

# The delimitation of boundaries between Church and State in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Malta

Michael Refalo

## Introduction

My concern is with the interstices between the two levels of power in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Malta. On the theoretical level, the subject is underpinned by Gramsci's theory of the 'Integral State,' more particularly his reference to the two aspects of power: the coercive and the hegemonic, exercised respectively by what he calls the 'political state' and 'civil society.' Empirically, it draws on the relations between these two levels of power in Malta during that period, namely, the British colonial administration, on the one hand, and the main institution of civil society, the Roman Catholic Church, as an institution, on the other. The collocation of the Roman Catholic Church with Gramsci's concept of civil society is based on the considerable hegemonic power exercised by it over nineteenth-century Malta, a power which made it the main component of civil society. This is in line with Gramsci's view: in a letter of 7 September 1931 addressed to his sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, he explained that 'the State' is usually understood as 'a political Society,' that is, the 'coercive apparatus.' His studies, however (he continues) have led him to the conclusion that 'the State' should be understood 'as a balance between political Society and civil Society.' This latter, he identified with 'the hegemony of a social group over the entire national society exercised through the so-called private organizations, such as the Church.'<sup>1</sup> Joseph Femia observes that Gramsci's concept of civil society is identified 'with the ideological superstructures, the institutions and the technical instruments that create and diffuse modes of thought.'<sup>2</sup> In nineteenth-century Malta it was the Roman Catholic Church that performed this function.

1 F. Rosengarten ed., *Antonio Gramsci, Letters from Prison* Vol. 2, New York 2011, 67.

2 J.V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought. Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*, Oxford 1981, 26-29. See also Guido Liguori and Pasquale Voza eds., *Dizionario Gramsciano 1926-1937*, Roma 2009, s.v. 'società civile.' P. Thomas, 'Conjecture of the Integral State? Poulantzas's reading of Gramsci', *New Directions in Marxist Theory. Historical Materialism Annual Conference 8-10 December 2006* <http://mercury.soas.ac.uk/hm/pdf/2006confpapers/papers/Thomas.pdf> [5 July 2011].

The existence of areas of contention between the coercive and the directive were fewer than what could be expected of two notionally alien institutions. As a general rule, in fact, relations between the local church (as an institution; the same, however, was not necessarily the case with regards to individual members of the clergy) and the Protestant government were good. A clear admission of the need of 'collaboration' between the coercive powers and the hegemonic, respectively represented by the colonial government and the church, can be seen in a letter which the Governor sent to Lord Knutsford when reporting the entry of Archbishop Pace into the Cathedral of Mdina. There he observed that,

[t]he close relations and complete harmony between my Government and the Ecclesiastical Authorities, which were thus evinced in a manner most intelligible to all and to the ignorant populace in particular cannot fail to have very beneficial effects to the tranquility and good order of these Islands.<sup>3</sup>

On a personal level, too, Governor Grenfell could refer to the 'cordial personal relations' existing between himself and Archbishop Pace.<sup>4</sup>

Later, when an occasion of contest arose – that connected with the introduction of a law making administration of Marriage Legacies subject to the supervision of the Courts – it was observed in London that, '[t]he Bishop has always worked well with the Government, & it would be very desirable to avoid any action which would lead to any breach between the Ecclesiastical & Civil Authorities.'<sup>5</sup> At times, however, and on particular issues, each side resisted encroachment and would brook no interference. Nor would it allow itself to be seen as having ceded ground or allowed its counterpart to overstep into a sphere which it deemed exclusively its own. This was bound to create potentially problematic areas. The undisputed hegemony of the local Church served both it and the Government well, but encroachment could create tension. The Archbishop was well aware that he shared jurisdiction over the local population. His use of the term *i miei consudditi*, when writing to the Governor serves as confirmation.<sup>6</sup>

It is, furthermore, being proposed that separation between the coercive and the directive was instrumental in enabling the British to retain control over the local population without the unrest and strife that characterised other British possessions. And it was the 'collaboration' on a neat division of spheres of power which enabled the local church to retain the loyalty of the subaltern for a period longer than occurring elsewhere. Striving for the preservation of neat boundaries between the two levels of power and, perhaps more importantly, a popular perception and belief that the two were separate and distinct was one of the factors contributing to the retention of a status quo favouring both. Other sectors of civil

3 23 July 1889, Torrens to Knutsford in N[ational] A[rchives], London] CO158/291/15112.

4 NAM CSG19/452-3, 14 Aug. 1901.

5 NA CO158/306/11596, Minutes.

6 Pace to Mansfield Clarke, 15.5.1906, A[rchiepiscopal] A[rchives] M[alta], *Pace Correspondenza*, 1906, Vol. XII.

society had to wait. The church, for example, was not too keen on politicians who could wrest hegemony from it. Bishop Pietro Pace's antipathy towards the leading anti-reformist, nationalist politician is well known. Yet, such figures as Fortunato Mizzi always protested their loyalty to the Catholic Church and its hierarchy. Others, Manwel Dimech being the most famous / notorious example, were not tolerated, and the coercive and hegemonic powers of 'the Integral State' coalesced to remove him from the local political scene.<sup>7</sup>

The correspondence between the leaders of the two institutions, serving as the principal source of the present writing, is illustrative of the care for the preservation and protection of the respective spheres of power. Such clear distinction was important on the superstructural level: it was an assertion of power vis-à-vis each other that had to be reflected on the ground. It was vital that the two should be *seen* as independent from each other. The church, and its upper hierarchy in particular, could not appear weak in the eyes of the faithful; neither could it/they afford to be perceived as collaborating beyond a certain measure with the British colonial authorities. That relations between the two were generally good during the nineteenth century was also due to their respective strengths, and that necessitated the need to secure one's boundaries. Within Malta's colonial setting and at that particular historical juncture, 'integral state' implies a necessary collaboration between the coercive and the hegemonic so that, on the one hand, imperial interests would be protected and, on the other, the Church's influence would be maintained. This 'alliance' transcended as much purely religious principles as it did political ones.

### Priests and Politics

This delimitation of boundaries was necessary at the level of practice, the level of the ordinary life of the subaltern. Heavily reliant on the guiding role of the church, the subaltern needed the security and comfort of knowing where *his* church stood. On the political level, an equally important fixing of boundaries was necessary. However, that was dependent upon a number of other factors, not least of which were Britain's relations with the Vatican. One of the more important instances where conflict occurred during the 1890s – the notorious 'Marriage Question' – constituted, for the Church, a direct intrusion on its most prized asset, the family. This has been the object of Dominic Fenech's study and is, therefore, not being treated here.<sup>8</sup>

One other area of potential conflict revolved around the involvement of priests in politics. Under the provisions of the 1849 Constitution, priests could stand for election, become members of the Council of Government, and generally engage in

7 On Manwel Dimech see M. Montebello, *Manwel Dimech (1860-1921) Malta*, 2004 and H. Frendo, *Birth Pangs of a Nation. Manwel Dimech's Malta (1860-1921)*, Malta, 1972.

8 D. Fenech, 'A Concordat turned Sour: The Simmons-Rampolla Agreement of 1890', *Karissime Gotifride. Historical Essays presented to Professor Godfrey Wettinger on his Seventieth Birthday*, Malta 1999, 135-145.

political activities. This changed in 1857 but in 1870, in response to demands for the repeal of the 1857 prohibition, a referendum was held. The majority vote was in favour of priests contesting elections. The result was that a maximum of two ecclesiastics were permitted to sit on the Council of Government at any one time. In subsequent decades, the presence of clerics was subject to frequent discussions both between the Governor and the Archbishop, as well as between the latter and those who were ostensibly elected to represent the Church. In their capacity as elected representatives, they could criticise the Government. When, however, the *locus* of criticism shifted from Council Chamber or political activity to church, then a problem arose. There was a vast difference when the criticism emanated from the political rather than the ecclesiastical pulpit. The latter implied not only a different audience; it conferred a divine blessing on the criticism.

When, in January 1891, Archpriest Xuereb of the village of Musta (Mosta) was reported to have expounded on political rather than religious matters in his Sunday morning sermon, the Chief Secretary promptly objected to the Vicar General. The Archpriest, a former member of the Council of Government, had referred to his efforts on behalf of government employees, and declared to have resigned – and renounced to a £300 yearly salary – because the Governor ‘had refused to act on his advice’.<sup>9</sup> Governor Smythe wrote to the Archbishop raising the question whether ‘the author of such communications [is fit] to continue in the charge of so important a Parish as Musta.’ London, on its part, was not so keen on the Governor’s actions. Without explicitly condemning the Governor’s communication to the Archbishop, it was felt that ‘it would have been better to have abstained from making any suggestion to the Archbishop as to what should be in a matter of purely ecclesiastical concern.’<sup>10</sup> When, however, the whole Chapter of a Church encroached overtly on civil matters, the situation became more serious. It was the Governor himself who wrote directly to the Archbishop on receiving information of an initiative by ‘the most Reverend Chapter of the Collegiate Church of St Paul in Valletta urgently convened for the purpose’.<sup>11</sup> Referring to a *Public Revenue Improvement Ordinance* introduced by Gerald Strickland, the monsignors had ‘come to the decision that a Low Mass and the Rosary were to be said in that church at 6.00 a.m. daily, their prayers being offered exclusively for the needs of the country’ and ‘in order that the Almighty may deign to save the people from the calamities with which they are being threatened’.<sup>12</sup> Those ‘calamities’ consisted of a vote for the substantial amount of £632,152 intended for ‘drainage extension ... water supply works ... several minor projects ... and to make matters worse ... indeed purposefully indigestible it would seem – £72,728 for constructing new schools and improvement of existing schools’.<sup>13</sup>

9 Congleton to Archbishop, 14 Aug. 1901, N[ational] A[rchives] M[alta] CSG019, p.105.

10 NA CO158/296/3283.

11 Congleton to Archbishop, 14 Aug. 1901, NAM CSG20, p.452-3.

12 *Ibid.*

13 H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony*, Malta 1991, 117-8.

What caused so much anxiety among the clerics at St Paul’s was the frightening spectre of taxes to finance this expenditure. The Chapter of St Paul’s intended to ‘induce the Parish Priests’ of other localities to have similar prayers ordered in order to avert the calamity. The Governor, on his part, acknowledged that the Chapter’s directives had not received the direct sanction of the Archbishop, who had denied paternity when called upon by the Chief Secretary. Nonetheless, it was felt that the Archbishop should be reminded of the existence of clear signposts:

I feel it is my duty to impress upon Your Grace that it would be much to be deplored if the Church were, even indirectly, to help what appears to be an attempt to make political capital out of religious feelings of this pious population, and that your Grace would assume a grave responsibility if you were to allow the Clergy to denounce in the Churches, as a public calamity, the order of His Majesty having reference to municipal questions in this colony.<sup>14</sup>

That warning was followed by a veiled threat:

Incidents would thus be avoided which, I am certain, Your Grace would regret as much as I should.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from fear of taxation, the proposed measures affected the sensibilities of the clerical section of the population as well as of the anti-reformist opposition in two other relevant respects. The intention to build new schools was seen as an attempt to privilege the teaching of English to the detriment of Italian. Furthermore, it was considered, as Henry Frendo observes, as ‘the superimposed transformation of the national culture’.<sup>16</sup> Of course, this did not imply only Anglicization but also a more widespread education that convoluted the dominant culture. Furthermore, there was the ongoing problem of utility. Maltese politicians often claimed that infrastructural works were intended for the benefit of the British garrison and not for the local population. The Maltese need neither new roads nor a drainage system. If the Government wanted them, these had to be financed by the Imperial Government not the people.

On his part the Archbishop too could play the game of veiled threats. ‘[M]y authority has certain limits beyond which I cannot go without exposing myself to the certainty of being disobeyed and of seeing my own authority despised,’ he wrote.<sup>17</sup> This statement formed part of a reply to Governor Grenfell who had warned against local politicians seeking the collaboration of the clergy in their attacks on the government’s policies ‘in connection with the system of Elementary Education in force in the Government Schools’.<sup>18</sup> There, the governor had appealed to the ‘well-known zeal [of clerics] in

14 NAM CSG019/452-3, 14 Aug. 1901 (italics added).

15 *Ibid.*

16 Frendo 1991, 118.

17 NAM CSG01/14909/1901, 22 May 1901.

18 *Ibid.*

supporting ecclesiastical authority.' The Archbishop, however, was careful in shedding responsibility for the actions of individual priests, thereby reminding the governor that authority could only be exercised where there was a real will to exercise it and to minimise such incidents. One should also keep in mind that greater education could spell the erosion of the authority of the church over the local population. It was understandable, therefore, that the Archbishop's zeal in assisting or collaborating with the government had certain limits. In explaining his action to Cardinal Rampolla, Secretary of State at the Vatican, Bishop Pace placed the question within a slightly different perspective. He said that this was a matter concerning *tutto il popolo e i preti, tanto come cittadini avente diritti civili uguali agli altri, come pure come persone che godono la fiducia del popolo*. Furthermore, he continued, it was not prudent to interfere *perché tanto è il calore sollevato che avrei pericolato non solo di essere disubbidito ma di vedere disprezzata pubblicamente la mia Autorità Vescovile*.<sup>19</sup>

In an earlier letter to the Governor, Archbishop Pace had observed that 'the case in question is so particular and isolated, *having regard to the generality of protests made independently of any religious feeling*, that by taking any notice of the same it would rather harm than serve the cause of the Government'.<sup>20</sup> However, away from the public gaze, Pace met the monsignors individually and expressed his displeasure at such initiatives. He also convened the Chapter of St Paul's and explained that such religious celebrations were detrimental to the Church and, it was agreed, that these should come to an end *ma senza tanto chiasso*.<sup>21</sup> In the intricate game between Archbishop and Governor, each side moved its pawns not only to win but also to protect and retain its power, its strengths, and maybe, reveal the weaknesses of its counterpart. Notwithstanding the warning letter, Archbishop Pace did not publicly prevent the saying of prayers at St Paul's, nor did he prohibit priests from taking part in the campaign against the proposed expenditure.<sup>22</sup>

These events were part of a larger problem which eventually led to the withdrawal of the 1887 Constitution, the first to have granted a majority of elected members in the Council of Government. The attempt to delimit boundaries, in this case, could not be amicably settled; the great majority of civil society was unified in its opposition to the government and the church made use of such instruments as it possessed to oppose the measures. The man behind the introduction of the substantial money vote was Gerald Strickland, then Chief Secretary to the Government. He was to be prime minister of the island some years later and was to meet the full force of the storm raised by him, and against him, with a church that demanded and expected total allegiance.<sup>23</sup> With self-government that conflict – for hegemony – would become harsher and uglier.

19 Pace to Rampolla, 3 June 1901, AAM, *Pace Corrispondenza 1900-1901*; Vol. IX.

20 Pace to Governor, 21 May 1901, NAM CSG01/14910/1901 (italics added).

21 Pace to Rampolla, 17 Aug. 1901, AAM *Pace Corrispondenza 1900-01*; Vol. IX.

22 Frendo 1991, 119.

23 See D. Fenech, *Responsibility and Power in Inter-War Malta. Book One: Endemic Democracy (1919-1930)*, Malta, 2005.

## Religious Ostentation

Away from the constitutional and political problems of the period, there were more mundane issues that could potentially threaten the delicate balance between the two institutions. Of these, non-Catholic religious ostentation was arguably one of the more important. Thus, the wearing of church vestments in public was deemed to be the sole privilege of the Roman Catholic clergy. Not even a minister of the religion of the colonial power could infringe that rule. Much less could those of other religions. The problem with Greek Orthodox priests, for example, had cropped up at least as early as June 1849. Then, Sir Edmund Lyons, British Minister at Athens had written to the Foreign Office referring to a letter from 'the Greek Minister for Foreign Affairs complaining that Priests of the Greek Church officiating at the funerals of Greek subjects in the island of Malta are prohibited from bearing the Cross or appearing with their Sacerdotal Ornaments.' Lord Palmerston's instructions were to inform his Greek counterpart that though the British Government extended complete toleration and protection to all religions, 'those terms cannot be interpreted as meaning that the British Govt. is bound to protect the performance of all religious ceremonies of Greek subjects when those ceremonies are conducted with such a public and ostentatious display as to be likely to excite disturbance of that public order the maintenance of which is the first duty of every Government.'<sup>24</sup> The 'abuse' as the Vicar-General called it, 'would cause no little surprise among the people,' hence the government had to ensure that such incidents did not happen.<sup>25</sup> Occasions when this happened in Malta were rare but not exceptional. Although the prohibition was not based on any legal impediment, there existed a custom which the Catholic Church was jealous to preserve, and the government careful to protect. If it was not tolerated when a Protestant minister wore clerical garb in the street for no apparent reason,<sup>26</sup> nor was it permitted when a minister was officiating at a religious ceremony, for example, a funeral.

The funeral referred to in the Bishop's letter appears to have been that of a sailor belonging to H.M.S. 'Leviathan' who died at Bighi Hospital on the 27 August 1905. The funeral started from the Hospital at 7.30 a.m. of the following day. The clergyman accompanied the corpse from the Hospital to the new cemetery near the Capuchin Convent. He was wearing surplice, stole and cap. No member of the Police was in attendance at the funeral, but the Police Constable No. 79 E. Farrugia of the Marine Police Branch appears to have noticed the Clergyman in his robes on the way.<sup>27</sup> Neither the Archbishop – who immediately reported the matter – nor the civil authorities –

24 25 June 1849, Palmerston to Wyse, No. 2 in NAM GOV/1/9. The problem cropped up again in 1852, 1887, 1891 and 1892 (see NA CO158/281/10010; CO158/285/3294; CO158/285/13777; CO158/298/11330 and CO158/302/8637).

25 Mercieca to De Petri, 11 July 1890, NAM/ CSG19 (in translation); original Italian version at AAM, *Pace Corrispondenza* Vol. 1.

26 i.e. The incident to which the letter of 11 July 1890 refers.

27 Minute by Vincent Frendo Azzopardi, 4 Sep. 1905, NAM CSG01/3513/1905.

## Conclusion

A number of other instances in the same vein may be quoted. To narrate them all would serve to confirm the quoted examples. All, however, point in one direction: the boundaries between what pertains to the government and what to the church had to be clearly marked in such a way that the subaltern could see them. It was in the interest of both that matters be so. If the government could mobilise police, laws, law courts and perhaps, ultimately, the military, the Church, as the umbrella of civil society, was vested with a hegemonic power which, properly used and directed, could serve all. The notion of 'integral state' within the colony is translated into the instrumentalisation of the island to British colonial and imperial exigencies. This required that the local population be kept as quiet and passive as possible. The generally peaceful rule of the Maltese Islands by the British was due to a variety of factors, not least of which was the collaboration which the Protestant colonial power elaborated with the local Roman Catholic Church. For this collaboration to be effective, it was vital for each side to keep within its limits. Ultimately, the hegemonic power of the local church benefitted also the local government. Hegemony was better than coercion. This necessitated mutual care and respect for the respective spheres of power. It was the best way through which the island fortress could thus serve its purpose.