

# **SPAIN'S RELIGION AT THE CROSSROADS**

## **UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AS A MATTER OF CONTEXT AND NARRATIVE**

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## **1. General remarks**

The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Religion Monitor is a most welcome, extremely useful instrument for global comparative research. The challenge is to take it as a reference and starting point in order to engage in a fruitful discussion of religion today – both its life forms and its social imageries, its practices and beliefs.

The unit of comparison is the country. To this effect, a representative sample of the general population was asked to make verbal statements about their religious experiences and beliefs. What, however, is the nature of the religious experiences and beliefs that make these countries homogeneous enough, so as to make the comparison meaningful or relevant? Clearly, in order to answer this question we have to treat religion as responding to temporal situations – in a sense non-religious ones – and as being part of an ongoing process. In other words, we need to introduce a dose of context and narrative.

First, the context. We cannot compare populations as aggregates of individuals that may respond to poll surveys; this is just an abstraction and not what the countries are really about. We are dealing with structured mixes of churches and lay societies, of religious and non-religious competitors who have alternative comprehensive worldviews, all of whom face each other and influence each other. These actors operate within an institutional framework, one that makes a crucial distinction between religious specialists, who are in positions of power or authority, and a laity that stands in a largely subordinate position. This is a simplified depiction, applying mostly to theistic religious societies, and, in particular, to Christian ones. Moreover, there are various ways to address the difference between the church and laity in Christian societies, and in this regard these societies have gone through momentous changes and are still changing. In addition, we have to see these two actors in the context of a larger field in which they meet a third: “the others,” so to speak, meaning other religions or, simply, a non-religious part of society. Prominent in this respect are the secularist elites and their mass followers – at times a very large following, indeed.

We may understand their relations in many ways. Some scholars see it in terms of a religious market, in some cases an open market. In others, church elites are seen to control supply, operating to a large extent in a monopoly (or quasi monopoly) market, meeting the population's demands for meaning, salvation and community, if and when these are

articulated in religious terms. Yet even then, sooner or later there appear competitors, whom these religious specialists have to resist, persuade or handle one way or another.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the narrative. Enlarging the *dramatis personae* of the play goes to the heart of the matter, because in order to understand today's religious forms and imageries, we have to understand how they came to be in the first place. This includes the memories and narratives or stories these players take into the drama. These narratives shape people's current expectations, motives and feelings about what is happening. Even if we focus on a peculiar corner of west Eurasia that happens to be Europe, the narratives of what has been taking place in France, Spain, Poland, Germany, Sweden or Italy are so different that unless we deal with these trajectories *qua* different from each other we cannot understand any of them and, therefore, cannot know what the object of comparison is.

## **2. The Spanish case: the long story, and the short one from the 1930s to the 1970s**

The situation of religion in Spain at the beginning of the 21st century can be seen as an ongoing story. We may leave aside, for the moment, the larger historical background – the long story – with the exception of a couple of cursory remarks that show its relevance to the situation at hand.

First, Spain is an overwhelmingly Catholic country. Still, in the last 10 years its population has risen to 46 million from 40 million, mostly due to the arrival of almost 5 million immigrants. Many of them are North-African Muslims, East-European Orthodox Christians and Latin Americans, an unknown number of which may have been influenced by the current wave of Evangelical Protestantism. Every group has its own social imagery. In the social imagery of the about one million Muslim immigrants, Spain might be understood as the current incarnation of another entity, Al-Andalus, which was Muslim for some four to eight centuries, depending on the region. (Then again, this might not be the case; it remains a matter of empirical inquiry.) Thus, people who may look to the autochthonous population like guests in an alien country may look to themselves as if they harbor a moral claim to the co-ownership of the country they have arrived in.

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<sup>1</sup> I have applied this schema to the Spanish situation in Víctor Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society: The Emergence of Democratic Spain*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 108-183.

Second, and on another note, the church in Spain has been embroiled for one to two centuries in the contentious games of peripheral nationalisms in two regions – the Basque country and Catalonia – with the local churches trying to remain as close as possible to their immediate constituencies. The end result may prove frustrating for the church, since it has not worked to reinforce its links with those regions (as in analogous situations in Poland and Ireland, for instance), since the church’s efforts to be pro-Spain in the rest of Spain and who-knows-exactly-what in these two regions have coincided with a remarkable weakening of Catholic practice and belief. The point is, however, that this matter lies very much at the heart of today’s public debate on politics and religion.

Remote Muslim past and peripheral nationalisms aside, let us focus on the general situation and on more recent times. Spain’s Catholic Church and population have lively memories of the period from the 1930s to the present. The story starts with a period of civil war, understood by the church as a time of martyrdom and crusade, and as a time of reckoning for the anti-church forces prevailing on the republican side. Memories here are not a matter of words, but of more than 6,000 corpses of priests, nuns and people from various religious orders killed in cold blood in the first weeks of the war. Those memories have never been forgotten, and the current (secularist) government is in the process of reactivating them in an indirect but quite eloquent way, by stirring memories of the people killed on the other side of the war (the one supported by the church itself). These are the kind of memories that are coming back, in full, at this very moment.

Then, from the late 1930s to the mid-1970s, a triumphant church imagined a revival similar to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when the Counterreformation gave rise to a unity of church and state. Seeming feasible (at last), the church it did its best to attain such a position, i.e. a virtual monopoly of the religious market. The public sphere was under the church’s watch and its strong influence. Practically everybody belonged to the church and went, duly, through the sacraments of baptism, marriage and last rites. The situation was attended to by a medium-size apparatus of about 20,000 priests (the number did not change much during the whole period) and members of various religious orders, whose numbers rose from about 40,000 to near 80,000.<sup>2</sup> They managed any number of activities, in particular a powerful educational system. In fact, the church had a prominent position in

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<sup>2</sup> See Albert Carreras and Xavier Tafunell, eds., *Estadísticas históricas de España. Siglos XIX-XX*, (Bilbao: Fundación BBVA, 2005).

secondary education, so that most of the elites of the 1970s through the 1990s were under the church's influence in crucial parts of their formative years.

Traditionally, the church sent two messages to the faithful: one for "the few," who might be induced to become religious enthusiasts, and another for the population at large. We have been told by historians and anthropologists that folk, Mediterranean Catholicism has always been this way, from olden times. According to this system, the church provided the masses with a message of meaning, salvation and community, in which a mix of otherworldly salvation and a modicum of the good things in life may be attained through negotiation with a personal God, with the help of privileged intermediaries of different sorts: celestial figures (the Virgin Mary, saints and angels) and the visible church here on earth, in particular by means of the sacraments. Taking part in these sacraments and exhibiting good behavior would fill the layman's part of the deal. Laymen would not need to be religious seekers as such, just people interested in a sensible management of life's crises when they arose. Underlying this modest, sort of realistic assessment of the religious needs of the majority, however, is a certain religious shallowness. There is little room for living while waiting for God's calling; less so in the case of a more personal calling with a strong emotional resonance (of love or fear or both). This would imply a substantial leveling between the religious specialists and the laymen and would suggest a cultivation of a religious attitude that reflects one of the possible meanings of *religio*: a readiness for a *re-legere*, an attentive reading of God's ways and words. This is not what the Catholic Church would have traditionally encouraged. Hence, expecting to find many religious readers in that milieu, among the Catholic masses, was not realistic.

Such bargaining amounted to keeping a distance from God and sticking to a position of subordination to Him, but with room for maneuver. And in that "in-between" space there appeared a number of intermediaries who are part of the bargain, ordered hierarchically. Thus structured, this religious space looked akin to and showed an obvious affinity for the arrangement of powers in the temporal order, both in the politics and in the social and economic spheres of many European societies of the last two to three centuries. So here was a reinforcing mechanism that added plausibility to the status quo in both directions: from the temporal order to the celestial order and vice versa, both in terms of social imageries and social life forms.

The stability of the system was facilitated by limited rates of economic development. This made the goods available at any given time seem fairly limited: the image of a “limited good.”<sup>3</sup> This would inhibit initiative and make prudent management of what is near-at-hand and a focusing on the local horizon seem the right things to do. Beyond that, there would be negotiations with larger-than-life figures, who were to be approached with a mix of apprehension and limited trust (be they religious specialists, political officials or social or economic *caciques*). Starting in the 1950s and 1960s the situation gradually changed as everything got moving: rapid economic growth, migration, an opening to Europe, political dissent. As a long wave of changing circumstances came into the picture, more and more moral energy went into the new possibilities of economic improvement and upward social mobility (which could be very well justified in terms of traditional morality, both in terms of enhancing the family’s prospects and family cohesion; in this respect, it can be said consumerism was only a small part of a larger picture). A loosening of social pressure came along with migration, urban growth and new forms of transport and communication.

Then, the lay religious enthusiasts got caught in a new imagery and mystique regarding how to deal with the *seculum*. It must be noted that in Spain at the time the place was not in tune with a general attitude of *contemptus mundi*; it never was. The legacy of the triumphant church was that the world could be shaped by religious enthusiasm of some sort. The original idea was to achieve it by means of a revival of 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, with some practical adjustments to the present. But now, gradually, temporal salvation received a new name, that of “progress,” and it was to be seen in a different vein. So much more so since the economic and social changes came hand in hand with a new definition of the historical horizon. From then on it did not make sense to try to construct Spain from within, outside of the European context. Hence, constructing a better world was now to mean creating a liberal democracy and a more just order. In the end, this translated into making Western Europe the model for Spain, following the lead of the Catholic Church elsewhere in Europe. Engagement in this task meant the church had to find a new language.

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<sup>3</sup> George Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” in J. Potter, M. Díaz and G. Foster, eds., *Peasant Society* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967).

The new language implied a break with the past. Civil war was not, now, to be seen as a crusade, which is the way it was understood by those who went through it. At the same time, however, having indulged such an idea for a long time (some would say, for about 100 years starting with the Carlist wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the church seemed at least co-responsible for what now looked like a tragic misunderstanding, one that made for a violent split between the church and the secularist elites and their followers. Given its responsibility for the course of events, the church, some felt, should also ask forgiveness for it. In any event, an alliance of 30 years with Franco's regime was not something to pass over without a comment. In sum, the church went through a period of self-doubt about its record, the reach of its social influence and its very ability to handle the new situation. In this context, we may understand that religious enthusiasts invested their energy in the temporal drama of the democratic transition of the 1970s partly as a way of getting away from these embarrassing and complicated explanations, and, possibly, in a search for certitudes of some sort, such as fighting for liberal democracy and a modicum of social justice. In fact, around this time many thousands of priests and members of religious orders abandoned their vows.

### **3. The situation from the 1970s through the early 21st century**

Thirty years later, what has happened to the Catholics in Spain? Statistics show that once a regime of political freedom was established, belonging to the church became a mark of identity not for everybody but for a very large majority – around 70 to 80 percent of the population. This has not changed much in 30 years. This questions the view of “two Spains,” a Catholic one and “another” Spain, roughly of equal size – two subsets that are, upon further examination, of differing magnitudes. According to this rather gross account, either Spain had been largely Catholic all along (including in the 1930s), or the church's strong influence, bordering on coercion here and there, and its persuasive capacity as of the 1940s had been a success of sorts after all, even though the number of religious specialists had dwindled. True, the present number of priests is roughly the same as in the early 1940s, but the Spanish population has more than doubled since, so that the ratio is significantly lower. In addition, membership in religious orders has fallen back to the levels of the 1930s.



Before we look into the church's strategy in more recent times, a question about the church's character may be in order, since it is most likely that strategy flows from character rather than the other way around. The church's character has been shaped by having been trained in the game of power relations with the state – first the Francoist state and then a liberal one – while putting in second place the problem of helping an active and self-reliant laity to progress – a world of religious entrepreneurs so to speak. At the same time, this last task was not made any easier by the circumstances of the day. For the reasons already alluded to, religious enthusiasts had a crisis of sorts in the last period of Francoism, from the 1950s through the mid-1970s. They were left on their own, seemingly lacking institutional resources. “Catholic politics” seemed out of the question; revival of a Christian Democratic party was not in the cards at a time when the prototype, the Italian Democratic Party, was in deep crisis. Social action and organization overtly based on Christian beliefs was losing steam, and most Catholic activists were joining socialist or communist unions. “Christian intellectual life” sounded too parochial. To the intellectuals, it suggested losing opportunities and cutting themselves off from the avenues of prestige and influence of the time. Something analogous may apply to the interesting (and understudied) world of ex-priests or ex-members of religious orders – who probably number around 30,000. They remained faithful to the church and kept their Catholic identity. Probably deeply religious in their lives, and possibly restless but with no outlet for their restlessness, they slipped to the margins, feeling they were of no use for anybody; in time, many of them joined civil society organizations.

For the time being, the church thus had to make do with lesser numbers of religious specialists and to recreate a network of lay religious enthusiasts. This required time and led to a period of trial and error. In the meanwhile, the church had to handle the situation as best it could, and its first reaction was to follow established routines and do what it had been trained to do. Hence, it focused on the public sphere and institutional games with the government, a variant of the games it had played for the previous 30 years.

The main issues the church has since tried to handle in the public sphere concern financing, education and issues of public morality. Let us look first at financing. The church was used to a vast amount of public funding for a variety of historical reasons. It then thought it had a permanent deal with the new liberal state thanks to an international treaty, a Concordat, the terms of which, however, were ambiguous enough to allow for a drastic revision of the government's contribution were the government to decide it wanted

one, thereby forcing the church to persuade its faithful to fund its activities. This is the situation now, with only about 33 percent of taxpayers agreeing to finance the activities of the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> Next, the church has also tried to keep alive a church-controlled system of education. It could have tried to do so by having parents choose religious schools in an open educational market. On the contrary, the church's deal with the government led it to accept public subsidies in exchange for government supervision, at the risk of diluting the religious character of its own schools. On top of that, the church has focused on making sure Catholic instruction is part of the curriculum in public schools, something that, in the end, is dependent on parents and the students asking for it. The data show that interest in religious education is decreasing, in particular in secondary schools, where the choice of subject matter is most influenced by the students themselves (53% of students in late secondary school opted for a course on religion in 2005-2006). Finally, the church has engaged in a number of battles in the public sphere to limit the effects of a broad and unremitting strategy by the current government for civil marriage being extended to homosexual couples and for divorce and abortion being made as accessible as possible. In fact, public support for the church's position is lukewarm.

What might be the reasons for the public's reticence to financing the church, and its limited enthusiasm for Catholic education and the church's desire to engage in moral issues?

Regarding the latter, we may intimate people's attitudes by looking at their actual behavior. The statistics indicate a trend in family life that may have consequences for the practice of the sacraments and for the intensity of individuals' religious experiences and their feelings of belonging to the church. Divorce rates have been going up, something that has been particularly true in recent years, due to a deliberate strategy by the current government to ease the terms of divorce, as well as abortion. (In 2007 there were about 200,000 marriages and 125,000 divorces; in 2006 it was estimated that 17% of all known pregnancies ended in an abortion). In addition, the practice of civil marriages has risen fairly dramatically, so that now nearly half of all new marriages are civil ones (45% in 2007). The practice of cohabitation without marriage is also fairly widespread, as indicated

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<sup>4</sup> Statistical data on these matters (public funding, attendance in religion classes) and on divorce rates, abortion rates, civil marriages and births out of wedlock come from Juan Carlos Rodríguez, "La religiosidad de los españoles y la Iglesia Católica: unos datos y una hipótesis", in *ASP Research Papers*, 82(a) (2008).

by the numbers of births outside marriage (about 28% of all births in 2006). Unless reversed in the future, the trend suggests there will be a substantial decrease in the practice of the sacrament of marriage, and this may translate in time into a substantial reduction in the number of baptisms. On the other hand, the traditional practice of burial on holy ground is being slowly displaced by that of cremation and giving the remains to the family (to be placed, presumably, on family property). Everything seems to be taking place as if a virtual threshold has been crossed. As social pressure to conform to established mores of Catholic baptism, marriage and burial wanes, more people may be expected to consider and to make crucial transitions in their own lives as if they were disconnected from religion.

#### **4. The current situation: A large Catholic population, but fragmented personalities and fuzzy beliefs, with a touch of magic**

And here is where the Spanish data from the Religion Monitor<sup>5</sup> may very well fit in; to begin with, in terms of those who belong to the church, a designation that applies to about four-fifths (79%) of the population. We then have about one-third who are highly religious. If we put these numbers side by side with those of regular churchgoers, the numbers have not moved much in 30 years. Perhaps this has been the case for a long time; we do not know for sure. If so, this would bear witness to a remarkable “Catholic resilience” on the part of one-third of the population and to its willingness to stick to it, through thick or thin. The rest includes another third of moderate Catholics, and about a quarter of non-denominational individuals (with a large share of non-religious people).

We must, however, also look into religious life forms and imageries, into practices and beliefs. In order to understand them, it may well be that the concept of secularization is of little help. Here I suggest another approach, one that looks into the *shape* of practices and beliefs in terms of the *degree of coherence* of conduct on the whole and of the *degree of clarity* of the belief system.

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<sup>5</sup> Carefully analyzed in José Casanova, “Spanish Religiosity: An Interpretative Reading of the Religion Monitor Results for Spain,” in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.), *What the World Believes: Analysis and Commentary on the Religion Monitor 2008*, Guetersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008.

One-third of the population, then, practices in public, and a larger proportion of it prays or feels it gets in touch with God or the divine. For most of the population, however, life as a whole seems impregnated by religious considerations only to a point. Here the striking thing about the Spanish data seems to be that family life is deemed to be both quite important in itself and quite influenced by religion. Still, the data referred to above suggest increasing strains in family life, given the rising rates of divorce, unmarried couples, births outside of marriage and abortion. In view of this, sex could be expected to be seen as somehow connected to family life and, therefore, somehow touched by religious considerations. But the fact is, Spaniards' answers suggest that they feel as if sex was both quite important and quite unconnected to religion; as if it was seen as something not to be influenced by religious.

Politics, too, is seen as outside of the religious picture. Possibly "politics" is implicitly understood as "real politics," that is, as "power politics" (the modern view), not as a search for a common good (the classical view). It may well be that the church's baroque political trajectory is included in that view. The church that identified with Franco's Spain exhibited a sort of split personality, with a democratic church playing a very significant role, at the last moment, in favor of the transition to democracy. Yet the whole episode left some people with the impression that there was a measure of opportunism in the game, and that from then on the orientation of the church might vary at will. At the same time, however, the effects of the church's hesitations must be seen in context. Analogous changes have been common in other quarters as well. The ex-Francoists became the main protagonists of the transition and were mostly responsible for its success. In time, the socialists went through a period of verbal radicalism and then took a very moderate stand, ending in an unlikely – although probably genuine – full embrace of the market economy and NATO. Communists, in turn, either became socialists or followed suite. For all of them, a judicious handling of their own ambiguities was the name of the game. The church's ambiguities were thus part and parcel of a general ambiguity, encompassing both the elites and the people. In fact, for most of the period from the 1950s onward, popular resistance to Franco was rather modest, contrary to the emerging myths of the new (democratic) regime, which likes to imply a sort of "tacit resistance" by the people to Franco's dictatorship.

Consequently, there seem to be signs throughout Spanish life of a fragmentation of personal experience, one in which, in every area of experience, we find a mix of instrumental rationality regarding some details and fuzzy beliefs regarding other details

and the larger picture. This we may see as a Spanish variant of a more general modern (or postmodern) phenomenon, or as an extreme, limiting case. In any event it fits in with the low degree of reflexivity indicated by the Religion Monitor data for Spain.

The data also show that ideas about angels and the afterlife seem remote, while, at the same time, there is a sizable interest in astrology. We may surmise that the weakening of interest in angels and the afterlife do not bear witness to a weakening of magic thinking, but rather to a change in direction. The fact is, in modern, so-called secular times, magic thinking is alive and well, even though it may be oriented differently, represented by a displacement of the sacred and a re-enchantment of the world, moving away from the traditional field of religion and into other fields, such as the political, scientific and economic. Thus, an argument could be made regarding the crucial importance played by the sort of “magic spell” attached to many modern political slogans, such as the recent surge towards the slogan of “the ark of progressivism,” a clear allusion to the ark of a new alliance; but every day brings a new slogan of a similar character. “Left” and “right” may work this way, depending on context and on the symbols and emotions attached to their use.<sup>6</sup> It is pretty obvious that many modern political movements can be better understood as ersatz religious movements (“gnostic,” according to Voegelin’s strictures).<sup>7</sup> Belief in progress has, of course, a component of millennial delusion underlying it. We must also remind ourselves that, on the ground, our very modern scientific practices and institutions work to some extent with magical thinking and practice. Keith Thomas already pointed out, in his study of 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, that for the time being modern medicine works more or less the same way that pre-modern medicine did, with laymen being largely unable to understand it, thus explaining the therapeutical importance of the placebo.<sup>8</sup> The market economy and the government’s attempt – or pretense – at managing it share, often, in the trickster’s magic. The recent financial turmoil reminds us of this, with a vengeance. It shows that markets may tend to convey *less and less* information (and not more and more, as expected) about the *contents* of economic transactions. As a result, both sophisticated economic agents and the people at large may end up in a very opaque

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<sup>6</sup> On the “magic” use of these political symbolisms see Víctor Pérez-Díaz, *El malestar de la democracia* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2008), 105-202.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays”, in *Modernity without Restraint* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 243-315.

<sup>8</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 209.

situation, leading to fear, a situation that is hard to tackle with rational means. Trust is then needed. Trust, of course, must be properly invoked, and the proper ritual (with its proper public officiants) must be attended to.

## **5. Conclusion**

In order to compare we must understand the basic units of comparison, in this case, national populations. For this, we have to introduce a context and a narrative that are, to a great extent, specific to each country, even though they may be shared, in part, by others. Thus, we need to be alert to the difference between religious specialists/churches and the general population – religious enthusiasts and common laymen included – and other actors in the country under consideration. We must also see how the whole field of actors and their relations evolve over a period of time.

In the Spanish case, the narrative, if reduced to the short story I've focused on, deals with the last 60 years: 30 years before the transition to democracy and 30 years after it. The present situation allows for several interpretations. Seen from the Catholic Church's viewpoint, the resiliency of a large majority's general feelings of belonging to the church and the strong religious commitment of a third of the population seem positive. Yet, on the other hand, the church now finds itself in a rather complicated predicament. It must face the growth in membership of other religious groups (mainly due to immigration), plus an occasional belligerent secularist adversary. The church must face these challenges not having been trained by past experience to handle such complexity and being prone to revert to deeply rooted institutional practices of accommodating the powers that be.

The critical point, however, lies elsewhere. As we look into people's religious life forms and imageries, the picture may seem more disquieting. While church and state quarrel and immigrants keep arriving, the population at large seems to be drifting away. Its behavioral traits – such as the sizable disparity between religious feelings, on the one hand, and sex, family and politics, on the other – suggest a low degree of personal coherence. This, in turn, fits a pattern of fuzzy beliefs, including a soft spot for magical thinking and its everyday manifestations, the reasons for which are based on a mixture of ancient traditions and current inducements. For some observers, this may look like a step forward in a quasi linear process of (modern) secularization. To me, it seems like another avatar in a familiar,

recurrent drift, one that, under different guises, has been repeatedly observed at critical times in Europe's history.

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