

## **History of Religions in Spain and the SECR**

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### **Premise**

In my presentation I use History of Religions as a term for our discipline, following the denomination of the international association represented in our session by the President, Rosalind Hackett. Study of Religion, the name preferred by the European Association represented here by the General Secretary, Kim Knott, is for our present purposes equivalent.

In any case I understand History of Religions not in a strict way, as an exclusively historical approach to the study of religions, but as a multidisciplinary approach to religious phenomena characterized by a core attitudinal focus: the conscious explicit rejection to religiocentrism and the openness to plurality.

This is not a simple matter... particularly in Spain.

### **1) A structural problem: the ideological background of the discipline in Spain**

In Spain an official religion held away for many centuries. Spanish identity was built on the denial of differences, using religion as a basic criterion for homogenization (also cultural and educational), not only on the well known dates of 1492 (the expulsion of Jews) or 1502/1609 (the expulsion of Muslims and Moriscos) but even in the early years of modernity, in 1812, the first Spanish Constitution (a liberal one) makes this stance explicit, twenty years after the first amendment to the Constitution of the U.S, in article 12: "The religion of the Spanish nation is, and ever shall be, the Roman Catholic Apostolic and one true faith; the State shall, by means of wise and just laws, protect it and prevent the exercise of any other".

As recently as the 1960s in the context of global changes in attitudes and values, and the progressive construction of post-colonial ideologies characterized by openness to diversity, also in religious matters, Franco's regime maintained a non-pluralistic position. The end point was the 1978 democratic Constitution defining Spain as a non confessional State, but the processes of building a multireligious model of coexistence continue even today.

In such a context and with that historical background, a non religiocentric study of religions is not easily established.

We face a problem of focus: on the one hand we have the Spanish National-Catholic ideology opposed to any study of religious matters based on a pluralist perspective, and on the other the opposite view, Spanish anticlericalism or even antireligious ideology in which the study of religion and even religions, in plural, is regarded with suspicion (and seen as covert clericalism).

Religiocentric attitudes (the insider view: theological-confessional - and its opposite) represent a genuine handicap for the development of the discipline in Spain and allow us to account for the recent history of the establishment of this area of study in my country and particularly the late creation of the SECR (Sociedad Española de Ciencias de las Religiones / Spanish Society for the Sciences of Religions) in comparison to other European neighboring associations.

## **2) Paths cut short: a discipline in limbo**

But history might have been different.

In 1954 the first chair in Spain, in the University of Madrid was created, under the title "History of Religions", the first (and in fact sole professor) was Ángel Álvarez de Miranda, a disciple of the great Italian scholar Raffaele Pettazzoni<sup>1</sup>. Álvarez de Miranda and his chair were exceptions in the National-Catholic Spain of Franco's regime. The context was the "liberal years" (1951-1956) of Joaquín Ruíz Giménez at the head of the Ministry of Education: he was a friend of Álvarez de Miranda, and was very interested in religious subjects, involved from the beginning in the project and a key element in countering the opposition to the creation of the chair. The timid educational openness promoted by Ruíz Gimenez's group (which also included scholars such as Pedro Laín, president of the University of Madrid) was cut short by the step backwards of the regime in 1956...

Álvarez de Miranda had an open way of understanding the discipline (centered on a general and comparative perspective, on the claim for the autonomy of the History of Religions in the line of the Scuola di Roma). He also had many projects for the development of the discipline, but, unfortunately died prematurely in 1957 without establishing the chair or the area of study firmly in the Spanish University. The chair disappeared de facto; one of the arguments seems to have been expressed in the following crude terms: "Why History of Religions if there's only one religion?" Franco's regime at that time opted for technocracy; some of the new leaders (especially in

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<sup>1</sup> In 1952 under his supervision Álvarez de Miranda presented a doctoral thesis entitled *Miti e riti sulla sacralità del toro/L'origine magica delle "corridas" nella Penisola Iberica ed in Creta* in the University of Rome.

educational and cultural matters) held a position close to the Catholic integrism promoted by Opus Dei. The pluralist position which defines History of Religions had no great future in that context and the discipline was far removed from the interests of the university leaders of Franco's regime.

The story in democratic Spain was more of the same... the Ministry of education has been generally in the hands of people in the line of non- or anti-religious points of view when the left win, and in the line of conservative Catholic or even integrist positions when the right was in power. The leading authorities in the universities follow similar standards... and we need to add another factor in their decisions: the collapse of the humanities within which the discipline is generally included in Spain, obscures the visibilization of the social interest for these kind of issues and studies.

Until the nineties History of Religions has actually survived as a subject of study in the public Spanish University, but only in the case of the University of Madrid, where it is relegated to a subordinate position in the programs of study. In the Catholic universities the discipline had a higher profile but in a theological-phenomenological-confessional way with strong religiocentric premises. In fact a number of Catholic scholars emerged from religious institutions and went on to teach in public universities in a bid to gain the freedom to develop their research programs without obstacles and impediments.

Despite the indifference (or even opposition) of the authorities, in the Spanish university in the seventies and the eighties an increasing number of researchers and scholars from different disciplines (historical, philological, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, juridical, etc.) made the study of religion an important area of their research interests. They constitute a critical mass, and when the general conditions changed, and they had the opportunity, with the reform of the early nineties, of changing the programs of study in their universities from the bottom up, the unenviable situation of the History of religions-the study of religions in the Spanish University saw a noteworthy improvement. It was in that context that the SECR was founded.

### **3) The expansion in the nineties and the constitution of the Spanish Association**

The Spanish Association was formally constituted in May 1993 in Madrid as an inclusive and multidisciplinary project of cooperation between more than a hundred scholars of varying disciplinary backgrounds and regional origins. The initiative was connected with the earlier creation in the Universidad Complutense de Madrid of the ICR "Instituto de Ciencias de las Religiones" "Institute for the Sciences of Religions" (<http://www.ucm.es/info/iucr/>) in 1993. The ICR was the initiative of one single university (even though it included an important number of invited professors from other institutions), the SECR was the culmination of a collective endeavor bringing

together members of almost all the universities and research centers in Spain. From the outset the Spanish Association saw the need for internationalization. Professor Zwi Werblowski, Vice-president of the International Association for the History of Religions was present at the meeting in which the Association was established, and one of the first decisions was to apply for membership of the International Association, a request that was formally granted at the 1995 Congress in Mexico City. The Spanish Association had been involved from the very beginnings of the constitution of the European Association for the Study of Religions, for example in the Preparatory Working Committee and in the subsequent Executive Committees. The Spanish Association was also involved in the aborted Eurassoc project.

The panorama of the studies of History of Religions in those first years was of outstanding expansion. The new programs of study, in an important number of universities, included religious subjects, particularly, in the cases of the University of Madrid (with the weight of the ICR and a doctorate in Sciences of Religions), of the University of La Laguna (with a program of specialization in History of Religions), of the University Pompeu Fabra of Barcelona, of the University of Cantabria at Santander, the University of Santiago de Compostela, the University of Seville, and a long etcetera, and the list was to expand later though in process of changing the Spanish university system to fit the European Higher Education Space, the presence of the subjects at degree level (for example in history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, philology or anthropology) is likely to diminish. At the same time, the numerous proposals of masters degrees in History-Sciences of Religions presented by a range of universities seems show an increase in the perceived importance of this area of study.

Coming back to the origins of the Spanish Association, it may be interesting (and not only for rhetorical and scholarly reasons) to say something briefly about the choice of the name. In both cases, in the ICR and the SECR, the term used has been Ciencias de las Religiones: Sciences of Religions and not the more traditional, History of Religions, a term which might better have reflected Álvarez de Miranda's legacy.

The reasoning behind the choice of term runs as follows; the Spanish Association is not the result of a coherent disciplinary construction of the kind Álvarez de Miranda's might have been aiming for. The SECR was built by the inclusion of scholars coming from various disciplinary fields, coming from several scientific approaches to the subject. Only a minority had in mind the model of a general and comparative approach constructing an autonomous disciplinary field (a Science of Religion in the German sense, a "Religionswissenschaft", a "Storia delle Religioni" in the sense of the "Scuola di Roma"). In Sciences of Religions, "Sciences" refers to the plurality of disciplinary approaches; "religions" refers to the plurality of religions to be studied. The choice implies more than a sole disciplinary view: it's a convergent project open to a range of interested parties. The model does perhaps, on the other hand, offer less, because there is a fragmentation of knowledge, a renunciation of a structured research agenda which seeks through the instruments of scientific method to understand religion and religions. I

hope it was not at the same time a comfortable way out of the explanatory ambitions implied in the terms History of Religions or Science of Religion, leaving those matters to other approaches. We need to have in mind that the theological and confessional perspectives are often designated in the Spanish Catholic universities (and also in the Spanish speaking countries) by the ambiguous term "Ciencias Religiosas" (Religious Sciences). Perhaps the covert mental schema implied for some (confessional o para-confessional) scholars is that History of Religions (and the other fragmented possible approaches, the other Sciences of Religions, including Phenomenology of Religion) could be merely reduced to "ancillae Theologiae".

#### **4) Milestones in the history of the Spanish Association**

1994 saw the beginning of one of the most important commitments of the Association, namely that of holding a conference every two years.

The first was hosted by the University of Madrid (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) and the Instituto de Ciencias de las Religiones under the direction of Julio Trebolle and Montserrat Abumalham. Thirty of the papers presented were included in the post-event publication in the newly born journal of the ICR, named *Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las religiones* and they provide an idea of the variety of interests of the first members of the Association. Ancient Religions, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Philosophy and Law are the fields best represented, but Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, and Phenomenology also have their place.

A more detailed review of the disciplinary affiliations of the members of the Association could provide information on the part played by religious subjects in Spanish scholarship.

The emphasis on ancient religions, studied from historical and philological perspectives, is an outstanding feature, comparable, perhaps, with the case of our Italian and French counterparts in the "Società italiana di storia delle religioni" and the "Société Ernest-Renan". In Spain interest in religions without living followers has been relatively acceptable even in the pre-democratic decades on condition that there was no explicit comparison with Christianity. In fact even Álvarez de Miranda came from that historical and philological background and the core of his publications was devoted to ancient religions (Iberian religion, classical Greek religion). His heritage was followed by colleagues and friends, classical philologists or historians, such as José María Blázquez, honorary member of the SECR, who formed and lead an active school of specialists on religious subjects, some of them members of the SECR. Among them was Ramón Teja, a specialist in Ancient Christianity and current President of the SECR. He was the organizer, with his team (where the participation of Mar Marcos needs to be

emphasized), of the VI congress of the SECR, held in Santander in 2004, jointly celebrated with the IV Congress of the European Association. Another disciple of Blázquez is Santiago Montero Herrero, current director of the ICR and son of the supervisor of the Spanish thesis of Alvarez de Miranda, Santiago Montero Díaz, who from 1957 until his retirement in 1981 was responsible for the teaching of the subject History of Religions in the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Blázquez was his successor). The IV Congress of the SECR hosted in 2000 by the University of La Laguna was organized also by disciples of Blázquez.

In the field of classical philology the specialists in Greek or Roman religions are well represented in the SECR, for example Emilio Suárez de La Torre, current Vice-President and organizer of the next biennial congress, to be held at the University of Valladolid next October.

The weight of Islamic studies in the Spanish Association is also noteworthy. The Andalusí heritage and the geopolitical position of Spain in relation to the *Maghreb* and the Arab World (it constitutes a key factor during Franco's regime who could explain the important investments in educational-cultural capital) explain the importance of these areas of study in the Spanish University. But in our case the figure of Montserrat Abumalham, current Vice-president of the Spanish Association, and one of the founders and supporters of the whole project, is also very important. She has attracted to the Association an active group of specialists in Islamic studies who organized the III biennial Congress, held in the University of Seville in 1998.

In sharp contrast to Islamic Studies, Asian studies, a crucial field in the configuration of the discipline in many countries, are not prominent in Spanish scholarship and therefore in the university. Spanish interests generally focused outside Asia (mainly in America), especially in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, a period which saw the development of Oriental studies not only among the colonial powers with interests in Asia but also in Germany, Italy and the United States. Some of the Spanish scholars who devoted their research to Buddhist, Indian, Japanese, Chinese, or to Asian studies in general, were forced to develop their careers outside Spain. A good example would be the first President of the Spanish Association (a presidency that he held for more than a decade, from 1993 to 2004) and also current Honorary President, Raimundo Panikkar, who lived in Spain before his retirement in the University of California in Santa Barbara. His career in the field of the religious studies was built outside Spain and his disciples in the subject have not found a place in the Spanish university. The buddhologist Abraham Vélez, occasionally involved in the activities of the SECR, is a case in point between others. Nowadays, the situation seems to be changing with the initiatives Casa Asia foundation in Barcelona and the development of teaching programs focused on Asia in that city, in the UOC (Open University of Catalonia), in Salamanca and other universities. Some of the scholars involved in those new projects are members of the SECR.

Another privileged field in the Spanish Association is Jewish Studies. One of the leading figures in the SECR was Julio Treballe, the first Vice-President. Treballe played a crucial role in the development of the institution. As a result of his efforts Jewish Studies was a constant presence and a basic reference in all the activities of the Association, in its conferences and publications.

A field with a striking prominence in the Association is legal-juridical science. The presence of legal scholars is much more important in the SECR than in any other of the associations included in the IAHR. National-Catholicism may well explain, yet again, this difference. Under Franco's regime, the Catholic Church had a central position in the legal system. Canon law was applied in matrimonial and other private (and even public) matters. Church authorities gave their approval to the laws and some members of the Catholic hierarchy were members of the franquist "pseudo"-parliament. Canon law was an important element in the study of law and several scholars devoted their attention to it. With the passing in 1978 of a Constitution defining Spain as a non-confessional state, some of those scholars changed their focus, and the teaching and the implications of religion and law became their main field of interest. The new subjects of study were especially the legal bases for the application of religious freedom, the analysis of the legal implications of the transformation of Spain from a country with an official religion to a multireligious context of coexistence or the implications of religious pluralism in the law (national and international) from a comparative perspective. All those subjects are at the core of the interests of an Association like the SECR, devoted to the understanding of the place of religion in the past but also in the present and even in the future. Legal scholars have and have had an important place in the direction of the Association, the current General Secretary, Fernando Amérigo, and the last director of the Bulletin of the SECR, José María Contreras, are legal scholars. It was in fact this group that organized the last SECR Congress, the seventh, held in Toledo in 2006 and hosted by the UNED (National University of Distance Education).

The philosophical implications of the study of religion, and in general, Philosophy of Religion, is also a well represented field in the Association, the second Congress, held in Barcelona and organized by Amador Vega in the University Pompeu Fabra is the best evidence of this.

The participation in the Spanish Association of scholars from other diverse disciplinary fields is perhaps too vast to describe here, though the biennial congresses provide a good guide: the fifth congress was organized by the group of psychologists of religion in the University of Valencia in 2002, and a group of sociologists of religion are planning the tenth congress to be held at the University of Santiago de Compostela in 2010.

Another important tool in the construction of the SECR's shared knowledge space is the association's bulletin, entitled BSECR (Boletín de la Sociedad Española de Ciencias de las Religiones). The first issue (number 0) was published in 1993, the most recent, the

nineteenth, two years ago, almost all the information included in that publication is accessible on the SECR's webpage, another basic instrument in the development of a scientific association.

## **5) Challenges of the future**

In the overview of the SECR I'm proposing, and before ending my presentation, some reflection on the future of the Spanish Association and the challenges to the discipline in Spain seems appropriate.

The main challenge, in my opinion, will be the redefinition of the role of Religious Education in the Spanish school (and perhaps also at the European level). The educational debate in my country, up until now, has been an element of confrontation in the political arena. The discourses, infected by "parti pris", tend to come down to two polarized positions akin to the structural problems I outlined earlier. In those circumstances, the SECR could offer expert advice to politicians in order to build a consensual model of Religious Education in Spain based on a long term vision rather than short term political agendas. One example has been the Cosgaya Manifesto signed in 2004 by a group of members of the Spanish Association proposing a non confessional and non religiocentric model of Religious Education, differing starkly from the current model which produces a classroom ghettoization when religious matters are studied (the class is divided into Catholics, Jews, Evangelical Christians, Muslims, non religious and followers of a non confessional religious Education).

To clarify the panorama in the school would be, it goes without saying, a basic element in the consolidation of the teaching of History of Religions-Study of Religion in the University levels.

Another challenge has to do with the increasing inclusiveness of the Association. We need to reach scholars and religious studies research groups thus far not greatly involved in the SECR project, especially anthropologists and sociologists. The focus on attracting other scholars needs go beyond groups of scholars involved in teaching the subject to include the groups of researchers springing up in Spain. It implies expanding the objectives of the Spanish Association in terms of research. For example, there is the need to involve the SECR in the increasing number of research projects in the field study of religious diversity in Spain promoted by official institutions and research centers. There has been tremendous growth in this area in recent years as a result of the rise in immigration and the resultant changes in the transformation of the religious map of my country due to the free exercise of religious freedom. Perhaps the most ambitious and long term research program is the one promoted by a public Foundation of the Spanish Ministry of Justice named Pluralismo y Convivencia ("Pluralism and



Coexistence”): <http://www.pluralismoyconvivencia.es>). The current director of the Foundation is José María Contreras, a legal scholar and prominent member of the SECR. The main research interest of the Foundation is to access up-to-date and accurate information about religious groups and communities in Spain, their history, problems, social action, integration, needs, etc. Pluralismo y Convivencia has signed research contracts with groups in several Spanish universities with the aim, over the next five years, to provide, *Autonomy by Autonomy*, an approximate map of the religious minorities in Spain. The pioneering study was carried out in Catalonia, financed by the Generalitat de Catalunya (the Government of the Catalan Autonomy), and completed four years ago, and the results published in Catalan in 2004 and translated in 2007 into Spanish. The studies of the Autonomies of Madrid and Comunitat Valenciana, have also already been published. The publications of the studies of Castilla-La Mancha, the Canary Islands and Andalusia are in preparation, and will be followed by those of the remaining zones. Members of the SECR are involved in some of the projects of that Foundation, though not in all of them.

I want to finish with the last challenge (in my opinion a central one for the Spanish Association), the publication of an academic journal with an international impact factor. The name chosen is *Bandue, Review of the Spanish Society of Sciences of Religions*. The first volume came out in 2007 and the second volume is currently in press. *Bandue* is a multidisciplinary journal published annually and dedicated to the study of religion and religions from an academic and non religiocentric viewpoint. Volumes published in odd years are devoted to a monographic theme ("Tolerance and intolerance" in the case of volume 2, edited by Ramón Teja and Mar Marcos). Volumes published in even years are open to miscellaneous contributions.

Let me finish with an explanation of the name of the Journal as a way of summarizing my presentation and the characteristics of the SECR. *Bandue*, as my Lusitanian audience is well aware, is a pre-Roman Hispanic divinity of which around 50 documentary testimonials remains. There is no agreement on the functions of her/him/it (*Bandue*'s gender changes in the sources). Depending on the disciplinary or theoretical position of the scholarship, various possibilities and etymologies have been considered, from the Celtic (in general) to the Galician or Lusitanian. Some assert that the name simply means god or goddess, others that it refers to an aquatic divinity. Other possibilities are that it has a functional specialization in war, protection or tutelage. An interpretation which is interesting for a multidisciplinary group of scholars who formed the Spanish Association is that it refers to a divinity of links, of interconnections (of the bonds, an English word related with one of the possible etymologies of *Bandue*). Another interesting hypothesis considers *Bandue* to be a divinity of the thresholds, of limits, both real and magical, of *limina*, of transitions, of *passages*. This liminal nature is another of the characteristics of that diffuse disciplinary field dedicated to the study of religion, in particular in Spain as we have seen. For the Spanish association, which is so difficult to define in many ways, *Bandue* provides a symbol of union in difference.