

## RELIGIOUS VALUES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS – A PERSPECTIVE

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CLEAR tendencies away from full adherence to the formal model of religiosity proposed by the Catholic Church have been noticed among Maltese University students for a number of years. These tendencies were again confirmed by the results of a small-scale survey conducted during November 1977.

In 1968, the *Religious Attitudes and Behaviour of University Students in Malta* were surveyed by an ad hoc survey conducted by the Pastoral Research Services. At that time students from most faculties had expressed belief in God, and as many as 24% had indicated that they pray 'Always'. Most of the remaining students expressed a more 'utilitarian' view of the God-man relationship, and, contrary to official Catholic teaching, they sought to intensify their relationship with God primarily in times of duress, (66%); only 20% then felt they ought to pray in times of joy and gratitude.<sup>1</sup>

A similar survey held among students of the *Junior College* (now *Upper Secondary School*, but then still run by the University) during 1973 showed that the general tendencies noticed in 1968 persisted among Malta's youngest generation of university students. Junior College students were now found to be quite critical of the 'average' priest (27.3% of respondents considered him 'antiquated'), and of the ecclesiastical authorities (37% considering them 'good pastoral guides'; 48.1% describing them 'old fashioned'; 29.1% 'too money-minded'; and 44.2% describing them with other appellatives not arising from the questionnaire). It then emerged too that though Church functions, and the sacraments, were still generally being made use of, they were not always considered as helpful as expected. The combination of negative attitudes to the Church and the institutions it patronizes with a positive attitude to the need for God in the students' life, undoubtedly gave some intimation of the possibly new attitudes towards religion in general, and the Church in particular, which were being generated among Malta's up-and-coming intelligentsia.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>B. Tonna, *Religious Attitudes and Behaviour of University Students in Malta* (Malta, PRS, 1968) especially pp. 10-17.

<sup>2</sup>See report in *Sunday Times of Malta*, 27 May, 1973, p. 8.

No extensive study of students' religiosity has been carried out since 1973. But superficial observation indicates that in general students tend to be dissatisfied with structured religion, and seek to draw from it only those aspects which satisfy their deeply felt needs for meaning. The student of the mid-seventies did not suffer much from the hot debates of the politico-religious disputes of the mid-sixties, and as such feels no particular 'pull' or 'push' towards religious structures. The generally secularising forces present in Maltese life generally, and particularly within the University where free debate is encouraged rather than stifled, have made the average student more selective and less emotionally involved even with values that his parents, or even his older brothers and sisters, so clearly and so dearly esteemed. The new liberating forces were facilitated by the media, by the new values imported by tourists, and by the loss, extremely significant for the inhabitants of the small villages, of the ascendancy enjoyed by the Church in previous generations.

Such general observation were confirmed by a pilot study of the value system of University students relative to family life conducted during November 1977. A small sample of twenty-five students following courses in a variety of Faculties (Law, Medicine, English Literature, Philosophy, Economics, Architecture and Mediterranean Studies) were interviewed by a small group of non-Maltese students.<sup>3</sup> The following summary of the results is being presented as an indication of emerging trends; a quantitative and more extensive study of religiosity still waits to be done. The changing mood – to the extent that it is correctly detected by the limited area covered by this study – suggests that very important structural shifts are taking place in Maltese society in general, and in the effectiveness of the traditional religious values in particular.

(i) All the students surveyed emphasised the enormous difference that existed between the religiosity of their grandparents, that of their parents and their own. Grandparents entertained an overtly ritualized version of religion, with a direct linkage be-

<sup>3</sup>The choice of foreign students as interviewers was purposely made: it was felt that in an area like this local students would be more prepared to express their real feelings, and not develop inhibitions, if they were approached by people they did not know well. There was of course the possibility that local students would try to project a too liberated image of themselves, but it transpired from the reports of the interviewers that interviewees adopted a dialogic attitude and wanted to check their arguments with those of people coming from a different social and religious background. The objectivity of the replies is therefore assumed.

tween officially sanctioned ritual (both liturgical and para-liturgical) and day to day life. There was little questioning, and the beliefs held by the Church were blindfoldedly accepted as given.

Parental views on religion were differently assessed: a significant relaxation of ritual observation was noticed, with Sunday now being given much more prominence. Attention is now focused more on the family rather than on the Church and church-related activities.

The students' own religiosity was a further development on that of their parents: ritual is important but only in so far as it was 'functional'. What matters is what I think God wants of me, and not what the Church suggests. Attendance to Mass on Sundays, although not necessarily every Sunday, seems to be still observed, but the Catholic Church as such is conceived as being too rigid and 'must change to be better adapt to modern times'. Religion is conceived more of an individual union with God, and the Church's function is generally considered to be the setting up of *basic* standards of right and wrong morals. 'As long as this is so, I would not mind bringing up my children as Catholics too', some said.

(ii) Students do not consider religious homogeneity as the most important aspect of a happy marriage. 76% of respondents said they would readily marry someone who is not a Catholic. For marriage 'love' was a value superior to 'faith'.

(iii) Sex in films need not be outrightly condemned. Films that exploit sex were thought of as 'morally wrong for society, especially since there has been a shift from one extreme to another as far as film censorship in Malta is concerned'. Some students condemned the 'capitalistic exploitation of sex in films'; others said that age requirements should be more tight.

(iv) Eighty-four per cent said they endorsed pre-marital sex; sixteen per cent expressed themselves against it. The following were the reasons brought forward to justify its endorsement; (a) it should be a prelude for marriage; (b) it is a natural expression of love; (c) it should not however be a necessary priority for marriage; (d) it fosters seriousness in a relationship.

It was made clear to respondents that full coital intercourse was being implied in the question. A small number of males who approved pre-marital sex insisted they would still like their wife to be a virgin.

(v) Seventy-two per cent expressed themselves in favour of birth control; twenty-eight per cent disapproved of it.

(vi) Seventy-two per cent were against abortion, twenty-eight per cent in favour of its introduction. The traditional arguments in

favour of the sanctity of life, of the uniqueness of life were used to back its rejection; those in favour suggested that the mother's health could be a factor that militates in its favour. Others said that females should be fully able 'to make a choice themselves'.

(vii) Sixty-four per cent believed that divorce should be introduced; thirty-six per cent said they were against it. The reasons brought in its favour suggested that a mistaken choice of partner should be open to correction.

(viii) Eighty-two per cent suggested that the custom of 'living together' should not be frowned upon, and there is nothing wrong that a boy and a girl set up house without getting married. Nine per cent were forcefully against such an idea. The majority agreed that it is really premature for anybody in Malta to put such an idea in practice because of the social stigma attached to it.