

Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Europe 500 to 1500

Week 5 | Inquisition, Gender, and Popular Religion

Overview

- The religious reforms of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries encouraged more intensive Christian practice, but also sharpened disputes over who could preach, teach, and define orthodoxy.
- *Inquisitio* was a judicial procedure for investigating suspected offences. From the thirteenth century, specialised papal tribunals employed it to identify and prosecute alleged heresy.
- Inquisition records illuminate otherwise poorly documented lives, but the questions asked, translation into Latin, unequal power, and the circumstances of interrogation shaped what was recorded.
- Women could exercise considerable religious agency, yet female preaching, visionary experience, and domestic ritual were increasingly subject to scrutiny, especially when outside authorised institutions.

Chronology

1184	Pope Lucius III issues <i>Ad abolendam</i> , reinforcing episcopal action against heresy.
1215	Fourth Lateran Council, canon 3, legislates against heresy.
1230s	Papal commissions and specialist inquisitors increasingly active; many were Dominicans.
1252	<i>Ad extirpanda</i> authorises regulated use of torture under specified conditions in antiheresy proceedings.
1307 to 1323	Bernard Gui operates as inquisitor in the Toulouse region.
1318 to 1325	Jacques Fournier, bishop of Pamiers, conducts detailed interrogations.
1486 to 1487	The <i>Malleus maleficarum</i> appears, an influential but contested text on witchcraft.

Inquisitions, not Inquisition

Inquisitio is a judicial technique, not an institution. It means inquiry or investigation. And there were several distinct ‘inquisitions’ in the Middle Ages. Episcopal investigations (from the twelfth century), papally commissioned medieval inquisitors (especially from the 1230s), and the crown directed Spanish Inquisition (authorised in 1478). They differed in jurisdiction, organisation, personnel, and political context.

From accusation to investigation

Earlier processes often depended upon an identifiable accuser or complainant. In the high Middle Ages, trained authorities could initiate investigations into reported offences without a private prosecution. Legal expertise, written testimony, documentation, and institutional record keeping became increasingly important.

- *Accusatio*: a party brings a formal charge and bears responsibility for establishing it.
- *Inquisitio*: a judge or authorised official investigates allegations, often acting on public reputation (*publica fama*).
- Heresy posed a particular challenge because its alleged consequences were framed as threats to souls and the Christian community, even where there was no obvious individual victim.

What happened when inquisitors arrived?

1. Preaching and an opportunity or demand to confess and denounce errors.
2. Collection of rumours, testimony, and the names of suspects.
3. Summonses, sworn questioning, repeated interrogations, and written records.
4. Penances or punishments, sometimes publicly announced in a *sermo generalis*. Imprisonment and, in certain circumstances, transfer to secular authorities could follow. Torture was legally permitted from 1252 but did not occur in every proceeding.

Working critically with inquisitorial records

A deposition is not an unmediated transcript of an ordinary person speaking. The record reflects the inquisitor's interests, a notary's selection and wording, translation from a local vernacular into Latin, the pressure of interrogation, and the witness's own strategies. Yet such documents also preserve extraordinary details of family, healing, work, faith, and local disputes.

Case study: Béatrice de Planissoles, questioned by Jacques Fournier in 1320. I typically assign this in my courses (see the bibliography at the end). Read the deposition both for what it reveals about Béatrice and for what the interrogator wanted to establish. What does the record conceal or distort?

Women, holiness, and religious independence

- Monasteries offered some elite women education, intellectual activity, and forms of institutional authority. Abbesses could control property and command considerable influence.
- Beguines and other lay religious women pursued prayer, celibacy, poverty, charity, and service without necessarily entering established monastic orders.
- Such aspirations overlapped with wider currents of apostolic reform. They became controversial when women claimed the authority to preach, interpret scripture, organise independent communities, or report direct revelations.
- The problem was not simply that women were less orthodox. Often, they were seeking a more intensive religious life but faced unequal access to recognised channels of expertise and legitimacy.

Popular religion, magic, and gender

- Healing charms, blessings, household protection, fertility rites, and appeals to saints existed alongside ordinary prayer and sacramental life. Distinctions between religion, natural effects, and magic were often uncertain.
- Scholastic debate increasingly asked whether apparently effective magic worked through nature, divine assistance, or demonic power. Some theologians construed suspect practices as involving implicit or explicit pacts with demons.
- Elite and formally trained practitioners had greater opportunities to defend astrology, natural philosophy, and some learned practices, whereas women engaged in informal healing could be associated with superstition or dangerous error.
- The especially large European witch hunts belong mainly to the early modern period, with a peak around 1580 to 1650, not the high Middle Ages. The medieval formation of demonological concepts nonetheless shaped later persecutions.

Selected scholarship

Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, 2nd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), especially ch. 6.

Mark Gregory Pegg, "Historians and Inquisitors: Testimony from the Early Inquisitions into Heretical Depravity," in *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources*, ed. Joel T. Rosenthal (Routledge, 2012), 98–113.

James B. Given, "A Medieval Inquisitor at Work: Bernard Gui, 3 March 1308 to 19 June 1323," in *Portraits of Medieval and Renaissance Living: Essays in Memory of David Herlihy* (University of Michigan Press, 1996), 207–232.

James B. Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society: Power, Discipline, and Resistance in Languedoc* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

Christine Caldwell Ames, *Righteous Persecution: Inquisition, Dominicans, and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

Karen Sullivan, *The Inner Lives of Medieval Inquisitors* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Elspeth Whitney, "Witches, Saints, and Other 'Others': Women and Deviance in Medieval Culture," in *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, ed. Linda E. Mitchell (Garland, 1999), 295ff.

Hans Peter Broedel, "Witchcraft as an Expression of Female Sexuality," in *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 167–188.

Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), especially chs. 4–5.

Cullen Murphy, "Torturer's Apprentice," *The Atlantic* (January/February 2012).

Primary sources

Fourth Lateran Council, canon 3 (1215), on the treatment of heresy. A concise legal framework for ecclesiastical persecution. [Online](#)

Bernard Gui, Inquisitor's Manual (early fourteenth century), selections on the Beguins and inquisitorial procedure. Direct evidence for the inquisitor's categories and demands; a translated excerpt is freely available. [Online](#)

Jacques Fournier, Inquisition Register, testimony of Béatrice de Planissoles (1320), trans. Nancy P. Stork. One of the richest surviving testimonies for women's lives and the process of questioning. [Online](#) | [Translation index](#)

Heinrich Kramer, Malleus maleficarum (1486 to 1487), selected passages. A late medieval demonological treatise; influential, controversial, and not representative of all church thought. [Online](#)