Religion in Spain and the United States. Close but distant


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Abstract

In this paper religion is explored both in Spain and the United States. Research has been conducted in relation to religion in Spain (de Miguel, 1994; Castillo & Tamayo, 2005) and the United States (Mora, 1992). There are also comparative studies, for instance, Wald and Calhoun-Brown (2007). Nevertheless, it is necessary to continue exploring this topic from other perspectives such as creeds, the number of practising believers, the relationship between politics and religion and festivities. This study shows that, despite interesting differences, which reflect the richness of cultures, the United States and Spain are not markedly different in religious terms.

Keywords: The United States, Spain, religion, similarities, differences

Título: La religión en España y Estados Unidos. Cercana pero distante.

Resumen

En este artículo se explora la religión en España y Estados Unidos. Contamos con estudios sobre la religión en España (de Miguel, 1994; Castillo & Tamayo, 2005) y en Estados Unidos (Mora, 1992). También con trabajos comparativos como Wald y Calhoun-Brown (2007). Sin embargo, merece la pena seguir explorando este tema desde otras perspectivas como credos, número de personas practicantes, relación entre política y religión y festividades. Este estudio muestra que, a pesar de ciertas diferencias que son de interés y reflejan la riqueza de las culturas, Estados Unidos y España no son tan marcadamente diferentes en términos religiosos.

Palabras clave: Estados Unidos, España, religión, similitudes, diferencias.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religion has always been an important part of society although it has also been a source of controversy. It is widely recognised that, in general, people feel a psychological need to believe in a divine being who raises hope and meaning to their existence. Beliefs are there to support a person when something traumatic and difficult to understand happens to him/her, such as the death of a relative or friend. Religion serves as a guidance in these moments. That is why it can be said that the necessity of having a religion is a universal phenomenon. The fact that many creeds coexist in a country may bring about serious conflicts but it cannot be generalised because on some occasions there are peaceful relationships amongst them.

Spain and the United States have certain similarities in terms of religion: Christianity is the main faith in both places, which has an influence on festivities. However, these nations differ in the varieties prevailing as well as their history and the ethnic groups who practise each creed. In this paper, we will compare and contrast the issue of religion in both countries by focusing on some curious aspects, namely, the creeds and the number of practising believers found, the relationship between politics and religion, and finally, festivities. There are studies which deal with religion in Spain (de Miguel, 1994\textsuperscript{21}; Castillo & Tamayo, 2005\textsuperscript{22}) and the United States (Mora, 1992\textsuperscript{22}). There is also comparative research, such

\textsuperscript{21} A. de Miguel, “Política y Religión en la España Actual”, en J. Sádaba (Ed.), \textit{La Influencia de la Religión en la Sociedad Española} (pp. 147-171), Madrid, 1994.

Nevertheless, this topic is worth exploring further in a comparative way by focusing now on the aspects previously mentioned. In some cases, the differences will be sharp but most times there will be similarities between these two nations. It must be taken into account that, as countries, Spain and the United States are close in other aspects as well, apart from beliefs.

2. AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

2.1. CREEDS

Without the slightest doubt, the religion par excellence in Spain is Catholicism (a branch within Christianity), with a variety: Roman Apostolic (Fernández, 2008\textsuperscript{27}). Actually, polls reveal that almost 80% of the population is Catholic. The fact that this Church is the basis of the country can be felt in the cathedrals built and the religious celebrations which take place, as will be seen later. History is a conclusive proof of the power of Catholicism in Spain. When the Protestant Reformation spread throughout Europe, Spanish people remained loyal to Catholicism and there were even missionaries, such as St. Francis Xavier, who tried to make this creed become known in other places. In the United States, religion is also an essential part of people’s lives (Bargy, 1902\textsuperscript{28}). The vast majority of Americans are Christians (almost 80%). Nonetheless, Roman Catholicism is not the largest branch (which makes it differ from Spain), but the second one. The higher branch is Protestantism (52%). According to Mora (1992), almost 80 million Americans are Protestants. Nonetheless, it must be said that none of the branches of Protestantism taken alone has more members than Catholicism, which in some way puts the United States not so distant from Spain in terms of creeds.

In the U.S., Roman Catholicism is followed by people of Irish, Spanish, Filipino, Italian, Polish, French, etc. descent. Amongst Protestants, Baptists (linked with the South of America and promoted amongst Asians now), Methodists, Anglicans (from the U.K), Lutherans (influenced by Germany and Nordic countries), Presbyterians, Evangelicalists (related to conservatism), Mormons (founded in the United States), Jehovah’s Witnesses and the United Church of Christ are worth mentioning. Apart from history, the fact that many immigrants live in the U.S. make the country be surrounded by different creeds (Lipset, 1964\textsuperscript{29}). Although Spain is increasingly populated by immigrants, it has not reached the level of the former.

Both countries are not strikingly different in the number of citizens who do not identify with any religious faiths. As shown in “Portrait of the U.S.A” (2003)\textsuperscript{30}, in the United States 10% are atheists, only somewhat inferior to the percentage found in Spain, 19%. This slight difference may be due to the fact that all the ethnic groups who inhabit the U.S. have their own religion, whereas in Spain, as said before, there are still not so many immigrants with divergent creeds. Nevertheless, in the last few years (after the 90s) there has been an increase in the number of Muslims in this country. In fact, nowadays Islam is the second largest religion in Spain with more than 3% of followers, a percentage which is surprisingly higher than that in the United States, where they make up 1% of the total population. It must be said, though, that this is only happening with Muslims, as there are not any other important creeds in number in Spain apart from Catholicism and Islam, which differs from the case in the U.S. There are only some Jews, mainly Sephardic, who left North Africa to settle in


\textsuperscript{28} H. Bargy, \textit{La Religion dans la Société aux Etats-Unis}, Paris, 1902.

\textsuperscript{29} S. Lipset, \textit{The First New Nation}, New York, 1964.

\textsuperscript{30}“Portrait of the U.S.A”, \textit{International Information Programs}, 2003, http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/factover/holidays.htm [Retrieval Date: 06.06.2011].
cities such as Barcelona or Madrid, and also some Anglicans. In the United States, however, Judaism represents an important creed with 2.1% of the total population. In fact, there are more than 5 thousand synagogues in this country. Mora (1992) states,

Thus, (...) God veneration in families as well as synagogues, (...) confidence in the man’s own ability to achieve salvation (...). All these are dear elements to the American conscience, as well as the traditional rejection of the original sin and hell (p. 205, our own translation).

It must be said, though, that the number of Jews is decreasing lately in the U.S.

2.2. PRACTISING BELIEVERS

As for Church attendance, the results obtained by polls do not always coincide in their entirety but some reliable data can be gathered. According to the CIS, although most citizens consider themselves to be Catholic, in general terms, the Spanish population is not practising. Whereas almost 70% of the people surveyed admit they never or seldom attend Sunday Mass, the remaining participants state that they do it either once or several times a week, or several times a month. Similarly, in the United States, a large number of people (almost with the same percentage) are not practising. In fact, according to a 2006 online Harris Poll of 2,010 US adults, only a quarter of Americans attend religious services on a weekly basis or even more frequently. The remaining respondents hardly ever or never go to Church.

Consequently, it can be suggested that both Spain and the United States are very similar in the regularity with which their inhabitants attend religious celebrations. Although the number of people who often practises their faith is gradually decreasing in both countries (taking into account that the new era is making citizens more independent from religiousness), if compared to many other countries, the U.S. and Spain give a major role to the practice of religion.

2.3. RELIGION AND POLITICS

2.3.1. THE STATE AND RELIGION

The major role that Catholicism has always played in Spanish politics is beyond Americans’ understanding. Although in the United States religion plays an essential part in people’s lives, as stated before, the separation between the state and religion has always been one of the basic principles in the country. In fact, the U.S. was one of the first countries to have a separation of both powers. When the United States was in direct conflict with Spain for the freedom of American Protestants, the strong bond between politics and religion in Spain was clearly witnessed by Americans. As Martín de Pozuelo (2005)31 states, «The [Catholic] Church is one of the main beneficiaries of the present-day régime» (para. 2, our own translation). According to American politicians, the Spanish Catholic Church was tightly linked with the government during Franco’s dictatorship. They supported each other. Americans alluded to the fact that history and the nature of the Church in this European country contributed to this connection.

In fact, it is true that the Spanish history has traditionally accepted a confessional state, as claimed by Castillo and Tamayo (2005). The main reasons for professing the Catholic faith were that the overwhelming majority of Spanish citizens (80.4%) were followers of it and that it was also a way of preserving the historical heritage, namely cathedrals, basilicas, etc. Nonetheless, the considerable controversy that the issue raised (which continues nowadays) brought about the emergence of a new section (number 16) in the 1978 Spanish Constitution, which defended the idea that the State is not allowed to support any particular creed (Barrero, 200632).


2.3.2. POLITICAL PARTIES AND RELIGION

Religion seems to be related to political parties both in the United States and Spain. In the U.S., politicians talk about religion in campaigns. The Democratic Party as well as the Republican Party count on Christian people although the latter is mainly supported by evangelical Christians. In contrast, more secular voters are in favour of the Democratic Party. Nonetheless, in order to continue being tax-exempt organizations, religious figures must not support a candidate publicly.

In Spain, politicians do not talk about religion as much as they do in the United States. Nevertheless, citizens know that the Catholic Church is generally aligned with the right wing political party Partido Popular (P.P.) due to the ideology they both defend. Actually, some radio channels such as The COPE and special groups within Catholicism, namely, Opus Dei (Legionarios de Cristo), which are represented by popular figures in P.P., are a reflection of the link between P.P. and Catholicism. Anyway, there is not an open alliance between both, which is similar to what happens in the United States, as said before. The fact that this party, Partido Popular, is against abortion as well as homosexual child adoptions, and it defends the teaching of religion at schools, amongst other aspects, makes it close to the Catholic Church. In contrast, politicians in Partido Socialista Obrero Español (P.S.O.E.) totally disagree with P.P.’s ideas, which makes them far away from Catholicism. As stated by de Miguel (1994): «76% of left-wing people think that abortion is a woman’s right, versus 6% of right wing and practising Catholics» (p. 165, our own translation).

2.4. FESTIVITIES

2.4.1. COMMON FESTIVITIES BUT A DIFFERENT WAY TO APPROACH THEM

Bearing in mind that Christianity is essential in both countries, three Christian festivities (which give rise to three national days) coincide: Christmas, New Year’s Day and Easter, although the way of celebrating them is not exactly the same. Two other important days: Halloween and Saint Valentine’s Day, will be also included in this section for being common (especially nowadays) in both countries despite not being national days.

2.4.1. CHRISTMAS

On the 25th of December, when the birth of Christ is remembered, most Americans (even some non-christians) decorate their houses with lights, put up Christmas trees and include strings of popcorn and candy canes on them. They also sing carols, give presents (when Santa Claus arrives, on the 24th of December) and send cards to each other. It must be said that Spanish people share all these customs with Americans, including the decoration of a Christmas tree, as a result of the spread of this tradition all over the world. Nonetheless, due to the influence of the major religion in Spain, Catholicism, other deep rooted traditions are still dominant in this country, namely, the displaying of a Nativity and the celebration of the arrival of the three Wise Men: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

An important symbol of the Spanish Christmas is the Nativity, i.e. the representation of the birth of Christ. Not only can they be enjoyed in houses, but also in shop windows. There are competitions to fight for the most elaborate one as well and every year real people play the roles of the characters in the Nativity.

The tradition of Santa Claus started in the U.S.A. in the 1860s although the figure came from the Dutch name Sintaklaas (Saint Nicholas). In Spain, as stated before, the Wise Men are still more powerful than Papá Noel. However, this figure is becoming increasingly popular amongst children nowadays given that, by being given their presents on the 24th of December, they can enjoy them during the holiday, whereas they do not have so much time when receiving them on The Day of the three Kings or Wise Men, which is held on the 6th of January.

According to the Bible, the Wise Men were the three kings who visited Christ when he was born in order to give him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. They represented tolerance, taking into account that they came from different parts of the world. The day before, Spanish children attend the well-known Twelfth Night procession (Cabalgata de Reyes), where they greet the Wise Men, who parade in their floats. Children go to bed early but not without leaving their shoes, a bucket of water for the Wise Men’s camels and a glass of anisette for each of the Kings in sight. The following morning, once the children have seen their presents, the whole family usually have the typical ring-shaped cake (rosçon de Reyes) for breakfast. There are little presents in it. The person who bumps into the little king when eating is crowned as the King or Queen of the house and that who has the bean has to pay for the cake.
In America, the traditional Christmas dinner is either roast turkey with vegetables and sauces, or goose, duck or ham. For dessert, it is usually delicious fruity Christmas pudding with sauce. In Spain, the usual main dish is still turkey, like in America, although shellfish, pork and lamb are also popular, depending on the region. As for the dessert, nougat (turrón), marzapan and a type of light, crumbly shortbread (polvorón) are typical in Spain. Afterwards, a glass of cava, the Spanish equivalent of champagne, is drunk. After the meal, many Spaniards and Americans go to the midnight mass. This is known as La Misa del Gallo, in Spain, or Rooster Mass, in America, due to the fact that the rooster is the first to announce the birth of Christ. In Spain, young people tend to go out after midnight to continue celebrating with friends.

2.4.1.2. NEW YEAR

New Year’s Day (January 1) begins to be celebrated the night before in both countries. People gather and toast to wish each other a happy new year but they do it in a different way. In the USA impressive fireworks are displayed in many cities, such as New York or Chicago. Actually, the ball dropping on top of One Times Square in New York is broadcast all over the world. Other towns or minor cities are beginning to imitate this tradition and they also include a ball drop in their celebrations. Disney World in Florida and Disneyland in California have their parks open until late.

Nonetheless, in Spain, although there can also be fireworks, other customs are more popular regarding this special night. On New Year’s Eve (Nochevieja), when the clock strikes 12, Spanish people eat 12 grapes. Those who eat all the grapes within time will have a year of good luck. Friends and families gather together since this night means the end of a year and the beginning of a new one. Spaniards celebrate by means of parties (cotillones), in which confettis, party hats, etc. are supplied. These parties will last until the next morning, when it is typical to have hot chocolate and fried pastry (chocolate con churros) for breakfast.

2.4.1.3. EASTER

At Easter, people celebrate the Christian belief in the resurrection of Christ. Easter is a day of religious ceremonies and the gathering of family. The tradition of the Easter Bunny, an American mythological figure who brings children colouring hard-boiled eggs (a symbol of resurrection and birth) and baskets of sweets on Easter morning, are deep rooted in the United States. Some European countries, such as The United Kingdom and Germany, also have these customs. In fact, it is said that some German people brought this tradition to the U.S.A. On Easter Monday, the following day, in the White House, the president of the U.S. holds the annual Easter egg hunt. In the regions of the south-east of Spain, in particular, Catalunya, Valencia and Murcia, there is a related tradition: Easter cakes (Monas de Pascua), which are made of chocolate and take the shape of an egg. They are very popular. Traditionally, they were given to godsons and goddaughters as a present by their godparents and they were eaten during the last day of Easter celebrations.

In Spain, as stated in “Semana Santa en España” (2007)33, in Holy Week all villages and cities are touched by public displays which celebrate the greatest feast for Catholics: the death and resurrection of Christ. They are typical in this country. Hooded penitents parade through streets and women dressed in black walk in procession followed by the Virgin. People from abroad come to watch this delight to sight. They can live the Passion of Christ first hand.

2.4.1.4. SAINT VALENTINE’S DAY

On the 14th of February, Saint Valentine’s Day, (Saint Valentine was a Christian martyr), both Americans and Spaniards give presents, usually flowers, to their partners/boyfriends or girlfriends/husbands or wives. As can be seen, the way of celebrating this day is very similar in both countries.

2.4.1.5. HALLOWEEN

The tradition of celebrating Halloween, on the 31st of October (the evening before All Saints) was originally pioneered by the United States and it is one of the most important festivities in this country, after Christmas, taking into account the

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money spent on its celebration. American children dress up as witches, devils, etc. and knock at doors saying “trick or treat”. Neighbours usually offer them sweets or money. It is also usual that young people and adults dress up in Halloween parties.

In Spain, Halloween has never been a tradition but there are an increasing number of Spanish people, mainly the younger generation in Catalunya, who, attracted by American films, are beginning to celebrate it in pubs and private parties. It must be said that Catholicism tried to assimilate this deep-rooted tradition, Halloween, which was originally pagan, and that is why they changed the month in which All Saints Day was set in: from May to 1st of November. Something similar happened with the Day of the Dead, held on the 2nd of November from that moment on.

2.4.2. PARTICULAR FESTIVITIES

It must be mentioned that the fact that Catholicism is by far the major religion in Spain means that the overwhelming majority of national festivities are related to Saints and Virgins (Fernández, 2008), such as The Assumption (15th of August), The Immaculate (8th December) or The Emmanuel (1st of January). There are even processions in small villages and town in which the Patrons (Virgins and Saints) parade through the streets surrounded by devout followers. Nonetheless, many of the festivities held in the U.S.A. are not so linked with religion due to the influence of the creeds and ethnic groups living together there. Martin Luther King Day, Presidents’ Day, Columbus Day or Veterans Day, amongst others, must be highlighted as important American days.

A festivity which is so typical of the U.S. that cannot be missing in this paper is Thanksgiving Day, which is celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November. Its origins go back to 1621, after the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts, fleeding the prosecution of Anglicans. They found it difficult to survive in a rough winter but, fortunately, they received help from Indians, who taught them how to grow cereals and other crops. This harsh situation inspired the Puritans to give thanks for the harvest the following year by holding a feast. This gave rise to the Thanksgiving feast, a national tradition. The present-day dinner often includes some of the products served in the first celebration: roast turkey, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, etc. Before eating, the family give thanks to God for letting them be all together and for their meal.

3. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the fact that religion plays a major role in people’s lives both in Spain and the U.S.A. must be emphasised. One may like it or not but this issue has always been in the spotlight. As can be seen, Spain and the United States are similar in the Christian festivities they celebrate and also in the fact that religion is involved in politics to some extent. Nonetheless, some of the differences found are caused by their different history and the ethnic groups who live in the countries. Thus, in Spain, Catholicism is deeply rooted as a result of history and tradition, and this can be reflected in the nature of the festivities held. In addition, the fact that there are fewer immigrants than in the multicultural U.S. does not lead to such a diversity of creeds.

In a sense, Spain is a traditional country when compared to the modern United States. However, there are not particularly marked differences between them for both being developed countries which have other common features. We are sure that the findings obtained in this paper could help readers to know these two important countries better in terms of religion. In our view, the subject of beliefs has always been worth going deeper into as it is highly controversial and it is a token of the history and culture behind a country.