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*Cover:* António Simões Ribeiro and Vicente Nunes, *Allegories of Honour and Virtue* (detail), University of Coimbra, Biblioteca Joanina, ceiling of the central room. Photo © José Maria Pimentel



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# Present (and Past) Concerns, Future Directions: Religion and the Church in the Writing of 19th-Century Maltese History

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*Bil-miġja tal Ingliżi f'Malta, twieldet kollaborazzjoni bejn Stat u Knisja illi kienet komda għat-tnejn. L-istorjografija Maltija tas-Seklu Dsatax tagħmel aċċent fuq il-livell politiku-istituzzjonali. Għaldaqstant, din il-kitba issegwi l-istess tendenza. Pero' fit-tieni parti tagħha, tipprova turi illi hemm triq obra illi twassal sabiex nifhmu aħjar ir-rwol tar-reliġjon u tal Knisja f'Malta fis-seklu dsatax.*

*Storiċi Maltin li jiktbu dwar dan il-perjodu, generalment jibbażaw il-kitbiet tagħhom fuq mill-anqas waħda minn tlett premessi: (a) il-proċess ta' modernizzazzjoni; (b) il-proċess ta' awto-determinazzjoni; u (c) l-integrazzjoni ta' Malta f'perspettiva Ewropea. Tema fundamentali obra hija dik illi tittratta r-relazzjoni bejn gvern Protestant u l-Knisja Kattolika fil-kuntest ta' poter u l-intriciġi konnessi miegħu.*

*Il-presenza Ingliża f'Malta tara l-bidu tagħha fit-talba ta' rapprezentanti Maltin għall-protezzjoni Ingliża. Minn dak il-fatt storiku l-istorjografija tittratta daww l-episodji illi juru kif il-Gvern kolonjali u l-Knisja Kattolika żvolgaw ir-relazzjonijiet ta' bejniethom matul iż-żmienijiet. Normalment kienet teżisti armonija f'dawn ir-relazzjonijiet. Imma minn żmien għal hmien kienu jqumu kwestjonijiet illi juru illi beżgħat u suspetti kienu jeżistu taht il-kalma apparenti. Fost dawn, ta' min isemmi daww marbuta mal-immunitajiet ekkleżjastiki, id-dritt ta' santwarju, il-liġi tal Manomorta, u dik rikorrenti dwar in-nomina tal Isqof ta' Malta. Imma l-akbar kwestjoni bejn iż-żewġ naħat kienet dik marbuta ma' l-attentat Ingliż għal introduzzjoni ta' leġislazzjoni biex tirregola iż-żwiġijiet imballta. Dawn kollha juru illi minkejja l-protesti Ingliżi illi dejjem irrispettaw ir-reliġjon tal pajjiż, xorta waħda kienu jqumu konflitti bejniethom. Fl-aħħarnett pero' kien hemm il-konsapevolezza illi posizzjoni rigida minn xi waħda mill-partijiet setgħet tkun ta' detriment għal-influwenza eġemonika tagħhom f'Malta.*

*Fuq il-bażi soċjali wieħed ma jistax jinsa illi l-vicinanza ta' Malta lejn l-Italja tar-Risorgimento u l-użu tal gżira bhala bażi militari u navali Ingliża kienu jikkontribwixxu għal presenza ta' numru konsiderevoli ta' barranin. Dawn bilfors kellhom effett fuq il-ħajja ta' kuljum tal popolazzjoni lokali u logikament fuq kif tiġi elaborata ir-relazzjoni mar-reliġjon u mal Knisja.*

*Sabiex l-istorja tar-reliġjon u tal Knisja f'Malta matul is-seklu dsatax tkun aktar kompleta hemm bżonn illi l-attenzjoni tal istoriċi tiffoka ukoll fuq l-aspett soċjali. Hemm*

*bżonn għalhekk illi jittiehed pass l-isfel biex nimxu 'l quddiem lejn stampa iżjed sħiħa dwar is-sugġett. Diġa jeżistu eżempji ta' dan fit-trattament ta' l-attitudni tal Maltin lejn l-Enciklika Rerum Novarum u fil kotba dwar Manwel Dimech. Pero ` l-eżempju illi juri b'mod l-aktar dirett id-direzzjoni futura huwa dak illi jittratta l-hwejjeg tal hajja ta' kuljum bhad-daqq tal qniepen. Huwa biss b'dan il-mod illi nistgħu nifmu ir-relazzjonijiet bejn il-massa tan-nies, il-Knisja, u l-Gvern Kolonjali bl-armoniji u l-konflitti illi fil-livell soċjali kienu parti sħiħa mill-hajja ta' kuljum.*

For over two hundred and sixty years the Maltese Islands were ruled by the Order of St. John answerable to the Pope. The Pope was also head of the two other institutions that played a dominant role over life in Malta: the Church and the Inquisition. The presence of these three institutions within the circumscribed territory that are the Maltese Islands, led to frequent disputes over jurisdiction and areas of influence. At the same time, it also helped to entrench religion in the mentality, mores and habits of the people<sup>1</sup>. This pervasive influence of religion and Church on all levels of social and civil life was, in a certain sense, new. Of course, the Maltese population had been Catholic for centuries. However, the Church did not enjoy the same influence in civil life during the late middle ages. As a general rule, the clergy “seem to have been almost entirely preoccupied with their religious duties and, perhaps with keeping body and soul together for themselves and for their dependents. Their incursions into politics were few and far between ... and they only attended meetings of the town council on the rarest occasions when specially invited, usually only when matters affecting them were on the agenda”<sup>2</sup>. As Dominic Fenech<sup>3</sup> rightly observes there seems to have been a temporal inversion in so far as Church involvement in civil and political matters are concerned: the term medieval is more appropriate to the attitude of the Church from early modern times onwards: “the penetration of the Church in Maltese public life occurred in reverse order of time”. Hospitaller rule thus ushered in Malta a period when the church was to occupy an important, hegemonic, influence over the political, institutional and social life of the tiny Mediterranean archipelago. This did not change when Britain took over Malta in the first decade of the 19th century. Ironically enough it was the confluence of interests of the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant coloniser that reinforced and solidified this state of affairs.

Hospitaller rule ended abruptly in 1798 with the arrival in the Maltese port of Napoleon and his fleet. The two-year French rule although overtly secular was not long enough to change the structural parameters upon which Maltese society had moulded itself during the previous two centuries or so. Indeed, the clergy participated actively in the revolt against French rule and in the ultimate expulsion of the French from the islands with the aid of the British and Portuguese navies.

This chapter reviews some of the more important writings on religion and the Church in 19th-century Malta. Since the balance is in large measure tipped in favour of the institutional, political aspect, it inevitably follows this course. However, it also seeks

to review departures from the mainstream. Hence, in its second, shorter, part, it looks towards the alternative view – the ‘bottom up’ approach. In doing that it aspires to show that by descending a few steps down the social scale one can advance towards a more complete picture of 19th- and early 20th-century life on the islands. The field of religion was a contested area where the various players acted out their part sometimes in harmony but sometimes not. The pressures brought to bear upon this field did not originate in the field of politics alone. What these were and how these affected the daily lives of the people is for future study to uncover.

The historiography on the subject generally owes its basis to at least one of three theoretical premises: (a) the process of modernisation; (b) the progress towards self-determination; and (c) integration of the Maltese Islands with a wider, European perspective.

In pursuance of the first premise, it has been asserted that during the first few decades of British rule, an attempt was made *by the colonial master* to bring the local church in line with the practices obtaining in other parts of Catholic Europe. “Other than in remote Quebec”, writes Harrison Smith, “the British had not – perhaps never would – encounter a Church medieval, a Church militant, and a Church that had lived under a theocracy long after the era of the nation-state had modified the feudalism of Europe”<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, and in accordance with the second premise, relations between Church and lay authorities were generally bilateral (local church or Rome and Governor or London) in the early stages. Subsequently, and gradually, the voice of a local interlocutor representing, whether in fact or in perception, the general population would play a part in the issue. Finally, some historians have placed the relations between the Maltese church and the colonial masters within a wider international perspective. These have successfully managed to show that the way problems in Malta arose and how these were solved had, or may have had repercussions elsewhere in the empire.

Apart from these general considerations there is another theoretical construct, not always explicit, but nonetheless present. This is relevant for a proper understanding of Church-State relations in Malta in general and for its historiography in particular: the relationship of power existing between a political master and a dominant religion within a confined geographic territory. The weaving of this ‘web in power’, not always explicit, provides the answer to the conundrum of how a Roman Catholic island in the middle of the Mediterranean could be ruled fairly peaceably by an Atlantic Protestant nation. Even where implicit, most histories of the period have concentrated on the ups and downs of this relationship. They have elaborated on one or more instances where Church and State were on the verge of a clash and then retreated from entrenched positions in the respective interest. Only on one occasion during the 19th century did this clash threaten to become nasty and when similar occasions arose in the 20th the British authorities played a minor role: the real conflict was between the church and local, not foreign, politicians.

Fitting Malta within the wider geo-political strategies of an imperial power did not require only the refurbishment of its port and the building of fortifications but also keeping the local population acquiescent. Some British politicians, starting from the Duke of Wellington, considered the island a man-of-war<sup>5</sup>. The best method to ensure acquiescence was through collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church. In the early decades of the century,

“The Protestant population did not exceed 700 excluding the garrison; of the remaining 120,000 inhabitants, 1020 were clergymen, the rest staunch Catholics. In Malta and Gozo there were 17 male convents and 5 nunneries and a total of over 250 churches and chapels. The Ecclesiastical Establishment was supported independently of the local government. The life of the people was centred in their church, they began the day’s work by hearing Mass and their main recreation was centred in religious festivals. In these circumstances an anti-Catholic policy was impossible of success, in fact the tranquillity of the island was seen in 1825 as a consequence of British policy of non-interference in religious matters”<sup>6</sup>.

It is no wonder then that the British “not only respected the liberty of the Church but also, to some extent, protected it from proselytising”<sup>7</sup>. “Public religious ceremonies held by non-Catholics could be banned whenever the government expected a disturbance of the peace ...”<sup>8</sup>. Not only were the British careful not to tread upon the toes of an all-powerful church, but they were also willing to offer honours and privileges to it and its leader. Commissioner Ball assured the Maltese that they would henceforth (from 1807) no longer have foreigners as bishops. The British also ensured that the Diocese of Malta would be separated from the Metropolitan See of Palermo (1831); and as early as 1801 the Maltese bishop “was given the right to receive the military honours of a Brigadier”<sup>9</sup>. Despite the protestations of the Anglican bishop (of Malta and Gibraltar) no such honour was bestowed upon him. The difference in treatment is also evident from the delay in erecting an Anglican church in Valletta. For Henry Frendo<sup>10</sup> it was only just that there should be an Anglican Church in the capital city of a British colony. Until 1844 however, the only Protestant place of worship was a small chapel in the Governor’s palace (previous used for a variety of purposes including as a kitchen). In the early years, an attempt had been made to turn the Conventual Church of the Order of St. John – formerly belonging to the Order but now contended between the secular and ecclesiastical authorities – into an Anglican church. However, that attempt was quashed by London<sup>11</sup>. The government still claimed ownership of the church, which had been declared a Co-Cathedral in 1798 (but made definitive only in 1925). A *modus vivendi* was found with the throne formerly occupied by the Grandmaster reserved for the British sovereign (and hence kept always vacant) and another one placed on the left hand side reserved for the Archbishop<sup>12</sup>. Another attempt was made to take over the former Jesuit Church adjoining the University. Once again London demurred<sup>13</sup>. It was only twelve years later that funds became available to build the Protestant church, and these were not forthcoming from the public coffer but from a private donation made by Queen Adelaide, Victoria’s aunt<sup>14</sup>.

The treatment accorded to the Catholic religion was not unique to Malta. Canada and some other colonies had been similarly treated<sup>15</sup>. Generally, however, historiography prefers to base this relationship upon a petition made by a number of persons, claiming to act on behalf of the local population, that requested British protection in 1802.

In that year, persons chosen “to represent them [the Maltese] on the important manner of ascertaining our rights and privileges”<sup>16</sup> asked for British protection and recognised the English King as “lawful Sovereign” of the islands. They made this request subject to a number of qualifications of which the sixth read:

That His Majesty the King is the protector of our holy religion, and is bound to uphold and protect it as hereforeto; and without any diminution of what has been practised since these Islands have acknowledged His Majesty as their Sovereign to this day.

This declaration and Britain’s repeated protestations that it adhered by it – particularly during the early decades – have found their way in most writings about the period<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, historians have highlighted the early attempts (often successful) made by the British in order to change some of the practices then current within the local church. These were considered detrimental to the smooth running of the local administration; in some cases hindering the proper exercise of justice. There was little in common between Malta and Britain. As Frendo says, the two islands had a different language, religion and temperament. But above all one could command and the other could only obey<sup>18</sup>.

The early measures which the British sought to reform were the right of sanctuary and ecclesiastical immunities. Both required the consent of Rome. “It was realised that obedience to the proposed Government regulations would demand from the people action contrary to certain Papal Bulls; and that such an offence merited excommunication. Obviously the difficulties of executing the regulations under such circumstances would be almost insuperable”<sup>19</sup>. Rome’s consent was negotiated, and, for Hilda Lee<sup>20</sup> “this material change ... [was] favourably received by the population at large”. Frendo sees these measures as essentially aimed at greater centralisation. Henceforth, he says, civil and criminal law became applicable to all the subjects of the Crown in the same way with exceptions depending upon Government. He also sees in them traces of secularisation and modernity because of the consequent equality before the law<sup>21</sup>. For Bezzina, on the other hand, the Vatican yielded easily, though unwillingly, to British diplomatic pressure “due to an eagerness to avoid any obstacles in the promulgation of the Emancipation Act [in the UK]”<sup>22</sup>.

One other problem concerned the vast land ownership of the local church. Mortmain law, in terms of which “the Church or other pious or religious institutions could not acquire immovable property, except under the condition that it should be sold or disposed of within one year; if it was not, the property would be forfeited to the Government *ipso facto*”<sup>23</sup> was introduced in 1828. That law was intended to restrict the temporal power of the church, owner of approximately one third of the land<sup>24</sup>. Koster argues that “the Maltese had on various occasions asked for legal remedies against this situa-

tion [i.e. the fact that the church owned one third of the property]”. He goes on to say that probably it was the landed class who had asked for these remedies because “these became burdened with a relatively more substantial part of the taxes as the Church was exempt from tax-paying”<sup>25</sup>.

There was another, more important matter that needed to be solved between the British and the Vatican: the choice of bishop for the island. As successors of the Order of St. John, the British claimed a right to indicate their preference. Hence when Bishop Mattei died (1829), they proposed their candidate Archdeacon Caruana. Caruana had been one of the leading insurgents against the French and had been favoured by the British also in 1807. Although Rome did not oppose this nomination, the King of Naples, in virtue of tenuous pretensions which in reality could never be asserted, still claimed the right to nominate.

The choice of Caruana established a precedent. Such decisions were to be made in Rome after taking into consideration the recommendations of the British government. No other party had a stake. “This was, therefore, another step in virtue of which the Crown could continue to consolidate its power over Malta and its population; through the maintaining of good relations with the ecclesiastical leaders of the country”<sup>26</sup>. And yet disagreements between Rome and London on the matter recurred. In 1841, for example, it was through the intervention of the Irish Catholic members of the House of Commons that an impasse was resolved<sup>27</sup>. When the problem cropped up again (1888) things had changed. With the grant of a form of representation to the Maltese, firstly as nominated by the Governor and then on an elective basis a new actor enters the scene. The local representative, then a politician, now in the process of becoming a political party, henceforth plays a role in the relationship between church and state. That role is hardly ever determinant during the period. And yet the local politician could make his voice heard and could move public opinion.

This is not the place to recount in detail the constitutional vicissitudes of the Maltese Islands under British rule<sup>28</sup>. They can, however, be summarised in the words of Jeremy Boissevian, “Constitutional development in Malta has been a painful and slow process; for it is not a simple matter to give representative government to a fortress”<sup>29</sup>. The first constitution under which elections were held was granted in 1849. Despite a limited franchise and repeated protests, that constitution remained in force until 1887. Henceforth, discussions held in the Council of Government found members supporting the government (usually the so-called ‘official members’ being nominated by the Governor) as well as an opposition (almost always all the elected members). This meant that matters affecting the Church and religion could now be used by these individuals and by the political parties that followed them, to castigate the government and, often, to make political mileage out of it.

The so-called ‘Marriage Question’ is such a case. Briefly, the problem concerned the validity of marriages celebrated in Malta when one of the parties was a non-Catholic. The Roman Catholic Church enjoyed absolute power over marriages in Malta. This matter, together with other topical issues, formed the agenda of a meeting in Rome between

the former Governor of the island, Sir Lintorn Simmons and Cardinal Rampolla for the Vatican<sup>30</sup>. “Sending a diplomatic mission to the Vatican was not a decision that the British Government took lightly”, says Dominic Fenech<sup>31</sup>. Indeed the respective interests of the two sides – the desire to establish diplomatic ties following the loss of temporal power on the Roman side; and the advantage of papal support in Ireland on the British side – made this a reality.

If some sort of working agreement was reached on the future appointment of Maltese bishops, no such agreement was forthcoming on marriages. Although civil legislation was necessary in order to regulate the civil validity of marriages

the Vatican had no wish to diminish Church influence by undermining the civil force of canon law ... After several consultations with the Maltese Archbishop, Cardinal Rampolla in January 1890 presented Simmons with the only formula that the Vatican would accept. The Holy See would not object to civil legislation stipulating that the form established by the Council of Trent was the only valid form of all marriages when at least one of the spouses was a Catholic<sup>32</sup>.

Matters became complicated in 1892 when the British Parliament enacted the Foreign Marriages Act which “validated marriages contracted in the presence of the colonial governor anywhere in the empire”<sup>33</sup>. The Maltese bishop was assured that the law would be suspended in Malta’s case until a decision (on the conflict between this law and the agreement reached with the Vatican) was forthcoming by the highest court of the land.

It is interesting to compare the two main writings on the subject. Henry Frendo’s *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience*<sup>34</sup> is devoted to the rise of political parties in Malta and covers the crucial period between 1880 and 1921. By the latter date fully-fledged political parties would contest elections to a Legislative Assembly entrusted with wide, albeit limited, legislative powers. Within this context, the ‘Marriage Question’ forms part of the larger picture of political parties, political figures, and political opportunism. Frendo illustrates the intertwining of politics and religion in the local setting: how politicians made use of the dispute to further political ends; how these attracted huge crowds to their meetings – called ‘monster meetings’ – by appealing to the religious sentiments of the people and how ultimately the British backed down. The position in so far as marriages in Malta were concerned was laid to rest for another eighty years: in fact, it was only in 1975 that Catholic celebration ceased to be the only accepted form of marriage in Malta. The incident was to herald an era of “the politics of religion”<sup>35</sup> – religion in the hands of Maltese politicians was to become a weapon with which to beat a political adversary; the church would accompany the rise of the Maltese political party but would also claim the right to guide, to interfere, to punish whenever it felt that the dictates of religion so demanded. Further elaboration on that would take us well into the 20th century.

Dominic Fenech places the discussions in Rome which preceded the dispute within the wider perspective of Anglo-Vatican relations. Referring to official papers and correspondence, he asserts, “The question of Maltese Episcopal appointments was the major

issue, especially for the Vatican. It had served as the subject of communication between Britain and the Vatican more than any other single issue in the past<sup>36</sup>. He asserts that because of the way events developed “[a]s far as Malta was concerned, the outcome of the mission was worse than useless”<sup>37</sup>.

What about the Church itself? How did it fit within the colonial framework? What were its fears, its hopes, its aspirations?

Although Protestant colonial rule may have suited the Maltese church better than the double nuisance of Grandmaster and Inquisitor, some measure of suspicion (and perhaps fear) remained. If Church and bishop were generally respected and honoured this does not mean that antipathies and fears did not, from time to time, surface.

Governor Stewart (1843-1847), “a Governor who made very obvious his personal prejudices against the Roman Catholic Church”<sup>38</sup>, had attempted to interfere with the administration of pious legacies and a clash was averted only when the Bishop pre-empted the Ordinance enacted by the Governor<sup>39</sup>. The ‘Marriage Question’ has already been mentioned; and other incidents were generally smoothed over due to the willingness of both sides to avoid, as much as possible, serious clashes which would render life on the islands difficult for both. As a general rule, Maltese historians have stressed this fact. Thus, for example, most writings on the period allude to the willingness of the British to curb proselytising by Protestant missionaries on the island. “The activities of Protestant missionaries ... were often frowned upon and restricted by the British administrators”<sup>40</sup>. The possibility of Protestantism spreading in Malta was a major preoccupation of both the 19th-century church as well as 20th-century historians. “[W]ith the lapse of time and with the increase of English residents, Protestant propaganda and attempts at proselytism had to start” says Arthur Bonnici<sup>41</sup>. The curtailment of activities of the (Protestant) Missionary Society and the restriction on distribution of translations of the bible are mentioned as proof of British reluctance to irritate the local church<sup>42</sup>. It was, above all, the lifting of press censorship that exercised the minds of the Maltese Bishop. It was feared that henceforth anyone could criticise the church of the land. Freedom of the press was granted in 1839. That this coincided with the landing in Malta of Italian refugees augmented Church suspicions.

For Henry Frendo the delay in the lifting of press censorship is attributable to the reservations that the local church had against the potential spread of Protestant teachings<sup>43</sup>. Indeed, both the local bishop and Rome had protested against the possible introduction of freedom of the press as early as 1836. In 1837 Rome informed Bishop Caruana that it would never approve of the lifting of press censorship even if laws against possible abuse were enacted<sup>44</sup>. One can understand the Church’s objection to a liberal press, says Adrianus Koster, “if the reader remembers that it has always been the policy of the Church to monopolise the means of orientation. The lifting of censorship made ‘free’ competition in the sector possible”<sup>45</sup>.

The presence in Malta of Italian refugees, fleeing from persecution in the Italian States – including the Papal States – in the wake of the reaction against revolts occurring there since 1848 and culminating in the *Risorgimento*, alarmed the Catholic Church in Mal-

ta. Newspapers critical of the temporal power of the pope and of absolutist monarchs were being published regularly in Malta. No doubt, the presence of these persons and their publications could only have, in the eyes of the church, a detrimental effect. “Il giornalismo di Malta, passato quasi completamente nelle mani degli emigranti italiani ... raggiunse nell’Isola una sviluppo quasi prodigioso. Dopo otto mesi di libera stampa si potevano contare ben ventotto fogli, mentre alla fine del primo semestre del 1846, i giornali pubblicati a Malta superavano la sessantina”<sup>46</sup>. It is no wonder then that the Church did its utmost to keep these Italian refugees at bay. These refugees, particularly those who arrived in Malta during the period 1839-1848, were more active than those that preceded them. They encountered the opposition of the Jesuits and the Catholic population of the island. The British, on their part, were sympathetic to the cause of Italian unification but at the same time felt that peace on the island could be disturbed<sup>47</sup>. In fact, the Roman Catholic Irish Governor of the islands, More O’Ferrall, frequently refused permission for refugees to land in Malta, even if this exposed him “to a great deal of criticism”<sup>48</sup>.

Protestantism, freemasonry and dissent in general were the main preoccupations of the local church and this is reflected constantly in the writings on the period by local – and foreign – historians. As a general rule there is an assumption, valid (at least until the last decade of the 19th century) that it was the ‘foreigners’ who were the problem. Whether these were the Italian refugees or the ever-increasing British soldiers and sailors on the island, the local voice of dissent is hardly ever mentioned. It was only towards the end of the century that a different voice – local, maybe isolated, but certainly powerful enough to ruffle the Episcopal feathers – could be heard.

Emanuel [or Manwel] Dimech, son of lower class parents, accused of complicity in murder and then of false currency, had educated himself in prison, ironically under the guidance of the spiritual director but also aided by protestant ministers. He rose to fame – or should one say notoriety – as a critic of an old-fashioned church and of imperialism.

Dimech was ignored by historians for over half a century. Starting from the 1970s a number of books have been published about him. Henry Frenzo’s *Birth Pangs of a Nation. Manwel Dimech’s Malta (1860-1921)*<sup>49</sup> was followed by two others of which the first reports Dimech’s pronouncements on various subjects and the second attempts a biographical reconstruction of the controversial figure<sup>50</sup>. If Frenzo’s book steers clear of “certain aspects of Dimech’s life, such as his criminal court cases, his imprisonment period, his years in exile and his family life”<sup>51</sup>, a new biography is not as reticent<sup>52</sup>. This latter publication not only examines in detail Dimech’s life but also attempts a psychological reconstruction of his character and his actions. It is not possible to comment extensively on the work. What concerns us are two main things, namely the historical aspect of a person who managed to attract a discreet following (its exact entity being unknown, but it certainly fluctuated in relation to the Bishop’s actions against him) and the set of events surrounding his notoriety in a colony considered totally faithful to the Roman Catholic religion; and the historiographical aspect. In connection with

the latter it is interesting to note that starting from the 1970s, secularisation in Malta became more prevalent. Furthermore, relations between Church and State (now independent of Britain and, from 1974, a republic) became strained. The newly elected Labour Government (MLP) embarked upon a process of net separation between church and state. Dimech thus assumed a topicality when the previous decades preferred to leave dormant such a controversial figure. Mark Montebello, a Dominican friar, but not completely 'in tune' with the Church hierarchy, 'resurrects' Dimech in a decade when secularisation and dissent no longer shock the psyche of the population.

Montebello views Dimech as a beacon of light in a dark, church-dominated society where the population is "predominantly fanatical and conditioned by the utterances of others [the clergy]"<sup>53</sup>. Dimech incurred the wrath of the Archbishop by his writings, critical of the church hierarchy. Furthermore, he was considered to have Protestant leanings because of his fierce criticism of processions and feasts<sup>54</sup> which he considered to be tools for the alienation of the people. Predictably, he attracted the suspicion of the imperial government because of his writings in favour of the Maltese language, of independence and of a republic of Malta. For Montebello, Dimech was engaged in a battle for the minds of a gullible, illiterate people. Despite a number of followers, Montebello goes on, "the embedded solidity of the clergy was too strong for him; he was alone"<sup>55</sup>. The stream of criticism which Dimech levelled at Archbishop Pace led to his excommunication and the sanctioning of his newspaper<sup>56</sup>. Although Dimech was later to retract his offensive comments and the Bishop was to pardon him, he remained suspect. Indeed, for the author, Dimech is transmuted from an enemy of the church to an enemy of imperial interests in Malta<sup>57</sup>. On the eve of the First World War such a person was uncomfortable for both Church and Government. He was hurriedly deported from Malta in 1914 and died in exile in 1921.

If the books dealing with the political history of Malta highlight the institutional level, Montebello's biography recounts the story of a man of lower class origins, perhaps a misfit, perhaps a visionary and definitely out of tune with the prevailing circumstances of the times. Montebello portrays Dimech in a David and Goliath struggle which the former could not win. "What Dimech had not understood despite his abilities was that he could neither penetrate to the basis of that phenomenal myth nor could he match the prestige of the exponents of that myth"<sup>58</sup>. The hegemonic influence of the church, the collusion with the government authorities were forces which however much, one tried could not be defeated.

One other aspect of that biography is the author's portrayal of his hero as the first person who created an organization<sup>59</sup> that transforms relations of charity into ones based on justice<sup>60</sup>. It is a constant of Maltese historiography of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries to stress the charitable activities of the church. This, accompanied by the reiteration of the devotion of the people towards their church, may be considered a recurring theme in all writings concerning the 19th century Maltese church<sup>61</sup>. One book, however, published in 1991, analyses the social consciousness of the Maltese church immediately before and after the promulgation of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891<sup>62</sup>. There, the author stresses that during the period "the local church had alleviated the worker

and his dependents in their social distress principally through her practice of Christian charity<sup>63</sup>. He mentions, as does Montebello, one of the first mutual aid societies to be founded in Malta. It was the intention of the founder – Angelo Caruana – to form “a workers’ society based purely on trade unionistic lines”<sup>64</sup>. This met with the opposition of the church. Some members of the clergy believed that “the aim of the society was to spread Protestantism in Malta”<sup>65</sup>. Caruana was eventually convinced by the church authorities to convert his union into a mutual aid society, to insert the word “Cattolica” in the name and to have a Curia-appointed spiritual director for the society<sup>66</sup>.

Agius says that the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* “had in fact been given due importance by the leading newspapers of the time”<sup>67</sup>. It was published in Italian and in English almost immediately. Similarly articles discussing ‘the social problem’ started appearing<sup>68</sup>. And yet “[h]ardly any article was written about the local social conditions of the working classes and how workers’ rights could be improved in the light of the social document”<sup>69</sup>. Agius, himself a cleric, justifies the lack of initiative of the Maltese church in this regard “on account of certain problems facing it at that particular moment, namely the involvement in the aftermath of the Simmons-Rampolla controversy”<sup>70</sup>.

In synthesis: Maltese historians have concentrated primarily upon the relations between the local church and the British masters. They accept that the original request made by the Maltese and its affirmation by the British formed the basis of a mutually convenient relationship. This notwithstanding, that relationship passed through moments of crisis but it behove both parties to settle them amicably. On the other hand, the two texts mentioned above steer away from the institutional-political field. If one is openly critical of the way religion was used to dispose of an uncomfortable person, the other seeks to patch up the inadequacies of the local church to deal with social matters during the 19th century. None however – as far as can be perceived – attempt to descend the social ladder in order to examine *how* religion was practised. Indeed, there seems to be an implicit assumption that all the people, all the time, were deeply faithful to their church; that life centred round their church; that religion permeated social and domestic life. Undoubtedly this is true to a very great extent. But the cosmopolitan nature of Maltese urban society and the presence of a foreign (Protestant) master need to be re-elaborated into the story of 19th-century religion in Malta. Thus, for example, we are told that many of the Italian refugees in Malta during the *Risorgimento* gave private lessons “to the children of the better Maltese families”. Some of them mixed with the Maltese upper classes: the nobility, the professionals, some merchants and part of the clergy<sup>71</sup>. Most of these refugees were openly critical of the temporal power of the pope and if they published newspapers with an anti-clerical bent, it is very unlikely that they did not have some influence on their hosts.

Similarly, during the second half of the century, British presence on the island increased substantially. This was accompanied, from 1869 onwards, by an influx of naval vessels on their way to the east through the newly opened Suez Canal. Research<sup>72</sup> shows that the local population eagerly awaited the British navy in port because that meant greater

spending, more profits. But research also shows that antagonism between the Maltese and the British sailor or soldier could sometimes end up in bloody fights. When the religious sensibilities of the population were hurt, as they sometimes were, the effect of religious belief upon ordinary men and women stands out. They fight, and beat – or get beaten by – sailors or soldiers who interrupt religious processions. They show intolerance when religious practices are not respected. But they are also critical of some priests; they refuse to accept parish priests imposed upon them by the Bishop, or insist on their replacement; they fight over their patron saints. If on one level there existed an institutional Church that dealt with the colonial authorities, on another level there existed the village church that dealt with the local villagers.

There is one pointer towards future directions. John Chircop's *Bell-Ringing in Maltese History 1800-1870s. Language, Regulator and Weapon*<sup>73</sup> is, according to the historian, "the preliminary section of a lengthier study which inquires on customary bell-ringing in the Maltese Islands, during these last two hundred years"<sup>74</sup>. Bells, bell towers and bell ringing are not only a manifestation of religious belief. Indeed, they are "instruments of communication ... impart[ing] social routines in the villages and towns ... they occupied the central space of the village square which was the permanent *locus* containing and channelling the daily social flow"<sup>75</sup>. As instruments "structuring and sustaining the lives of the people," bells were appropriated by "the fundamentalist Catholic Church [which] reinforced ... cultural values through the official interpretation of bell-ringing"<sup>76</sup>. On the other hand, bell-ringing was viewed by "the civilising colonialist mind" – Protestants who objected to the pervading influence of the Catholic Church – as "an expression of the 'corrupt state of morals' existing in the people under Popish rule"<sup>77</sup>. There is a further facet to bell-ringing: "although the Archbishop commanded the Church, he did not control and had no rights of ownership over the belfries"<sup>78</sup>. In this sense, therefore the bells become an instrument of protest, of assertion of rights by 'the ordinary people'. The incident referred to concerns the limitations on bell-ringing ordered by the Archbishop on a number of occasions in 1865. This offended not only the proprietary rights of the parishioners but was also understood as an encroachment of "the people's inherited rights"<sup>79</sup>.

John Chircop is critical of the '*High History*' approach highlighted in the earlier part of this essay. For him these only serve for a "fabrication of a *homogeneous national identity*"<sup>80</sup>.

An approach "from the bottom" serves to illustrate that religion in 19th-century Malta was not a paradigm that applied throughout without crease or tear. Whether it was the relationship of the people with ecclesiastical or civil authority, whether it was the contact with foreigner or whether it was the simple human urge to assert oneself, the correct approach should encompass both 'high' and 'low'. Only in this way can a proper understanding of the past be attained. If historical circumstances placed an island population which is neither fully Latin nor totally Arab under Anglo-Saxon domination; if it served the interests of both secular and clerical rulers to join forces, this does not mean that history should concern itself solely with this fact. Whether it is religion or

politics or social structure, the theme can only be correctly analysed and presented in correct historical terms by paying attention to all levels. At the lowest level one discovers areas of conflict, of compromise and of harmony that are hidden from view when looking from the top. Our knowledge of the past is enriched and our understanding of ourselves can only be achieved by starting from the ground before taking flight.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive survey of 18th-century religious practices and malpractices see F. Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition in Early Modern Malta*, Malta 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> G. Wettinger, *Early Maltese Popular Attitudes to the Government of the Order of St. John*, "Melita Historica", VI, 1976, pp. 255-278.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Concordat Turned Sour: the Simmons-Rampolla Agreement of 1890* in P. Xuereb (ed.), *Karissime Got-tifride*, Malta 1999; pp. 135-145.
- <sup>4</sup> H. Smith, *Britain in Malta. Volume 1. Constitutional Development of Malta in the 19th Century*, Malta 1953.
- <sup>5</sup> H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience*, Malta 1991, p. 3.
- <sup>6</sup> H.I. Lee, *British Policy Toward the Religion, Ancient Laws and Customs in Malta, 1824-1851*, "Melita Historica", XV, 1963, pp. 1-14.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Bezzina, *L-Istorja tal Knisja f' Malta*, Malta 2002, p. 144. See also A. Koster, *Prelates and Politicians in Malta*, Assen 1984, p. 39.
- <sup>8</sup> Koster, *Prelates* cit., p. 40.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>10</sup> *Storja ta' Malta. Is-Seklu Dsatax. Zmien l-Inglizi*, Malta 2004, p. 110.
- <sup>11</sup> A. Bonnici, *Thirty Years to Build a Protestant Church*, "Melita Historica", XXV, 1973, pp. 183-191.
- <sup>12</sup> Bezzina, *L-Istorja* cit., p. 181. For a slightly different version see Frendo, *Storja* cit., p. 111.
- <sup>13</sup> Frendo, *Storja* cit., p. 111.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111-113.
- <sup>15</sup> Lee, *British Policy* cit.
- <sup>16</sup> *Declaration of Rights of the Inhabitants of the Islands of Malta and Gozo (1802)*, in *Maltese Political Development 1798-1964: Selected Readings Edited, Annotated and Introduced by Professor Henry Frendo*, Malta 1993, pp. 55-56.
- <sup>17</sup> See, for example, Lee, *British Policy* cit.; Bezzina, *L-Istorja* cit., pp. 177-178; Frendo, *Is-Seklu* cit., pp. 23-26.
- <sup>18</sup> Frendo, *Is-Seklu* cit., p. 75.
- <sup>19</sup> Lee, *British Policy* cit.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Frendo, *Is-Seklu* cit., pp. 81-82.
- <sup>22</sup> *Religion and Politics in a Crown Colony: The Malta-Gozo Story 1798 - 1864*, Valletta 1985, p. 146. The Catholic Emancipation (Relief) Act was enacted by the British Parliament in 1829 and made Roman Catholics eligible for most public offices.
- <sup>23</sup> Koster, *Priests* cit., pp. 44-45.
- <sup>24</sup> Frendo, *Is-Seklu* cit., p. 79.
- <sup>25</sup> Koster, *Priests* cit., p. 44.

- <sup>26</sup> Frendo, *Is-Seklu* cit., p. 83 (*Mela dan kien pass iehor sabiex il-Kuruna tkompli tikkonsolida s-setgħa tagħha fuq Malta u niesha, billi tassigura kemm tista' relazzjonijiet tajba u kordjali mal-mexxeja ekkleziastici fuq il-post.*). See also Bezzina, *L-Istorja* cit., pp. 184-185 and Lee, *British Policy* cit.
- <sup>27</sup> Bezzina, *L-Istorja* cit., p. 184.
- <sup>28</sup> For an exposition of the early constitutions see J.J. Cremona, *Malta and Britain: The Early Constitutions*, Malta 1996.
- <sup>29</sup> J. Boissevian, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*, New York 1965, p. 7.
- <sup>30</sup> See H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience*, Malta 1991, pp. 71 ff.
- <sup>31</sup> *A Concordat Turned Sour: The Simmons-Rampolla Agreement of 1890* in P. Xuereb (ed.), *Karissime Gotifride*, Malta 1999, pp. 135-145.
- <sup>32</sup> Fenech, *The Concordat* cit., p. 137.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- <sup>34</sup> Malta 1991.
- <sup>35</sup> Fenech, *The Concordat* cit., p. 74.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- <sup>38</sup> Lee, *British Policy* cit., p. 4.
- <sup>39</sup> See, for example, Bezzina, *L-Istorja* cit., pp. 182-183.
- <sup>40</sup> Koster, *Priests* cit., p. 40.
- <sup>41</sup> Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta. Volume IV 1800-1975*, Zabbar 1975, p. 189.
- <sup>42</sup> See, for example, Koster, *Priests* cit., p. 41; Bezzina, *L-Istorja* cit., p. 178; Frendo, *Is-Seklu* cit., p. 102. A dissentient voice is that of Bianca Fiorentini, for whom Britain attempted to subject Malta to its own religion (quoted in Koster, *Priests* cit., p. 39).
- <sup>43</sup> Frendo, *Is-Seklu* cit., p. 103.
- <sup>44</sup> Bezzina, *L-Istorja* cit., p. 182; Frendo, *Is-Seklu* cit., p. 104. In his autobiographical chronicle of the 20th century, Herbert Ganado (*Rajt Malta Tinbidel*, vol. 1, Malta 1977, p. 114) adds that we should not judge the Vatican decision to oppose press freedom at all costs from today's perspective.
- <sup>45</sup> Koster, *Priest* cit., p. 46
- <sup>46</sup> B. Fiorentini, *Il Giornalismo a Malta durante il Risorgimento Italiano*, in V. Bonello - B. Fiorentini - L. Schiavone (eds.), *Echi del Risorgimento a Malta*, Malta 1963, pp. 21-111. Journalism in Malta passed almost entirely in the hands of the Italian immigrants. Within eight months from the lifting of press censorship there were twenty eight papers, and by the first half of 1846, papers published in Malta exceeded sixty.
- <sup>47</sup> L. Schiavone, *Esuli italiani a Malta durante il Risorgimento* in Bonello - Fiorentini - Schiamone (eds.), *Echi* cit., pp. 113-164.
- <sup>48</sup> C. Cassar, *A Concise History of Malta*, Malta 2000, p. 161.
- <sup>49</sup> Malta 1972. The book was preceded by another one in Maltese also by H. Frendo on which the latter work is based: *Lejn Tniissil ta' Nazzjon, it-twemmin socio-politiku ta' Manwel Dimech*, Malta 1971.
- <sup>50</sup> G. Azzopardi, *X'Garrab Manwel Dimech*, Valletta 1975 and, by the same author, *Għajdut Manwel Dimech*, Valletta 1978.
- <sup>51</sup> Frendo, *Birth Pangs* cit., p. 8.
- <sup>52</sup> M. Montebello, *Dimech (1860-1921) Bijografija*, Malta 2004.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 341 [*Fuq il-mobb ta' popolazzjoni predominantement fanatika u dipendenti fuq kliem hadiebor*].
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 435
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376 [Dak li jidher li ma fehm x Dimech kien li bil-hila tiegħu kollha u ma setax ilabhaq sal bazi ta' dak il-mit fenomenali u anki prestigjuż ta' l-Awtoritajiet li kienu qegħdin imexxu l-mit].
- <sup>59</sup> Called *ix-Xirka tal Imdawwlin* – Society of the Enlightened.
- <sup>60</sup> Montebello, *Dimech* cit., pp. 453-454.
- <sup>61</sup> See, for example: A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta. Vol. IV. 1800-1975*, Zabbar 1975; Bezzina, *Istorja* cit., but also a number of books dedicated to monasteries, communities or religious and lay persons who devoted their lives to charity or education of the children of the poor. Some examples of the latter are A. Azzopardi, *Jesuit Schools in Malta*, vol. I: 1592-1907, Malta 2002; A. Bonnici, *Is-Sorrijiet tal-Karità u l-Hidma Tagħhom f'Malta*, Malta 2002; L.A. Grasso, *Fra Diegu Bonanno 1831-1902*, Malta 1995.
- <sup>62</sup> E. Agius, *Social Consciousness of the Church in Malta 1891-1921. The Impact of Rerum Novarum*, Malta 1991.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-32.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- <sup>71</sup> H. Ganado, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel*, vol. 1, Malta 1977, p. 112.
- <sup>72</sup> I am carrying out research in this area in connection with my doctoral thesis under the (provisional) title *Social Class in Malta 1870-1914*.
- <sup>73</sup> Published in *Karissime Gotifride*, Malta 1999, pp. 147-158.
- <sup>74</sup> Footnote to title.
- <sup>75</sup> Chircop, *Bell-Ringing* cit., p. 148.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

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