

# RELIGION AND SOCIAL COHESION IN MALTA: DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

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*Abstract - The presence of religion in Maltese society at the end of the millennium is not insignificant, but it is very different from what it used to be at its beginning. The fabric of Maltese society has changed radically, and with it, the role of religion has been modified both from within and from without. This paper seeks to identify these changes and the extent to which religion continues to exert influence and control.*

## Introduction

At the beginning of this century, life in Malta was all of-a-piece, with barely any structural differentiation in the way society was organised. Malta was a colony under British rule, and despite the extensive processes already very present for more autonomy and self-determination pushed forward by caucuses of Maltese leaders, the affairs of Malta depended extensively, if not exclusively, on the needs of the Empire. The islands were considered strategically important for the maintenance of military power especially in times of war, and economic activity reflected such needs. During the previous century, the British presence had spread its tentacles on all aspects of life, despite the fact that Britain had originally been invited to help the Maltese in their predicament after Napoleon Bonaparte had ousted the Knights of St John from ruling Malta and had accepted the famous Maltese Declaration of Rights before they acceded to this invitation.

The population at large was cushioned from being completely acculturated by the British colonisers by two very important processes that had served them well in this respect during other times in the island's chequered history. Social distance was kept through the existence of an indigenous language, Maltese, a variety of Arabic, and by religion itself. Maltese, an underdeveloped Semitic language was effectively the language the people used in their daily interactions and, even if without any literary history, it was practically the only effective means of communication among the Maltese. Only those Maltese who had gone through formal education, and only a few of these existed, had become conversant in Italian, then the

language of culture in Malta. Italian had developed locally in parallel to its development in Italy, and was used in Malta by the courts, by the clerics and even in the few newspapers and other publications that existed. To the *litterati* use of Italian was the way in which they distinguished themselves as 'cultured', but at the same time, as 'different' from the colonisers. Maltese, the language of the locals, was strong at the level of interpersonal communication, but was held low in esteem by both foreigners and by a good number of *litterati* and professionals who did not want to be associated with, except by extending patronage to, the common folk.

Another important mechanism bound the Maltese together: their belief structures. Catholicism is indeed readily recognised to be an import in Malta, but its presence at every stem of Maltese root was indeed pervasive. To each Maltese, religion - and religion in this context is synonymous with Catholicism - had provided the framework for a local system of organising their affairs at all levels, namely civil and religious. Indeed one could barely talk of a distinction of social spheres: the dividing lines between politics and religion, the economy and the Church, leisure and religious practice, family life and the Church were indeed thin, and hardly discernible.

With a measure of education, when this became compulsory in the aftermath of World War II, this was bound to change. The presidency of the Church was forcefully shaken when a new group of indigenous leaders developed a party system that, despite all odds, gradually led Malta to achieve Independence from Britain in the first half of the nineteen sixties. As a result, the Church did not provide any more the only status route to power. Concomitantly, the need for a new island state to survive made the need to diversify its economy and to shed its erstwhile dependence on expenditure of foreign military services stationed in Malta even more urgent. The resultant tourist influx, now possible as Europeans discovered cheaper and faster air travel and the Mediterranean was swiftly transformed into the European's holiday resort, brought many more Maltese in direct contact with foreigners of a different kind from those they were used to before. The massive military presence in Malta especially in time of war, had put many Maltese in contact with outsiders, especially British, but tourism had not only diversified the culture of origin of these outsiders, but the context in which they had visited the island. Now they were on holiday, and therefore keen to shed the self-controls that are normal in daily living, but which are often perceived to spoil the fun of a holiday. New social mores were now projected as 'fun' to a much wider number of

Maltese, young and old, who themselves started unconsciously to compare their own rather restricted traditions with those of the seemingly more liberated and 'modern' visitors. These mores affected erstwhile taboo areas like sexual activity, family life, religious practices and socialisation patterns. They influenced all spheres of life and the value system traditionally upheld by the Maltese. The novel 'culture of contentment' gradually started to root itself among an increasingly large number of locals.

Tourism, education and national politics were of course not the only agents which produced such changes. Television and the new media, together with the gradual but steady increase in the propensity of the Maltese to travel abroad, continued to contribute to the gradual melting of traditional values and modes of behaviour. Secularisation became a very visible phenomenon, and one that was deeply felt in both clerical and outside circles. In the process, enforced secularisation became a not-so-hidden agenda of one of the main local political parties which, especially through its hot debates with the Church, both when in government and outside, had introduced some 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 of Maltese (Vassallo 1975a; 1975b; 1977; 1979).

Even when Malta experienced a massive rallying around the Church in the early 1980s, when the Labour administration undertook measures to take over control of Church schools, the de-secularisation trend that was noticeable was basically secular in nature. The process of 'secularised secularisation' is documented in Vassallo (1981b). The rallying around the Church against the Labour government was a classical case that resulted from the need which many parents felt: they had to affront a strong national government which was seemingly eroding what was perceived as a natural right. Vassallo analyses how, in those circumstances, established religion met all the conditions for it to be instrumentalised by the Maltese to achieve their aims. Once this necessity existed no more, the broader pattern of secularisation continued, and still continues.

The questions that arise are obvious ones: does this mean that religion is no longer relevant to the Maltese? Does religion contribute anything to cohesion and control in contemporary Malta? Vella (1996) argues that *"the emergence of a more assertive secular presence in Malta is the more remarkable given the preponderance of strong Catholic values shared by its conservative population"*. Vella asserts that the trend is however in lock step with a more permissive and questioning lifestyle observed by

other Western countries, even though he admits that there are those who will argue with strong moral conviction against the lessening of restrictive codes of conduct, governing family institutions and civil responsibilities. Vella suggests that for these, the church remains a bastion of strength and renewed spirituality, a port of haven providing shelter against the onslaught of human license seemingly gone wild. He further claims, without providing hard data to prove himself however, that:

*The demographic profile of the conservative element in Malta favouring continuation of a strong elitist church is largely constituted of senior people. They are mostly female, followers rather than leaders, who welcome the embrace of the mother church and feel spiritual security through blind observance of dogmatic discipline. For this dedicated group, religious observance is not a question of choice. It constitutes an imperative (Vella 1996).*

A number of attempts have been made to reconceptualise the notion of social control and to identify the role of religion. Long (1980) describes social control as “*that mode of action which aims at protecting human life from threats of illegitimate conduct and impotent structure*”. According to him it takes two reciprocal forms: (i) the regulation of individual deviance and (ii) the reinforcement of cultural rules against social dissidence. In Malta, there has not been any measure of tightening up of control through formal legal structures, but there has been extensive direct and indirect public discussion on domains which previously were tightly controlled by both law and religion. This has definitely affected values especially among the younger generations, as documented by Abela (1995) in the same pattern extensively documented for other societies (see e.g. Gonzalez: 1987 and Milanesi: 1993).

### **University students in Malta**

An indication of where Maltese society is heading can perhaps be obtained through an analysis of the results of a survey conducted among a sample of 450 University students during 1998. University students are known world wide normally to be at the forefront of change and if this applies to Malta, the indications are that further changes are bound to take place in the role of religion on the island.

**Table 1: Religiosity – Self-Perception**

	TOTAL	GENDER		NATIONALITY			YEAR				
		MALE	FEMALE	MATESE BORN MALTA	MALTESE BORN GOZO	NON MALTESE	1 <sup>ST</sup>	2 <sup>ND</sup>	3 <sup>RD</sup>	4 <sup>TH</sup>	5 <sup>TH</sup>
N=	450	227	223	407	26	15	133	122	99	70	26
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
NA	1.6	1.8	1.3	1.5	-	6.7	2.3	1.6	1.0	1.4	-
NO	32.0	33.5	30.5	32.2	19.2	53.3	30.1	37.7	32.3	32.3	32.9
YES	66.4	64.8	68.2	66.3	80.8	40.2	67.7	60.7	66.7	65.7	67.1

Table 1 clearly shows that 32% of University students do not consider themselves to be ‘religious’ at all, whilst 66.4% state that they do. The remaining 1.6% did not answer a direct question on the matter. Although absolute numbers are very small, it is somewhat significant that students born in the smaller sister of Gozo, where the traditional church-centred parish is much more effective, state that they are religious in a higher proportion than those born on the main island (religious: 80.8% vs. non-religious 19.2%). Conversely, the proportion of non-religious students from among foreign students is higher than that of those who confess that they are religious (religious: 40.2% vs. non-religious 53.3%). Of interest too is the fact that slightly more females state that they are religious than males (68.2% females vs. 64.8% males). The breakdown of these figures by ‘year of course currently followed’ suggests that students do not tend to change their religiosity much as they go through their University studies. Those who considered themselves to be ‘religious’ were in turn asked why they do so. A full range of answers was elicited by this open-ended question. The more frequent answers were:

**Table 2: Reasons why students perceive themselves to be ‘religious’**

N=299	%
I believe in God	31.1
I believe in and abide by my religious creeds	20.7
Christianity has an important role in my life	11.0
I attend Mass	8.7
I practise my religion	6.0
I follow my upbringing	5.4

The striking fact about these frequent responses is that reference to specific Church structures and the attendant rituals are mentioned only by a very small number of respondents. Similarly, students who did *not* perceive themselves to be religious were asked to explain their answers. The main reasons for their non-religiosity were:

**Table 3: Reasons why students do *not* perceive themselves to be ‘religious’**

<i>N</i> =144	%
I am not interested	25.5
My interest fluctuates	17.4
I do not believe in God/anything	14.6
My principles do not depend on any particular religion	6.3
I believe in a new spirituality/morality	5.6
I do not believe in the Church	4.2

Other reasons were added, and negative feelings towards institutionalised religion were not absent. If one groups this sub-group of reasons together, it becomes clear that a good number of reasons for non-religiosity is either disillusionment or resentment towards the Church itself and not towards ‘belief in God’ as such. Interestingly too, none of the Law students gave any of these reasons for non-belief. Could this possibly be because law students feel comfortable with a law-making institution?

**Table 4: Church-related reasons why students do *not* perceive themselves to be ‘religious’**

<i>N</i> =144	%
I do not believe in the Church	4.2
I am against the Church and Priests	3.5
I cannot relate to a male-dominated institution	2.1
The Church is hypocritical	2.8

The level of attendance at religious activities can be taken as an important indicator of commitment to organised religion. Table 5 confirms the statement about how students perceive their own religiosity. The levels of ‘rare’ and ‘never’ attendance add up to 37.5%, which is just 5.5% more than what had been registered as being ‘non-religious’.

**Table 5: General participation in Religious Activities  
by Gender and Nationality**

	TOTAL	GENDER		NATIONALITY		
		MALE	FEMALE	MALTESE BORN MALTA	MALTESE BORN GOZO	NON MALTESE
N=	450	227	223	407	26	15
%	%	%	%	%	%	
NA	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	-	-
Frequently	27.6	29.5	25.6	28.0	26.9	13.3
Occasionally	34.4	33.0	35.9	33.4	53.8	26.7
Rarely	25.1	23.8	26.5	25.6	15.4	33.3
Never	12.4	13.2	11.7	12.5	3.8	26.7

Interestingly too, although the percentage of ‘never attending’ religious activities is slightly lower among females, when ‘rarely’ and ‘never’ are added, the difference across gender becomes minute. The figures for Gozitan students in respect of non-attendance are again very low. When the same figures are broken down by the students’ Faculty or Institute, it emerges that the highest number of ‘never’ and ‘rarely’ are true of Science students and those attending courses at the Institute of Health Care (IHC). The extent of the difference between IHC students and those attending the Faculty of Medicine is interesting and significant, given the fact that both groups of students follow broadly disease-related courses and are, consequently, often in contact with persons in situations in their life-time where religion traditionally re-acquires importance even if it had been neglected during a person’s lifetime.

**Table 6: General participation in Religious Activities  
by Faculty or Institute**

		NA	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	RARELY	NEVER
	N=	%	%	%	%	%
Arts	61	-	18.0	39.3	29.5	13.1
Theology	30	-	86.7	13.3	-	-
Medicine	59	-	33.9	39.0	15.3	11.9
Law	60	-	20.0	35.0	35.0	10.0
Architecture	30	-	13.3	40.0	30.0	16.7
Engineering	26	-	26.7	23.3	40.0	10.0
Science	30	-	26.7	23.3	40.0	10.0
IHC*	30	-	10.0	30.0	36.7	23.3
Education	60	3.3	25.0	36.7	16.7	18.3
FEMA**	60	-	35.0	30.0	25.0	10.0
Others	4	-	25.0	50.0	25.0	-

\* IHC= Institute of Health Care, which caters for Nursing and other allied health courses; FEMA= Faculty of Management and Accountancy.

Religious beliefs can be grouped in different ways. Notions can be concept-related or institution-related. When University students were asked whether they believed in a set of 'religious facts', the results confirm that those facts which are more specifically related to Church structures were less believed in. Table 7 shows that belief in the saints and in the sacraments is relatively low at 68.4% and 71.8% respectively, when compared to belief in God, which registered a high 91.6%.

**Table 7: Belief in a Set of Spiritual Notions\***

	NA	NO	YES
	%	%	%
God	0.7	7.8	91.6
Sin	1.3	19.1	79.6
Heaven	2.0	18.4	79.6
Hell	3.1	28.0	68.9
Saints	4.0	27.6	68.4
Sacraments	2.9	25.3	71.8

\* Base=All



What Maltese students seem to be saying is that their religiosity is moving away from structures and ritual into the more personal areas of their lives.

To test the extent to which this could be true, University students were further asked two separate but related questions on the extent to which religion and the Church affected their views and behaviour on a number of important areas. Table 8 summarises the findings:

**Table 8: Perceived Influence of Religion and of the Church on a Set of Issues related to the Private Sphere\***

	Religion				Catholic Church			
	NA	Always	Sometimes	Never	NA	Always	Sometimes	Never
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Relations with others	0.7	18.0	48.7	32.7	0.4	13.8	43.3	42.4
Work	0.2	12.9	44.2	42.7	0.4	9.6	41.3	48.7
Sex Life	0.4	22.9	39.6	37.1	0.2	20.0	40.7	39.1
Your Family	-	24.7	43.8	31.6	0.2	18.0	42.2	39.3
Choice of Friends	0.2	11.1	34.9	53.8	0.4	8.9	32.9	57.8
Choice of Partner	0.9	14.9	35.8	48.4	1.3	11.3	34.9	52.4

\*Base=All

What these figures emphasise is the loss of influence of religion on important aspects of daily living. The percentages for ‘never’ are consistently higher than the figures for non-religiosity given in Table 9 and conversely the figures for ‘always’ are consistently very low. In turn, the figures regarding the influence of the Catholic Church on the same set of areas are even higher for ‘never’. The extent of control and influence of religion and the Catholic Church on the decision making process of Maltese University students in areas which are considered core domains in which religious commitment would ‘always’ tend to have an influence, is indeed quite low.

Students were further asked about their views on a set of usually controversial issues: *divorce, pre-marital sex, abortion, married clergy, contraception, euthanasia* and the *illicit use of drugs*. Table 9 summarises the findings. In this Table ‘No’ means that respondents do not agree with; ‘Yes’ means that they disagree with the issue or practice concerned.

The data in this Table point to a number of important deviations from ‘received value-systems’ and from the official position of the Church. The

highest overall rating of 72.2% in favour of contraception is perhaps not as striking as the widespread acceptance, especially among members of certain faculties, of pre-marital sex (overall total in favour at 55.6%, but with a rating of 76.6% among Law students; 73.8% among Arts students; 73.3% among Science students and 70% among Architecture students); of divorce (with an overall rating in favour of 44.9%, but a high 66.7% among Architecture students); euthanasia (with 30% overall average but with a strikingly high 46.7% each for Science and Institute of Health Care students). Even in the Faculty of Theology, attended primarily but not exclusively by seminarians preparing for the priesthood, views not exactly in tune with those of the Church do exist: 53.3% are in favour of a married clergy; 16.7% are in favour of contraception; 6.7% are in favour of pre-marital sex and 3.3% are in favour of divorce. What is also striking in Table 9 is that there is not much difference across gender, even though females register slightly lower figures 'in favour' of these controversial issues than their male counterparts.

**Table 9: Views on a number of Controversial Issues\***

	TOTAL GENDER			FACULTY										
	Male	Female		Arts	Theol.	Med.	Law	Arch.	Engin.	Scien.	IHC	Educ.	Fema	Others
N=	450	227	223	61	30	59	60	30	26	30	30	60	60	4
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Divorce</b>														
NA	1.1	1.3	0.9	-	-	1.7	1.7	-	-	-	-	3.3	1.7	-
NO	54.0	53.3	54.7	45.9	96.7	52.5	51.7	33.3	88.5	16.7	53.3	56.7	60.0	-
YES	44.9	45.4	44.4	54.1	3.3	45.8	46.7	66.7	11.5	83.3	46.7	40.0	38.3	100.0
<b>Pre-marital sex</b>														
NA	1.6	1.3	1.8	-	3.3	1.7	-	-	7.7	-	-	5.0	-	-
NO	42.9	41.9	43.9	26.2	90.0	49.2	23.3	30.0	50.0	26.7	56.7	43.3	56.7	-
YES	55.6	56.8	54.3	73.8	6.7	49.2	76.7	70.0	42.3	73.3	43.3	51.7	43.3	100.0
<b>Abortion</b>														
NA	1.8	1.8	1.8	-	-	1.7	1.7	6.7	-	-	-	-	3.3	50.0
NO	87.1	85.9	88.3	78.7	100.0	86.4	88.3	93.3	96.2	76.7	96.7	86.7	85.0	50.0
YES	11.1	12.3	9.9	21.3	-	11.9	10.0	-	3.8	23.3	3.3	13.3	11.7	-
<b>Married Clergy</b>														
NA	2.4	2.6	2.2	-	-	1.7	3.3	6.7	7.7	-	6.7	1.7	-	25.0
NO	48.2	46.3	50.2	55.7	66.7	35.6	41.7	33.3	50.0	40.0	60.0	48.3	56.7	25.0
YES	49.3	51.1	47.5	44.3	53.3	62.7	55.0	60.0	42.3	60.0	33.3	50.0	43.3	50.0
<b>Contraception</b>														
NA	1.3	1.3	1.3	-	-	1.7	1.7	10.0	-	-	-	1.7	-	-
NO	26.4	25.6	27.4	29.5	83.3	32.2	13.3	3.3	11.5	13.3	13.3	20.0	41.7	-
YES	72.2	73.1	71.3	70.5	16.7	66.1	85.0	86.7	88.5	86.7	86.7	78.3	58.3	100.0
<b>Euthanasia</b>														
NA	3.6	2.6	4.5	3.3	-	6.8	5.0	6.7	-	-	-	5.0	1.7	25.0
NO	64.4	68.3	64.6	65.6	96.7	69.5	56.7	53.3	84.6	53.3	53.3	61.7	78.3	25.0
YES	30.0	29.1	30.9	31.1	3.3	23.7	38.3	40.0	15.4	46.7	46.7	33.3	20.0	50.0
<b>Illicit Use of Drugs</b>														
NA	1.3	0.9	1.8	-	-	1.7	1.7	3.3	-	-	-	5.0	-	-
NO	88.7	85.9	91.5	91.8	100.0	91.5	90.0	86.7	76.9	76.7	96.7	81.7	91.7	75.0
YES	10.0	13.2	6.7	8.2	-	6.8	8.3	10.0	23.1	23.3	3.3	13.3	8.3	25.0

\*Base=All

The figures relating to the two life issues of abortion and euthanasia among students following health-related are also very illuminating. In contrast to Science students who traditionally were considered to be more liberal, Medicine and Nursing students (the latter following IHC courses) have traditionally supported notions of the sanctity of life and promoted their professions as the ones safeguarding it. But the figures in Table 9 suggest that other currents of thought are now prevalent: 11.9% of Medicine students and 3.3% of IHC students favour abortion; 23.7% of Medicine students and 46.7% of IHC students favour euthanasia in contrast to the views of science students on the same two issues (Euthanasia 46.7%; Abortion: 23.3%). Illicit use of drugs is only favoured by a relatively low 10% of the total student population, but registers 23.1% among engineering students. In contrast, Medicine students registered 6.8% in favour and IHC students 3.3%.

In order to further test students' views on the role of religion in their lives and the way it relates to other spheres of life as they perceive them, they were asked to state their agreement with a number of statements, some of which were purposely made to offset others, on a five-point Likert scale. The results are presented in Table 10.

Interestingly enough, what emerges is not opposition to the Church, but distance. Taken together, students seem to be suggesting that the Church, and what it stands for, is not quite irrelevant to them, but not all that it stands for is relevant. Neither are they prepared to follow its leadership blindly. The clergy are relevant, but not necessarily as a group: there could be individual members of the clergy who have earned esteem and are therefore listened to and liked, but as a 'social class' the clergy is not ranked very highly.

**Table 10: Agreement with a set of Statements\***

	NA	TOTALLY	AGREE	INDIF-	DISAGREE	DISAGREE	TOTAL
		AGREE		FERENT		TOTALLY	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
The Catholic Church in Malta influences me a lot	1.6	7.6	27.6	23.3	20.7	19.3	100.0
I do not like all priests	0.2	18.9	38.9	19.8	13.6	8.7	100.0
Some priests influence me a lot	0.7	10.4	30.7	23.8	21.1	13.3	100.0
I enjoy religious activities	1.1	11.1	26.7	32.2	14.0	14.9	100.0
You do not need to go to Church to be religious	1.3	25.8	30.7	10.2	23.1	8.9	100.0
Helping others is enough to love God	1.3	17.3	28.4	18.0	27.3	7.6	100.0
I do listen to the Church, but then I decide on my own	0.7	12.9	33.6	23.1	19.1	10.7	100.0
The Church should not talk about sexual matters	0.7	8.7	10.7	23.1	29.8	27.1	100.0
My conscience is more important than what the Church says	1.3	21.3	26.4	20.9	21.3	8.7	100.0
Most of what the Church does/says is outdated	1.1	14.2	21.3	24.0	28.0	11.3	100.0
I do not feel that if I do not follow what the Church says I suffer social exclusion	1.1	21.8	29.3	25.6	15.3	6.9	100.0
When I do not follow what priests say I am more popular	0.9	1.6	5.6	36.0	32.9	23.1	100.0
The Church in Malta controls me	0.2	1.3	6.9	20.0	38.2	33.3	100.0
The Church in Malta only controls old-fashioned persons	0.4	10.2	15.1	26.2	31.8	16.2	100.0
Politics and religion have nothing to do with each other	0.4	16.0	16.7	21.6	27.1	18.2	100.0
Politics and business have nothing to do with each other	0.9	5.8	7.1	15.8	34.2	36.2	100.0
I never think about death	0.9	4.9	3.3	14.9	44.2	31.8	100.0
I am not worried about what happens after death	1.3	9.3	10.4	21.3	34.4	23.1	100.0
The Church has nothing to tell me about suffering	1.1	8.9	7.1	26.9	30.7	25.3	100.0
I think that religion is the opium of the oppressed	2.0	8.7	13.1	25.1	28.9	22.2	100.0
Children are made to believe that religion is too important	1.1	19.3	26.9	20.0	24.2	8.4	100.0
Religion was given too much importance in my upbringing at home	0.4	15.1	28.2	19.1	27.8	9.3	100.0
I would prefer my children not to be brought up as Churchgoers	0.9	7.3	9.3	23.8	30.2	28.4	100.0
Most of my closest friends do not care much about religion	1.8	8.4	18.9	20.0	36.0	14.9	100.0

\* Base=All

The above data were used to compute two sets of indices for each statement, and the results are reproduced in Table 11. The first index is based on all the respondents, the second statement is based only on those who actually offered an opinion on that specific statement. Theoretically, each statement could register a maximum 100 points or a minimum of -100 points.

**Table 11: Indices for a Set of Statements**

	BASE=ALL	BASE=REPLIES
The Catholic Church in Malta influences me a lot	1.11	0.60
I do not like all priests	33.78	33.78
Some priests influence me a lot	11.63	11.48
I enjoy religious activities	15.78	15.58
You do not need to go to Church to be religious	25.78	25.68
Helping others is enough to love God	16.96	16.74
I do listen to the Church, but then I decide on my own	19.78	19.69
The Church should not talk about sexual matters	-23.26	-23.64
My conscience is more important than what the Church says	23.48	23.35
Most of what the Church does/says is outdated	6.81	6.52
I do not feel that if I do not follow what the Church says I suffer social exclusion	33.11	33.11
When I do not follow what priests say I am more popular	-27.48	-28.03
The Church in Malta controls me	-46.15	-46.33
The Church in Malta only controls old-fashioned persons	-8.22	-8.41
Politics and religion have nothing to do with each other	-1.85	-2.01
Politics and business have nothing to do with each other	-42.96	-43.65
I never think about death	-48.89	-49.63
I am not worried about what happens after death	-22.22	-22.97
The Church has nothing to tell me about suffering	-22.81	-23.45
I think that religion is the opium of the oppressed	-15.04	-16.02
Children are made to believe that religion is too important	19.70	19.55
Religion was given too much importance in my upbringing at home	12.59	12.50
I would prefer my children not to be brought up as Churchgoers	-26.81	-27.35
Most of my closest friends do not care much about religion	-10.59	-11.39

Undoubtedly, the most striking feature resulting from the responses to the statements is the negativity expressed in the answers given by the students. A positive 50 points was not reached by any of the 'positive' statements; nor a negative 50 points was reached by the 'negative' statements. On the second index (based on replies) the highest positive rating was given to the statement '*I do not like all priests*' (33.78 points). Since the statement is a negative statement it effectively means that there is more agreement with this statement than disagreement, as can be confirmed by the percentages in the preceding Table 10. A number of statements result in a negative index rating, thus implying that there is a rejection of the statement. Thus the rating of the statement '*I never think about death*' - 49.63 implies that students do think about death sometimes.

A careful analysis of the indices shows that there exists an anti-church approach and lack of appreciation of the role of priests. In fact, the statement '*The Catholic Church in Malta influences me a lot*' was rated only 0.60 points out of maximum of 100. Similarly '*I do not like all priests*' registered 33.78 points whilst '*Some priests influence me a lot*' registered a low 11.48 points.

The existing dichotomy and uncertainties in Church related matters is also disclosed by students in other statements: '*You do not need to go to Church to be religious*' registered 25.68 points whilst the statement '*The Church should not talk about sexual matters*' registered -23.64 points. The last rating suggests that the Church is expected to talk about sexual matters. In the same way Maltese University students are not against a Christian environment and upbringing, as confirmed by the negative rating (-27.35 points) given to the statement '*I would prefer my children not to be brought up as Churchgoers*'. And this despite the fact that quite a few thought that too much importance was given to religion during their own upbringing, as attested by the rating 12.50 points registered for the statement '*Religion was given too much importance in my upbringing at home*'.

If willingness to listen exists, there is evident reluctance to be controlled. The statement '*The Church in Malta controls me*' registered a negative rating of -46.33. The negative rating clearly suggesting that the Church is not perceived to have the power to control the respondents. This was confirmed by the rating achieved by the statement '*I do not feel that if I do not follow what the Church says I suffer social exclusion*', obtaining an index rating of 33.11 points. The whole trend is probably best encapsulated in the rating given to the two statements '*I do listen to the Church,*

*but then I decide on my own*' and *'My conscience is more important than what the Church says'* which respectively registered 19.69 and 23.35 points on the index.

## **Conclusion**

In most European nations, and even in the United States where attendance at religious celebrations is relatively stronger than it is in Europe, very deep changes in the religiosity of the population have been noticed and documented. The relevance of ecclesiastical and other religious structures in an open society, in which organised religion does not offer a rallying point for a distinctive cultural or ethnic identity, is on the decline and the practice of religion has moved into areas which affect the individual person more intimately. This was for a long time thought to be the effect of a forceful tidal wave of secularisation that was gradually destroying the remnants of a past religious civilisation (see Vassallo 1996). Gradually, however, it was realised that what was happening was not the advent of the death of religion, but a process of transformation which was ascribing to religion those areas where religion alone had something to offer, namely issues related to the meaning of life and problems of ultimate meaning. These issues have to be dealt with in the private sphere, areas which traditionally religion had indeed given importance to, but ones which had been eclipsed by the massive presence of religion and the churches in the public sphere.

The changes that have been documented elsewhere in Europe are gradually but very forcefully making their way into Maltese culture. The data derived from the study conducted among University students in 1998 certainly does not capture the full reality of Maltese society, but it does seem to capture important trends which manifest themselves elsewhere, albeit in different ways. Malta has recently experienced an upsurge in the popularity of new religious movements, particularly in through the Neocatechumenal, the Charismatic and the Focolarini movements. It has also witnessed non-Maltese sectarian groups finding niches in which to establish themselves, something which was unheard of even two decades ago. The current multiplicity of religious and para-religious groups is indeed a far cry from the stoning of those participating in the first Protestant organised procession under the British in Malta!

What all this points to is that the issues confronting individuals living in bigger nations and more diversified cultures are also confronting the



Maltese, and that the way these issues are being resolved is not dissimilar to the way that they are being confronted elsewhere. Naturally, the fact that Malta is a small island state makes it more difficult for foreign structures to penetrate and establish a strong foothold, but the strong feeling expressed by University students that they do not suffer social exclusion if they do not follow what the Church has to say shows that there has been a radical transformation of the role of religion in Malta. Social mores are changing, and new ones are developing. If University students are a good indication of what is happening in wider society to date, it can be said that the Maltese are prepared to listen to what 'mother church' has to say, but the market for ideas is wide open, and the sources for social cohesion and control are no longer restricted to what the priests have to say from their pulpits. The market place has been considerably liberalised, and although there is a place for the Church, even a pre-eminent one, as the new millennium approaches the pressure on the Church for it to compete on the open market is bound to increase. And unless the Church realises this, it will perhaps continue to provide occasions where jollification and celebration provide magnificent occasions for extended socialisation through its deeply ingrained village festa structures. It will also continue to provide other similar occasions for social interaction on a large scale when the different emotional outbursts, typical of life's climaxes through the celebration of its rites of passage (Vassallo 1981a). But it might miss the opportunity to provide solutions to the more devastating problems of meaning which modern man is faced with. The contemporary trend affirms a newly found link between conscience and the Deity. A modicum of sacramental intervention will probably persist but devoid of the need for intervention through highly differentiated hierarchies with their feudal-like systems of rank and privilege.

The type of social control enjoyed by the church when Malta was a colony and a rallying point for national identity is practically lost for the Church in Malta. Whether the church will further lose its ability to maintain social cohesion seems to depend on the extent to which it understands social change. Without necessarily condoning all the attendant derivatives of social change, the Maltese Church still captures enough 'listening ears'. In future it might still manage a measure of control and bring about social cohesion of a different but more individually meaningful kind. But to do so, it seems that the Church would need to re-direct its energies first and foremost to understand modern man's deepest needs for recognition and interpersonal communication, and to provide meaningful structures

and meaning systems that the individual would be prepared to 'buy' on the open ideological market place because they are appealing for him because they are perceived to be logically consistent and 'good value', and not because if he does not bow his head in devoted obedience he would suffer stigma or social seclusion.

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