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The Influence of Religion on Maltese Society: Past and Present

HENRY FRENDO

What follows is an updated text of a paper in the same name which I had read at a seminar on 'Development: The Maltese Experience' by Ruskin College, Oxford, and the Malta Labour Party Young Socialist League at the University of Malta in April 1977. As the emphasis of this conference was obviously on development, rather than underdevelopment, I just prefaced my paper by pointing out that in recent years even the Roman Catholic Church has revised some of its older doctrines with regard to the meaning of suffering on earth. In other words, there is hope that progressive elements within churches will contribute a noteworthy share in the evolution of the contemporary world, and indeed there is encouraging evidence of this, especially in certain areas. The attitude of churches, including the Catholic Church, is, in general, no longer masochistic or even doctrinal so much in a theological sense: verbs are more often conjugated in the present tense; in a truly Protestant vein, good deeds are seen increasingly as the qualifications to an after-life, with more emphasis on heaven rather than on hell. Being an amateur in such matters, I do not know about purgatory or limbo. Dante

Alighieri in his *Divine Comedy*, had of course found a suitable place for such worldly, obnoxious ecclesiastics as sorrounded him in his days – he sent them all to hell:

> *Questi non hanno speranza di morte.*
> *E la lor cieca vita e tanto bassa,*
> *Che invidiosi son d'ogni altra sorte.*
> *Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;*
> *Misericordia e giustizia li sdegna:*
> *Non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa.*[1]

It was, I believe, John Henry Newman, a convert to Catholicism, who in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) first held that even doctrine in fact changes with time. The 1962 letter of the Chilean bishops *Social and Political Duty in the Present Hour*, for instance, went beyond the redistributive aspect with regard to a people's economic wealth:

> A wider distribution of opportunities, products, capacities and responsabilities can have a great influence on the increase of the total product and therefore, in the satisfaction of global needs. For this reason the disciple of Christ, impelled by love of neighbour, must concern himself directly with the increase of the quantity of goods and services which the economy of the country places from year to year at the disposal of the national community. In other words, love of neighbour implies a serious responsability for economic development...
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> This is not an unworthy task for the Christian, but a necessary implication of love for our neighbour in need. This is not a shameful concentration on the material aspect of life but a response to the situation of underdevelopment in which we find ourselves. We do not hesitate to speak of a true "spirituality of economic development."[2]

I don't think that the Church in Malta, although evidently in decline especially among the younger generations, has ever uttered such statements – probably because it has long been very close to the seats of power, economic and political, and so it may well be still. In Malta, Christianity – more accurately, the Roman Catholic Church – has had a somewhat peculiar European development, with some Islamic and other influences that may go deeper than mere linguistic borrowings, such as the use of the word "Allah" for

God. By the 12th or 13th century, the Arabs (870 –c. 1090) had been replaced by European overlords and Malta has been within the Christian European influence since then. Geographically and culturally a part of the Mediterranean region, the inhabitants of these islands had, since very ancient times, manifested a keen religiosity. There is a theory that Malta was "l'île sacre" where Mediterrenean travellers met to worship; it is certain that Malta is rich in archaeological remains, dating back thousands of years, which indicate not only that religious usages were common but also that they were comparatively intense. In tracing a sketchy caricature of religious history in these islands one cannot stretch the present too far back, yet it is well known that modern religions are in certain respects developments from pagan ones, and indeed that religions influence and modify one another: in the Mediterranean region alone, Judaism influenced Christianity, and Christianity in turn influenced Islam. In other words, religions are influenced by societies just as societies are influenced by religions: there is, I am sure, no such thing as a universalism of religious practice and belief, however catholic a church may pretend to be. Local circumstances inevitably condition doctrinal tenets – in religious expressions, if not in professed creeds. As religious beliefs become ritualised, and hence institutionalised and organised, they tend to become structurally hierarchical, thus both expressing and influencing already existing traits in society, notably the family (whether patriarchal or matriarchal) in its relations with other families, and in the relations of these within the religion or religious state.[3]

One function that religions have usually manifested has been what Fawcett calls "the organic pyramid of society", in the social structure of the monarchy, he says with special reference to primitve religion, we find the idea of a sacral society most fully expressed: like the rainbow, it "connected earth with heaven".[4] The gap which all the world's great religions show between the teachings and writings of their great exponents on the one hand, and the mass of the people on the other, is by no means an absolute one, as a lady (by the happy surname of Bliss) points out in her book on *The Future of Religion*:

> The affirmatives and negatives of a religion affect a temperament and outlook, predisposing men to attitudes of fatalism or to assertiveness as well as to specfic actions and

> taboos: its organisational patterns may be indistinguishable from society itself, as the caste system has been for centuries part and parcel of Hinduism and the Christian parish was the local social and administrative unit of western Europe. The rhythm imposed on life by religious festivals, be they weekly Sabbaths or Sundays, or seasonal events, is visible in every culture. The gap may be narrowed from the other side also: popular needs press upon high religion and bring about modifications of dogma, moral standards and ritual practices.[5]

In a sense, then, we may speak of a Maltese religion, to mean those social functions and outlooks on life and 'extra-mental' reality that have long influenced and characterised the inhabitants' life-style (although, of course, no lifestyle is static, precisely because it does not exist in a vacuum). The phrase 'a Maltese religion' makes more sense than at first appears, considering that for nearly three centuries 'the Religion' was actually the government of Malta. The Order of St. John of Jerusalem were given Malta and Tripoli as a fief by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1530 and they more or less administered the place until 1798, when Napolean Bonaporte first thought of republicanising the people here. Now the Order – poised, strictly speaking, in the role of a feudal lord – were themselves a Roman Catholic religious institution who naturally recognised the Pope as *pontifex maximus* and as their head. Apart from the catholic Grand Master, there was also the catholic bishop; and as if to increase competition in the sacred realm, there was also the Holy Inquisition, first called in during the 16th century, to supervise the good and punish the wicked – the wicked being, naturally, all those humans who somehow expressed views of a heretical nature, being bedevilled by certain ideas other than those laid down jointly by government and church as the standard uniform for everybody's salvation.

Apart from all this, there were also long established religious Orders, such as the Dominicans, and then the troublesome Jesuits came too; these were expelled in the seventeenth and more seriously in the eighteenth century but they made a triumphant comeback during British rule, when it was however found convenient by the authorities concerned simply to change the nationality of these reverend gentlemen, getting Britons instead of Italians, to facilitate the teaching of religion in the language of the government. Throughout this period there were times when it seemed as if

Malta was a Popish colony: some Popes were worse than others, but remember that the Pope was a statesman in those days, and the Order's navy was useful to help him fight battles. What Malta had, in effect, were varieties of temporal power vested in religious attires. The grand master, bishop and inquisitor quarrelled among themselves over who of the three had most authority over what, whereas in the meantime the native inhabitants had little to console themselves with except everyday religion (preferably prostrate in the kneeling down position), and the restful and colourful folklore, emanating largely from it, throughout the year. As you see, the rulers and the ruled used the one religion common to all rather differently; and partly because of this the theocratic disposition was never as well rooted as in Islam. Malta, as it were, had an 'ummah' that held a common belief but was at the same time fragmented into rival parts: some sought the protection of the bishop, others of the inquisitor, and still others stayed with the grandmaster. Some possibility of choice, with implication of a secular type, existed; even though the Reformation (which Paul Tillich, for one, identifies with 'modern history') may be said to have passed Malta by.[6]

The people were greatly influenced by the ceremonious ritual associated with such institutions and as time passed they made ingenious appropriations of these for their own satisfaction. Many feast days and celebrations closest to the hearts of the common folk began or continued under the Knights' rule and were directly or indirectly related to dates in the church calendar – for example, carnival, a time for merry-making, preceded Lent, a time of fasting and penance – or else to 'national' anniversaries, also of a semi-religious nature – for example, the Regatta boat-races on *Otto Settembre*, the date marking the victory of the Order over the Turks (i.e. of the Cross over the Crescent and the "European" over the "Oriental"), in 1565. Some of the most popular holidays, such as the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul (commonly known as 'L-Imnarja'), which owed their origin to this era, were really much more secular than religious, serving primarily as an occasion for expressions of communal fulfillment by means of such things as harvest festivals, impromptu singing, talent shows, donkey races and the traditional 'open air' rabbit meal, 'fenkata', the centre of attraction being the goings-on in and around the Boschetto gardens in the limits of Rabat. Another popular saint's feast, San Girgor, took on a similar

character being celebarted mostly by the seaside in the fishing village of Marsaxlokk. Religion, in other words, provided the occasion for social gatherings of various kinds, and the Maltese loved it with the same glee that they reserved for dazzling parades such as "Trooping the Colour" in the heyday of the British empire. Bands and marches are, as we know, still a Maltese – and indeed also a Mediterranean and "Latin" – feature of outdoor life, and spectacle; here too the patron saint feasts more often than not provide the occasion for the show.

Indeed, whereas feasts connected with religious folklore have long been commonly accepted, more recent dates connected with strictly political events – such as Independence or Republic day – have not been so accepted by the general public. This may be only because of partizanship, but an alternative explanation would be that in Malta, secularization, even in the late twentieth century, is still proving to be a strained, if not painful process. *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* were not much fancied by the Maltese; nor indeed was the Napolenic interlude in 1798-1800 successful in its revolutionary concern by abolishing the inquisition and burning titles of nobility. It was as counter-productive on the part of the soldiers to rob the churches as it was outrageous to rape the girls.

The Maltese uprising on the 2nd September 1798 against the French garrison was a heroic expression of a people's sentiment, epitomised above all in their regard for religion as a bond of nationality as much as a treasure of the spirit; it was also possible because of the reverential position held by members of the clergy and the other bourgeois elements among the common folk, especially the peasants, who were the mainstay of the insurrection. The influence of religion and the clergy cannot be underrated, however, because it was an influence that found a direct and staunch response from the people themselves, and it was a means whereby to stand up for one's rights and fight. Other causes of popular discontent in 1798, however, had nothing to do with religion, such as meddling with agricultural land leases or embarking young men for the Egyptian campaign. The 2 September Insurrection also set a precedent in Maltese history, and was an example which was certainly not forgotten. On the contrary, under British colonialism it became a myth of redemption, a source of moral strength giving cohesion to nationalist discontent.

The British played a different game, one that they were sure to win. Wary of the priestly influence on the people, they quickly found

collaboration in the right quarters: Canon F.S. Caruana, who had taken a leading part in the anti-French uprising, was made bishop through British influence, no doubt, and I think his portrait was displayed in the governor's palace. Caruana's appointment was the reward for his anglophile stand, since it turned out that the British navy, who were invited to protect the Maltese, stayed as dominators.

It was necessary, then, both for church and state to come to a *quid pro quo*: the government realised that they were not likely to have any serious trouble unless they molested the privileges of the church. Sanctuary and mortmain (*manu morto*) were removed but, for the rest, customary rights and privileges were retained. Both church and state had vested interests to protect: the church and state each owned one third of the land, and both required the support of their subjects. When colonial officials became angry, they reminded the bishop that the position of the Maltese church was no better protected than that of any other in the whole British empire; and when the bishops became angry at the colonial officials they made angry noises in populist rhetoric, read in the churches and explained by the clergy to the faithful. When they needed to pull a heftier lever, they naturally had recourse to the Pope. It was a rather familiar process to Maltese history by now; only the inquisitor was missing.

The influence of the church as an institution was probably consolidated by the British occupation in an age of secularization: there were few instances where any serious confrontation arose between the two as such, with the exception of the mixed marriages question, in the 1890's, when Vatican diplomacy was directly involved in connection not only with Malta but also with Anglo-Vatican relations with regard to Ireland. One Irish MP even stated in the House of Commons that at the time Malta was being used as a means by which to exert pressure on the Irish nationalist movement, in order to gain favour in Rome with the court at Westminster. Otherwise, serious direct bishop-governor clashes were almost unknown, except indirectly through the intermediary role played by local politicians who had anglophile tendencies, particularly Sir Gerald Strickland in the 1930's and Mr. Dominic Mintoff in the 1950's (first over the integration proposals and later on, in the 1960's, when the clash took a somewhat different form.)

On the whole, the church took the government side. When a prospective bishop, Buhagiar, showed signs of sympathising with the nationalist opposition led by Dr. Fortunato Mizzi in the 1880's, the government, through the agency of the young Strickland, made sure that the Vatican never appointed him bishop; Buhagiar was diplomatically 'promoted' to a post in Latin America, where he died. Bishop Pietro Pace succeeded Bishop Scicluna in 1889 specifically because he had rendered services to the British and was considered an anglophile. There was no problem about Pace's successor almost thirty years later because the new man, Mgr. Mauro Caruana, had been educated partly in Britain and he was immediately acceptable.[7] When Caruana died, the British had a problem on their hands because of the forceful challenge put in by Mgr. Michael Gonzi, who only retired in the later 1970's while remaining titular archbishop of Malta. Gonzi was a rebellious character, not easily subdued, although in the course of his career he too was knighted by the Crown. He was fearful of Malta's integration with Britain in the mid-1950's as he was of of its Independence from it in the early 1960's.

Of all these bishops, with the possible exception of Buhagiar, Gonzi was the only one who had involved himself directly in party politics, being a Labour Party senator in the 1920's. Ironically, it was Gonzi who led the hysterical fight against the Labour Party led by Mr. Mintoff many years later. As for the nationalists, they are usually associated with the church, particularly in view of the quiet brand of conservatism implanted by the Borg Olivier leadership from 1950 until 1977, and his successors Edward Fenech Adami and Lawrence Gonzi; under the Mizzis, especially under Fortunato Mizzi, the nationalists were radical and some were openly anticlerical, so much so that in 1890 their party paper, *Malta*, was excommunicated and the party leader himself barely escaped excommunication at the hands of Bishop Pace.[8]

Religion has been a curious component in the varieties of Maltese nationalism experienced through the years. On the one hand, as a bond of nationality, it was useful and indeed necessary in order to give popular substance to political aspirations. A politician who first made remarkable use of the church hierarchy for this purpose – and, certainly, the church hierarchy made use of him – was Sigismondo Savona during the mixed marriages question in the 1890's. Three large mass meetings were organised then, getting out the countrymen from their villages to Floriana where priests and

politicians together spoke from the rostrum – as was not unusual, in view of the involvement of priests in the politics of the day in Malta, as in most Catholic countries.

There was great indignation one night in the mid-nineteenth century when two armed, drunken soldiers entered a packed church during Christmas mass; the same happened when two or three decades later a governor (Borton) attempted to cross through a religious procession before his palace in Valletta; the policeman who dutifully restrained his horse's bridle was downgraded! Malta was typical of other Catholic areas in the British empire, such as Ireland and Quebec, but the religious under-current was enormously strong in almost every colonial situation where a clash of cultures and interests necessarily occurred and the natives relied on their religious beliefs as a support as well as a means of agitation. In Malta religion was mixed up in every issue from language to taxes: this now may seem unique (which it was not) or ridiculous (but that is a value judgement). Consider, for a moment, that nationalism in, for example, Burma, arose in confrontation with the British rulers when the locals began protesting against the fact that Europeans walked on Buddhist pagoda platforms with their shoes on. The "All-Burma Conference of Buddhists", held in Rangoon in 1918, passed no less than eleven resolutions on the crisis of the use of foot-wear by visitors to pagodas; there was also the problem, for gents, of removing their socks, and, for ladies, that of removing their stockings.[9]

On the other hand, religion was divisive because of the hierarchy's relations with the colonial government, and restrictive, because of the power which the church wielded with the common people. It was never possible to be overtly anticlerical in any religious sense, or violent in any circumstance: one had to make sure that he distinguished the dignitary being opposed from the religion being professed, and the rhetoric from the reality. This was continuously a stratagem used by both the Mizzis and perhaps even more so by Strickland and Mintoff: until recently slogans such as "veri nsara" (true Christians) and "ġlieda qaddisa" (holy war, without the connotation of *jihad* however) were often used in public meetings on all sides. An unusual exception was Emanuele Dimech – a non-conformist journalist, teacher and agitator – who was excommunicated by the bishop (Pace) and then exiled by the governor (Rundle); he died in exile and is buried in an unknown

grave.[10] Maltese politics could not but be influenced by religion, and so we get anticlericals and ultra-montanes often masquerading under political guises, or vice-versa, making due allowance for variations owing to social class differences, the working classes as a rule being most fanatical in their religiosity (or dissidence).

Basically, it can be said that it was Savona, originally a utilitarian-liberal anglophile politician, who stirred the masses through religious motives, and if we accept at least a degree of linear development through from Savona to Strickland and then to the present Labour Party, it might even be argued that the Labour Party owes its origins partly to clericalism of this kind, whereas the Nationalist Party originated from a more secular, anticlerical position, but was rather swamped by conservative clericalism partly due to the influence of such ecclesiastical personalities as Mgr. Ignazio Panzavecchia between the world wars and later, and partly due to class considerations, or colonial conditions. This interpretation, I believe, turns 'popular' contemporary impressions on their head, since until now it appears to be generally – I almost said 'religiously' – assumed that the M.L.P. under Mintoff was the secular and anti-clerical party, whereas the P.N. under Borg Olivier was the clerical and conservative party. Times change; personalities and power situations are apt to influence ideological stand-points as well but change takes place in continuity.

The common folk's religious ways were sometimes interrupted by politico-religious disputes. One can trace a succession of these from the early 1890s, when the Pope himself ostracised the elder Mizzi as an enemy, to Count Strickland, when after the latter's party had been interdicted Strickland apologised for his alleged errors, and finally in the 1960s when Mintoff party leaders and newspapers were interdicted until a kind of peace concordat was signed by Mr. Mintoff and a new bishop in 1969; that bishop became unpopular for various reasons and he was soon promoted like Buhagiar, being made a nuncio in Latin America. At no time, however, were the majority of the population on the side of the anti-church party; nor indeed would any party have admitted that it was in reality anti-church at all.

The influence of the church continued to be felt on the law, especially by means of the Canon Law which, until 1975, made Malta one of the very few countries in the civilised world where civil marriage did not exist. Even so, hardly anybody marries outside the church so far. Malta

still has no divorce law; only separation – and possible concubinage. The Church greatly influenced education – even the University was originally a Jesuit college – and was largely responsible for charitable institutions – our medical tradition dates back to the Hospitallers and also inspired philantropic guilds and mutual benefit societies affecting various categories of workers from craftsmen to industrials.

The church influence is in the very architecture. Look at the church at the centre of the traditional small village; it occupies the same place there that the religion occupies in the hearts of most parishioners.[11] Nor indeed is there any way of knowing whether the big tarmac roads cutting through such villages promote development in any real sense. There must be reasons other than aesthetic ones for supposing that they well be harmful to communal life. New towns do not usually have the same architectural structure, partly because the whole process is more bureaucratized and mechanised; but again the absence of a central village square with the market or civic centre there may be taking a lot away from the communal living in the open to which the Maltese are accustomed and for which the Mediterranean climate and temperament are suited.

We may yet have conduminiums towering over the town instead of the church steeple or dome, but it is little consolation to know from the remains that in ancient times the inhabitants lived in caves while the only proper building was in fact the temple itself. While it is no doubt better to have a decent place in which to live, than to reside in a cave and freely adore your god every so often, on the other hand one should, I think, salvage as much as possible of that which makes for harmony in communal relations rather than for uprooting and alienation. Of course, it may be argued that in a small place such as Malta anonymity may be a good way of avoiding parochial strictures, but on the other hand the problem of solitude is, in this industrial age, a feature of urbanised life everywhere, and precisely because Malta is small there may one day be nothing but "a city on the sea". Fortunately, and in spite of the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, birth control is now possible; it used to be quite impossible until the mid-1960's and quite difficult until the early 1970's. This is rather effective, not only because of (in some instances) the pressures of competition on the local girl in relation to "liberated" female holiday-makers, but also because of the very real problems of over-population; we have almost come

down to zero growth in recent years. At the latest count, in 2008, the resident population was up to 410,000, the highest density in Europe (c. 1,300 per sq. Km)

The religious calendar is for most people still the basic definition of obligations: church functions and outdoor feasts being the major attractions. Religious feasts, perhaps bordering on idolatry in the best pagan spirit, actually bring about family reunions and comunity work whenever and wherever they take place; there is also drinking around the town or village with old friends. It is one of the few occasions in life when members of rival political parties might be tempted to visit each other's clubs – for the wine, or beer, of course, partly because they are somewhat tipsy by the end of it, and at worst have to be carried home.

It is, I find, a positive side of religious practice that people have a home-grown communal motivator and moderator; although the theologian might object and condemn such *bona fide* humanism as sacrilegious, probably with the same vituperation with which a local priest in 1963 had devoted a whole Sunday sermon to castigate immorality in dress, on the morning when a member of the congregation had published a letter in the paper in favour of permitting tourists to swim in bikinis; he was in the front row in the chapel and after that he was first in the queue to receive communion. This relatively minor and harmless example is an indication of the negative side to religion: the bigotry, the self-righteousness, the obscurantism, the self-ordained hierarchy who dispense with souls, creating heroes and outcasts. It is so serious because such qualities are not limited to the religious or ecclesiastical sphere; they constitute an outlook on life, a way of thinking, or rather of not thinking because blind faith knows only one Truth. There is no "Reformation", no choice: you are "either with me or against me"; the virtuous middle way, preferred by Saint Paul, is the place where you are sure to get knocked down by some polluted vehicle.

An exquisite (but in some respects frightening) example of the messianic tendency as reflected in politics is the following, taken from the Savonian *Malta Tagħna* in 1896 and directed, of course, against the Mizzian nationalists after the chastisement of Mizzi by bishop and Pope:

> We do just what we like; nobody has any power over us; our will is God's will ... The leader of our souls is the Pope; the leader of our hearts is Mr. Sigismund; by their word of command we will drown Malta ... We are the King, the Government and the law; our will shall have to be carried out; and nobody is great when compared to us. With the red and white flag around the portrait of Gismond, and with the Pope's cockade, we will run down every enemy.
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> They have called us ... the men of the turned-up sleeves, as if they were the offspring of noble paladins. You, our brethren, you dogs! Say what you like; the reins of this Island are in our hands ... Hurrah for the turned-up sleeves! They are the King of Malta! ... The Redeemer, Mr. Savona, our Master, long may he live![12]

The reference to Savona as a 'Redeemer' may be partly explained by the fact that he was popular in Senglea, where the figure of Christ the Redeemer is especially revered; Strickland, who lived in the Lija area, was called the 'Saviour': in Lija it was Christ the Saviour who had a special following. Mizzi, of course, knew the pulse of the populace no less well: he inveighed against "their Popess", Queen Victoria, and "the first authority after their Popess", the Archbishop of Canterbury. The use of religious symbolism in public speaking was and still is very strong.

One can see 'religion' also in the authoritarian petty parochial rivalries, often incensed by personal animosities (not unusually related, somehow, to the local clergy), and the relations of these with the parties now or before. One can see it in styles of parenthood, of leadership, and in forms of social and of political organisation, often originally pioneered by the church or by the colonial government, subsequently adopted in modified forms by the parties. The Labour Party may appear as the worst offender in this respect because it is more populist, less bourgeois in character; the Fascist-like uninformed Labour Brigade, for instance, smacks of religious societies such as the Sodality of Our Lady or the Legion of Mary, and Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts, no less than it utilizes the old jesuitical principle: "catch them before they are seven."

Does reason stand a chance? Will the Maltese experience of development take on a humanist form, whether Marxist, or

Christian or both together? Or shall we be condemned to piques and cults reminiscent more of the dark ages than the space age? Perhaps, after all, the space age itself is taking the wrong paths to development, and we are simply being carried away with it, sometimes trampling on what deserves to be conserved, and sometimes boosting what may be yet derided. Cars and aeroplanes, TV sets and cinemas, radios, records and books still may not serve the individual in society as an alternative to the values implied in religious behaviour. "There are very few systematic theories of religious behaviour, and many of those that exist are merely descriptive", note Argyle and Beit Hallahni: "As a result some interesting theoretical insights are hard to test empirically."[13] The phenomenon is as fully alive as ever.

It is basically a question of the relation of tradition to change: a social rather than a religious problem. If it is, the society that more readily sets the standards for a way of life, the state can only postulate a remedy, a blueprint, or a 'straight-jacket', but still, only those who opt out of traditional habits may be inclined to partake of such possibilities, or else merely to make of the newly-founded manners of behaviour different versions of their old ones. The sinews of any culture are not likely to change over a short time, nor does the adoption of new forms for the same substances mean a radical cultural change, although it could perhaps gradually pave the way for such a change. In adopting the secularisation 'gospel', then, the politician or social reformer must not commit the same mistake as the preacher with his "carrot-and-stick" (or "apple-and-snake") pulpits.

In planning for the future, conventional religion probably has little place, but there obviously is much that may be extracted from various wholesome traditions relating to the religious experience. The all too familiar religious disposition, however, should make way for more reasonable forms of communication. The transition is coming, and it should come; but it must be a humane one, not a super-imposition or a hybrid. This is, in a sense, the problem of faith: should this be blind or enlightened? Should the believer prescribe the agnostic, or the agnostic the believer, or may they co-exist without unbearable friction? Will tomorrow's Malta look to Christ the dictator or else to Christ the liberator? Before, it was forbidden to question but unless we look at ourselves in the mirror

the worst features in the religious attitudes will surely prevail for a long time to come, so that moral and human values will continue to be mistaken for religious instruction and dogmas of the faith.

Twenty years later, the baritones of religious influence in Maltese society remain firmly discernable, but much has changed. This may be guaged from the findings of sociologists and ex-ecclesiastics like Mario Vassallo in the 1970's and the late Anthony Abela who surveyed shifting values at the turn of the millenium.[14] Except for an agitated church-state dispute concerning Catholic schools in 1984, Gonzi's successor Gużeppi Mercieca tried hard to steer clear from getting involved in politics to the point of reacting only very tamely even to instances of violence and police torture of opponents under the Mintoff and Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici 'socialist' administrations especially in the decade between 1977 and 1987.

Even more than mass tourism had done in and after the 1960's, the opening up of the avi waves followed by the advent of cable internet and the IT revolution accompanying globalisation rapidly and effectively challenged traditional social norms and mores. In the sphere of sexual relations, where the greatest contraints and taboos had prevailed, premarital intercourse and cohabitation grew by leaps and bounds; civil marriages, still in the minority, have been on the rise, while single parent families and children born out of wedlock have never were so numerous becoming a social problem. *Rites de passage* continue to be predominantly religious but decreasingly so. Regular church attendance among the younger generations has rose-dwindled to below 50%, although on average it continues to be higher than Ireland or even Poland. Village feasts centred around patron saints, spruced up by brass bands and spectacular fire-works, have continued to act as a social gel particularly at the parochial level but competition in the field of leisure and entertainment has grown radically in line with consumerist tendencies and the pleasure ethic of 'life is now' and 'just do it' as constantly publicized and promoted by the media. The Church remains a generally respected 'national' institution and it may have been somewhat injected with a novel populist dynamism by the recent appointment of a new archbishop, Pawlu Cremona, who projects a happy, positive image of religion and the church. The late Pope John Paul II visited Malta twice to tumoultous welcomes. The political parties and the state have tended to uphold Catholic norms in certain policies and attitudes, such as

their continuous opposition to abortion and so far, even to divorce. Contraception is rampant, but in 2008 a young lady sunbathing topless on a remote beach was arrested and initially fined, recalling the case of an English tourist who in 1963 had been similarly apprehended for swimming in a bikini before being acquitted, opening the way to bikinis on the beach as a norm since then.

On the whole, interest in religion and the church has dwindled, especially among the younger generation, even as the clergy and church leadership seek to modernize their approach to be more relevant in an ever more permissive society. The broader philosophical and moral issues relating to value and meaning, however, remain central to society's existence demanding attention and a degree of engagement. The drug problem has increased but the the crime rate remains relatively low and many in Malta continue to value the family highly. Ironically, Catholicism in relation to a Maltese European identity, may benefit from a largely Muslim sub-Saharian and Arab mass illegal immigration, especially since 2002, just as it did during a Protestant colonial rule, and as it continues largely to do as a factor of provenance, affinity and distinction among Maltese migrant settlers in the English-speaking world.

Notes

1 *Divina Commedia*, Inferno, III, 45-51; quoted in H. Frendo, *Story of a Book*, Lux Press, Sta. Venera, 1972.

2 D. E. Smith (Ed.) *Religion, Politics, and Social Change in the Third World*, London, 1971, pp. 203-204.

3 See H. Frendo, *Maltese National Identity*, H. Frendo and Oliver Friggieri (ed.), *Malta: Culture and Identity*, Ministry for Justice and the Arts, 1994.

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5 Kathleen Bliss, *The Future of Religion*, London, 1969, p. 3.

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[8] *Op. Cit.* And see also J.M. Pirotta, *Fortress Colony: The Final Act*, Studia, Valletta, 3 vols., 1987-1999; H. Frendo, *Ċensu Tabone: The Man and His Century*, Maltese Studies, Valletta, 2000, 2nd ed. 2001; and, *Patrijott Liberali Malti: Biografija ta' Ġorġ Borg Olivier*, 1911-1980, Valletta, 2005.

[9] See D.E. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-109.

[10] See H. Frendo, *Birth Pangs of a Nation*, Valletta, 1972.

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[12] H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony*, *op. cit.*, and *Żmien l-Ingliżi. Is-Seklu Dsatax*, KKM, Valletta, 2004.

[13] M. Argyle and B. Beit –Hallahmi, *The Social Psychology of Religion*, London, 1975, p. 178.

[14] See Mario Vassallo, *From Lordship to Stewardship: Religion and Social Change in Malta*, The Hague, 1979 and, A.M. Abela, *Transmitting Values in European Malta: A Study in the Contemporary Values in Malta*, Malta, DISCERN, 1994.

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