

Defining Catholic: a study of individuals self-labeling and legitimizing

by Maxwell Weiss

A B S T R A C T

The Maltese islands and specifically Gozo are generally believed to be a highly religious place. With ninety-eight percent of its residents being catholic, Gozo is one of the most religiously homogenous places in Europe (Cheney, David). Keeping this in mind, I set out to understand the current identity and action of Gozotan youth (ages about eighteen to twenty five) in respect to their religion and moral decision making. My work centered around informal interviews with a young teacher, a construction worker, a waiter, a scuba instructor, a young church volunteer, a recent graduate from seminary school, and a former archpriest of St. George's Basilica in Victoria. Through these talks I learned how young Maltese might negotiate their way through an increasingly complex matrix of outside influences since the country joined the European Union to come to conclusions about their own religious identity.

Definitions

When it comes to discussions of religion it is important to define one's terms in order to avoid confusion. Everybody has some perception of what it may mean to be religious but in individual cases, differences in those perceptions may cause tensions. Since I was interested in individual cases of the Maltese I tried to allow my informants to use their own definitions in order to explain their personal views. In some cases I even asked my interviewees to define terms for me. Using this method I was able to avoid labeling someone as Catholic by their weekly church attendance or observance of the official church law, but instead I label them as Catholic only if they consider themselves as Catholic. I believe that this is the only true measure of a person's religion, since even in a somewhat strictly defined religion such as Catholicism, there is too much room for ambiguity on an individual level to measure one's Catholicness with quantitative variables.

Interviews

Joe and Mike

The way in which I became acquainted Joe and Mike was simply through the exploitation of the physical attractiveness of a fellow field school participant. Sitting at a bar in Xlendi bay, several young men approached my fellow student and began to talk to her. Two of these young men became key informants of mine. Joe is a special needs teacher and commutes to Malta every day and Mike is a construction worker on Gozo. The next night we met them again and after becoming more acquainted, my research interests were brought up. I asked them general questions about their religious views and practices.

Joe was the first to answer. He explained to me that he rarely goes to church because he finds it boring and unnecessary although he may attend on major holidays. His parents continue to encourage him to attend more often as they attend mass every day. Despite the lack of church attendance he was very clear that he considers himself a Catholic. He also will cross himself as he passes a church. He does pray daily and he sees no problem in a drop in church attendance for the Gozotan youth.

Mike, the quieter of the pair, attends church every Sunday. He does live with his parents which may play a key role in his decision to attend mass. He will cross himself when he comes to a graveyard, and will speak to his deceased grandparents when he walks by where they are buried. He considers himself a Catholic but remained quiet on the broader issue of youth moving away from organized, traditional religion, both in Malta and abroad.

Over the next several weeks I spent more time with both Joe and Mike. Their actions did not strike me as anything out of the ordinary for many people in their early twenties but their actions may have broken the doctrine of the Catholic Church. In one case, Mike left work (because of a hangover) claiming he was sick. In order to still be paid for the day he then took an illicit substance so that he could complain to the doctor at the clinic that he had "red eyes" and a stomach ache. He received his doctor's note and brought it to his employer the next day.

Father Max

The next person I interviewed was a recent graduate from seminary school. We met at one of the Festas and arranged to meet again over a beer in Xlendi bay. I began by asking what it meant to be a Catholic to him. He replied that to be a Catholic you must "live it on the inside" or "live the values of the church". The only way to do that is through regular church attendance. He followed this up by saying that by statistics, Malta is one-hundred percent catholic but now

he wonders if the people are actually one-hundred percent catholic on the inside.

The next topic discussed was schooling. Maltese education is divided into two spheres. There are both state and church schools and within their education system the Catholic religion is taught. Max believes that in the church schools there was obviously nothing wrong with this. In the case of the state schools the issue was more complicated. Students are also taught Catholicism in these schools but parents have the option of pulling their children out of class during these lessons. Additionally, some teachers choose to teach other religions but most abstain from this. Since in the Maltese constitution it states that they are a Roman Catholic country, teaching about another religion could be viewed as anticonstitutional. Max did mention with a positive tone that during seminary school the future priests were required to take at least one class in Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam.

The third theme that Max and I discussed at length was the issue of purification. Max believed that although church attendance was dwindling, Catholicism was just going through a period of purification. A lower limit will be reached and the remaining members of the church will be true believers. Max expressed that he would rather have ten believers in his mass than a thousand who wonder.

Finally the topic of divorce was brought up. Malta does not have any legal divorce so when two people separate they are technically still married. Max told me that he would rather not have the church make a big fuss in the government since a bill has recently been proposed that would introduce divorce. He explained that everybody knows the church's position on the matter, but there are people of other religions in Malta and their rights must be respected. The fact that Malta is constitutionally Roman Catholic however further complicates the matter. Additionally, for a catholic politician, separating his secular from his religious life may be impossible. Regardless of the above complications, Max did not believe that legalizing divorce would lower the rates of some of their social problems with separated families and single parents. Instead he expressed a need for more "preventative medicine" before marriage. Currently, a young couple must go to a priest for several sessions before they can receive a marriage license and get married. Many young couples find this useless and an annoyance. Max on the other hand believes that this course should be expanded in order to fully prepare young couples for marriage. This would be the only way to prevent the broken homes that are becoming more prevalent in Maltese society.

James

I met James at the café he works at in the square outside

of St. George's Basilica in Victoria. He told me that he used to attend church every day but he has become too busy and can only currently attend on Sundays. He then told me that most of his friends also attend church and circles of friends often have similar religious practices. He did state that he disagreed with the church's view of individuals who go through gender changing surgeries.

Jake

Jake works as a scuba instructor and bar tender in Xlendi bay during the summer, and is a university of Malta student during the school year. When I first asked if I could speak to him about religion he responded that he would not be able to tell me much since he was an atheist. His father is also an atheist but his mother is Catholic and raised him as such. He has been baptized and confirmed, although he couldn't remember the name for it, but has rejected the Church since then. He stated his belief in Karma and especially the golden rule. He also wanted to make it clear that he does not just treat others well as a means to go to heaven; he does it just because it is the right thing to do, although the source of his right and wrong is up for debate. Jake then explained that many of his friends were also atheists but that it was very rare.

Father Joseph

My fifth interview was with Father Joseph. He was the former archpriest of St. George's and a professor at the University of Malta. As a religious expert I wanted to know how he would define a catholic. He split the term up into three groups.

1. A practicing catholic goes to church at least once a week, is devout, and takes their fate seriously.
2. A non-practicing catholic would be considered culturally catholic. They may go to church on Christmas and Easter and be married in a church or baptize their children, but their relationship with the church does not go beyond that.
3. Default Catholic's values are still catholic but nothing else about them identifies them with the church.

He then went on to explain that a catholic is simply a Christian who is guided by faith by a Bishop who follows the Bishop of Rome. There cannot be catholic fundamentalists because the religion is not up for personal interpretation, only the teaching office of the church may interpret the gospel. There are traditions passed by word of mouth of the teachings of Christ and there is the Bible (which must be seen in context since Jesus sent the apostles to preach and not to write) and so a catholic will live their life in terms of

the Gospel written by the church.

The conversation then moved to the importance of attending mass. Father Joseph expressed that in order to master a religion you must have regular meetings, and if you do not attend, you will fall away from the church (which does not necessarily mean you are no longer catholic because you may come back). Joseph believed that everybody must live their life according to what makes the most sense to them. For him, he would not be a catholic unless it was the most sensible option in life.

Finally, I inquired about a necessity for the church to change in order to stop the loss of members, especially young people since Father Joseph had told me that when he was young everything in mass was virtually the same except it was better attended. Joseph explained that the church should never change its values, instead it must change the way they are applied and presented. For example, when he was the Archpriest he made sure that the music (Gregorian chants) were the best possible. He also stimulated the young volunteer corps by giving them keys to the church and letting them fix problems they may see without permission from higher church officials. He also opened the back of the church up for most of the day so people could wonder back and have conversations with the priests or some of the volunteers. Finally, he digitized.

Francesco

The final few days of my fieldwork were spent speaking with a young volunteer at St. George's. He was in seminary school for a few years but then (for unspecified reasons) changed tracks and is now a University of Malta student in theology as well as the webmaster of St. George's Basilica. Francesco himself was a very committed Catholic, attending mass every day and spending a significant portion of his free time volunteering at the church.

Francesco spoke about the divide between spirituality and religion. Religion has lots of traditions and devotion on Gozo, but he would not consider many people on Gozo deeply spiritual. He thought that the divide is showing especially among young people. Youth feel obliged to attend mass but they do not experience it. Committing sin will not weigh heavily on their conscious but that same conscious will tell them they must attend Sunday mass. This is due to influences from the local culture and their parents. Between seventy and eighty percent of Maltese youth would fit this description. The remaining minority may put all their efforts into their Parish. Francesco thought this is because many people naturally go through a rebellious stage when they discover the world is bigger than their small island. This trend is directly related to the University of Malta being on the main island. He

explained that Maltese students have more time because their parents can help them with daily tasks so they can go to their home parish and attend mass and youth groups. Gozotan students on the other hand do not have that luxury. Of the seventy-five to eighty percent of students from Gozo that decide to go to the University of Malta, sixty to seventy percent live on Malta during the school year. Since their parents are back in Gozo they must be more self-sufficient and have less time for church activities. Additionally, very few students will integrate themselves into a new Parish on Malta. This phenomenon causes a population drain on Gozo, specifically of the population that has the most energy and therefore could help the church the most. Additionally, since Malta joined the European Union, more young people will go abroad (often to western Europe) and come back with a more negative view of the church. They may even stop attending Sunday mass which was something unimaginable only thirty years ago.

Francesco then further broke down the young people on Gozo and their interaction with Catholicism. He explained that the very young are very eager to participate in mass every day. However, now that the children are the offspring of those who started to rebel in the previous generation this may be changing too. Once they receive their confirmation at age eleven, children stop going to catechism school and their relationship with the church may dwindle. Youth between fifteen and eighteen really start to rebel against the church. Peer pressure and a natural inclination to rebel are the two main factors that influence this. As a result, there is a high rate of drug and alcohol use as well as smoking. The shockingly high single mother rate is a direct result of these life style choices. Francesco called the people that engage in these activities as “catholic for the name only” meaning there is no profound meaning to the church for them, it is simply an institution. They will only be involved with the church for Sunday mass; a funeral, marriage, wedding, baptism, etc.; or during the Festa week. For the more involved, church is more of an experience and they abide by the love of Christ and of the neighbor. The primary difference between these two groups is true happiness. Those who look for drugs and sex believe they are happy because they are free but in reality the religious and spiritual people are the ones who have found long term happiness. When people mature more (between thirty and thirty-five) it is not uncommon for them to return to mass daily. This is often triggered by difficult times in their life such when a family member or close friend dies. They also may join bible study groups which may help revitalize their interest in the church.

Conclusions

From the above interviews as well as simple observations (at bars, a dance club, and on the street), Gozotan youth as a whole strongly identify themselves as Catholic, although their actual involvement in the church varies greatly. It appears that each young person finds their own way to legitimize their interaction with the Catholic Church as morally and socially acceptable. From the perspective of a priest or a stricter observer of the catholic gospel, there is less room for individual editing of the moral code put forth by the Vatican in order to legitimize one's own actions. Despite this, religious leaders still consider the Gozotan youth Catholic, even if they may prelude it with “culturally” or follow it with “for the name only”. I believe this is because even amidst increasing numbers of outside influences that may tear Gozotan adolescents away from the Catholic church, the vast majority of them still truly think of themselves as fundamentally Catholic. When they get married it will be within the Catholic Church and when they have children they will be baptized.

In order to more fully understand the complex relationships between Gozotan youth and their church further research is necessary. Although during my time in Gozo I was lucky enough to meet informants from a broad spectrum of religious views, a greater number of interviews and informants would always be helpful. Additionally, further study of those Gozotans who left, or all but left, the church when they were younger and have now returned to mass regularly, living by the gospel, and being spiritually (in the sense that Francesco used it) connected to the catholic doctrine could assist in learning about the future of the Catholic Church on Gozo. Will today's youth come back to the church as their parents did? Is the Catholic Church dwindling on Gozo? Will new legalized divorce undermine the Gozotan culture? These pivotal questions and more have yet to be answered as Gozo moves through what is clearly a transitional and delicate time.

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