of this background brings us up to 1492 and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. The monarchy and nobility had been able to solve the problem of the Jews and the creed of limpieza de sangre had begun to appear on the scene to protect the Church. The fact still remained, however, that the New Christians had positions of power, were financially wealthy, were creditors to the nobility and even had managed to breach the barriers of the Church. To rectify this situation, the Santo Oficio was established.

On November 1, 1478 Pope Sixtus IV empowered Isabella to establish a national Inquisition in Spain and on September 17, 1480 Dominican inquisitors began their work.<sup>11</sup> Thus began the history of this infamous institution which was to hold a grip on Spain and her colonies until the nineteenth century. The reasons behind the establishment of the Santo Oficio, as the Inquisition was called, were officially claimed to be "a special ecclesiastical institution which combated and disciplined those who sought to undermine the faith."<sup>12</sup> It was designed to cope with two elements of the Spanish population, the conversos or converted Jews and the moriscos, or converted

Moors. Jews as Jews, were never subject to the jurisdiction of the Holy Office, but this was an inconsequential fact since openly practicing Jews left the country in 1492. Two of the more influential men who helped start the Inquisition were Fray Alonso de Hojeda, prior of the Dominican convent in Seville and Nicholas Franco, the papal nuncio. When they found that the financially ill Crown received one-third of the possessions confiscated by the Holy Office, they exerted pressure on Ferdinand and Pope Sixtus IV to set up the tribunal. Whether or not the prime motive was religious or economic is open to dispute, but the evidence leads me to accept the economic as opposed to the religious. As facts come to the surface in this thesis, the reader will understand why I consider the economical factors for this explanation as primary. In no way, however, do I mean to negate the religious motivation as a basis for the establishment of the Inquisition, but I have chosen one as primary and the other as secondary. Nevertheless, whichever motive one chooses, the Pope did agree to issue the bull in 1478 and the monarchs agreed to it. It would seem that the sovereigns established the Inquisition as a method of doing away with the rights of the New Christians and erasing the debts owed by the nobility. If the conversos were charged with judaizing, that is relapsing back to practicing and teaching Judaism, they lost their wealth, position, and property, and of course their right to claim the money owed them from loans to Old Christians.

In the first year of the Santo Oficio (1481) 298 people were burned at the stake while in the second year 2,000 were consumed in the flames and 17,000 lost their property.<sup>14</sup> The Inquisition, which was finally united in all parts of Spain in 1516, continued in existence until February 22, 1814 when it was abolished. In July of that year Ferdinand VII was restored to the throne and with him, the Holy Office, but on July 15, 1834 it was abolished permanently.

The head of the Inquisition was the Inquisitor General nominated by the Crown and confirmed by the Pope. He had the authority to create local tribunals, name inquisitors and recruit staff for the lower courts. A special council, el Consejo de la Suprema y General Inquisicion or simply the Suprema, was created to assist in running the Santo Oficio. The council consisted of five councilors appointed by the Inquisitor General with the approval of the king. The first Inquisitor General of Spain was Cardinal Juan de Torquemada. Each local tribunal had a minimum of two inquisitors, an assessor of property, a prosecutor and a constable. In order to coordinate the activities of the various tribunals, the Suprema issued the Instrucciones de Sevilla on November 29, 1484, the Instrucciones de Valladolid in 1488 and Instrucciones Antiguas in 1498.

The precise steps in a proceso or case before the tribunal will be dealt with in another chapter, but several



comments are in order regarding the workings of the Holy Office. Not only were the inquisitors concerned with the practices of heretics but also the books they read. Consequently the first index of prohibited books was distributed in 1632 and anyone caught with these books was subject to severe punishment from the tribunal. After all it was standard procedure for the Santo Oficio to consider a defendant guilty and it was his responsibility to prove his innocence.<sup>15</sup> The tribunal used torture to obtain confessions and these consisted of: a) garrucha - hanging the subject by his wrists with weights tied to his feet and letting him drop almost to the floor; b) toca - a cloth was pushed down the throat of the subject and water poured in his mouth to give a drowning effect; and c) potro - a rack upon which the body was stretched. Those convicted of charges were required to appear in an auto de fe, a public or private penitence, which could be anything from wearing the sanbenito to burning. The first auto de fe was held on February 6, 1481 at which six people were burned at the stake. In order to obtain names, the Holy Office established the Edict of Grace which gave people a period of amnesty, free from prosecution, during which they could confess their violations. These lists also provided the tribunal with names of persons who might be suspect in the future.

"Ferdinand and Isabella perceived religious unity of the Inquisition as well as its potential for political



unification and economic advantages through confiscations."<sup>16</sup> Under canon law a heretic's property was confiscated and the king and Holy Office secured much spoil through this action. The tribunal was expected to be self supporting from confiscations, fines and penances and even though all confiscated property went technically to the Crown, the Holy Office soon gained control over many sources of revenue. It is well documented that "the first to suffer confiscation by the Inquisition were the conversos, whose notorious wealth must have stirred many an orthodox spirit."<sup>17</sup>

Needless to say, the conversos or those with Jewish ancestry are of direct concern for without them, there would have been no Inquisition. I have refrained from using the word marrano as it does not appear in the procesos or official documents of the Holy Office. Furthermore, I will make no attempt to take a position on whether these conversos were crypto-Jews or not, as this problem is secondary to the purpose of this thesis. It is certain that these people were charged with judaizing, but whether they were really carrying out these practices is still open to question. Therefore when referring to those of Jewish ancestry after 1492, the term converso will be used in a neutral way with no reflection on their activities or their guilt.

1480-1520 was what might be called the judaizante phase of the Spanish Inquisition and by then it was

obvious that the tribunal was "clearly set up as the result of agitation against the New Christians."<sup>18</sup> The Holy Office was more motivated by economic and political than by religious reasons. With this motivation in mind, a fair analysis of the Santo Oficio might show that it was to make legal the dismantling of the status of a privileged class and to take in a considerable amount of wealth.

Spain, however, was not a country limited to the Iberian Peninsula but exercised sovereignty over large colonial possessions. A papal bull of Pope Alexander VI in 1492 gave to Spain all islands and mainlands found west and south between 48° and 49° degrees west of Greenwich.<sup>19</sup> At the height of her power, Spain controlled all the territory from the Carolinas down to Panama and Peru, placed in her hands by men such as Cortes, Coronado and Pizarro. In August of 1524, Charles V set up the Real y Supremo Consejo de las Indias, known as the Consejo, which ruled the colonies under the king.<sup>20</sup> The king was absolute lord over these territories and the Consejo was his mouthpiece. Inherent, of course, was the problem of committee-under-king decisions, which produced arguments back and forth on policy and resulted in a hodge-podge of rulings. The Consejo had complete judicial and administrative jurisdiction until it was abolished on March 24, 1834.<sup>21</sup> Their agent in each colony was the viceroy who was the supreme authority in all political and judicial

matters.

The conquistadores who came to the colonies brought with them the Santo Oficio. The same religious duties and motives of the Holy Office in Spain were pursued with great zeal in the New World. The exact nature of the tribunal in the colonies will be considered in a subsequent chapter, but a general introduction is in order here. It was the official policy of Spain to keep conversos out of the New World. Greenleaf states that "it was the duty of the Suprema to keep all suspect persons out of the colonies by a minute examination of the backgrounds of all emigrants."<sup>22</sup> Practically speaking, however, conversos were allowed into the colonies because it was financially beneficial for the chronically empty treasury of Spain. As an example of this, in 1509 the converses of Seville paid 20,000 ducats to the crown and were permitted to travel freely back and forth from New Spain (Mexico) for two years to carry on trade.<sup>23</sup> This is just one of many such agreements between the government and "those who could not enter the New World". The tribunals in the New World grew rich, even after enormous remittances to the Suprema, almost exclusively from confiscations and penances. Yet all was not smooth in the colonies due to the constant bickering between the representatives of the Crown and the Santo Oficio. Typical of this is the fact that the king agreed to support the Holy Office in New Spain until it was self supporting from confiscations.

The inquisitors there, however, never stated that they were ready to be self supporting and the Suprema agreed even though it was getting large sums from New Spain. Thus the king never got as much as he could have wished from the confiscations, for the tribunal made it appear that financially confiscations were a failure. As we shall see in later chapters, this was a total falsehood.

This, then, is the background from which Spain extended her mighty reach accross the Atlantic. Despite the turmoil and instability within her own society, she expanded her dominion over an area more than twice the size of the Iberian Peninsula. By 1492 Spanish nobility had solved the problem of the Jews and had begun on the road to solving the issue of the conversos. Spain introduced the infamous Santo Oficio into the vocabulary and lives of millions and allowed it to spread its tentacles of devastation into the New World. From this background, the Mexican Inquisition must be viewed. Each chapter of this thesis is designed to produce pieces for the picture of history which will be overviewed in the concluding chapter. The following material represents the pieces from chapter one.

1. Spain was a land of turmoil and instability affecting both state and church.

2. Spain in the sixteenth century was mistress of the greatest empire in the world; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by contrast, she was among the weak-



est of the world powers.

3. It is postulated here that economic factors are more determinative than ideologies, however raucous the latter may be.

4. Spaniards had little entrepreneurial ability while the nobility were only concerned with enjoying the amenities of their status.

5. The Jews and conversos not only served as financial advisors to the Crown and nobility, but were sources of wealth as well.

6. The Jews and later the conversos were saddled with jobs, such as tax collecting, which the nobility refused to do, and which exposed them to the hostility of the masses as well as the impoverished nobles.

7. When the Jews found themselves under harassment and pogroms in 1391 and around 1415, many converted to Christianity and the New Christian or converso class was created.

8. In 1492 the openly practicing Jews were expelled in order to rid the nobility, crown and Church of heavy debts and mortgages.

9. The Inquisition came into existence in 1478 on the grounds that judaizers were threatening Christianity. The real reason, however, was to confiscate converso wealth and oust them from positions of power.

10. The Holy Office was primarily a tool of royal despotism and only secondarily for religious fanaticism.



11. When the conquistadores came to the New World, they brought with them the nefarious machinery of the Santo Oficio.

12. The official position of the Church and crown was opposed to conversos entering the colonies in the New World. In reality, however, they were permitted to enter due to their great financial acuity and entrepreneurial skills and of course the possible fortunes that they could produce for the Spanish elite.

13. The colonies were sites of constant bickering between the representatives of the Crown and the Church.

With these pieces available for putting the puzzle together, we move to the area of prime concern, New Spain (Mexico) and her Santo Oficio.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE COLONIZATION OF MEXICO

Ever since man learned the art of navigation, his inquisitive mind has lead him to forgo the safety of home shores and venture out in exploration. The early conception that the Pillars of Hercules marked the end of the earth was shattered in 1492 when a hardy group of explorers under Columbus traversed the Atlantic. The land opened for settlement gave Spain control over an area more than twice the size of her home shores. Wealth and influence were concomitant with Spain's new possession and played a key role in elevating her to the acme of world power. Of all her new colonies, Nueva Espana or New Spain, as Mexico was called, represents the best and the worst of early foreign settlement by European powers. In order to comprehend the full potency of the Mexican Inquisition it is essential that we begin with the settlement of Nueva Espana by the conquistadores as they brought the Holy Office with them.

The goal of this chapter is to review the early colonization of Mexico with an eye on its part in the establishment of the Inquisition, and its relation to the Jews of New Spain. Obviously not all of New Spain's

colonization will be dealt with, rather, only those aspects which most directly relate to the topic of this thesis. This chapter will also deal with Spain in as much as she wielded great influence over this, her prize colony.

The four aspects of Mexican colonization with which we will be concerned are: a) the conquest of Mexico; b) the secular government; c) the economics of the colony; and d) the role of the Catholic Church. Since the Inquisition and the Mexican Jew will be considered in subsequent chapters, they will generally be omitted here. Instead we will concentrate on Mexico as a colony and her relation to Spain.

When one thinks of Mexico prior to 1519, the word Aztec looms large in the mind. Of all the tribes which inhabited the part of the Western Hemisphere known as Mexico, the Aztecs were the greatest. Their civilization was one of the most highly advanced and despite their human sacrifices for the glory of Huitzilopochtli, man reached a high level of development. Around 1325 the Aztecs found a permanent home in the Anahuac valley and built their capital Tenochtitlan on two small islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco. "Enriched by the loot of a hundred triumphant campaigns, Tenochtitlan acquired a splendor which could scarcely be duplicated in Europe."<sup>24</sup> Tenochtitlan was connected to the mainland by thirty foot broad causeways and surrounded by dikes to prevent flooding. Honey, vanilla, rubber, cochineal, pottery, textiles,

gold, silver, jade, animals and slaves were all found in her open air market. In the center of the city was the temple enclosure which contained no less than forty temples for the various gods of the conquered tribes, as the Aztecs had not yet learned religious intolerance. The dominating structure, however, was a two acre pyramid built in honor of the god Huitzilopochtli.<sup>25</sup>

In 1519 the Aztec people were ruled by the cacique Moctezuma who was an absolute monarch. He was a gentle man who lacked the pragmatism of those leaders who raised the Aztecs to their position of prominence. Moctezuma was a great believer in dreams, prophecies and divination which would eventually lead to his downfall. One of the legends which was to play a major role in the conquest of the Aztecs centered around the god Quetzalcoatl. The tradition was that Quetzalcoatl, a bearded, white-faced god, would return one day to rule all of Mexico and it would be the end of the Aztec Empire.

"The Indias held more than naked savages; they held also a kingdom to be looted."<sup>26</sup> With this in mind, "the principal motive which had brought colonists to Mexico was the hope of living in aristocratic idleness at the expense of the native population."<sup>27</sup> To implement this desire, Diego Velasquez, Governor of Haiti, commissioned Hernando Cortes in 1518 to sail for Yucatan and secure the rumored wealth of the Aztecs. Despite the withdrawal of his commission, Cortes left for Yucatan in



February of 1519 with soldiers, ships and horses.

Hernando Cortes was the greatest of the builders of the Spanish Empire. He was destined to conquer more lands than any other conquistador, but not in the same vein. Cortes saw in the New World an opportunity not just to loot, but to create an empire which would one day take its place along side Spain as a productive partner. The problem he faced was that those in power under the king were only interest in viewing Nueva Espana as a mine from which much would be taken but nothing put in. With his goal in mind and after battles and treaties with various other tribes, Cortes marched toward his destiny with Moctezuma on August 19, 1519.

Influenced by his dependence on legend and magic, Moctezuma considered Cortes to be the returning god Quetzalcoatl. The impending destruction of his empire was even more imminent when the Aztecs saw the Spaniard's horses and guns. Since they had never seen these things before, the Indians considered the horses to be gods and the guns to be lightning sticks. Moctezuma attempted to dissuade Cortes from coming with gifts, but they only served to ~~wat~~ the Spaniard's appetite for a glimpse of the treasures. Cortes entered Tenochtitlan in the latter part of 1519 and was welcomed as a god. All went smoothly for a while during which time Cortes ruled the Aztecs from behind the throne of Moctezuma. In the early part of 1520, after six months in the capital, Cortes was forced

to march to Cempoala in order to destroy Panfilo de Narvaez who was sent by Governor Velasquez to suppress Cortes. Meanwhile, Pedro de Alvarado, in command at Tenochtitlan, blundered into a battle with the Aztecs. After Cortes' return, the Spaniards were soon cut off in the temple enclosure and were forced to flee. On the night of June 30, 1520 Cortes was routed and while fleeing lost so many men that the night was called la noche triste (the sad night). On August 13, 1521, however, the Spaniards reconquered Tenochtitlan but only after destroying most of the city. Cortes then set about draining the lake and rebuilt the town naming it Mexico City.

Hernando Cortes' rule was not very smooth as he was constantly beset with rivals for authority. In 1524 when he went to Honduras, Gonzalo de Salazar and Pedro Alminda de Chirinos rebelled. They killed Rodrigo de Paz, Cortes' delegate, and assumed control until Cortes returned and deposed them. The Catholic Church was also anti-Cortes as indicated by the zeal with which the Dominicans tried conquistadores, who supported Cortes, on charges of blasphemy.

The colonial period in Mexico began with the conquest of Tenochtitlan and lasted for 300 years (1521-1821). One despot after another followed Cortes until Spain realized that she was not receiving all she could out of the "mine" of Nueva Espana. To remedy this, the first government was set up in 1535 with the appointment

of Antonio de Mendoza as the first viceroy. Mexico was typical of the other Spanish viceroyalties in that it was governed by a viceroy and under him an audiencia. Only as a court of law was the audiencia supreme over the viceroy otherwise he was the highest authority. Subordinate areas were ruled by a governor and normally the viceroy served as governor within the area in which he resided. The government was not intolerably bad, but it was never vigorously good. It is fair, however, to say that after Cortes, Viceroy Mendoza and the first archbishop Juan de Zumarraga were the creators of Spanish Mexico.

The Spanish monarchs were anxious to acquire as much as possible of the profits available in Mexico. The Crown realized, however, that in order to receive their due, they had to keep a close rein on the colony. To assure themselves of their portion, the Consejo appointed from time to time a visitador who made an inspection tour or visita to keep a check on the colonial activities. In this way, despite many inequities, the Crown received much wealth from Mexico.

In 1545 there were already 1,385 settlers in Mexico City and this number increased greatly during the following years due to encouraged immigration. During the colonial period there were four general groups within the population of Nueva Espana. The gachupines were the native Spaniards who held not only the higher governmental positions but

also much wealth. The criollos or children born in Mexico of Spanish parents by being barred from holding office above the municipal level kept the gachupines in power. The children born of mixed parentage, Spanish and Indian, made up the mestizo group. The fourth and largest group was the Indian who served mainly as slaves to the Spanish. In overview, it is clear that the bureaucracy of New Spain was burdened by the gachupine class who were as unfit for menial tasks of government as were their counterparts within the nobility of Spain.

"The exploitation of the Indian was the mulsill upon which he (the Spaniard) built his society."<sup>28</sup> This concept, however, led to an intellectual dispute between the Christian humanists and the Spanish imperialists. The two points of contention were did Spain have a right to be in Mexico and force Christianity on the Indians, and were the Indians to be treated as humans or as beasts. Don Basco de Quirago was one of the few who opted for humanism, while the conquistadores viewed the Indians as perfect beasts of burden. Unfortunately the humanists were unsuccessful in their bid for decent treatment of the Indians and the Spaniards continued to exploit the natives throughout the colonial period.

In the early days of Mexico's colonization, her lands were distributed to settlers in the form of encomiendas. An encomienda was "the patronage conferred by royal favor over a portion of natives and land ...



coupled with the right to demand tribute or labor in return for these privileges."<sup>29</sup> Since the early settlers from Spain had the Spanish aversion to labor, this system was most acceptable to them. In return for this patronage, the encomendero, as the owner was called, owed a military obligation to the king which history shows he was called upon to fulfill. The sad part of this economic distribution was that the owners were responsible for the Indians within their territories. The encomenderos, however, used the Indians for slave labor or paid them so little that it was like slavery. Some friars were able to aid the Indians, but certainly couldn't reverse the actions of the land owners.

The primary economic function of Mexico was to provide the Spanish Crown with revenues. To accomplish this aim, Nueva Espana was treated like a mine from which much was taken and nothing was put in. Revenues for the Spanish treasury were sent yearly - every February by means of a treasure fleet. The Crown stopped at nothing to get money and even resorted to seizing private bullion coming into Spain. The greatest receipts that Spain ever received came during the first thirty-five years of the sixteenth century. During this era of colonization, commerce, goods and markets were the principle objectives of the Spanish Crown.

As we are dealing here with economics and since from this point on moneterial figures will be quoted, an

explanation of them is in order. The basic units in use during this period were the peso and ducat which were almost equal. One ducat or peso is equivalent to about 10 English pounds or about 35 American dollars. A better gauge for the worth of one ducat or peso is to indicate that it was equal to eight days wages for a skilled worker.<sup>30</sup> This should give the reader some idea of the wealth that many of the colonists possessed when it is expressed in the unit of the day.

" The newly discovered country (Mexico) had mines of precious metals and vast expanses of arable land; it offered an excellent market for European goods and skills, and the aborigines were pressed into service as slave laborers."<sup>31</sup> The same goods which filled the street stands of Moctezuma's capital now found their way to the vast markets of the Iberian Peninsula. The one industry which Spain was anxious to encourage was mining and since Mexico was rich in gold and silver, large fortunes were to be made from ventures into this area of commerce. From 1548 on, a steady flow of precious metals came from Mexico to replenish the coffers of the Spanish elite. After 1550, a new commodity called cochineal became a major part of trans-Atlantic trade. This brilliant red dye was highly prized and stimulated new merchants to enter into colonial trade.

Foreign trade was strictly regulated by the Crown. The regulations that were enforced served to not only

provide pelf for the Crown but also to keep undesirable influences out of the colonies. Violations of these trade regulations, however, became habitual with the entire population of Mexico from the viceroy on down. One of the methods used was to have a foreign ship dock under emergency conditions on the pretense of needing water. The laws required that the cargo be unloaded and locked in a warehouse. Then at night the town merchants switched the goods from the ships for silver and cochineal. The next day the ships were reloaded and set sail "without trading". This type of activity was very profitable and well worth the risk involved.

"The influence of the priesthood became unbounded," so that after the viceroy, the archbishop was the most important figure in the country.<sup>32</sup> The ecclesiastical government was vested in a bishop or archbishop and all members of the Church enjoyed the fuero to answer only to clerical courts. The Church in New Spain was neither unified in theological orientation nor in patterns of action. There was great bitterness between secular clergy and missionary orders which was fomented by the fact that friars were only responsible to quasi-episcopal authorities and not the bishop. Despite this strife, however, 12,000 churches were built in Mexico during the colonial period or about 40 a year. Once a territory had been conquered, it was transferred to the care of priests, organized into bishoprics and put on a paying

basis. The Indians were forced into the Christian faith but in reality they continued to worship their gods in secret.

The clergy in Mexico increased tremendously in numbers, in political power, in social influence and in accumulated wealth out of all proportion to the needs of New Spain. Throughout the colonial period the clergy were steadily growing richer until by 1800 it was estimated that more than one half the land in use in Mexico had become their property. The Church gradually became owners of such enormous fortunes that when an improvident landowner needed funds, he went to the monasteries.<sup>33</sup> "There can be little doubt that in certain respects the ecclesiastical establishment ... was an economic burden on the colonies," due to their legalized looting and "one of the most troublesome problems bequeathed to the nascent republic in the nineteenth century."<sup>34</sup>

Such was the colonization of Mexico by both the secular and ecclesiastical branches of Spanish society. It is certainly apparent that New Spain was settled for the imperialistic purpose of supplying Spain with pelf. The secular and clerical governments were arranged so that the resources of Mexico could be exploited without much regard for the native inhabitants. With this in mind, this chapter then provides the following pieces for our historical picture:



1. Mexico was a rich land just waiting for exploitation as evidenced by the Aztec Empire.

2. The stories of Indian wealth brought the first Spanish conquistadores who sought mainly gold and riches.

3. The secular government of Mexico was an extension of the Spanish Crown and served to provide riches for her superiors across the Atlantic.

4. Mexico was like a mine in that much was taken out while little or nothing was put in.

5. Even though foreign trade was under stringent supervision, for the benefit of the Crown, illegal trade was rampant.

6. The Church in Mexico grew in such wealth and influence that by 1800 it owned more than one half of the land in use.

"The concepts of religion had, for the Spaniard, a peculiar reality; for the sake of its ideas he was prepared to kill or be killed, to endure hardships and practice the extremities of mystical devotion, and also to torture and murder with a callousness that was equally extreme."<sup>35</sup> In the next chapter on the Mexican Inquisition we shall see what these ideas were and to what extremes these colonists went.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE HOLY OFFICE IN MEXICO

Man's inhumanity to his fellow human beings is a well documented phenomenon of recorded history. The methods employed to achieve savage brutality were as varied as the instances of their occurrence and the motives which instigated the actions as devious as the men who executed them. One of the most ingenious institutions created for this purpose was the Santo Oficio. This nefarious organization touched millions of lives and spread terror for hundreds of years. By utilizing religion for political purposes, which in turn equated service to the Crown with the cause of Catholicism, the Spanish king was able to create a Church-State unity. Under the guise, then, of religious fanaticism, unscrupulous men bettered their positions at the expense of their victims. The influence of the Holy Office, instituted in 1478, was felt in every colony under Spanish rule.

In this chapter, we shall consider the Holy Office in Mexico. Since this colonial tribunal was not only identical with the ones in other colonies, but also in Spain, an explanation of it will give the reader an overall understanding of how the Inquisition operated. As

the next chapter will be devoted to the conversos and the Inquisition, this group will be omitted here and instead, this chapter will be limited to a basic elucidation of the Santo Oficio. In dealing with this subject, the following material will be considered: a) the early Inquisition under Cortes; b) the background to the establishment of the Holy Office; c) the operation of the tribunal; d) the conflict between the Santo Oficio and the secular authority; and e) the relation of the Inquisition to the economics of Nueva Espana.

When Columbus set sail in 1492, he not only carried with him goods to trade and guns to fight, but also clergy to carry the faith. When Cortes arrived, he too brought with him clergymen, but unfortunately they carried with them more than sacraments, for each was also vested with inquisitorial powers.<sup>36</sup> Even Cortes himself initiated the movement to punish blasphemers in 1520. The first friar in Mexico with specific inquisitorial powers was the Franciscan Martin de Valencia. Up until 1532, control of the nascent Inquisition seesawed back and forth between the Franciscans and the Dominicans. These early prelates carried out their inquisitorial activities under rights granted by two separate authorities; a) on July 22, 1517, Cardinal Ximenez de Cisneros, Inquisitor General of Spain, granted inquisitorial powers to all bishops of the Indias; and b) in 1522 a papal bull called the Omnimoda gave all clergymen the rights of an ecclesiastical judge ordinary.<sup>37</sup>

The first trial, under these rights, took place in 1522 against an Indian, Marcos of Acolhuacan, who was charged with concubinage.<sup>38</sup> From 1526 to 1532, the Dominicans held control and two of the major commissaries of the tribunal were Domingo de Betanzos and Vicente de Santa Maria. In 1535, the first bishop of Mexico, Fray Juan de Zumarraga, was made apostolic inquisitor, a position which he held until 1543. He was succeeded by Alonso de Montufar, who carried out these duties until 1570 when the first Inquisitor General was appointed.

The early inquisitors were not official parts of the Holy Office. It was not until January 25, 1569, when Philip II authorized the establishment of a tribunal of the Santo Oficio in Mexico.<sup>39</sup> The basic laws under which this colonial branch operated were the Instructions of Sevilla written by Fray Tomas de Torquemada in 1484, and the Instructions of Toledo written by Don Fernando de Valdez in 1561. During the viceroyship of Martin Enriquez, Don Pedro Moya de Contreras was appointed, on August 18, 1570, the first Inquisitor General of Mexico by Cardinal-Bishop Diego de Espinosa, the Inquisitor General of Spain.<sup>40</sup> The formation of an official tribunal was due, in general, to fights between clerical and secular authorities over control of inquisitorial powers. This control was particularly important because the holder of this authority had access to unlimited wealth as will be shown later.



"The Holy Office of the Inquisition in Mexico had as its purpose the defense of Spanish religion and Spanish-Catholic culture against individuals who showed lack of respect for religious principles."<sup>41</sup> This generalization overlooks the fact that more was involved in the activities of the Holy Office than just religious zeal. It will become clear to the reader in the latter part of this and in the ensuing chapter, that financial considerations took precedence over religious fanaticism. However, before going into the motives of the Inquisition, space will be devoted to its workings.

The supreme authority of the Santo Oficio in Nueva Espana was the Inquisitor General of Mexico and under him were subordinate inquisitors who headed local tribunals. Most tribunals had two inquisitors and various other officials such as a fiscal (prosecutor), a calificador (censor), a nuncio (messenger), a receptor (secretary), an alguacil (constable), a provisor (assistant inquisitor), several familiares (police), and some cautelos (spies). Whenever the Holy Office went into action, it was these officials that were involved. The first action, when the tribunal came to a city, was to issue an Edict of Grace on a feast day giving 30 or 40 days for confession of sins with only light penance. When three or more trustworthy denunciations were made against a person, the evidence was examined by calificadores who determined what the charges should be. If they felt there was sufficient

evidence, the fiscal petitioned for arrest and either the alguacial, nuncio or familiares carried out the job. The prisoner was confined in the Inquisitorial jail and his possessions were confiscated. Usually within a week or so, the defendant was called to the first audiencia, questioned on his life and family, and asked to recite the Paternoster, Ave Maria, Credo y Salve, and Doctrina. The prisoner was told to admit his guilt; but was never told what he had done. In this way the tribunal considered a man guilty till he proved himself innocent and provided a method for more self-incrimination on the part of the defendant. After three admonitions to admit his crimes, the prisoner was read the charges, after which a defense attorney was appointed and a reply was made to the charges. The testimonies of the various witnesses were read but their names were withheld and, of course, they never appeared in person. If more incriminating evidence was needed, a cautela was put in the cell with the prisoner and usually was able to provide more information, although its reliability was certainly questionable. If the prisoner refused to confess, the tribunal would order him tortured. Since torture was only allowed once, the succeeding sessions were considered a continuation of the first, and if the prisoner died under torture, it was considered to be his fault for not admitting his guilt in the first place. There were two purposes for the torture: in caput proprium-to force the accused to confess his own guilt, and

in caput alienum - to get the accused to denounce others. If a person was convicted, there were basically six punishments: a) abjuration de levi - to swear alligence to the Church; b) abjuration de vehementi - sworn oath to the Church, with relapsing leading to the stake; c) verguenza - lashes preceded by a procession through the streets on a donkey; d) service in the galleys as an oarsman; e) imprisonment; and f) relajado - relaxation to the quemadero for burning. The Church did not have the power to actually burn the prisoner, and so they turned him over to the secular authority who carried out the sentence. Many who appeared in an auto de fe wore the sanbenito or cloak with specific signs on it to indicate the crime and punishment. In 1527, the tribunal began hanging the sanbenito in the cathedrals with the name of the person, date of sentence and crime written on them. In this way, the Holy Office caused the sins and punishments of the fathers to affect the children down through the fourth generation. In 1598, the Mexican tribunal built its first prison and the upkeep of the prisoners was paid for by the prisoners themselves, which after confiscations, usually resulted in bankruptcy.

Many types of cases came within the purview of the Holy Office. From the earliest days of Mexico's conquest, both civil and religious authorities were greatly concerned with blasphemy, sorcery, superstition, and the books read by the people. 1536 to 1540

was the Lutheran and heretical phase of the Mexican Inquisition, while 1543 to 1569 saw the tribunal concerned with colonists and foreigners who echoed Protestant ideas.<sup>43</sup> These foreigners usually came ashore with corsairs who prowled the waters of the New World such as the Hawkins fleet which was destroyed at San Juan de Ulua in 1568. These facts certainly indicate that "the investigations of the Holy Office are a gauge of ideological change" within Nueva Espana.<sup>44</sup>

" Cooperation of Church and State in the exercise of inquisitorial functions led to political involvement of the Holy Office."<sup>45</sup> This so-called cooperation, however, grew into civil invasion on religious functions, religious invasion on civil functions, constant struggles and poor management of the colony. In order to try to keep things in hand, and of course, to keep his revenue coming, Charles V, in 1543, appointed Francisco Tello de Sandoval as visitador to investigate the activities of the colonial authorities. In 1651, Philip IV, due to the same causes, appointed Pedro de Medina Rico as visitador and his tour resulted in the conviction of three inquisitors.

In the 1800's, the Inquisition was intimately involved in helping Spain maintain control of Mexico. Miguel Hidalgo y Castilla and Jose Maria Morelos, two early leaders for Mexican independence, were victims of the Holy Office in Spain's attempt to silence their liberal oratory. On February 22, 1813, the Cortes



abolished the Holy Office not only in Spain but also in the colonies. It was reestablished on July 21, 1814 by King Ferdinand VII but finally suppressed with Mexico's independence from Spain.

The major role of the Holy Office in Mexico, as I would like to postulate here, was in the area of economics. It has already been shown that all who were arrested by the tribunal lost all or part of their possessions and that the king received part of the confiscations. It has been noted by historians that one way to put an economic competitor out of business was to denounce him to the Santo Oficio, especially since those reconciled were prohibited from engaging in the same mercantile trade.<sup>46</sup> An example of this was the case of Simon Falcon who, in September of 1588, had charges trumped up against him by his economic competitors and was bankrupted by the actions of the tribunal.<sup>47</sup> If this possibility held true for individuals, would it not also hold true for the Crown? When the king or Church was in financial trouble, could it not turn to the Holy Office as a source of help? The answer is not only that they could, but that they did. In chapter one, I indicated how wealth was confiscated by the Inquisition when the nobility was in debt and the treasury was empty, and in Mexico the same can be demonstrated. Between 1500 and 1550 there was great wealth coming into Spain from New Spain and hence there was no need for a formal tribunal. However, in 1569 as the revenues declined

due to colonial disputes and official cheating, the king established the Holy Office in Mexico. Even though this did not end the cheating, it did increase the revenues coming into the Spanish treasuries. Another example is found a century later. Between about 1600 and 1625, little activity was observed in the plazas of the autos, while from 1625 to 1650, more autos de fe were held than in any other era. This also happened to be a time when Portugal broke away from Spain at a great loss to the Spanish Crown, when raids on Spanish shipping was heaviest and when the treasury was low. According to Medina, from 1640 to 1649 alone, three million pesos were confiscated by the tribunal in Mexico which is equivalent to around 105 million American dollars, which isn't bad for religious fanaticism!!!

This, then, was the Mexican Inquisition in almost all of its major aspects. In considering this material, the following points are significant for they represent additional pieces for the historical picture.

1. The Holy Office came to Mexico with the earliest conquest.
2. Prior to 1569, inquisitorial powers were vested in local prelates.
3. The official tribunal of the Holy Office was established on January 25, 1659 with Don Pedro Moya de Contreras as the first Inquisitor General.
4. When one was arrested by the Holy Office, all

ones possessions were confiscated.

5. A method of eliminating a competitor was to denounce him to the Inquisition.

6. When things were economically good, the Holy Office was near dormant, while in times of economic stress, the tribunal was very active.

7. The Church and Crown used the Inquisition to secure pelf and power.

"Except when they challenged the Church or Spanish authority in an open manner or when they particularly rankled the peninsular Spaniard as a business competitor or as a political rival, these heretics did not appear in the halls of the Inquisition."<sup>49</sup> The question that must be raised is, who were these heretics? In the next chapter, we shall look at the conversos of Nueva Espana in an attempt to see their relationship to the Holy Office and the Crown.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CONVERSOS IN NUEVA ESPANA

In the fourteenth century B.C.E., Abraham left his home in Ur of the Chaldeans in order to make a new life in the land of Canaan. About three hundred years later, some of his descendents, who had recently converted to Catholicism, left their ancestral home in Europe and ventured into the unknowns of the New World. The ideals which they carried and the motives which drove them on were varied and intense. Despite the hardships and barriers, they persevered and succeeded in creating a new existence for themselves and their families. These conversos, who were an integral part of Mexican society were both loved and hated by virtue of their position and influence within the colony. Furthermore, it is certainly reasonable to conclude that without the conversos, there would have been very little with which the Inquisition would have occupied itself.

In this chapter, we shall deal with the conversos in Nueva Espana and in particular, their relationship to the Santo Oficio. This chapter will consider the legal status of the converso, his role in the economics of the colony and an analysis of his relation to the Holy Office.



The last words of Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte, as he went to the stake on April 11, 1649 were, "Pile on the wood! How much my money costs me."<sup>50</sup> In the following pages, we shall see how profound his words were.

The term converso is used in this chapter as it has been throughout the thesis. In Mexico as in Spain, after 1492, there were no openly practicing Jews within the citizenry. Whether or not the conversos charged by the Mexican Inquisition were in fact, practicing Judaism, is not of paramount importance. What is of consequence is that these people were of Jewish ancestry, in the economic fields usually worked by Jews and were susceptible to the same charges as their practicing counterparts. Therefore, in this chapter as well, the term converso will be applied in a neutral way with no judgement as to guilt or innocence.

Up until the death of Queen Isabella in 1508, Jews, conversos, moors and reconciliados were not permitted in Mexico. When she died, Ferdinand removed this barrier and allowed descendants of these groups to immigrate from the fourth generation on. In 1518, however, Charles V replaced the old restrictions until 1522 when he permitted conversos to immigrate with royal permission only. In January of 1523, the old restrictions were once again in effect, but never rigidly enforced.<sup>51</sup> Conversos came with Cortes and Panfilo de Narvaez in the 1520's, and by 1545, there were 1,385 settlers in Mexico City alone, with

300 of them of the converso class.<sup>52</sup> During the entire sixteenth century, illegal immigration was the general rule, and these prohibited individuals entered the land by changing their names and bribing officials. This influx of official undesirables, was, in reality, most welcomed, as they possessed the capital and knowhow required to develop the colonial trade. In spite of prohibitive laws, therefore, conversos, both Spanish and Portuguese, were found in New Spain in increasing numbers until by the middle of the seventeenth century, the vast majority of the Spaniards running big trade outfits in the Caribbean were conversos. Three of the more influential members of that community were Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte, Simon Vaez Sevilla and Sebastian Vaz Acevedo.

"During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Jews (conversos) in New Spain were accepted without animosity by the general populace because they served a function and role which the Spaniard was unable or unwilling to assume. They were merchants, peddlers, itinerant salesmen and importers."<sup>53</sup> Due to their financial acuity and entrepreneurial abilities, the conversos successfully pre-empted the field of trade and commerce. As early as 1521, Hernando Alonso settled in the Michoacan region and became a rich merchant until his property and wealth were confiscated by the Inquisition.<sup>54</sup> The major commodities in which the conversos dealt were maiz, chocolate, cacao, sugar, yerba, tobacco, pearls, cloth,

cuchineal, silver, and gold. As a matter of fact, "es difícil se encontrara algun aspecto de la vida economica en que los conversos no hayan participada ..." (it is difficult to encounter any aspect of economic life in which the conversos had not participated).<sup>55</sup> The testimony of Gaspar de Robles, at his trial before the Holy Office in April of 1641, indicated that many conversos were involved in trade with China, Havana, South America and many other parts of the world.<sup>56</sup> As a form of emolument for importing slaves, conversos were given haven or the privilege of living in Yucatan, unmolested by the Inquisition. An example of this is verified by records that the charges against Cristobal de Miranda in 1575, were dropped due to his activities in slave trade.<sup>57</sup> Apparently even after confiscations, the conversos were capable of re-establishing themselves as successful merchants in other areas. After only three years, Antonio Mendez, who was freed with little more than a shirt on his back, reached such wealth that his bed linens alone were worth more than 400 pesos (\$14,000). This ability to come back with communal help seems to indicate some relationship between conversos. Whether or not this was based on crypto-Jewish practices, is still a point in contention. Nevertheless, the relation did exist in Mexico as it did in Spain and Europe. Despite the threat of the Holy Office, the conversos not only remained in Mexico, but even more immigrated. The question which

must be asked is, "why". The answer probably is best given by Liebman when he states that, "we know that some Jews (conversos) had plans to leave, but there was always a debt to be collected, another ship to come in, or another transaction to be completed."<sup>58</sup> In other words, the conversos were so intimately involved in the commerce of Nueva Espana, that they were willing to live under the heel of the Holy Office. These facts also indicated that by virtue of their commercial activities, the conversos were in the same position as their counterparts in Spain. That is, they were a necessary evil for the Crown and Church, but incurred their wrath as a result of the jobs their position forced them to carry out. Just as in Spain, when the nobility was financially threatened, they used the Inquisition to bail themselves out, so it was in Mexico. Therefore, not only did the local merchants resort to denouncing their competitors to the Holy Office, but the Church and Crown as well.

These attempts to intimidate and restrain the growth of the converso population, were a complete failure. Not only was there illegal immigration, but also ingress sanctioned by the very groups who officially tried to keep the conversos out, as indicated in the first chapter. The first prosecutor of judaizers was Fr. Vincente de Santa Maria who arrived in 1528 and whose records indicate, "that converted Jews were the first to receive formal sentence of burning at the stake."<sup>59</sup>



Not only did these people go to the stake, but "the Jews (conversos) were the ones who suffered total loss of their worldly wealth."<sup>60</sup>

As was shown in the last chapter, the Inquisition was near dormant in prosperous periods, but vigorous in times of financial hardships. "The tapering off of persecutions in Mexico and the economic prospects of the silver rush encouraged many judaizers to migrate to Mexico from 1606 to 1642. They were active in business and some became very wealthy. The Holy Office, seeking an opportunity to fill its coffers, in 1642 created such an occasion."<sup>61</sup> This period from 1606 to 1642, which followed a 36 year period in which the Holy Office was concerned with judaizers, saw no conversos appearing in autos de fe. Yet in the decade from 1640 to 1650, "the confiscations were very large, placing the tribunal at its ease for future times, besides what was embezzled by the inquisitors."<sup>62</sup> As a matter of fact, on April 11, 1649, so many conversos were burned at the stake, that the event was labeled "el gran auto" (the great auto). As the reader will remember from the last chapter, this was a period of financial and political trouble for the Spanish Empire.

It has been indicated previously that the history of Spain in the sixteenth century reflects a time of prosperity, while for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a time of turbulence and financial trouble. If the hypothesis postulated above is correct, then the

Inquisitional records should show few converso cases in the sixteenth century and many cases in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Based on a cursory count of recorded procesos, one finds that the hypothesis is validated. In the sixteenth century there were 191 cases recorded in Mexico and 25 in Spain. The seventeenth century records show 751 cases in Mexico and 631 in Spain, while the eighteenth century shows 886 cases in Spain alone.<sup>63-64</sup>

However, some question might be raised as to the validity of this hypothesis in light of the fact that there were autos de fe during periods of economic prosperity. This fact, in my opinion, does not negate the theory and is easy to understand if we look at a modern example. When an army is not fighting a real battle, practice war games are an integral part of its training in order to keep it at its peak level of performance. If the army did not keep itself at this optimal level, it would atrophy like an unused muscle. Similarly, the Inquisition, in order to keep its machinery well oiled, engaged in trying cases even though the financial situation was not critical. Furthermore, this gave the Inquisitional authorities the opportunity to perfect the necessary machinery that would be needed in the future.

Now given the above facts concerning the number of cases, we now turn to specific instances in order to determine if another major hypothesis is correct. It has been suggested that the Mexican Inquisition was a tool by

which the Church and Crown increased their wealth and power. If this is true, then individual cases should reflect this assumption. Since there are so many cases on record, it would be impossible to cite them all. Therefore, seven representative cases have been chosen, based mainly on the availability of the records.

In 1528, Hernando Alonso, an ardent supporter of Cortes, was a wealthy merchant in Mexico. Fray Vincente de Santa Maria charged Alonso with judaizing even though the practices mentioned were not Jewish rites at all. At first, Alonso denied the accusations, but after torture, he confessed to them. His mines and herds of cattle were confiscated, and Alonso was burned at the stake.<sup>65-67</sup> This proceso is important because it shows how the Inquisition not only acquired wealth, but also did away with a political ally of Cortes, who was in disfavor at that time.

Many books have been written about the Carvajal family and in particular, about Governor Luis de Carvajal and his nephew Luis. Between 1583 and 1590, the Governor, an ardent Catholic, was charged with judaizing. A thorough study of his procesos indicates that, without a doubt, the Governor, was denounced for reasons of economic and political rivalry. Here is an example of the Inquisition in the role of a political instrument used by the Crown and Church.<sup>68</sup>

The last case to be mentioned from the sixteenth

century concerns Sebastian Rodriguez, who was reconciled in an auto de fe conducted on December 8, 1596. Rodriguez was a merchant carrying on trade between New Spain and China, and his proceso indicates that the conversos played a large role in developing international trade in Mexico.<sup>69</sup> This case provides us with an example of how the Crown allowed conversos to establish trade and commerce, and then took over to suit their needs.

The remaining four cases have been taken from the seventeenth century, as this was the most active period of the Holy Office in Mexico. On August 10, 1646, an auto was held in which Margarite Morera was reconciled. Her husband was a successful merchant and when her property was confiscated, it amounted to 9,827 pesos or about 344,000 American dollars.<sup>70</sup> This is a prime example of how the Holy Office acquired great wealth from its confiscations despite guilt or innocence.

In the same auto, Francisco Texosa was also reconciled. Captain Texosa was a merchant who lived in Vera Cruz and whose property, when confiscated, was valued at 3,353 pesos or about 117,000 American dollars.<sup>71</sup> His possessions provided the coffers of the Santo Oficio with funds that were badly needed.

Simon Vaez Sevilla, in the period from 1625 to 1650, was one of the richest conversos in Mexico. He was a banker and an international merchant who had seven ocean-sailing vessels. On April 11, 1649, Sevilla's



property was confiscated and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Although no record was available on the value of his confiscated goods, there are records of the claims against his estate. Some of the more important ones totaled more than 25,000 pesos or about 875,000 American dollars.<sup>72</sup> There is no question but that his confiscated possessions greatly enriched the impoverished royal treasury.

Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte, the last case to be considered, was a wealthy converso involved in the trade and manufacture of cochineal dye. Sobremonte was burned at the stake on April 11, 1649 and his estate amounted to over 16,000 pesos or about 560,000 American dollars.<sup>73</sup> His final words, "Pile on the wood! How much my money costs me", gives us insight into the reason for his execution, that is, his great wealth.

These cases, though brief in number, give one the impression that the Inquisition used its authority to fill not only its coffers, but also those of the Crown. Therefore, the second hypothesis has been validated by the procesos themselves, despite the religious interpretation given to these trials.

This, then, was the relationship between the Santo Oficio and the conversos. It is clear that his class of people played an integral part in the economics of New Spain. Further, it is patent that the Holy Office used its machinery to fill the empty treasuries of Spain by

confiscating the property and resources of those who had them. The pieces, therefore, which this chapter contributes to our picture of history are:

1. Conversos were legally prohibited from entering Mexico, but in reality were there from the beginning of colonization.

2. The nascent economic set-up in Nueva Espana was suckled by the converso class and they became the prime agents of commerce in the New World.

3. The number of procesos in New Spain reflected the economic and political situation in Spain and her colonies. Economic prosperity and tranquility, few cases; financial stress and turbulence, many cases. Hence, economics determined ideology.

4. The Inquisition took advantage of the financial wealth of the conversos, and used its machinery to replenish the empty purses of Spain.

"When, as we have seen, the judaizers commenced to appear among the penitents in the autos de fe, the longed-for relief derivable from confiscations, fines and penances was at hand."<sup>74</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Concluding chapters usually allow the author to pull together all the various facts from each section so that he can create a final picture utilizing all the pieces. The picture, thus created, can be viewed either by gazing at each of its specific parts, or by gazing at the entire work. Since the preceding chapters of this thesis have dealt with the various individual facts, and since each chapter builds upon the preceding one, this final section will concentrate on the topic as a unity. In other words, an attempt will be made here to give an overview of the conversos and the Holy Office in Mexico, as opposed to a restatement of the individual facts.

Needless to say, there are problems involved in the reconstruction of a history and the postulating of hypotheses concerning events which took place 500 years ago, particularly in light of the scarcity of truthful documentation. As any student of history is aware, one must be careful of relying on records which present only one side of the picture and which were prepared by a group with a vested interest in their contents. In truth, it was this caveat which lead me to question the standard analysis of the Mexican Inquisition, and the

study of which has resulted in the hypotheses to be considered in this chapter.

Basically there are three major points in which this study has resulted. The first being that the economics of the times was the major factor in determining the ideology of the Crown and the Church. Religious matters aside, it was the financial requirements of these two institutions which shaped their thoughts and policies. Jews, and later conversos, were permitted to enter Spanish and Mexican societies, despite previous rejection, only because of the benefits and entrepreneurial talents which were useful to the religious and secular hierarchies.

The second major hypothesis is that the Inquisition was a tool by which the Crown and the Church could secure their financial requirements. Since the Jews were now Christians (conversos), a system had to be created whereby the secular and religious authorities could "legally" confiscate the financial resources accumulated by this group. The Holy Office fulfilled this need in a very admirable and efficient way. Its machinations filled the coffers of Mexico, and in turn Spain, with pelf and property sorely needed by the Church and Crown.

The final point is in actuality a proven fact based on the available data and a corollary of the first two hypotheses. The Inquisition was not very active in times of economic prosperity, and extremely active during times of economic hardship. This validates further the



previous two propositions and lends credence to the theory that religious fanaticism was not the guiding principle of the Holy Office.

This, then, is the Santo Oficio of Nueva Espana in overview. As a completed picture, it is not the most pleasing work of art, because of the havoc and terror which it produced. In a morbid sense, however, it must be admired for its efficient activities and successful operations.

In terms of Jewish history, the Mexican Inquisition serves to teach us a lesson for future generations. Despite the outward, altruistic statements of any institution, we must be careful to suspect ulterior motives. Perhaps this is a form of paranoia, but on the other hand it may represent a striving for survival, that is, the same kind of striving that any creature does in order to live. A minute aspect, in a far distant place, in the flow of Jewish history, yet a prime example of man's inhumanity to his fellow man - was the Mexican Inquisition.

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