The Violation of the Ninth Commandment and the Injustices of the Spanish Inquisition:

How the bearing of false witness played a key role in a terrible historical episode.

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Abstract

One of the worst and most infamous periods of injustice in the history of the Church involved the regular and egregious violation of the 9th Commandment. The command that forbids bearing false witness against one’s neighbor has at its root two great virtues commended to all people in Scripture: love of truth and love of one’s neighbor. Both are central to this commandment’s meaning and implications. The disregarding and violation of this negative command thus promotes falsehood, lying, and slander against others, which, consistent with a lack of love toward the victims, leads further to wrongs of an even more cruel and barbaric nature against them. This terrible cause and result are on graphic display in a historical analysis of the ugly period of the Inquisition in 15th and 16th Century Spain.
The Violation of the Ninth Commandment and the Shame of the Spanish Inquisition

At the popular level history is known largely in terms of dominant images and associations. The average person, hearing mention of the French Revolution, for example, will see in his mind’s eye either a silhouette of the Bastille, an angry peasant mob, or a grisly execution scene featuring the guillotine. In an image-oriented culture that is mostly ignorant of history’s finer details, this simplistic slideshow representation of major happenings is accompanied by an equally simplistic (and knee-jerk) emotional reaction to those events. The Renaissance evokes positive feelings, while the Holocaust negative ones, even if relatively little is known about either.

In a game of historical word-association, then, the emotional response of modern people to history’s best-recognized chapters would be fairly predictable. It is in this sense not difficult to imagine what proceedings of the past would cause the most consistent recoiling and disgust, and surely nobody will think it a daring prognostication to suggest that near the top of the “History’s Most Hated” list would be the dreaded Spanish Inquisition.

Christians should at all times strive to be well informed and honest about historical events, particularly ones featuring so explicitly the deeds of those professing the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and still all the more when those deeds have become notorious or infamous for their perceived evil, as is the case with the Spanish Inquisition.

In what follows my purpose is to illustrate that the egregious injustices of the Spanish Inquisition, which were as damaging to the permanent reputation of historic Christianity as they were terrifying to their victims, were made possible in large part by a
depraved disregard for truth and love, specifically in the form of what became a habitual violation of the command not to bear false witness against others.

This analysis will make clear that kings, priests and common citizens all played a sinister role in the promotion of false witnessing, devising and instituting a system of interrogation that promoted, incentivized, and rewarded the act of lying about people such that they were thrown into the corrupt inquisitorial process and machinery, usually without proper recourse or defense. The motives for this ranged from fear to hatred to greed to misguided religious zeal, but the additional sin and central operative practice of falsely testifying against people was the regular fuel for the decades-long flames of cruel injustice.

I will begin with an analysis of the Ninth commandment, both its original intent as part of the Decalogue and the implications of its adherence and/or violation for the community. In so doing I aim to show that the mandate forbidding the bearing of false witness involves two great virtues that are given prominent attestation throughout the whole of Scripture, namely the love of truth and the love of one’s neighbor. To bear false witness against another person involves both subversion of the truth (i.e., lying about one or more things pertaining to another person) as well as an act of malice or ill will against a brother or sister in the community.

I will then turn attention to what I take to be a notable if not notorious historical test-case of sorts when it comes to the importance of this commandment (and the consequent disaster of its wholesale disregard and violation). That test-case is the Spanish Inquisition, as it is usually called, which went in some form or another for over
300 years, moving from Spain to Portugal and then out across the oceans to many of the colonial outposts of the two European powers.

The analysis of the social and religious forces at work in the inauguration and execution of the Office of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal reveals causes consistent with typical human errors and failings. But more to the point, the process by which the Inquisition operated in the various cities of Spain and Portugal over a period of many years involved the critical and morally disturbing element of people testifying against other people in a way that put them within the terrifying reach of the inquisitors and thus in danger of imprisonment, torture and even execution. And not surprisingly, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that great numbers of the accused were partially, mostly or entirely innocent of the charges that put them at the mercy of their punishers.

I will conclude by highlighting the main lessons, grave as they are, that the history of the Spanish Inquisition offers in terms of the dangers that await any community wherein people succumb to sinful inclinations to bear false witness against others for the sake of some sort of illicit gain, whether it be the satisfaction of a grudge, unvarnished greed, competitive envy, or some other morally depraved motivator. And I will give special attention to the importance of honoring the Ninth Commandment within the Christian community in particular, as it was within a professing Christian culture that the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition endured for their bloody season, and because Christians are those who ought especially to practice lives of moral uprightness with regard to a love and commitment both to the truth and to all other persons.
The Ninth Commandment

Even as Westerners continue to grow estranged from the Bible that once held the place of authoritative prominence among nearly all members of their ancestry, literate or not, still the Ten Commandments of the twentieth chapter of Exodus remain at least recognizable to them. Not that the common citizen today would be able or concerned to list the commandments accurately or elucidate their meanings for ancient Israel or mankind in general. This brief and famous passage from the ancient Torah holds its spot in our thin but broad base of knowledge, alongside the most famous stories from the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Noah’s flood, David vs. Goliath, Sampson’s strength, Jonah inside the whale, etc.)

But as biblically astute Jews and Christians have long recognized, the “Ten Words” are a kind of summary or essence of the Mosaic Law. The regulations for the guidance of a theocratic nation were, of necessity, long and detailed, including a number of specifics that modern readers are apt to find either exceedingly strange or historically interesting but not necessarily profound nor applicable outside of their time and place. The Decalogue, however, savors of universal moral principles, both with regard to the true worship of God and with regard to the most basic moral truths that apply to human relationships.

Specific to the point at hand, the commandments applying to human relationships – the last six of them – have been recognized by Christians of many generations as the backbone of civil law. They are societal ethical prescriptions, giving proper value and sanctity to people’s lives and property. But interestingly, as Eugene Merrill (1991) points out, the ninth commandment adds “the value of his reputation”
(p.130) to the list of things that each member of the community is bound to honor with regard to every other member. To phrase it negatively, according to this list you may not wrongfully kill a fellow citizen, nor have relations with his wife, nor take his property (nor even covet his wife or property), nor, in the words of the ninth commandment, “bear false witness” against him (Exodus 20:16).

This important prohibition, known to most English speakers by the familiar phrase of the King James translators “bear false witness,” and echoed in exactly those terms in a number of later English translations, is nevertheless rendered in many modern English translations and paraphrases variously as “give false testimony” (New International Version and Holman Christian Standard), “accuse falsely” (Good News Translation), “testify falsely” (New Living Translation), “tell lies about” (New Century Version), and “give false evidence against” (Complete Jewish Bible).

In ancient Israel, as in any society, people’s reputations were a matter of honor and great significance. And particularly in light of the laws mandating justice in the courts and legal system, giving a false report about another person could prove damning to him (Merrill, 1991, p.133). In such a circumstance the lie told against a fellow citizen might end up as devastating as though you had killed or robbed him directly, if in fact the thing of which he was falsely accused results in a loss of his property or life. So aside from the sin of slander, of ruining a person’s reputation in the community and/or fueling gossip, the penal system could cause a violation of the ninth commandment, in essence, to lead directly to a tacit violation of the fifth (murder) or eighth (theft) commandments.
The Two Virtues Involved: Telling the Truth and Loving your Neighbor

Prohibitions are pointers toward the ideals we are supposed to uphold. A negative command implies the commendable behavior opposite that which it forbids. In Aristotelian terms, every virtue (or quality of moral excellence) has for its antithetical parallel a vice, which bespeaks a character defect causing a person to fall short of the trait of moral excellence that is the natural goal (telos) of human ethical behavior (Thiroux & Krasemann, 2007, p.72).

The mandate not to bear false witness against one’s neighbor can in this way be seen as advocating the two virtues of truth-telling and loving other people. Whether the circumstances of bearing false witness against a neighbor are legal or personal – that is, whether the testimony is “official” as in a court room deposition or merely social in the form of illicit gossip (perhaps the spreading of a false rumor that damages another person’s reputation) – the same two vices are in play. For in both circumstances the violator of the commandment is not being truthful and is doing harm to his or her neighbor.

In the general and universal sense, both telling the truth and treating other people rightly are, by common, shared moral intuition, perceived and advocated as fairly basic. They are part of what natural law philosophers like J. Budziszewski (1999) refer to as things “stamped” upon all human beings by our Creator – things we can (and often do) suppress and attempt to forget, but things which ultimately we “can’t not know” (p.8). Many theologians refer to such knowledge as part of “common grace.” They agree that this notion of natural law is expressly taught by Paul when he writes in Romans 2:15 that the various peoples (ethnoi) of the world perceive “instinctively” what
the law requires and attempt to do it, because the law is “written on their hearts.” Divine revelation thus verifies what discerning thinkers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had perceived by observation and intuition. The immediate culture of those Romans who received Paul’s letter largely agreed, as evidenced by the natural law views of groups like the Stoics as well as of Roman lawyers and statesmen like Cicero (Lovin, 2000, p.47).

But as universally recognized as are the two moral prohibitions against lying and the maltreatment of other human beings, what a point of fascination it is that in the Ten Commandments they are combined in this fashion. There is, after all, no independent commandment in this famous list that says, “Thou shalt not lie.” Lying in general is certainly an important sin to address, but here its prohibition is expressed in the context of lying about (perhaps even against) another person. The emphasis cannot be missed. The relational element is not incidental, and must not be treated as though it reads something more along the lines of, “Do not lie – as in the case, for example, of speaking falsely about another person.”

The “love your neighbor” component of the 9th commandment is as important, if not more so, than the truth-telling component. In a well-known passage in Matthew 22, Jesus is asked (v.36) “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” The famous reply is that the greatest is to love God fully, and the second greatest to “love your neighbor as yourself” (v.39, ESV). These, Jesus says, comprise the foundation of all the others.

It should thus be no surprise that the overriding emphases of the Decalogue are loving God (the theme of the first four commandments) and loving others (the theme of
the last six). Each of the commands after the fourth is rendered meaningless without the social reality of others, for every act prohibited in them represents a violation of one sort or another of what Jesus said is the second greatest commandment. Dishonoring of parents, adultery, theft, and murder all inflict direct and overt harm upon other people. Coveting things is less direct though perhaps likely to lead to the direct ones such as theft (taking what is coveted), adultery (taking whom is coveted), or murder (for the sake of jealousy of another’s possessions or as a plot to secure them). But even the act of coveting by itself - without it leading to these other sins - must of necessity involve others. An utterly isolated life – being raised and living one’s life, for example (and were it possible), in a remote location without any awareness of the existence of other human beings – would not afford the temptation to covet any more than it would afford the temptations to commit any of the other sins against people.

In a similar sense, lying is only possible in communion with other people. Since it is technically impossible to lie to God, one would need other intelligent persons, but who lack omniscience, in order to practice lying. And specifically, the 9th commandment seeks to prevent the kind of lying to others that is also about others. Innocuous untruths may indeed qualify as lies (thus as ethically wrong acts), but the specific emphasis of this command involves something of a greater magnitude than simply telling a ‘tall tale’ about one’s accomplishments or fibbing about a minor detail of some sort. The kind of lies this command warns against are motivated by malice and designed to slander, besmirch or ruin another person. They are those false accusations that bring pain or loss to another person, not victimless ‘white lies.’
The bearing of false witness can be as dire and dangerous as murder itself. As
the apostle James warned, the tongue, small as it is, has immense power to wreak
destruction. “See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!” (James 3:5,
NASB). History and human experience bear out the ominous reality of this graphic
warning, and perhaps no historical episode reveals just how great a forest can be
burned by the words of false witnesses more than the Spanish Inquisition.

The Spanish Inquisition

The Western (Latin) Christendom of late medieval Europe faced challenges and
threats, real and perceived. The worst were internal, as the large hierarchical and
institutional Church headquartered at Rome tried to deal with elements of laxity and
abuse in the clergy, culminating in a few high profile scandals; while meanwhile just
over the horizon loomed a period of Renaissance and Reformation whose initial tremors
were being felt. Also the papacy was dealing with the tense political tugs of war as kings
of the emerging European states gained the kind of stature and clout to challenge the
holy office that had once been strong enough to have the final say on most matters to
which it spoke.

Of all the threats or crises that troubled Rome’s leadership, however, the one that
was bound to bring out the worst in people was the problem of heresy. Based on a New
Testament word meaning “division,” heresy became for the leadership of the Roman
Catholic Church any kind of deviant beliefs within the Christian community into which
nearly everyone had been baptized and reared.
People being what they are, there has never been a shortage of spiritual innovation, novelty or individual revelations of all sorts within the population of the devout. But unlike the modern American circumstance of a religiously pluralistic society, most people in history were expected to conform their beliefs and practices to the authoritative guidelines and instructions of their spiritual leaders. And where the church and state were wedded, heresy amounted to a kind of treason by which dangerous spiritual diseases were spread by subversive persons doing Satan’s work to undermine the sole avenue of God’s salvation and blessing to the world (Perry et al., 1989, p.217)

The response to heretical teachers and movements became codified in a kind of legal system designed by the church specifically to address it using zealous and educated clerics – typically supplied by the monastic orders, and particularly by the Dominicans, whose Spanish founder Dominic was a dedicated theologian who had written and preached against a widely known and active heretical sect called the “Cathari” but known in various places across Europe by additional names such as “Albigenses” and “Bulgari” (O’Connor 1909).

While the precise year of the official establishment of the Office of the Inquisition is sometimes debated, it took place during or shortly after the 1229 Council of Toulouse, during which, according to church historian K. S. Latourette (1997), the church “systematized and elaborated” the new office (p.457). Both the procedure and the word describing it (Latin inquisitio) were borrowed directly from old Roman law (Perry et al., 1989, p.217). It referred simply to the establishment of a local tribunal to make inquest or inquiry into a specific issue. It was not the first time papal instructions had been given for dealing with groups like the Cathars and Waldensians. But the Inquisition
would thereafter be the established legal method and process by which hearings would take place, suspects would be questioned according to given regulations, and punishments would be meted out for the guilty and unrepentant.

In any town or region where the Inquisition was established, usually after permission from Rome at the request of local rulers, secular or clerical, in order to deal with a perceived problem meriting the office, the procedure, generally speaking, followed thusly: Upon the arrival of the tribunal, a public meeting would be held announcing the reasons and causes for the Inquisition’s attention in the location, and informing people of the basic procedures that were to follow, beginning with an initial opportunity or grace period – thought usually to consist of thirty days (Contreras & Henningsen, 1986, p.120) – for coming forth to confess one’s errors or report others, in exchange for lighter punishments such as prayer, pilgrimage, public recantation or maybe a term of imprisonment.

**Spain’s Version of the Inquisition**

Unique among the European states during the medieval centuries was Spain. Many Jews had lived there since the New Testament era (Amador de los Rios, 1960, p.29), and it was the sole part of Europe that Muslim armies had been able to occupy and claim in the 8th Century. In no other part of Europe were rival Christian kingdoms sharing a national boundary with Islamic caliphates, and no other European country had more confessing non-Christians than Spain (Latourette, 1997, p.657).

A result of this distinctive history was that Spain’s Christian population was battle-tested and had an edge to it from years of fighting for the sake of re-conquest (the
“Reconquista”). Another result was that a decidedly ardent allegiance to Rome was rooted in the collective soul of Spanish Catholics. And this allegiance that would, in later years, not only make Spain the seat of the counter-Reformation and thus the single most difficult country in Europe for Protestantism to gain any foothold, but it would also play a role in creating the cultural context of fear, suspicion and animosity that made it possible for inquisitorial abuses of the worst kind.

The long-standing co-existence (“convivencia”) of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Spain would ultimately give way to a re-establishment of Roman Catholic rule under the leadership of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. They began their string of military triumphs over the Moors (the word Europeans used for Muslims of N. African Berber-Arab descent) in the mid-13th Century (Green, 2007, p.22), and the campaign culminated in the historic victory in 1492 over the last Muslim stronghold of Granada. In time the Roman Catholic Church would own half of Spain’s land, and nearly a quarter of the Spanish population would hold some level of clerical office (Perry et al., 1989, p.300).

Many Jews and Muslims still lived in Spain during and after the re-conquest, and the customs of Islamic life continued to be part of Spanish language, dress, etc. Even as quintessentially Spanish a phrase as “Ole!” is derived from the Arabic “Wa-l-lah” meaning “for Allah” (Castro, 1954, p.121). The combination of a zealous church-state with the sometimes tenuous relations between people whose backgrounds and ancestries are intertwined with perceived anti-Catholic sentiment proved toxic.

If there is one phenomenon without which perhaps the long and tragic history of the Spanish Inquisition might have been averted, it is the mass conversions of Jews and
Muslims in Spain after the period of re-conquest. Historians point to a handful of motives for the conversions, most of them unsavory. Some swore allegiance to Christ and to Rome because of the passion and eloquence of certain preachers like the Dominican missionary Vincent Ferrer, who is said to have travelled widely throughout newly re-conquered Spanish towns converting thousands of Jews and Muslims (Latourette, 1997, p.657).

But fear and the impulse to survive were the cause of many conversions as well. Ferdinand and Isabella, the “Reyes Catolicos” (Green, 2007, p.22), intended for Spain to be fully Catholic. There was an attempt to expel all Jews after the victory at Granada, and in 1502 the Muslims of Castile were given by the royal couple a simple alternative: “emigration or baptism” (Latourette, 1997, p.657). Citizens perceived this well, and, in the words of Toby Green (2007), the national character became “decidedly testy” (p.24). The same aggression and honor-based warrior mentality that had helped the Spanish win the protracted battle to re-take the country and that made the far-travelling “conquistadors” so successful in subduing native armies in new worlds was hazardous to the local peace. Invariably civil strife gave Spaniards the opportunity to continue practicing their fighting skills, and wherever a riot of this nature broke out, those with the misfortune of being Jews or Muslims had reason to fear the mob.

It is the view of some historians that at this time the Spanish needed a common enemy from which to divert their attention from civil wars and on which to place their ire. Nothing unifies people like a common enemy or threat, and in late 15th Century Spain one was being invented (Green, 2007, p.25). The term that came to be used for those who had been practicing Jews (or whose parents had been) was “converso.” A
converso was either a convert to Rome him/herself, or at least descended from them. Contrasted with conversos were the majority “Old Christians”. The similar word for those with Islamic ancestry was “moriscos.” In the course of the long, tragic history of the Spanish Inquisition, the conversos, moriscos, and suspected Protestants were, overall, the three main targets of persecution.

As violence in Spanish towns began often turning against conversos, Ferdinand and Isabella began lobbying Rome for permission to establish the Inquisition in Spain. No doubt the circumstances by which so many Jews and Muslims had been converted contributed directly to many conversos and moriscos being merely nominal Catholics. But in time many who had converted in earnest would also be suspected of maintaining their former religion’s rituals in secret (Latourette, 1997, p.658). The Spanish crown plead with Rome to give Spain the means to deal with those undermining the faith. And finally, in November of 1478, Pope Sixtus IV issued the bull known as *Exigit Sincerae Devotionis Affectus* granting the establishment of the Inquisition in Spain. The bull acknowledged specifically the claims of the king and queen that because of those falsely professing Christ while secretly returning to the customs of Judaism, all kinds of afflictions were being endured by the nation as a form of judgment (Green, 2007, p.31).

**False Witnesses in the Spanish Inquisition**

The circumstances by which the Inquisition was planted in Spain could hardly present a more obvious danger of corruption and injustice. Aside from the enmities, suspicions and misguided zeal that was bound to lead to false accusations, the accepted procedures by which the courts of Inquisition operated were lacking in
fundamental legal fairness – something not lost on the many vocal critics of the new tribunals. Green (2007) describes “an increasing awareness in many circles that inquisitorial justice left much to be desired” (p.63). The flaws in their system were not necessarily novelties. In the annals of jurisprudence and courtroom procedure, old Roman customs and medieval practices, much of which formed the basis for inquisitorial proceedings, do not generally stand out for their equity and humaneness. Because the secular systems of justice of that period employed torture methods to extract confessions, and because in Spain church authorities acted in harmonious concert with civil ones, this unsavory part of the process turns out not to be terribly surprising.

Along with the use of torture – primarily either water torture (akin to modern day “waterboarding”) or the stretching of limbs using pulleys (Green, 2007, p.70) – other unpleasant features of the inquisitorial trials in Spain included the anonymity of one’s accusers, the absence of professional representation for the accused, and a general presumption of guilt until or unless one could somehow prove his or her innocence (Perry et al., 1989, p.217). This was why falling into the hands of the inquisitors was a frightening prospect, and why so many protested the entire enterprise.

Unfortunately for the frightened converso community, cries of injustice not only did not accomplish a softening of the procedures, but the Spanish crown became defiant against papal interference and more determined than ever to wrest control of the proceedings from the Vatican. When Pope Sixtus IV, having heard the reports of the initial outrages and abuses by Spanish inquisitors, issued a bull demanding that all accused persons know the identities of their accusers, that appeals be heard and
weighed carefully, and that all confessions be accepted as absolving people of their guilt, Ferdinand and Isabella responded in anger that the great danger posed by heretics and false Christians was more serious than the pontiff realized, and that they were in the best position to oversee the Inquisition properly in their own country (Green, 2007, p.39).

Ultimately the pope did not have the political power to win this battle of wills. Spain was too important an ally – particularly once the Protestant threat arose. In time the Spanish royal couple would have their way, and the Inquisition in their lands would no longer need to worry about outside interference or oversight. The king and queen moved the court of appeal for the Inquisition from Rome to their own Seville. Written documents from the pope supposed to guarantee protections to certain *conversos* were ignored or suspended (Leon Tello, 1979, pp.512-14). Ferdinand and Isabella even appointed as the first Inquisitor-general their own personal confessor, the austere Dominican friar Tomas de Torquemada, who would soon found the “supreme council” and draft his own set of instructions for inquisitorial procedure (Green, 2007, p.40).

It is fair to say that these political and religious leaders bear responsibility, not for the individual cases in which someone bore false witness against a *converso* neighbor or relative so much as for creating the environment in which such a scenario was encouraged and rewarded. How telling it is that none of these monumental figures involved in the establishment and execution of the Inquisition in Spain would ever be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. It is as if the church realized from the beginning that, as immense as the influence of these figures – kings, queens, and inquisitors-general – and as much as they were seen within their own popular circles of
'Old Christian' families in Spain as champions for the cause of the Catholic faith, nevertheless it is not conceivable to number among the saints anybody involved in the creation and propagation of such a twisted and cruel system (Latourette, 1997, p.658).

It was a time when the influence most needed among the Spanish citizenry was opposite the one provided. A society of “factionalism” and “violent hatreds” that was “riven by conflicts” (Green, 2007, p.43) needed a moderating voice to prevent them from persecuting conversos out of jealousy, greed or some other animosity. Instead the Inquisition merely gave them a legal tool for exercising their sinful desires. Perhaps even the inquisitors themselves were surprised to see the deluge of denunciations when they opened their hearings. The new courts were so busy in the early years that Sundays and holy days were only breaks in an otherwise packed schedule of arrests and hearings (Beinart, 1974-85, p.xvi).

“There was no effective defense against false witnesses,” writes Green (2007, p.62), because they were never really challenged nor punished if their reports were to be proven false (which was itself very difficult to accomplish). Public outcries were immediate from conversos and those who believed they were being unjustly targeted and condemned. Barrios (1991) quotes one such person: “Good Christians are more in danger than bad ones of being both imprisoned and condemned even though they are blameless, something which has happened many times” (p. 31). Green (2007) echoes this when he alleges that the Inquisition “burnt just as many good Catholics as it did people whose religious outlook was more mixed” (p.37).

Within meticulous inquisitorial records exists a wealth of evidence regarding victims going to their deaths clutching crosses and professing their Christian belief.
Numerous accounts describe the condemned “taken to the stake shouting out their innocence in vain” (La Mantia, 1977, p.42). Advocates for condemned conversos lashed out that “many souls have been condemned to hell … since they are able to say what they do secretly, … and give evidence about things they have never seen” (Barrios, 1991, p. 32). Such protests were useless. “In fact,” writes Green (2007), “what really emerges from the trial records … is the envy and family discord at the heart of so many of the cases – emotions that meant that some of the denunciations were sure to be malicious” (p.37).

Apparently it became common knowledge that the unscrupulous could rather easily arouse suspicion about other people. Threats could be issued, as in the reported case of Catalina de Zamora of Ciudad Real, whose son, though a friar in the town, nevertheless was not above saying to her, in the heat of a hateful exchange between them (the town having recently heard that tribunals might soon be established there), “Listen, you old whore: if the inquisitors come here, I’ll make sure that you and your sisters are burnt as Jews” (Beinard, 1974-85, p.392).

The same kind of depraved intimidation and manipulation were also on display as inquisitorial judges used inmates in their jails against fellow-prisoners, employing promises and threats, in some cases, in exchange for helping secure convictions. The excessive length of incarcerations was itself part of the scheme, since the longer people rotted in the jails “the more likely it was either that they would incriminate themselves to their fellow inmates, or that these inmates would themselves become so desperate that they would invent stories about other prisoners … to gain the favor of their judges” (Green, 2007, p.56). People learned to hold out and remain stoic rather than yield to
excessive conversation with cellmates, some of whom were thought to be spies. More than one case exists in which inquisitors are said to have bribed inmates to denounce fellow defendants (Baiao, 1921, p.21).

In the long and sordid history of these events, it may be that no single account better demonstrates the abusive and predatory use of false testimony for the sake of malice than the account of the demise of one Bartolome de Carranza, which took place after the initial phase of the Inquisition, when attention had begun to turn to the threat of Protestantism. The remarkable nature of this story is owing to who Carranza was and why he fell prey to the Inquisition. Carranza was a Dominican theologian who had experience prosecuting inquisitorial cases. When Mary Tudor was crowned in England and the tide turned back toward alliance with Spain and allegiance to Rome, there alongside her and her husband Philip II was Carranza. He was pivotal in the decision to burn Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer in 1556 (Menendez y Pelayo, 1945, pp.19-20).

The zeal that made Carranza hated among Anglicans solidified him in the mind of Philip, who, upon his ascension to the Spanish throne, appointed Carranza to replace the recently deceased archbishop of Toledo, which, being the most significant see in Spain, ought to have paved Carranza’s way to a bright and illustrious future. But he had a rival who had coveted the position for himself and who was set on Carranza’s downfall. Besides Torquemada, Fernando Valdes was “without question the most important inquisitor-general in the history of the institution” (Green, 2007, p.129). Valdez had the marks of corruption on his record, from the nepotistic appointments of so many
of his relatives to high positions to his many bureaucratic machinations for the sake of advancement. And this powerful conniver counted Carranza among his enemies.

It must be noted that in the mid-16th Century the stalwart Roman Catholics of Spain no longer feared crypto-Judaism so much as the newer—and frankly more vital—threat of Protestantism. The neurosis and paranoia were the same, only with a different name. Carranza had made the unwitting misstep of printing and publishing a book in the Netherlands in 1558 entitled *Commentaries on the Christian Catechism*, aimed—quite ironically, as it turns out—at further arming English Catholics against Protestant influences and ideas (Tellecha Idigoras, 1968, p.84). Valdez made great effort to secure a rare copy of this text in Spain and then set about a careful analysis thereof. He then found another longtime adversary of Carranza—fellow Dominican Melchor Cano—who had gone so far as to steal a copy of Carranza’s book from another friar’s sleeping quarters. Both men shared an interest in the new archbishop’s downfall (Green, 2007, p.131).

The trouble began to brew against Carranza even before he completed his trip back from England to Spain. Upon learning of rumors against him, Carranza wrote to Valdez for advice but was spurned. Soon after among those gathered together as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V lay dying, Carranza somehow or another raised the ire of yet a third party—the emperor’s confessor Juan de Regla, who in turn reported back to Valdez that he heard Carranza uttering “Lutheran-sounding” phrases at Charles’ deathbed (Tellecha Idigoras, 1968, p.177). Cano would echo this charge in a printed repudiation of Carranza’s book, citing 141 propositions that had Lutheran overtones (Menendez y Pelayo, 1945, p.40). Those bent on ruining Carranza did not seem to mind
that much of what Cano claimed had Lutheran flavor came verbatim from the Gospels (Tellecha Idigoras, 1968, p.31).

There were of course those who thought these judgments were unfair and defended Carranza’s work, but Valdez had their opinions suppressed and threatened them. One Carranza defender had his office broken into and all his papers seized. In a show of even greater boldness, Valdez sent emissaries to Rome to lobby for a special papal exception that would allow the Inquisition to proceed against a bishop. When he finally gained such permission, Valdez had his enemy in his crosshairs. What was then set in motion came to fruition in the summer of 1559 when Philip II confirmed that a warrant had been issued by the Inquisition for his old friend on the charge of the propagation of Lutheranism (Menendez y Pelayo, 1945, p.47). Through a long, tired process of slow inquisitorial justice, Carranza would grow ill and weary. Authorities came and went, the case was put on hold here and there. Carranza went on to spend seven years imprisoned in Spain, then ten more after being moved to Rome where he died in despondency. His name was never cleared of heresy (Green, 2007, p.140).

**Conclusion**

The case of Bartolome de Carranza demonstrates the effectiveness with which truly corrupt people were able to destroy other people simply with words. During the many years of the Inquisition in Spain, and later in Portugal and out beyond in remote parts of the globe that two nations colonized, people professing to be Christians testified against others who professed to be Christians, taking advantage of a warped system of suspicion and interrogation. The temptation to get another person’s goods or exact
revenge upon him or her was too great for people to overcome, in many cases. Other times the worst of people’s prejudices were given terrible expression, as they sentenced people to financial ruin, imprisonment, humiliation, physical torture and even death – all by choosing to open their mouths and speak against them.

Throughout the many years during which the Inquisition held cities and towns in its grip of fear and suspicion, an occasional spectacle could be seen in the town square. It was called an auto-da-fe (“trial of faith”), and it was the public ceremony in which those found guilty of heresy were displayed openly, some in their penitent dress of shame, demonstrating that they had confessed and were undergoing reconciliation, others en route to the place where they would be tied to a stake and set ablaze. Over time these attractions became grand and theatrical. A massive train would wind through the streets like a parade, with thousands of spectators (Green, 2007, pp. 1-3).

This image is sufficient to remind us of the decadent nature of human sin and corruption, and specifically it may serve as a warning of historic proportions against the neglect and violation of the ninth commandment. For though it was one of a handful of causes of this notorious period, we cannot doubt that the willingness to dishonor a person’s reputation for some base reason led to the hellish carnivals of injustice that the false witnesses then watched with depraved eagerness. It would appear that those who profess to be Christians may thus be so easily drawn to the depths of evil if over time they allow themselves to justify the malicious use of their tongues, and thereby to suppress such a simple and timeless command as “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”
References


http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05106a.htm

