

Pact between Muslims and Christians

Stanley Fiorini (*The Sunday Times*, April 4) must acknowledge that there is no hard evidence for the existence of any *dhimmi*-type pact between Muslims and Christians in Malta for the whole Muslim period. The character of the brutal events of 869-870 AD alone should simply rule out the very possibility of such a pact at that time.

Then, only constant vigilance and the presence of a garrison would have prevented the *dhimmi*-status Gozitans from crossing over and gradually re-settling in Malta. And there would have been plenty of archaeological evidence for the existence of such a community through all those centuries down to 1127.

The relatively well-known pact of ca. 1048 was definitely not a *dhimmi*-type pact, as I have explained already in my previous letter and other writings. Christians were not involved, and both Al-Himyari and Al-Qazwini start off by stating that Malta (which must have included Gozo) was then populated by Muslims, and the only Christians mentioned were the Byzantine invaders who were repelled. And Bishop Burchard who reported in 1175 that Malta was inhabited by Saracens was himself no doubt talking comprehensively of the whole Maltese archipelago and

apparently unaware that there was a community of *dhimmi* status Christians on the island of Gozo.

In 1091, Christian captives were found on Malta and they were helped to leave the island by Count Roger's men. On Gozo, no Christians of any sort were reported by his people ashore on that island. A well-known agreement was reached between the local Muslim administration of Malta and Count Roger, but no provision was recorded to have been made for the practice of Christianity on either island, both of which were invaded by the Normans.

The Pact of Old that is reported in the poem must be the one of ca. 1048, thus also indicating that the practice of Christianity had long since died out on both islands and was only resumed in 1127 with the re-conquest of the islands by Count Roger II. The poem even manages to record the expulsion from the island in 1127 not only of the sheikhs but also of their black slaves, the latter forcefully recalling to the reader the *ghabida* of the pact of 1048, who actually then were officially discovered to have outnumbered the free Muslim warriors as both Al-Qazwini and Al-Himyari reported.

Ghabida are normally described in the documents of

the time as black mercenaries. Incidentally, their expulsion in 1127 and later years as indicated in this poem explains why Malta was not left with the ethnic problem that has characterised American history as the result of the large black slave communities planted there by the white slavers of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

I have omitted all the frills in the ca. 140 pp. of the introduction to the book. If Professor Fiorini complains that I have let any baby pass out with the bath water, that is exactly what he has himself done by omitting all reference not only to most of my main points, and especially to the pact of 1048 itself in its two versions. He also strangely avoided any detailed examination of the nature of *dhimmi* pacts in general.

May I finally thank the three scholars for their strenuous labours which have enabled us to obtain a clearer idea of what the population of the Maltese Islands must have passed through during the period of the Crusades and anti-Crusades or Jihads in the High Middle Ages. The introduction itself definitely needs some vital changes and, in my opinion, much structural re-fashioning and re-thinking.

Godfrey Wettinger
St Julian's

Reforming Matsec system would help students

I am in my first year at University and can still remember with perfect clarity what a nightmare my A-levels were. I describe them as such because the material was vast and, when compared with other countries, ridiculously difficult. The level of difficulty can be compared by just taking a look at Matsec past-papers and Edexcel or AQA past-papers.

Our educational system used to be based on the British system (three A-levels); I don't think it would be a bad idea to convert completely to their system.

One can take an Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level in a subject and, if further interest is developed, it can literally be taken to the next level.

This could lead to students experimenting with different subjects and possibly encouraging them to choose subjects that could be conducive to their enjoyment of academic life.

However, the problem with grading always remains. I think it is quite fair that lecturers grade their own students' papers; however, the paper should be jointly set to offer a constant standard throughout Sixth Form schools.

As for Systems of Knowledge (SOK), I think what makes it so irksome to some students is the fact that it is compulsory.

I thought it was a very insightful subject, but too vast. Also, during my two years at Junior College, I had two different lecturers (one for each year). Their teaching styles and methods were entirely different.

Obviously, it is not very likely for two people to have similar, much less identical, styles when it comes to teaching the vast and subjective topics within SOK. At this point, I would suggest seminars for teachers of SOK to be able to discuss possible methods of teaching which could involve the students in field-trips to sites of culture and national heritage, such as the temples in Hagar Qim and various museums, as well as discussions about art in Egypt, democracy in Ancient Greece, the moral side of science, and so on. Debates could also be encouraged.

Also, I would like to suggest that the guidance counsellors, possibly even University lecturers and local companies, give short lectures about potential career and academic paths open to pupils. By doing this, the student may see the bigger picture, even if only marginally, and make informed decisions when choosing to enrol in a particular course.

Ingrid Sultana
Mosta

You made me a better man

To all my mates inside the dry-docks and outside, plus the lovely people I met in the bars around Bormla:

I owe you so much. I was a little boy from Sliema when I started my apprenticeship in the dockyard. To be honest my parents wanted me to be a pen pusher.

I'm 57 now, but I remember it very well. The very first time I came and saw what happened at the drydocks I was petrified, seeing all those men in boiler suits (in the 1970s there were 10,000 workmen at the drydocks). There were ships in all five docks, and more waiting to come in. I remember saying to another apprentice, 'I'm out of here! This is not for me'.

I did not sleep that night and to this very day I think it changed my life and made me a better man. I couldn't help noticing how happy these dirty-faced workmen

looked. I decided to give it a go for a few weeks. I just got hooked; I realised these workmen didn't just build ships, they built real men.

After a few months I was one of them (and still am). I was proud that they dropped my name, and started to call me by a nickname (*damdima*).

I'd love to thank all those who taught me the trade as a welder, those lovely people in the pubs in Bormla and Senglea, and of course the lovely girls that served drinks behind the bar. They all made me who I am now. I can walk anywhere with my head held up high, because I lived and worked with real people.

This happened again with my late sister Anna. She was like me, from Sliema and living in a bubble. Once she started to socialise with you she became a completely different and better

individual. We became closer than ever once she gained your friendship. I need not tell you she died a hero, like all those workers who died doing their job. I can still remember some of them.

I have been missing the life of the drydocks for a very long time. I've lived in the UK for more than 30 years. I still tell great stories to my friends and their children and my two daughters.

I did come to have a look three years ago with a very good friend of mine, Tony Mangion. Honestly my great friends I cried my eyes out. It was like a morgue. I just wanted to get out of there. What have they done to the place where I was reborn?

What more can I say, but thank you all so much for making me and my sister walk tall for having been accepted by you lovely people.

Joe Xerri
Wales

A warning to those who follow the 'progressives'

Those who advocate responsible government spending should not protect those who consume a lot but do not declare their true income.

The advocacy by those pretending to be in favour of transparency, yet keen on resorting to accounting tactics to lower tariffs - which have led Greece, Iceland, Portugal, Spain, Britain and dozens more with deeper pockets than our minuscule islands into near bankruptcy - seems a forewarning to those starting to warm to the 'progressives'.

The self-styled political defenders of low earners place this sector at the forefront, to shield those engaged in the black economy, some of whom would have come from the ranks of the 'workers aristocracy' who have raised such a ruckus over market determined tariffs for eating into their undeclared profits.

Hearing what is planned by one who would wish to lead our people instils the impression that to garner the popular vote he advocates that upright people should shirk the short straw, be it in marriage or in shouldering their share of expenses.

This undoes any pluses Joseph Muscat's 'modern' approach seemed to earn him initially, more so considering he stepped in and secured a seat which he had not contested and for which he was not chosen by popular vote.

Lucky for us, the last democratic vote entrusted our immediate future to a team of people who do not shy away from taking unpopular decisions if these are for the greater common good, such as maintaining the indissolubility of marriage.

Colin Debono
Ghajnsielem

The future of St Luke's Hospital

Back in February 25, 1998, we were informed that there were 57,000 vacant properties.

More and more buildings, including mega developments, are either in progress or in the planning stages.

On May 27 last year, we were informed that there were 1,666 on the waiting list for entry into state old people's homes. One presumes that this number has increased since then.

On July 21 last year, it was reported that the world elderly population would reach 1.3 billion by 2040.

By February 6 this year almost 80 social cases were taking up beds at Mater Dei.

This situation has prevailed since St Luke's Hospital was in operation.

On March 2, we read that our brand new state of the art hospital needs emergency treatment. I just wonder in which department!

It is therefore incredible that on March 4, we read that our Prime Minister stated that the St Luke's site must be developed.

First of all, St Luke's is much more than a simple site to be developed. More disturbing than anything else why be so affirmative and say "must"?

"Intervening in reply to a supplementary question by Labour MP Noel Farrugia which was being answered by Health Minister Joe Cassar, Dr Gonzi was reported to have said he disagreed with turning the former St Luke's Hospital into

an old people's home, even if temporarily." (March 4).

The government said it would decide on the site's development once the world economic situation was better.

National economics were leaning to services, including high quality offices and other upmarket real estate. It was therefore leaving all options open on the site of the former national hospital.

Does anyone blame me if, as an elderly chap, I feel let down and frustrated by our Prime Minister's attitude

I, we, will make sure we have the last say when the appropriate time comes.

Vincent Chetcuti
Sliema

Rubber band technology

The whole of Malta and Gozo blacked out again for the second week on the trot. The problem is due to the rubber band technical approach to providing power for

its nation. What a disgrace on the eve of the Pope's visit. Shame on you Malta.

Phillip Clarkson
Naxxar

The Pope's visit

Stay home and scrape your stables.

The current putrefying stench emanating is suffocating.

Somebody once said "With God - yes; with the Church - no".

Was this a prophecy?

Mary Grech
Msida