War and peace in Mediterranean: an everlasting challenge

by Simon Mercieca

BETWEEN November 2 and 3, the Mediterranean Institute at the University of Malta saw academics from all over the Mediterranean meeting to discuss the theme "War, peace and antiquity".

The international dimension came from the active participation of professors and researchers from the French universities of La Rochelle, Paris 1, Nanterre, Poitiers and Bordeaux, the Greek University of Komitini, the *Istituto Orientale* of Rome and *Ains-Chams* of Cairo.

The occasion provided the Mediterranean Institute with the opportunity of entering into a strategic partnership with the Strickland Foundation, without whose support the meeting would have been impossible.

The present crisis in the Middle East has brought to the world's attention the importance of both peace and war in the Mediterranean. While other regional conflicts have been successfully brought to an end by the use of an international force, as was the case in Serbia and Iraq, it appears impossible to apply the same policy to the turbulent region of Palestine.

The aim of the conference was to understand through the long-term perspective of history why war and peace have almost become synonymous with the Mediterranean world.

Religion was for long considered a prime mover in the development of the Mediterranean civilisation. The premise that Jews, Muslims and Christians are all sons of Abraham is a common element of unity in the region. Yet past historical emphasis on religion has obfuscated the importance of classical heritage as another tenor of unity.

Antiquity offers several common features that can be advanced to bring closer the diversified ethnic communities of the Mediterranean basin. Ironically enough, ancient wars and past peace alliances present a shared experience that is still conditioning the relations among the people of this region.

The conference focused on the state of war from ancient to modern times from a theological, juridical and historical perspective. The evaluation of war over the long-term view of history offers another instance of a common heritage as war and peace were judged in the same manner both in the north and the south of the Mediterranean basin.

The colloquium opened with a discussion on the concept of war and peace in antiquity.

In Greek civilisation war was considered the origin of the cosmic order of which human nature is just a reflection. Peace was defined simply as a postponement of war, a period of non-belligerency. The consideration of peace as a natural state does not appear before the fourth century BC; in fact the peace treaties in classical Greece permit an analysis of the concept of friendship and alliance.

It is interesting to note how panhellenism considered cities outside the sphere of Greek influence: they were defined as exterior enemies.

This natural state of war was embraced by the early Christians and adjudged as an inherent human reality. This is a direct influence of the Greek mythology. Both in ancient Greece and in the early Christian society, peace on earth was considered a reflection of heaven. War was looked upon as a human matter.

Rev. Dr Edward Farrugia talked about the concept of war and peace in classical Rome. He moved away from the paradox that opposed Constantine, the peace giver, to Nero, the persecutor. In Dr Farrugia's words, the former legitimised Christianity, the latter created a highly valued image of martyrdom. Yet neither the advent of Christ nor the new powers acquired by Christians succeeded in bringing about peace in actual reality.

If social and political peace are ideals, the early Christians went further away from them by considering their inner emotions as a bridge of serenity with their God. Therefore, war was only accepted as the scapegoat for their sins. This philosophy led Christians to see war as a remedy to evil while keeping peace as an ultimate objective.

This subject was further developed by Professor Gerard Guyon of the University of Bordeaux. In the Christian heritage, he noticed a conflicting relationship between *Pax Romana* and *Pax Cristiana*. In the first three centuries of the Christian era, Christian soldiers were often confronted with a moral dilemma of having to serve the emperor. This clearly expresses the religious ideal of the early Church. War was hardly ever just and peace was often considered an ideal which could be realised.

The Muslim tradition followed the same principle. Originally war was not legitimised because it was deemed to be a natural phenomenon necessary as a means of defence. The original notion of the Islamic *jihad* was based on this dialectic.

It meant a war in defence of the name of God but without carrying any claim of sacredness. Its significance was changed by the Sunnites and the Orientalists of the 19th century by giving its present sacred significance. Therefore, the original meaning of the word *jihad* admits peace but one has to distinguish between the idealist talk and the realistic discourse on the concept. The former considers war as an end in itself, the latter sees in it an innate state intended for the propagation of faith.

The principle of a religious war as a self-defence weapon seems to have first originated among the Christians of Byzantium. Professor Constantinos Pitsakis of the University of Komotini insisted that it was at Byzantium that Christians began to think about war in terms of defence. Yet this idea did not restrict the scope of a holy war.

Peace remained the ideal state. In the 12th century when defensive Europe sought to contain – through the Crusades – the advancement of Islam, the state of war was seen as an initiation to martyrdom – war

MR MERCIECA addressing participants at the Friday seminar

became, therefore, just and sacred but never saintly. Professor Claude Andrault-Schmitt from the University of Poitiers expressed the opinion that the knights could kill the enemies of God without any sense of guilt and at the same time, thinking it was still possible to extend peace in Christ. .

The Sicilian medieval heritage of war was reviewed by Mr Charles Dalli, a member of the History Department at the University of Malta. He gave a different reading to the dialectic of war in medieval Sicily. He described how the whole political set-up was addressed to war. The island's topography and its medieval social organisations propagated invasions in hope of acquisition of a strategic base in the heart of the Mediterranean.

In the humanistic age, Albertus Gentile advanced the theory that natural law, which during his time was considered to be part of the divine right, was given by God only after peace had been achieved. In other words, peace was considered a utopia but if good men are in power, a just war becomes acceptable. Besides defensive war, the concept of a positive war began to appear in humanist works. Humanists, on the other hand began to present themselves as true peacemakers.

Francesco Balbi da Correggio's chronicle of the Great Siege presents an occasion where the humanistic influence and the ancient Greek tradition of the concept of peace surfaced in the written records of a local event.

According to the present writer, who contributed a paper on "Homer's account of the Trojan War and Balbi da Correggio's chronicle of the siege of Malta of 1565: some common socio-cultural aspects", Balbi was inspired by the Homeric tradition and, as in the case of the Iliad, his descrip-

tion of the Turkish siege of Malta alternates between characters responsible for war (knights) and those responsible for peace custody (priests).

The 18th century spirit of the enlightenment gave birth to a modern notion of war which again came from Christian quarters through the French Jansenist philosophy. Professor Jacques Bouineau, from the University of La Rochelle, explained how war began to be defined in terms of hatred and tyranny. Therefore, the antagonism between war and peace was considered until the French Revolution on a dual level: the human and the divine.

The desacralisation of war on the European continent came about in the 19th century. The French Revolution laid the first stone in this process of secularisation. The period of the Consulate brought an end to the revolution but it also revived the Roman concept of war. The restoration of the

monarchical regime failed to change the newly acquired juridical state.

The French Revolution provided a legal justification for the suspension of constitutional measures in times of emergency. This was evaluated by Ahmed el Djerbi as a direct reference to ancient Rome when its constitution was suspended in favour of dictatorship. Yet, this revived concept for the suspension of laws has come to stay. Modern democracies often resort to the temporary suspension of the constitution as in times of war.

It is hoped that the conference served to help contemporaries to better understand the origins of present-day conflicts through a cultural perspective. It definitely succeeded in offering a different reading of the notions of war and peace in the Mediterranean world.

These papers will be published by the University of Paris – Nanterre in their publication *Méditerranée*.