

## Inquisition

Written by W.J.Pais

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By this term is usually meant a special [ecclesiastical](#) institution for combating or suppressing [heresy](#). Its characteristic mark seems to be the bestowal on special judges of judicial powers in matters of [faith](#), and this by supreme ecclesiastical authority, not temporal or for [individual](#) cases, but as a universal and permanent office. Moderns experience difficulty in understanding this institution, because they have, to no small extent, lost sight of two facts.

On the one hand they have ceased to grasp [religious belief](#) as something objective, as the [gift of God](#), and therefore outside the realm of free private judgment; on the other they no longer see in the [Church](#) a [society](#) perfect and sovereign, based substantially on a pure and [authentic Revelation](#), whose first most important [duty](#) must naturally be to retain unsullied this original deposit of [faith](#). Before the [religious revolution](#) of the sixteenth century these views were still common to all [Christians](#); that [orthodoxy](#) should be maintained at any cost seemed self-evident.

However, while the positive suppression of [heresy](#) by ecclesiastical and [civil authority](#) in [Christian](#) society is as old as the Church, the Inquisition as a distinct [ecclesiastical tribunal](#) is of much later origin. Historically it is a phase in the growth of ecclesiastical legislation, whose distinctive traits can be fully understood only by a careful study of the conditions amid which it grew up. Our subject may, therefore, be conveniently treated as follows:

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