

Leaping from Non-secular to Post-Secular Society.
A Study of the Maltese Scenario

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Abstract

It is possible to assume that the particular history, politics and social milieu of Malta is making it possible to experience a shift from the non-secular type of community to a post-secular one with relatively very few signs of secularism. This seemingly strange phenomenon is particularly due to (i) a very strong Catholic Church, (ii) political and economic factors, and (iii) the ever-increasing interactions with western society.

The paper analyses historical, political and sociological documents in order to investigate the Maltese experience of the non-secular and its persistence. It is argued that while, through the 1970's and 1980's, there was a systematic political endeavour to secularise society, the macro-economic situation and politico-religious conflict served to favour the strengthening of a communitarian experience and to counteract the process of secularisation. Ironically, it was the new economic policies of the conservative party –seen as being close to the Church – which served to bring about the introduction of individualism and a movement towards secularization. Recent sociological studies point to a shift in the way Maltese relate to, experience and conceptualise religion. It is argued that, while contemporary Maltese society is very much influenced by global trends, it is also very much up to the local Catholic Church whether Malta will move towards a secular or post-secular scenario. This paper will hopefully throw more light on the dynamics that play in the construction of meaning, and relationships between religion and society, and between the individual and the state.

Malta is an archipelago of three small islands, with a population of 404,000. Situated in the middle of the Mediterranean these islands have always been considered as strategically important since they lie at the cross-roads between the western and the eastern parts of the Mediterranean, and between Europe and Northern Africa. For this reason, Malta had always, until forty years ago, been dominated by the major powers of the time. Thus from the Phoenicians and Carthaginians (480-261B.C.E.), to the Romans (261B.C.E-395C.E.), to the Byzantines (395-870), to the Arabs (870-1090), to Norman rule (1090-1194), to the Holy Roman Empire (1194-1266), to the house of Anjou (1266-1283), to the Spanish (1283-1530), to the Knights of St. John (1530-1798), to the French (1798-1800), and finally to the English (1800-1964). The coming together of so many different peoples and different cultures, have created a peculiar situation where the identities of different civilisations have merged into one. Thus, the Maltese have inherited a language which is mainly Arabic but with considerable elements of romance languages, a Semitic and Mediterranean temperament, and a strong Catholic culture.

Whilst acknowledging that there are various factors that influence the Maltese character, one must also recognize that religion has been and, to a certain extent, still is, an important protagonist in the construction of the identity of Maltese society and of individuals. Indeed, the main testimony left by the first civilisation that inhabited these islands is religious. The 30 or so Neolithic and Megalithic temple complexes, which date back to 7000 and 5000 years ago, attest to a strong cultural identity with its own theology and mode of expression. The inhabitants of the Maltese Islands were able to construct their own theology mainly influenced by elements deriving from mainland Europe and North Africa, which influence was conditioned by the experience of limited resources and relative isolation. Religion, as shaped by these conditioning factors remained influential throughout all periods of Maltese history in constructing a meaning and identity.

In this paper, we will be studying the historical and contemporary contribution of religion to the construction of meaning and identity in Malta. In particular, we will discuss how Maltese society has moved from the non-secular to the post-secular scenario without an explicit process of secularization. We will argue that the Church's stance will prove decisive with regards to the role of religion in the public sphere.

x.1 A Non-Secular Society

The use of reference to the past, the creation of local mythologies and legends and the identification of the religious community with the population are three general categorisations that definitely played a major role in the relations between church, individuals and society during the non-secular age.

For instance, evidence from the post-Arab period, around the dawn of the second millennium, seems to suggest that one of the methods used by the Byzantine monks to re-Christianise the Muslim population was their moving to troglodyte settlements and attending to the needs of the agricultural community. They also exploited the islands' Christian past and constructed a Pauline mythology (Buhagiar 2005). The accentuation and reinterpretation of the Christian past, the construction of local and indigenous Christian stories and, most importantly, the closeness of the religious community to the indigenous community were always vital roles of religion, throughout Maltese history, in the construction of identity and understanding of relations amongst individuals and those between the Maltese and their rulers.

No one quarrels with the idea that in pre-modern society and, to a considerable extent, in pre-Second World War society, Western states, societies and individuals were

greatly influenced by Christian Churches and theology. This non-secular state of affairs was also the situation the Maltese experienced until very recently. One cannot establish a clear demarcation line when this situation was no longer true. Indeed, it seems that parts of the population are still influenced by a non-secular mentality. However, besides the recent changes which did contribute to change people's mentality, there have also been conscious attempts to secularise Maltese society. In the late medieval period, the Church again used the past and constructed myths, such as the legendary miraculous intervention of St. Paul who appeared riding a horse brandishing a sword against the Moors that attacked Mdina in 1429. Again, from the 17th century till very recently, the Church used, in a very unscientific way, the etymology of place-names and the popular veneration of Byzantine saints as a proof of uninterrupted and loyal presence of a Maltese Christian community on the islands. Once again, there is no doubt that the Catholic Church secured its place during the period of the reign of the Knights of St. John when Malta was close to being a theocracy with the Knights, the Inquisition and the local Bishop being the sole authorities. When the British arrived on the Maltese islands, the Church gathered more power. The British held the policy of religious neutrality and protected the Church from foreign influence (Bezzina 1985). Regarding the position of the Church during the British occupation, Governor Le Marchant (1858—1864) stated that,

the protection which the Roman Catholic Establishment has constantly received at the hands of the British Government in Malta, the liberty which that Church has invariably enjoyed, and the care which successive Governors have unremittingly had to avoid anything that might give annoyance to the Ecclesiastical Authorities...enabled the Crown Advocate publicly to state...that there was no country in Europe where the Roman Catholic Church was better protected than it was in Malta. (Bezzina 1985, 143-144).

The Church's role in politics was a natural consequence of the central part it was accorded in Maltese social life. With its capillary network in towns, villages and hamlets, the Church assured itself that it could care for the physical, social, political and spiritual needs of the individuals. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, the Church secured its social action through the foundation of numerous homes and institutions for specific needs and through the consolidation of local festas and other cultural activities. The power of the clergy, recognised and reinforced by the state (Koster 1984).

Ambivalent Europeans

The situation of Church hegemony in Malta has been challenged on various occasions during the twentieth century, but the change in the religious beliefs, attitudes and practice is only recent. While it has become almost a cliché to say that Europe has steadily become more and more secular (Greeley 2003), the same cannot be said to be also happening in Malta. In Europe an increasing majority has ceased to participate frequently in religious practices or has stopped altogether to pursue their religious beliefs publicly or manifestly. In one respect such a trend was to be expected. According to the standard theories of secularisation, modernity should inexorably be accompanied by a decline of all that is sacred, a decline that is inversely proportional to increased progress, to the spreading of education and to processes involving urbanization and industrialization. However, in Europe, it does not appear to be the case that the number of believers is as small as the size of the congregations, but just

that there are fewer who pursue religion publicly, choosing instead to maintain their faith privately.

To be sure, secular society typically relegates religion to the individual's private life. It is summed up in the famous maxim of Frederick II of Prussia that "everyone must find his own salvation", or in Thomas Jefferson's argument that "it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." And yet there is also an ideological element of triumph associated with the idea of a secular society. It came into being in a way which was perceived by those who attended and welcomed its formation and development as a kind of "struggle" which has persisted through the generations.

Historically, of course, the secular state is the result of a collective learning process that can be traced back to the European wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After much bloodshed and violence, that experience of religious conflict gave birth to the insight that freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a basic human right. Freedom of thought embraces both the positive freedom to live according to one's own religious, quasi-religious or non-religious worldview and the negative freedom to be protected from disturbance through the undue influence of the worldviews of others. Indeed, commitment to such freedom has justly become one of the mainstays of liberal democratic social societies. Even if the above, rather potted, historical account may be true, what is of great sociological significance is that those who considered themselves to be protagonists of secularisation increasingly idealized themselves and the process and that idealization became an important element of the process. Such slogans as Voltaire's "*Écrasez l'infâme!*", or Kant's quotation from Horace "*sapere aude*" – chosen by the Prussian philosopher as the maxim of the Enlightenment and translated by him as "Have the courage to use your own intellect" – became iconic expressions of secular society. Sociologically speaking, the most interesting issue is not the fact of progressive decline in religious practice among the European population, but the fact that this decline is interpreted in line with the secularisation paradigm. Once it is interpreted through the lens of a "secularist" self-understanding, such a decline is seen as "normal" and "progressive". It is perceived as a quasi-normative condition for being a "modern" and "enlightened" European. It is precisely this "secular" identity shared by academics and by ordinary people in Europe that is sociologically so interesting. The history of Malta has allowed little room for the development of such sentiment among the general population or even among intellectuals. In Malta, the general population did not experience the 16th century religious wars, while the introduction and propagation of the reformation were severely restricted by the Knights and the Inquisition. For a long period the enemy was the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim infidels while, during the colonial period, the British were identified as the other and the population were exhorted to pray for their conversion. The enemy was rarely from within. The identification of the poor and the lower classes with the Church, the close associations of the ecclesiastical authorities with the a large section of the political class and well-off elite and the continuous confirmation of the synonymous nature between the Maltese and Catholic identities have made it possible for there being an almost inexistent process of secularisation up until to a few years ago.

x.2 A Secularist Attempt

The difference between the Maltese situation and the European situation emerged in different contextual and historical conditions. The rupture of the close ties that existed

between the Church and the people originated from the foundations of the Maltese population, that is, from the working class and later through those political parties which projected themselves as representatives of the workers.

While the Church in Malta hitherto was considered to be part of the domestic reality, by the second decade of the twentieth century clouds started gathering over an almost idyllic relationship. The first signs of discord were clear in the 1917 riots when workers protested against the increasing cost of living. The Archbishop was called by the Government to mediate and calm the demonstrators. However this was interpreted by the latter as a betrayal and the crowd started booing the bishop. Afterwards, the mob broke into the Archbishop's palace and did considerable damage there. Only later did the representatives of the workers speak to the Archbishop who then made representations, to the colonial government, in the name of the workers. (Bonnici and Cassar 2004). This incident was an indication of the growing rift, especially in language and mentality, that started to develop between the institutional Church and the lower-income classes.

During this century there were three religious-political disputes. These occurred between 1927-1930, between 1955-1969, and between 1977-1984. In the first case the dispute was about the right of priests to contest elections in the wake of the fact that two priests in parliament voted with the opposition. There was war of words between the Prime Minister and the Archbishop. The then Prime Minister, Lord Strickland, argued that priests' influence should be limited to religious matters, while the Archbishop did not want to renounce to his political power and influence (Koster 1984). The situation was made worse by the decree of the Archbishop which condemned, under penalty of mortal sin, anyone who read the newspapers of the Constitutional Party which, at the time, was in government. Moreover, the Church insisted that the Labour Party withdraw the support it had previously given to the Constitutional party. Strickland lost the subsequent elections, but the Church would afterwards learn that she also suffered a progressive, long-term damage. A part of the population was disillusioned and new ideas were in the making.

The second dispute – that between 1955 and 1969, this time between the Church and the Malta Labour Party – left an indelible negative imprint on Maltese society. The fourteen-year dispute was a trial of strength between the Church and the Labour Party. It brought about the demonisation of the labourites and social stigmatisation of Labour Party supporters. It is obvious that the Ecclesiastic Authorities of the 1950's had not learnt much from the previous dispute. It is not surprising that this clash caused anger, hurt and antagonistic sentiments, that are still felt to this very day. The Labour Party had announced its intentions to ask Malta's integration with Britain. Fearing a "protestantisation" of Catholic Malta, the Archbishop requested the Government to discuss the issue regarding the position of the Maltese Catholic Church. Following the discussions of the Maltese representatives in London, the Catholic Church in Malta was not satisfied with the assurances given. The charismatic qualities of the leaders on both sides, the growing resistance to the Labour Party's proposals of integration and the fear that the Labour party was influenced, if not financed by communist ideologies and parties, led to harsh struggles between both sides with impressive mass demonstrations. (Frendo 1999, Pirotta 1991) The Church authorities issued a proclamation of Interdiction against the members of the Executive Committee of the Labour Party and imposed the penalty of mortal sin on all those who read the Labour newspaper or voted Labour in the coming elections (Għ.Ż.L, 1980). The pressure imposed by the Church on labourites was enormous. Amongst others, fervent labourites and their families would not be visited by parish priests,

their children would not be allowed to continue to serve as altar boys, their marriages or baptisms would be celebrated in a sacristy instead of inside a church, while some would not even be given the last rites or be buried on consecrated ground. In a non-secular context, the consequences of such measures were tragic.

Although formally, the Malta Labour Party and the Church signed a peace agreement in 1969, it is not surprising that, when the circumstances changed the Labour Party tried to diminish the power of the Church. When the Labour Party won the 1972 elections, the newly-elected cabinet took charge of an independent country. Dom Mintoff, who became Prime Minister, was not constrained by the authorities in London and could implement his own and his party's vision without any external interference. Little by little the government introduced measures aimed at re-dimensioning and reshaping the position and influence of the Catholic Church. Through the last dispute (1977-1984) the Labour government wanted, amongst other things, to deprive the Church of its wealth, its influence in education, and its power on social and political matters (Koster 1984). In a preface to a government publication on Church and State relations in Malta the Prime Minister Dom Mintoff claimed that the Church in Malta had been protected for too long from the reformation and purification process that the continental Church experienced. Moreover, he stated in no uncertain terms that the dispute was aimed at diminishing the secular powers of the Church.

This is a quarrel that is deeply concerned with social justice, the right of every Maltese person to free education and the eradication of superstitions and confusions that are still present amongst us – and our case appears to be unique – since medieval times. We want to eradicate superstitions that brought about the manipulation of innocent people for political reasons.
(Mintoff 1983, iv free translation)

At the same time the Labour government tried to construct its own terminology and mythology. It insisted on the Mediterranean identity of the population, the vocation of neutrality, it constructed local secularist heroes like Manuel Dimech, used the past in new proposals (such as the use of the mediaeval term "*Dejma*"); it propagated the idea of a free (as opposed to an independent) Malta and the use of a puritan Maltese language which uses Semitic rather than Romance rules in the construction of words. However, even though the Labour government was in power for 16 years, the effects of this secularist attempt were counter-balanced by a politics and an economy that fostered and emphasised a communitarian dimension, a polarisation which, at times, even flared in violent confrontations, between the labourites on one side and the nationalist opposition claiming to be on the side of the Church on the other, an insularity of the Maltese community and economic policies which restricted a general growth and change in standards of living. By 1983, the European Values Survey found that the Church was by far the institution that enjoyed most confidence, with 84.2% as against the educational system which placed second with 73%. It is interesting to note that the population's confidence in Parliament and in the Judiciary system was as low as 44.1% and 44% respectively (European Values Survey 1983). The situation started changing after the 1987 elections when the Nationalist Party returned to government. In the 1987 elections, the Nationalist Party gave importance to the re-structuring of the country's economic and political system. Then, the Nationalist government had decided to adopt a market economy, thus liberalising the market with the aim to better the nation's standard of living. This new policy allowed individuals to undertake most activities of production distribution and exchange, reducing public intervention to a minimum. The result was the creation of new

mentalities and thus of new values. People adjusted their lifestyles to respond to the new context leading to a situation where

the lifestyles of successful business people, in a free market economy... become status symbols which other people seek to appropriate in order to enhance their rank in society (Tonna 1995, 67)

Such changes inevitably lead to a consumerist mentality. People were not only consuming basic needs but also other needs suggested by the new culture. Tonna points out that “people were actually buying and selling symbols” (Tonna 1995, 73). This liberalisation process brought a variety of adjustments to lifestyles, amongst which an adjustment to an individualistic mentality leading to a “Here and Now” mentality. With the market’s continued expansion, more new values were adopted by Maltese. It seems that the 1987 decision to introduce a market economy brought radical changes in lifestyle. The improved economy brought with it the idea of an economy that not only satisfies the group’s or the family’s basic needs but that it could also meet and immediately satisfy the needs of the individual. The ideal of the economy became that of serving the personally useful now, thus introducing more individualistic traits (Tonna 1997). These new traits were reflected in all sectors of life. In 1996, the year of the next elections, these new traits were reflected in the electoral manifestos of the two major parties, where both parties pointed towards the welfare of the person and the individual. The Nationalist Party gave importance to the development of the whole person, while the Labour Party made more emphasis on the individual citizen who should be the prime mover and prime beneficiary. With the Labour winning the elections Tonna states that the Maltese confirmed that this

individuality made sense because it directed citizenship towards the person first, then towards to the community (Tonna 1997, 169).

Tonna (1997) concluded that the changes in the life of the individual meant changes in the life of the family and community life in Malta. Studies in the mid-nineties showed the family as being very important in the lives of Maltese who, when compared with other European countries, claimed the highest level of satisfaction with their home-life (Abela 1994). Abela (1994) concluded that in Malta there is no alleged situation of individualistic mentality in the family but also stated that,

the western European trend towards greater individualisation of family values, manifest in lower birth rates and higher divorce rates, is making its way gradually amongst certain professionals... People are more tolerant of individualized and liberal life-styles in society at large, though they often tend to emphasize more conventional life-styles for themselves. (38)

A year later Tabone (1995) reported that 30% of the Maltese families experience problems which “might be disturbing family solidarity and stability” (124). However, up till then only 1.8% were divorced or separated and that only a small minority showed a consistent rejection of family values. New concepts and models of family were entering into the Maltese culture. Tonna (1997) noted that the Maltese family was changing its identity. According to him, people were afraid “that they could stretch their capacity for family life to a breaking point” (76). This has brought about

a growing concern for the security and capability of self-preservation of families. According to Tonna, the post-modern thrust is helping people to search for new ways of experiencing family life. This brought about an increasing tendency to consider family members as individuals rather than as a group.

Unfortunately the post-1987 Church was excessively concerned with securing its institutional position in society. A number of agreements concerning Catholic Schools, marriage legislation, and the teaching of Religion in Schools between the Republic of Malta and the Holy See might have given the impression that the Catholic Church's place in society was protected. However, an increasingly heavy and centralised structure of the institutional Church alienated the latter from society in general. The rift between the population and the Church widened during a period of non-confrontation when, ironically, the political powers did not have any intention of introducing a secularised mentality.

During the nineties up till very recently the issue of national identity cropped up on various occasions. However, although a number of papers and conferences were published and organised, with the issue being thoroughly discussed prior the Malta's accession to the European Union, the contribution of the Church was quite poor. This notwithstanding that the Church did have the language and the resources not only to contribute to the discussion but to propose new modes of constructing Maltese identity.

The ambivalence shown by recent data seems to suggest that Maltese society is at a turning point. For instance, while there has been a significant decline in birth rate of 19.1% over an 8 year period., (NSO 2004) the number of births outside marriage (which are mainly teenage pregnancies) increased from 4.6% to 20.1% in just a decade (NSO 2007). These figures are in total contrast with the rate of change registered in other European countries, (Eurostat 2007). This certainly implies a change in the composition of the family and values. While the Maltese seem to be consistent in the importance they give to the family, with family, work and religion ranking most important in the 1991 and 1999 and 2006 (EVS/WVS 2006, European Commission 2007a), there are evident signs of change. Whilst the statistics deduced from the latest Census show that number of separations is just 4.8%, when one analysis this data one finds that the highest percentage of marriage breakdowns is in the 30-39 age bracket with 7.2% (NSO 2007b).

Similarly, from an economic point of view, while on a personal level, Maltese have increased their disposable income, they have also started to borrow more money. Over the nine-year period, loans increased by 241.9%. It is interesting that the fastest growing rate in borrowing was related to consumer loans and not to home loans with an increase of 393.5% in the former and 205.9% in the latter (NSO 2004).

Data at hand seems to point to the existence of a communitarian-individualistic divide with no clear borders. Indeed many Maltese seem to experience a fragmented lifestyle. In an analysis of the results emerging from recent Eurobarometer and European Values Survey, Abela concluded that there seems to be competing Maltese identities. On the one hand, an inherited national identity which is related to people's attachment to the Church and religion and, on the other, a growing identity which is driven by individualised and secular values (Abela 2006).

x.3 At the Crossroads

One cannot argue that Malta is a secular society even though a sizable part of the population relate and operate through a secular mentality, and the majority of the population experience reality in both secular and non-secular terms.

Indeed, not even Europe can be defined as a secular society in a strict sense. Recent sociological data show that that Europeans are not indifferent to the religious and spiritual dimensions (Berger 1999, Davie 1999, Greeley 2003, Norris and Inglehart 2004). Similarly such major events as the death of Lady Diana in 1997, the tragedy of 9/11, the tragedy caused by the Tsunami, the death of Paul John Paul II, and the terrorist attacks in London and in Madrid have consistently shown that there are particular instances when the religious and spiritual dimensions come again to the fore.

At present, one could perhaps speak of the unchurched of Europe, and of religious individualization, rather than of secularisation. For it seems that, in so-called secular societies, people have developed a private religion rather than have abandoned religion altogether. Religion has become invisible rather than non-existent. The emphasis has been switched to individualization of belief; the compilation of personal creeds that give meaning to one's unique existence, according to one's experiences, interests and aspirations. Hence, in contemporary Europe, religious identity is increasingly a matter of personal choice. Of course, this trend certainly disrupts the traditional forms of involvement in religious groups at the parish and also hampers the transmission of religion through the family environment. Even so, religion continues to exist even as a means of individual identification. However, it informs collective identity to a far lesser degree and often no longer provides the framework for ethical standards in the common life of Europe's citizens. More than any other peoples, Europeans are moving away from a model which depicts a believer as *receiving* one's religious identity from the community within which one has grown up, and within which one complies with rules and practices that regulate religious observance and protect the transmission of belief, towards a pattern which has been described in terms of two biblical images: that of the *pilgrim* (who follows an individual spiritual journey with a number of stages) and that of the *convert* (who chooses the faith to which she belongs) (Hervieu-Léger 2004, as cited by Hervieu-Léger 2006).

These two images appear to be exceedingly appropriate characterizations of the trend towards religious individualization prevalent particularly in Europe. Perhaps the best description of this state of religious individualization in Europe is the expression, coined by the British sociologist Grace Davie: *believing without belonging* (Davie 2000). At the same time, however, large numbers of Europeans even in the most secular countries still identify themselves as "Christian," pointing to an implicit and somewhat diffused Christian cultural identity which — even from a distance — still governs collective reflexes in terms of identity. In this sense, Danièle Hervieu-Léger too appears to be correct in coming up with the counterpart characterization of the European situation as *belonging without believing* (Hervieu-Léger 2004 as cited by Hervieu-Léger 2006). As she points out very well, "secular" and "Christian" cultural identities are intertwined in complex and mostly tacit modes among most Europeans. Jean-Paul Sartre put it even more strongly when he claimed, in the name of the French people, "We are all Catholic".

In Malta, the 2005 Mass attendance census showed that on a given day in November, 52.6% of the Maltese population attended Sunday Mass (DISCERN 2006), which figure indicates a steady decline in mass-attendance over the past thirty years. Even so, mass-attendance remains high by European standards. In 1999, the European Values Survey revealed that 74.7% claimed to be religious persons while, in 2006,

the mean for a ten point Likert-scale item on the importance of God in one's life was 9.15 (EVS/WVS 2006). The Social Values, Science and Technology survey demonstrated that, when compared to their European counterparts, Maltese have the highest belief in God (95%), the lowest non-believing group (2%), and lowest group of believers in a life force or spirit (3%) (European Commission 2007b).

Religion and religiosity permeate Maltese society. The enthusiasm by which the population has acclaimed the newly elected bishop of Gozo in December 2005 and the newly consecrated Archbishop of Malta in January 2007 are good indicators in this regard. A considerable part of the population is involved in organizing and participating in local village feasts. In 2005, some 9000 persons were involved in the organisation of local village festas, there were 393 band performances, and 5658 persons in 14 out of the 85 local parishes participated in Holy Week processions. In these last four decades, contrary to the predictions of previous sociological studies, there has been a growth in the celebration of feasts (NSO 2006a, 2006b). Boissevain (1990) explains that this is due to the growth of the economy and especially to the desire to reaffirm the bonds of community. Debono Roberts (2003) claims that these *festas* have been appropriated by lay organizers who have tapped old religious symbols and artifacts in order to infuse solidarity, identity and a new religious sentiment which may not be completely in line with the formal religion offered by the Church. The mixing of mundane and sacred elements in the *festas* point to accommodation of the sacred and the secular at a local village level.

In this scenario, it is interesting to note that, even in what has been described as an "unchurched" Europe, religious traditions and expressions of faith are returning to the public sphere. Private religion is returning strongly and dynamically to public view (Berger 1999). Here we can see, in fact, the face of "post-secular society" – to use the term coined by the German sociologist Klaus Eder. The Professor of Sociology at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, has defined "post-secularism" as the "return of religion to the public sphere" (Bosetti and Eder 2006). He noted the rise of religious messages in the society of communication, resulting in the greater visibility of religious beliefs in public arenas. He expands on this idea in a useful recent interview, claiming that:

What I want to say is that during the secular era (still predominant in Europe), religion did not disappear, but instead took a form that was invisible at a public level. No one talks about religion, and religious groups don't dare to enter the public sphere because they do not feel legitimate. Secularisation is nothing more than a phenomenon that has hushed up religion: seizure of land, interventions, censorship in schools. Therefore, religion has left the public sphere and entered the private. But this is not to say that it has disappeared. It has simply become invisible. In fact, at a certain point in secularisation, religion became confident enough to re-emerge in the public sphere, not with one voice offered by the institutions, but with as many voices as there are individuals. We can observe this in the amount of activity and religious texts on offer (Bosetti and Eder 2006).

This visibility increases with increased media mobilization and the awakening of new religious movements. Eder would claim that the idea of a secular Europe is entirely up for discussion: religious believers are demanding a stronger and more pervasive presence, although the religious phenomenon they are presenting is a less organized one, and they are often understood as upholding fewer bonds of belonging.

The term “post-secular” is also being used repeatedly and increasingly by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his more recent works. In his celebrated dialogue with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which took place in Munich under the title “The Pre-Political Moral Foundations of a Free State,” on the 19th January 2004, the German self-described political liberal philosopher called for a process of reciprocal understanding between religious and non-religious citizens:

The expression “post-secular” does more than give public recognition to religious fellowships in view of the functional contribution they make to the reproduction of motivations and attitudes that are societally desirable. The public awareness of a post-secular society also reflects a normative insight that has consequences for the political dealings of unbelieving citizens with believing citizens. In the post-secular society, there is an increasing consensus that certain phases of the “modernization of the public consciousness” involve the assimilation and the reflexive transformation of both religious and secular mentalities. If both sides agree to understand the secularisation of society as a complementary learning process, then they will also have cognitive reasons to take seriously each others’ contributions to controversial subjects in public debate (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 46-47).

Habermas (2006) concludes his speech by arguing that liberal democracies must leave space for religious expression and religious forms of life. He insists that the state should guarantee equal freedom to both religious and secular views. A secular state should not only hold the possibility that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth, but should expect that secularized citizens contribute towards translating relevant contributions from the religious language to the public as a whole.

In short, Habermas is proposing no less than a “revised concept of citizenship” (Habermas 2006, 14) that restores freedom of religious thought and reasoning to the public square and also enjoins that secular reasoning proceeds with an eye open to the duties of respect, listening, and reciprocity expected of all citizens. It is interesting to note that Habermas has moved from a philosophy that was dismissive of religious tradition (Habermas 1984 and 1987) to a philosophical position that argues for a *post-secular*, democratic, public sphere in which participants in discussion would be receptive to the presumed rational content of arguments whether they be religious or non-religious. Secularly minded citizens are required to adopt a self-reflexive attitude towards the limits of secular reason and strive to be open to the possible cognitive substance of religious reasons. On the other hand religiously minded citizens are required to acknowledge the secular nature of the democratic constitutional state and to accept the validity of liberal democratic principles such as equality and liberty (Habermas 2006).

Habermas wants to avoid splitting the identity of believers by totally relegating the religious to the private sphere. This line of thought was echoed by then-Cardinal Ratzinger in his debate with Habermas. Indeed, one of the main points made by the German Cardinal – now Pope Benedict XVI – was that our Western civilization appears to be divided into the sphere of reason and science and that of religion. He warns that both spheres cannot pretend to be insulated from each other. On the one hand, the rational and scientific *Weltanschauung* is not only ethically challenged but actually produces many of the ethical dangers of contemporary life. It is not an exaggeration to speak of a “hubris of reason” and it makes sense therefore, that secular rationalism should listen to guidance from religious values. On the other hand,

religion – like rationality – has not yet been able to establish a set of principles acceptable on a universal level and indeed has been seen to produce “false universalisms, thereby leading to intolerance and acts of terrorism” (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 64). It too needs to acknowledge its need for the critical and cleansing guardianship of reason. In order that religion and reason might be purified of their respective pathologies they both call for one another.

Ratzinger is in broad agreement with Habermas about post-secular society, about the need for a willingness to listen and learn from each other, and about the requirement of self-limitation and humility necessary on all sides.

Undoubtedly, religion in Malta remains very much in the public sphere. Religious believers certainly manifest a strong and pervasive presence in Maltese society, although they appear to uphold fewer bonds of believing Church teaching and engaging in religious practices than hitherto. Notwithstanding this increasingly post-secular face, it appears that religion remains central in the construction of the Maltese identity even if the religious phenomenon is less homogeneous. It is in this increasingly post-secular society that the Church is called to live and proclaim its message. And it is precisely in this scenario that the Church – like the rest of society – must manifest a willingness to listen and learn from others, and show self-limitation and humility. In addition, in this ever more post-secular milieu the Church is called upon to make its message – particularly its social message – clear in secular (or rational terms). Pope Benedict XVI expressed these features extremely well in his first encyclical:

Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God... But it is also a purifying force for reason itself. From God’s standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly. This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place: it has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just. The Church’s social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being. It recognizes that it is not the Church’s responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life... Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew. As a political task, this cannot be the Church’s immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically. (*Deus Caritas Est* 28)

As has been seen, in contemporary Maltese society, there is evidence of both secular and post-secular trends, with the latter showing more persistent signs. In this situation, one can hypothesize that the direction in which Maltese society will move – whether towards a secular or towards a post-secular scenario – is also up to the local Catholic Church. If it is perceived as insisting excessively on securing its institutional position in society, this could ironically hasten the secularisation process in Maltese society.

The way forward appears to be a humble, yet clear, transmission of values and ideas that are readily understandable in secular terms even if they are different from secular ideas and values. Here, the signs appear to be positive; the new Archbishop of Malta identified his mission to be that of a bridge-builder and highlighted, on many occasions, the value of dialogue. In a speech at the University of Malta, he proposed to reflect on dialogue in the following terms:

In the first place, as Church, we must realize that we live in a pluralist society ... We cannot afford to continue to be surprised when we hear messages different from ours ... We cannot experience paralysis because our society no longer speaks one language ... This is a necessary conversion on the side of the Church. However, even liberal society must accept that, as a Church, we cannot be culturally and politically correct. Liberal society should not be amazed at the fact that the Church speaks of values that are different from secular values ... How could one expect that the Church speaks in the same manner as liberal society when its premisses are different?.... It is essential that dialogue take place in real freedom ... Liberal society must allow the Church to present its message in the maelstrom of ideas in pluralist society. It is then the people who, for better or for worse, decide. (Paul Cremona 2007, 4-5 free translation).

The present situation is indeed a complex one, but this does not preclude the Church from again using the past, delving deeper in local myths/legends, highlighting new stories and outlining the deep relationship between the Christian community and the Maltese community. What is needed is further reflection on the role of the Catholic Community with respect to the identity, politics and economy of society. In clarifying its own preferred ecclesial model and in strengthening its own identity the Catholic Church – as the foremost religious institution in Malta – not only makes an important *ad intra* exercise but contributes to national identity and *social imaginary*, that is “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others . . . and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2004, 23).

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