

David Hodson: No-One Expects the Spanish Inquisition...

Pope Benedict XVI has visited Spain. He is worried about an “aggressive anti-clericalism” similar to that which it experienced in the 1930s and, presumably to his mind, contributed to the Spanish Civil War. Whilst it can’t be denied that one side of that conflict explicitly stood for the dual causes of monarchy and Catholicism, this was only the continuation of similar conflicts in the region dating back to the early 19th century, between conservative factions and those fighting for socialism.

Of greater concern to any thinking human being is the possibility that Spain might decide to become rabidly Catholic in its outlook. All the elements are there for a re-imposition of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

Currently, Spain is going through a rougher economic transition than just about any other nation in Europe except Greece and Eire, although the French seem intent upon stealing the headlines for a short while. A short sharp dose of “Thatcherism” should sort the French hash out, at least until they as a nation realise that even retiring at 62 is still unreasonably young for their mollycoddled public sector workers. Spain, however, is a different kettle of paella.

Most people today consider the Inquisition as a tool to root out witchcraft and settle religious conflicts between different branches of Christian dogma, thanks largely to Roger Corman movies and the dumbed-down film version of *The Name of the Rose*. For a time, however, it was a highly effective money-making machine for the Spanish monarchy.

The initial purpose of the Inquisition was to test the faith of Jews and Muslims who had converted to Catholicism in the aftermath of the Reconquista, and the expulsion of the Islamic Moors who had ruled the majority of Spain for nearly 600 years since the fall of the Visigothic kingdom of Spain in 711AD. Pressure from the Spanish monarchy on the then Pope, Sixtus IV, gave control of the Inquisition to said monarchy, and this testing of faith resulted in contemporary estimates of between 300,000 and 800,000 Jews being expelled from Spain and their property confiscated by the crown. Admittedly, modern estimates lower this greatly to about 80,000, but this would still be far higher than prosecutions of Muslims or Protestants or of those suspected of such offences as witchcraft, blasphemy, bigamy, sodomy or freemasonry.

Of course, the Jews were always a popular target with European monarchies wanting to raise some quick cash. In 1290 Edward I expelled all Jews from England when their rules of usury — the lending of money on which interest could be levied (something

that was strictly forbidden under Canon Law) — brought them into conflict with just about everyone because of their extortionate interest rates.

There might not be many Jewish moneylenders to pick on these days, but let's just hope, for the sake of the Spanish population at large and maybe a few villa-owning British expats, that the Inquisition continues to restrict itself to pushing up daisies.