

# The Difference A King Makes: Religion And National Unity In Spain

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Pilate entered the headquarters again,  
summoned Jesus, and asked him,  
'Are you the king of the Jews?'

(John 18.33)

The answer, of course, is 'Yes', although Jesus doesn't reply quite so directly, and his followers proclaimed Jesus' kingship. Saint Paul, perhaps the most famous of them, wished to preach here in Spain.<sup>1</sup> We don't know whether he set foot on Spanish soil — so perhaps you are doing something Paul longed to do, but didn't manage!

The first reliable evidence for the existence of Christians in Spain comes from a letter written by Cyprian of Carthage in A.D. 254 to presbyter Felix and deacon Elio, and their congregations. Regardless of when Christianity first arrived here the faith certainly spread during Roman occupation of the Iberian peninsula. Letters and other references to persecutions<sup>2</sup> point to a well organised Church by the third century. Indeed, one of the earliest recorded councils took place in Elvira, probably present day Granada.

It is the end of the Roman period, however, that interests us most. What happened then is a model for the relationship between Church and state that has had an enduring and powerful influence.

## I The Visigoths

At the start of the 4<sup>th</sup> century barbarian tribes, including Alans, Vandals, Suevi and Visigoths, invaded Europe from the East. The Visigoths were the main invaders of Hispania, although the Suevi occupied what is now Galicia. The then Roman emperor, Valens, who was of Arian persuasion, made a relatively successful effort to convert the barbarians,

<sup>1</sup> Rom 15.24, 28.

<sup>2</sup> Especially those of Decius (249–252) and Diocletian (303–304). Constantine legalised Christianity throughout the Roman empire in A.D. 313.

with the result that by the 6<sup>th</sup> century there was an uneasy co-existence between Roman Catholic majority and Arian Visigoths.

The Visigoth king, Leovigildo, became convinced that political and military cohesion was only possible if there was religious unity, and he attempted to impose Arianism as the state religion. He was not successful. However, when his son, Reccared, converted to Catholic Christianity in A.D. 587, the opposite scenario, political and religious unity based on a common *Catholicism*, became a possibility.

Upon his conversion Reccared called a conference of Arian bishops in order to persuade them to adopt Catholicism, according to Biclario, his chronicler, "not by force, but by reasonable argument". The synod did not meet at once, however, because of Arian resistance. By A.D. 589, though, Reccared had defeated all opposition and established his hegemony throughout nearly the entire peninsula,<sup>3</sup> enabling the third Synod of Toledo to commence.

Reccared presented himself to the synod as an instrument of Providence, bringing all his peoples into the one true Church. The bishops responded by declaring Reccared to be *rex catholicus*, *rex orthodoxus*, worthy of being called an apostle. Pope Gregory the Great wrote to the Visigoth king in truly eulogistic terms:

What am I going to say at the awesome moment of judgement if I come before Him with empty hands, whilst you present yourself accompanied by a crowd of faithful, who were brought to the grace of faith by your constant and diligent preaching?<sup>4</sup>

There is no need to explain what sort of

<sup>3</sup> The exception was the Basque country – which also successfully resisted the Moors.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of this period see José Orlandis, *Estudios de historia eclesiástica visigoda* (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 1998), 83–92.

'preaching' actually went on in many cases! The point is that very nearly the whole population came to embrace the *Catholic* faith, and for the first time since the introduction of Christianity into Iberia there was both political and religious unity under a single monarch.<sup>5</sup>

This alignment of religion and politics became known as 'sacral monarchy'. On the one hand the Church developed a doctrine of legitimate anointing that became the constitutional basis for monarchical leadership, which was formally promulgated at the 4<sup>th</sup> Synod of Toledo in A.D. 633. On the other hand, the Church's decrees had political force because their pronouncements, being approved by the king, became state legislation. The Church, therefore, obtained the state's help in combating heresy.

The Visigoth period lasted until the Muslim conquest of Iberia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. But the model of state unity under-girded by religious homogeneity has endured much longer, as we shall see.

## II The Catholic Monarchs and Philip II

The disintegration of the Visigoth kingdom enabled Muslim princelings from north Africa to invade the peninsula and negotiate with a semi-independent aristocracy opposed to the Crown. By the middle of the century the Muslims had completed their occupation. In 755 Umayyad prince Abd al-Rahman, defeated the Abbasid governor of Al-Andalus and had himself proclaimed Emir in Cordoba. In the first third of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Abd al-Rahman III restored and extended the Al-Andalus emirate and became the first Spanish Caliph.

The 'Reconquest' of Spain by Christian rulers lasted seven centuries: it was neither immediate nor total, but a long struggle to 'reclaim' patches of the peninsula and bring them, one at a time, under a different rule. This was not a well planned national strategy, but a series of pragmatic decisions by individual leaders who thought that they could fashion a small kingdom in the part of Iberia in which they found themselves.<sup>6</sup> There were both victories and

set backs, and, inevitably, conflicts between Christian kings not just the Muslim foe, as rulers sought to consolidate and extend their territories.

By the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century there were five Christian kingdoms in the northern half of the peninsula: Portugal, Leon, Castille, Navarra and Aragon. The south remained a Muslim dominion.



Map 1: Iberian Peninsula 1210

By the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the map looks quite different both because the Reconquest had enlarged Christian domains, and because royal families had consolidated their kingdoms.



Map 2: Iberian Peninsula 1360

It is especially important to note there was no single nation incorporating all Iberian peoples. This was exacerbated by wide discrepancies in economic prosperity between regions. For example, international trade routes through ports like Cádiz

<sup>5</sup> The Jews, of course, remained outside this harmonious framework. In an effort to strengthen national unity Sisebut decreed in 616 that they convert under pain of confiscation of goods or death, a precedent for future such 'conversions'.

<sup>6</sup> So, for example, Alfonso I occupies Galicia 750; Wilfred the Hairy establishes a kingdom in Barcelona 873–98; Sancho I creates a Basque kingdom in Navarra

905–26; Alfonso V of Leon reclaims his kingdoms 999–1018; Ferdinand I conquers Coimbra 1035–63; Alfonso I of Aragon takes Zaragoza 1118; Alfonso IX of Leon conquers Mérida and Badajoz 1230.

and Barcelona meant these geographically peripheral cities were relatively wealthy, whilst a paucity of transportation routes into the hinterlands resulted in an economically impoverished centre.<sup>7</sup> One can speak, therefore, of a mosaic of kingdoms, the most important of which were Castille and Leon, and Aragon, governed by Isabel I and Ferdinand II, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

When Isabel and Ferdinand married the way was open for a formal union of the majority of the territory that we now call Spain.<sup>9</sup> They are known as the 'Catholic Monarchs' because their strategy was the same as that of Reccared: to achieve political and cultural unity *via* the imposition of a common faith, Roman Catholicism. Two events, in particular, provide clear evidence for their policy. First, they established the Spanish Inquisition.<sup>10</sup> This enabled the monarchy to intervene directly in religious affairs without the Pope's interference and was a way of coercing a powerful *converso* minority, Jewish people who had converted to Christianity to avoid confiscation of their property, which was regarded with suspicion by both Jews and Christians.<sup>11</sup> The point was to promote religious uniformity and suppress dissent. Second, the retaking of Granada in 1492, the final act of the Reconquest, was 'celebrated' by a edicts expelling first Jews and then Muslims from

<sup>7</sup> See Raymond Carr (editor), *Spain: A History* (Oxford: OUP, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> The death of Henry IV in 1474 sparked a power struggle between contenders for the throne of Castile. Henry's daughter, Joanna, who he had disinherited prior to his death, was supported by Portugal and France, whilst Isabel I was supported by Aragon, and the Castilian nobility. Victory in the War of Castilian Succession enabled Isabel to retain her throne.

<sup>9</sup> In reality they continued to rule their own kingdoms individually rather than both jointly. Portugal retained its independence, even when governed by the Spanish monarch from 1580. John IV's successful uprising in 1640 established the Braganza dynasty, which lasted until 1910.

<sup>10</sup> Established in 1478 the Spanish Inquisition was not definitively abolished until 1834.

<sup>11</sup> Some historians highlight the profit motive for the Inquisition itself since the guilty (and, at times, even the merely suspect) had their property expropriated by the state. It is also true that Isabel, in particular, wished to purge widespread corruption within the Church, although without touching doctrine. See Julio González, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2 The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 110–14.

their kingdoms.<sup>12</sup>

The policy of national unification under a single monarch by means of the imposition of a common religion was continued by Phillip II. He reigned from 1556–98, an especially turbulent time in European history because of the Protestant Reformation, Catholic Counter-Reformation, and their military and political consequences.<sup>13</sup>

British people usually remember Phillip II best as consort to Queen 'Bloody' Mary, and the sender of the Spanish Armada. Our present interest, however, is in his unwavering support of the Inquisition as a means of suppressing opposition. Thus new doctrines, whether Protestant, humanist or dubious Catholic practices, like mysticism, were investigated and often eradicated.<sup>14</sup> Even his own chaplain, Constantino Ponce de la Fuente, was condemned for simply possessing the 'wrong' sort of literature. In all this Phillip's aim was to consolidate political power at home and throughout a growing empire by eliminating religious heterogeneity. But if Phillip enjoyed the unwavering support of the Roman church, the latter also gained. Faced with dissent and a challenge to its authority throughout Europe, Rome was keen that political rulers govern to the advantage of Catholicism. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century this meant suppression of the Reformation, and in Spain they found a leader wholly committed to this task.<sup>15</sup>

This vision of sacral monarchy, mutually advantageous for both ruler and Church, did not die with the Catholic Monarchs and Phillip II, but has continued to resonate down the centuries.

### III Franco – 'A Crusade'

In Britain, the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be neatly summed up by a single name, 'Victoria'. As queen she represents years of political stability, economic growth and cultural prestige—at least for the middle

<sup>12</sup> Columbus 'discovered' the Americas in 1492, the year Jews were expelled; Muslims were expelled or obliged to convert in 1502.

<sup>13</sup> Luther pinned his theses to the door of Castle Church, Wittenburg, in 1517; the Council of Trent was held 1545–63.

<sup>14</sup> St Teresa and St John of the Cross were investigated by the Inquisition.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth remembering that according to official doctrine 'secular' rulers were subservient to the Church and were obliged to rule so as not to undermine its teaching.

and upper classes. In Spain, however, the picture is entirely different. Although it started well, with the rebellion against the French starting in 1808, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of economic decline, political instability culminating in civil war and, at the very end, a disastrous loss of empire. All this forms the backdrop to the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Franco's 'Catholic Crusade'.

The underlying issue at stake during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has been whether Spain should be a liberal nation, both politically and culturally, or a homogenous, authoritarian state based upon the 'old order'. Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church, at least, consistently supported the *status quo*.<sup>16</sup> This was not only in order to defend economic interests, although these were incredibly significant,<sup>17</sup> but for social and doctrinal reasons.<sup>18</sup> So, for example, the Church opposed the 'liberal' Constitution of Cádiz, 1812, and supported the absolutist stand of Ferdinand VII. On the other hand, reforms aimed at replacing the feudal system led to expropriation of Church property, which was obviously resented by the Church and its sympathisers.<sup>19</sup>

The instability of these years was exacerbated by oscillations between moderate (both liberal and conservative) regimes and authoritarian dictatorships. Regardless of the merits of individual governments (although, to come off the fence, liberal society is definitely preferable to dictatorship!) the state's relationship with the established Church became a weather cock. It is in this context that one can understand Franco's uprising, and why it received the support of the Catholic church. This is not the place to evaluate the rights and wrongs of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39),<sup>20</sup> rather I wish to highlight how the

<sup>16</sup> For the development of an alternative voice within the Roman Catholic church see Frances Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain 1875–1975* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> In 1834 over half the net product from land and buildings in Spain belonged to the established church, cf. Moreau de Jonnés, *Statistique de l'Espagne* (Paris, 1834), 79.

<sup>18</sup> In 1864 Pius IX condemned liberalism in his encyclical *Quanta cura*.

<sup>19</sup> Especially during the regency of General Espartero (1840–43).

<sup>20</sup> For completely different assessments see Paul Preston, *Franco: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1993) and Warren Carroll, *The Last Crusade: Spain 1936* (Front

ideal of sacral monarchy informed both Franco's and the Roman Catholic church's actions.

Although Franco rebelled against a democratically elected government the political situation during the 1920s and 30s can only be described as chaotic and violent. He presented himself as saving Spain from the communist threat and protecting Christians from extreme anti-clericalism. However, neither the election of a left-wing government nor the wonton murder of nuns and priests were the *cause* of either his or the Catholic church's antagonism to the Republic. Instead, it was the old view of sacral monarchy, that Spain should be united because it was Catholic, and because it was Catholic, united; that plural liberal society was anathema. One commentator observes that the

extreme conservatism of the established church in Spain – and in particular the unreconstructed catholicism [*sic*] of the Castilian hierarchy, whose attitude to truth and error dated back to the ideals of the counter-reformation – was of course central to its support for the nationalist war effort.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, on 13 August 1933 Cardinal Gomá justified the Nationalist cause to the Holy See as a 'crusade'; and in a pastoral letter dated 30 September the Bishop of Salamanca, Enrique Pli y Deniel, employed the same terminology, using Augustine's contrast between the heavenly and earthly cities to compare the two sides. When victory was announced Pope Pius XII made a radio broadcast in Spanish speaking of his 'immense joy', and praising the 'most noble and Christian sentiments' of Franco.<sup>22</sup> The institutionalisation of the relationship between the Catholic church and Spanish state reached its climax in the Concordat of 1953 between Spain and the Vatican. Article 1 reaffirmed

The Roman Catholic and Apostolic Faith will continue to be the only religion of the Spanish nation, and will enjoy all the rights and

Royal: Christendom Press, 2004). A useful collection of articles is Chris Ealham and Michael Richards (editors), *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Helen Graham, "Review: The Franco Regime," *The Historical Journal* 32 (1989): 757–61, quote 759.

<sup>22</sup> On this pope's predilection for totalitarian regimes see the study by John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (London: Penguin, 2000).

prerogatives that are due to it, in accordance with divine law and canon law.

The perspective of the other side, of course, is rather different. Upon victory, all traces of opposition to the new regime were systematically eliminated or deprived of basic human rights. Among these was the right to religious expression. As may be expected, Spain's history, and in particular the attitude to non-Catholic religion, has had serious implications for religious freedom.<sup>23</sup> The treatment of Protestants during this period is salutary.<sup>24</sup>

To summarise, Franco used the Roman Catholic church to legitimise his uprising and regime. In the same way as Reccared and the Catholic Monarchs, he employed religious homogeneity as a means of securing political unity. The other side of the coin was that the church enjoyed unparalleled support and protection from the state, privileges which it finds very difficult to contemplate giving up.

#### IV The Difference A King Makes To Us

I have undertaken this historical survey of the relationship between religion and politics in Spain because the issue of sacral monarchy is alive and well today. The underlying issues resurface continually in present political debate and in conversations with friends. Although the political situation now is quite different from that of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> or even early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of my non-Spanish colleagues are surprised at the polarisation of Spanish society around this issue, along with the absence of debate in major national newspapers that steps outside the categories we have examined; black and white are preferred to shades of grey. It is not, of course, the only issue that preoccupies Spaniards but it is important, especially in political debate.

For example, only last month an impromptu demonstration against the government's policy regarding ETA was led by a banner with the words 'Spain, One and Catholic'. And legislative proposals like that permitting homosexual marriage are perceived by opponents as *primarily* an attack upon the Roman Catholic church. On the other hand, there remains strong resentment of the power exercised by the church and the economic and legal privileges it

enjoys. And the Pope's recent beatification of 266 priests and members of Catholic religious orders killed during the Civil War is viewed as *party* political.

Rather than dwell on what this means in negative terms—you can look at the history books or newspapers for details—I want to conclude by returning to Pilate's question, and how the implied answer should affect evangelicals' attitudes. Pilate asked Jesus whether he was king of the Jews. We have seen the difference that kings and queens have made to Spain, using Christianity for their own political ends to forge a united nation over which they could reign. And we have seen that the Roman Catholic church in Spain has often been a willing partner in this process. From the point of view of the Gospel, at least, there is something profoundly worrying about all this. Indeed, Jesus himself highlights the problem when he replies to Pilate:

My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here. (John 18.36)

Having Jesus as king, therefore, should make a difference. What difference does king Jesus make to us? And what does all this history have to do with SEUT?

Our location in El Escorial is significant. The building of the Royal Monastery of Saint Lawrence of El Escorial (1563–84) to commemorate Philip II's victory at the Battle of St Quentin (1557) was managed from this site. In the corner of the garden the king had a small cottage where he stayed when supervising the building work; the monks of the order of St Jerome lived and worshipped here before occupying their much grander premises; and the glass for the monastery was fired in *La Chimenea* (The Chimney).

When the monastery was complete the village of El Escorial fell into disrepair, and the site was divided up among different families. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a German missionary to Spain, Frederick Fliedner, purchased these separate smallholdings. He was obviously cognisant of the symbolic significance of his actions, for in his diary we read

Who would have told Philip II, monarch of two worlds, who in the time of the Huguenots defended the Catholic faith with an almost delirious fanaticism in wars in France and Italy, that today all these premises, built for

<sup>23</sup> From the Reformation until 1976 there were only seven years of religious freedom, 1869–74 and 1933–36.

<sup>24</sup> See Jacques Delpech, *The Oppression of Protestants in Spain* (trans. T. & D. Johnson; London: Lutterworth, 1956).

himself as a convent, find themselves in the hands of a Protestant pastor.<sup>25</sup>

Flidner conceived of his purchase as a sign from God. He wanted to convert the very place where a human king had built a great monument to power, from which he micro-managed an empire and suppressed the Reformation, into a witness to the Gospel of peace.

At SEUT we want to take up this vision, not to build with bricks and mortar, but create a centre of spiritual and theological formation. Our sight is set not on visible concrete, but the invisible and eternal. So we pray that in the same place where the glass for the Royal Monastery of Saint Lawrence was fired, God would fan the flames of his Holy Spirit and work for *his* glory.

To us, that is the difference a king makes.

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<sup>25</sup> *Memorias de la familia Flidner* (ed. Ana Rodríguez Domingo; Madrid: Gayata, 1997), 96.

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