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Simon Mercieca SENIOR



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When religious belief was declared dead in Europe, academic interest in religion started to increase rather than decrease. This is attested by the increase in the number of books available that study various aspects of religious dynamism in the past. Victor Mallia-Milanes' new book does not fall under the heading History of Religion as it is normally understood in our contemporary society but it is expedient to state that it is a book about religion. It deals with the relationship of the Republic of Venice with the Knights of Saint John. The latter are now popularly known as the Knights of Malta. More importantly, they are a Religious Order of the Roman Catholic Church. This research seeks to instill a different appreciation of these two political one-time powers by placing them within the framework of what is known as economic diplomacy.

In brief, it is a study of the diplomatic relationship between a country governed by a Religious Order and the Republic of Venice. Venice was one of the first countries in Europe to adopt and become a secular realm, a century before this concept became fashionable during the period of Enlightenment. La Serenissima and the Order of Saint John had one element in common; both were steeped in tradition and both were staunch believers in what Montesquieu termed an alliance between State and Religion.

The Order of the Knights of Malta was the epitome of a power for whom religion and statehood was one and the same thing. After winning many battles, the Grand Master of the Order of St. John became the undisputed head of an island called Malta. In the same period, the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia* became the designated authority to regulate all trading matters pertaining to Venice.

The core of this book is the documentation supported by an extensive historical introduction. The editor of these documents, Victor Mallia Milanese, remains faithful to the original text, setting the correct backdrop to these diplomatic letters, wherein he touches on various aspects of Mediterranean life in the 18th century without shying away from giving us his own interpretation of the history of the period.

These documents are in Italian, which was the lingua franca of the Mediterranean at the

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time. The protagonist is Massimiliano Buzzaccarini Gonzaga, a Venetian knight of Malta and the resident Venetian minister in Malta. He wrote practically every fortnight, providing a chronicle of events in Malta, and sharing his views upon various issues with the *Cinque Savii*. He also recounts trading disputes that arose from time to time between the corsairs operating from Malta and the Venetian merchants operating in the Levant.

These letters, therefore, are not only of great importance to the historian but are also of interest to those who study the history of the Italian language as Buzzaccarini Gonzaga wrote in his Venetian dialect and the diplomatic language of these letters follows the style of the time. The language is balanced and one can sense Buzzaccarini Gonzaga's efforts to diffuse, and to leave behind the drama of previous centuries between the two maritime powers, even if, on various occasions, he had to deal with extremely thorny issues and Malta's legal system under the Knights of St. John, which left much to be desired. Buzzaccarini Gonzaga spent a great deal of energy safe-guarding the interests of Venetians traders, who felt maligned by the actions of the corsairs operating under the protection of the flag of the Knights of Malta. This was the principal bone of contention.

Prior to the suppression of the Venetian Republic by French Republican forces at the Treaty of *Campo Formio* in 1797, the Serenissima had enjoyed 900-years of uninterrupted statehood. Usually, the last decades before the final fall of a Republic are more often than not defined as periods of decline or instability. These documents challenge that assertion. On the contrary, they attest to the various efforts, and the periods of revival. This correspondence highlights Venice's expertise in the way she dealt with other powers. For this reason, these documents offer a beautiful journey through various aspects of Venetian history in the late 18th century and the trade relationship between Venice and the Sublime Porte. These letters provide the reader with more than a glimpse of the last phase of one of the longest surviving powers in Europe. Buzzaccarini Gonzaga writes to the point and avoids the characteristic vagueness for which some of the diplomatic correspondence of the period is known.

One of the strategies advocated in any academic course on International Relations is how to achieve security. The advice is for countries to seek friendly relations with neighbouring giants. This is what the Knights of Malta would seek to achieve for the first time in the second half of the 18th century. In a renewed collaboration, Venice and Malta found a hidden force through which they could face the shared threats, perceived or real, coming from the Ottoman Porte. Both became trusted friends. Venice and Malta began to share economic and defence strategies. They were not interested in wars, rather more in bringing about an economic miracle to help them survive the challenges of the time. For this to happen, both sides realized peace had to prevail in the Mediterranean.

The spirit of the Enlightenment, which began in Italy, more precisely in Northern Italy, with Venice being one of its promoters, would become, in the end, a force of military aggression. Unlike what many of the enlightened thinkers said, or believed, the Enlightenment brought about the creation of new tensions in Europe and the Mediterranean, and as Edward Said would show, produced 19th century colonialism. In other words, by the end of the 18th century, the real threat for the two countries did not come from the East but from the West. It was this same Enlightenment that Venice had proudly embraced which would turn on her and bring about her political downfall.

The diplomats engaged in this exchange of correspondence quite fail to anticipate this end. Perhaps, they were overtaken by what is known as emotional “*authority*”. Both the State of Venice and Malta were overtaken by the dynamism of trade, attesting to the human experiences and the individual needs of the merchant-traders, but, at the same time quite unable to see the storm that was brewing on the horizon. This story extends beyond the period covered by these documents and the protagonists of these documents were no longer there to witness the devastating impact of the French Revolution upon both Venice and Malta.