

Mad for god: Bartolome Sanchez, the secret messiah of cardente

Opinion

“Were I on trial, I should wish for any judge of the Spanish Inquisition, in preference to most of the judges in the world today,” I remarked to two medical men who were discussing justice at a cocktail party. They appeared shocked and disbelieving, as I continued: “The rate of capital punishment in the United States over the past 200 years has been three times as high as it ever was under the Inquisition.” They shook their heads and gently admonished me that such a thing could simply not be true. The conversation changed and the party dragged on. When I returned home, I pulled this book by Sara Nalle off the shelf and re-read it. I recommend it to anyone else whose ideas of the Spanish Inquisition have been formed by the conventional received wisdom.”

The book is a summary of the records kept by the Inquisition of the trial of one Bartolome Sanchez, who walked into Mass on a holy day in March of 1552 and began blaspheming, insulting all present, and shouting heresy. Sanchez was a migratory farm labourer near the town of La Mancha, a place now immortalized in musical comedy. The man was mad, and he affronted all that was dear and important to his neighbours. He deserved to go before the Inquisition, and he did. But then come the surprises in the story.

First of all, one learns that the standards of the Spanish Inquisition when it came to proof were meticulous and exact. Truth and justice were sought above all in every case. And the Inquisitors kept very good records, far surpassing those of other judicial processes in those days, which is why we can know Sanchez’s story.

The evidence against him was overwhelming. He carried on, ranting about idol-worship, Christ’s Passion, Confession, Communion, Baptism, indulgences, the nature of the Trinity, the authority of the Church—and damned everyone who contradicted him. Still, the forms of law required that the accused be given many opportunities to respond to the charges. When presented with a copy of the indictment, he burned it. Since Sanchez was obviously mad, the Inquisition sent him to a hospital, where he was put in “the ward for the mentally ill, which was separate from the rest of the hospital, was spacious with men and women’s dormitories with individual beds for the inmates... and a separate salon for the mentally impaired where the fireplace was protected by a safety grill so the patients would not injure themselves. Patients who had to be physically restrained were kept in cells. After admission, mentally ill patients were given green and brown shifts and were supervised by five salaried ‘fathers’ and ‘mothers.’ Inmates who were not dangerous were given various tasks to do around the hospital. The women spun, sewed, washed lengths of cloth, and made pastry. The men worked the hospital’s kitchen gardens, did domestic service, and laboured in the workshops...The patients’ diet included meat every day, but they received less than the other inmates so as not to overheat their already unbalanced brains.”

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For Sanchez, this place should have been a paradise compared to his previous life of extreme poverty and hard labour. Yet, after eighteen months, he escaped and headed homewards. The Inquisition tracked him down, intending to send him to a prison for the insane in Zaragoza, until something else was decided. A letter was to be sent, giving full instructions. It never did come. and the book ends, “the ultimate fate of Bartolome Sanchez. Woolcarder and secret Messiah, remains unknown.” (Escape from the confinement of the Inquisition seems not to have been unusual; even many of the condemned managed to wander off. and thus were merely burned in effigy.)

The conventional account of the Spanish Inquisition is, at bottom, a concocted, anti-Catholic slander. The witchcraft mania of the 16th century, which took so many innocent lives in the Protestant countries of northern Europe, never caught on in Spain, because the Inquisitors were never convinced by that lurid witch-hunter’s manual, the *Milieu Maleficarum*. Anyone who really wishes to know something true about the Inquisition should start by reading this book, *Mad for God*, and follow it with Henry Kamen’s *The Spanish Inquisition, a Historical Revision*, reviewed in these pages in March/April, 1999.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.