Introduction (1)

On 1499, while in Granada with the Catholic Kings, archbishop of Toledo Fray Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros managed to get the alfaquís (Muslim judges) to bring out in the street their copies of the Qur'an and other works written in Arabic and set up a bonfire that destroyed more than five thousand volumes "with ornamental bindings, even of gold and silver and of admirable artistry" (Harcey 333). He refused to give some of them to Christian scholars who asked for them, and only allowed some works of medicine to be saved from the fire (books which were later on sent to the library of the University of Alcalá).

Cisneros' action was part of a campaign set up to convert the local Muslim population to Christianity. His methods were a clear contravention of the terms of the capitulations signed after the surrender of Granada in 1491 and were completely opposed to those of Fray Hernando de Talavera, the local bishop, who had tried to convert Muslims only by the force of reason and had respected the capitulations, which allowed Muslims to continue to profess their faith under Christian rule.

This action, at the eve of the XVI century, marked a turning point in the relationship of the State and the Church with intellectual and religious diversity and signals the beginning of a new approach, that was going to continue for centuries: repression and censorship. But the burning of books was hardly an invention of Cisneros.

The Acts of the Apostles record the first instance of book burning under the authority of the Christian Church. Some new converts from Ephesus gathered their scrolls, considered to be anti-Christian, and burned them: a total value calculated at fifty thousand drachmas (19,19). Later on, Constantine wrote an edict that commanded under threat of death all possessors of Arian writings to surrender them for burning in public; and pope Leo I, in a letter to Toribio of Asturias, indicated that all Priscillianist books were not only to be forbidden but also to be collected and burnt. (2)

This policy of complete eradication of works considered to be heretical and against orthodox thinking was not an exclusive prerogative of the Christian church. In the Spanish territory under Muslim rule, book burning was not unusual. For instance, when the vizier Al-Mansur set up a plot to usurp the throne of Cordoba in 978, he gained the support of the local jurists (one of the pillars of Islamic society) by copying out the Qur'an with his own hand and by removing several heretical works from the library of his predecessor al-Hakam II and having them burnt (Watt 82). However, the XV century conditions allowed for unprecedented behavior: book-burning among different religions in Spain. The convivencia that somehow had been established between the three monotheist religions for almost eight centuries was to end.

Introduction of the Press in Spain

It does not seem to be an agreement among scholars as to which was the first book printed in Spanish soil. It is now somehow assumed, although still discussed, that the date 1468 (M.CCCC.LXVIII) printed by Juan Gherline in Barcelona on a Latin grammar by Bartolomé Mates is simply a misprint and that the printer forgot three X from the year, which should read M.CCCC.LXXXVIII. Therefore, this cannot be the earliest printed book in Spain. (3)

For a long time it was considered to be a work beginning with the words Les obres o trobes dauall scrites les quals tracten dela sacratissima verge Maria, printed by the German Laurentius Palmar with indication of neither date nor printer. However, several scholars (Revello, Serrano y Sanz, Lambert) agree on the fact that the Germans Henricus Botel, Georgius vom Holtz and Johannes Planck had printed three works by Aristotle in Latin (Ethica, Economica and Politica) in Saragossa in 1473. (4) Thus, these would be the first books printed in Spain in any language and the former the first book printed in Spain in the vernacular. As for the Spaniards themselves, the first three Spanish printers were Antón Martínez, Alfonso del Puerto and Bartolomé Segura, who were working in Seville in 1477 (in 1480 they produced the first illustrated book printed in Spain, the Fasciculus temporum by Werner Rolewinck).

As we can see, printing in Spain was mainly a Christian activity. Even if the paper had been introduced to Europe by the Muslims (the Spanish town of Xàtiva is mentioned as soon as 1150 as having a flourishing paper-making industry: Berry and Poole 4), the mobile press had its origins in Northern Europe and the social configuration of Spain at the end of the XV century did not allow for a different setting. The Jews were a minority and the public animosity towards them was increasing; the Christians had managed to resettle in the majority of the peninsula after the Muslim conquest in 711, and the Muslims occupied only the reign of Granada, which was conquered in 1491. At the end of the century, the whole peninsula was under Christian rule and so it would remain.

This does not mean that Christians were the only early printers in Spain. In 1482, Solomó ben Moisé Levi Alkabiz was established in Guadalajara and produced the first printed edition of the Talmud; in 1485, Elieser ben Alatansi was established in Hijar, and, in 1487,
history and profane books to the Americas: 1531 queen Juana issued a letter to the royal officials of the Casa de la Contratación in Seville asking them to prevent the trade of retained their own consejos until the Decretos de Nueva Planta issued by Philip V. The book trade to America was also regulated; in time, but whose primary purpose was not, theoretically, book censorship. 

This system of control through licenses granted by different authorities did not seem to work very well and in 1554, Charles V centralized control that in all centers of learning there should be estacionarios, keeping books to hire to the students for the purpose of copying. However, to keep an estación required the license of the rector of the university, who was instructed before granting it to examine the stock of books as to their legibility and correctness; if lacking in these respects, the bookseller was refused a license until his books should be duly amended (Lea 17).

The arrival of the press was initially received with great excitement. In 1477, Theodoric, a German printer, complained to the king and queen that he had been asked to pay duty at the ports of Sanlúcar and Cádiz on printed books which he had imported into Spain, while he was "ennobling many libraries and furnishing many scholars with rare texts" (Norton 118). Queen Isabella has been depicted as a protector of the press because, in response to that complain, she sent a letter-order to the tax officials in Murcia ordering that "Teodorico, alemán, impresor de libros de molde en estos reynos, sea franco de pagar alcabalas" (Torre Revello 21). This exemption was later extended to all foreign books imported into Spain:

Y porque de pocos días á esta parte algunos mercaderes nuestros naturales y extrangeros han traído, y cada día traen libros buenos y muchos, lo cual parece redunda en provecho universal de todos, y en ennoblecimiento de nuestros Reynos; por ende ordenamos y mandamos, que allende dicha franquenza, que de aquí adelante todos los libros que se traxeren a estos nuestros Reynos, así por mar como por tierra no se pidan ni pague, ni lleven almojarifazgo, ni diezmo ni portazgo, ni otros derechos algunos por nuestros almojarifazgos, ni los dezmeros, ni portazgueros ni otras personas algunas, así de las ciudades, villas y lugares de nuestra Corona Real, como de Señoríos, y Ordenes y behebrías; mas que de todos los dichos derechos y diezmos y almojarifazgos sean libres y frances los dichos libros. (6)

However, this optimism regarding the import of foreign books was soon to be put to an end. The divulgence of ideas considered to be heterodox was possible thanks to the book trade that linked the universities of Salamanca and Alcalá de Henares with Germany and to the influence of reformist ideas on Spanish troops abroad (Gómez Reino 22). In 1502, following the example of pope Alexander VI who in 1501 had issued a constitution forbidding any publication in the diocese of Cologne without license (to be granted after careful study of the book to be published), the Catholic Kings issued a new pragmática which introduced the requirement of a license to publish and previous censorship on any foreign book to be imported into Castille: 

Mandamos y defendemos, que ningún librero ni impresor de molde, ni mercaderes ni factor de los suso dichos, no sea osado de hacer imprimir de molde de aqui en adelante por villa directa ni indirecta ningún libro de ninguna Facultad o lectura, ó obra, que sea pequeña ó grande, en latín ni en romance, sin que primeramente tenga para ello nuestra licencia y especial mandado ó de las personas siguientes [presidents of audiences and some archbishops]; ni sean asimismo osados de vender en los dichos nuestros reynos ningunos libros de molde que truxeren fuera dellos, de ninguna Facultad ni materia que sea, ni otra obra pequeña ni grande, en latín ni en romance, sin que primeramente sean vistos y examinados por las dichas personas, ó por aquellos á quien ellos lo cometieren, y hayan licencia dellos para ello. (7)

The need to obtain a license introduced political control and censorship in the Spanish book industry. However, it must be noted that the kings delegated the power to do so to civil and ordinary religious authorities; not to the Inquisition, which had been functioning for some time, but whose primary purpose was not, theoretically, book censorship.

This system of control through licenses granted by different authorities did not seem to work very well and in 1554, Charles V centralized the Consejo de Castilla the authority to grant licenses (Aragon, Valencia, Catalonia, and Navarra followed the same policy but retained their own consejos until the Decretos de Nueva Planta issued by Philip V). The book trade to America was also regulated; in 1531 queen Juana issued a letter to the royal officials of the Casa de la Contratación in Seville asking them to prevent the trade of history and profane books to the Americas:

Yo heseido yntformada que se pasan a las yndias muchos libros de Romançe deystorias vanas yde profanidad como son el amadys y otros desta calidad [...] yo vos mando que de aqui adelante no consyntays ni deys lugar apersona alguna pasar alas yndias libros ningunos de ystorias y cosas profanas salvo tocante ala Religion...
The Reaction of the Church: Inquisition and Indices

As we have seen, censorship was present from the very beginning of the history of the Christian Church, always prompt to fight heresy and disidence. During the XV century, however, although no particular heresy was threatening the Church, the increasing stream of books issuing from the press aroused a sense of the necessity of some supervision. In 1486, Berthold, archbishop of Mainz, tried to establish censorship on all books translated into the vernacular from foreign languages, and in 1501 the pope Alexander VI issued a bull instructing the German prelates to exercise a close supervision over printers. In 1515, the fifth council of Lateran issued a papal constitution that forbid forever after the publication of any book without a preliminary examination and the granting of a license (the famous imprimitur, issued by the local bishop or inquisitor and still in use nowadays).

Within this frame, the Catholic Kings pragmática of 1502 can be seen as no more than the implementation in Spanish soil of a general European trend: previous censorship. However, this ordinary censorship exerted by the local bishops would too soon be superseded by the extreme efficiency of a new body that was to become widely known and feared: the Spanish Inquisition.

The Inquisition was not unknown in Spanish territories in the XV century. During the XIII century, a special tribunal had been created in the territories of the crown of Aragon to fight against the Catharian heresy; it depended directly from Rome and took its officers from among the Dominican and Franciscan orders. Thus, in 1316, the inquisitor Joan de Llotger condemned the works of Arnau de Vilanova on spiritual Franciscanism (lea 19), and later that century Nicolau Eymerich condemned some books by Raimon Llull and Ramon de Tàrrega. However, during the XV century this inquisition was mostly inactive.

The social situation of Castille compelled many Jews to convert to Christianity, trying to avoid the legal limitations and the harassmant they suffered. Nevertheless, the creation of a new social class (the converted Jews, cristianos nuevos or marranos, as opposed to original Christian. cristianos viejos or lindos) was regarded as highly suspect by many, who thought that they were not really Christians and tried to persecute those who still professed the Jewish faith in secret. In 1478 the queen decides to ask Rome for the creation of an Inquisition for Aragon and Castille, desire that pope Sixtus IV fulfills that same year. The news found great resistance in the territories of Aragon, Catalonia and Valencia, who regarded the new tribunal as an attack to their particular laws.

Nevertheless, in 1480 the first inquisitors, Miguel de Morillo and Juan de San Martín, were appointed, and in 1483 the Consejo de la Suprema y General Inquisición, presided by Fray Tomás de Torquemada, was created. The legal provisions for this court were quite clear: its members were to be appointed by the Crown and not by Rome (thus beginning a confusion between secular and religious power that would go on for centuries), and its jurisdiction was limited to those baptized (but one must remember that after the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and the forcible conversions of Moors in the early XV century, Spain was officially a Catholic country and, therefore, all its inhabitants were Christians).

The Inquisition did not have the authority to grant publication licenses and, most important, among its functions was not the censorship of books. Nevertheless, it tried hard to obtain the authority to grant licenses and very soon started with book censorship, under the excuse of fighting heresy. For instance, it is not clear under which title was acting Diego Deza in 1504 when he assailed Elio Antonio de Nebrija, the author of the first Castilian grammar and a great humanist, since he was both bishop of Seville and Grand Inquisitor. Many times did the Courts of both Aragon and Castille met to ask for a restrain in the activities of the Inquisition and in 1578 even the emperor Charles V had to enact a law reminding that only the Consejo de Castilla had the authority to grant publishing licenses.

The Inquisition began acting and very soon superseded the authority of local bishops, becoming the religious authority in matters of heresy, and therefore, in matters of book censorship. One of its activities was the creation of indices of forbidden books, which although belong to the XVI century proper, deserve some attention.

The first official index of forbidden books (Index librorum prohibitorum) was published in Rome under pope Paul IV in 1559, and was considered so severe that later that year a deeree of the Holy Office mitigated it. (10) Later on, in 1565, the Tridentine council issued a new index which included ten general rules concerning the prohibition of books and, finally, in 1571, the Congregation of the Index, an executive agency of the papal government, was created to handle all matters concerning the Church control of literature. Despite all this activity, the Spanish authorities had been composing indices for some time and would continue to do so afterwards, indices that not necessarily agreed with the contents of the Roman ones.

In 1521, cardinal Adrianus, Grand Inquisitor, issued in Tordesillas a letter forbidding the introduction in Spain of books by Luther. Later on, Charles V, alarmed by the increasing importance of reformation ideas in Germany, asked the theologians of the university of Louvain to issue a list of heretical books printed in Germany. That list, with some modifications, was to become the first index issued by the Spanish Inquisition, in 1551 under Inquisitor Fernando de Valdés, the Catalogi librorum reprobatorum, ex iudicio Academiae Louaniensis, Cum edicto Caesareae Maiestatis euulgati, Valentai, Typis Joannis Mey Flandri, M.D.LI. Mandato Dominorum de consilio sanctae generalis Inquisitionis. It followed the Louvain list but included some Latin and Castilian books that circulated only in Spanish territory. Many more indices were to follow.

Special Study of the Translation of the Scriptures into the Vernacular

Among the many obsessions of the Spanish censors during all ages, the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular has a special place. The presence in Spain during many centuries of three religions deeply attached to their foundational books allowed for several instances of translation and prohibition, the translation being sometimes an act of genuine interest in the origins of one’s or the neighbor’s religion and some other times a tool to work on the refutation of religious ideas considered deviant.
Since Jews and Christians basically share their holy books, the history of its translations is somehow intertwined. The Talmud was very persecuted during the Middle Ages: pope Gregory IX ordered all copies of it to be burned in 1239 and many popes followed the same example afterwards; in 1267, for instance, pope Clement IV instructed the king of Aragon to force Jews to deliver their Talmuds to inquisitors (Karolides, Bald & Sova 261). Later on, when the Talmud was printed in Spain, it became the target of the Spanish Inquisition, as we have seen with the bonfire set up by Fray Tomás de Torquemada. Even so, it was widely used by translators who preferred to follow the Hebrew Scriptures than the Latin Vulgate.

The Islamic population of Spain was well aware of the importance of translation. During the XIth century, Ibn 'Abdun, a jurist writing in Seville, forbid the selling of books to Jews and Christians, because "they translated them and passed them as their own compositions" (Burnett 1041). However, that was not the case with the Qu'ran, which was indeed translated and, of course, never passed as a Christian or Jewish composition. Hermann of Carinthia, Robert of Kenton, and Peter of Toledo, commissioned by Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, made the first translation of the Qu'ran, around 1141. Its primary purpose was to be an aid for missionaries to get the conversion of Muslims. It was still being used in the XVII century. More important, however, is the joint venture of Juan de Segovia and Ice de Gebir, who in 1455 produced a new translation into Latin.

Cardinal Juan de Segovia was in exile in Savoy, and decided to study how the conversion of Muslims might be effected. He concluded that a new translation of the Qu'ran was needed and somehow convinced a hafiz, a memorizer of the Qu'ran, from his hometown to come to Savoy. That memorizer was Ice de Gebir, an Islamic scholar, who traveled there, wrote the Arabic version, translated it into Castilian, and then helped with the translation into Latin. No version of the manuscript of this translation was ever printed or is extant, but the very thought of possibility of translating Arabic sacred texts into Castilian was the origin of some works by Gebir, such as the Breviario sunni (a law compilation in Castilian for the use of Spanish Muslims), and of the idea of aljamía, the writing of texts in Castilian with Arabic script.

As for the translations into the vernacular of the Christian Bible, they were sometimes persecuted by the Crown and sometimes approved by it. In 1234, king Jaume I of Aragon forbid the possession of any portion of the Old and New Testament in Romance, in order to fight the Catharist heresy, which preached the use of the New Testament in the vernacular. However, at the same time in Castille Alfonso X was patronizing a translation into Castilian of the Bible, the Biblia Alfonsina o Española.

During the XV century, the prohibition of 1234 had been forgotten and a renewed interest in the translation of the Bible from its Hebrew original arouse. In 1422, the master of the order of Calatrava, Luis González de Guzmán, ordered Rabbi Moyses Aben Ragel to translate for him the Old Testament giving as a reason that "the current Castilian versions are not to be depended on for fidelity and are antiquated in language" (Lea 19) (12) A number of versions were executed in Catalan, and one was even printed in 1478 in Valencia, by Philip Vizlant under the careful revision of inquisitor Jaume Borrell. The two most important translations executed during the age of early printing are the Biblia Poliglota Complutense (1502-1517) and the Biblia Regia o de Amberes (1573), both being multilingual versions of the Scriptures. Still, it must be indicated that none of them included vernacular versions (only Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin and Greek), and that neither this fact nor the royal patronage of the latter freed them or their authors from the persecution of the Inquisition: Benito Arias Montano, the author of the Biblia Regia, who later would write some indices for usage in the Spanish territories of Flanders, had to appeal to the Inquisitor General Quiroga to demonstrate his innocence against the accusations of León de Castro, a professor in Salamanca (Lea 54).

All this translation activity was put to an end after the appearance of the Lutheran reformation and the implementation of stricter measures of control. The Spanish index of 1551 forbid all "Biblia Hispano aut alio vulgari sermone traducta" and all "Alcoranes, vel alii libri in aravigo, ubi sunt errores sectae Mahometicae" (Reusch 73-74). From then on, all translations into Romance would be persecuted by the Inquisition and published abroad.

Final Remarks

Book production in early printing times was a highly risky business. The initial enthusiasm with which the new invention was greeted turned almost immediately into fear and paranoia. Somehow, the particular social conditions of the country at the time did not allow for a different outcome.

Religion and politics had been always too close in Spain. From 711 on, many political matters had a religious connection and, although the three religions (Judaism, Christianism and Islam) had been able to live next to each other, both Muslim and Christian rules were more than aware of the tantalizing power of words such as "crusade" or "jihad". During the XV century, the creation of a unified state under an absolute monarch (two in fact, but that would not last long), took the form of a victory against paganism: Christians had won the battle.

Moreover, the expulsions and massive conversions would make all the subjects of the Crown officially Catholic, and, therefore, subject to the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. Both authorities set up a state of cultural control that would last for centuries. Here I have only studied some instances of this kind of control, and, because of the scope of the work (the age of incunabula), (13) only some tendencies can be described. However, they sure show how the evolution of the printing industry would be in subsequent centuries.

Notas

(1). I would like to thank my fellow graduate student Alejandro Alonso, from the Hispanic Literature department at CUNY's Graduate Center, for his help providing extremely useful bibliography for this work.
(2). This letter, dating from 447, may well be the first instance of book burning in Spanish soil (Lea 16).

(3). As often happens in Spanish scholarship, there is a question of national pride in this matter, different scholars from different Spanish regions trying to locate the first impression in their communities.

(4). I follow Torre Revello, but it must be noted that Berry and Poole indicate that one edition was printed in Barcelona and the other in Valencia.

(5). Novísima Recopilación de las Leyes de España, VIII, 15, 1 (Gómez-Reino 205).

(6). Later on, princess Juana completely forbid the introduction of books printed outside Castile, "aunque sean impresos en los reynos de Aragón, Valencia, Cataluña y Navarra" (Pragmática de 7 de septiembre de 1558, quoted by Gómez-Reino 207-208).

(7). Novísima Recopilación de las Leyes de España, VIII, 16, 1 (Gómez-Reino 206).

(8). Archivo General de Indias, sección 5, est. 148, caj. 2, leg. 2 (Revello iii).

(9). His famous work, Manual de inquisidores, was enforced on the XVth century and is still published today.

(10). This Moderatio indices librorum prohibitorum was forgotten until 1909, when it was discovered in Codex Vaticanus lat. 3958, fol. 74 and published for the first time in the Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen (Hilgers). Later on, some more indices were printed and never promulgated, such as those of 1590 and 1593.

(11). It is interesting, though, that the very attachment to the book was what allowed for tolerance under Islamic rule, since both Jews and Christians were considered Ahl al-kit?b (people of the book) and, because of that fact, granted the status of dhimmis, protected under Islamic law.

(12). At the beginning he did not want to translate it, for fear of the reaction of the Church, but after he was assured protection he accepted to do it. It took him eleven years to finish the job (Catelli 65).

(13). Although it is true that I have had to go past and beyond the theoretical ending point of that date (1450-1500) to describe some phenomena.

Works Cited


Index Librorum Prohibitorum, SS. mi D. N. Pii PP. XII iussu editus, anno MDCCCCXLVIII Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1948.


Book censorship is the act of some authority, government or otherwise, taking measures to prevent access to a book or to part of its contents. It can be enacted at the national or subnational level, and can carry legal penalties. Books may also be challenged at a local community level, although successful bans do not extend outside that area. Similarly, religions may issue lists of banned books—a historical example being the Roman Catholic Church’s Index Librorum Prohibitorum—which do not always carry legal penalties. Manuscript production in Europe during the Middle Ages generated a vast variety of page designs, illustration and lettering styles, and production techniques. Isolation and poor travel conditions allowed identifiable regional design styles to emerge. The Kelmscott Press recaptured the beauty and high standards of incunabula (texts produced when books were still copied by hand), and the book again became an art form. The press’s masterwork is the ambitious 556-page The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Four years in the making, the Kelmscott Chaucer has 87 woodcut illustrations from drawings by renowned artist Edward Burne-Jones.