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A Presentation:

In his “Treatise on the Truth of the Law of Moses”, written in 1659, in Portuguese, Haham Saul Levi Mortera, spiritual leader of the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam (the edition of the unpublished autograph manuscript was my doctoral dissertation at the University of Nijmegen in 1988), described as follows the “dissembling” or “dissimulation” of those New Christians in Portugal (I translate the Haham’s Portuguese) “who, being Christians in their hearts, out of dread of torture and fear of losing their lives, confess to being Jews, though they are not.” He attributes to the methods of the Portuguese Inquisition the transformation of the New Christian immigrants to Amsterdam from pious Catholics in their h

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This brief treatise revealed the day-to-day practice of the three Portuguese inquisitorial tribunals. The anonymous author made a detailed analysis of 17 Portuguese inquisitorial trial-records over a period of 12 years, identifying the accused by their names and demonstrating, in each case, not merely the absurdity of the accusations and confessions of and denunciations for Judaism, but also the wickedness of the punishments. I myself identified in the Portuguese National Archives and rigorously compared with “Inside and Posthumous Information” 13 of the 17 manuscript trial records referred to in the book and was able to conclude that they were quoted and summarized therein with great accuracy.

The basic point made by “Inside and Posthumous Information” is that the minute attention to detail which characterizes the Portuguese inquisitorial procedure was no more than a façade. In fact it was never intended to distinguish between guilt and innocence, but designed to get confessions and denunciations out of any arraigned New Christian. Thus the Portuguese Inquisition was entirely dependent for its survival on a sizable and recognizable New Christian element within Portuguese society. As the contours of this element began to fade, the Inquisition, fearful of losing its grip on terror and power – since the desire to “Judaize,” by the Inquisition’s own definition, was an ethnic phenomenon, transmitted by blood – arbitrarily designated more and more people as New Christians, or “partial New Christians” or “possible New Christians.” Had the Inquisition modified this definition and rendered it non-ethnic (i.e., extended the suspicion of Judaic heresy to all Portuguese, disregarding the distinction between Old and New Christians), without modifying its judicial procedure, the persecution would immediately have degenerated into a parody, because the cycle of confessions, denunciations and arrests must needs enmesh the entire Portuguese population, including the Inquisitorial staff. The Inquisitors from the 16th century on were keenly aware of this Achilles’ heel, in that an Old Christian was just as prone to
confess to and denounce for “Judaizing” as a New Christian and by so doing expose the “Judaic heresy” for the contrivance it was and the trials for their cynicism.

In this brief presentation I forego to expatiate upon the impact of “Inside and Posthumous Information” on the history of the Portuguese Inquisition, even provoking a seven year suspension of its activities. Suffice it to say that the persecution of the so-called New Christians started up again with unrelenting vigor in 1682, attaining new peaks of violence during the first half of the 18th century. Thus, to all appearances, “Inside and Posthumous Information” exercised no lasting influence.

And yet, in 1738, a foremost 18th-Century Inquisitor, António Ribeiro de Abreu, penned a 240-page manuscript in Portuguese entitled “Reply to the Book ‘Inside Information’ by Father António Vieira”, followed up five years later, in 1743, by a 500-page manuscript entitled “Treatise Composed by Senhor António Ribeiro de Abreu In Which He Replies to the Book ‘Inside and Posthumous Information’, a Calumnyous Satire of the Holy Office of Portugal and Spain.” Abreu navigates between on the one hand, his outright attribution of the book to the famous Portuguese Jesuit António Vieira (1608-1697) and, on the other, his claim that the latter participated in, or was associated with its authorship. Abreu considers Vieira to have been the greatest all-time enemy of the Portuguese Inquisition, principally for having urged the abolition of the distinction between Old and New Christians. I took it upon myself to transcribe, edit and copiously annotate these two manuscript works by Abreu and introduce them by a monographic study encompassing 1) the perception of Father Vieira as an advocate of the New Christians and a friend of the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam (for which he was denounced to the Inquisition as a Judaizer and subjected to a five-year trial including three years in the inquisitorial jail) and 2) the career of Inquisitor Abreu and an analysis of some of the many trials at which he presided.

Abreu’s voluminous replies to “Inside Information” testify in and of themselves to the profundity of the wound inflicted upon the inquisitorial armor by the book’s reputation (if not actual contents), but their full implications go far beyond that. They constitute an apology for the intensified persecution of the New Christians during the first half of the 18th century, including an abundance of references to actual trials – often ending in execution – over which the author presided or in which he participated, aside from many references to Latin treatises “justifying” that persecution. He directs his major work to a new generation of Inquisitors, in order to repress in them the slightest vellarity of compassion for the victims and to maintain until the end of time the separation between Old and New Christians in Portugal and, above all, the latter’s unremitting persecution. I translate the author’s Portuguese: “And so it has to be until the world comes to an end, because of the blood they called upon themselves and as punishment for such great wickedness.”

To me, the writings of Abreu are fascinating, for they reveal the entire mechanism of the inquisitorial mind in relation to the persecution. We are given the key to an Inquisitor’s intimate convictions. We discover here a response – subtle and complex – to the question hovering on the lips of all recent students of this phenomenon: the 225 years of intense persecution of the Portuguese New Christians. Did the Portuguese Inquisitors, in their inmost thoughts, really believe in the reality of the “Judaism” they imputed to a part of the Portuguese population? In Abreu’s writings we are given – for the first time – a direct contact with the tortuousness of the Portuguese inquisitorial mind, revealed by an as it were autobiographic text, which opens a big field for psychological analysis. Abreu is convinced of the reality of a constant, endemic and chronic peril, forever looming in Portuguese society: the existence in its bosom of a minority, well defined by its innate ideology, to wit, Judaism, which poisons the country of which he and his colleagues are the purifying guardians. He believes in the efficacy of his organization and in its divine mission. Sustaining the author’s entire ratiocination is his attribution of a collective and a priori guilt to an ethnically determined group.

To profess without more the “reality” of the “Judaic delicts” before a new generation of Inquisitors – after “Inside Information” – became a chimerical enterprise. Thus the “Judaic delicts” took on (or kept) in his mind’s eye a potential, collective and hereditary reality: they are ethnically determined, restricted to a group (of which the Portuguese New Christians are only a part), which includes all the “Jews” in the world, past, present and future, definitively cursed by the killing of Christ. The punishments are always deserved. The New Christians’ “crime of Judaism” resides in their being New Christians. The “reality” of their Jewish practices (whether confessed or denied) depends on their Jewish ancestry, no matter how limited. Any New Christian is wicked by definition and a potential Judaizer.

This “rigorist” inquisitorial ideology triumphed in Portugal over any vellarity of reform until the laws conceived by the Portuguese dictator Marquis of Pombal (officially implemented only on May 25, 1773) forever abolished in Portugal all distinctions between New and Old Christians. Actually, it was on October 27, 1765, ten years after Pombal came to power, that the last persons designated New Christians, 4 in number, appeared for sentencing at a Portuguese auto-da-fé.

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