The development of the sociology of religion in Spain has been both belated and difficult: Belated in comparison with other neighboring countries where the discipline was institutionalized and acquired an academic grounding many years ago, and difficult for having been caught in repeated reverses due to the political instability that the country experienced during the twentieth century through the course of two dictatorships and a bloody civil war. This is not a condition specific to the sociology of religion, however, but rather to that of sociology in general. As some authors have noted, “what distinguishes Spanish sociology from that of other European countries is that it was born later” (Miguel and Moyer 1979: 6). In many respects, it was not until the 1980s, and only after the end of the Franco dictatorship, that the discipline was able to develop with assurances of continuity and stability within Spanish universities. This is not to say that the history of sociology in Spain is entirely encompassed within the last forty years. Since the late nineteenth century there have been various attempts to promote sociological thought within the country.

The first efforts in this field were varied and ranged from the Catalan anar-chists who claimed sociology as a form of emancipatory knowledge (Torns 1989), to the Madrid Krausists who considered it to be related to science, to the Catholics influenced by Rerum Novarum who saw in sociology the primary means to tackle social problems and carry out reforms in this context (Álvarez-Uría and Varela 2000). All of these efforts were fruitful and, for example, in 1899 the first chair of sociology, held by the Catalan Manuel Sales i Ferré, was established in the Faculty of Arts at the Central University in Madrid. In that context, moreover, several key works in sociology such as Durkheim's Suicide or Simmel's Sociology and Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism were translated. Indeed, some of these were translated into Spanish before they were translated into English (García de León 1994).

However, few works by the Spanish sociologists of this era have endured and made a mark on Spanish thought. This tradition was also truncated by the Franco dictatorship, which viewed sociological work with suspicion and distrust, hence significantly hindered its development. Numerous intellectuals
were forced into exile after the Spanish Civil War, and there were many others who left afterwards, spurred by Franco’s reprisals or by the realization of the impossibility of pursuing sociology in a context where academic freedom was violated repeatedly. In this respect, therefore, the history of sociology shows the impossibility of separating scientific evolution from historical time and circumstances.

This is particularly relevant in relation to the sociology of religion in a country where Catholicism has played a dominant role. The centrality of the Catholic Church in the political, social and cultural struggles of Spain has greatly influenced the establishment of the conditions and characteristics of the study of religion. It is vital to keep in mind that the battle in Spain between the clerical and anticlerical has shaped the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that the Catholic Church maintained its influence in the country thanks to a dictatorial regime that lasted more than forty years (1939–1978). In this sense, the historian of religions Francisco Díez de Velasco observes:

> The study of religions is not favourably regarded by those who embrace the Spanish National-Catholic ideology or the Catholic integrism and who reject the study of religious matters from a pluralist perspective; for those who adopt the opposite view, that of Spanish anticlericalism or even an explicitly antireligious ideology, the study of religion and even religions, in plural, is regarded with suspicion (and seen as covert clericalism).

2009:125

This inevitably made the emergence and consolidation of the sociology of religion difficult and also explains the belated and obstacle-riddled development of religious studies in Spain (Marcos 2009).

Circumstances, though, have changed, and since 1978 the democratic constitution has guaranteed the freedom of religion and academic freedom in the universities. Since then the study of religion has become institutionalized in the university context and acquired increasing scientific rigor. One proof of this is the creation of the SECR (Sociedad Española de Ciencias de las Religiones

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1 In this regard García de León states, “Among the most important figures in this sociology in exile were Ayala, Medina, Echevarría and Requesens, whose resulting status was that of ‘sociologists without a society,’ while Spain itself was left with a society without sociologists, without teachers, without professors, and ultimately with a cultural life laid waste that had to rebuild itself from the ground up” (1994:157).