

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIONS IN ALBANIA

The contribution of Albanian Catholic Community in the formation of Albanianism

My paper intend to give a historical panorama of religious pluralism in Albania and the scale of its influence in the formation of the National identity. At the same time, I would like to be focused on the contribute of the Catholic Community in the formation of Albanianism,

In this paper, the following points or issues will be briefly elaborated:

1. The religious composition of post-Ottoman Albania
2. Consequences of mass Islamisation of the Albanian people
3. Platform of Albanian National Renaissance
4. The contribute of Catholic Albanians on Cultural Movement during the Renaissance and Independence
5. The state and religions in the newly constituted Albanian state of 1920s
6. The Communist take-over of Albania at the end of 1944 produced serious consequences for the religious communities.

Ethnically, Albania is homogeneous, more than 95 per cent of the population is made up of ethnic Albanians. The officially recognized minorities are the Greeks, concentrated in the south, Macedonians, Serbs and Montenegrins. In addition to these minorities, there are Vlachs and Roma. This ethnic uniformity is incarnated into the two ethnic sub-groups to which Albanians actually belong: the Geghs in the North and the Tosks in the south, the approximate line of demarcation between them being the Shkumbini River which flows through Elbasan. The Geghs and the Tosks differ from each other in linguistic, historical-cultural and socio-religious secondary characteristics.

The religious composition of post-Ottoman Albania is often asserted to be as follows: 68 per cent Muslims (dispersed throughout the country), 20 per cent Orthodox Christians living in the south of the country and 12 per cent Roman Catholics dwelling in the north. However, these percentages do not reflect the distinction between Sunnis and Bektashis among the Muslims. Considering the profound differences between them, it would be more accurate to say that the population of post-Ottoman Albania comprised about 53 per cent Sunni Muslims, 20 per cent Orthodox Christians, 15 per cent Bektashis and 12 per cent Catholics. An analysis of the population's religious composition by ethnic sub-groups reveals that in the north the Geghs were predominantly Catholics and Sunni Muslims, whereas in the south the two main religious affiliations of the Tosks were Bektashism and Orthodox Christianity.

Emerging from a five-century Ottoman rule, at the dawn of Albanian Independence, Albanians no longer resembled a Christian nation. Moreover, the balance between the different religions was to the detriment of Christianity. Albanian Catholicism once called the *arbanska vera*, was now confined to about 12 percent of population. The Orthodox population was excessively tied to the Greek Church, which continued to identify religion with nationality. The remaining majority, about two-thirds of the population, had converted to the new religion, that is Islam

In the wake of the culture of the East, the new faith, Islam, had also penetrated the mentality of the Albanian, his songs and dances as well; it had left its impressions on his customs and traditions, and had begun even to color the heroic epic songs. This new religion of the Albanians according to its own principles, considered religion and nationality to be identical. If one opens the dictionaries of Arabic and Turkish, he will find the concepts of *din* (religion) and *millet* (nationality) to be synonymous; they have only begun to diverge from each other in contemporary Turkish dictionaries. Mass Islamisation, involving almost two-thirds of the Albanian people, created a factor of differentiation that had consequences for Albania, because it created a series of causes for discord among the Albanian people.

Parts of Muslim Albanians, having the same rights as Ottoman citizens and hitching their destiny to the Ottomans, assumed some of the highest political and military posts in the empire administration. When the Christian peoples of the Balkans began to move towards independence at the beginning of the 18th century, Christianity for them was no longer tied to nationality. Since the earlier stages of Albanian National Movement, the Catholic parts of Albania has followed the way of the other Balkan nations and has served as example for the other segments of the Albanian population.

The Albanians, seeing themselves partitioned by the Treaty of Saint Stephen at 1878, came to their senses and organized the League of Prizren at the end of the 19th century. But the politicians of Europe, having considered them to be Turks, and having decided to banish the Turks from Europe would not think of doing anything for them. This danger opened the eyes of the Albanians at the start of their movement based not on the percentages of Albanian religions, but on the bases of national unity and ethnic appertaining. The League of Prizren leaders didn't confuse the Albanian cause with the Ottoman one and therefore stood apart and did not mix themselves up with the Turks.

In the case of Albania, the Cultural Renaissance preceded in long time terms the processes of national unity, the foundation of the state and at the same time the economic and political post-ottoman formation. The Representatives of the Albanian Renaissance and the great Albanian statesmen understood that a Christian nation could really remain behind because of the Ottoman domination, nevertheless, released from Turks, it was quite possible to be easily and briefly reintegrated in the European Civilization from which it was disjoined. Meanwhile, a people who has considerably changed his religion after the liberation from the ottoman occupation wouldn't so easily and passionately welcome European civilization, because the Ottoman occupation had shaped a different mentality, had

imposed different customs and different law system act. Thus, the Albanians, deprived for the time being from the same religious base, were constrained to use the argument of the same ethnic origin, common customs, linguistic unity to realize nation unity and the achievement of independence. Only believing on these common features was it possible to hope that those would still work as internal propulsive instigators of the political life. Father Gjergj Fishta, one of the most famous scholars and politicians of the Albanian Nation from the Franciscan Fathers Convent in Shkodra, tried to explain to the Albanians the differences which exist between a civilization and another one, between a culture and another one, understanding the fact that culture is product of human spirit. Father Fishta also concretely determined the distinctions which exist between the Asian cultural system and the Western European Culture.

If we scrutinize the history of the Albanian Cultural Movement during the Renaissance and Independence, or the history of diplomatic efforts to achieve the international recognition of the Albanian Question, and finally, if we analyze rebellious efforts of the Albanian against the Turkish occupation, one will easily reach the conclusion that the Albanian Catholic Community has played a decisive and irreplaceable role in the achievement of National Independence. On the other hand, I would like to stress that the same parallel role has been played by the Muslim and Orthodox Albanian intelligentsia, mostly the ones educated in the West. What I would like to say is that Albanian intellectual leadership has been compact in following the national goals.

Albanian diplomatic representation in 1911-1913, especially at the Ambassadors Conference in London and after the First World War in the Versailles Conference in 1919, Filip Noga, Dom Nikoll Kaçorri, Father Gjergj Fishta, Imzot Jacomo Serreqi, all from the Albanian Catholic Community, managed to get rid of the unfounded claim of the neighboring chauvinist circles that "some of the Albanians had fought against them". When Dom Nikollë Kaçorri stood by the side of Ismail Qemal Bey to demand the independence of the homeland, he did not calculate the percentages of the religions in Albania! When Monsignor Jak Serreqi wrote to the League of Nation that in Albania, Christians and Muslims are brothers and want to live in the same state, he did not base his argument on percentages. Only after these prolonged efforts of the Albanians leadership, was Albania created, Albania that we have today.

What I would like to say is that neither twenty centuries of Christianity nor three centuries of Islamisation could sever the Albanian ties with the great Indo-European family. Nevertheless, the nucleus of immigrants from Anatolia within Albanian territories or the inclusion of the Albanian elements in the Ottoman administration influenced the delay of the independence process, obstructed the clarification of the position towards the progress, but did not stop it.

After five centuries of Ottoman occupation, though of a different religious composition, Albania preserved the national identity and the laic content of national ideology in its own Renaissance Movement.

In the newly constituted Albania, I mean, the Albanian state of 1920s, two important factors appear in relation to the organization of the religious Communities. First, the new state opted to have no proclaimed official religion. Secondly, the civil code was adopted in 1928. In this context, three “national churches”, independent of the state, but increasingly controlled by it, were instituted: the Christian Orthodox Church, which proclaimed itself autocephalous in 1922, but was not recognized by the Istanbul Patriarchate till 1937; the Sunni Muslim Community, which declared itself independent of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1923; and the Bektashis, who were driven towards independence by the abolition of the dervish orders in Turkey in 1925. Uniquely, the Albanian Catholic Church maintained close ties abroad, with Vatican. Where the Muslims are concerned, two important developments should be noted: First, leadership of Sunni Muslim Community from the end of the 1920s was provided by reformers, and secondly, the Bektashi Order acquired *de facto* the status of a full-fledged and distinct religious Community with its own statutes and organization, despite remaining officially attached to Sunni Muslim Community till 1945.

The Communist take-over of Albania at the end of 1944 produced serious consequences for the religious communities. While all religious activities were banned in 1967, during the so-called “cultural revolution”, the authorities had been fighting against them since 1944. Many clerics from all religious persuasions, especially from Catholics, were sent to the jail or killed, land and goods belonging to the communities were confiscated, many religious schools were closed, and the liberty of press was suppressed. Under these conditions it was only at home and in secrecy that the religious traditions, Muslim as well as Christian, could be preserved and transmitted.

The persecution of the Albanian Catholics was a genuine genocide that bears no comparison with any assault on any other compact section of the population in Albania. Historically, the patriotism of the Albanian Catholics and their contribution to culture and politics were unquestioned until the day the communists took power and started to persecute them in their maniacal fashion. The reasons for this attitude are clear today. Prof Giuseppe Valentini a well-known Italian albanologist, points out that their natural outlook was toward the West and that their philosophical, theological and legal cast of mind was entirely opposite to that of communists. “Being cultured and with a very high level of education, the Albanian Catholics had always aroused some people’s jealousy”. Thus, the communist regime, under the order of his fanatic leader Enver Hoxha, exterminated from the ranks of the Catholic intelligentsia not only those it considered active enemies, but also those who were reckoned simply to be “potential enemies”. Besides, their extermination obliterated Albania’s chances of turning its eyes towards Europe. The destiny of the nation rested on the hands of a former tinsmith, Koci Xoxe, former Minister of Internal Affairs, who had emerged from the filthy shanty towns of the most Hellenophile section of the Orthodox population; an initiate of left-wing freemasonry of France; and some segments of non-Albanian origin or former employees of ottoman administration who at that time embraced communism.

Moreover, this was also a sign that Hoxha's dictatorship system and his inheritance was not exclusively Stalinism. It was a perfect tradition of backstairs intrigue and political wheeler-dealing.

In the historical sense, it might be said that their extermination had heavy consequences for the actual situation of the Catholic community. Since 1992, the improvement of the Catholic position has not been a goal of any political governmental party, although there were some signs of changing it in the period 1992/1996. The Catholic community today still continues to be out of any satisfactory representation at highest ranks of the Albanian administration, the diplomatic service, and generally out of an equal treatment which is characteristic of a real and pluralist democratic society. I would like to stress that such an attitude constitutes a huge deficiency for the integration capacity of Albania in the European Union.

Since the end of 1990, following the collapse of the Communist Regime, religions have reappeared in Albania, thus drawing the attention of many observers in the neighboring countries as well as in more distant ones, and attracting numerous missionaries of various persuasions. After fifty years of Communist rule (during twenty of which religion could not be practiced openly), significant numbers are either atheist or, while retaining their faith, do not attend places of worship. Only people over sixty and certain families have kept the tradition alive. Consequently the young – a very high percentage of the population- are now targeted by all the religious missions. So, the percentages given in the first part of this paper are not valid for the Albanian situation after 1990, in the sense that we have not an update of the religious percentages for nowadays.

As a conclusion:

1. After five centuries of Ottoman occupation, though of a different religious composition, Albania preserved national identity and laic content of national ideology in its own Renaissance Movement.
2. Albania has a laic state and the religions are separated from the state.
3. The amalgamation of Muslim religion with ethnic and national identities is not an argument which can readily be applied in the case of the Republic of Albania where there is no direct confrontation with non-Albanian elements and about 30 per cent of the population is of Christian origin. At the same time we have to understand that the religious situation in Albania after 1990 is rather different from the traditional figures
4. A division between two mentality represents a potential danger for the disintegration of any nation. The inclusion of the Albanian elements in the Ottoman administration influenced in the delay of the independence process, obstructed the clarification of the position towards the progress, but without stopping it.

5. In the case of Albania, there is a movable cultural reality, that is to say, it is a country which faces within his national borders two different traditions, each with his own criteria of judgment and with their own different historical stands towards modernity. Nowadays, these two traditions are not fully based on the religious considerations and appertaining, they are mainly founded on the educational and civilization systems which influenced the contemporary Albanian citizens.
6. In Albania where there is no ethno-religion-based confrontation within the country, the strategy of identifying national identities with religious ones does not appear so fruitful. Furthermore, Western propaganda appears stronger and has greater advantages especially among those individuals attracted by the West. Those attracted by the West are mostly young and educated town-dwellers and intellectuals. One of the advantages enjoyed by the Christian churches is that many Albanians have had to travel to Italy, Germany and Greece to work or to study.
7. Generally, Albanians today, based on their traditions, have achieved a consensus in the unified presentation of their desires and problems, starting not from the religious considerations, but from national considerations.

What I would like to add is the fact that today Albanians, apart from the religious appertaining, incline mostly towards a full integration of their country in the European Community.

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