

Secularisation and Partisan Dealignment: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

The Troika: Religion and Politics in Malta

“For one to be Maltese one must be either a Nationalist or a Labourite, and definitely a Catholic.”¹

Both party politics and the Catholic Church have impacted on the social reality of the Maltese Islands so that cultural life and “national pride”² are largely dominated by religion and politics. This notion has been aptly captured by Baldacchino who argues that in Malta “National symbols remain significant in their absence and, where identified, are quickly taken over and co-opted by partisan and/or religious motifs,” such that “only the members of the troika - the two main political parties and the Catholic Church - loom large as anchors of identity.”³

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¹ Mark Anthony Falzon and Mark Micallef, “Sacred Island or World Empire? Locating Far-Right Movements in and Beyond Malta,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 16, n.3 (2008): 399.

² Anthony M. Abela, “Shaping a National Identity. Malta in the European Union,” *International Journal of Sociology* 35, n.4 (Winter 2005): 24.

³ Godfrey Baldacchino, “A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU,” *West European Politics* 25, n.4 (October 2002): 198-199.

Yet, as mutual anchors of identity, religion and politics not only have a strong and intriguing relationship, but also a long and turbulent history, aggravated by the country's marked propensity towards dualism,⁴ which "has permeated our society, from band clubs and feasts to soccer and what have you, politics not excluded"⁵ resulting in a situation where "those who are not with you are against you."⁶ Indeed, as "Post-colonial Malta was ruled by [this] powerful troika ... some people were grievously harmed whenever one side bolted to the right, another to the left, while the third adamantly stamped its hooves, resisting efforts to move ahead."⁷

Malta has definitely moved ahead from "the dark days of the politico-religious dispute" ...[when] ideas, customs, social and religious development, etc., were those of the 1960s, not of today."⁸ Indeed, "useful lessons have been learnt from the tragic events" of this conflict⁹ and apart from the fact that "relations between the present Maltese Government and the Catholic Church are very good,"¹⁰ contemporary Maltese society is very much different to the post-colonial era, as it has become less homogenous and insular, and more liberal and cosmopolitan - "It was a different Malta that has totally vanished."¹¹

Globalisation has indeed impinged on all aspects of economic, social and cultural life, not least on politics and religion, as evidenced through increased secularisation and partisan dealignment trends. As secularisation has progressively

⁴ Jeremy Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*. (Malta: Progress Press, 1993).

⁵ Toni Abela, in Stephen Calleja, "Small Political Parties- What Future?," *The Malta Independent* (18 April 2010). <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2010-04-18/news/small-political-parties-what-future-273272/> (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁶ Godfrey Baldacchino, *The Power of Jurisdiction in Promoting Social Policies in Small States* Programme Paper 45 (2011): 19. [http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/462fc27bd1fce00880256b4a0060d2af/d4c9913e82705ad9c125781f0061ae49/\\$FILE/Baldacchino.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/462fc27bd1fce00880256b4a0060d2af/d4c9913e82705ad9c125781f0061ae49/$FILE/Baldacchino.pdf) (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁷ Carmen Sammut, "Once Upon a Time There Was a Troika...," *MaltaToday* (9 August 2012): par. 1. <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/comment/blogs/699/once-upon-a-time-there-was-a-troika#.Yc4362jMLHo>. (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁸ Desmond Zammit Marmara, "How can Secularism and Religion Co-Exist in Maltese Society?," *The Journal.mt* 21 (June 2021), para. 8. <https://thejournal.mt/how-can-secularism-and-religion-co-exist-in-maltese-society/> (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁹ Joseph Ellul, "The Catholic Identity of Malta After Ten Years of European Union Membership: Challenges and Prospects," *Reflections of a Decade of EU Membership: Expectations, Achievements, Disappointments and the Future*. Occasional Papers 2, Institute for European Studies (Malta) (2014): 14.

¹⁰ Zammit Marmara, "How can Secularism and Religion Coexist in Maltese Society?," para. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, para. 8.

become a topical issue within theology and partisan dealignment an increasingly topical issue within the area of political science, so have such trends increasingly emerged as an issue of concern within the local context, though compared to other Western countries, with a time-lag effect.

Notwithstanding their empirical reality, both secularisation and partisan dealignment processes remain debatable and contested concepts. Moreover, despite their evident concurrent occurrence on both the local and international sphere, they have largely been considered as separate unrelated processes and rarely addressed in tandem. Yet, secularisation and dealignment present a number of mutual commonalities; both can refer to conditions at the public macro-societal and at the private micro-individual level, and both can be expressed passively through indifference towards religious and political beliefs and practices, or actively through the adoption of a more affirmative stance towards secular ideals or resacralization in the case of religion, and realignment through engagement in non-partisan forms of participation, in the case of politics.

Given these perceived yet questionable parallels and convergences between these two 'separate' processes, this paper examines secularisation and partisan dealignment trends in Malta, a country, still characterised by outstanding high levels of religiosity and political partisanship. In examining these trends, the paper poses a number of questions; are secularisation and partisan dealignment trends unrelated parallel processes or are they intrinsically linked through some underlying common denominators? Are religious institutions and partisan bodies subject to the same forces of contemporary postmodern narratives – such as greater individualism, loss of trust in authority figures, more personal convictions and life-style choices - pushing them towards destruction and/or pulling them towards renewal?

Following an examination of Malta's religious and political dynamics; characterised by simultaneous conditions of high levels of religiosity and partisanship in tandem with evolving trends of increased secularisation and partisan dealignment processes, the paper will attempt to respond to the above questions by undertaking an analysis of the complex relationship between these paralleling and perhaps converging trends.

Religiosity or Secularisation?

Malta's history as a "Catholic fiefdom facilitated the emergence of a local ecclesiastical hierarchy that exercised strong political and cultural influence. This, in turn, has bred a national mind-frame strongly determined by religious precepts

of propriety and morality.”¹² Although the Church’s power has diminished over the years, it is still an influential social force, and its power “must not be underestimated even today.”¹³

Religion and religiosity dominate every aspect of Maltese society, with 97.6% of the population adhering to Catholic belief.¹⁴ Compared to their European counterparts, the Maltese report the highest rate of belief in God (95%), have the lowest non-believing group (2%), and the lowest group of believers in some sort of spirit or life force (3%).¹⁵ A small minority of the population belongs to other religions or non-Catholic denominations, such that “one can hardly speak of religious pluralism.”¹⁶

Incorporated in the general culture of the country, Roman Catholic religiosity is epitomised by traditionalism and institutionalism.¹⁷ Indeed, the “Catholic Church and its ethos and ceremonies remain today the closest to a national Maltese symbol.”¹⁸

Results emerging from Eurobarometer and European Values Survey indicate however that contemporary Maltese society is also characterised by competing identities;¹⁹ an inherited identity related to religious attachment and a growing identity typified by individualised and secular values. This is seen to point towards “the existence of a communitarian-individualistic divide with no clear borders,” such that “many Maltese seem to experience a fragmented lifestyle.”²⁰

¹² Baldacchino, “A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU,” 196.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ European Values Study Group & World Values Survey Association 2006. *European and World Values Surveys Four-Wave Integrated Data File, 1981-2004*. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA5080 Data file Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.11159> (Accessed 15 December 2022).

¹⁵ European Commission. *Social Values, Science and Technology* (Brussels: European Commission, 2007).

¹⁶ Archdiocese of Malta, Secretariat for Catechesis, *Religious Education in Malta: Reflections by the Catholic Community* (2008), 14. http://gozodiocese.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/religious_education_in_malta.pdf (Accessed 15 December 2022).

¹⁷ Charles Tabone, *The Secularisation of the Family in Changing Malta* (Malta: Dominican Publications, 1987); Charles Tabone, ‘Secularization’, in *Maltese Society: A Sociological Inquiry*, eds. Ronald G. Sultana & Godfrey Baldacchino (Malta: Mireva Publications, 1994), pp. 285-300.

¹⁸ Baldacchino, “A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU,” 196.

¹⁹ Abela, “Shaping a National Identity. Malta in the European Union.”

²⁰ Archdiocese of Malta, Secretariat for Catechesis, *Religious Education in Malta*, 15.

Indeed, fuelled by inbound and outbound tourism, education, and the proliferation of the media²¹ amongst other trends, the last decades saw “the gradual melting of traditional values and modes of behaviour.”²² National politics also played an important role²³ where the introduction in the 1960s and 1970s of “novel notions of the role of conscience, of the distinction between religion and the Church, of secular and religious spheres, which had been completely alien to previous generations”²⁴ led to a process of “enforced secularisation.”²⁵ Indeed, within the context of distinct ideologies between the two major parties, secularisation constituted a central aspect of the electoral and governance programme of the then Malta Labour Party. Despite the adoption of a more conservative outlook, the change in governance during the 1980s and 1990s did little to curb secularisation trends as Malta became increasingly subjected to liberal market forces, characterised by overt consumerism and materialism outlooks. These trends, coupled by unbridled exposure to the media and foreign life-styles may have led to further alienation of people from the Catholic Church. Through these processes, secularisation “became a very visible phenomenon, and one that was deeply felt in both clerical and outside circles.”²⁶

Secularisation become evident also at the institutional level as the role of the Catholic Church has with time became more “purely a spiritual one”²⁷ and whilst advocating on social matters the “bishops of Malta are conscious that they are pastors and not feudal lords.”²⁸

This increase in secularisation²⁹ is most tangibly reflected in the decline in “the number of practising Catholics.”³⁰ Among those identifying as Catholics,

²¹ Mario Vassallo, “Religion and Social Cohesion in Malta: Does It Really Matter?,” *Humanitas: Journal of the Faculty of Arts* 1 (1999): 1-19.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Mario Vassallo, “Religious Symbolism in a Changing Malta,” *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* 6, n.4, 232-252; Mario Vassallo, *From Lordship to Stewardship: Religion and Social Change in Malta* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979).

²⁴ Vassallo, “Religion and Social Cohesion in Malta: Does It Really Matter?,” 3.

²⁵ Maroia Vassallo, “Development and Dissent: The Ambivalent Role of Religion in Contemporary Malta,” in *Acts of the IV International Conference of the Euro-Arab Social Research Group* (Rome: 1981).

²⁶ Vassallo, “Religion and Social Cohesion in Malta: Does It Really Matter?,” 3.

²⁷ Zammit Marmara, “How can Secularism and Religion Co-Exist in Maltese Society?,” para. 2.

²⁸ Ellul, “The Catholic Identity of Malta After Ten Years of European Union Membership: Challenges and Prospects,” 14.

²⁹ Angela Abela, “The Changing Landscape of Maltese Families,” in *Social Transitions in Maltese Society*, eds. JosAnn Cutajar and George Cassar (Malta: Agenda, 2009), 23-50.

³⁰ Zammit Marmara, “How Can Secularism and Religion Co-Exist in Maltese Society?,” para. 2.

63.7% consider themselves as practising members of their religion, while 22.3% considered themselves “lukewarm” and 12.9% considered themselves as non-practising.³¹ Secularisation is also evident through the decline in participation in religious rituals and activities. For example, whereas Sunday mass attendance stood at 67.5% in 1995, by 2005 this decreased to 56.5%.³² Another survey conducted by MaltaToday in 2018 records a higher level of mass attendance, where 63.7% reported having attended the previous week’s celebration.³³ This secularisation trend reflects generational differences, since while Sunday mass attendance was highest among those aged 65 and over, it was significantly lower for younger age groups, with 53.8% of those aged between 18-35 declaring lack of attendance. Apart from a drop in mass attendance, confession seems to have become “unfashionable for a vast majority of Maltese Catholics,” with only 30% reporting to have “participated in the sacrament of penance” in the previous month.³⁴

The declining influence of religiosity “to guide individual morality is also particularly evident in the realm of intimate relationships”³⁵ where a strong majority of the Maltese electorate voted in favour of divorce legislation in the 2011 referendum, and many were in favour the introduction of same-sex marriage. Moreover, lifestyle patterns indicate that the Maltese have become more liberal in their sexual mores as attested by the high incidence of sexual relationships, births and cohabitation outside marriage and more liberal stances on the use of contraception and abortion. This liberal mentality has increasingly become entrenched in legislative and public policy frameworks as evinced from the introduction of divorce and same-sex marriage. The issue of reproductive rights is also on the political agenda as the decriminalisation and legalisation of

³¹ Kurt Sansone, “Maltese Identity Still Very Much Rooted in Catholicism,” *MaltaToday* (2 April 2018). https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/data_and_surveys/85738/maltatoday_survey__maltese_identity_still_very_much_rooted_in_catholicism#.Yc4yymjMLHof (Accessed 15 December 2022).

³² *Sunday Mass Attendance 2005: Preliminary Report* (Malta: Discern, 2006).

³³ This disparity may be due to different methodological considerations. While the census physically gauges Church attendance as a percentage of the whole Maltese population, the *MaltaToday* survey asked the question only to respondents who identified themselves as Catholic. See Sansone, “Maltese Identity Still Very Much Rooted in Catholicism.”

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Angele Deguara, *Between Faith and Love? Sexual Morality and Religious Belief Among LGBT and Cohabiting Catholics in Malta and Sicily*. A Thesis Presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Malta, 2018, 23.

abortion has been brought to the fore by civil society organisations and women's rights activists.

In addition, "the substantial increase in the number of foreigners now living in the Maltese Islands has meant that religions other than the Catholic one have flourished."³⁶ Yet, despite these secularisation trends, a "whopping 93.9% of people still identify themselves as Catholic" while only 3.9% identify themselves as atheist, and 1.3% as adhering to other Christian denominations.³⁷ The large majority of people (88.8%) were also against the removal of Catholicism as Malta's official religion from the Constitution and "an even stronger majority was against the removal of the crucifix from public buildings."³⁸

The co-existence of the religious and the secular within the local context, highlight that:

While the complex nature of the phenomenon of secularisation has to be approached with caution in any social context, the situation in Malta may be even more difficult to decipher in view of the islands' strong religious identity and history as well as the paradoxes which seem to characterise the Maltese experience. In Malta we can still see a thriving sense of belonging to the Church and a high level of belief in God combined with a growing trend where individuals are inclined to choose their own lifestyle, even if their choices depart from the teaching of the Church.³⁹

Thus, it seems that in spite of the various developments which point towards the consolidation of secularisation trends, including evidence of a "secularised secularisation,"⁴⁰ religion remains an integral aspect of Maltese identity. Yet, in spite of this strong religious imprint and anchor in cultural identity, presaging incidents of de-secularisation, contemporary "Maltese society is at a turning point" with "evidence of both secular and post-secular trends."⁴¹

³⁶ Zammit Marmara, "How can Secularism and Religion Coexist in Maltese Society?," para. 2.

³⁷ Sansone, "Maltese Identity Still Very Much Rooted in Catholicism."

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Deguara, *Between Faith and Love?*, 28.

⁴⁰ Vassallo, "Development and Dissent," uses the term "secularised secularisation" to refer to de-secularisation trends that are secular in nature. A case example concerns the rallying around the Church when in the 1980s the Labour government of the time attempted to take control of Church schools.

⁴¹ Adrian Gellel and Mark Sultana, "A Language for the Catholic Church in Malta," *Melita Theologica* 59 (2008): 9-10.

Partisanship or Dealignment?

Partisanship could also be a personal and cultural identity for many people, irrespective of how committed they are to political ideology. Indeed, apart from religion, partisan politics occupies a central role in people's everyday life and is regarded as a defining feature of national Maltese identity.

Politics in Malta is typified by "intense partisanship, by the conflation of national and local issues, and by a style of leadership that has elements of both charisma and patronage."⁴² Moreover, the nature of political activity is primarily and explicitly defined in terms of a polarised two-party system. The two major parties, the centre-left Labour Party and the centre-right Nationalist Party are institutionalised to the extent that the large majority of the electorate identifies either with one or the other, moulding politics in "a moral community"⁴³ of intense and competitive partisanship, particularly during the "extremely heated affairs" of elections.⁴⁴

In its post-2009 election survey, the European Parliament⁴⁵ confirmed Malta as the most politically charged EU member state. Moreover, existing evidence indicates that "voters and parties tend to be united by a rather strong bond."⁴⁶

A 1984 survey suggests that 55% of Maltese respondents (compared to 39% in the EU) viewed themselves as being close to a political party.⁴⁷ Similarly, the Public Opinion Monitoring Unit of the European Parliament (2009) finds that 78% of Maltese respondents submit their vote because they feel "very" or "somewhat" close to a political party (compared to an EU average of 43% of Europeans). Another study conveys that the share of the electorate who reported

⁴² Edward Warrington, "Taking Account of Small Scale and Insularity in Administrative Reform Strategies: The Case of Malta 1988-90," in *Public Administration In Small And Island States*, ed. Randall Baker (West Hartford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 1992), 222.

⁴³ Baldacchino, "A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU," 197.

⁴⁴ Michelle Cini, "Malta Votes Twice for Europe: The Accession Referendum and General Election," *South European Society and Politics* 8, n.3 (2003): 1.

⁴⁵ European Parliament. *Post-electoral survey report. Special Eurobarometer 320/Wave 71.3.* (2009) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/28_07/EB71.3_post-electoral_final_report_EN.pdf (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁴⁶ Godfrey A. Pirotta, "Maltese Political Parties and Political Modernisation," in *Maltese Society: A Sociological Inquiry*, eds. Ronald G. Sultana and Godfrey Baldacchino (Malta: Mireva, 1994), 96.

⁴⁷ Gallup, "Maltese Values 1983" (Malta: Gallup Malta Limited, 1984). <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.4438> (Accessed 15 December 2022); Anthony Abela, *Transmitting Values in European Malta: A Study in the Contemporary Values of Modern Society* (Malta: Jesuits Publication & Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1991).

themselves either “very” or “somewhat close” to a political party stood at 71%, with Malta having the highest percentage rate amongst all countries in the study.⁴⁸

The extent of this partisan attachment also emerges from the findings of a study by Tabone.⁴⁹ This study showed that 42% of Maltese families had at least one member who was affiliated to a political party; 72% buy a political newspaper and 46% attend political events. Moreover, about 30% of respondents admitted readiness to comply with any directives issued by their preferred political party “always and in everything,” emphasising the great loyalty enjoyed by parties even “when their instructions and directives go against the citizens’ personal interests and opinions, or against the customs and traditions of Maltese society.”⁵⁰

The Maltese are also more likely to consider voting as a duty compared to other Europeans. In a 2009 post-election study, 74% of Maltese respondents declared that they felt duty-bound to cast their vote in contrast to 43% of European respondents (EU Parliament, 2009).

Indeed, Malta is considered to have the highest electoral turnout in all Western democracies and ranks fifth in terms of electoral participation worldwide.⁵¹ This track record is even more remarkable given that electoral participation in Malta is not compulsory. Moreover, apart from the initial elections following the Second World War, the level of turnout has remained relatively stable over the years with little major ebbs and flows in participation rates.⁵² Since the 1947 election which exhibited an electoral participation rate of 75.4%, turnout has experienced a steady upward linear growth, such that, from 1971 onwards, it was always higher than 90%. On this basis, Malta has been aptly described by⁵³ as a country of “near-universal turnout.”

Compared to other advanced industrialised democracies, Malta has also remained strongly partisan-aligned. Partisan loyalties tend to be remarkably

⁴⁸ Richard S. Flickinger and Donley T. Studlar, “One Europe, Multiple Electorates? Models of Turnout in European Parliament Elections after 2004,” *Comparative Political Studies* 40 (2007): 383.

⁴⁹ Tabone, *The Secularisation of the Family in Changing Malta*.

⁵⁰ Pirotta, *Maltese Political Parties and Political Modernisation*, 97.

⁵¹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). (2009). *Voter Turnout*. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout> (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁵² International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). *Voter turnout in Western Europe since 1945: A Global Report* (2004). http://www.idea.int/publications/voter_turnout_weurope/upload/Full_Reprot.pdf (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁵³ Wolfgang Hirczy, “Explaining Near-Universal Turnout: The Case of Malta,” *European Journal of Political Research* 27 (1995): 255-272.

“strong, stable and rooted in social and family background”⁵⁴ with minimal incidence of inter and intra electoral volatility in the share of the votes between the two major parties. Apart from its tradition of high voter turnout, Malta is indeed renowned for its “fiercely competitive party system”⁵⁵ and “bi-polar nature of its politics.”⁵⁶ Malta’s “pure” two-party system, characterised by the representation of only two political parties in parliament is a unique case in Europe.⁵⁷

In fact, there have been very few instances in local electoral history during which other parties, apart from the Nationalist and the Labour Party, competed in elections with parliamentary success.⁵⁸ This “bipartisan see-saw formulation”⁵⁹ with the “PN and PL acting in tandem as a duopoly”⁶⁰ is further reinforced by a situation where until the last rounds of elections, the allegiance of the Maltese electorate was nearly always equally shared, resulting in very close contestation between the two major parties.⁶¹ This bi-polar competitive political environment, combined with a proportional representation system where a “winner takes all political system prevails”⁶² results in a situation where literally every vote counts.

In the context of such an intense political climate, it is perhaps not surprising that although the 2008 parliamentary election brought no major landslide or realignments in the pattern of party politics, in a way that it “confirmed and even emphasised well-established patterns of behaviour,”⁶³ it was decisively

⁵⁴ Ibid., 258.

⁵⁵ Dominic Fenech, “The 2003 Maltese EU Referendum and General Election,” *West European Politics 1743-9655*, 26, n.3 (2003): 163-170.

⁵⁶ Wolfgang Hirczy and John C. Lane, *Malta: STV in a Two-Party System* (1999). <http://www.maltdata.com>. (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁵⁷ Godfrey Baldacchino, “Jurisdictional Self-Reliance for Small Island Territories: Considering the Partition of Cyprus,” *The Round Table* 91, n.365 (2002): 349-360; Hirczy and Lane, *Malta: STV in a Two-Party*.

⁵⁸ Hirczy and Lane, *Malta: STV in a Two-Party*.

⁵⁹ Falzon and Micallef, *Sacred Island or World Empire?* 393.

⁶⁰ Michael Briguglio, “Small Political Parties- What Future?,” *The Malta Independent* (18 April 2010). <http://www.independent.com.mt/news.asp?newsitemid=104758> (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁶¹ Baldacchino, “Jurisdictional Self-Reliance for Small Island Territories: Considering the Partition of Cyprus,”; John C. Lane, “The Election of Women Under Proportional Representation: The Case of Malta,” *Democratisation* 2 (1995): 140-157.

⁶² Baldacchino, “Jurisdictional Self-Reliance for Small Island Territories: Considering the Partition of Cyprus,” 197.

⁶³ Dominic Fenech, “Malta,” *European Journal of Political Research* 48, n.7-8 (2009): 1048. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01882.x

atypical with regards to the level of turnout. At 93.3%, the proportion of those abstaining in parliamentary elections has never been so high since the election of 1971 when 92.9% turned out to vote. This turnout decline was additionally accompanied by a relatively high rate of invalid voting. At 1.2% of all submitted ballots, the rate of invalid voting was one of the highest ever recorded in Malta's electoral history. This atypical occurrence of lower electoral turnout combined with higher rates of invalid, floating and cross-party voting also characterised the subsequent 2013, 2017 and 2022 elections, revealing a marginal yet growing influential segment of the electorate, who are deviating from mainstream voting patterns of behaviour.

While the atypical voting patterns of behaviour could be explained by the exceptional nature governing these electoral campaigns, including amongst others, serious allegations of corruption, the entanglements emerging from the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, changes in the governing party's leadership, the disarray within the major opposition party and the country's grey-listing by the Financial Action Task Force, the electorate's response to such issues reflects a move towards dealignment. Within this context, even the atypical landslide victories experienced in the last round of elections by the Labour Party, have ironically been characterised by a lower share of the partisan vote amid a higher abstention rate.⁶⁴ Indeed, whilst the impact of exigent contextual conditions undisputedly impact electoral outcomes, it could equally be argued that each election occurs within the context of its specific exceptionality.

Thus, within the context of Malta's exceptional high electoral turnout, durable partisan loyalties and "entrenched two-party political system and its totalising discourse,"⁶⁵ one observes a mutable electoral trend which "may reflect the initiation of partisan dealignment in Maltese society."⁶⁶ Indeed:

There are signs that within Maltese society attitudes may be changing as more people are increasingly becoming critical and distrustful of political parties and representative forms of democracy. Apart from abstention, such cognitive mobilisation is reflected in a more rational assessment of parties through increased floating and cross-party voting, as well as higher participation in non-electoral forms of participation.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ As a result of lower turnout, in the 2022 election the Labour Party gained 55.1% of the share of the popular vote, but with a lower number of votes than in the 2017 election.

⁶⁵ Godfrey Baldacchino, "A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU," *West European Politics* 25, n.4 (October 2002): 191.

⁶⁶ Mary Grace Vella, "Non-Voting: Disconnecting from Partisan Politics," *Symposia Melitensia* 14 (2018): 409.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 505.

Furthermore, “in line with the experienced trend in other advanced industrialised democracies, there may be reason to believe that such occurrence may continue to materialise, possibly with an incremental effect.”⁶⁸ This fluidity points to the emergence of “a more flexible - and less forgiving - electorate slowly breaking out of its traditional patterns of behaviour.”⁶⁹ Though there is no clear evidence that the general electorate is turning from conventional politics to other forms of political engagement, whereas voter turnout appears to be declining, involvement in non-traditional participation methods seems to be on the increase. Concurrently, whereas level of trust is consistently low amongst institutional political bodies, civil society gears more public support. Thus, there appears to be an attitudinal, if not as yet, a behavioural devolution from representative democracy to a widened form of participatory democracy, and from mainstream parties to civil society organisations.

However, despite these attitudinal and behavioural processes of dealignment arising from weakened party loyalties, Maltese political structures have remained unwavering as evident from the persistence of the two-party system. Yet, Maltese society appears to be heading towards a more dynamic shifting of balance between partisan alignment, dealignment and realignment forces, leading to a more vibrant and multi-layered political culture. The devolution of Maltese politics is indeed projected to evolve on the same lines as the secularisation process evident in Maltese society.

Secularisation and Dealignment: Parallels or Convergences?

Despite the impact of social change, both the Catholic Church and mainstream political parties have remained influential on the social sphere, such that “issues of religion and the political style show that, whenever the Maltese value something strongly, it remains an important element of their culture for a long time.”⁷⁰ Indeed, within Maltese history, politics and religion have been strongly intertwined, both upholding great influence and control on the general public. However, as the institutional Catholic Church has been slowly losing its grip on its devout followers, similarly the major political parties may be losing

⁶⁸ Ibid., 409.

⁶⁹ Dominic Fenech, “The 1996 Maltese Election: Swing of the Pendulum,” *West European Politics* 20, n.2 (1997): 193.

⁷⁰ Anna Zammit, *Malta's Culture in Flux: Negotiating the Mediterranean and the EU* (2003), para. 15. http://www.adriangrima.com/malta_culture_flux.htm (Accessed 15 December 2022).

their hold on the Maltese electorate. The experienced decline in both religious and electoral participation in fact presents a number of intriguing parallels.

As “an increase in educational levels, coupled with a larger awareness of how other nations thrive freely under democratic institutions, has led to discontent with Malta’s traditional ties with the mother church and a desire for legislative reform,”⁷¹ similarly processes of cognitive mobilisation through increased levels of education and exposure to other cultures and democratisation processes have led to disillusionment with present party politics, fuelling calls for reform. As religious belief has declined due to increased rationality, similarly partisanship may be in decline as political and electoral behaviour is increasingly driven by ideology and rational assessment.

In the same way that Church attendance has declined predominantly among the young, partisan dealignment is correspondingly more pronounced amongst the younger cohorts of the electorate. While the demographic profile of the “conservative element in Malta favouring continuation of a strong elitist church is largely constituted of senior people...who...feel spiritual security through blind observance of dogmatic discipline”⁷² similarly, it is the older cohorts of the electorate who remain most faithfully loyal to their political parties. For these devotees, partisan allegiance as in the case of “religious observance is not a question of choice. It constitutes an imperative.”⁷³

Independently of these staunch adherents, however everyday reality is fraught with “widespread disregard by the laity of outmoded church prohibitions,”⁷⁴ as evident from the practice of liberal sexual mores and life-style patterns. Despite this prevalent disregard to religious teachings, the masses still ritually partake in religious activities such as feasts, weddings, funerals and other ceremonies of symbolic gesture. Thus, although “when push turns to shove, few Maltese will not stand up in defence of their Catholic heritage. Yet more often than not they pay lip service to a religion which is increasingly at odds with beliefs.”⁷⁵ As ritual Catholics do not live up to their religious teachings, similarly most ritual partisans do not live up to the ideology of the party in terms of values and life-style patterns. Likewise, when in election mode, few Maltese will not turn up to cast their decisive vote in favour of their own party. Yet again, this support may

⁷¹ Joseph Vella, *The Emergence of Secularism in Malta* (1996), para. 1. <http://www.aboutmalta.com/grazio/secularism.html> (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁷² *Ibid.*, para 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, para 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

be mere lip service, and as one may question whether such ritual laities are really devout, one may similarly doubt the principled nature of ritual partisanship.

While the “surest way for the Church of Rome to accelerate retrogression is to maintain its insistence on dogma”⁷⁶ when faced with emerging lifestyles which are incongruent with its religious teachings; for political parties, remaining unyieldingly loyal to one’s traditional class-based orientation may well denote progressive losses in their electoral support base. As the Church is trying to modernise its approach to adapt to the changing moral landscape, similarly partisan structures are in an ongoing redefinition to accommodate emerging popular demands and extend their appeal to the wider electorate. While materialist values remain the dominant concerns of Labour and Nationalist parties, in line with emerging public concerns, they are increasingly also referring to new political issues, whilst also drawing on populist discourse and a more centrist stance to appeal to the wide, largely middle-class electorate. In this strategy, while the church has to a large extent remained loyal to its fundamental beliefs and morals, parties seem to have significantly abandoned their traditional ideologies, in effect broadening their policies to such an extent that they have become “catch-all” middle-of-the-range parties.

As religious institutions may be slowly undergoing a process of secularisation themselves to the loss of authentic religion,⁷⁷ similarly it may be the case that due to the broadening of their political portfolio and ensuing compromises to appeal to a wider repertoire of the electorate, “authenticity” - if this may in any way be invoked in the context of institutional politics - may not be found anymore in established parties. As the ecumenical movement may reflect a sign of weakness since “organisations amalgamate when they are weak rather than when are strong,”⁷⁸ similarly appeals of alliance by the Nationalist and Labour Parties, as also evident from their respective slogans for the last rounds of electoral campaigns, may indicate weakening ideological dispositions through a more concessionary and conciliatory style of politics. Such catch-all style of politics has in addition resulted in increased policy convergence between parties characterised by the lack of defined ideological identity.

As the Church’s influence on political matters has waned through increased secularisation and differentiation, similarly political parties may be losing their clout through the competing influential powers of the market and international

⁷⁶ Ibid., para 6.

⁷⁷ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jews* (Garden City: New York, Doubleday, 1960).

⁷⁸ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society. A Sociological Comment* (London: C.A. Watts, 1966), 176.

regulatory bodies and processes. In restricting the gamut of member states, the Europeanisation and globalisation processes may be resulting in consequential limitations on the significance and remit of local party structures. Rather than counteracting such restrictive processes, however, mainstream parties have cordially embraced such developments, increasingly converging their agenda towards the European model and neo-liberal free market economy. In conjunction, parties are progressively resorting to market-based strategies, in the process becoming “increasingly Americanised...[where] Marketing, charisma and personality are of primary importance.”⁷⁹ Similarly, it may be the case that the way forward for the Church is the “transmission of values and ideas that are readily understandable in secular terms even if they are different from secular ideas and values”.⁸⁰

The same predisposing factors leading to reduced conviction in institutional religion may correspondingly be an influential force in plummeting trust in partisan politics, with resultant “suspicion in all forms of institutional authority.”⁸¹ Dealignment and secularisation may thus be correlated on both a macro and micro level acting in mutual reinforcement, such that increased secularisation traits on a personal and community level may lead to a concomitant thrust in dealignment processes. Likewise, a more dealigned context may propel society towards increased secularisation, advancing a self-reinforcing secular and dealigned development.⁸²

The decline in religious participation, does not inevitably “conjure a lessening of moral values, but simply a distancing between individuals and the formal worship of religion.”⁸³ Similarly, lower turnout may not necessarily reflect a decreased interest in political issues or rejection of democratic ideals, but simply the disenchantment of the electorate from institutional forms of political representation. The dealignment process like secularisation thus “reflects a

⁷⁹ W. Mintoff, “The Sin of Complacency,” *MaltaToday* (30 March 2008), para. 6. <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/en/archive> (Accessed 15 December 2022).

⁸⁰ Gellel and Sultana, *A Language for the Catholic Church in Malta*, 13.

⁸¹ Mark Montebello, “Religion in Contemporary Maltese Society,” in *Social Transitions in Maltese Society*, eds. JosAnn Cutajar and George Cassar (Malta: Agenda, 2009), 121.

⁸² From research carried out on electoral abstention in Malta, it transpires that non-voters tend to exhibit maverick personalities; valuing autonomy and unconventional beliefs and lifestyles. In conjunction to being cognitively mobilised, they tend to uphold liberal and secular values, and are more likely to pertain to non-traditional Catholic faiths and even doubt or reject all forms of religious belief. Vella, *Non-Voting: Disconnecting from Partisan Politics*.

⁸³ Vella, *The Emergence of Secularism in Malta*, para. 4.

healthy inclination to question authority where rhyme or reason need prevail, consistent with democratic precepts.”⁸⁴

As the outcome of the divorce referendum has surfaced through the institutional religious doctrine, given the right contextual conditions, such dealignment and calls for realignment may eventually rupture through the dogma of partisan politics. As yet, given present electoral legislation and political culture, including the lack of an adequate amalgamated protest movement, such an opportunity does not seem imminent. However, this belies the fact that as observed from the above discussion, the undercurrents for the “resacralisation” of politics in Malta may be increasing both in strength and in number.

The prognosis of Maltese society presents a plausible increase in a more educated and liberal citizenry, more receptive to diverse moral and political views and lifestyles. It also presents increased access to apartisan and secular information, factors which collectively lead to increased cognitive mobilisation and other forms of rationalisation processes. Maltese society is also presenting increased opportunities for citizens to participate in non-electoral forms of participation and diverse forms of spiritual and religious rituals. Increased opportunities for mobility may also enhance cognitive mobilisation processes, resulting in a more broadminded citizenry, which is simultaneously more amenable to different ethical and political orientations and more critical of an insular style of religion and politics. As life-style patterns and the pace of life become more hectic and demanding, people may have less time to dedicate to religion and political matters. Furthermore, increased individualism may be resulting in a loss of sense of community with less incentive to participate in society’s running on a moral and political sphere. For these segments of the population, politics and religion provide little signalling value, since they “have too many pressing tasks, from making money to making love, to follow the arcane procedures of government”⁸⁵ or institutionalised religion.

The analysis suggests that the dynamics underlying these attitudinal and behavioural trends reflect generational differences. If so, processes of generational replacement will eventually produce a public which is more rational and cognitively mobilised⁸⁶ as well as more distrustful and possibly more indifferent towards institutional forms of religion and politics. Such a secularisation-dealignment process is thus considered as a long-term evolutionary development taking place

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Gerard Pomper, *Voters, Elections, and Parties: The Practice of Democratic Theory* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers: 1988), 259.

⁸⁶ Vella, *Non-Voting: Disconnecting from Partisan Politics*.

through changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the population over time.⁸⁷ Despite being counterbalanced by demographic ageing which may reduce the momentum of generational replacement, the sustained secularisation of ritual laity and the demobilisation of ritual partisans, along with the consolidation of habitual patterns of secular and apartisan attitudes and behaviour, is expected to result in the accrual of a more secular and dealigned population. Thus:

While the troika still commands significant political clout, we are witnessing the spread of liberal aspirations, based on democratic values and a human rights morality. Secularisation in a place like Malta does not merely entail a decline of religious influence but also a decline of ideologically-committed institutions.⁸⁸

Dealignment similarly does not only denote weakening partisan ties by the electorate but also less ideologically committed political parties, as also reflected through their 'catch-all' non-ideological policies.

Indeed, it is not just the population that seems to be becoming more maverick. Political and religious institutions themselves may be becoming more fluid and in the process less predictable and more destabilised. As Church dogma has increasingly been subjected to internal resistance and overt contestation by rebellious clerics, the political realm also seems to be experiencing this internal strife; as attested by recent episodes of dissenting politicians who refused to toe the party-line, to the extent of voting in favour of opposition motions against their own party structures. Whatever the motives underlying such dissent, these occurrences suggest the plausible emergence of intra-institutional secularisation and dealignment which may provide fertile ground for processes of resacralisation and realignment, characterised by new waves of maverick religious faiths and political ideologies. As the draconian efforts of the ecclesiastical authorities to silence its non-conformist factions may prove futile in a more secularised environment, restraining and ostracising intra-party dissidents to preserve an external semblance of cohesion, may prove useless in internally sabotaged terrain.

Despite the fact that these trends do not attest to any critical abrupt upheavals in the near future, these secularisation-resacralisation and dealignment-realignment theses predict that Maltese society is progressing towards a more dynamic, invigorated and multi-layered religious and political culture, leading to transformations not only within these spheres, but in all aspects of social life.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Sammut, "Once Upon a Time There Was a Troika," para. 9.

Thus, whether in terms of secularisation or dealignment, it seems that “Malta has no other choice but to embrace progress.”⁸⁹ This development, however, “does not come without a price.”⁹⁰ Maltese society must learn how to address the challenges and deal with “the side effects [of these dynamics] to preserve advancement.”⁹¹ Increased maverickism, whether on an individual and institutional level, along with merging religious and civil society pluralism may in effect lead to a more complex analysis and execution of faiths and ideologies, as well as the need for more demanding representative and responsive structures. It may also be the case that as more fundamentalist religious movements have the opportunity to flourish under a more secularised environment, a more dealigned political context may offer a more fertile ground for the mobilisation of retrogressive politics such as through the rise of far-right and populist movements.

As “the day when organised religion was the exclusive centre of learning, wisdom and power, towards which a poorly educated flock looked up to for salvation, is gone forever,”⁹² the time when mainstream political parties were the “sole political agenda setters”⁹³ and exclusive opinion-makers are becoming obsolete. As more plurality of beliefs and rise in new religious movements may have decreased the power of the Church, (Wilson, 1966) similarly a wider plurality of political beliefs and civil society formations may be diminishing the hegemonic influence of political parties. In this context, “the way of the future calls for a stronger secular role in the affairs of state, with a corresponding lessening of ecclesiastical involvement in government affairs,”⁹⁴ while the future of Maltese politics commands less partisan involvement in administrative processes and other spheres of social life.

As the contemporary religious style “affirms a new found link between informed persons of conscience and God,”⁹⁵ emerging political trends amongst the cognitively mobilised may similarly reflect a more direct form of political engagement without heeding interference of intermediary partisan structures. Given that such a process may reflect a purer form of religious belief, such development may equally bestow a purer form of political participation and

⁸⁹ Vella, *The Emergence of Secularism in Malta*, para. 7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, para. 6.

⁹³ Pirotta, *Maltese Political Parties and Political Modernisation*, 99.

⁹⁴ Vella, *The Emergence of Secularism in Malta*, para.1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, para 4.

democratic governance. In the same way that “without recourse to a particular religion or belief, people have an infinite capacity for good and evil [since] this basic human quality requires no particular formal affiliation with a state sponsored church,”⁹⁶ without affiliation to a particular partisan structure, people similarly have an infinite capacity for political engagement which needs no particular formal, ritual affiliation to an increasingly indistinguishable two-party system.

In the context of these dynamics, the time may have come where, as it needs to be considered “categorically improper to legislate any one church as the state religion,”⁹⁷ it likewise needs to be deemed unacceptable that electoral participation and political parties remain the sole form of decision-making and representation.

The Maltese scenario as observed from the above discussion, represents neither complete stability nor complete instability in terms of religious and political allegiance. This fluidity and transformation, envisaged through gradual miniature ruptures from existing institutional political and religious dogma, validates the evolution of these secularisation-dealignment processes. As critique and retaliation against a two-party system that has exercised hegemonic governance represents a clear sign of dealignment, “the possibility of disagreement with an institutionalised religion that exercised a moral hegemony is however itself a sign of secularisation.”⁹⁸

The discussion succinctly points towards a number of commonalities between secularism and decline in partisan alignment, suggestive of a strong affiliation between the two phenomena. Yet, this parallelism may be far from a simple causal relationship, or even the subject of a more complex spurious relationship. Indeed, despite the existence of various analogous drivers, no such relationship is positively verifiable, as the two phenomena may not necessarily be so conveniently and invariably commensurate. Nor is the force of the rise and decline in secularisation and partisanship of equivalent or corresponding momentum. The fast-changing pace of the political landscape, where “a week is a long time in politics,” particularly in times of electoral campaigning, makes dealignment more fluid and dynamic than secularisation, which is to a greater extent characterised by a slower, yet more consistent evolutionary abatement.

Moreover, while materialism tends to be inversely related to spirituality, increased materialism may be positively correlated to partisan loyalties and

⁹⁶ Ibid., para 7.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Deguara, *Between Faith and Love?*

attachments, as well as electoral turnout. It is also the case that while both the Church and political parties may be subject to the same relentless shrouding forces of materialism, their response to these forces has been fundamentally different. While in their bid to gain a wider support base and appease the electorate's demanding appetites and aspirations, political parties have to varying shameless degrees shed their traditional ideological ties, the Church is inevitably constrained or in effect, liberated by loyalty to the principles of its ethical doctrine. The irony of this state of affairs is that whilst the unscrupulous shedding of one's political ideology garners electoral support, adhering to ethical conviction tends to dispirit laity membership and support.

In these circumstances, are secularisation and partisan dealignment really two sides of the same coin, or more so two coins of a different currency?

Secular and Dealigned: Embracing the Future

Despite its systematic inertia, Malta is not immune to the forces of modernity. Indeed, with the passage of time, the PN-PL-Catholic Church "Troika"⁹⁹ may inadvertently be changing both its religious and political attire, reflecting a wider and more fluid spectrum of ideologies, beliefs and practices on both the individual and institutional level, where "within these hegemonic structures some are seeking to reinforce or renegotiate the status quo and yet there are also individuals who are seeking renewal."¹⁰⁰ These concurrent contradictory forces of conservative and progressive trends, characterised by strong religiosity and partisanship within the context of growing secularisation and partisan dealignment, seem irreconcilable with the "either-or' and 'us-them'" bi-polar cultural paradigm which defines Maltese society.¹⁰¹

Yet, it is these opposing forces and the wide spectrum in between, that define the multiplicity of realities, both in terms of beliefs and practices within the local context. "Can secularism and religion co-exist in today's Maltese society?" asks Zammit Marmara as he answers, "I believe that the answer is a definite 'yes.'¹⁰² Can dealignment and partisanship co-exist in today's Maltese society? Similarly, the answer is a definite "yes." These affirmations reflect the pluralism of contemporary Maltese society characterised by multiculturalism, diversity of views and opinion, and variety of life-style choices. However, "tolerance of

⁹⁹ Baldacchino, *A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU*.

¹⁰⁰ Sammut, "Once Upon a Time There Was a Troika," para. 16.

¹⁰¹ Baldacchino, *A Nationless State? Malta, National Identity and the EU*, 203.

¹⁰² Zammit Marmara, *How Can Secularism and Religion Coexist in Maltese Society?*, 5.

different opinions from one's own is precisely where we face a major problem in Malta" as evidenced by "the strong and derogatory language used by many champions of the opposing views on controversial issues affecting one's secular outlook on life or one's religious beliefs,"¹⁰³ or with regards to ideological posture and partisanship ties.

As a result, embracing an inclusionary approach through the renunciation of non-existing hegemonies and a true appreciation of diversity is a must, for:

We cannot continue to progress unless we learn to accept and tolerate different ideas, opinions, customs, beliefs, etc. This is the world we live in today where we have to adapt to rapid changes every single day. Both secularism and religion [as well as dealignment and partisanship] are part of this reality and people who hold opposing views have to learn to live with each other in tranquillity and peace.¹⁰⁴

By going beyond the dualism of religion or politics, secularisation or dealignment, and resacralisation or realignment, this appreciation would help us all to accept the past and embrace the post-secular post-dealigned future, whatever this might hold in store.

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¹⁰³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 9.