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## **Catholics express frustration with religion in public schools**

### ***New course offered on Islam and Catholic course non-credit***

Zenit (11.11.2004)/HRWF (15.11.2004) - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - The National Catholic Confederation of Parents of Families and Students (CONCAPA) criticized the government's decision to impart Islamic religion classes in public schools next year.

The organization considers that the right to religious freedom "is recognized to Muslims but hindered in the case of Catholics."

The Islamic religion classes will begin next year, at least in areas where there is a large presence of Muslim faithful, such as Barcelona, Madrid and some capitals of Andalucia and Levante.

The announcement was made by Mercedes Rico Godoy, general director of Religious Affairs, during a visit to Melilla, a city that, together with Ceuta, has already been imparting this religion course for the past four years.

Catholic associations of parents of students say they do not understand why the government of Jose Zapatero has reduced a similar class on the Catholic religion to a non-credit course, and yet upgraded the class in Islam.

In a statement issued by Veritas, the confederation states that the government "should remember the majority, 80% of whom register their children in the Catholic religion class."

Moreover, the confederation was "surprised" to learn that "the content of the messages of Islam is not controlled, but without going into its possible anti-Constitutionality, it is enough to see how treatment of the person might vary according to gender."

"The generosity in meeting the needs of parents and children who profess Islam is not matched with a consequent enthusiasm for insisting on reciprocity for Catholics living in their countries," the statement added.

The Spanish Federation for Religion in Education (FERE) described as "irrational" the executive's attempt "to push aside the Catholic religion of the majority while facilitating the teaching of the Islamic religion of the minority."

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## **Funding for church to be slashed**

by Isambard Wilkinson

The Telegraph (25.09.2004)/HRWF (28.09.2004) The Spanish government sparked a furious row yesterday after it emerged that it had drawn up a timetable to halve state funding of the Roman Catholic Church and to ban crucifixes from public buildings.

The Socialist government has already pledged to confront the Church ideologically and fiscally and to transform Spain into a fully secular society by scrapping the Church's "privileged position in society".

The newspaper El Mundo reported yesterday that the government has now drawn up a timetable to break the bonds, removing any lingering hopes that it might reach an accommodation.

The government plans to put an end to the arrangement whereby Spaniards can offer a percentage of their taxes to the Church. This arrangement contributes £54 million a year to Church funds.

Governments in the past have made up the remainder directly or indirectly through government funds paid to Church organisations. This funding, which was agreed in accords signed 17 years ago, is also now under review.

El Mundo complained in an editorial yesterday that the government's "secularism should not be used as a weapon against half the country". Although only a minority are regular churchgoers Spain continues to be "a sociologically Catholic country", it said. In a reference to the Spanish Civil War the editorial said: "If we should learn anything from recent history that it is a mistake to use secularism as a weapon against believers."

Earlier plans included a pledge to scrap the promise of the previous centre-Right government of Jose Maria Aznar to re-introduce obligatory religious instruction. The new government said religious education would be optional.

It is also to scrap the existing system whereby teachers of religion are paid by the government but proposed by bishops. The teachers will now be subject to secular employment regulations.

The newspaper reported that a commission under a senior government figure, Gregorio Peces-Barba, is drawing up proposals to eliminate Christian symbols, such as the crucifix, from state-owned public buildings such as schools, prisons and military headquarters.

Mr Zapatero's first act after winning the general election in March was withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq, to the irritation of America and Britain. He then turned on the Church, which he views as part of the "old Spain", announcing a string of reforms that have infuriated ecclesiastical authorities.

Mr Zapatero plans an entire programme of social reform, including equality for homosexuals, allowing women to inherit the Spanish throne, liberalising abortion laws, lifting restrictions on embryo research and cracking down on domestic violence.

In July, the Church struck back, springing an ambush on Mr Zapatero when he accompanied King Juan Carlos to the annual national offering at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. With 52 clergymen looking on, the Archbishop of Santiago, Julian Barrio, let loose a withering denunciation, accusing Mr Zapatero of perverting the natural order.

He declared that marriage was "essentially heterosexual" and that the Church had every right to interfere in national politics "in cases of people's fundamental rights, or the salvation of souls."

Recent surveys show that 80 per cent of Spaniards consider themselves to be Catholic but half of that figure admit 'almost never' going to church. Only 20 per cent of Spaniards claim to go regularly to church.

Further enraging conservatives, the government has drawn up plans to finance the teaching of Islam in state-run schools and to give funds to mosques on the grounds that it will create greater understanding of the country's one million Muslims.

Although Spain has been a Catholic country since the expulsion of the Moors in 1492 it has also long had a tradition of anti-clericalism that flared violently during the civil war. The old saying was that "a Spaniard is always behind a priest, either with a candle or a stake."

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## **Spain considering plan to subsidize mosques**

by Renwick McLean

International Herald Tribune (26.07.2004)/HRWF Int. (27.07.2004) Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> -- The Spanish government has begun formal discussions on a proposal to subsidize mosques in an effort to make them less dependent on financing from extremist groups abroad, according to government officials.

The proposal, which legal scholars say is likely to test the limits of Spain's separation of church and state, reflects a widespread belief among counterterrorism officials here that Spanish mosques are vulnerable to the influences of extremist groups because they feel the need to turn to them for financing.

Publicly, the proposal is being presented mainly as an egalitarian measure intended to offer all of Spain's major religions the same treatment given the Catholic Church, which has received state funding under a supposedly temporary agreement reached with the Vatican in 1979.

But officials in the interior and justice ministries say the proposal is also motivated by a desire to seal off Spanish mosques from the influence of extremists in other countries.

"It's about keeping them from having to look outside for financing because the state does not, in a way, support their activities," said Antonio Camacho, the secretary of state security.

Spanish investigators say the terrorists who blew up trains in Madrid on March 11, killing 191 people, attended mosques that had ties to Wahhabism, a puritanical form of Islam that is the predominate doctrine in Saudi Arabia.

Several experts in terrorism have warned recently about the threat posed by Wahhabi influence in Spain. Jesús Nuñez Villaverde, director of the Institute for the Study of Conflicts and Humanitarian Action, told Parliament two weeks ago that Spain had "closed its eyes to the implications of Wahhabism as a doctrine, which I insist is fundamentalist, which violates human rights."

The state, he said, must do more to dilute the presence of "fundamentalist religious expression that is financed through its own channels, and for which we have not one single instrument of influence, contact, or association."

A Justice official said significant financing for Spanish mosques comes from Saudi Arabia and Morocco, but he added that the money trails are difficult to track. "Often, we don't know. And that's the problem," he said.

Riay Tatory, secretary general of the Islamic Commission of Spain, questioned whether mosques relied on money from extremist groups abroad. "Normally, they are financed by the worshipers," he said.

A spokeswoman for the Saudi Embassy, Brigitte Scheffer, said that Saudi Arabia had financed the construction of some of the mosques in Spain, but that it no longer provided them with money.

The Socialist government, elected in March just three days after the Madrid bombings, has been cautious in discussing its proposal. In May, it stirred a storm of criticism from Islamic leaders and civil liberties groups by suggesting that Spanish laws needed to be altered to allow the government to monitor the sermons being delivered inside mosques.

It quickly backed away from the idea, and officials are now careful to avoid describing any proposals as an effort to control the mosques.

But the government seems to have a wish list. "As we are in Spain, it would be recommendable that they preach in Spanish," a Justice official said. "Not the prayers, which should be in Arabic in accordance with the norms of the religion," he said. "But the sermons, yes."

Despite Spain's history of giving financial support to the Catholic Church, it is by no means clear that the constitution permits state financing of religion, according to legal experts.

"The financing is constitutional," Abraham Barrero Ortega, professor of constitutional law at the University of Seville, "but many authors say it is not because it goes against the provision that says the state will be nondenominational."

But Barrero, in an analysis shared by the government, said that the constitution also includes a "cooperation clause" that allows the government to actively support the religious life of its people.

The funding of the Catholic Church has sidestepped constitutional controversy, legal scholars say, because it is theoretically temporary, originally designed to help the church only until it could support itself.

But because that day is still far off, government officials say, extensions have been repeatedly granted to keep the money flowing. The current extension expires at the end of 2005. Last year, the church received about \$170 million from the government.

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## **Spain jails Imam for book on wife-beating**

by Dale Fuchs

NY Times (15.01.2004) / HRWF Int. (16.01.2004) Email [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website <http://www.hrwf.org> -- A Muslim spiritual leader who wrote a book telling Muslim men how to beat their wives was sentenced to 15 months in prison for encouraging violence against women, a court in Barcelona announced Wednesday.

In his 120-page book, "Women in Islam," Mohamed Kamal Mustafa, imam of the southern Spanish town of Fuengirola, urged husbands not to hit their wives on sensitive parts of the

body or with force but, rather, "on hands and feet, using a light rod so that the blows don't leave scars or bruises," according to the sentencing document, dated Monday and released Wednesday.

Mr. Mustafa's lawyer argued that the book, distributed in Islamic bookstores in Barcelona, merely rehashed versions of Islamic writings from the 13th to 19th centuries and did not represent the imam's personal views. "Freedom of expression wasn't the right argument, it was freedom of religion that had to be protected," said the lawyer, José Luis Bravo García.

In the decision, however, Judge Juan Pedro Yllanes stated that the book was "infused with a tone of obsolete machismo," and that it violated the constitutional "principle of equality" and promoted "intolerable" discrimination against women, outweighing the guarantee of religious freedom. The passages on wife-beating, he said, are "incompatible with the reigning social mores, even if we must remember that the treatment of women in this country was very similar in a not too distant past."

It is the first verdict in Spain that recognizes "incitement to violence on the basis of gender" as a crime, according to a prominent feminist lawyer, María José Varela, who represented the three Spanish women's rights federations that filed the lawsuit over the book in July 2000.

"We showed that Islam had evolved, and that the imam can't shield himself behind religious texts from medieval times," she said, noting that Spanish Muslim women testified at the trial about the evolution of women's rights in contemporary Islam.

The verdict comes as Spain's European neighbors struggle to find a balance between freedom of religion and women's rights in a secular society. But while a French law to ban head scarves and other overt religious symbols in public schools set off protests, several representatives of Spain's diverse Muslim community supported the verdict issued Wednesday.

"We respect the sentence," said Mohamed Halhoul, director of the Islamic Council of Catalonia. "In Islam, there does not exist any type of call for aggression, either towards men or women."

Jadicha Candela, president of an association of Muslim women, hailed the ruling. "With all the confusion about what Islam stands for in Spain, we were afraid that it would be accused of protecting such conduct."

Mr. Mustafa's lawyer said he would appeal the decision, saying the case had been distorted by "media pressure" regarding domestic violence.

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