THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN MALTESE PUBLIC LIFE

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The discussion on the place of religion in public life is as old as humanity itself, and it shows no sign of abating in our own times. In the Maltese context, where the Catholic religion is culturally still so strong, this debate is of special importance as we embark on our EU experience.

The latest discussion on whether to place an image of Christ on our euro coin is very indicative not only of certain attitudes which die hard among us, but more so of the enduring importance of religion and the emotions it can easily produce among the Maltese.

Yet it is obvious that in a very real sense, this is not only a Maltese debate, but a universal one. The furore around the publication of the Danish cartoons is just one of the latest examples, but new ones seem to appear every week. Religion finds itself accused of most of our world’s mishaps, from fundamentalism and terrorism to the rising toll of AIDS victims in the developing world.

Speaking very broadly, one can distinguish two main positions in the debate on the place of religion in public life within democratic societies. There is the liberal position that largely excludes religion and religiously motivated arguments from the public debate; then there are those who, claiming that it is in fact impossible to eliminate religion from the public debate, advocate an even wider discussion which includes all views, including the religious one.

The Liberal Position - John Rawls

The two basic tenets of liberalism are equality and freedom. Admitting religious argument in the political and public debate would mean giving an unfair advantage to those who hold religious ideas over those who do not, thus imposing an unacceptable level of inequality. The liberal position claims that religion should have no place in public debate, especially in our pluralistic society, for it is only divisive and will end up by imposing one set of beliefs or behaviours on free citizens. ‘A public and workable agreement on a single and general comprehensive conception [of the good] could only be maintained by the oppressive use of state power’.

Moreover, since September 11, religion is seen by some to be the main cause of violence and fanaticism in our world, so that it is best excluded from the political discussion. Huntington’s famous assertion that ‘Islam has bloody borders’ epitomises the basis of the claim that all religion - and not only Islam - is inherently divisive and generative of conflict so that the use of religious arguments in the public arena will certainly lead to greater division, possibly to a clash of civilisations. The main virtue of our times should be tolerance of the different viewpoints existing in our societies.

Of the many versions, more or less radical, of this position, the one which best seems to grapple with the complex issues involved is that of John Rawls. The question of the place of religion in public life and debate was of constant concern to the Harvard philosopher in all his writings, and while he retained his position excluding religion, his understanding of the issues involved has certainly developed over the years.

Rawls’ starting point is that for democracy and justice to exist, there is a real need for stability in society. Rawls believes that any discussion based on the citizens’ different comprehensive views, whether religious or philosophical, will inevitably lead to the appearance of irreconcilable differences. It is in the very nature of these views that they can only be justified in a manner that is not accessible to all citizens, so that using religion-based arguments in public discussion lacks the essential element of reciprocity. Hence religion is best left out of the discussion altogether.

Only Public Reason

Thus, only ‘public reason’ should be allowed in the public debate, for three reasons: ‘As the reason of free and equal citizens, it is the reason of the public; its subject is the public good concerning questions of fundamental political justice…; and its nature and content are public, being expressed in public reasoning by a family of reasonable conceptions of political justice reasonably thought to satisfy the criterion of reciprocity’.

Rawls’ understanding of public reason grew wider and more inclusive with time. He is willing to acknowledge the contribution that religiously inspired views have made at certain turning points of the American constitutional development, yet he insists that this ‘intrusion’ is acceptable only in ‘emergency’ situations, and the proponents of religiously inspired views have the duty to explain their position in universally accessible terms once the emergency is over.

In his final writing on the subject Rawls draws an important distinction. He confines public reason to constitutional essentials and issues of basic justice, but develops the idea of the ‘background culture’, which he describes as neither public nor private, but ‘non-public’, and to which he attributes an important role in the political discussion. He describes it as the ‘culture of civil society… and includes, then, the culture of churches, and associations of all kinds, and institutions of learning at all levels, especially universities and professional

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3 He refers to two especially important moments in the constitutional development of the United States, both of which he admits to have been religiously inspired - the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement.
schools, scientific and other societies. He also speaks of the media, which he describes as the mediator between the background culture and the public political culture. Religion has every right to participate in these non public spheres, while it should be excluded from questions of public reason.

**Tolerance, The Modern Virtue**

Yet, in our experience stability looks less attainable in a society that understands itself as being irremediably pluralist. In this scenario, it is claimed that rational discussion is possible only if our society is characterised by tolerance, the virtue that will guarantee stability. Without tolerance, our societies would soon fall apart, especially if the discussion were to include comprehensive views, whether religious or otherwise.

Tolerance began to be seen as the ideal for our Western societies in the 16th century, when the Christian religion was no longer a force for unity but became the source of deep and often violent divisions all across Europe. Early modern Europeans realised that waging wars of religion was only self-destructive, so they chose to accept differences in religious affiliation. This option for tolerance took a long time to be realised in practice, and was fully embraced for the first time in real terms only in the US Constitution.

This perceived link between religion and intolerance, even religion and violence, led the Enlightenment to reject religion, restricting it to the private sphere, together with other philosophical and ethical choices of the individual. Throughout modernity this process was further hastened by the claims of the natural sciences to exclusive and absolute objectivity: the only absolute truth was that which could be arrived at empirically, scientifically; all the rest was to be confined to the private realm.

The step to making tolerance the ideal of our culture was then a small one indeed: morality is considered to be a private matter, and society should not impose any standard on any of its members, except, perhaps, the duty not to judge the behaviour and the moral choices of others.

**Yet, is Tolerance Enough?**

Our commitment to the dignity and equality of all members of society certainly ranks among the greatest achievements of modernity. Yet when tolerance was first put forward as the royal road to achieve these high ideals, this happened in the context of a strong moral consensus and a widely shared vision of society. Nowadays, we realise that contemporary pluralism reaches much deeper into our life, so that the real moral consensus is much thinner than in the 17th and 18th centuries. Consequently, a shared vision of society has become much more difficult to articulate.

As the range of our pluralism expands, we seem to harbour more doubts about the validity of the option for tolerance. What is supposed to strengthen our democracy by acknowledging the equality of all views, sometimes seems to be leading us in the opposite direction - towards ever greater individualism and fragmentation with a consequent loss of a

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sense of community: we seem to have lost our ability to engage in any type of moral argument. As a result of this all-pervading individualism, we seem to be experiencing what Charles Taylor called the third malaise of modernity, ‘a society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are “enclosed in their own hearts”…where few will want to participate actively in self-government. They will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life’.

With tolerance as a starting point, setting the agenda of our public, political debate takes on a new twist. Should we deal only with issues of procedure, about ways of ensuring equality before the law and the structures of the state, or should we also try to answer questions of greater substance regarding what is acceptable and to be sought in our life together? This is a vital question which somehow seems to surface all the time in our debates. Those who hold the view that we should give precedence to right over good insist that society’s duty in this respect is only to ensure that all citizens have all the space necessary to follow their own private choices; matters of substance should not be discussed in public for they ultimately belong to the private space.

Yet we are facing more and more situations which seem to put into serious question the position that all we need to achieve a good life together is tolerance and adequate rules of procedure. There are, as David Hollenbach puts it, ‘Problems that tolerance cannot handle’. Vital complex problems like global poverty, stem cell research or religious fanaticism, to name but a few, prove how insufficient a live and let live attitude can be. Our present predicament seems to call for a more daring and engaged approach to public life, one that is willing to go beyond tolerant individualism to identify and achieve the good of all. No wonder that the phrase ‘common good’ is being heard more often in the public debate. This is the real discussion that will bring not only stability but justice and effective dignity to all members of our global society.

**What Place for Religion?**

Many authors, like Michael J. Perry, David Hollenbach and Jeffrey Stout, ask whether it is realistic to exclude religion from this vital public discussion. When surveys repeatedly show that most people still choose to call themselves religious, and that religion provides many (if not most) citizens with their most basic motivation in life and their fundamental understanding of the world and of human life, it becomes more difficult to justify excluding religion from the public discussion, especially if this is done in the name of democracy. Michael Perry even opines that these convictions can be the principal grounds of political deliberation and choice.

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6 CHARLES TAYLOR, *The Ethics of Authenticity* Cambridge (MA)/London: Harvard University Press 1991, 8. The other two malaises of modernity, which are the cause of this third one, are individualism and the rise of instrumental reason.


The fundamental point is this: One’s basic moral/-religious convictions are (partly) self-constitutive and are therefore a principal ground - indeed, the principal ground - of political deliberation and choice. To “bracket” such convictions is therefore to bracket - to annihilate - essential aspects of one’s very self. To participate in politics and law - in particular to make law, to break law or to interpret law - with such convictions bracketed is not to participate as the self one is but as some one - or rather some thing - else.\textsuperscript{11}

Moreover, while there is no doubt that religion is sometimes the motive for violence, there is also much evidence that it is often a source of reconciliation.\textsuperscript{12} The Catholic Church has become one of the most vocal defenders of human rights the world over, and Pope John Paul’s radical and consistent disagreement with war during his pontificate won him respect from many otherwise critical commentators. The same can be said of other religions, which are an inspiration to innumerable peace loving citizens and movements, in diverse situations ranging from Cambodia to Northern Ireland, the United States and South Africa.

Another area where the positive contribution of religion to public life is being increasingly acknowledged is that made by communities of religious people to the common life. Research shows that persons who are religiously active tend to be more involved in public life than others who are not. People who take their religious life and duties seriously, seem to find in their religion a higher motivation to participate in civic life: they tend to vote more, be more active in civic movements, be members of trade unions and political parties, and serve on school boards.\textsuperscript{13}

The corollary to these assertions is that a religion-based position claiming such an important place in the public debate must be capable and willing to accept challenge and criticism. Perry, in line with contemporary Catholic teaching on religious freedom and the imperative to dialogue, calls for as wide a discussion as possible - an ‘ecumenical’ discussion - where all views and their foundations are welcome. This calls for attitudes which go beyond mere tolerance towards a more serious engagement for the common good and deep mutual respect, qualities which are not always automatically identified with people holding religion-based positions.

The Case of the European Constitution

The anti-religious bias in our European societies is much stronger than on the other side of the Atlantic. In Europe, the modern liberal state was born in opposition to religion, and particularly to Christianity, which in turn proved incapable to read the signs of the times, and remained a staunch supporter of the \textit{ancien régime}.

No wonder that even after more than two centuries, the debate about whether to include a reference to God and Christianity in the European constitution was passionate indeed. Many, including the late Pope John Paul II, were advocating an explicit mention of God and

Christianity in the new constitution, mostly on the basis of what was claimed to be the undeniable Christian roots of European culture.

The European value of *laïcité* seems to have prevailed, but not wholly. The Constitution opted for a realist approach which rejected both the rigorous exclusion of religion from political affairs, and the confessional option. In its article I-52, the Constitution says that:

‘1. The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States.
2. The Union equally respects the status under national law of philosophical and non-confessional organisations.
3. Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations.’

This formal constitutional acceptance of a structured dialogue between the Union and the Churches and other religious communities and associations acknowledges the public role that such bodies have for the democratic and social development of Europe and its member states. Indirectly, it is the acceptance of a legitimate public role of religion and religion-based arguments.

The Malta Experience

The history of the influence of the Catholic Church on the legal and political development of Malta has still to be written. Our country certainly has a long and varied history of close encounters between politics and religion, both under the non-Catholic Imperial administration and in our years as an independent state. Often these encounters were intense and passionate, with the participants ending up bruised in the process. All acknowledge that these methods belong to the past, yet there is no doubt that religion, and specifically the Catholic religion, is still a strong force in Malta. The vast majority still describe themselves as Catholics, sharing the main tenets of that faith. Most children are baptised, most marriages are still celebrated in Church, and external signs of religiosity, from house names to village festas, show no sign of disappearing. For many parents it still seems quite important to send their children to church schools, and Sunday mass attendance is still much higher than anywhere else in Europe. Malta is one of the very few countries world-wide where divorce and abortion are illegal.

Yet there are many clear indications that these ties are growing weaker, for while the external signs of belonging to the Church are still there, more and more feel free to choose their own lifestyle. Anthony M. Abela calls this trend an ‘individualized Catholic identity’, where one sees oneself as a member of the Church while feeling very free to dissent from the Church’s teachings in one’s personal life options. Abela defines this movement as:

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‘a multiplicity of risk-taking and self-determining individuals who are not concerned to reconcile traditional religion with the demands of later modernity. They shape their Catholic identity in a fragmented social context. They include individualists who take most of their personal decisions by themselves, without much advice …’.16

A recent survey among university students17 seems to reflect this trend. A sample of around 500 university students was selected and personally interviewed on their religious affiliations, beliefs and behaviour. The picture that emerges is very striking indeed.

Most students profess their belief in the main tenets of the Christian creed. Belief in God, the Trinity, Jesus as the Son of God, the Holy Spirit, the Incarnation, Mary as the Mother of God, and the after life all scored over 90%. An impressive 75% believe in the Church, while a slightly lower percentage, (72%) believe in the bodily resurrection.

These answers do, however, belie a certain amount of inconsistency if not outright confusion: more students profess their belief in the devil (86%) than in angels (82%), while marginally less say they believe in heaven and hell (81%). More significantly, belief in God and the afterlife exists side by side with other beliefs that the Christian faith considers incompatible: 13% believe in the horoscope, 23% in reincarnation and 15% in fortune telling. An even higher percentage (45%) believes in ‘the influence of other supernatural energies (besides God) on our lives’. 77% say they believe in the intercession of saints.

This ambiguity in the students’ sense of belonging to the Church is even more pronounced when we move to the questions dealing with their behaviour in the areas of sexuality, married life and abortion.

When asked about the level of their religious practice, 77% replied that they go to mass every week, while nearly 50% receive communion every time they go to mass. Nearly one fourth (23%) go to confession at least once a month.

The overwhelming majority are against abortion: only 2.5% see nothing wrong in it, and twice that number say it can be carried out when one knows the child to be born will be disabled. Yet those who say it is always morally wrong are 63%: the rest, a solid 37% accept only one exception - it can only be performed to save the mother’s life.

More than half (58%) of all the respondents agree with premarital cohabitation, and less than a third (29%) express their disagreement when asked about the morality of pre-marital sexual intercourse. In fact, 40% of respondents admit practising sexual intercourse during the preceding year.

16 ANTHONY M. ABELA, ‘Young Catholics in Malta: Similar Origins, Multiple Destinations’, in John Fulton and others, Young Catholics at the New Millennium. The Religion and Morality of Young Adults in Western Countries, Dublin: University College of Dublin Press, 2000, 47.
17 CHARLES TABONE et al, Religious Beliefs and Attitudes of Maltese University Students Malta: University Chaplaincy 2003.
The Future

I find no reason to believe that this attitude belongs only to the university students in Maltese society. In fact, I believe that, in some measure, it reflects important shifts in our value systems. This trend, together with a rapidly changing situation on the ground, with for instance, an increasing number of marital separations and rising levels of extra marital cohabitation, will increase the pressure for changes in the present legislation. At the same time, we can already see the first signs of a reaction by groups who will push for a more rightist agenda in Church affairs, putting even more pressure on the institutional Church.

One extremely important feature of the Maltese church is the impressive number of its lay members who are organised in many types of different groups, traditional and of more recent, more or less charismatic, inspiration. The sense of belonging of these Christians, of whom a good proportion are young people, and their willingness to take their Christian life seriously, is certainly one of the most striking characteristic of the contemporary Church in Malta.18

This is another feature of our scenario that will ensure that culturally, and therefore politically, the Church will remain a very strong presence, and as we move into more pluralistic waters and with new leaders, one wonders how the encounter between politics and religion in Malta, now an EU member, will evolve.

I believe that this debate will be carried out in three main areas: the family, the defence of human life and the field of social welfare and human rights. The first two have always occupied a primary place in the Church’s vision of a well ordered society, and Church teaching on these areas is well developed and articulate. The recent diocesan Synod has also published a fine document on Marriage and the Family19, and has chosen the family as an area of special concern.

Less obvious is the Church’s future role in the discussion in the social field, especially in the debate on our future welfare system, and in the area of human rights as racism rears its ugly head and as the problem of irregular migration becomes a permanent feature of our reality. The Synod document on Diakonia and Justice calls for participation of the Church in these debates20, but it seems that these are areas where the local church still finds it more difficult to form an opinion and express it as a qualified participant in the current debates.

Religion will certainly remain a major influence in the public debate in our country for the foreseeable future, even if the Church becomes weaker as an institution. Hopefully, attitudes seeking dialogue with people of other views will prevail over what can sometimes be perceived as ‘megaphone diplomacy’. More lay Christians are receiving a stronger theological and pastoral formation, and there is a real quest for community life whose

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witness is another important element in the public discussion in the midst of an advancing individualism.

Thus this presence of religion will not be achieved by seeking direct political power but through the promotion of human and Christian values and the strengthening of human communities, especially of the family and of special concern for the poor. As Pope Benedict says in his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*,

‘The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics and not of the Church. Yet, the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply’. (28)

It is not very easy to decipher what the Pope means by the first sentence of this passage, but there is no doubt that he is claiming a clear public role for the Church and for religion. He calls for a socially active Church, yet one willing to enter the fray of rational, non-confessional, argument to promote and safeguard the values it believes in and bring about greater justice in the world.