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Balance of an age in Spain's politics: the Aznar administration (1996-2004) and European identity



Francesc Serra i Massansalvador

Dr. Francesc Serra i Massansalvador

Lecturer in International Relations at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

During the period in which José María Aznar leaded the Spanish government, his European policy has experienced a clear twist in relation to the precedent administrations. Felipe González, the Spanish president who brought at his time not only the negotiations towards the Spanish joining of the Communities, but also the conclusive Maastricht debates, had shown a strong communication with the European building process. Nonetheless, the governments leaded by the Partido Popular seem to have broken the existing empathy between the Spanish policies and the European ones, empathy that seemingly had adopted structural characteristics.

It appears that the new Partido Popular administration, once got the power at 1996, gave a basic priority in foreign policy to promote the transatlantic security relations. This brings us to give a secondary role to the efforts of the previous governments for joining in an active position the European building process. The Spanish presence before the European institutions is focused mainly in the defence of the privileges acquired in that area, especially in what refers to the structural funds assigned to Spain and the power acquired related to the Council decision-making system approved at the Treaty of Nice, on December 2000. Meanwhile, the EU is been living a delicate period which includes the approbation and implementation of the Treaties of Amsterdam and Nice and the starting of the rough road towards the 2004 enlargement and towards the initially failed Constitution. At this period the European institutions started a low level debate focused in the frustrated constitutional text, around the identity contents of the future EU. Spain, centred in an aggressive and often obstructionist European policy, did no participate in a constructive mood in that debate, but she did bring its own point of view and sensibility which, actually, gets the support of other European governments. The picture given by the Aznar administration is one of a Union strongly governmental, not much integrated from an institutional point of view and with its security strongly linked to the Atlantic interests. This picture lets a narrow space to the symbolic contents of a Europe which is designing its geographical and cultural boundaries with a new enlargement and with a new Carta Magna. Nonetheless, Spain showed a particular insistence in that the European Constitution should reflect the cultural heritage of Christianity. This has been the main input from Spain to a debate which will not mean in fact anything else that a foolish show of opposed attitudes which reflect national or ideological sensibilities, without a clear interest in approaching positions or bringing elements of common interest in a European framework.

Although Spain is a mainly Catholic country<sup>1</sup> and the relationship between the democratic public administration and the Catholic Church has been always one of collaboration, both institutions have been always very careful in keeping their independences. The 1979 Spanish Constitution grants the lay character of the State and does not include any reference to the cultural heritage of Christianity. Nonetheless, the Spanish Popular, with a strong Christian Democratic inspiration, brings a representation to a social sectors closely linked to the Church. This relationship between the party and the clerical sectors has not had, in domestic policy, any meaning further

<sup>1</sup> The data showed by the Catholic Church (brang by the *Annuario Pontificio 2001*, available at [www.katolsk.no](http://www.katolsk.no) ), Spain has a 94,1% of baptized people. Nonetheless, a wide poll made by the Spanish official sociological centre *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* on September 2002 ([www.cis.es](http://www.cis.es)) gives an amount of 80,8% of Spaniards who identify themselves as Catholics, from which only 21% are regular adherents; the data shown in that work coincide with others from recent polls and enquiries.

that a low-intensity debate around the religious contents at school. Anyway, President Aznar seems to have focused in the European arena his personal and political sensibility in what refers to religion. Aznar has met four times as Prime Minister of Spain with Pope John Paul II: in 1997, in February 2003, during the Pontifical visit to Madrid in May of the same year and, last time, in January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2004, in what has been understood as a personal farewell from Aznar to his spiritual leader<sup>2</sup>. No one doubts that at these three last meetings both leaders had been talking about the point in which converged their worries: the inclusion of a reference to Christianity in the European Constitution.

The President of the Spanish Government has placed himself as the main speaker of the Vatican position towards the European constitutional process. The Spanish attitude was of defending the humanitarian contents of Christianity as an essential input which defines Europe and must be reflected on its fundamental texts. In that way was expressed by President Aznar at the Forum Ambrosetti in Cernobbio (Italy) in September 6<sup>th</sup> 2003, where he said he could not understand why there is not a reference to the Christian heritage of Europe, "*since without it we can not explain the actual Europe, not exactly because its character of being a faith but mostly for the freedom, equality and respect to the human rights we can find in the essence of Christianity, whatever is anyone's religion, and because we are talking of a real fact*".<sup>3</sup> Not long later he insisted again in the issue in an interview published by the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in November 4<sup>th</sup> 2003: "*The European concept is linked to the European Christian tradition. Otherwise we could not explain the history of my country. I can not explain the gothic domain in Spain without the Christianity, nor the re-conquest of the country (from the moors), the influence of the Catholic Kings or the Charles V Catholic monarchy. It's impossible.*"<sup>4</sup>

In a coherent way, the Spanish delegation delivered this position to the European constitutional debate. On June 19th 2003, at the Saloniki European summit, José María Aznar showed his worries about the inclusion of a reference to the Cultural heritage of Christianity in the European Constitution. Despite the explicit support to the Spain official position expressed by different leaders of the European Popular Party and, more exactly, by the Italian and Portuguese prime ministers, the Spain's minister of Foreign Affairs, Ana Palacio, felt obligated to explain in that meeting that the reference required by Aznar was to be included at the preamble, not at the juridical body of the future Constitution.<sup>5</sup>. At the Rome summit on October 4<sup>th</sup> 2003, which inaugurated IGC which had to lead to the approval of the Constitution, Aznar wanted to make clear that the religious reference was a priority to him: "*I did not mention all the issues that I understand we must face but, among the ones I did mention, one of them is that I believe the preamble of the Constitution must include a reference to the Christian roots. (...) We must put the important issues on the table from the very beginning.*"<sup>6</sup> In that occasion coincide also in requiring the reference to Christianity the leaders from Poland, Italy and Portugal.

Although the religious issue has not been decisive in the failure of the Constitution at the Brussels summit, it did contribute to define some intransigent positions among the European leaders in a sharp debate which hardly allowed any space to condescendence o dialogue attitudes between this unexpected "Catholic lobby" and the firmly laicist positions leaded by France. The Spanish position reflected a sensibility which belonged to a government and a single party, but it did not mean exactly that this position came from a social debate or worry in Spain. At the contrary, in this same period, we can find a strong detachment of the Spanish society facing the exigencies of their government related to the symbolic contents of the future EU, at the same time that we find a strong implication of the Spanish society in the European building process. The Spaniards show themselves among the firmest European partisans of a Constitution: 85% of enquired people in the Autumn 2003 eurobarometer express some kind of

<sup>2</sup> We must remind that the last two meetings between Aznar and the Pope have taken place with the international background of the Iraq crisis. Although the Vatican was openly opposed to the intervention, the papal visit to Madrid meant a strong backing to Aznar in a delicate moment to his popularity.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.es-ue.org/Documents/Cernobbio.doc>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.info-spanischebotschaft.de/doku/r90.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2003/06/19/internacional/1056054739.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://noticias.ya.com/mundo/europa/2003/10/04/5575250.html>.

agreement with it, when the EU average is 77%. In the same poll, 62% of the Spanish enquired gave support to the EU enlargement to all applying countries, against the 47% we find for the whole EU.<sup>7</sup> According the 2000 barometer, in a moment of booming of immigration in Spain 75% of the Spanish enquired agreed with the statement “it is a good thing for any society to be shaped by people from different races, cultures and religions” (second position in the EU, after Sweden; the European average being at 64%); in the same poll, 56% of Spanish enquired showed their disagreement with the statement “the presence of people from minority groups in a cause of insecurity”, face to a 34% who disapproved it (in the whole of the EU, 44% agreed with this statement, and 43% disagreed); 23% of Spaniards, facing 17% of European citizens, stated that “the cultural diversity helps to strength our country”, and only 1% of the enquired Spanish (against 5% of the EU citizens) confessed that the presence of people from other “race” provoked “disturbance” to them.<sup>8</sup> In a significant way, 68% of Spaniards felt in 2003 that immigration policies should be decided at EU level, against 51% who thought in such a way in the whole EU.<sup>9</sup>

The insistence of President Aznar regarding the inclusion of the religious reference in the Constitution reflects actually a personal and political position. It contributes as well to shape a national attitude in a hardly born debate about the symbolic contents of the future institutional Europe. But we can find out that it does not reflect an essential point of view among the Spanish social priorities, and it does not even bring a starting post for a consensus among the different European countries and sensibilities. Its essential function is to bring an image of strength before the European institutions as well as before the Spanish society, bringing forward at the same time a picture of what appears to be an especially sensitive issue to the Spanish culture. The failure of this proposal was more than foreseeable, done not only the secular tradition in several European countries, but also the European social and political tendencies of the last decades; but, since Spain and other countries with similar political needs opposed to the European Constitution for much deeper reasons, such as the power sharing or the future of the structural funds, the fact of keeping the intransigence on the symbolic aspect of the text does not bring anything else than a strength for the obstructionist attitude towards the Constitution. On the other hand, as we have seen, Spain under the Aznar administration has not a major interest for the shaping of the future Europe since it overcomes its actual ambitions in domestic policy or in a security centred in the Atlantic Alliance. For that reason, it can afford an aggressive attitude on a symbolic issue without a real importance, appointed to failure and without a big social support, but which brings the image of a firm, coherent and internationally respected leadership in a constitutional debate at European level; debate that, actually, Spain did not kept a serious interest in defending it or in driving it to a good harbour.

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<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/flash/fl159\\_fut\\_const.pdf](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/flash/fl159_fut_const.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> See [http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_138\\_tech.pdf](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_138_tech.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> See [http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb60/exec\\_summ\\_sp.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb60/exec_summ_sp.pdf).