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Secularization and the Impact on Spanish Social Policy

The 1978 Spanish constitution was a signal event. It sealed the disestablishment of the church and codified a democratic regulation of its relations with the state. The effect was to assist ongoing secularization through dismantling Franco’s ‘National Catholicism’. Instead, besides retaining its role as a moral agent occupying a special cultural position, the church was transformed politically into an influential pressure group, albeit one among several. These processes matured towards the end of the 1980s, when the socialists reached a broad accommodation with the church over its role in welfare services, future funding and, less conclusively, in education.

This chapter examines the nature of secularization in Spain, both in international context and the trends in religiosity among Spaniards. The changing relationship of the church and the state is then discussed, particularly with regard to funding, in order to set the context for policy analysis in the areas of sexual matters, the family, education and social services.

Spanish secularization in comparative context
The particular attributes of secularization are a function of the tradition of catholicism prevalent in any country. In this regard, Wallis and Bruce (1992) juxtapose southern European catholicism – politically reactionary, supported by anti-liberal elites, and exposed to outbreaks of anticlericalism – with the more ‘uncontentious’ catholicism of Ireland and Poland. The economic dimension, too, is an additional contributory factor. Although protestantism is associated with earlier industrial take-off, catholic Catalonia and the Basque territories were among the industrializing pioneers in Europe. What is vital for Germani (1968) is the harnessing of that industrialization for renewal of the state: in general,
it was protestant countries that created flexible, modern institutions of statecraft to match new economic imperatives.

The path towards a secular foundation of society can be subject to volatility and reversals of trends. In Spain, within a general drift away from the church, there have been periods of religious revival. For example, as discussed in Chapter 1, the last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a strong return to vocations, particularly among orders working in education and welfare in the newly urbanizing areas (Lannon, 1987). Conversely, the Second Republic of the 1930s was associated not only with a sharp decline in attendance at mass particularly in the rural south, but with virulent, politically driven anti-clericalism (Payne, 1976). Later, the Franco regime stimulated a certain return to piety, although a ‘liberalizing shock’ occurred with the papacies of John XXIII and Paul VI, and the calling of the Second Vatican Council, which itself enlivened the call to vocations and grass-roots religious sentiment. Thereafter, democratization is associated with a fall in church attendance, although, as we shall see, not necessarily in personal faith.

The same mixture of trends can be found when examining the changing fortunes of the institutional role of the church in southern Europe. The growth of statutory welfare was accompanied by a substantial laicization of certain key provisions. The development of public universal services displaced the assistential approach of the church, historically provoking the object of much popular resentment, and religious agencies were exposed to the challenge of secular professionalization (Wilson, 1992). On the other hand, some social policy innovations had unintended consequences and reinforced the role of the church as provider. This was, for example, the case of Spanish ‘modernizing’ education reforms since 1970 which, contrary to original ambitions, guaranteed a long-term, sometimes expanded, role for church schools. Moreover, there have also been church-led ‘counter-secularizing’ manifestations, as evidenced by the Spanish hierarchy’s critique of neo-liberal economic policies in the 1980s and the advocacy work of the catholic charity, Caritas, on behalf of the socially excluded.

Welfare, the church and the state in Spain

From broadly the last quarter of the nineteenth century until the 1962 Second Vatican Council the Spanish hierarchy shared the general reaction of the southern church to the exigencies of modernization. In the main – and contrasting with their brother bishops in the north – the Spanish episcopate resisted political demands arising from the new economic