

# PAGEANTRY AND SECULARIZATION -- the Malta case

Mario Vassallo

In this paper 'pageantry' is being understood as the 'display of the magnificent', in whichever medium this display is expressed. Sociology is interested in pageantry in so far as it is a very effective mode of mass communication,<sup>1</sup> and to the extent that, through it, social forces are generated in a way that drives men to participate with intensity in group life. My main interest here is 'religious pageantry', but this type of pageantry cannot be fully understood without reference to other, largely non-religious, types. In the context of Christianity, 'religious pageantry' can be of two main types:

(a) **ceremonial** which forms an essential part of ritual or liturgy in the strict sense. This type is governed by very specific regulations, known as 'rubrics'; and

(b) a type which is difficult to name with precision. I therefore name it negatively: **non-ceremonial pageantry**. This type of pageantry is more associated with social custom and tradition rather than with specific rubrics. It is not, generally speaking, considered to be an essential part of religious expression by the theologians of a particular religious tradition, although its significance for social bonding is widely appreciated both by those who participate in it and by religious leaders, or 'clergy'. This type of celebration is not unrelated to the liturgy; in fact it generally leads to or extends from it, but is clearly not governed by the same set of rules. This is made obvious by an element of distancing between religious personnel and the 'folk' who engage in it. This type of pageantry is generally associated with folk jollification and outdoor celebrations. This type can also be referred to as 'festival pageantry'<sup>2</sup>

This paper is concerned with the effect of secularization on religious

1. 'Communication' is here being defined after T. Parsons as "the action process which is the source and the bearer of cultural creation and maintenance". See T. Parsons, Introduction to Part Four, "Culture and Social Systems", *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory*, edited by Talcott Parsons et al (Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1961), vol. II, p. 977.
2. In traditional society, especially of the agrarian type, the festival cycle and its attendant pageantry, has been repeatedly found to act as the essential means whereby solidarity is maintained at the local level. See, e.g. the studies of Rampur, a northern Indian Village by D. Lewis *Village Life in Northern India* (New York, Random House, 1958) and that of Suye Mura, a Japanese village by J. Embree, *Suye Mura, A Japanese Village* (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1939).

pageantry. Both types of pageantry just described will be referred to, but most of the paper is devoted to an attempt to interpret the effects of socio-economic development in Malta on the second type. A brief background note on the incidence of recent social change in Malta is therefore apposite.

Throughout most of its history Malta has served as an island-fortress, an easy prey for the most powerful nation of the era, and an important stepping-stone for whoever happened to be the master of the Mediterranean at the time. Despite continuing outside pressures, the Maltese managed to maintain an indigenous identity with language and religion as its basis. To a certain extent, both language and religion are imports to Malta. Maltese (the language spoken by an absolute majority as their first language) morphologically derives from the Semitic group of languages so widespread in the Mediterranean; the Catholic religion which most Maltese profess ultimately depends on the central authority seated in Rome. But throughout the centuries (and one can here talk with certainty for the last ten centuries, since the Arabs left Malta in 1090 i.e.) both language and religion supported each other and acted as a very effective buffer against foreign influences, steadily absorbing the preoccupations of folk culture into a Catholic matrix. As such, the Church was the natural agency for the preservation of the Maltese way of life, and the custodian of the institutions of socialization and social control, especially on the local level where relationships mattered most. This was after all the level at which solidarity could best be expressed, in religious ritual and especially, as is to be expected of a generally sedentary and illiterate society, in the pageantry that accompanied it. With the attainment of national Independence in 1964 — an event that clearly marked an important stage in the gradual maturation of an effective political voice for the indigenous community independently of the Church — the Church's role as the fulcrum of social life of the Maltese was bound to change.<sup>3</sup> With secularization, commentators like Boissevain had observed, religious pageantry would also decline.<sup>4</sup>

What follows in this paper can be divided into the following three sections:

- (a) a look at the arguments on which the decline forecast was based;
- (b) a look at the evidence to assess whether pageantry in general

3. See, for a more elaborate discussion of these points, M. Vassallo *From Lordship to Stewardship — Religion and Social Change in Malta* (The Hague, Mouton, 1979) and the comments on Vassallo in W. Oeckl *Kolonialherrschaft contra Selbstbestimmung — Das Straben nach politischer Emanzipation: Malta* (Augsburg, MaroVerlag, 1981).
4. J. Boissevain *Saints and Fireworks — Religion and Politics in Rural Malta* (London, the Athlone Press, 1965) pp. 78-79; J. Boissevain in 1968 Postscript to the same book, pp. 144-147; and J. Boissevain *Hal-Farruġ: A Village in Malta* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) p. 90.

and religious pageantry in particular has declined or not; and

(c) an evaluation of the available data in the light of a general theory of secularization.

### THE DECLINE FORECAST

The more important arguments on which a decline was forecast can be summarized thus:

(a) Socio-economic development, and especially universal education, was bound to bring about substantial changes in the position and in the legitimating powers of the Church at the local level. The domineering position of the Church, symbolized even in the architecture and general layout of the villages, was bound to decline. A direct result of this would be a phasing out of the rivalry between different factions (or partiti) in the same villages, and between neighbouring villages. A major stimulus in what had been a process of constant accumulation of traditions and practices would therefore be removed, thus making festas nothing else but remnants of a dying culture. In any case, the newly available entertainment outlets, now increasingly available for tourists and Maltese alike, would make traditional pageants and patterns of jollifiction anachronistic.

(b) the secularizing effect of the politico-religious dispute of the 1960s between the leaders of the Malta Labour Party and the Church was eroding the authority of the clergy, for a long time the natural leaders of the community and those who, for centuries, had rallied support and collected moneys for religious pageantry. An erosion of leadership roles would eventually destroy traditional festivities, the most important single item in the annual programme of the parish priest and his assistants.

(c) New patterns of socialization, now extending far beyond the village and the family network, were undermining the confraternities (or guilds), the institutions, that is, on which the organizational aspects of such pageantry depended. Confraternities steadily lost their appeal among Malta's youth who now became more interested in youth clubs, political parties and trade unions. Some thought that soon there would not even be enough people to carry the statue out in procession.

(d) Influences exogenous to the local Church, and most especially the effect of the Second Vatican Council, could not be underestimated. Feasts centered primarily around an individual saint, and the Church in Malta suddenly realized that a more Christo-centric approach had to be adopted. This meant giving more importance to Easter and secondary importance to patron saints.

### A LOOK AT THE DATA

Contrary to the forecast made by the decline prophecy, 'non-ceremonial pageantry' has not died out in Malta. Important changes however have taken place over the last two decades in the way pageantry in

general, and religious pageantry in particular, are being understood by the Maltese. The main developments can be summarised thus:

(a) *ceremonial*, (or that type of pageantry which has been earlier described as forming an essential part of liturgy), has developed along lines emanating from central authority. After Vatican II, even the geographical space where these manifestations of colour and sound took place was substantially re-ordered to reflect a more participative environment. The change in language from Latin to the vernacular, and especially the changed conception of the role of the choir reflect the emphasis. The interior decorations of the Churches have also undergone changes and there is now a preference for simpler, less baroque 'props' (statues, candlesticks, etc.) and more use of fresh and varied decorations, with an unprecedented emphasis on the use of flower arrangements, use of directed lighting, etc. The changes have at times been criticized as a loss of the aesthetic dimension of the liturgy, a watering down of the colour and pomp. But when a representative sample of Maltese was asked whether they approved of the changes, an overwhelming majority did so because, as they said, 'now I can understand what is going on' and 'we are no longer mere spectators now'. The Maltese seem to have taken after the official line. When I interviewed the clergy about the matter in 1974, one particular priest had this to say:

'That our festa had a tradition of grandeur is admitted; whether it did have a tradition of mystery, unless in a quasi-superstitious meaning is debatable. What was mysterious in the 'old' liturgy was more due to a lack of understanding of its real mystery. The new liturgy brings the mystery within the people's grasp and has, certainly, greater didactic content since it is understood, at least literally, by the congregation...'<sup>5</sup>

Feelings of nostalgia, especially among the more sophisticated members of the clergy did of course exist, as a retired professor of Philosophy, and canon of the Cathedral Chapter told me:

I am very fond indeed of Plain Gregorian chant and of Sacred Polyphony of the Palestrina-Pergolesi-Victoria-Perosi-Bartolucci, etc. type. The organ is the only musical instrument I like in church. The new liturgy has done harm to this type of sacred music; but the Pope has just promised to reconsider the problem...<sup>6</sup>

In 1982 only very few elements of the earlier elaborate ceremonial persist: some vestments used by the Cathedral Chapter (mitres, capes, etc.) the hieratic styled panegyric given in praise of the village patron saint on the day of the village festa, the opera-style music used for

5. M. Vassallo *ibid* p. 161.

6. *Ibid* p. 159.

Mass and Vespers on the same occasion. The notion of 'display of the magnificent' now seems to have been dropped from the liturgy.

(b) Malta has experienced a steady decline of non-ceremonial religious pageants previously organized on a grand scale on the national level. Thus the feasts of San Ġirġor and **Hadd in-Nies** the feast of Mnarja (St. Peter and St. Paul), have lost most of their religious significance. These essentially religious feasts had gradually developed into occasions for exhibitionism in which most parishes vied with each other. Rather than national events, such occasions are now more of a district tradition, and devoid of any social significance beyond a popular day off work spent on the beach.<sup>7</sup>

(c) There has been a steady increase in the interest shown by the Maltese in the traditionally well-established festivities on the **local level**. The inhabitants of the various towns and villages contribute enormous sums of money every year towards the maintenance of village festas, Good Friday processions etc. Most of the money is spent on bands, out-

7. (a) The extent to which these feasts were directly dependent in their respective origin and at various stages of their history, on religion, is a complex question that only further historical research can fully unravel. The origin of the feast of San Ġirġor is linked to the emergence of Lutheranism, and the procession seems to have been introduced by Dominicus Cubelles in 1543. (See M. Fsadni *Id-Dumnikani fir-Rabat u fil-Birgu* (Malta, Il-Hajja Press, 1974) pp. 258-259). The clergy were at the very centre of the feast's organization and for four hundred years the pique among parishes created serious difficulties for Church authorities until they themselves took measures to suppress excesses which they considered 'unreligious'. This is in itself a clear element of secularization, but it is quite different from that which affected the Mnarja festivities. Even though the relation between at least some aspects of the day's programme for Mnarja and religion used to be tenuous, Mnarja, globally considered, was a religious feast. Mnarja was not suppressed by the Church, but by deliberate State action, and came about as a measure of enforced secularization within a wider programme implemented by the Socialist Government. The point being made here is that as an effect of secularization, understood as a very complex process and not necessarily as one with a uniform or unilineal form of development, non-ceremonial pageantry, that was largely dependent on religion, declined.
7. (b) Following the 'ambivalent' results of the December 1981 General Elections, when the Nationalist Party polled a majority of votes but gained a minority of seats in Parliament whilst the Malta Labour Party polled a minority of votes but obtained majority in Parliament, the Nationalist Party embarked on a public campaign of passive resistance and civil disobedience. The campaign was inaugurated on the 29 June, Feast of *Mnarja* and the Nationalists requested everybody to take that day as a holiday in view of the traditional values associated with it. The Labour Government reacted by suspending and subsequently sacking all government employees who obeyed this directive. Employees who later agreed to sign a declaration stating that they did not envisage such consequences and that they would not follow any further similar directives were given back their jobs.

door decorations and fireworks. Even though not many people actually participate in the actual festivities as such, many more people support such occasions financially. This interest in the setting up and maintenance of local pageants is reinforced by the vast movements of the island's population that take place every Saturday and Sunday whenever a festa is due. Even though they do not have anybody to meet in another village, people flock to enjoy the fireworks, to admire the decorations, and not in the least, to dissect the display of house decorations that are purposely left with the front doors wide open for the passing observer to admire.

(d) Parallel to the decline of popular interest in nationally organized festivities with an element of religious pageantry, there has been a growing participation in purely secular occasions where pageantry is organized on the national level. Some of these occasions are time-honoured and might have started with a religious connection (such as Carnival, the Regatta of September 8); others are of a very recent origin. Some of these occasions (such as the May-day 'Battle of Flowers') are organized by sectoral institutions like the Malta Labour Party, others (like the festivities of National Day) are intended to be non-partisan, although the level of politicization in Malta is currently too high not to tarnish even the unifying potential of this last group. In the early 1980's such activities were growing and not declining, thus creating a paradox to anybody who wants to make sense of the Maltese interest in pageantry on a national level.<sup>8</sup>

(e) Finally, a negative development has to be noted: newly-created parishes have not developed pageantry to any degree comparable to the festa celebrations in traditional villages. Recent urbanization in Malta has been of two main types: the creation of a completely new town, and the extension of the old ones. Santa Lucia, a town built at the outskirts of one of Malta's older villages, Tarxien, but divided from it by a dual-carriage road, has nothing like a festa. The inhabitants still generally feel they have to visit their kin on the occasion of the festa of their parish of origin, but even now that there is a second generation of Santa Lucia inhabitants, any suggestion of building up any festa-like activity will be scorned at.<sup>9</sup> The other type of parishes, created as a result of the gradual expansion of a particular neighbourhood (such as the parish of the Immaculate Conception in Hamrun, the three Marsa parishes, St. Joseph in Birkirkara) have a very muted style of celebrating their festa, and there

8. Though not exactly 'pageantry' in the standard form being discussed (particularly because it lacks the calendar regularity normally associated with pageantry) a new set of pageant-like elements were introduced in political ritual in the early 1980s. Public meetings, both prior to and following the elections, were characterised by a lot of colour, *suffarelli*, band marches and other artefacts that had previously been restricted to traditional, regularly celebrated, pageantry.

9. M. Vassallo *op.cit.*, pp. 96 ff.

are no indications, as yet at least, that any elaborate developments can readily take place.

Such an admixture of developments in modern Malta presents a number of paradoxes. On the one hand the Maltese are not showing themselves uninterested in pageantry; on the other their interests do not seem to be totally consistent. Interest in religious pageantry in particular has become more selective, and more effectively apparent on the local rather than on the national level. Interest in 'national' held pageantry has declined only if it is related to religion: now more people participate and support an extensive range of occasions, extending beyond the traditional ones already mentioned to other imported ones like beauty contests and fashion shows.

In a recent revision of the decline-thesis to which he had formerly subscribed, Jeremy Boissevain lists a number of reasons why he thinks that religious pageantry has not died out in Malta.<sup>10</sup> He divides his arguments into two (a) indigenous and (b) exogenous. Among indigenous reasons he mentions

- (a) the interest taken by enterprising individuals (more entrepreneurship, if you like)
- (b) the occurrence of certain events (centenaries, etc.) that facilitate the blow-up of pageantry; and
- (c) selective political patronage.

Among exogenous factors he mentions

- (a) tourism;
- (b) higher living standards in Malta;
- (c) the need for solidarity in an increasingly politically divided Maltese society;
- (d) the emancipation of workers.

Boissevain's analysis is restricted to religious pageantry, and as such it does not take into consideration how developments there relate to the development of pageantry that is not related to religion. In effect the three endogenous factors which he offers as reasons for the non-decline of religious pageantry appear to me to be possibly the effects of wider social processes. Similarly, the exogenous factors mentioned by him could easily be seen as 'facilitating agencies' rather than 'causes'. This suggests that one must look deeper at what is happening in Maltese society to make sense of recent developments in the popularity of the various types of pageantry. What follows is a set of hypothesis constructed on the available evidence, but only ad hoc research can provide the real set of answers:

- (a) **changes in the aesthetic appreciation of the Maltese.** As a result of the spread of universal education (resulting partly from more extended

10. J. Boissevain 'Why are Maltese Religious Pageants Growing in Scale?' University of Amsterdam, Euromed Working Paper No. 8, 1979.

formal schooling and partly from more widespread contacts with other cultures through outgoing and incoming tourism, through books and the media) the level of aesthetic appreciation of the Maltese has been dramatically improved. This is a very gradual process, and one which is extremely difficult to quantify without tailor-made longitudinal studies. But on reflection many people in Malta accede to this fact when mentioned to them. As such it exhibits itself in widely different areas, ranging from the money spent on make-up and fashion to the more extensive market for stereo recorders and record players. It has affected the interior design of most houses in the same way that it manifests itself in the at times very delicate flower arrangements in Church. Pageantry has been earlier described as the 'display of the magnificent', and as such it could not escape this surge in the appreciation of the beautiful and the aesthetically pleasing, whether this happens to be religious or secular.

(b) a **new cosmology**. With independence, and the loss of the Church's domineering, if hitherto apparently so natural, position in the social life of the Maltese, there has occurred in Malta and by the Maltese, an unconscious re-dimensioning of **space** and **time**. It came about as the direct effect of the process of structural differentiation that is basic to an understanding of social change in Malta. The concept of a 'national Church' is receding into the background as the at times harsh reality of an overwhelmingly present State is experienced. This explains both the decline in the appeal of 'national organized' religious pageantry and the parallel increase in the interest of the Maltese in national 'secular' pageantry.

(c) from **Wertrationalität** to **Zweckrationalität** the maintenance and expansion of small-scale, local celebrations at the exclusive expense of the locals on the one hand, and the simultaneous use of them as marketable commodities to outsiders on the other hand, is more difficult to match. Traditionally the occasions for the expression of **Gemeinschaft** for the local community had been provided by the Church, and it is not surprising it still does. The difference now is that more people are prepared to contribute money and support the celebration of local pageantry because they realise that such occasions could be used to weld tighter family, kinship and friendship bonds. Such occasions nowadays provide **more and more** a useful occasion for the encounter of individuals who are already acquainted with each other, who enjoy each other's company with the lights, the colours and the sounds of village pageantry as background, and **less and less** an occasion for public jollification. The fact that this is so, and that people are becoming increasingly aware of it, demonstrates a clear shift from **Wertrationalität** to **Zweckrationalität**; it gives a clear indication that people are becoming more self-conscious about such festivals, and that from the natural parts of social life in its various manifestations, intrinsically self-justifying and self-legitimizing, these occasions have come to acquire instrumental significance. More



succinctly perhaps, it can be said that 'symbols' are becoming 'signs'.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the boundaries of the local community the shift from **Wert-rationalität** to **Zweckrationalität** is even more significant: people with no connection to the community which is celebrating a festa are attracted only by the colour of the decorations and perhaps more importantly, of the fireworks. Many attend, but remain lost as individuals in a nameless crowd. For others still, these occasions can be used to generate profits, and they do so by selling them to the tourist who is always in search of the indigenous and the ephemeral. To these entrepreneurs, that same religious pageantry that is used by the locals, in an increasingly rationalistic way, to recreate **Gemeinschaft**, becomes an isolated, saleable artefact of culture to be offered to complete outsiders for whom it has no basic meaning but the qualities of spectacle. The effects of secularization are thus easily discernible in the action of both locals and outsiders. Paradoxically though, it is this very process of secularization that has contributed to the reform of 'ceremonial' pageantry and that is reinforcing the maintenance of tradition-nurtured 'non-ceremonial' religious pageantry on the island.

11. The increase in *Zweckrationalität* as a measure of secularization in Malta has been documented elsewhere by the same author. In recent times it seems that even a return to religion, especially if understood in terms of a continuing, and at times of an upsurge of support for the Church in Malta, might itself be instrumental and therefore reflecting a particular type of secularization. In 'Development and Dissent — The Ambivalent Role of Religion in Contemporary Malta' (a paper presented during the IV International Conference of the Euro-Arab Social Research Group, Rome, 1981) M. Vassallo discusses this particular problem and develops the concept of *secularized desecularization* to examine the role the Church played in Malta in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of an uprise in 'state ideology' and its effect on the lives of the Maltese.