

Source: **The Sunday Times** [Malta]. (1990)(11Feb.29)

## **Christianity in Malta under the Arabs**

M. Brincat

There are those of us who, unlike Professor Wettinger (*The Sunday Times*, November 19) believe that Christianity continued as a significant element in the population of the Maltese Islands during the Arab period. Those like myself who believe this, do not necessarily do so for fanatical reasons or for the satisfaction that our ancestors did not “fall.” I am not sure how many of us have blood descended from those Maltese and I respect Islam and the Arab people.

However, I cannot accept that the circumstantial evidence that exists in favour of a continued Christian presence can be discounted and swept aside. The evidence for the presence of Islam in these Islands during the period of Arab political predominance of these islands is very tenuous and one could likewise state that Islam then did not exist, since evidence for an Islamic presence in these Islands dates from the Norman period and in some instances even later, in the time of Frederick II Hohenstaufen.

Professor Wettinger made the case for the complete Islamisation of these islands, but surely he cannot ignore the evidence for the continued Christian presence during this time.

Firstly, there is the linguistic tradition. I find it illogical to accept that the Christian semitic words that we learnt, were relearnt after the Normans had taken the islands. Had the population been re-christianised we would have relearnt Romance Christian words for Christian terminology from our Latin missionaries and not retained what are Arab Christian words currently extant among such peoples as Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinians Christians. This, to my mind, points to the antiquity and continuation of the Christian tradition in Malta.

Professor Wettinger himself admits to the presence of the Byzantine rites in Malta after the Norman occupation. I find it unreasonable to explain this in the manner that he does, namely that the Moslem Maltese found it easier to convert to the Greek Orthodox rite than to the Latin one. Why would a population ready to become Christian, presumably for political advantage, convert to the religion of what was fast becoming a minority sect in Sicily?

If the Islands were under the Latin Church’s influence and the Latins were Latin, surely there would be more points to be gained by following the Latin Church rather than the Greek rite on an island which was no longer under the sphere of influence of Constantinople. The much more logical would be that the Maltese, having formed part of the Byzantine empire, probably since the expedition of Belisarius, followed the Greek rite and those who remained Christian continued to do so under Arab rule, just as they did in Sicily.

The Normans, although Latin themselves, protected the Greeks and the Greek rite in Sicily, and indeed even endowed and refounded Basilian monasteries there. Any conversions would, however, naturally have followed the rite of the conquerors. Although one might admit some sort of folk memory of the old Greek church by lapsed Christians, this must be deemed unlikely, as Islamisation was as widespread as Professor Wettinger suggests.

In Spain for example converts became Roman Catholic and not Mozarab Christians who remained Christian throughout the Arab era but adopted Arab dress, customs and language. To all intents and purposes they were Moors in all but religion. Their Christian rites were different to the Latin rite and using Professor Wettinger's logic it would have been far easier for the Moors to convert to Mozarab rites than to Latin rites.

### **Folk memory**

There certainly is undisputed evidence that the folk memory of pre-Arab Christian rites was maintained. Thus, at Tas Silg, San Pawl Milqi, Hal-Millieri and probably Bir Miftuh there is evidence of post-Arab churches being built on the sites of pre-Arab Christian churches or holy places. Other pre-Arab Christian sites, such as *Abbatija tal-Dejr* and St. Agatha's catacombs were used in the post-Arab period as sites of Christian worship, while an old post-Arab church at Msida is known to have been built on the site of a Roman tomb, perhaps the resting place of an early Christian martyr or that of a reputed saint.

The fact that this memory persisted suggests a continuation of practice perhaps not overtly, although there is nothing to suggest anything covert, especially in the final years of the Arab political predominance.

Had the entire population been convincingly Islamised and then re-Christianised, as Professor Wettinger suggests, up to as late as the 1240s, then it would be very hard to imagine why newly Christianised Maltese would go to the ancient spots and rebuild their churches on these sites. Surely they would have chosen new sites, having forgotten the ruins of their old [ones] a long time ago. After all, how many of us remember the sites of churches 400 years ago? This evidence once again suggests a continuous unbroken tradition, with the Maltese knowing where these venerated holy sites were.

### **A strong Christian community**

Professor Wettinger refers to the chronicler of the voyage of Bishop Burchard (1175) who describes the Maltese as Saracens. The profound ignorance of these chroniclers is now well known, especially when referring to peoples who were outside their immediate sphere of knowledge, namely outside Central Western Europe. Even as late as the Crusade of Cyprus of 1365, William Machaut, while describing the sack of Alexandria, talks of the entire population as being Saracen and makes no distinction between or the Moslems. As it was, both communities were massacred and pillaged.

This, apart from greed, can also be explained by the fact that to the Crusaders all inhabitants in Moorish dress and speaking Arabic were Saracens. As it was, they deeply distrusted the Greek orthodox Byzantines and frequently described them as no better than Saracens.

The truth about 12<sup>th</sup> century Malta, whether it was wholly Moslem, mainly Muslem or otherwise, is best revealed by official documents. As Professor Wettinger admits, even before the death of Roger II (1154), the Christian communities of Malta and Gozo were laid under an obligation by the Norman administration of paying an annual fine for assassinating a Muslim inhabitant. The aggressors seem to have been the Maltese Christians and the assassination was apparently the culmination of a longstanding interconfessional feud. Otherwise the punishment would have been undeserved. Now, one might ask, would the

Maltese Christians have been so aggressive had they been in a minority. Rather, they would have needed a small army to protect them from the fury of the aggrieved and vengeful Moslems. The permanent conquest of Malta, mind you, happened in 1127, that is a mere 25 years before this incident, and yet the Maltese Christians were, apparently, already very numerous. The strength of the Christian community is also attested to by the fact that, at least from 1153, the Maltese islands already had their own bishop. Could this sizable community of Maltese Christians have been solely the result of massive conversions or does it point or does it point to the survival of Christianity even under Arab rule?

Finally, there is the famous census that shows the Christians to be a minority in Malta (but not in Gozo) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. I can only quote the eminently logical explanation from Leonard Mahoney in his book *A History of Maltese Architecture* which was endorsed by Henry Frendo in his book *Malta's for Independence*.

Briefly the 1240 census of the number of Christian and Moslem families in the islands as interpreted by Luttrell indicates that there were some 6,000 Christians on the Island (1,250 families). This number corresponds with the number of the slaves in 1050 and given that in those days the population was virtually static this indicates that the bulk of the Maltese slaves constituted the Christian population in later years.

### **On religion and assimilation**

Commenting about the famous passage by Al Qazwini wherein the Arab historian describes the Byzantine raid of 1048, Professor Wettinger asks rhetorically: "Why should (the Maltese slaves) have expected the same death from the invaders as their Muslem rulers if the invasion succeeded?" If some Maltese slaves remained Christians but in everything else, in language, dress, etc., had become assimilated to their Arab masters, they could hardly expect the battle-maddened Byzantines to stop and enquire about their religion. This situation was obvious both to the Moslem Arabs and to the Christian, or partially Christian, Arab[ic]-speaking Maltese. That is why they were told "we shall all be killed if the invasion succeeds."

Curiously enough, Professor Wettinger already had an inkling of the truth. In *Malta, Studies of its Heritage and History* (Malta, 1986), Professor Wettinger tells us that R.W. Bulliet in *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period, an essay in Quantative History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1979) shows how it took centuries for complete populations to switch over from one religion to another. Why is this? For the very good reason – a phenomenon proved to us over and over again – that when a group of people is absorbed by another group by losing its culture, language and religion in the process of assimilating the ethnic features of the stronger group, culture and language are the first to go; religion is the last racial characteristic to be abandoned.

We have already mentioned the Mozarabs of Spain, but a similar behaviour – Of a people adopting the language, dress and customs of their Arab conquerors, but not their religion – could be witnessed in other parts of the Arab world, in Syria, in Egypt, in Persia, as well as in Sicily. Throughout history nations have clung obstinately to their religion as a safeguard of their individuality. For the same reason others have opted for an alternative new religion to that of their stronger neighbour. Thus we find the Irish jealously guarding their old religion because their neighbour, England, had turned Protestant, and Scotland embracing Calvinism because England was, by contrast, Romish.

It is therefore very probable that when, during the Arab occupation, the Maltese slaves started to lose their culture, language, and religion, and to adopt that of their conquerors, there were still some (how many we do not know), who continued to cling tenaciously to their old Christian religion. Human nature is the same everywhere and it would be very perverse to insist that the Maltese behaved differently. To Wettinger's "it is likely that there were no indigenous Christians left for the whole period ca. 1000-1150 A.D.," my reply, based on the experience of people the world over, is a resounding "it is even likelier that there were quite a few Christians throughout the whole Arab occupation."

### **European culture**

The purpose of this article has been to indicate that although evidence is scarce as to what was happening in Malta during the period of Arab political predominance, traditionally taken as 870-1090 one can at least still present evidence that Maltese Christianity survived this period. The exact dates themselves are extensively debated but I feel that this is not so important to the central argument of this particular article. The evidence for the total Islamisation of the Islands during this period is slim and it really is up to the proponents of this theory to prove their case, although a *modus vivendi* must have occurred in Malta just as it did elsewhere.

Finally, this year will see the 900th anniversary of the traditional date of the invasion (liberation) of these Islands by Count Roger of Normandy. Whether this was as dramatic a historical event as we have traditionally thought, might be debated, but its traditional significance to us Maltese cannot. Its significance must surely lie in the fact that this event was the start of the return of the Maltese to the European Western sphere of influence to which we have since been tied. One can be proud of one's tongue and respect other nations' culture, but the fact remains that to our Western Christian culture this event is of unique importance.

At the end of the day a historical event is judged by its lasting effects even though that event may be clouded in the mists of time (cf. St. Paul's coming to Malta – traditionally 60 A.D.). The victory of Western European Christian culture in Malta was total and complete and this was brought home to me recently when in the space of a week I learnt of two colloquial expressions current in Egypt from two different sources. The first in translation is "looking for a Moslem in Malta," signifying "looking for a needle in a haystack" and the second is "Praying for (the conversion/taking of) Malta," signifying wasting one's effort in an impossible task (*tagħzaq fl-ilma*, as we say).

Why is it, therefore, that there are no organised national celebrations for this event? Maybe, our application to join the EEC has been timed to coincide with this anniversary.

*The author is an obstetrician and gynaecologist. He is not a graduate in History and his Ph.D. is in Gynaecological Endocrinology.*

### **Selected bibliography**

Cassady, R F. (1986) *The Norman Achievement*. Sidgwick & Jackson, London.  
Frendo, H. (1989) *Malta's Quest for Independence*. Independence Print, Malta.

- Galea, P.P.G. (1989) *San Fulgenz u l-Agostinjani f' Malta. Fehmiet u Fehmiet*. Media Centre Print.
- Glubb, J.B. (1978) *A Short History of the Arab Peoples*. Quartet Books Ltd., London.
- Hallam, E. (1989) *Chronicles of the Crusades. Eye Witness Accounts of the Wars between Christianity and Islam*. Printer, Portugesa Industria Grafica, LDA, Portugal.
- Hitti, P.K. (1970) *History of the Arabs*. The MacMillan Press Ltd, Hong Kong.
- Luttrell, A.T. (1975). *Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the Knights*. The British School at Rome. Heffners Printers Ltd. Cambridge, England.
- Mahoney, L. (1988) *A History of Maltese Architecture from Ancient Times up to 1800*. Veritas Press, Malta.
- Marzials, F. (1908) *Memories of the Crusades of Villehardoun and de Joinville*. No 333, Everyman's Library. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, London.
- Norwich, J.J. (1981) *The Kingdom in the South*. Solitaire Books, London.
- Norwich, J.J. (1976) *The Kingdom in the Sun*. Faber and Faber Ltd., London.
- Ramsey, John (1973) *Spain: The Rise of the First World Power* The University of Alabama Press, University Alabama
- Runciman, S. (1954) *A History of the Crusaders*. 3 vols. Cambridge University Press.
- Vella, A.P. (1974) *Storja ta' Malta*, Vol I. Edizzjoni Klabb Kotba Maltin, Malta.