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## Freedom of Conscience in Miguel de Unamuno

“Venceréis, pero no convenceréis.” Faced with the violent arrogance of General Millán Astay, Unamuno’s final public words spoken on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1936, in the Aula Magna of the University of Salamanca, may be duly appreciated as the peak of one writer’s brave defense of conscience against despotism (Selser 103).

What exactly did Unamuno mean? A succession of writings from his early years until his death under house arrest offers us the key Unamuno himself offers to what he “meant”. Along with his books, we seek out the real “man of flesh and blood” (*Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* ch. 1). In our search for Unamuno’s thought on truth and life, religion and ideology, conscience and authority, we pursue that living and developing intelligence by which he wrote, argued and acted. Therefore, we may rightly apply his own literary and philosophical thought over a life-time of writings to Unamuno’s own actions in freedom of conscience. His multiple experiences in defense of freedom are witnessed by deep meditation as related in his books, poems and letters.

Following the distinction made by John Henry Newman in his *Essay on a Grammar of Assent* we are concerned with that personal “assent” of conscience to authority or beliefs, that is, the act of faith rather than the content of that faith (93-94). So, the argument of religious or political assent is considered from the point of view of personal conscience. Hence, the question is not whether Unamuno was or was not a believer when he died or wrote the *El Cristo de Velásquez*, but rather we focus on the fact of his reading the poem at the anticlerical *Ateneo* (1914). That is, we are concerned with how Unamuno viewed different aspects of authority during his life. We are not focusing on how religious or political authorities viewed Unamuno’s decisions in conscience.

What was Unamuno’s view of conscience in religion and politics? Why did he courageously face such overwhelming odds throughout his life and writings? “Mi religión es buscar la verdad en la vida y la vida en la verdad, aun a sabiendas de que no he de encontrarla mientras viva”, writes Unamuno in his essay entitled “Mi religión” in response to a Chilean reader’s query on what his religion was (370). And, if we were to ask what was not his religion, in his essay “Verdad y vida”, Unamuno writes: “El creyente que se resiste a examinar los fundamentos de su [sic] creencias es un hombre que vive en insinceridad y en mentira. El hombre que no quiere pensar en ciertos problemas eternos, es un embustero, y nada más que un embustero” (384).

Here, Unamuno accepts a philosophy of freedom of conscience, with the given that the very mysterious character of religious belief demand that it be subject to free examination by the thinking person. Hence, the affirmation and belief in rigid dogmas lends itself to the possible proscription of free thought and investigation: “Y lo más opuesto a buscar la vida en la verdad es proscribir el examen y declarar que hay principios intangibles. No hay nada que no deba examinarse. ¡Desgraciada la patria donde no se

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permite analizar el patriotismo!” (383). Seeing that religion is essentially mysterious and not self-evident to human beings, religious assent therefore can never be demanded of another person. The use of control by fear and coercion by force is not coherent with the free nature of belief: “Pero ha sido menester convertir a la religión, a beneficio del orden social, en policía, y de ahí el infierno” (*Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* 125).

In this context, belief for Unamuno is a constant fight with mystery, from dawn to dusk, like Jacob in the Bible (Gen 32, 24). And, precisely because religion is something or rather someone mysterious, lazy peoples: tend toward dogmatism, rather than face the difficulties caused by religious belief. Unamuno believes that the Spanish people have fallen into a routine dogmatism, either in judicial Catholicism or freethinking liberalism. Hence, he considers his role to be that of someone Socratically waking people up to thinking for themselves, rather than swallowing the sociological thought of the powers that be in society:

Y puesto que los españoles somos católicos, sepámoslo o no lo sepamos, queriéndolo o sin quererlo, y aunque alguno de nosotros presuma de racionalista o de ateo, acaso nuestra más honda labor de cultura, y lo que vale más que de cultura, de religiosidad—si es que no son lo mismo—, es tratar de darnos clara cuenta de ese nuestro catolicismo subconsciente, social o popular. Y esto es lo que he tratado de hacer en esta obra. (*Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* 265)

Besides, we may apply to Unamuno his own theory on ideas being both in the writer and in the reader of his books and life, as he himself did with Cervantes (*Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* 274). So, not only may we read Unamuno's text, as he understood it there and then. Hence, we investigate whether Unamuno's ideas in his writings and witness conveyed to the reader today can be developed into a coherent theory on freedom of conscience.

This essay is, therefore, both philosophical and literary, based on his idea of conscience in “Mi religión”, but open to the historical method present in the events of *Paz en la guerra*; the literary study of the *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*; the philosophical approach of *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos*; the personal, concrete, touch of *La agonía del cristianismo* and *Cómo se hace una novela*; and the existential realities of *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*. Hence, we are deducing a theory of freedom of conscience in Unamuno vis-à-vis political and religious authorities as applicable to all human beings independent, but inclusive, of their political and religious beliefs.

Following a chronological order, his thought is first brought out in *Paz en la guerra* (1897), where he sees religion being identified with the Carlist side in a civil war for power. We can imagine the young boy of ten watching a bomb destroy a neighbor's home, and cry, “me duele España”. Unamuno notes that the bombing marked “el fin de mi edad antigua y el principio de mi edad media” (*Recuerdos de niñez y mocedad* 79). And all this killing was in the name of Christianity and the Prince of Peace. The role of the village curate in supporting the Carlist side as the religious side, being only interested in his flock, and destroying enemies, brings out the inherent role of established religion, as determining

sociologically the correct beliefs and party to belong to, even to survive. All of which obviously is contrary to a mysterious and free adherence to belief.

Unamuno's philosophy on freedom of conscience, based on the very mysterious character of religious belief, demand that it be subject to free examination by the thinking person. Hence, the affirmation and belief in rigid dogmas lends itself to the possible proscription of free thought and investigation. Seeing that religion is essentially mysterious and not self-evident to human beings, religious assent therefore can never be socially demanded of another person. Worse still, as was the case in this Carlist civil war, when political powers wish to use these religious beliefs for their own partisan and selfish benefits, the stage is set for ideological monopolies and discriminations, if not persecution, of either non-believers or followers. Against the theory that religion is necessary for morality, Unamuno turns the argument around, Kantian style. If religious people are good just because there's a heaven or a hell, what kind of moral character do they have? Would it not be simple for them later to justify immoral atrocities, such as "cruzadas", in the name of the same religion? "Habrá que arrasar todas las ciudades liberales y sembrar sal en ellas... ¡Los demás esto no se acaba nunca!" exclaimed the minister of religion in *Paz en la guerra* (253).

Later, in "Mi religión" (1907), Unamuno states his freedom of belief even to the point of being free to contradict himself in his own life: "... y reclamo mi libertad, mi santa libertad, hasta la de contradecirme, si llega el caso" (375). Truth in life means sincerity and time in seeking the truth, and obviously respect for another's search. Life in truth means being willing to risk one's reputation, career and life, as in fact happened. Hence, truth for Unamuno is worth more than peace of the ignorant and servile.

In his main philosophical work, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* (1913), Unamuno begins with the philosopher as a "man of flesh and blood." This emphasis on the individual vis-à-vis established religion is, no doubt, a nod to Kierkegaard's insistence on the primacy of personal conscience against a hegelian human spirit in social and historical Christianity. Nonetheless, the problem of the individual and the problem of religion both begin, according to Unamuno, with the problem of death and immortality. While not accepting the traditional rational arguments for immortality, Unamuno sees how his will tends to need to believe in such a life, parallel to his emotional attachment to Christianity. With Schleiermacher, he sees religion as fulfilling an authentic human emotional need. But the abyss remains between the intellect seeking meaning in mystery and the will that accepts a Christian answer. Unamuno concludes that his role as a philosopher is to attack "holy ignorance":

¿Qué es eso de la santa ignorancia? La ignorancia, ni es ni puede ser santa. [...] Sí, sé la canción, sé lo de "que" buena almohada es el catecismo! Hijo mío, duerme y cree; por acá se gana el cielo en la cama. ¡Raza cobarde, y cobarde con la más desastrosa cobardía, con la cobardía moral que tiembla y se arredra de encarar las supremas tinieblas! (*Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* 228)

In *La agonía del cristianismo* (1925) Unamuno continues to seek truth in life, meaning a constant struggle for faith, above all in immortality, within the mystery it entails,

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linked to the prayer, "Lord, I believe; but help my weak faith" (Mark 9:23; qtd. in 1008) In his own life, he became a dissenter from throne and altar, Spain and Catholicism, who nonetheless prayed every night. During this bitter exile in Paris, he read a chapter from the Gospels every evening. Nonetheless, he finds no rational reason for either immortality or the existence of God. Likewise, he refuses to accept "la fe del carbonero" linked to the thought-stopper that "doctores tiene la Santa Madre Iglesia que os sabrán responder" (1013; ch. 9).

The unfortunate step in historical mainline churches of moving into dogmas, legalism and authoritarianism, explains why Unamuno accepts Harnack's theory that institutionalized Christianity has rationalized a personal experience, that which religion really is *per se* (*Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* 121; ch. 4). The consolidation of their beliefs fixed in words, and society's obligation to uphold and enforce these truths and authorities lead to the excesses of inquisitions, expulsions and massacres.

The second part of the paradox of religion, according to Unamuno, is seeking life in truth. In *Cómo se hace una novela* (1927), Miguel quotes people requesting he stick to his expertise, poetry. Referring to the Russian Revolution, Unamuno questions whether the writings of Marx or the guns of Lenin were the most powerful. Unamuno's own life of exile, ridicule, demotion, persecution and death under house arrest ultimately show how he felt he ought live in accord with what he believed.

Que hoy, en mi patria, se trata de luchar por la libertad de la verdad, que es la suprema justicia, por libertar la verdad de la peor de las dictaduras, de la que no dicta nada, de la peor de las tiranías, la de la estupidez y la impotencia, de la fuerza pura y sin dirección. (18-19)

At the end of his life in *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (1931), the force of religion lies in its offering a simple solution to the great enigma of death and existential need for immortality. Hence, this double mystery death-immortality is both the beginning of philosophy and the basic meaning of religion. The strength of this novel is that Unamuno clearly respects people right to belief, though it is not his own personal conviction. Moreover, there seems to be a contradiction with his earlier wish to always say the truth. Here, the incredulous curate takes care of his believing parish in their sufferings, respecting their belief in eternal life. Their religiosity is a far cry from the Carlist crusade for religion. The struggle he personally had with the problem of death may have convinced him to let people be in their simple faith. Freedom of conscience is either for all or not for any.

¡Déjalos! ¡Es tan difícil hacerles comprender dónde acaba la creencia ortodoxa y dónde empieza la superstición! Y más para nosotros. Déjalos, pues, mientras se consuelen. Vale más que lo crean todo, aun cosas contradictorias entre sí, a no que no crean nada. [. . .] No protestemos. La protesta mata el contento. (134)

In this, Unamuno's last novel, both the curate and people have their own beliefs vis-à-vis immortality, living together in a caring society. Ultimately, this is what freedom of conscience is all about. So, as this essay claims to show, we find in Unamuno a process of

reasoning, starting off from his own conscience, and, then, moving on in his life to accept or reject certain religious authorities with their teaching and commands. Their acceptance will be only valid in so far as it is accepted in the individual conscience. The very fact of the curate himself not believing, brings out the strength and the validity of dissent from the pressures of society and position. This latter statement in the novel implies a liberty of conscience vis-à-vis both social and religious authority. No doubt this is the path that Unamuno has consistently followed throughout his life.

So, globally, freedom of conscience for Unamuno is the constant fight ("agony") with mystery, from dawn to dusk, like Jacob in the Bible ("Mi religión" 370). And, precisely because religion is something or rather someone difficult to comprehend, "tanto los individuos como los pueblos de espíritu perezoso – [...] – propenden al dogmatismo [...]. La pereza espiritual huye de la posición crítica o escéptica" (369). Unamuno believes that the Spanish people have fallen into a routine dogmatism, either in judicial Catholicism or freethinking liberalism (373). Hence, he considers his role to be that of Socrates waking people up to thinking for themselves, rather than swallowing the sociological thought of the powers-that-be in society.

Conclusively, because conscience is personal, and not social, one's beliefs are individual, not global. Hence, Unamuno hated the idea of being labeled or pigeon-holed, a member of either an organized creed or church. Belief is both a free and personal search for truth:

Y yo no quiero dejarme encasillar, porque yo, Miguel de Unamuno, como cualquier otro hombre que aspire a conciencia plena, soy especie única [...]. (371)

De lo que huyo, repito, como de la peste, es de que me clasifiquen, y quiero morirme oyendo preguntar de mí a los holgazanes de espíritu que se paren alguna vez a oírme: "Y este señor, ¿qué es?" [...]. (374)

Y es obra de suprema piedad religiosa buscar la verdad en todo y descubrir dondequiera el dolor, la necesidad y la ineptia. (375)

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