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RELIGION AND MODERNITY IN SPAIN: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE
NOVELS OF RAMÓN PÉREZ DE AYALA

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The first decade of the twentieth century in Spain is framed by Galdós's *Electra* (1901) and Pérez de Ayala's *A.M.D.G.* (1910), works which indicate the continuing importance of the religious question and highlight the anticlericalism of a significant sector of the intellectual elite. Loss of faith and anticlericalism, in fact, are only facets of a more complex situation for, if in countries such as England and France, attempts were made to reconcile religion and new scientific ideas, Spain is claimed to have adhered to an authoritarian, conservative version of Catholicism,¹ with the result that religion in Spain is often portrayed in essentially negative terms as being both socially corrosive and devoid of spirituality. Spain, it is argued, had no modernist movement in theology and was immune, for example, to new developments in Biblical scholarship, just as it was long argued that its literature was not part of the wider European movement known as modernism.² In this article, I propose to examine the work of one of the leading modernist intellectuals in Spain, Ramón Pérez

¹ See, for example, Frances Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy. The Catholic Church in Spain 1875-1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); William J. Callaghan, *The Catholic Church in Spain 1875-1998* (Washington: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2000).

² It is appropriate to record here a session at the Conference of the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland, held at the University of Nottingham in 1980, when Alex Longhurst and I presented papers which questioned standard accounts of the literary history of the period and proposed that there was a Modernist Novel in Spain. This notion provoked considerable debate, and indeed some hostility. My paper was published in expanded form as 'Ramón Pérez de Ayala y la novela modernista europea', in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* Nos. 367-68 (1980), 21-36. Professor Longhurst went on to publish several pieces on this question, including 'The turn of the Novel in Spain: From Realism to Modernism in Spanish Fiction', in *A Further Range. Studies in Modern Spanish Literature from Galdós to Unamuno*. Edited by Anthony H. Clarke (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 1-43, and 'Coming in from the Cold: Spain, Modernism and the Novel', in the special issue of *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, "Hispanic Modernisms", edited by Nelson R. Orringer, LXXIX, Nos. 2-3 (2002), 263-283. Also of considerable interest from another perspective is Nicholas G. Round, 'Misericordia: Galdosian Realism's "Last Word"', in *A Sesquicentennial Tribute to Galdós 1843-1993* Ed. Linda M. Willen (Newark, Delaware: Juan de la Cuesta, 1993), 155-72.

de Ayala, in order to suggest a less clear-cut attitude to questions of spirituality, dogma and education.

Of all the major writers of early twentieth-century Spain, Ramón Pérez de Ayala has always been regarded as the most extreme in his anti-religious views. Joaquín de Entrambasaguas, for example, wrote that “si en Unamuno el problema de la duda religiosa es fina porcelana, y en Baroja, cerámica popular, en Pérez de Ayala es loza vulgarísima”.³ The writer confessed, in an interview with Andrés González Blanco, that “he perdido hace algún tiempo otro divino tesoro, que es la fe. Pero en cuanto le digo que estudié seis años con jesuitas [...] se explicará Ud. fácilmente esta segunda pérdida”.⁴ The Jesuit legacy, however, was not entirely negative, for it inculcated in Pérez de Ayala a particular, and very intellectual, cast of mind, a love of the Classics and a deep knowledge of religious writing which permeates the entirety of his work. We know, for example, that he spent his last years in Madrid revising his Latin and Greek and reading various versions of the Bible, though this was by no means a late pursuit. As early as *Tinieblas en las cumbres* (1907),⁵ we find an example of his erudition in a note which cites several scholars in support of his opinion on the dating of *Ecclesiastes*, which contradicts that of the Council of Trent (284-85), proof of his awareness of contemporary trends in Biblical studies. Several critics have alluded briefly to the wider religious implications of Pérez de Ayala’s world vision,⁶ but the frequent use of religious references and allusions in his novels would suggest that a more systematic study be undertaken.

³ Joaquín de Entrambasaguas, *Las mejores novelas contemporáneas*, VII, (Barcelona: Planeta, 1967), 334.

⁴ *Los Contemporáneos*. Primera Serie, Quoted by José García Mercadal in Prólogo a Ramón Pérez de Ayala, *Obras completas*, 4 vols. I, (Madrid: Aguilar, 1964) xxxvii. The first lost ‘tesoro’ was his youth.

⁵ *Tinieblas en las cumbres* Edición de Andrés Amorós (Madrid: Castalia, 1986). All further references to this and subsequent novels are included in the text.

⁶ Andrés Amorós, *La novela intelectual de Ramón Pérez de Ayala* (Madrid: Gredos, 1972); Agustín Coletes, Blanco, *Gran Bretaña y los Estados Unidos en la vida de Ramón Pérez de Ayala* (Oviedo:

Pérez de Ayala lived, it is worth remembering, in a period which was not as secularised as our own time. His life spans the Restoration, the monarchy of Alfonso XIII, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, the Second Republic, and over two decades of the Franco era, and his ideas are unlikely to have remained fixed over such a long period.⁷ Like most sons of the middle classes, he received an education at the hands of the religious orders and grew up at a time of intense religious controversy and political conflict. The Counter-Reformation roots of his education were balanced by his wide reading, particularly of authors from abroad. He was a subscriber to reviews such as *Le Mercure de France* and the multifaceted nature of his approach to religion is evident from his earliest writings. Indeed, against the background of the antagonism between Liberalism and Catholicism - in 1905, just a few years before Pérez de Ayala wrote *A.M.D.G.*, the *Mensajero del Sagrado Corazón* had contained an article affirming that it was always a mortal sin to be a liberal - Pérez de Ayala deliberately appropriates the word liberal in his definition of religion: “¿Qué es la religión en su alcance más íntimo y venerable? El respeto a la obra del Creador. ¿Qué es el sentido común? Otro tanto. ¿Qué es el liberalismo? Lo propio.”⁸ Pérez de Ayala’s primary conception of religion has to do with meaning and sense-making, with community, with non-specific spirituality as distinct from dogma, and also with respect as distinct from mere tolerance. In one sense it is progressive and forward-looking and, in another, it looks back to pre-modern, primitive ways of thinking and modes of religion.

Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 1984); Manuel Fernández Avelló, *El anticlericalismo de Ramón Pérez de Ayala*. (Oviedo: privately published, 1973).

⁷ See Miguel Pérez Ferrero, *Ramón Pérez de Ayala* (Guadarrama: Fundación Juan March, 1973) and *Las mocedades de Ramón Pérez de Ayala (1880-1908)* (Oviedo: Grupo Editorial Asturiano, 1992). Also Florencio Frieria Suárez, *Pérez de Ayala y la historia de Asturias*, (Oviedo: Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 1986).

⁸ Ramón Pérez de Ayala, *Obras completas*, III, (Madrid: Aguilar, 1966), 59.

Considerable critical work since the 1980s has been devoted to demonstrating the unhelpfulness of the then accepted distinction between Spanish and Spanish-American *modernismo* and the Spanish Generation of 1898 for an understanding of early twentieth-century fiction in Spain.⁹ The case for a work such as Unamuno's *Niebla* (1913) is relatively easy to make¹⁰, and now, a quarter of a century later, the concept of a Spanish modernist novel has become a new orthodoxy, encompassing writers as diverse as Ángel Ganivet and Pío Baroja. The philosophical and ideological implications of Modernism's engagement with Realism have therefore been well studied, as have their formal consequences for the new novel of the early twentieth century. Similarly, the impact of new social and political theories, of industrialization and modernization, of foreign influences on artists and intellectuals, have to varying degrees been researched and analysed.¹¹ One area of relative omission, however, surprising in view of the importance of the religious question in Spain, has been any sustained consideration of the relationship of religion and modernity in the fiction of the turn of the century.¹² In this respect, the new novel displays a marked continuity with its nineteenth-century predecessor. Contemporary interpretations of Spain's turbulent nineteenth century, in which there were the Peninsular Wars, seven constitutions, fifty-two revolutions and three civil wars, had Catholicism at their centre, whether perceived as the cause of, or the cure for, Spain's ills. The whole

⁹ See note 3 above and John Macklin, *The Window and the Garden. The Modernist Fictions of Ramón Pérez de Ayala* (Boulder, Colorado, Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1988).

¹⁰ See my 'Competing Voices: Unamuno's *Niebla* and the Discourses of Modernism', in *After Cervantes. Seventy-Five years of Iberian Studies at Leeds*. (Leeds: Leeds Iberian Papers, 1993), 167-93.

¹¹ E. Inman Fox, *Ideología y política en las letras fin de siglo (1898)*, (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1988); Lily Litvak, *A Dream of Arcadia. Anti-Industrialism in Spanish Literature 1895-1905* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975); Gonzalo Sobejano, *Nietzsche en España* (Madrid: Gredos, 1967).

¹² An important exception is *Religión y Literatura en el Modernismo Español 1902-1914*, Co-ordinated by Luis de Llera (Madrid: Editorial Actas, 1994) which, in addition to looking at questions of interdisciplinarity and historiography, examines aspects of the work of José Ortega y Gasset, Miguel de Unamuno, Pío Baroja, Ramiro de Maeztu and Felipe Trigo.

period from the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1875 until the establishment of the Second Republic in 1931 is a complex one but, whatever their political stance, it is important to remember that the main writers of the period were products of a culturally Catholic society, in which it was taken for granted in the dominant ideology that national greatness and the transmission of Catholic values were inseparable. The Counter-Reformation origins of modern Spanish Catholicism are reflected in the continued rejection of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, Protestants, Freemasons, foreign ideas, liberalism. In turn, hostility to the Church was often godless, violent and fanatical. In the early twentieth century, Eugenio Noel observed, in *Semana Santa en Sevilla* in 1916, that Spain was “un país católico y al mismo tiempo tan poco religioso”.¹³ This kind of comment, not surprisingly, earned him both notoriety and led ultimately to his excommunication, but it raises another kind of question, that of a change of emphasis within Catholicism towards a Catholicism of modernity. The interesting question is whether there were at the time currents of thought, drawing on philosophies to which orthodoxy was intensely hostile - empiricism, positivism, Kantian idealism - which, while seeking to acknowledge religious belief, was not concerned with proving the existence of a personal God.

Although theological, or religious, modernism did not have the obvious manifestations in Spain as it did in other countries, notably Germany, France, Switzerland and, to a lesser extent, in the United States, some of the earliest literary historians of the period, including those who adhered to and promoted the 98-*modernismo* division, did perceive a connection between the two movements. Guillermo Díaz-Plaja wrote that

¹³ Eugenio Noel, *Semana Santa en Sevilla*. Ed. Jorge Jiménez Barrientos and Manuel J. Gómez Lara. (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 1991), 26.

coinciden curiosamente ambos modernismos, el estético y el religioso, en su postura antitradicional, en la sustitución de los dogmas por actos de sinceridad interior, en la predicación de un agnosticismo, en el valor de las formas intuitivas por encima de las racionales, en el culto al misterio como campo de la intimidad efusiva.¹⁴

The most consistent advocate of a close connection between literary and theological modernism was Juan Ramón Jiménez who argued against

las críticas generales que han sustentado el error de considerar el modernismo como una cuestión poética y no como lo que fue y sigue siendo: un movimiento jeneral teológico, científico y literario que en lo teológico, su intención primera, comenzó a mediados del siglo XIX en Alemania y se propagó a distintos países, Francia, Suiza, Estados Unidos u otros.¹⁵

The conventional wisdom is that Spain's transition to modernity was slow, painful and delayed and indeed the preoccupation of writers and intellectuals with the problem of Spain, following Spain's effective loss of Empire in 1898. Some interpretations which identify this problem entirely with the mindset created by an all-pervasive Counter-Reformation Catholicism stress the fact that modernism in the Catholic Church, so influential elsewhere in Europe and the United States, was virtually non-existent in Spain. And of course, while it was recognised that modernism was a wider phenomenon than a purely theological one, a thinker of the stature of Unamuno was reluctant to equate the two: "Hay clérigo que confunde el

¹⁴ Guillermo Díaz-Plaja, *Modernismo frente a 98* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1951), 8.

¹⁵ Juan Ramón Jiménez, *El modernismo. Notas de un curso (1953)* (Mexico: Aguilar, 1962), especially 225-26. Original orthography.

modernismo literario con el modernismo religioso, y le parece que Rubén Darío es de la misma denominación que el P. Tyrrell”.¹⁶

From his earliest novel, *Tinieblas en las cumbres* (1907), Pérez de Ayala is aware of modern ideas on Biblical interpretation.¹⁷ This first novel is, significantly, characterized by a dualism with regard to religion in that, while it is full of anticlerical mockery, it also demonstrates the author’s affection for simple religion, mainly through his description of plain country churches (92), a constant throughout his work. Simplicity, of course, can be simplification which, allied to superstition and ignorance, can permeate popular religion and facilitate the imposition of an essentially Counter-Reformation Catholicism based on fear and desire. As against facile concepts of religion, Alberto seeks something more profound, and the *Coloquio superfluo* is an attempt to relate man’s religious feelings to his affinity with Nature. The debate between Yiddy and Alberto, who feels himself “confundido y disuelto en un espíritu o gran alma universal” (248-49), on pantheism and spiritualism marks the early stages of Pérez de Ayala’s engagement with the infinite. Some of the ideas expounded in this section recall the definition of religion proposed by William James: “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they can apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.”¹⁸ The contemporary Church view can be found in encyclicals such as *Aeterni Patris* of 1878, in which Leo XIII enthroned a scholastic philosophy which insisted on the separateness of God from his creation, and *Pascendi Gregis*, in which Pius X asserted that “the Modernist acceptance holds and professes that every phenomenon of

¹⁶ Miguel de Unamuno, “¡No existe lo primitivo!” in *Meditaciones y ensayos espirituales* in *Obras completas* (Madrid: Escelicer, 1967), 1184. Unamuno had copies of Tyrrell’s work in his personal library.

¹⁷ For a fuller treatment of Biblical allusions in Pérez de Ayala’s novels, see my ‘Pérez de Ayala and the Bible’, *Moenia* Universidad de Santiago de Compostela (forthcoming 2012).

¹⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

consciousness proceeds from man as man. The rigorous conclusion from this is the identity of man with god, which means Pantheism”.¹⁹ For the orthodox Catholic, God is both immanent and transcendent. Yiddy’s despair is born of an awareness of death, the undesirable consequence of a Jesuit education, and is foreshadowed in the epigraphs at the beginning of the novel. Alberto’s affirmation that he believes “en algo misterioso, de sutilísima esencia que, infundido en nuestro cuerpo, lo anima y le ha de sobrevivir” (262) suggests that a rejection of the notion of personal immortality does not imply lack of belief in eternal life. Yiddy, on the other hand, sees the death of the individual as the death of consciousness. While Alberto aspires to seeing in Nature “el más claro y limpio espejo de la divinidad” (255), Yiddy wants to retreat into a world of epicurean scepticism and to enjoy the pleasure of the hour, after the fashion described by David in *Ecclesiastes*. Drawing on Pascal’s “roseau pensant”, Alberto places man at the centre of the universe - an early expression of the phrase “el ombligo del mundo” which is the title of a collection of short stories published in 1924: “el hombre es el sentido de la tierra” (257). The residue of Alberto’s religious education is seen when he enters the chapel towards the end of the novel. Alberto prays frantically to the God of his childhood, but is brought to reality by a vulgar image of the Sacred Heart, a devotion, promoted by the Jesuits, which Pérez de Ayala mocks, as he does in *A.M.D.G.*, where it is described as a “culto puramente simbólico....que las gentes de poco seso al punto lo adulteran, convirtiéndolo en devoción a una víscera”(185). For this reason, and on aesthetic grounds, he rejects popular images of piety, like that described here in *Tinieblas en las cumbres* as “un cromó del sacratísimo corazón de Jesús, uno de esos cromos jesuíticos en que la divina humanidad del Nazareno parece despojada de toda hombría y majestad” (296).

¹⁹ *Pascendi Gregis*. Official English translation, (London: Burns and Oates, 1908), 50.

Conventional religion offers no solace in a world where everything is “ciego, estúpido, vertiginoso y fatal” (298).

Pérez de Ayala’s second novel, *A.M.D.G.* (1910), which was dedicated to Galdós and which precedes Joyce’s *Portrait of an Artist* by some six years, was a *succès de scandale*, though its content is far from original. In a sense, the novel is less about religion and more about education. For Pérez de Ayala, education is not about transmitting knowledge and passing on dogma from generation to generation, but about inculcating an independent capacity for judgement and critical inquiry. Pérez de Ayala’s critique is that of an intellectual arguing for laicisation of education. Written within a year of the “Semana trágica” in Barcelona, a year punctuated by general strikes, in which the first Socialist deputy was elected, the year of the derogation of Article 556 of the Código Penal, and the blocking of the Ley de Reforma Agraria. On the religious front, Pius X’s Encyclical *Pascendi Gregis* condemning the Modernists had been published in 1907, as was his *Syllabus of Errors* (*Lamentabili Sane*). The requirement on newly ordained priests to take the Anti-Modernist Oath (*Sacrorum Antistitum*) was imposed in 1910. In *A.M.D.G.* themes from Pérez de Ayala’s first novel are taken up and extended. Essentially, for Pérez de Ayala, the Jesuits through their colleges serve a particularly sterile form of bourgeois morality; they subordinate everything to religion and consider man to be intrinsically evil. In *A.M.D.G.*, the *Spiritual Exercises*, much praised in the Church, are seen as St Ignatius’s desire to materialise the spiritual, to engage in action rather than abstraction. The novel contains a detailed account of the *Exercises* (235-47), which are then mocked, when an appendage is added to a quotation from Apocalypse stating that we need to thank God, the Lamb and the Exercises of St Ignatius for our salvation (238). Not surprisingly, given its themes, the Bible appears prominently in the novel.

In terms of the modernist debate, it is significant that Fr Atienza insists, that far from being something divine and immutable, imparted through the authority of the Church, the various parts of the Bible were rooted in a specific historical context and written in the language of its day. Moreover, for religion to be successful, it requires an elaborate ritual and a number of saints to be venerated.

Many ridiculous superstitious tales are recounted to illustrate the methods of indoctrination used on the children, and the intensity of these intellectual assaults can be seen to result in Bertuco's exaggerated reaction of self-chastisement to his early intimations of rationalism (248-49). The sacraments are mocked, too, in that Bertuco seeks out a priest he thinks will be indulgent and is relieved beyond belief on receiving absolution. There are references to the cult of the saints (St Anthony of Padua, St. Malo, St Francis of Assisi) and especially the Virgin. The text is replete with references to religious figures, such as Juan Perrone (1794-1876) a Jesuit theologian very much favoured by various Popes who was entrusted with doing the necessary work preceding the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (1854). His work was used extensively in seminaries, especially his writings on the heresy of Protestantism. Other examples are Fr Nieremberg (1595-1658), who wrote biographies of illustrious Jesuits. Fr Sequeros is devoted to the cult of Fr Cristótopmo Riscal (140, 183) and is particularly devoted to the Sacred Heart, a devotion fully explored and derided in the novel. Atienza, the modernist, explains the origin of this devotion, which he calls "cordicolismo" (185), in the visions of Santa Margarita María de Alacoque (1647-90). Intended as a symbolic representation of God's love for humanity, it acquired a real and tangible presence, and was promoted through the Jesuit publication *Mensajero del Sagrado Corazón*, an independent Spanish version, founded in 1886, of the French original. Devotion to the reign of the Sacred Heart

intensified to such a degree that Spain was dedicated to the Sacred Heart in 1919 by Alfonso XIII and a statue erected in the Cerro de los Ángeles as a symbol of opposition to religious pluralism.

Alongside Pérez de Ayala's critique of conventional religion, however, we can discern from an early stage a deep interest in religious experience, evidenced in his awe before nature and in his piety before unadorned, country churches. In *La pata de la raposa*, his third novel, he speaks to his *novia*, Fina, of the Franciscan ideal: "trabajar sin dinero, siendo pobre; trabajar sin sensualidad, siendo casto; trabajar sin humildad, siendo obediente" (276), an indication of his desire to return to the ideals of early Christianity. Later he composes a poem which echoes the sentiment, and style, of Fray Luis de León's *Vida retirada* (284). The key section in the novel, is Chapter VI, a kind of intercalated chapter in which the author through the use of animals to embody moral positions or attitudes to life, conceives religion as a search for meaning rather than certitude. The dog Sultán is used to define the Semitic conception of a personal God, belief in the existence of a superior being who rules man's conduct and from whom morality derives. The same idea recurs in *Troteras y danzaderas*: "el perro ama al hombre y el hombre ama a Dios" (55). In the poem, Sultán's "filosofía/no conoce la duda y el negror" (75), for his is a religion of subservience, leaving no room for imagination and the possibility of uncertainty, which Pérez de Ayala likens to the experience of the mystics: "Hay que dejar abierta una puerta del alma, por si llegara el Esposo" (74). Yet the deficiency of canine morality is that it confronts death by creating an afterlife. Alectyron, the cock, represents the sensual life, embodied in *Ecclesiastes*, and Calígula, the cat, "un pirronista militante/que nada cree; ni en Dios, ni en la virtud" (77) represents Hellenic morality, the search for fulfilment in which man is "el ombligo del Universo" (74). Such an attitude ignores

the concept of the unknown and the unknowable, which the ant (Madama Comino) avoids through endless work and activity: “sólo en la faena se agota tu desvelo” (80). All these animal perspectives, which Alberto puts forward in total seriousness, have their limitations and inadequacies. Only in an imaginary realm of harmony, embodied in the poem “En el cielo”, where there is no conflict between ideological positions, is Pérez de Ayala’s liberalism realised, but it is an illusory harmony, for its implied tolerance is something which appears to be beyond the capacity of mankind.

Belarmino y Apolonio (1921) is usually considered as a comic exercise in perspectivism, an exploration of drama and philosophy, and a novel concerned with knowledge and with language. What is striking about the novel, however, is the extent to which it is infused with religion. The temporal framework of that part of the novel recounted by the first-person narrator is provided by Holy Week, from Holy Tuesday until Easter Sunday.²⁰ Apart from the two eponymous shoemakers, the main character is the priest, Don Guillén, whose relationship with Angustias, a prostitute, elopement and subsequent enclosure in the seminary, form the plot of the novel. The priest’s ideas on religion feature prominently throughout the work, especially in Chapters IV and VII which are in effect monologues. His first appearance in Chapter I provides an early opportunity for anticlerical remarks: the priest is likened to a freshly cast and painted saint; his eminence for his age is attributed to influence, though he does not have the appearance of the “cura conquistador” or the “curilla faldero” (77).

The novel soon moves away from mere anticlericalism towards a more profound consideration of religion. Don Guillén himself, found not observing the requirement of abstinence, explains the difference between the Church and the State and between dogma and observance. The State permits freedom of thought, but not of

²⁰ Sara Suárez Solís, *Análisis de “Belarmino y Apolonio”* (Oviedo: Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 1974).

action, whereas with the church, the opposite is the case. “La iglesia es intransigente en materia de ideas y tolerante en materia de acciones: sólo el pensamiento peca” (87). This confirms the message of *A.M.D.G.*, namely, that the most monstrous sins receive absolution, but not “la más mínima duda del confeso en materia de la fe” (xxxx). The book on evolutionary science by the “good” and erudite Jesuit Fr Atienza’s was refused publication by the ecclesiastical authorities, a rejection of intellectual freedom and a reference to the Church’s refusal to permit Julio Cejador, who also taught Pérez de Ayala, to publish his work on philology. This, and not liberalization, is the real secularization of the spirit, an example of how the Christian Church “de potencia espiritual y apostolado de caridad social, se trocó en potencia política” (253) a process initiated when Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. As the Church becomes a political power, the true Evangelical message is submerged.

From this perspective, the romantic subplot of the two lovers, Pedro and Angustias, can be understood in terms of allegory. Pedro, in his role as a prominent cleric, represents the official Church, whereas Angustias is likened the primitive church, and their reuniting at the end of the novel symbolizes the return of the official Church to its Christian roots. As was the case with earlier novels, the technique of Biblical reference is continued. Pedro’s and Angustias’s elopement is likened to the flight of the Jews in *Exodus* and is accompanied by references to the Flood in which their carriage becomes a new “arca de salvación”. This procedure imparts a mythical dimension evoking the destruction of a degenerate humanity and the survival of an ideal humanity symbolized in the “arca de la alianza” (179) which accompanies their escape. Throughout the novel there had been references to Pedro’s sanctity, to the extent of likening him to Jesus on the Cross. Initially, this characterization had been

related to the degraded religious iconography of halos and bleeding feet of the Counter-Reformation. As the novel progress, however, this characterization acquires more dignified and spiritual tones. Pedro's disquisition on the Breviary allows him to comment on the role of St. Paul in spreading, or rather creating and founding, Christianity, in particular the importance the apostle placed on the spirit, as explained in *Corinthians II*. In fact, *Belarmino y Apoloni*, Pérez de Ayala's most anticlerical work also contains his clearest pronouncements on spirituality. "El Señor es el espíritu; Dios reside en nuestra alma. Todo el resto, documentos, testimonios, dogmas, es secundario" (182), asserts Guillén, which is reinforced immediately afterwards in the words "Creo en el espíritu y soy continente; todo el resto es secundario" (183). One could even argue that the model of punishment, repentance and redemption is no longer understood exclusively in its supernatural sense and is reincorporated into the archetypal modes of human behaviour. In this way, the uniqueness of the scriptures as the Word of God is undermined. By querying of the supernatural inspiration of the Sacred Books, by viewing them as a merely human, and fallible, documents or set of documents, Pérez de Ayala locates them in the wider body of literature as mythical narratives of the human experience.

Beyond the question of spirituality, there are contemporary concerns which inform the work. Firstly, Pérez de Ayala tantalizingly holds out the prospect of recounting in a future novel Guillén's work as a social reformer. Historically, the role of the Church and the social question is an important one, with the rise of workers' movements and Encyclicals such as *Rerum novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, and is inseparable from the application of evangelical notions of poverty to ideas of social order. Pérez de Ayala links the two in his ideas on anarchism as a quasi-religious form of social organisation (272), embodied in the pre-hierarchical primitive Church. The

Church's promise of eternal life, obviously impossible in a physical sense, is transferred to the spiritual realm in the notion of a Paradise beyond death. The goal of humanity is eternal happiness and in this way the Church justifies the many evils and inequalities in the world in which we have no lasting abode. Guillén insists on the right to happiness in this life and by implication highlights the inadequacy of the Church's social teaching and the degree to which it has deviated from Gospel precepts.

Secondly, Pérez de Ayala adds an Epilogue to his narrative purported to be the work of El Estudiantón, also known as Froilán Escobar, giving examples of Belarmino's vocabulary. What is of significance are his ideas on art, or rather, on his ideal of cultivating the Good, the Beautiful and the True. This picturesque character dies young and Pérez de Ayala thereby underlines the danger inherent in this ideal neo-Thomist trinity, which in the realm of aesthetics implies that the creative impulse is a divine gift, that all artistic beauty is a reflection of divine beauty and that the object of art is to convey the attributes of God. For Pérez de Ayala, this is the equivalent of stifling the imaginative springs of creation. Its corollary, scholasticism, then widely disseminated in the seminaries, is the antithesis of modern philosophy, not least in its rigid and extreme rationalism. Neo-scholasticism, which emphasises proof via the intellect, kills curiosity and imagination. Pérez de Ayala is not interested in proving or disproving the existence of God, but seeks rather to investigate the nature of religious experience.

Finally, Catholicism's obsession with sexuality is questioned. In Pérez de Ayala's novels there are no conventional family relationships and in fact little attention is accorded to family life. Many of his female characters are prostitutes and the cult of virginity is constantly mocked. Angustias, the fallen woman, is regularly

compared to Mary Magdalen, and her relationship to Pedro linked to a particular interpretation of Jesus and Mary Magdalen as portrayed in the Gospels. Three hymns of the *Breviary* on Mary Magdalen -one by Cardinal Bellarmine, another by St Gregory rewritten by Cardinal Bellarmine and a third by St Odon of Cluny - embody Pedro's vision of himself and his lover, though as a reversal of the Bible story. The hymns emphasise the episode where Mary Magdalen washes the feet of Jesus and is restored and redeemed, an episode which is enacted later in the novel (279), except that now it is Pedro who seeks forgiveness and redemption. The notion of the fallen woman is combined with that of spirituality to discredit notions of physical sin. The reuniting of Pedro and Angustias is related to the ritual and story of Holy Week, a new Passion of suffering and love. Underlying this is the myth of death and resurrection, translated on to a human plane. Easter Sunday and Pentecost (195, 209) represent the new life. The narrator goes to Angustias on Easter Sunday, in a profane re-enactment of the resurrection (279). The salvation of the fallen woman is, however, given a secular and thoroughly human interpretation.

Male-female relations form the basis of Pérez de Ayala's last two-part novel, *Tigre Juan* and *El curandero de su honra* (1926)²¹ which deal with the question of *donjuanismo* and the Calderonian concept of honour. From the point of view of religion, this is an interesting choice, since Calderón was the dramatist *par excellence* of the neo-Catholics: "Calderón es nuestro". Leaving aside this politico-religious dimension, the novel exhibits highly suggestive religious resonances, many of which are connected to traditional social and Catholic concepts of woman. Pérez de Ayala, though on one level progressive in his approach to the sexes in his rejection of Spanish *machismo*, could be argued to be very conventional in his views to the extent

²¹ *Tigre Juan. El curandero de su honra* Ed. Andrés Amorós. (Madrid: Castalia, 1980).

that some critics have accused him of anti-feminism.²² A persistent theme here, found in other novels, is the ideal of motherhood. In *Belarmino y Apolonio*, Don Amaranto quotes St Augustine on woman: “nisi mater, instrumentum voluptatis” (67). Tigre Juan’s idealization of doña Iluminada leads him to create a trinity of decency which includes only “Mi madre, la Madre de Dios y ella” (108), although in other works, such as *Luna de miel, luna de miel* (1923),²³ Pérez de Ayala has criticized by implication the idolization of the mother and the mother fixation which characterizes Spanish males: “El culto o la idolatría de la madre, en abstracto” (9).

Tigre Juan moves from one view of woman, based on his understanding of the archetypal Eve and his own experience, to a more balanced one, though still traditional. Woman is the cause of man’s fall, is untrustworthy, unlike the “fuerte mujer bíblica” (133) as described in *Proverbs, XXXI*, 10-31. Doña Iluminada, whom Juan admires, is described in the hagiographical words “virgen y mártir” (109) and her spirituality is expressed in the words Jesus used to Pilate (*John, XVIII*, 36): “Mi reino no es de este mundo” (145). Thus she can claim to be an “Esposa mística [...] no en el claustro, sino en el siglo” (141). The ideal archetype imposes itself progressively in the course of the narrative. Whereas in *El cuarandero de su honra* there is a quotation from *Revelations*: “Mulier sedet super bestiam” which is comically translated, another tradition is also upheld, that of woman as the perfect companion of man: “el Espíritu Santo afirma que la dicha mayor del hombre mortal es la compañía de una esposa amante y perfecta” (351). This view is reflected in texts such as *Proverbs, XXXI*, 10-31 or *Ecclesiastes XXVI*, 1-35. Behind such a conception is also

²² See, for example, Sara Suárez Solís, “El antifeminismo de Pérez de Ayala”, *Los Cuadernos del Norte*, I, No.2 (1980), 48-52 y Thomas Feeny, “More on the Antifeminism of Perez de Ayala”, *Hispanic Journal*, 7, No. 1 (1985), 115-21.

²³ *Luna de miel, luna de hiel. Los trabajos de Urbano y Simona*. Introduction by Andrés Amorós. (Madrid : Alianza, 1969).

the presence of the moral and philosophical treatise of Fray Luis de León, *La perfecta casada* (1583) inspired by a rich tradition of Greek and Patristic sources.

A repeated Evangelical theme (*Mark*, VIII, 18) is that of having eyes and not seeing which, in turn, relates to Juan's negative view of woman, based on his understanding of the archetypal Eve as she appears in "la Santa Biblia, dictada por el Eterno" (115) and reinforced by his own experience. Another repeated Evangelical theme (*Mark*, VIII, 18 and *Matthew*, XV, 14) which accompanies Juan's movement from ignorance to enlightenment, and reflected in images of light and darkness, is that of having eyes and not seeing. When Iluminada informs Tigre Juan that Herminia is the person who has refused Colás, she uses these words. They are embodied later in the person of Don Sincerato Gamborena, the priest who directs the school for blind, deaf and dumb children. *Tigre Juan* ends with his words: "Ojos tiene y no ven; oídos, y no oyen [...] Los que llamáis ciegos son los que mejor ven, porque no han menester luz; sordos y mudos, los que mejor hablan, porque para ellos el silencio es elocuente" (235). The theme is taken up again in the "coro mudo y cabalístico" (264) at Tigre Juan's and Herminia's wedding.

The actual death of the priest, Sincerato Gamborena, is set in the context of the midsummer feast of St John's Eve, in which pagan and Christian ritual are blended to signify the triumph of light over darkness and a capacity to see the world, and its deceits, *sub specie aeterni*. Alongside this, Nachín de Nacha evokes rustic superstition: "Veo pantasma. Homes y muyes abrazándose. Pantasma. Oigo las tarramelas de la culiebra. Oigo los blincos del trago y la risada del diablo burlón" (327). Pérez de Ayala appears to explore the deceits of the senses and the attainment of a higher order of understanding, free of dogmatism and rigid moral values, and the

humble acceptance of the fugitive nature of existence. Life appears in the *Coda* to the novel as the dream of an unseen (and impersonal) creator:

Gozar ... Penar ... Vivir
 Goces y penas huideros
 Todo huye y se desvanece.
 Vivir, soñar. La vida es sueño.
 No soñamos los hombres mortales.
 Nosotros mismos somos un sueño.
 El mundo es el sueño de Dios. (373-74).

Pérez de Ayala puts in the mouth of Colás his view on justification (a theological term), one which expresses his undogmatic conception of human life: “Justificar: reconocer la justicia que a la vida le asiste, en cada caso y momento, para ser como es, infinitamente diversa en su irracionalidad” (395).

The most fundamental Biblical theme in the novel, however, is that of Apocalypse, first used when Tigre Juan’s past, in the form of Isabela Semprún, returns to disturb his present. It is like a “trompetazo del Juicio Final” (182) in which Tigre Juan undergoes a revelation, an insight into his erroneous vision of the past: “el derrumbamiento y catástrofe de un mundo, falso, percedero, mundo de apariencias falsas” (183). This leads to a mythical death and resurrection, as of one being born again: “¡La Apocalipsi! ¡La resurrección de la carne! (197), concepts which are sustained as eschatological themes throughout the remainder of the work. The Apocalypse theme is appropriated to describe Tigre Juan’s movement from ignorance to enlightenment; but the Biblical texts, while indicative of a general truth, are placed in an unmistakably profane context. There are numerous examples of sacred texts being applied to a profane context. Herminia, her feet bleeding, walks “con gesto de Dolorosa sobre andas” (263). When Herminia is taken to a brothel, Pérez de Ayala puts in her mouth words close to those attributed to Santa Teresa: “Nada me espanta” (307). Tigre Juan looks expectantly at Vespasiano in the manner of “los hebreos en el

desierto, hambrientos de maná” (256) in *Exodus*. Later he says to Nachín de Nacha: “El rayo de la revelación hendió mi carne” (334).

Christian tradition is rewritten and applied to individual experience, the Bible providing the embodiment of universal truths, though not in the context of the supernatural. Pérez de Ayala states this explicitly in the case of Carmina’s love: “una pasión casi mística, semejante a la vocación de las esposas de Cristo, salvo que no estaba enderezada a un fin sobrenatural, sino esencialmente natural y humano” (27). Christian tradition, including the notion of putting on the new man is rewritten on a smaller scale and is applied to individual experience. Hell becomes nothing other than the torments of one’s own conscience as Juan confronts the skeletal bodies of his past and present in a grotesque Dance of Death in the Valley of Josaphat. The novel is an implicit criticism of literal interpretations of the Bible. The resurrection of the body is to be understood metaphorically, whereas for Catholicism, in its purest form, revelation means a compendium of truths which have been revealed by God to the apostles and their successors, the Pope and the bishops. In other words, obedience is required from the faithful who must submit to the authority of the Church. In the work of Pérez de Ayala, revelation is something personal and intimate. Tigre Juan renews himself and his new self is the result of a personal revelation. In this way, Pérez de Ayala undermines one of the fundamental doctrines of the Church, the immutability of a faith because it denies the value of individual experience. In each individual resides the power of personal transformation, the power to live authentically and sincerely without any institutionalized religious support. Revelation is not a truth imparted by a divinity to a Church, but a process of individual discovery and self-realization.

This is in turn related to creation and paternity. When Juan becomes a father, his spiritual feelings acquire a greater depth and are expressed in the poem with which the novel proper ends. This recourse to poetry is characteristic of Pérez de Ayala and relates to his concern with the mysterious and the ineffable, present in his first novel. In *Luna de miel, luna de hiel*, Urbano feels sure that he will eventually reach “un límite donde él no podría avanzar en el umbral de esta zona de misterio [...] pues cada vez que él se sintiese niño se sentiría religioso” (100). Towards the end of the same novel, the protagonist says that “Por mucho que llegue a saber, siempre tropezaré con las fronteras del misterio” (206), an outright rejection of dogmatism. Similarly, Juan knows that the eternal questions have no answers. His poem is, in essence, a prayer, an inner reflection, a characteristically human activity, reserved for moments of transcendence and personal significance. The mature Juan knows there is no answer to the ultimate questions. Relating his own paternity to the Father’s creation, he acknowledges that the only meaning of life is life itself. When he claims that “Sólo tú, Padre, estás en el secreto”, he acknowledges the mystery of existence which is beyond human understanding. A religious journey is not the arrival at a destination, but an endless quest built on uncertainty.

It might appear from this account of Pérez de Ayala’s novels that we are describing a progression from fierce anticlericalism to inner spirituality, or from the turmoil of youth to the serenity of maturity. Yet if we go back to Pérez de Ayala’s earliest writings, we find that the later ideas are present from the outset. *Trece dioses*,²⁴ published in 1902 but only discovered in the 1980s, embodies a kind of neo-Platonic aesthetics which sees in poetry a manifestation of the infinite, the absolute and the divine. Religion appears most prominently in the final chapter in which

²⁴ *Trece dioses. Fragmentos de las memorias de Florencio Flórez* Ed. Geraldine M. Scanlon. (Madrid: Alianza, 1989).

Simeón has to abandon his ‘novia’ and become a priest, while she enters a convent. Simeón says Mass, one of the few references to the re-enactment of the Last Supper in Pérez de Ayala’s works, but this is no external sacrament, rather something profoundly interior, inexpressible, “el alma de aquel Jesús sublime que predicó el amor humano” (116). This Evangelical reference is underscored in the words “Dios hecho carne” (116), which refer to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, but with a very secular and physical meaning. It also refers to something profoundly inner, ineffable and is accompanied by another reference to “aquel Jesús sublime que predicó el amor humano” (116). Equally, we could consider the short narrative, *El Anticristo*, written shortly after the horrific events of 1909 in Barcelona, the famous ‘Semana trágica’, and before the founding of the ‘Liga Anticlerical Española’ in 1911. In *A.M.D.G.* reference was made to extreme manifestations of anti-Catholicism and to the fear experienced by members of the religious orders. In the story, the Antichrist, modelled on Alejandro Lerroux, leader of the Partido Radical Republicano to which Ayala belonged at the time, turns out to be kindly, progressive and tolerant, very different from the demonic figure imagined by the nuns.

In conclusion, religion is inseparable from Pérez de Ayala’s concept of literature. The Bible and devotional texts serve as the intertextual base of many of his works which constitute a corpus of writing, enabling us to reach the idea of God, expressed in metaphors and images that, like the Bible, do not purport to represent a literal truth. It is difficult, in a writer of such ironical and comic intent, to state with certainty where his real views lie, and it is beyond dispute that religious texts are frequently used in his novels for profane purposes. Nevertheless, his treatment of religion and the Bible needs to be placed in the context of the religious debates of his time and it is clear that, inspired by his wide reading, he postulates a less rigid, less

authoritarian interpretation of the Holy Scriptures than that advocated by the Church authorities of his time.. It is evident that for Pérez de Ayala, God is not a person with human characteristics, still less a fierce and merciless deity as represented in the Old Testament, but rather a metaphor for something that transcends the individual.

Narrative offers a way of representing to ourselves the manner in which we approach the mystery of existence without fully deciphering it. The concept of God, moreover, exceeds human efforts to describe it/him, given our linguistic limitations. Above all, the act of writing and reading creates a nexus of relationships, a quest for spiritual contact. Reason cannot respond to final questions, nor can spiritualism offer a convincing proof of the existence of God. For Pérez de Ayala the self exists only within a community of relations and perhaps for this reason Pérez de Ayala, in his last novels, insists less on physical death and instead affirms life in all its richness and potentiality. Can this properly be called religious feeling? It is not what is normally understood by the supernatural, but it is supernatural in that it embraces more than the simply natural, the physical limits of each one of us and of the world. In his thinking, Pérez de Ayala draws on the etymological basis of the word “religion”: “¿Qué es religión? [...] Religión es atar juntamente y bien anudado. Atar ¿qué atar ¿quién con quién? Atarlo todo: el hombre con Dios; el hombre, con las cosas; el hombre con sus semejantes [...] Catolicismo es palabra griega y significa literalmente universalidad [...] Religión es la ligadura universal”.²⁵

This might lend support to the hypothesis that the traditional paradigm - religion in Spain as always and everywhere the enemy of modernity - is worthy of a further look. The critical framework which we use at present tends to lead us to equate religion with reaction, tradition and even evil, while liberalism, is all that is

²⁵ *Obras completas*, III, p.520

progressive, modern and indeed good. Is this Manichean vision, over-simplified here perhaps, due for a reevaluation as was *modernismo*/98 some thirty years ago? Despite all its undoubted defects, there was, as this study of the most virulent of anti-Catholics demonstrates, a positive and forward-looking side to religious thought which pervaded some liberal intellectuals in *fin-de-siglo* Spain, including the *bête noir* of the Church, Ramón Pérez de Ayala. Despite his reputation, a case can be made for Pérez de Ayala as a modern example of *homo religiosus*. One could talk of the influence of Erasmianism, but equally his work, in particular his emphasis on the spiritual dimension of existence, anticipates many of the liberal strands which became prominent within post-Vatican II Catholicism not long after his death in 1962. It might even be further argued that he challenges in anticipation some of the cherished arguments of those New Atheists of our own time who so defiantly deny the value of religious experience without acknowledging feelings and intuitions with which Pérez de Ayala wrestles, as he imaginatively places his own creativity within the wider conception of Creation.