

The Church (Spain)

By [José-Leonardo Ruiz Sánchez](#)

Summary

The Spanish church identified with Pope Benedict XV's efforts in favour of neutrality and in search of peace: this position also coincided with the choice made by the Spanish liberal governments. Generally speaking, however, Catholic groups (clergy, media, lay organizations and related political parties), sympathised with the Central Powers and were hostile to the Entente. Progressive and left-wing parties supported the latter. Only the episcopacy, after the actions taken by foreign Catholic clergy, modified its initial approach.

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Introduction

The Spanish Church was completely in line with the position taken by Pope [Benedict XV's \(1854-1922\)](#) call to [neutrality](#) in his speeches in November 1914 and January 1915. These were the first ones he made during his pontificate concerning this matter and in them he condemned the violations of peace, without denouncing those who were directly responsible, as there were Catholics on both sides involved in the war. The Spanish Church also agreed with the pope's resolute [humanitarian](#) (without religious, national or ethnic determining factors) and diplomatic actions which developed throughout the conflict. The pontiff showed a merciful and *Samaritan* profile rather than that of a supreme and unquestionable judge.

About the War

As well as echoing the papal documents, the Spanish ecclesiastical journals gathered

together the various Spanish religious declarations that sought to secure the restoration of peace in tune with what the pope demanded: pastorals by different prelates (from Toledo, Tarragona, Segovia, Vic); pilgrimages (most typically, to El Pilar, in Zaragoza); tridua; novena prayers; Holy Hours; rosary prayers; collections, etc. The pope's isolation, due to the participation of [Italy](#) in the war on the side of the Entente (May 1915), led to the Spanish episcopacy publishing a collective document on 11 June the following year as a statement from the "Spanish people". In this document the pope was invited to settle his residence in [Spain](#) if he were forced to abandon the Holy See, a gesture which was confirmed by the Spanish monarch [Alfonso XIII \(1886-1941\)](#) and the Spanish government. Due to the Catholic hierarchy's interest in identifying with the Roman pontiff's wishes, other countries on both sides ended up giving preference to defending themselves from the external enemy (a type of behaviour that was clearly nationalistic and warmongering). Conversely, the Spanish Catholic hierarchy seemed to have no solid arguments to prevent their full identification with the pope's position on this matter. Subsequent Spanish governments (all of them liberal, although with different trends) followed the declaration of [neutrality](#) made at the beginning of the international conflict. This was in accordance with not only the civil and ecclesiastical authorities (as was the case in the other belligerent nations), but also with the pope's wishes. Alfonso XIII conformed with this as he tried to collaborate with Benedict XV: an attitude that was always praised by the nuncio in Spain, [Francesco Ragonesi \(1850-1931\)](#).

Neutrality, not Impartiality

The official [neutrality](#) of the Spanish Church disguised a very different reality. The vast majority of disparate Spanish Catholic groups was in favour of union around the Central Powers (although it might be more correct to say they were against the Entente and, more precisely, against the French, English and, to some extent, the Belgians). However, in reality, due to strictly doctrinal approaches, they lacked compelling arguments to position themselves clearly in favour of either side. Even using the term "a just war" as an argument to choose one side was not useful due to the divergence of opinions. The Austrians, most of the French (and the Italians in 1915) were Catholic and found themselves fighting on opposite sides. In addition, there were Protestants, Christian orthodox, and even Muslims in the pro-Central Powers camp; and Anglicans and orthodox in the pro-Entente camp. In fact, this was the principle of freedom, not in its doctrinal formulation (in which belief would be necessary) but in its ideological one, with its translation into politics, that weighed heavily on the Spanish Catholics when they had to take sides in the war. The new ideological currents that triumphed during the revolutionary processes gave way to the Contemporary Age (liberalism, with its effects of secularization and laicism). Faced with this, Catholicism in general, but particularly Spanish Catholicism, adopted a policy of rejecting new trends considered to be foreign (that is to say, anti-liberal). These trends appeared in the political

arena in Spain as the Carlist ideology (named after [Carlos, Prince of Bourbon \(1788-1855\)](#), the brother of [Fernando VII, King of Spain \(1784-1833\)](#), who gathered around him those in favour of absolutism). Although it would never reach power, this very aggressive, reactionary ideology was generally adopted by the regular clergy and some of the secular clergy (particularly the lower and middle-ranking clergy) who were its leading exponents.

In terms of this Spanish, confrontational, 19th century Catholicism, [France](#) was not the [church](#)'s favourite daughter any more and symbolized the enemy, since it was where the liberal and republican revolutionary principles had triumphed. The secularist policies adopted by the Third French Republic at the beginning of the 20th century separated state and church, excluding religious orders and institutions from government. In Spain however, the separation of church and state was fought by Spanish Catholicism which had vehemently mobilized between 1910 and 1912 against the secularizing measures of the liberal government of [José Canalejas \(1854-1912\)](#).

The negative attitudes of these factions to France were similarly extended to the liberal [Great Britain](#), birthplace of Anglicanism and Freemasonry. Freemasonry was regarded as the institution that brought about the decline of the church, as the Freemasons were very active agents of liberalism and secularism. For this reason, they were behind all the liberal revolutions that took place in the country (whose first measures were always against the church). Anticlericalism and the recent colonial losses were claimed by some Catholics especially, to be the Freemasons' doing.

There was also Gibraltar, considered the platform of agents that were enemies of Spain (Freemasons, liberals, Anglicans), which made it impossible to have territorial integrity. The view was contrary to that in [Belgium](#) and based not on religious considerations but on the fact that the Belgian government had allowed the protests against Spain (in fact against the government of the conservative politician [Antonio Maura \(1853-1925\)](#), who was highly regarded by these sectors at the time) after the violence in Barcelona during the summer in 1909 known as "Tragic Week". A monument was erected in Brussels in honour of [Francisco Ferrer i Guardia \(1859-1909\)](#), the person considered responsible for the events, during which several religious buildings were burnt. The later inclusion of Italy in the Entente (Italy being a country that not only held the pope prisoner but had isolated him as a consequence of the war), and also of the [United States](#) (ultimately responsible for Spanish colonial losses), added arguments against joining the Entente. Germanophilia was therefore widespread among Spanish Catholics, and religious issues such as Lutheranism or the difficulties experienced by Catholics during the *kulturkampf* made no impression on them. It seemed that they had been overcome, or rather they were not taken into account at this stage (neither was the fact that

the [Ottoman Empire](#), mostly Muslim, was on this side). There was a generalized admiration for [Germany](#) as it represented the authority and order facing democratic freedoms, regarded as terrible for the church in various countries. The negative secular view of the French and British political models held by most of the Spanish Catholics, as they mostly clung ideologically to anti-liberal or clearly reactionary positions, led to their positioning themselves in favour of those who fought against these countries at the outbreak of the war. Opposite them, the most liberal, progressive and anti-clerical groups took positions that were in favour of the Entente.

The Catholic Germanophile Press

The Catholic [media](#) reflected this approach to perfection. *El Universo*, regarded as the official medium of the Spanish episcopate, had a strongly neutralist view about the conflict. *El Debate* was different, as its pages were full of the most relevant figures of the social Catholicism of the time and it was on its way to becoming the most important national newspaper advocating this tendency. Run by the young [Ángel Herrera Oria \(1886-1968\)](#), President of the National Catholic Association of Young Propagandists, and created shortly before by young people connected with the Jesuits, the newspaper defended the strictest neutrality during the war, and wished no sort of participation in the conflict. That approach did not prevent them from expressing their antagonism towards France and England: and [Wilhelm II, German Emperor's \(1859-1941\)](#) religiosity was praised, even though he was not Catholic. *El Debate* stated at the beginning of the conflict:

We the Spanish Catholics positioned ourselves next to Germany, seen as spiritualist, deistic, Christian and defender of the social order, and which uplifted the public morals; we also position ourselves against the separation between the Church and the State, the expulsion and spoils of the religious Orders, the inventory and robbery of the temples and seminaries, the vexations against the Catholics just for the sake of being [...] that this would be the France that would triumph.

In this Germanophile atmosphere some articles stood out, written by an anonymous military man under the pen name Armando Guerra. They included allegations favourable to the Central Powers, backed up by the inclusion of some comments from the [French press](#). *El Debate*, which achieved its high circulation at that time, tried to justify its strong Germanophilia as being due to the attitude of its ideological enemies: if the Spanish left wing had expressed their sympathies for the cause of the Allies, which included secularist France, they necessarily had to be with those who did not wish for that triumph, but fought it. With the German defeat, the newspaper tried to make a fresh start by highlighting how appropriate its commitment to neutrality had been for the nation.¹

Not only the newspapers took this stance. As Alfonso Botti has pointed out, the most outstanding Spanish religious journals of the time showed the same view of reality: support of the official neutrality and evident Germanophilia.² France was not the same country as that of Joan of Arc, but that of the Commune of Paris. The triumph of Germany would mean the triumph of authority, social preservation, collective interests and the meaning of life against utilitarianism and individualism, as Father Martinez said in the Augustinians' journal *España y América*.³ The same could be said about the Jesuits' main journal, *Razón y Fe*, which was particularly vocal over Spain's non-participation in the war, and contrasted the *Kaiser's* extraordinarily religious spirit with the attitude of the Masonic organisation, the Grand Orient de France, that enabled the rest of the Masonic Obediences to win the battle against the obscurantism personified by Germany and [Austria](#). The Dominicans' *La Ciencia Tomista* expressed the same idea. Following [Saint Augustine \(354-430\)](#), it saw the the war as "the providential and divine punishment for the sins of the people", and, following the reactionary thinker [Joseph de Maistre \(1753-1821\)](#), considered that it contributed to the atonement of sins and the regeneration of people more than any other earthly calamity. War was to increase religious fervour.⁴ The same approaches could be found in the books and religious brochures of many priests and religious men, some of whom were prominent members of Cathedral Chapters.

Catholics and their Parties

At that time no great lay Catholic organization in Spain had an inclination to take part in public life and penetrate the centres of political decision. Ángel Herrera's group was still emerging and their activity in politics, following the social doctrine of the church, would take place in the 1920s and mainly in the 1930s. In any case, the public opinions of the group about the war – Germanophile – were captured in *El Debate*. As there were no confessional political organizations at a national level in the strict sense of the term (some were regional or local), Spanish Catholics were attached to other related parties. Liberal conservatism was in power when the world conflict started, and it promoted neutrality. At that stage the group was divided between the followers of [Eduardo Dato \(1856-1921\)](#) and Maura, the person who had had the leadership until shortly before, with great prestige and with sympathies among the Catholic sectors around the country, including those who followed Herrera. Despite the existing ideological and personal differences between the two conservative leaders, Maura and his followers supported the government in its neutrality, and explained it was due to their patriotism. The *mauristas*, who made up a great proportion of the Catholics of the country, were openly Germanophile and understood that with neutrality, the German side benefitted as they believed in its triumph; in that regard they dissociated themselves from other leaders with the same conservative tendency. This was the case of the organizer of the

party, [Ángel Ossorio y Gallardo \(1873-1946\)](#), who had clear liberal anti-German sentiments, and even of Maura, who was more in favour of impartiality and not inclined to favour either side. This disappointed a lot of *mauristas* who were more right wing and even held reactionary views.⁵

Among the different organizations with a clear reactionary ideology, Carlism stood out, being clearly anti-liberal. It had been fighting in favour of religion and an apostolic Roman Catholic Spain since the second third of the nineteenth century. Both the regional and national press was related to this from an ideological point of view, was passionately Germanophile, and above all, francophobe. *El Correo Español*, published in Madrid, stood out in this matter. In the public speeches of the most pre-eminent figure of this group, [Juan Vázquez de Mella \(1861-1928\)](#), the German emperor was regarded as “a Caesar” as he guided his troops (as did [Philip II, King of Spain \(1527-1598\)](#) and [Napoleon I, Emperor of the French \(1769-1821\)](#)), at the same time declaring himself an enemy of England for having ruined Spain and its history. Paradoxically, at the end of the conflict, he was disavowed by the Carlist pretender [Jaime de Borbón \(1870-1931\)](#), in favour of the Allies (he had been confined by the Austrians in his castle near Vienna).⁶

The Episcopacy and the Catholic Missions of the Entente

The attitude of the Spanish episcopacy had great importance because, as shepherds of their flocks, the bishops could influence the opinions held in their provinces and had to show they completely identified themselves with Benedict XV's approaches. Their initial attitude was not very different from the existing one in the social and religious spectrum to which they belonged: that is to say, they were in favour of governmental (and pontifical) neutrality and had open sympathies for Austria and Germany. The difference lay in their prudent and reserved attitude, without the belligerence that others showed, in their public speeches. Pontifical recommendations in favour of world peace appeared in many pastoral appeals published in the ecclesiastical bulletins, as well as through different religious acts in collaboration with different religious associations. They drew attention to the neutrality of the country; they begged for peace; they praised the Pope's humanitarian work; and suggested positioning themselves as not in favour of either side. Their initial Germanophile attitude was redirected as military operations advanced. The accusations by Cardinal [Désiré-Joseph Mercier \(1851-1926\)](#), Archbishop de Malinas (Belgium), about German cruelty inflicted on the population and himself (deprived of liberty and subjected to strict vigilance) seemed to have shocked the episcopacy. This was contrary to other Spanish Germanophile groups that justified German violence as due to the anti-Spanish attitude shown by the Belgians in 1909.⁷

The Germanophilia of Spanish Catholics deeply worried the Allied religious authorities; the nuncio was also apprehensive as this went against the pope's wishes for peace. To overcome this situation, the Catholic hierarchy launched initiatives to influence the Spanish episcopacy. In the case of England, as soon as the conflict started, the Roman Catholic bishop of Southwark, [Pedro Amigó \(1864-1949\)](#), who was originally from Gibraltar, complained to the nuncio about the orchestrated campaign against England in the Spanish Catholic media, which could have led to a Protestant offensive against them. In 1915, he visited Spain and had an interview with relevant figures in the church. He obtained the promise from the superiors of religious orders and the Catholic news agency to silence their Anglophobia. In this meeting, the representative of the Holy See regarded the Spanish attitude as due not to religious matters but political and social ones, so he advised Amigó that he should say this to English Catholics. Amigó did so in March 1916 in an interview with *The Dublin Review*. In a journey that took him to different cities, as well as from having interviews with Alfonso XIII and the king's Austrian mother and British wife, Amigó spoke with various Spanish bishops. His conclusion about where the sympathies of the Spaniards, and more specifically the clergy, lay, was that they "condemn the treatment that the Church was given in France and others believe that the Allies exaggerate when mentioning Germany's atrocities in Belgium". He further stated that the Spaniards had a high regard for German Catholics, maybe because they did not know the anti-Catholic measures carried out by their government in relation to matters such as religious and secular education. Not only Amigó but also other English Catholics made the nuncio aware of their unease due to the Anglophobe and Germanophile tendencies in most of the publications of the religious orders (he referred specifically to *El Mensajero Seráfico* of the Capuchins), and the excesses of many priests.⁸

The French Catholic hierarchy similarly tried to prevent the church from being regarded as responsible for the war. In response to this, the Catholic Committee of French Propaganda was created, chaired by the Chancellor of the Catholic Institute of Paris Monsignor [Alfred Baudrillart \(1859-1942\)](#), who developed an intense campaign in traditionally Catholic countries such as Spain, [Portugal](#), [Ireland](#) and South America. One of the tools used by the Committee, in collaboration with the bishops, was propaganda through the Parisian Publishing House Bloud et Gay, through whom they tried to discredit the Germans, reporting their atrocities in Belgium and Northern France. In Spain, the committees and [propaganda](#) network included exiled French religious people and non-religious, as well as Spanish sympathizers with the Allied cause. It is estimated that there were about twenty-two regional subcommittees in the main cities and more than 500 press correspondents. However, results were not very satisfactory.⁹

The statement by [Antolín López Peláez \(1866-1918\)](#), Archbishop of Tarragona (the most

prestigious see after the Primada of Toledo), falls within this context. In an interview given to an American journalist that appeared in the French press in 1917,¹⁰ Peláez stated that, as a Spaniard and a member of the Catholic Church, he was neutral or “better, Hispanophile”. He declared:

I cannot hide my sympathy and love for France, neither my feeling that part of the minor clergy in Spain has accepted Germanophile ideas and showed Germanophile tendencies, although this movement, to be perfectly honest, has exaggerated and exaggerates profoundly abroad, a fact which is carried out by people that do not know the real situation in Spain.

In his opinion, all this happened because the clergy had mistaken French governmental politics with pro-Catholic feelings predominant in French society. His statements went further than that, when he specifically indicated that “I have forbidden the clergy under my orders to make any comments against France and express, concerning the war, Germanophile ideas, becoming like this tools of a Germanophile and belligerent propaganda”.¹¹

Other bishops expressed themselves in clearly neutral terms and demanded rogations in favour of peace, although at that stage, and separate from the establishment of an international system influenced by the pope’s supreme arbitration, the Spanish episcopacy was far more worried about the complex situation created by the [Russian Revolution](#). Above all, they were worried about the serious crisis of the Spanish political system that summer, as was stated in the collective document of 15 December 1917 in which, with hardly any allusions to the war, the restoration of Christian society was demanded.

Conclusion

The Spanish Catholics were aligned with their government and Benedict XV in that they favoured neutrality as a means to peace. The hostility that these sectors felt for France (identified with the country of revolution and secularism) and the United Kingdom (among other things, birthplace of Anglicanism and Freemasonry), made most of them wish for the victory of the Central Powers. This was reflected in all the Catholic publications of the time, though without showing any interest in participating in the conflict. Catholics in the Allied countries tried to redirect this view, launching different initiatives with little success, except within the church hierarchy, who modified their initial Germanophile approach. The neutrality of the government and Spanish Catholics was praised by the nuncio at all times.

José-Leonardo Ruiz Sánchez, Universidad de Sevilla

Notes

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2. Botti, Alfonso: The Great War in Religious Reviews, in: Ruiz Sánchez, José Leonardo / Cordero Olivero, Inmaculada / García Sanz, Carolina: Shaping Neutrality throughout the First World War, Seville 2015, pp. 165-186. ↑
3. Ibid. ↑
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External Links

- [Aubert, Paul: *La propagande étrangère en Espagne dans le premier tiers du XXe siècle*, in: *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* 31/3, 1995, pp. 103-176 \(Persée\) \(Article\)](#)
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