Multi-religiosity in the Canary Islands: Analysing processes of religious change between continents

Francisco Diez de Velasco

Instituto de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Campus de Guajara, Universidad de La Laguna, E-38205 La Laguna, Canary Islands, Spain

ABSTRACT

This article is made possible by the research program of the group RELICAN (Religions in the Canaries), which is devoted to the study of multi-religiosity in the Canary Islands. The aim of the group is to analyse the different religious components implied in the configuration of the present diversity of the Canarian religious field. In this exposition, the tri-continental geo-strategic position of the Canary Islands is understood to be of critical importance as the islands form an archipelago located near the coast of Africa, but they are closer to Europe from a cultural and political point of view, and they are also closely linked to Ibero-America (and to the whole American continent) in many respects.

Christianity is the primary European religious tradition in the Canaries, and it has many faces: Catholicism maintains an undeniably powerful influence but the presence of Protestant churches continues to increase both for foreigners and tourists (mainly from European countries) and also for Spaniards who convert to non-Catholic Christian churches.

African religious perspectives have been reinforced as a result of immigration: Islam is the second most prominent religion in the Canaries due to the importance of Moroccan immigration, but also due to the increasing presence of Senegalese, Mauritanian and other Muslim immigrants.

The impact of American religious traditions is increasing not only due to immigration from Ibero-America but also because of the influence of Pentecostals, Baptists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other American (i.e. U.S.) models of being Christian.

The problems and challenges that are particular to this field of research are examined and revised in the last part of the article from an analytical perspective that has as its focus the local–global implications of the religious changes taking place in the Canaries.

The Canary Islands are a religious (and geo-strategic) crossroads between continents. In this paper I propose to use this fact as a guideline for outlining the premises, aims, methods, challenges, problems and results of the research on multi-religiosity that is being developed on a Canarian regional scale by the research group RELICAN (from “Religiones en Canarias:” Religions in the Canaries¹). Since 2001 RELICAN has been developing a systematic research program for the study of the processes contributing to the emergence of a multi-religious model of coexistence in the Canaries.² In 2006 the research group yielded its first collective fruit in the form of a Congress, focused on methodological reflection, hosted by the University of La Laguna, where the main panel was dedicated to “Multi-religiosity in the Canaries as a challenge for the present and the future.”³ Since October 2006 the group has been involved in a research project entitled “Multi-religiosity in the Canaries: analysis of minority religious groups and communities,”
which is a product of a research contract with the University of La Laguna and a public Foundation of the Spanish Ministry of Justice named Pluralismo y Convivencia. The main result of the project has been the production of a monograph (Diez de Velasco, 2008d) that employs the same tri-continental perspective as this paper (see Diez de Velasco, 2008a). In May 2007 the group also dedicated an experimental meeting, hosted by the University of La Laguna, to the discussion of the results of its research. The meeting was open to the public and included a speech for the religious participants.

Due to the complexity of the Canarian religious field and the importance of Catholicism (around 70% of the population describe themselves as Catholic), which itself demands a much more extensive program of investigation, especially at the regional level, our research is focused mainly on the study of religious “minorities” (taking care to avoid any pejorative sense that may be associated with the term). That being said, we are also aware that people who understand themselves as non-religious are a growing demographic—in spite of the so-called religious resurgence or de-secularisation of our post-industrial societies—that probably make up around 20% of the population (see, e.g. CIS Barómetro julio, 2008). In the current phase of our research we have focused our efforts on religious groups that are much more significant when one considers the fact that, at present, religious differences are multiplied by the impacts of immigration and the increasing importance of personal-individualized religious options (in terms of religion “à la carte” or religion in constant mutation), not only to mention the growth of non-religious or “post-religious” points of view, all of which has the potential to transform religion into a vanishing subject (substituted on occasion by discussions of so-called “spirituality;” see Diez de Velasco, 2008c). The situation in consideration is made all the more complex by problems resulting from the collective experience of adapting to religious diversity in a country with a religious history as “peculiar” as that of Spain; with its maintenance of an official religion until 1978, and with centuries of violent prohibitions against religious diversity (see, e.g. Diez de Velasco, 2005).

The richness of this field of research and the implications of the regional (but also global–local) focus of our analysis will be better understood if we move to the facts in consideration. I will use the implications of the tri-continental space inhabited by the Canaries (the geographical closeness to Africa; the cultural, political and geo-strategic proximity to Europe; and the close relationship with Ibero-America) to introduce the subject in greater depth and afterwards to propose some suggestions related to methodology and the strategies employed in developing our study.

The European context

The Canary Islands are, from a political, geo-strategic and cultural point of view, the Southern frontier of Western Europe.

This is a territory that has only recently been Europeanised. The European conquest began in the first years of the 15th century with the control of the eastern islands (Lanzarote and Fuerteventura), and ended in the last years of the century with the Spanish conquest of the island of Tenerife, achieved in 1496. This was four years after the emblematic year 1492, which was the year of Columbus’ American adventure, the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from the unified kingdom of Castile and Aragon, and the defeat of the last Muslim kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula, the Nazari sultanate of Granada. As a key feature in the Spanish Imperial model of dominion, the spread of Christianity was applied in both a systematic and experimental way in the Canary Islands, as a sort of laboratory for the American conquest, through compulsory conversion and the imposition of religious homogeneity by way of religious institutions (especially the Inquisition: see Fajardo, 2003). Considering the size of the territory in question, this religious transformation took hold relatively quickly, unlike in the Ibero-American case where pre-European religions survived due to the impossibility of complete territorial dominion (which is not to deny the profound cultural and symbolic destruction sustained).

From the first decades of the 16th century, and to date, Catholicism has been the religion of the greater part of the Canarian population and it maintains an undeniable collective legitimacy (it contributes to the confirmation of the collective imaginary, including some core Canarian signs of identity). Even a large number of those who have entirely abandoned all forms of Catholic practice could easily opt to identify themselves as Catholic in preference to non-religious or atheist in superficial interviews, although a more careful ethnographic investigation focused on defining religious identities could offer a more precise panorama (detecting thelevity of the religious interests of some interviewees, or even the complexity of their internal religious understandings — in many cases, these understandings may not be defined as “religion” but instead as “spirituality” and they are interiorized and hidden from any degree of social visibility: see Diez de Velasco, 2008c). Nevertheless the importance of non-religious points of view cannot be dismissed, due to the fact that, as we have seen, there are large strata of the Canarian population who experience religion mainly as cultural heritage (for example, in terms of collective rituals such as processions or other religious performances that make use of public spaces).

Having maintained an official religion for several centuries, the process of building a multi-religious model of coexistence, which began after the democratic Constitution of 1978 in which Spain came to be defined as a non-confessional State, is best described as under construction. This is due to the structural (symbolic, behavioural, etc.) weight of Catholicism and the dissimilar (and occasionally capricious) application of a legislation characterised by a theoretical equality between religions and a strict protection of religious freedom. Therefore Catholicism continues to be the model for religious legitimisation (as the basis of the collective imaginary) and constitutes the point of

---

4 Pluralismo y Convivencia is difficult to translate into English, because “Pluralismo” in Spanish is not strictly equivalent to “Pluralism” in English; perhaps “Plurality and Coexistence” would be an approximation of the sense and implications surrounding the name. See http://www.pluralismoyconvivencia.es for the objectives and characteristics of the Foundation, which is presided over by the Spanish Minister of Justice. Pluralismo y Convivencia has also signed research contracts with groups in several other Spanish universities to the aim, in the next five years, to put forth, Autonomy by Autonomy, an approximate map of the religious minorities present in Spain. The pioneering study was conducted in Catalonia, financed by the Generalitat de Catalunya (the Government of the Catalan Autonomy). It finished four years ago and the results were published in Catalan (Estruch et al., 2004) and translated in 2007 into Spanish. The studies of the Autonomies of Madrid, Comunitat Valenciana and the Canary Islands are: López & Ramírez (2007), Buades & Vidal (2007), Diez de Velasco (2008d).


6 Catholicism agglutinates about 70–75% of the Spanish population, but with varying levels of practice (only around 20% maintain a systematic form of religious participation): see Pérez-Ago & Santiago (2005: 144–145) and CIS Barómetro julio (2008).
Another characteristic feature of the Canary Islands is the result of its position along the Atlantic commercial routes (and thus within the privileged tax system of the archipelago). Traders, seamen, merchants and others who made their way to the Canaries from different countries were allowed to maintain their religious practices, even during the centuries of official religion in Spain, which granted them a certain degree of toleration. Protected by their status as foreigners, subjects or citizens of other authorities or countries included: Anglcian, Lutherans, and other Protestant or Evangelical Christians and, increasingly in the last decades of this period, Hindus (an important commercial community: almost half of the Hindus of Spain live in the Canaries: Verona, 2008a), Chinese (mainly atheists or non-religious Chinese, but also including followers of Chinese Taoist–Confucianist–Buddhist syncretism: Verona, 2008c), Koreans, a few Jews (mainly Sephardim originating from the Spanish colonial Protectorate in Morocco: Verona, 2008a), Japanese (e.g. the first followers of Soka Gakkai in the Canaries), and Persians (primarily followers of the Baha'i Faith: Garcia, 2008), etc. These communities established churches, shrines, temples and meeting places for foreigners using mainly (or even exclusively) their native languages.

The development of Christian churches for foreigners has increased in the last three decades due to the enormous impact of the tourist industry, which is the primary source of revenue in the Canaries because of the privileged geographic position of the Islands (with a mild subtropical climate). The result of this growing industry has been a dramatic increase in the number of tourists (more than 10 million per year for a population of 2 million in 2008) who come mainly from Europe (around 3.4 million from the UK, 2.5 million from Germany, 0.5 million from Ireland or the Netherlands, and 0.4 million from Sweden, Norway or Denmark). Some of these tourists (mainly German and British) are retired and, in many cases, they spend more than three months per year in the Canaries. Some tourists (even if they do not maintain a very active form of religious participation in their countries of origin) wish to have the opportunity to pursue a form of religious practice during their holidays or retirement (seeing as the church is often a place to find compatriots and speakers of one's own language, but also in order to change the monotonous routine of a beach holiday). They search for religious ceremonies in their mother tongue and, if available, for the denomination which most closely resembles the one they follow in their home country. Lutheran and Anglican churches for tourists, and even interdenominational services, are sometimes located in multi-use churches (in some cases sharing Catholic spaces, based on a tacit agreement to renounce any form of proselytism and to avoid the use of the Spanish language) and they have become more prolific in the tourist zones of the Canary Islands (Rodrı́guez, 2008: 70ff.). Churches located in shopping centres that are intended for tourists are not uncommon and often they have developed strategies for spreading information and increasing their visibility (using propaganda in English, German and other non-Spanish languages, mainly Scandinavian). The number of followers of these tourist churches is not easy to determine due to the volatility of the participants (changing from week to week with the exception of a core of long-time residents and supporters of the congregation), but it is a significant number (see Rodrı́guez, 2008: 47ff.). If we compute in extenso the profiles of these practitioners, it seems probable that Evangelical Christians constitute the second largest religious group in Spain (and in the Canaries), surpassing the Muslims.

Within the last few decades, however, especially after the acceptance of religious freedom by the Catholic authorities (in the post-Vatican II era), and following the development of legislation protecting this right (and particularly the right to conversion), a number of religious developments of European origin have emerged (and begun to be more visible). These new developments are managed by Spaniards and, unlike many non-Catholic religious groups, are not devoted to (and led by) foreigners (who are usually non-Spanish speakers even if they remain for a long-term stay).

The phenomenon of conversion from Catholicism to Evangelical and other Christian denominations (not only of European origin—the historic Protestant churches mainly—but also of American origin—mainly Jehovah's Witnesses, but also including Pentecostals and Baptists) has multiplied (especially in the last twenty years). As a result, so have problems related to social legitimacy and stigmatisation, which have their roots in the non-pluralistic religious background previously explained. The difficulty with which a context of real (and not only theoretical) equality is fostered (especially in terms of the use of public spaces and in gaining access to the numerous privileges associated with religious activity when one is Catholic) is one of the most evident problems detected in the interviews and in the work developed by our research group. In some cases relationships between churches devoted to tourists/foreigners and churches for non-tourists (churches using English or German in their services, and churches using Spanish, i.e. churches with a non-proselytizing approach and churches that have a membership base that is the result of conversion), even if they are from the same denomination or another that is closely related, are not developed. This separateness illustrates an interesting cultural bias: being a Spaniard means being Catholic (or a non-religious critic of Catholicism, as an assumed counter-option), whereas being religious but non-Catholic means being a foreigner (see Diez de Velasco, 2008a: 21ff.).

Furthermore, in the last decade, due to the growing number of immigrants from Eastern Europe (especially from Romania, but also from Russia and other countries) the impact of Orthodox Christianity has begun to be felt, even if the ecclesiastical network is not well developed in the Canaries (with the exception of Gran Canaria which has a permanent priest). The other stable Orthodox communities depend on priests coming occasionally from Continental Spain (or the Balearic Islands) or from France or Eastern Europe in order to be able to perform their services, and they often make use of local Catholic churches.

These religions of European origin pose a number of research problems. Aside from linguistic challenges (which are prominent when considering those churches attended by foreigners and tourists, where the Spanish is neither used nor understood), we need to note the differences in terms of social legitimisation between religious groups constituted by immigrants and tourists, between Spanish speakers and non-Spanish speakers, between groups with proselytizing programs and groups only serving foreigners, and between religious groups with a long-standing presence in the Canaries and those religions that are more recent arrivals.

Perhaps these sorts of research challenges will be even more visible when taking into consideration the African perspective on our subject due to the inequality that exists between North and South (which is less evident from a European perspective).

---

8 See the statistics provided by the ISTAC (Instituto Canario de Estadı́stica): http://www.gobiernodecanarias.org/istac.
The African perspective

Although the Canary Islands are included in the European Union as a part of the Kingdom of Spain, from a geographical point of view the archipelago is located in Africa. The nearest continental territory (Tarfaya, in southern Morocco) is only 100 km. from the continental coast of Fuerteventura, the island nearest to Africa. In contrast, the nearest European and Spanish town is Cadiz, 1250 km to the north-east.

The pre-European population, not Christianised in Antiquity, and never Islamised in Medieval times, maintained models of religious behaviour comparable to the pre-Islamised Berber (Amazigh) populations of North-Western Africa until the 15th century. But Christianisation in the 15th and the first decades of the 16th centuries was intensive and very rapid and, as a result, these models of behaviour disappeared and the pre-European Canarian population was either annihilated or assimilated. At present only a recent (beginning their activities in 2000) and small neo-pagan group, named “Iglesia del Pueblo Guanche” (Church of the Guanche9) People: see Verona & García, 2008; Díez de Velasco, 2008a: 24; Ramos, in press), has tried to claim this religious heritage, reshaping it based on a wiccan model and focusing on the cult of the Goddess (named Chaxiraxí; one of the names of the pre-European Canarian Goddess). The IPG claims to be the purest and most pristine form of Canarian religion in remaining independent from European colonial influence which, in their opinion, is inherent in the Catholic Church. The members of the IPG redefine their identity by changing their European (Spanish) names for Guanche names (in a religious ceremony equivalent to a baptism). It is interesting to highlight that most of the leaders of the IPG have previously maintained political commitments related to movements promoting the independence of the Canary Islands from Spain (opting, in general, for the re-vindication of their African identity over and above their European identity). Religion in this case seems to offer a new profile for or a new degree of legitimacy to these political commitments. In this way, these commitments become rooted in a set of complex narratives where religious experiences (including visions of the Goddess Chaxiraxí) are able give them a more nuanced character.

The main African influence on the Canary Islands in terms of religion is the result of the proximity of the islands to the African continent and the increasing global migratory flows between South and North that have occurred in the last few decades. For a significant number of Africans the Canary Islands constitute the nearest southern frontier where European “prosperity” can be reached, not only by plane (as is usually the case) but also by following the marine currents between the coast of western African and the Canaries, although at the risk of losing one’s life.10

The African migrants who have settled in the Canaries are mainly Moroccans (see Abu-Tarbush, 2002; Contreras, 2008: 121; about 20,000 according to official statistics11). In recent times, however, there has been an increase in the number of Mauritanians (about 4000 in the official statistics) and Senegalese (3000 in the official statistics), the majority of whom are Muslim. Protected by the Spanish legislation that ensures religious freedom, Muslims in the Canary Islands are increasingly more prominent, now reaching the approximate number of 35,000–50,000 (see Contreras, 2008: 126 for his discussion about the details of the statistical data). In the most oriental islands (Lanzarote and Fuerteventura), which were not very densely populated in the past but which have experienced a notable increase in population in the last few years due to the need for handiwork related to the tourist industry, Muslims now make up close to 10% of the population (whereas the ratio in Continental Spain and in the rest of the Canaries is eight times less).

Islam in the Canaries is not only defined by immigrants who engage in unskilled labour, as some Africans are also traders, and religion has also been a factor in the building of trans-national networks with important global economic implications. For example the expansion of Senegalese Sufi brotherhoods (mainly the Murid in the Canarian case) is notable in that it facilitated migration processes and helped to forge commercial links between Africa, Europe and America with the Canaries as a crossroad.12

Islam is not only the religion of African immigrants as conversions among native Canaries are on the rise. In particular, the study of women who have converted to Islam is one of the specific subjects that our research group addresses (see Contreras, 2007: this is the subject of her upcoming doctoral thesis).

On a much less significant scale than Islam, some African immigrants in the Canaries are Evangelical Christians (mainly Pentecostals: Rodríguez, 2008: 75) and a small segment maintains native African religious practices.

The challenges posed to our research by the African component in the religious mixture we have studied, in addition to the linguistic challenges we have faced, have to do with a distorted perception of immigrants in Canarian Society (which only adds to the already prevalent stigmatisation of Islam) and with the opacity of this field of research, meaning that religious participants are hesitant to be involved in a research process which has unknown implications. Our public display of our research (methods, aims, problems) during our meeting in May 2007, and on other occasions, has been very strategic in its attempt to establish a degree of mutual trust between researchers and religious participants based on knowledge (and implying an unsigned contract that guarantees transparency and openness).

American influence and beyond

The American (in an extended sense of the term)13 cultural influence is also outstanding in the history of the archipelago, and at present, seeing as the Canary Islands served as a stop along Spanish navigation routes in travelling from Europe to America since the time of Columbus. From the 19th century onwards some ritual practices of Ibero-American origin began to be detectable in the Canaries and the impact of these practices increased during the 20th century. The importance of immigrants of South-American origin, mainly from Venezuela (50,000, mostly Canario-descendents) and Cuba (20,000, mostly Canario-descendents) has further multiplied this presence. In

---

9 Name of the pre-European population of Tenerife.
10 A terrible reality, one which the mass media shows with macabre insistence, which in the group RELICAN we were also able to study specifically in terms of the significance of religious factors for immigrant minors who had endured the perilous crossing and were afterwards detained under the protection of the Spanish Administration (see Verona, 2007).
11 In all the following cases the statistics provided by the ISTAC only include legal migrants.
12 Senegalese immigrant trader women in the Canaries (and their specificities) have been studied by Evers-Rosander (2002, 2005).
13 America is mainly used in the paper in an extended geographical sense, referring not only to the United States (the usual enic or “native” sense of the word in anglophone countries, derived from the “Monroe Doctrine”) but to the continent as a whole, in the sense of the continental perspective proposed in the study.
our research group we study the impact of Afro-American religions with particular dedication, including: Cuban Santería and Palomonte, and the Venezuelan cult of María Lionza (Galván, 2007; García Viña, 2007; Galván & García Viña, 2008), but also, although to a lesser extent, Afro-Brazilian cults (because of the lesser importance of Brazilian immigrants in the Canaries, about 3500).

The impact of African religion is much more evident beyond the direct relationship that the Canary Islands have with Ibero-America. In other words, this impact is much more pronounced in keeping with the global tendency for the flourishing of churches and denominations of American (mainly U.S.) origin: Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, Mormons and especially Jehovah’s Witnesses (with around 10,000 followers in the Canaries: Diez de Velasco, 2008a: 31ff).

In the Canarian case (and in other areas within Spain), immigration is also important in order to consider the recent spread and impact of these churches, especially in terms of immigrants with Ibero-American origins. Generally having been converted prior to their migration, these individuals tend to increase their religious practice and commitment in the process of adapting to this country as their new home. Finding fellow believers and connecting to the trans-national religious networks that are made available to them allows for easy contact between different churches, a factor that increases stability and success in the migration process and also facilitates subsequent integration.

Moreover, the impact of the commitment of the Ibero-American immigrants is noticeable within Catholicism: the Canarian population (and the Spanish population in general) has very low levels of religious practice, as we have seen; on the contrary, the immigrant population has higher levels of practice (and also a relationship with priests free of the characteristically Spanish anticlericalism). In fact, immigrants have also changed, with their presence, the previously deserted aspect of some Catholic dominical masses.

The Ibero-American component in the Canarian religious puzzle has the benefit of speaking the same language as the local population (including the same pronunciation, as the Canarian manner of speaking is closer to Venezuelan or Cuban pronunciation than it is to the Spanish standard). Religious integration within the Spanish-speaking Evangelical churches is relatively smooth; some immigrants easily attain positions of leadership and responsibility, as is the case within Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal, Baptist or Adventist communities.

Other continents also play a part in the flourishing multi-religiosity in the Canaries, what with globalisation expanding routes beyond the Atlantic, especially in connecting Asia with the Canary Islands. The Hindu community, present in the Canaries since 1880, continues to grow (they are almost 10,000: Verona 2008b, in anticipation of his doctoral thesis devoted to this subject), as does the Bahá’í faith (García, 2007, 2008) and other Oriental religions, such as Buddhism, where the majority of the followers are Spanish (and Canarian) who have converted. Some religious leaders in these communities come from Continental Spain or Europe but others come directly from Asia (in a complex and fascinating mixture of provenances and influences: Diez de Velasco, 2007b: 383ff., 2008b).

Global multi-religiosity from a regional perspective: implications for the field of research

The basic premise of our investigations is a desire to be adaptive to the needs and variable complexity of the field of research and the subjects being studied. Being non-centralised and with few structured cults, as is the case for Afro-American Santería or Candomblé in the Canaries, certain groups require an approach based on making explicit the subtle signs of visibility as well as the application of complex theoretical tools as, for example, in identifying and outlining the concept of trans-national religions (Galván, 2007; Galván & García Viña, 2008). Religious options centred around domestic structures or in small groups around a guru, as is the case with Hinduism, require a methodology and an approach that is sensitive to the value of intimacy and respectful of the complexities of semi-public religious locations, but also open to the possibility of finding in these (theoretically) non-structured places the existence of complex, inexplicit structures which might require a micro-analytic approach in order to be decrypted (Verona 2008b). On occasion the tenuous position of the researcher in the field can lead one to be confronted with, and challenged by, the limits inherent in the tools we possess, for example, in studying ecstatic religious practices, as is the case in Afro-American cults, but also in Hinduism (e.g. a case study of the spontaneous trance dancing of two Hindu twin sisters in Tenerife—explained by the religious participants as “manifestations” of Shiva–Parvati) or in Charismatic Christianity (a notable example is offered by the Philippine “Iglesia del Espíritu Santo,” who use trance and massages in their worship: Rodríguez, 2008:112). Strategies of research are of course different in the case of more visible religions (e.g. Christians or even Muslims), where the application of quantitative techniques of analysis is possible, as is the use of the fruitful approaches that describe the geography of religions (for example, mapping the presence of Jehovah’s Witnesses—with more than 40 Kingdom Halls in the Canaries—shows a network of religious locations surpassed only by the Catholic Church).

A basic challenge in doing research is maintaining a balanced position in the field, somewhere between “neutralization” and being fully implicated. Due to the fascinating character of the field, we might have the tendency to overemphasize the narratives of our interlocutors, who could themselves be mutually incompatible, even within the same religious tradition (as might be the case in examining Historic Protestants and Pentecostals or Maghreb Muslims and Senegalese Muslims).

Another challenge is in dealing with terminology, as the terms that we use to describe the denominations within larger groups could be problematic or unintelligible beyond Spanish frontiers. For example, in Spain (and also in Ibero-America) the term Evangelicos (Evangelical Christians) is preferred among certain groups instead of “Protestants,” or other names that have been stigmatised during the long history of confrontations with pre-Vatican II Catholicism. But in Spanish juridical terminology Evangelicals also refers to a complex ensemble of Christian denominations which, in 1992, at the same time as Muslims and Jews, signed cooperation agreements with the Spanish State and were organized into a Federation (FEREDE, “Federación de Entidades Evangélicas de España.” Federation of the Evangelical Entities of Spain), which acts as a mediator with the Justice Ministry (which is responsible, in Spain, for the relationship of the State to the different religious confessions). FEREDE, which agglutinates (as usual) Historic Protestants, Baptists, Pentecostals, etc., also includes Adventists and even some Orthodox Churches. It also actively works towards the goal of guaranteeing the equal treatment of religions (i.e. equality with Catholicism). However, FEREDE doesn’t include a notable number of Christian Churches (especially Independent Christians) who prefer not to be federated. For our research purposes, to have an interlocutor from FEREDE is useful even if such a “strong” voice could reduce the impact of the “smaller” and fragmentary voices of non-federated churches and groups. In our research we need to avoid the trend to ignore those who are not federated and not only in the case of the Christian churches; this is a problem that is also faced in researching Muslims, especially those from Sub-Saharan Africa and particularly with Senegalese Sufi groups opting for non-federated structures and tending to vanish and to become invisible.
This research group is developing a pioneering investigation in the Canaries, and this also poses a challenge: we are producing the first general study on the subject of multi-religiosity and in some cases also the first specific study of particular groups.\(^\text{14}\) We have tried to use adaptive techniques in the process of interacting with participants in the field, by sharing spaces and even by opening, on occasion, the position of being speakers in academic scenarios to them. For example, during the 2006 Congress we led an experimental session dedicated to the history of Buddhism in the Canaries where those responsible for speaking on the subject (never previously investigated) were two religious leaders (two Buddhist masters; both were also former students of the University of La Laguna, graduates in History and Philology) and myself (in a symbolically imbalanced distribution, with religious participants in majority). The session was carried off as a piece of complex ethnographic work (carefully documented in audio and video), where academic narratives entwined with the participants’ narratives under the scrutiny (and submitted to the questions) of a mixed public composed of academics and Buddhist believers (see the report on the experiment in Diez de Velasco, 2007b).

In the 2007 meeting, we discussed the progress of the past year’s research by restricting participation in the presentation of results to members of the research group, but we opened the sessions to the voices of the religious participants, as they were invited to express their opinions about our work in progress. Some of them communicated their basic doubt about our actual position in the field. They also publicly described the discomfort they felt in relation to our dependence as researchers upon the needs (which were occasionally subject to suspicion in their opinion) of our sponsor, the Foundation Pluralismo y Convivencia, a Public Foundation that is itself dependent upon the Spanish Ministry of Justice. One of the main interests of the Foundation is to have updated and accurate information about religious groups and communities in Spain in terms of their history, problems, social action, integration, needs, etc. Even if the point of view of the Foundation financing the research projects is one that promotes knowledge, and in general the purpose of this institution is to boost religious and social-cultural coexistence, Pluralismo y Convivencia also has important economic implications in the present management and financing of religious minorities (i.e. non-Catholic groups) by the Spanish State. During the meeting and in other circumstances, some religious participants also exposed one of the inconsistencies inherent in our work, namely, the difficult position in which researchers find themselves, as they are caught in limbo between their supposed neutrality and their submission to the will of the institutions who give out funding, who are able to demand what it is that we identify, situate and tally. Tallying numbers is an activity that has the potential to clash with the sensibilities of some religious groups (e.g. the Jews, see Verona, 2008a for a survey of Canarian Judaism; in this case active members—with a synagogue that continues to operate—are very few, whereas the number of Jews who maintain a non-religious Jewish identity are much more numerous). It is, however, also a need of the Spanish administration, which can only gain access to these figures by indirect means because the Constitution (article 16.2\(^\text{15}\)) protects citizens from answering any compulsory questions about religious identification. This article has been strictly upheld up until the present, meaning that religious questions have not been included in censuses (which are otherwise the best instrument for gathering useful quantitative information about subjects). Polls, developed for example by the CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociolóègicas—Centre for Sociological Investigations), which include religious questions in recent times (or even specific polls devoted to religious questions\(^\text{16}\)) only produce approximate information as they tend to focus on Catholicism and on profiles of non-believers, all the while underestimating the presence of minorities.

One of the results of our research has been an approximate quantification of the presence of religions (as well as non-religious persons) in the Canaries in 2008, as shown in the following table (for details see: Diez de Velasco, 2008d: 40–42).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>% Of the population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholics</td>
<td>1,400,000/1,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-believers</td>
<td>400,000/500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>35,000–50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians (Catholics excepted)</td>
<td>35,000–40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>8500–10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afro-American Religions</td>
<td>3000–5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Spiritualities /Alternative Religions (including Chinese Religions)</td>
<td>1000–5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>1000–5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baha’is</td>
<td>700–1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iglesia del Pueblo Guanche</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our research suggests that the presence of religious minorities in the Canaries approaches 5% of the population, when in the polls the percentage is estimated at 2% (CIS Barómetro julio, 2008: question 30). Quantification, even if it is criticized by some religious participants, also seems to be an excellent tool for measuring visibility.

In summary, public meetings which include the active participation of religious participants, can be fruitful exercises in methodological and theoretical mise en cause.

Obviously the needs of one’s sponsors determine (in part) the methods used and even the theoretical premises and basis of a research project. The objectives of Pluralismo y Convivencia are better served by conducting systematic interviews with religious leaders. This kind of interview needs to be structured in order to be quantifiable and comparable, but at the same time the voices of these participants tend to be

---

\(^{14}\) For example, in studying Buddhism and other Oriental religions and Afro-American religions in the Canaries; in the study of Pentecostals or Baptists, and even some aspects of Islam, or in terms of alternative religions and new spiritualities (see Diez de Velasco, 2008d).

\(^{15}\) “No one may be compelled to make statements regarding his or her ideology, religion or beliefs” (“Nadie podrá ser obligado a declarar sobre su ideología, religión o creencias”)

\(^{16}\) See http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/EN/index.html for the English version of the webpage of the institution, including publications and access to databases. Religious questions are included in the monthly polls (named Barómetros, see the recent CIS Barómetro julio, 2008) and in monographic studies (e.g. Pérez-Agote & Santiago, 2005).
depersonalized so as to attain higher degrees of collective representation. In fact, we face an ethical and methodological (or even symbolic) challenge: we (as researchers) are located in a liminal and confusing crossroads in terms of our roles, caught in the uncertain (and uncomfortable) position between being “free” observers (our desirable, although imaginary, status interiorized) and being perceived as “intimidating” inquirers representing the “Leviathan” of the administration.

Beyond the implications for this specific project, the interests of our research program (which intermingles different research sensibilities and projects) are various (with a diversity of methodological and theoretical implications). And in contrast to the rigidity of the interviews focused on active leaders, in other cases we could promote open-listening sessions with average believers who might be more disposed to an unrestricted dialogue. This is the approach of a long-term research project that I’m developing on conversion, based on interviewing techniques that are similar to internal and biographical investigations (the study is more specifically focused on deciphering the sensorium implied in conversion—configuring subtle interior spaces in mutation). This is also the approach of the research of Victoria Contreras on women who have converted to Islam.

In conclusion, a last challenge posed by the research process is the ability to adequately reflect the configuration of Canarian models of defining religions, and to be sensitive enough to be able to decrypt the processes of religious localisation that develop within the framework of religious globalisation.

Some Buddhist Canarian masters are now tending to define ways beyond the ethnic implications of schools and lineages (configuring a Canarian dharma in a fascinating de-orientalisation and re-orientation in terms of a New Buddhism: Diez de Velasco, 2007b: 392ff.). Some Evangelical pastors try to develop their practice in terms of a Canarian way to be Christian (to be adaptive to their religious globalisation. defining religions, and to be sensitive enough to be able to decrypt the processes of religious localisation that develop within the framework...

References


Francisco Diez de Velasco is Professor of History of Religions in the University of La Laguna (Canary Islands, Spain). Head of the Research Project “Multireligiosidad en Canarias” (Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia-Universidad de La Laguna; other participants: Néstor Verona, Roberto Rodríguez, Victoria Contreras, Alberto Galván, Alfonso García, Angela García, José Abu-Tarbush). Editor of Bandue. Revista de la Sociedad Española de Ciencias de las Religiones|Review of the Spanish Association for the Sciences of Religions (http://www.secr.es/Bandue). More information is available from: http://webpages.ull.es/users/fradive/cvelascengl.htm.