Emperor Charles V gave Malta to the Knights Hospitallers as a fief in 1530. This was a significant event in the annals of the island because the arrival of these “haughty occupiers” meant that the inhabitants lost the self-government, or universitas, which they had enjoyed since 1428. Nevertheless, this oppressive government had several redeeming factors. First of all, it made Malta a nation. Before the arrival of the Order, the island was considered one of the cities of Sicily, such as Palermo and Messina. Now the knights guarded jealously the “independence” of the island fortress. Secondly, Malta became a secure place to live in. The great siege of 1565 was the last time the “Turks” assaulted the island. Instead, the war was taken into the enemy’s own territory and Maltese as well as foreigners armed their ships in search of rich booty in Ottoman waters. This security made the population grow fivefold, so that by 1798, when the Hospitallers were expelled by Napoleon, it amounted to 100,000. And, what is even more suggestive, the advent of the Order transformed the texture of Maltese society. Previously it was a rural, sparsely settled society. After two and a half centuries, it had become a mobile society, with densely populated urban centers, whose inhabitants were to be found all over the shores of the Mediterranean. This exodus of Maltese was counterbalanced by

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Abbreviations: AAM—Archiepiscopal Archives, Malta; AC—Atti Civili; ACDF—Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede; ACM—Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede; AIM—Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede; AS—Archivio di Stato; ASV—Archivio Segreto Vaticano; Corr.—Correspondence; Libr.—Library; Mem.—Memorie; NLM—National Library, Malta; PA—Parish Archives; Proc.—Criminal Proceedings; RS—Registrum Supplicatorum; SS—Segreteria di Stato; St St—Stanza Storica.

1 Roberto Valentini, I Cavalieri di S. Giovanni da Rodi a Malta: trattative diplomatiche (Malta: 1935).
the influx of immigrants—artisans, soldiers, sailors, actors, musicians and, above all, corsairs, who with their spoils made Malta an active commercial centre.  

This exchange of people was complemented by books. There is ample evidence that Maltese culture was open to European movements and that Malta was by no means an intellectual backwater. At first this assertion seems strange because censorship left little place for independent thinking, as works for publication had to be scrutinized by the inquisitor, the bishop and the grand master. Besides, the clergy were a veritable army, constituting 1.3 per cent of the population. But if this meant the death knell of local literature, fierce intellectual yearning did survive among the privileged few. The literate sectors of society could not be shut off completely from access to the printed word, as the trials of the inquisition amply prove.  

However, this cosmopolitan openness did not stray from reference to God. Two examples from the “crises of the European mind” illustrate this point clearly. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) identified God as the “first and eternal cause of all things.” But nowhere did he suggest that the “First Mover” continued to direct the world and the affairs of men; that is, he made no mention of a divine providence. The Huguenot exile Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) not only argued that, since matter is eternal, providence is redundant, but even claimed that a society of atheists would be as civil and moral as any other.  

Such painful anxieties did not affect the Maltese intellectual scene in the eighteenth century. In the 1768 statutes of the newly erected university, there is a sustained engagement with the arguments of Hobbes. The professor of natural law was to start his lectures by establishing the principle that only God preserved created things. To this end He implanted natural law in men’s hearts, which urged them to

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4 Frans Ciappara, Society and the Inquisition in Early Modern Malta (Malta: 2001), 46-56.
5 Frans Ciappara, Enlightenment and Reform in Malta 1740–1798 (Malta: 2006), 1–5.
6 For the significance of this term see Paul Hazard, La Crise de la Conscience Européenne, 1680–1715 (Paris: 1961; orig.: 1935).