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## RAFAEL ALTAMIRA Y CREVEA

### *Introduction*

THE purpose of this essay is to give an account of one of the outstanding personalities of recent times, Rafael Altamira y Crevea.

Historian and writer, he was the first Spaniard to consider historiography with regard to its relation to culture.

Of course, we do not intend in this study to give a full description of the important role played by Professor Altamira in this world.

He was not only a historian of great reputation, but also a great philosopher, educator, literary man, and jurist. The writer has tried to give in this essay as complete a picture as possible of his accomplishments. I hope that my effort in presenting this great man will some day be continued on a larger scale in the English language; for his contribution will never be forgotten, not only by the people of Spain, but by the people of the world.

Rafael Altamira was born in Alicante on February 10, 1866.<sup>1</sup> Early in his life he was already known in Spanish intellectual circles. As a student of the University of Valencia, from 1881-1886, he had already developed the outstanding qualities shown later in his life.<sup>2</sup>

### *Early Life and Education*

In Valencia he distinguished himself by taking part in political agitation. It was here that Altamira developed his fervor for Republican ideas, which he sustained throughout his life. He was editor of a Republican newspaper, *La Justicia*.

Not finding the opportunities that he wanted in life, Altamira went to Madrid for the purpose of continuing his law studies in the most famous faculty of Spain, the University of Madrid. From this institution he obtained a Doctor of Law degree in 1887. At Madrid he found a better environment, and soon he was surrounded by a group of brilliant men, among them such personalities as Gumersindo Azcárate, Hermenegildo Giner de los Ríos, Joaquín Costa, and the famous lawyer Nicolás Salmerón.<sup>3</sup>

Early in his youth he discovered that Spain was dormant in many respects. He is perhaps the best example of the Spanish intelligentsia, who were conscious of this situation. Due to this fact he developed a deep feeling for his beloved country, which was revealed in all aspects of his life. Through his writings and lectures, both in Spain and abroad, he tried to guide his country out of this condition. "In him", said the famous historian Bernadotte E. Schmitt, "we are going to find the patriotic man, who preaches with confidence that Spain will

<sup>1</sup> Excmo. Sr. D. Rafael Altamira y Crevea in *Trece Años de Labor Americanista Docente* (Madrid, Publicaciones de la Revista de las Españas, No. 5).

<sup>2</sup> See *Bibliografía y Biografía de Rafael Altamira y Crevea* (México, Ediciones Mediterrani, 1946), 55. Altamira received his elementary school training at the College of St. Joseph in Alicante. At the Institute of that city he finished his secondary education.

<sup>3</sup> Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *Some Historians of Modern Europe* (Chicago, 1942), 2.

rise again as a great civilization if their citizens accept the proper instruction".<sup>4</sup>

Up to 1897, when Altamira became a professor at the University of Oviedo, he scarcely can be described as being a professional historian. During this period he delivered public lectures on historical subjects, published articles on legal history, and contributed with some of his essays to the *Revue Historique* of France.<sup>5</sup> Being Secretary of the Spanish Pedagogical Museum, he also became the editor of the *Revista Crítica de Historia y Literatura*.<sup>6</sup> He achieved great success in different fields: literature, education, history, and law. It was through his literary interests that Altamira met such Spanish literary men and scholars, as Leopoldo Alas (Clarín), Menéndez y Pelayo, Unamuno, Pérez Galdós, and Ramón Menéndez Pidal.<sup>7</sup> However, his real interest was in history; and in 1907 he abandoned literature, devoting all his time to history and other realms.

### *History and Teaching*

In his book, *La Enseñanza de la Historia* (1895), which marks a new driving force in Spanish methodology, Altamira analyzed the teaching of History from an early age.<sup>8</sup> The book is a great help in the process of teaching history in the schools not only in Spain, but in other countries as well, where his masterpiece received a warm reception. He believed that students should be given a knowledge of history early in their educational career. No other subject, perhaps, will help more to bring a national consciousness among students, and at the same time develop in their minds the idea that their country should be improved, when comparisons are made with other nations of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. In 1914 he was appointed professor at the University of Madrid.

<sup>5</sup> Rafael Altamira in *Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada* (Barcelona, Vol. 4), 953.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 953.

<sup>7</sup> *Bibliografía y Biografía*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

It was his opinion that the methods used in the teaching of history were far from adequate, for they were based upon the so-called memorization process. No effort was made to arouse in the students a critical attitude, or to evaluate material presented to them.<sup>9</sup>

In Altamira we find the belief that all teaching of history is not to be found in history books. He asserted that history books get old rapidly, and he tried to prove this fact by comparing two books which had the same title. The first appeared in 1822, from the pen of the Spanish historian Juan Sempere y Guarinos (1754-1830) *Historia del Derecho Español*; and the other book, that of Eduardo de Hinojosa (1852-1919) appeared in 1887.<sup>10</sup>

For Altamira the real purpose of any teaching is the formation of the personality of the student and the development of his innate qualities. In history the student should have the critical attitude and the absolute belief in only the truth. He suggested a practical method so that the student would have a closer contact with history. His purpose was to acquaint the student with the practical side of teaching, thus giving him a good opportunity to use documents, make excursions, study monuments and relics.<sup>11</sup>

Altamira analyzed the procedures followed in the history classes at the Universities, and then presented an ideal program—a complete methodological doctrine which, according to him, should be put in practice when teaching history. For this purpose he compared the educational policies, and especially the teaching of history in other countries with those of Spain, which he described as detestable. His investigations covered countries like Germany, France, Russia, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Holland, and the United States.<sup>12</sup> In fact, to improve the Spanish educational system was one of the most important tasks of

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<sup>9</sup> Rafael Altamira, *La Enseñanza de la Historia* (Madrid, 1895), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 Altamira also wrote a book on this subject. See *Historia del Derecho Español* (1903).

<sup>11</sup> Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Rafael Altamira, *op. cit.*, 21.



Professor Altamira during much of his life. From his University days on, he published articles and books, and exposed his liberal ideas through a series of lectures. He also participated in several international congresses, such as those which met in Rome (1903) and Berlin (1908).<sup>13</sup>

While a professor at the University of Oviedo, he inaugurated certain reforms in the school system. Among them were important reforms in the art of teaching and the introduction of the seminar method, later widely used in all Spanish universities. As Director General of Elementary Education, from 1911 to 1913, Altamira used all his efforts to revitalize the system of public education in Spain.

But let us turn again to his book in the teaching of history. Altamira believed that it represented the literary sources of history, and that it was an auxiliary instrument, without any other value than that of being an interpretation and a subjective exposition, more or less truthful, of the historic fact and of its direct sources. For him a real historical education should stress the sources and not a second hand narration.<sup>14</sup> He believed that the books which are not the direct results of historical facts have their value and utility as scientific works, because they represent a complete process of investigation and permit in a short period of time the recording of previous happening and knowledge. In general, any textbook contains two great inconveniences, according to Altamira: (1) It is, commonly, a third or fourth hand work, written rapidly, without any scruples and with more of a commercial purpose than scientific. (2) It has a dogmatic character, narrow and dry.

### *His patriotism*

For Altamira the word patriotism fills the highest place. His patriotism had as a motto the well known words of the famous Roman historian Tacitus, *Sine ira et studio*.<sup>15</sup> After

<sup>13</sup> *Bibliografía y Biografía*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Rafael Altamira, *La Enseñanza de la Historia*, 323.

<sup>15</sup> Rafael Altamira, *Psicología del Pueblo Español* (Barcelona, Segunda Edición, 1900), 25.

the Spanish American War Altamira assumed the role of a historian-patriot of national importance. He believed that the events related to the war with the United States had made the Spaniards feel their lack of prestige in the world. He added:<sup>16</sup>:

The loss of the last American domains caused a depression in Spain similar to that produced by the defeats in the seventeenth century after Rocroy. There followed a period of great dismay and at the same time there aroused an antagonistic opinion against all conquering or dominating activities outside of Spain. The nation wanted to dedicate itself to internal affairs and to work toward its betterment and prosperity, for now it lacked confidence in itself.

As Altamira pointed out, the catastrophic defeat of Spain in 1898 resulted among other things, in the stressing in the public mind the gravity of those political and national effects to which the disaster for Spain was attributed. Public opinion considered this as significant of Spanish inferiority in face of the enormous advance made by the United States.

In accordance with the natural emphatic manner of the Spanish character, made more significant this time by the painful defeat and by the circumstances under which it happened, this opinion changed rapidly into pessimism. This condition affected not only the situation of the moment, but the whole history of Spain—that is to say, the work of the Spanish spirit throughout the ages, and the fitness of its qualities for modern civilization. Among the various writers who then expressed this exaggerated attitude, Joaquín Costa and Ricardo Macías Picavea stand out as the most influential.<sup>17</sup>

In this common feeling of hopelessness which lasted for some years, there were only isolated voices which dared to disagree and proclaim optimism. Altamira was one of them.

<sup>16</sup> Rafael Altamira, *Manual de Historia de España* (Buenos Aires, Segunda Edición, 1946), 503-504.

<sup>17</sup> Rafael Altamira, *A History of Spanish Civilization* (New York, 1930, English translation by P. Volkov), 238. See Macías Picavea, *El Problema Nacional* (1891).

His optimism was based upon an energetic advance in all spheres of national activity, especially in teaching, and on recognizing that the characteristics shown by the Spanish people in past centuries was a reaffirmation of natural capabilities.

### *The Hispanophobe Movement*

During the Spanish American war the hispanophobe movement was revived. Hispanophobia grew and reached a peak in the last quarter of the eighteenth century throughout the world. The questions asked by other European writers were: What is owed to Spain? What has Spain done in Europe?<sup>18</sup> In Italy the hispanophobe movement was carried on by Tiraboschi in his *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* and Bettinelli in his *Risorgimento d' Italia negli studii, nella arti, e ne' costumi, dopo il mille*.<sup>19</sup> In France the movement against Spain was represented in such authors as Raynal in his *Histoire Philosophique*; and Langle in his *Viaje de Figaro*.<sup>20</sup> Other hispanophobe leaders were Rousseau, Prevost and Voltaire.<sup>21</sup> In both countries the hispanophobe movement was stronger than in other European nations.

As a direct result of hispanophobia the question related to Spanish decadence became prominent at the turn of the century. Shall we or shall we not win against Spanish decadence? This was the question asked by Rafael Altamira of the Spanish people. For him the only way that it could be done was through a great effort to be made by the Spanish people.

### *Spanish Decadence*

The real causes of the Spanish decadence are really unknown. It can not be attributed to an inferior race, because Spain throughout history and especially from the thirteenth to

<sup>18</sup> Rafael Altamira, *La Psicología del Pueblo Español*, 127-128.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

the eighteenth centuries played a leading and outstanding role in the history of the world. For Professor Altamira the real causes of the Spanish decadence were mainly: (1) An economic disorder, which brought a natural impoverishment and (2) The depopulation of Spain during the tremendous colonization enterprise in America.<sup>22</sup> As pointed out, the effect of the Spanish defeat in 1898 was deeply felt in Spain, and Altamira joined the patriotic movement of resurrecting the achievements and grandeur of the Nation, so as to bring again optimism to the people. He analyzed the hispanophobe writings of the past and reached the conclusion that it was all an exaggeration against his beloved country. He saw the grandeur of Spain, capable of accomplishing things for the benefit of the Spaniards and of other people. Altamira was of opinion that the work of regeneration could only be reached through a process of honest evaluation of Spanish history.<sup>23</sup>

Regeneration became a common word for such isolated thinkers like Altamira, who wanted a better and optimistic Spain.<sup>24</sup> For bringing again the needed self-confidence to his compatriots, Altamira published his books, *Historia de España y de la Civilización Española* and *La Psicología del Pueblo Español*.<sup>25</sup> In this second book he carried forward his ideas, and perhaps the improvement in the feelings of the people of Spain is greatly due to this masterpiece, which received an exultant acclamation in Spain and abroad.

According to Professor Altamira the psychology of the Spanish people had been described erroneously, mostly from the point of view of hispanophobia. He attributed this fact to the jealousy toward Spain on the part of other nations.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Rafael Altamira, *Psicología del Pueblo Español*, 11. See *Regeneración*, Biblioteca Alicantina, Vol. IV, Alicante, 1901.

<sup>25</sup> *Bibliografía y Biografía*, 13. Dr. Charles E. Chapman, former professor of the University of California published in 1918 *A History of Spain*, which is "in great part a summary or selection" from Altamira's *Historia de España y de la Civilización Española*. The book, which has been used as a text in many colleges and universities of the United States, was written "as an attempt to give in one volume the main features of the Spanish history from the standpoint of America". There are several editions of Chapman's history.



Altamira, at the head of the optimistic group, tried by all means to fight the psychological enemies inside and outside of Spain. After studying the problem very carefully, Altamira reached the conclusion that the evils existed more among the Spaniards themselves than among public opinion abroad. These evils, as properly seen by Professor Altamira were, the lack of national solidarity, which was manifested in the discussion of the so-called concept of the word *patria*, and the pessimistic attitude of the Spaniards.

Professor Altamira's critical attitude was directed to the group of Spaniards who called themselves patriots, and who wished to rejuvenate the nation, but at the same time assumed a depreciating attitude toward Spain, thus lowering their reputation. This was done not only before their fellow citizens, but what was more unpardonable, in the presence of foreigners.<sup>26</sup> Altamira, again and again, stressed the point that it was imperative to recover the reputation of Spain inside its own boundaries and at the same time in the foreign world.

But in order to struggle against the pessimistic spirit, it was necessary for him to show in his writings the lack of scientific value of the various psychologies, which tried to define in an erroneous way the Spanish soul, and especially of those who affirmed in their writings the incapacity of the Spanish nation to accomplish a renaissance. He tried by all means to show the scientific problem of the so-called psychology of the Spanish people. For Professor Altamira this was a serious problem; and so since 1898 many of his writings and lectures were related to the *psicología del pueblo español*,<sup>27</sup> where he showed the outside world all the erroneous views that had circulated about his country.

In a campaign which he developed in his lectures, books, speeches, and articles, Altamira endeavored to bring optimism again to his compatriots and make them forget their defeated spirit. He was of the opinion that the most important aspect

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<sup>26</sup> Rafael Altamira, *Psicología del Pueblo Español*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

in the process of regeneration consisted in developing a new educational method in the intensification and diffusion of Spanish culture, to be followed by an energetic campaign for popular education throughout Spain.<sup>28</sup>

Gradually this thought gathered force, and with it, among the less optimistic, arose the conviction that it was their duty to strive to conquer obstacles and not to give way until they had made every effort to remove them. Thus, year after year, the situation changed, and by the end of 1914 a renewal of collective confidence was perceptible. To a great extent hispanophobia disappeared, making possible once again the recognition of the achievements of Spain in the past.

### *Altamira and Latin America*

It should be kept in mind that Altamira looked toward Latin America with great sympathy. He never forgot that Hispanic America was once the pride of Spain, and that his country transplanted her institutions into America. Regarding Latin America as ground where the Spanish people were demonstrating their vitality again, Professor Altamira conceived several projects to stimulate the intellectual communion of the Spanish people on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1909 Altamira initiated a very important goodwill mission throughout Latin America. During a period of ten months he delivered some three hundred lectures in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Perú, México, and Cuba.<sup>29</sup> His mission was a very important success in developing a stronger Pan-Hispanic movement.

Professor Altamira demonstrated once more his intense patriotism for his country when he defended from the attack of the critics the Spanish system which once prevailed in Latin America. Altamira believed that the Spanish colonial record was great, and creditable enough, to make any Spaniard feel

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Bibliografía y Biografía*, 57. This trip was sponsored by the University of Oviedo. After his mission was completed Altamira wrote *Mi Viaje a América* (1911).

proud of it.<sup>30</sup> The results of the Spanish Empire are still seen. Let us analyze carefully, in an impartial way, the position Altamira took, and there is no doubt that he was right in his ideas. If we take a glance at a map of the world, immediately we will realize that Spanish culture is spread over a considerable area. Spanish, like English, and perhaps alone with English, said Professor J.B. Trend, "may justly be described as world language." Today Spanish is considered a very fine and perfect instrument for the expression of human thought.

His researches in the Hispanic American realm were really quite significant. Among his best works in this field are, *Cuestiones Hispanoamericanas* (1900) *Literatura Histórica Americana* (1904), *España en América* (1908), *Cultura Hispanoamericana* (1915), *España y el Programa Americanista* (1917) the second part of which is, wholly, of patriotic vindication, *La Política de España en América* (1921), and *La Huella de España en América* (1924).<sup>31</sup>

### *All-around man*

One of the best descriptions that can be applied to Rafael Altamira is of being throughout his life an all-around man. He was not only the philosopher, the literary man, the historian, but also a great jurist. His doctoral dissertation, *La Historia de la Propiedad Comunal*, published in 1890, placed Altamira as a member of the most famous liberal school of Spanish jurists.<sup>32</sup> He served as president, in different occasions, of international juridical societies, as well as arbitrator for the Spanish government in labor disputes. His reputation as a jurist was rapidly recognized. In 1920 he was chosen, together with other famous jurists, by the Council of the League of Nations, to draw up a plan for the Permanent Court of International Justice.<sup>33</sup> In 1921

<sup>30</sup> Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *op. cit.*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Bibliografía y Biografía*, 10-24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

he was appointed judge of the International Court of Justice. He was a member of this organization until 1939.<sup>34</sup>

In 1932 Altamira was mainly responsible for the creation of the *Conferencia Internacional de la Enseñanza de la Historia* (International Conference on the Teaching of History). He remained president of this organization until 1936.<sup>35</sup> After 1939 Altamira never went back to Spain. He was deeply affected by the Spanish Civil war which resulted in the Franco regime. Professor Altamira was against the Franco government.

During World War II Altamira was in France. In the city of Bayonne he was engaged in the writing of new books. He also collaborated with several outstanding journals of Europe and Latin America.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Other works and articles*

Among the other most noted works of Altamira are *De Historia y Arte*; *La Reforma de los Estudios Históricos por España*; *Filosofía de la Historia y Teoría de la Civilización*; *Temas de Historia de España*; *Pestalozzi y Nosotros*; *Giner de los Ríos, Educador*; *Libro de Máximas y Reflexiones*; *Ideario Pedagógico*; *Cuestiones Modernas de Historia*; *Últimos Escritos Americanista*; *Discursos a la Nación Alemana*; *Cuentos de Mi Tierra*; *Escritos Patrióticos*; *Constituciones Vigentes en los Estados Americanos*; *Cuentos de Levante, Reposo*; *Novelitas y Cuentos*; *Problemas Urgentes de la Primera Enseñanza, Psicología y Literatura*; *La Guerra Actual y la Opinión Española, and Arte y Realidad*. In French he wrote *Le Problème de l'homme de Génie et de la Collectivité dans l' Histoire* and *L'Enseignement des Sciences Sociales en Espagne*.<sup>37</sup>

One of his best books is *Manual de Historia de España* (two editions, 1934 and 1946). This book is not just a mere resumé

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<sup>34</sup> *Diccionario Enciclopédico U. T. E. H. A.* (México), 532.

<sup>35</sup> *Bibliografía y Biografía*, 10-32.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada*, 953.



of his *History of Spain and of Spanish Civilization*, but an entirely new book. Several reasons prompted him to write it: (1) The progress attained by the Hispanic historical studies, which brought on a number of innovations, and (2) the change undergone by his outlook on some of the aspects and periods of the history of Spain, and, as he himself declares, "I was forced, for diverse reasons, to use a more informal tone and manner of presentation, I mean to say, more popular, than that which characterizes the *History* from 1900-1911".<sup>38</sup>

Altamira published many articles in newspapers and journals, such as *El Heraldo de Madrid*; *La Nación* (Buenos Aires); *Diario Español* (Habana); *El Día* (Montevideo); *La Prensa* (Madrid); *Hispania* (Barcelona); *Revista Jurídica de Cataluña* (Spain); *Revista de las Españas* (Spain); *La Ley* (Buenos Aires); *Revista Universitaria de la Universidad Mayor de San Marcos* (Perú); (Buenos Aires); *Revista de la Universidad* (México); *Bulletin Hispanique* (Bordeaux); *Revista de Historia de América* (México); *Diario de Yucatán* (México); *Cuadernos Americanos* (México); *Mediterrani* (México); *Boletín de la Academia de Historia y Geografía* (México), and *Filosofía y Letras* (México).<sup>39</sup>

### *Altamira in Mexico*

In 1946 Professor Altamira went to Mexico, where he delivered a series of lectures in historiography at the College of Mexico.<sup>40</sup> These lectures were published in 1948 under the title *Proceso Histórico de la Historiografía Humana*. This volume was distributed by the *Fondo de Cultura Económica* of Mexico. His<sup>41</sup> last three works were written in that beautiful land south of the Río Grande. They are *Los Elementos de la Civilización y del Carácter Español* (1950); *Ensayo Sobre Feli-*

<sup>38</sup> See Rafael Altamira, *Manual de Historia de España* (Buenos Aires, 1946).

<sup>39</sup> *Bibliografía y Biografía*, 33-39.

<sup>40</sup> Rafael Altamira, *Proceso Histórico de la Historiografía Humana* (México, El Colegio de México, 1948), 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

*pe II, Hombre de Estado, Su Psicología General y Su Individualidad Humana* (1950) and *Diccionario Castellano de palabras jurídicas y técnicas tomadas de la legislación Indiana* (1951). He died in Mexico in 1951.<sup>42</sup>

### *Style and position as a historian*

As a result of his reaction against the rhetorical and philosophical flights of fancy by other historians, the style of Altamira was somewhat based on facts and softened. In his first works he had the habit of using long involved sentences. However, as practice continued, Altamira's style became very brilliant and lucid. He took very seriously the role of the historian, for he reminded the other historians that they were men with great moral and political responsibility. The following remarks by Mrs. Muna Lee, well known American poetess and former professor of English and Director of Publicity of the University of Puerto Rico, constitutes one of the best descriptions of Altamira's attitude as a historian:<sup>43</sup>

Clarity, objectivity, and scrupulous adherence to the historic fact characterize Rafael Altamira's attitude as a historian. It has been said of him that his books show why Spanish things are as they are—in both Europe and America. They show no less what humane and generous concepts, what rectitude of criterion and what temperatedness of judgement, have made Rafael Altamira an enduring interpreter of the history and the conscience of Spain.

Altamira's position as a historian of world-wide reputation led him to receive invitations to offer lectures and courses in the most famous European Universities, among others, Oxford, Cambridge, London, Brussels, the Sorbonne and the College of France. He also gave lectures in many Latin American universities in the United States. He received honorary degrees from the Universities of Bordeaux, Cambridge and Paris.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Diccionario de Literatura Española* (Madrid, 1953), 24-25.

<sup>43</sup> Rafael Altamira, *A History of Spain*, Translated by Muna Lee (New York, London, Toronto, 1949), VI.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, VI.

His work as a historian will have a lasting value. Describing him as a historian, Professor Bernadotte Schmitt said: "History he wrote taught, and even preached. Not often in recent times has its value been affirmed with more spirited consistency than it has by Rafael Altamira".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *op. cit.*, 20.