

INTER-CHURCH AND INTER-RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN POST-COMMUNIST EASTERN EUROPE: THE CASE OF ALBANIA

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Introduction

At the end of September 2006, I was invited to give a paper at the NATO advanced research workshop in the Albanian capital Tirana. The workshop's main focus was to strengthen and promote religious co-existence and tolerance for a more secure civil society in the Balkans and beyond. Among the invited speakers were Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, Jewish and Catholic religious leaders as well as scholars from United States, Israel, Italy, France, Austria, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. The conference was organized in a very historic place, the Albanian Museum of National History, which was built during the Enver Hoxha regime, but the pavilion of the icons where the NATO conference was held, did not exist during communism. In fact, the decorated iconostasis and forty eight Byzantine and post-Byzantine colorful icons dating from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries became part of the National Museum only in 1997, after the fall of communism.

The day after the workshop concluded its deliberations, there was a press release by the director of the Millenium Club Center, Mr. Mentor Nazarko, a conference local organizer, explaining the conference's stand on Muslim issues.¹ The

¹ Nazarko, Mentor, *Njoftim Shtypi, Zyra e Marrëdhënieve Publike të Qendrës Millenium Club, Tiranë, October 2, 2006, p. 1.*

Muslim community and the Muslim Forum of Albania protested because of low Muslim participation in the NATO conference and especially about a paper read by the former Albanian President Rexhep Mejdani, who presented the Muslim population of Albania as shrinking to 38.8% in comparison to 74% according to the 1922 census. According to the Muslim leadership the statistics presented by Mejdani were bogus and biased. They also considered Mejdani's sources for such statistics as "not serious enough to be cited by a former Albanian president."² The paper was referring to some recent statistics published in the World Christian Encyclopedia in 2001.³ The October 2 Millenium Club press release clarified that both the heads of the Albanian and Kosovo Muslim communities, Selim Muca and Naim Tërnavë respectively, were invited to the conference. The communiqué explained that the percentage of the Muslim faithful in Albania and the statistics referred to by Rexhep Mejdani in his paper were published data.⁴

Beside the sources mentioned by Rexhep Mejdani, there are other published data that show the number of Muslims in Albania as shrinking in numbers. According to The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), Albania's largest religious groups are as follows: Muslim 43.27%, Christian 40.04%, Non-Religious 11.78%, Atheist 4.64%, Bahai 0.27%, Other 0.01%.⁵ Additionally, according to 2001 East-West Church and Ministry Report the number of Christian Albanians is as follows: Orthodox 1,101,230; Roman Catholic 521,390; Unaffiliated Christians 27,519; Independents 17,000; Protestants 20,000; Evangelicals 6,000; and Pentecostals-Charismatics 100,000.⁶ Both sources testify that the number of Christians is on the rise.

However, it is interesting to observe that the protests and declarations from the

² Pata, Ylli, "Kundërpergjigjen Organizatorët e Konferencës: Reagimi për Statistikat i Adresuar Keq," *Gazeta Shqip*, October 3, 2006.

³ Hoti, Bledar, *Panorama*, October 1, 2006.

⁴ Nazarko, Mentor, *Njoftim Shtypi*, Zyra e Marrëdhënieve Publike të Qendrës Millenium Club, Tiranë, October 2, 2006, p. 2.

⁵ The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_3_1.asp, Accessed August 18, 2007.

⁶ 2001 East-West Church and Ministry Report, Vol. 9, No. 3, Summer 2001, Covering the Former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe, <http://www.eastwestreport.org/articles/ew09302.htm> Accessed August 18, 2007.

Muslim leadership and Muslim Forum of Albania came right after the conference, which once again reinforced the historic exemplary religious tolerance and co-existence among Albania's religions.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze religiously motivated tensions after the fall of communism and their impact on the inter-religious relations among Albania's religious communities. Furthermore, the paper will explore internal and external tensions facing the respective religious communities.

General On-Ground Religious Dynamics

Scholars agree that the revival of religion in Albania proved to be more intricate than in other East European countries. Among the reasons are Albania's multiconfessionality, decades of forced atheism, and the presence of a Muslim majority, which make this country a particularly interesting case study in East European ecclesiastical history. There is a pronounced on-ground tension among three groups, which represent three dynamics: first, Occidentalists or pro-Europeanists, who reject Islam and Orientalists; second pro-Islamic, pro-national multi-confessionalist; and third Albano-Islamists, who promote a European-Albanian-Muslim prototype. The proponents of the first trend were calling for a European, Western-oriented Albania, arguing the return to Albania's Catholic roots as an identity mark. There was a dispute between Rexhep Qosja, a Kosovar academician and prolific writer, and Ismail Kadare, Albania's world renowned writer, on the issue of Albanian identity. Kadare promotes the European identity of Albanians and supports the idea that a divided religious identity brings about a divided nation. On the contrary, Rezhep Qosja is a promoter of the idea of Albania as a multi-confessional country, which although divided among four religions is still united under a common national identity which entails a common language, race and traditions. Albanian-Islamists or the proponents of an European-Albanian-Muslim prototype, which the King Zog of Albania tried to create, think that Albanian Islam is not an impediment for Albania's integration to the European Union. No doubt, the combination of these dynamics is causing tensions among and within Albania's religious groups.

Tensions in the Islamic and Bektashi Communities

The case of Albania's Islamic community is very complex. There is a political-religious stake concerning the relations between the Sunni Islamic community and the Bektashi community. There are also tensions between Bektashi and other mystical brotherhoods of dervishes including the Halvets, Kadiris, Rifais, Sadis, Tidjanis, which have been present in Albania for a long time, with the Bektashi tending to monopolize the whole mystical scene.⁷

Tension and competition amplify with the arrival of various Islamic groups from foreign countries including the neighboring Balkan countries, Arab countries, Turkey, Indonesia, Syria, Egypt, and Malaysia as well as from the European and North American diaspora. Certainly, each of these Islamic groups brings with it its own dynamics, its own interpretation of the Qur'an or its own version of Islam, its own financial power, and its own pieces of the religious corpus from which the locals can draw according to their sensibilities. Additionally, other tensions, like that between Iran and Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the Muslim world, operate in Albania as well. It is obvious that Iran and the Shiite groups try to use the presence of the Bektashi and other mystical brotherhoods to spread their influence in Albania and certainly add to the on-ground tension.

After the fall of communism, Wahabi and Salafi fundamentalist groups began to spread, especially among confused young people. The purpose of these groups is the de-nationalization of local, national Islam in the name of a universal Islam and a fight against Western values. They pay a great deal of attention to the opening of Islamic schools as well as the translation of propagandistic literature in Albania. The Saudis paid for more than half a million copies of the Qur'an to be imported, which so exceeded the demand that a familiar sight in mosques during the early 1990s was numerous unopened boxes of these volumes. The financial aid given to young graduates from Islamic universities from these groups is part and parcel of these organizations' agendas, focusing on the destruction of local historical Islam.

⁷ Clayer, Nathalie, "God in the 'Land of Mercedes.' The Religious Communities in Albania since 1990," in *Osterreichische Osthefte*, Jahrgang 45, Heft 1/2, Wein 2003, p. 291.

Saimir Rusheku, Head of the Department of Education in the Muslim Community, estimated that in 1996 there were 1357 Albanian students pursuing degrees in universities in Islamic countries, including Turkey (350), Egypt (206), Libya (42), Jordan (20), Malaysia (50), United Emirates (14), Syria (50), Lebanon (70), Qatar (120), Oman (17), Yemen (78), Kuwait (26) and Saudi Arabia (350).⁸ According to Miranda Vickers these foreign educated students dominate several Qur'anic schools, Mosques and other Islamic institutions in Albania and display a stronger sense of Islamic identity than older Albanian Muslims.⁹

The graduates from Islamic universities who return to Albania after completing their degrees add on to the on-ground tensions. There is no doubt that in Albania exists Islamic fanaticism, and currently this fanaticism is coming from the individuals trained in Arab countries and not from foreign missionaries as it was initially. Certainly, Albania needs to recognize this danger and stop ignoring the reality. The danger of an Arab version of Islam or the Arabization of Albanian Islam is real. Scholars agree that the material, cultural, and spiritual competition between the various religious personnel has worsened during post-communism, despite continuous references to the so-called traditional tolerance of Albanian religious communities.¹⁰

Tensions in the Orthodox Community

The 1992 appointment of Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, an ethnic Greek and a Greek citizen, by the Patriarch of Constantinople as Albania's Archbishop and leader of the Autocephalous Albanian Orthodox Church, aggravated the delicate situation within the Albanian Orthodox Church. Article 16 of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church statute of 1929 is very precise with regard to nominating of foreign clergy to key church positions. The article reads: "... the

⁸ Nazarko, Mentor, "Religious Divergences in Albania and its Implication to Security in the Balkans," paper read at the *NATO Science for Peace Project Advanced Research Workshop*, Tiranë, Albania, 29 September to 1 October 2006, p. 4.

⁹ Vickers, Miranda, "The Development of Religion in Post-Communist Albania," paper read at the *NATO Science for Peace Project Advanced Research Workshop*, Tiranë, Albania, 29 September to 1 October 2006, p. 5.

¹⁰ Clayer, Nathalie, "Islam, State and Society in Post-Communist Albania," in Poulton, Hugh, and Taji-Farouki, Suha, *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State* (New York University Press, New York 1997), p. 137.

Archbishop, Bishops, their local substitutes, the Ikonomi i Madh Mitrofor, the General Secretary of the Synod, as well as substitute clerics of the Archbishop and Bishops, should be of Albanian blood and language. They should hold Albanian citizenship as well.”¹¹ In contrast to this dictate, currently the Holy Synod of the Albanian Autocephalous Church is made up of a non-Albanian, Greek majority, thus going against the statute.¹²

On religion in post-communist Albania, Donika Omari indicates that in the time of democracy, i.e., contemporary, post-communist Albania, to the traditional religious differences were added other unnecessary and even dangerous differences that are imported from foreign countries. The author is referring to the use of Greek as the liturgical language in the Autocephalous Albanian Orthodox Church in the capital, Tiranë. She is critical of the trend followed by the Archbishop to detach the Albanian Orthodox Church from its national roots.¹³

Furthermore, Fr. Nikolla Marku of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and Eduard Papamihali, secretary of St. Mary’s Orthodox Church in Elbasan have criticized Archbishop Anastasios for his systematic Hellenization agenda. The authors, both Orthodox Albanians, call for an immediate eviction of Anastasios from Albania. Furthermore, the conversion of several Muslim Albanians, who work in Greece, to Orthodoxy, is considered a Hellenization device by the Greek Church on the part of Muslim leadership in Albania. This is causing tensions among Orthodox and Muslims communities. There are also tensions between Orthodox and Muslims, regarding the erections of crosses on public property. Such was the case of the nine meter long cross installed at the national road Tiranë-Elbasan. The setting up of this religious symbol was blessed by the Orthodox Church. The Muslims reacted criticizing the act as an offence of their religious beliefs. According to an interview with the Shkodër Mufti, Haxhi Bashkim Bajraktari, for *Panorama*, the mufti expressed himself

¹¹ *Statuti Kishës Ortodokse Autoqefale të Shqipris*, Korçë, 1929, p. 9.

¹² Hoxha, Artan, “Sinodi I Shenjtë nga Dje nën Kontrollin e Klerikëve Helenë,” *Gazeta Shqiptare*, November 28, 2006.

¹³ Omari, Donika, “Kujt i Shërben Largimi i Feve aga Tiparet Kombëtare?” *Kuvendi eDSH*, <<http://www.edsh.org/diskutime/viewthread.php?tid=1400&page=2>>, accessed 30 August 2007.

against the installation of religious symbols in public squares, saying that Albania is a secular country, without an official religion, where church and state are separated, and, as such, there is no ground for religious symbols on public property.¹⁴

However, one need not forget that Archbishop Anastasios came to Albania, together with other foreign missionaries, to help the Albanian Church rise from the catacombs. No doubt the Orthodox Church has a lot of accomplishments to be proud of and these successes are due to Archbishop Anastasios's leadership.

Tensions in the Catholic Community

In the eyes of Albanians who are coming out of a long period of isolation, more than the Orthodox Church, which by many Albanians is considered Oriental in nature, the Catholic and Protestant emerging churches are considered exemplifications of the West or of Western values. Albanian Occidentalists are in favor of the expansion of these churches in Albania and consider them as representative of Western ideals. However, a distinction needs to be made between the traditional Catholic Church and the newly, post-communist establishment of Protestant Churches. The standing of the Catholic Church in the country is different from that of the Protestant Churches.

Additionally, the stance of the Catholic Church in Albania is particular, as it is the numerically smallest community in the country which still commands a lot of respect among the people and government circles. The fact that a good part of the Catholic clergy is not ethnic Albanian, does not seem to create the same controversy that the 1992 election of Archbishop Anastasios caused. However, there exist internal tensions especially between Franciscans, who historically have been for the most part of Albanian descent, and foreign clergy.

In a 2005 interview with the Albanian independent, *Shekulli*, the late 82-year-old Fr. Zef Pellumbi, an Albanian Franciscan who had spent most of his priestly life in communist re-education camps, regretted foreign leadership in the Catholic Church of Shkodër, and was criticizing both the Vatican and the Albanian government for

¹⁴ Dibra, Ritvan, "Myftiu Bajraktari zbardh biseden me presidentin," *Panorama*, January 11, 2006.

allowing this to happen.¹⁵ There is certainly a disparity between the numerical and political importance of the Catholic Church and its image in the country. Catholicism enjoys prestige in the sphere of culture and sophistication and is credited as the main force in forging Albanian national identity, even by non-Catholics. Catholicism is viewed by Occidentalists as Albania's indigenous faith, to which Albania needs to return, and this as a consequence will guarantee Albania's joining of the European Union.

However, there is much controversy and tension regarding the erection of the bust of Mother Teresa in a distinctive place at the entrance of the city of Shkodër. The project was initiated by the Albanian minister of culture, Bujar Leskaj, on the occasion of the second anniversary of Mother Teresa's beatification. The Muftiny¹⁶ of Shkodër, after many petitions received from Muslim faithful of the city, especially those of the Xhabije neighborhood where the bust was going to be installed, in a press release read by Haxhi Bashkim Bajraktari, insisted that Mother Teresa's Catholicity offends Muslims, if her bust is installed in public property, shared by Muslims and Christians alike. In essence the figure of Mother Teresa, the declaration from the Muftiny reads, is religious and as such the focus of Mother Teresa's mission was the propagation of Catholicism. The Muftiny reminds people that Mother Teresa was beatified by Pope John Paul II exactly for her contribution as Catholic missionary.¹⁷

Conclusions

As analyzed in this paper, there are a lot of religiously motivated tensions in post-communist Albania. Religious tolerance is a must in the current post-communist milieu but religious tolerance does not mean refusing to accept the current religiously motivated post-communist tensions.

¹⁵ Budini, Belina, "At Zef Pellumbi: Shqiperia e Pushtueme prej Prifterinjve te Huaj," *Shekulli*, December 12, 2005.

¹⁶ Organizational districts.

¹⁷ Dushi, Anila, "Myftinia e Shkodrës: Jo Bust, Nënë Tereza ishte Katolike," *Shekulli*, March 26, 2006.