

The influence of Catholic religion on Spanish psychiatry

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Abstract. *The purpose of this paper is to review the role played by Catholic religion and its influence in the development of Spanish psychiatry. This religion has played an important role in Spanish culture for centuries. A special attention is devoted to the dark period of General Franco's Dictatorship, from 1939 to 1975, when the role of Catholicism was overwhelming by its strong influence on every aspect of Spanish society. Psychiatry could not escape to this influence and many conceptions were embedded by religion in the more fundamentalistic way.*

Some comments on the important role played by the Catholic Church in the field of psychiatric assistance are also presented.

Key words: Psychiatry, history, Spain, religion, Catholicism

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INTRODUCTION This paper deals on the influence of Catholic religion in a particular country, Spain, and more specifically on the psychiatry that has developed in this country. The topic of the influence of Catholicism on Spanish psychiatry is much wider than one would expect at a first glance.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND The first thing to be stated is that the Catholic Church has been an extremely powerful institution for centuries in Spain. It must be reminded that Spain was very early christianized. According to the legend, Saint James, one of the 12 apostles, came to evangelize Spain and his grave at the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela is the highpoint of the famous pilgrimage, known precisely as “El camino de Santiago” (the way of Saint James). Even if the Santiago legend might be false, the true fact is that around the 4th century, Christianity was spread all over Spain. Don't forget that Islam also came to Spain in the beginning of the 8th century as a result of the Arabic invasion through Gibraltar. For almost 8 centuries the Muslim people remained in Spain and in fact, during this long period, all kinds of things happened between the invaders and the primitive Christian Spanish kingdoms. There were agreements and alliances sometimes, endless fighting and wars at other periods, even if the “official” patriotic Spanish history tends to depict this period as “La Reconquista”, a very long process of conquering back the Iberian peninsula to the “unfaithful people” and expelling them back to northern Africa. In fact, for many years, Christians, Muslims and Jews coexisted peacefully allowing the transmission of all kinds of philosophical and scientific knowledge as the Arabs had at this time a much more refined culture than the Spanish Christians. There is no need to remind the fantastic architectural legacy you can visit in Andalusian cities as Granada, Córdoba or Seville that contribute to the mystique of El-Andalus (Islamic Spain) that you can still find in any Islamic country.

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Little by little, the scattered Christian kingdoms managed to unite, fight the Moors and the Reconquista ended with the so-called “Catholic Kings”, Isabel of Castille and Ferran of Aragon, whose marriage allowed a dynastic union of the whole country. Christianity became the undisputed leading church, specially after 1492. This was a very special year in Spanish history. Columbus discovered the New World for the Catholic Kings. The last Muslim king, Boabdil of Granada, was expelled and for the sake of purity of “Spanish race”, the Jews were also expelled. Many converted (or pretended to do) to Christianity, but several thousands began a new diaspora all over the Mediterranean. You can find this Sephardic Jews (Sepharad means Spain) for example in the Balkans, in Istanbul or now back in Israel, still speaking in their 15th century Spanish. Even if Spain entered in the path of what was going to be its great expansion, giving birth later on to the Spanish Empire of the 16th and 17th century, many people in Spain think now that, expelling the Jews and the Islamic Arabs was impoverishing the society and contained the germ of the decadence that had to come much later. What could have been a great multicultural coexisting experience ended with a bloody religious and cultural clash. Maybe we can still learn something from the past experiences.

Possibly for this reason, the Catholic Church has in Spain a long-standing tradition of intolerance, hardness and association to the political power. The kings of Spain, always Catholic, defended with their armies the Catholic faith all over Europe and the conquest of America was presented as a major evangelization enterprise, hiding the undeniable economic motivations.

The Catholic Church in Spain is, by one side, linked to admirable things like the mystical poetry of Santa Teresa de Jesús or San Juan de la Cruz, the beautiful Romanic paintings or the Gothic cathedrals, the defense of the American-Indian human rights by Father Las Casas, or great education achievements and charity works in Spain and America. But, on the other side, Spanish Catholicism is linked to the defense of the more intransigent and fundamentalistic attitudes, to the Inquisition, to the foundation of the Jesuit order by Ignacio de Loyola (the “soldiers of Christ”, as he said), and in the 20th century to the foundation of the Opus Dei, for some people an admirable and true Christian institution, for many other, a sort of destructive sect. No wonder that the archetype of the Spanish Catholic is defined in an idiom: “*más papista que el Papa*” (more papist than the Pope himself).

As I grew up under Franco’s dictatorship, my personal memories of the 50’s and 60’s are of an oppressive society where the Catholic church was in narrow association with the fascist regime. Those were times of the so-called National Catholicism. Political and religious power were coincident and dictated societal norms. Moral standpoints were very strict, sexuality was associated to sin, divorce was out of sight, not to mention abortion. The censorship was active in press, books, films, radios and television and of course, at all levels of education. The Spanish Church has to be ashamed of this long association and strong support to the last Hitler’s ally, general Franco. It is also true that in the last Franco years, many priests took a valiant standpoint in defense of union rights and minorities like the Catalan and the Basque people that were specially oppressed.

The Spanish society has gone through an incredible process of transition in the last 30 years (Franco died in 1975). This oppressive, dark, deeply religion-rooted country has turned into an open, democratic and scarcely religious land. The process of secularization of Spain has changed the face of the country. Folkloric and cultural aspects of Catholicism might stand: Easter processions, church weddings and so on, but my impression is that Spanish people, specially the youngest ones, are among the less religious people in the Western world, blame it on the Catholic Church.

The Church is still very powerful: owns media, schools and universities, hospitals and tries to play a leading role on moral aspects. But, nowadays, nobody cares much: divorce is quick and easy,

abortion is available in the public health system, top-less is widespread in Spanish beaches, smoking cannabis is accepted almost everywhere, religion classes are not compulsory in the school system and to the big scandal of the Church, the new socialist government has passed a law on homosexual marriage and right to adoption. The Church is really angry but cannot do much about. The decadence is evident: the seminaries get empty, many priests quit and people turn their back to the Church.

According to several surveys, in 2001, 80.8 % of Spanish people defined themselves as Catholic, 11.2 % as non-believer, 4.6 % as atheist and 1.6 had other religions. 2% did not answer (C.I.S., 2001).

People indifferent to religion were only 3% in 1970, but 26% in 1989. Among young people, in the period 1960/75, 50% were practicing Catholics, but only 15 % in 1989 (Callahan, 2003).

The Center for Sociological Investigation establishes the following figures in 2001 about mass attendance: 46.1% almost never go, 18.5% almost every sunday. There are 20,000 secular priests in Spain, 64,000 members of religious orders, 13,000 missionaries and 14,000 members of contemplative orders (C.I.S., 2002). There are thousands of education centers and about one million of students under university level. Religious weddings are still 73%, mostly for traditional reasons. The Spanish state still contributes with 3,522 million euros to the Church. But while only 42% of the population trusts the Church in Spain, the world mean is 64%. So there is not much to be proud for the Spanish Church these last years.

SPANISH PSYCHIATRY AND CATHOLICISM Psychiatry tends to be a reflection of the society where it develops. Psychiatric ideology depends on the cultural context and, after all, psychiatrists are normal people submitted to all sorts of influences. As far as we can talk of a Spanish School of Psychiatry – and I assume that such a School, maybe a minor one compared to the German or French Schools, does exist -, it is interesting to analyze the period where a strong influence of Catholicism has been evident on psychiatry.

Lopez Ibor Jr (2001) reminds us of some people, much before we can talk of psychiatry, that developed activities or ideas linked to psychiatry.

In Roman times, in 303, in Seville, Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian distinguished themselves by their care for mental patients.

Around the year 1.000, the king Alphonse X the Sage wrote a book, *Las siete partidas* (The Seven Laws) where madmen are considered like children, so not responsible for their acts.

Arnau de Vilanova, a great physician, Ramon Llull, a franciscan philosopher, among others, contributed in some way to what could be considered early psychology or psychopathology.

But we have to jump again to the 20th century when we can really talk of psychiatry as an established medical speciality. During the second Spanish Republic, in the early 30's, Mira i López was appointed to the first chair of psychiatry in the Autonomous University of Barcelona. But the republican period was not a good time for the Catholic Church. There was a great turmoil in the country when the president of the Spanish Republic, Manuel Azaña, said “Spain is not catholic anymore”, meaning only that the new regime stated the laicism as the official position. Seventy years later, nowadays, this can be truly said of Spanish society.

After Franco's victory in 1939, many psychiatrists –as many liberal professionals did- had to exile. It was a disaster as a long period of scientific darkness began. Those remaining, often directly linked to the military power, paved the way to what some authors like González Duro have called the Spanish “national” psychiatry (Gonzalez Duro,1997). This was a strange mixture: due to the great influence of german psychiatry, some ideas of nazi psychiatrists about eugenics were adopted and mixed with ultranationalistic and fundamentalistic catholic ideology. Fortunately, eugenics

were not taken to an extreme as in Nazi Germany, but mentally ill people, considered as bearing a biological defect, had to be secluded and prevented from marrying and having children.

Hispanic race was considered better than the rest of Europe. Spain was the spiritual reserve of the western world and this came, of course, of "the religious mood as social way of life, the religiosity intrinsic to the true Spanish life". To reach this goal, the most important psychiatrist of this time wanted theology to impregnate the new being of Spanish culture and to inspire the new Spanish psychiatry. For some, Marxism was a disease and, consequently, Marxists, mainly dissenting people, had to get psychiatric treatment. Vallejo-Nájera, who came from the Psychiatric Services of the Army and was appointed chairman at Madrid University, was one of the main ideologists of this movement that reminds me of the Taliban. Not only Marxism was bad, but democracy itself was, for him, socially harmful because it "liberated the psychopathic tendencies of people and ended by degenerating the race". To overcome this degeneration of Spanish race due to intellectual atheist influences from Europe, Spanish people had to go back to good virtues from the 17th century Empire like mysticism, pride and honor. For Vallejo-Nájera "Our race is the Hispanic-Roman-Gothic race whose peculiar psychological features come from the Catholic ideal given by Saint Isidoro". So, a severe social discipline was necessary with a rigid moral life. Vice would be destroyed by imposing religiosity and patriotism. One branch of this racial hygiene was mental hygiene. Psychopaths should be segregated in compulsory work camps. Hysteria and neurasthenia were the product of a decadent civilization.

Other psychiatrists of this time gave more theological explanations of mental disease. Marco Merenciano said that madness might be a punishment for a sin. This sin was impossible to repent, so madness had no cure. Still in 1964, a very famous psychiatrist said "There is no doubt that the sin causes sometimes diseases".

In this peculiar context, it is not surprising the emergence of a need for the so-called "national psychotherapy". This new discipline intended to help the individual to recover mental health so to allow philosophy and religion to open the path to superior values. Psychoanalysis was rejected: too subversive, too involved into sexuality, not spiritual. It could be good for Jewish people, not for Catholic Spanish people. It has to be reminded that, for Franco, Jews, along with Marxists and Masons, were the worst enemies. It was underlined that the most solvent theories of modern times, like Marxism and psychoanalysis came from Jewish minds.

Instead of analyzing the dynamics of the unconscious and liberating instinctive pulsions, what the Spanish man had to do was reaching spiritual goals, forget about his desire and repress the dark forces of the unconscious, considered evil and revolutionary.

The religious or theological interpretation was considered the most adequate to the deep religiosity of Spanish patients. In this conception, the psychotherapeutic process tends to spiritualization, and moments of intense religious emotion were to be expected. Psychotherapy could become a sort of mystic experience.

Consistently with such points of view, the physician had to be a person of strong faith. According to Marco Merenciano, a good physician should have "professional grace". This was better than technical knowledge to cure. It has already been said by an important professor, that only grace could dissolve anxiety. Religion was ever present in this psychotherapeutic approach. In the 50's, references to Catholic psychotherapy and pastoral psychotherapy were frequent. Psychotherapy was supposed to go far beyond the patient conflicts and find the way to approach God. Another psychiatrist, Cores Escandon, stated "the neurotic has lost his sense of life. The sense is God. Giving back the sense of God to this person, logically his disorders will be cured".

Of course, these ridiculous theories were so weak that they were not going to survive for a long time. At the end of the 60's new winds began to blow in Spanish psychiatry, and even under dictatorship, the contemporary theoretical trends were known and happily welcomed by younger generations of psychiatrists.

All this almost delusive construction of the more retrograde and repressive ideas based in the worsts aspects of Catholicism was rapidly forgotten.

It was a complete anachronism and could not endure too long.

Now, at the beginning of the 3rd millenium, all this dark period of Spanish psychiatry looks like a nightmare. The Catholic Church does not play any major role in today's spanish psychiatry except for the assistance field.

It might be interesting to recall that as early as in 1409, Father Gilabert Jofre ,who belonged to the Order of the Mercy and knew about the existence of institutions of this kind in the Muslim world, founded a mental hospital in Valencia. This is considered the first hospital in Western world dedicated exclusively to the care of mental patients, separated from other patients.

For centuries, several religious orders have been creating institutions and taking a very active role in Spanish psychiatric assistance. In 1963, for example, the religious orders in Spain had a total of 18,856 psychiatric beds, almost 50 % of the total number (Arranz Muñecas, 1992). As community psychiatric systems developed, the number of beds has been going down. In 1973 the number of beds depending on the orders were only 10,969, representing 27.1% of the total. Of course, in the last years what these orders do is opening day centers or community clinics and so on.

One of the main orders is San Juan de Dios (Saint John Of God). This spanish saint used to be a soldier that turned into a monk. He spent the rest of his life founding hospitals and, by the way, ended up as inpatient in an asylum.

This Order runs, at the present times, many hospitals and clinics all over Spain. With an open mind, they have been accepting all kinds of professionals and helping to develop a community centered psychiatric system. This can be a good example of the admirable work done by monks and nuns of different orders for years. In this sense, it represents a positive side of catholic Church influence in the field of mental health assistance. This contribution has to be fully recognized.

CLINICAL FLASHES Among Spanish patients the religion topics are not uncommon. To begin with, it is quite usual to be greeted by patients who say: “A psychiatrist is like a priest, I must tell you the truth like in a confession...”. We try to explain the difference but it is true that, for centuries, many priests have been playing a major role giving something between psychological support, counselling, religious therapy or whatever you might call it.

Many patients, bearing any kind of psychiatric problem, recognize the tendency to look for support and help from religion when hard times come. It is also true that some of them might feel disappointed when they feel that this help does not come. A long letter given to me by a dystimic patient sounded like this: “ I lost my faith and turned agnostic. I think that God does not exists while he used to comfort me sometimes, in the past”.

Some curious aspects are not so frequent and might be more anecdotic. One bipolar patient, for instance, tended to join the Jehova's Witnessess when he turned maniac, and used to leave them when euthymic. Some people have come to me after being expelled from religious institutions like the Jesuit Order or the Opus Dei, after showing some kind of mental unstability. It is very difficult for them to overcome the sense of shame they feel.

To end this overview, I would like to quote a terrible sentence written by the Romanian/ French philosopher, Émile Cioran: “The Catholic Church invented Spain in order to better destroy it”. (Cioran, 1980)

I would not go that far, but Catholicism has, indeed, been an ideological construct that has brought repression and despair too often to the Spanish population. It is not easy to live in a joyful way a religion so centered on sin, guilt and sacrifice. On the other side, this religion has been – and still is – supportive and helpful for many people.

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