

The Religious Cults of the Albanian Faith during the Early 20th Century

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Abstract

During the early twentieth century, Albania was visited by various British and American people who were eager to know about the curious features of this little country's particular life. They had heard of it in their homeland and chose to trace a reality that was much different from the one they were used to. The materials they wrote and published, constitute a reliable source of information, whose analysis from the modern perception draws a picture of the life almost a century ago. This paper aims to describe the particular context of the relation that Albanian people had created with God and the way the religious life was shaped through the traditional rituals of the country. A few of the arguments that will be analyzed are: the way the religious faith was integrated in the daily activities, the religious tolerance in the state policies and the way it was reflected in the life context, religious attitudes due to the historical development of the past centuries, the influence of the new entries of the '30s, the restricted intercourse of the northern Albanians due to their geographical isolation and the pagan rituals and symbols of the traditional ceremonies. The Albanian way of worshiping seems to have been shaped by life pragmatism, social equilibrium and personal honesty. Nothing can describe it better than the people who lived with it for some time and were able to define it from a different mental perception. The description may supply modern insight of the particular attitude that this country reflected in early in the past century.

Keywords: religious faith, pagan symbols, traditional traits, bloodfeud, religious conversion and tolerance.

The early 20th century was a period in which Albania became a country of concern for the international dialogue. It was a small isolated piece of land lagging behind the development rates of other European nations and trying to survive after centuries of voiceless history. Its name was increasingly being mentioned in European newspaper articles, which struggled to judge the decisions of the Six Powers on its territorial integrity. When finally, its international position was established, in the end of the year 1920, philanthropic organizations were the first ones that entered its territories. Their reports back to their motherland rose the interest of the journalists, who started to publish newspaper articles about the unusual character and lifestyle of the Albanians. During the 20s and the 30s of the last century there were many sociologists, anthropologists, economists, journalists, tourists, historians and politicians who chose to visit this country. Research on the British and American corpus of literature written about it during this period reveals an interesting perspective of the main historical issues, human values and social relations in this country. Visiting its territories at the time is described as entering a middle ages reality and witnessing human traits of life that the modern conception had already forgotten long ago.

Furthermore, during this period Albania was experiencing a new governmental form, the Royalty, which in fact deepened the contrast between the social strata and affected the way social relationships were managed in the country. One of these, the Albanian religious context, is largely described in the British and American writings of the period, as a strange interweaving of the religious communities that during the centuries had shaped their own profile in the same motherland context. The Albanian had inherited a distinct attitude to the religious faith and, even though in different periods had considered it a means of political, social and economic power, in the daily life he had not given up the way his ancestors

had worship God in their particular ancient way. Due to the fact that signs of these particular features were still evident during the three first decades of the 20th century, made the British and American visitors, meditate about the reasons why the daily practices of the Albanian spiritual life were much different from the formal practices of the respective religious bodies in the country. In order to understand that, it is necessary to review the way these writers describe the actual state of affairs of religious faiths in Albania at the time and the way they relate it to the historical developments of this country.

- *Albanian religious faiths of the early 20th century*

One of the main features of the religious division in this country was the shape of the very different geographical features of its northern, central and southern territories. The sharp relief of the northern regions had always been hard to penetrate and it was regarded as a hindrance to physical and psychological communication; neither of the numerous weaves of the invaders had been able to control the entire region. Therefore the most remote areas had managed to preserve life features of a long past and had been left undisturbed in their daily practices. In terms of religion they remained Catholic, while the regions the main cities, their surroundings and the villages that were along the main roads, had converted into the Islamism during the Turkish invasion. Most writers believed that the religious conversion in southern and central Albania was not simply a matter of faith principles; it was regarded as a means of official survival for the Albanian authorities, who, otherwise, would have lost their position and wealth.

The period of the 1921-1939 had inherited the unusual features of the above historical developments; the religious areas of influence are reported to have been well defined one from the other. In 1930 the Albanian government undertook a formal registration of the population within the territories. Its relevance was undisputable, especially because of the data it introduced on the religious belonging of the population. According to the numbers that Edwin Jacques (an American educator who lived in Albania for some years in the 30s), there were 696 000 Moslems, 200 000 Orthodox and 105 000 Catholics; only 85 people were classified under the definition "others" and this number included even 24 atheists. In the view of a historian, Jacques concluded that "the presence of 71% Moslems, 10% Catholics and 19% Orthodox, mainly in the south, made Albania the country in which the religion and nationality were not virtual synonyms of one-another". (Jacques, 1995, 437). Furthermore, Albania at the time had opened its doors to the Jewish community, who was escaping the German discrimination. In spite of its shortage of national wealth and legal security, this small nation showed that it could also be distinguishedly described as an anti-Semitic country. (Roucek, 1939, 85)

Vandeleur Robinson (1941), who visited Albania in the late 30s, wrote about another religious sect. In Elbasan he came across group of *Uniates*, who represented a particular profile of the orthodox faith in Albania. According to his explanation, the Uniates used either the Greek, the Old Slavic or even the Albanian language in their liturgical ceremonies. The Uniates priests could marry (a feature of the orthodox religion); however, they recognized the authority of the Pope of Rome as well. In general, at the time, the Uniate community in Europe aimed to settle a compromise between the orthodox faith and the political position of the people who practiced the Latin rites. The author, also claims that the foundation of this community, was itself an act of compromise. When the Austrians and the Hungarians invaded orthodox communities, they tried to denationalize them by converting the population into the catholic faith. The orthodoxy reacted with great dissatisfaction and the Uniate sect offered a satisfying solution for both parts. "In the political point of view", explains Robinson, "the Uniates are the Pope's "Fifth Column" in the Orthodox Church, in his perpetual struggle for souls; they are the means by which obstinately Orthodox communities in Catholic countries can be pulled half way over the border. The Vatican sometimes finds it worthwhile to expand money upon Uniate communities; and the Uniate Church at Elbasan is a case in point. Even though religious proselytism was forbidden by law in Albania, the religious sects tolerated each other sufficiently and the worst negative reaction to the Uniates, would be that of being far too much aware of the "value" of their souls". (94)

In the writings of this period, one can frequently come across the description of another religious group, the *Bektashi*, which is described as a mediation bridge over the gap that divided the three main religions. According to Carleton Coon, an American anthropologist that carried out research about the inheriting brachycephal characteristics of the northern Geghs (inhabitants of the northern Albanian), the duality feature of this sect was due to the fact that the Albanians had managed to preserve some pagan features of the way their ancestors had worshiped their Christian God. (1950, 35) At the time, the Bektashi community was enjoying a safe position in the Albanian religious setting; some privileges had been given to it since the time of Ali Pashe Tepelena, who had encouraged its expansion as a way to detach the Albanian Moslems, in the territories in which he was imposing his rule, from the Turkish influence. Since then, they tekkes, had served as shelters of the national movements. According to Bernd Fischer (2004, 170) during the thirties, the expansion of this sect had also

been encouraged by the government of King Zog I. New tekkes, were reconstructed in the southern territories; they welcomed visitors very warmly guided by the principle of the general truth and the fact that all nations were to be given the right to exist and develop freely, in spite of their religious faith. This explains the touch of tolerance that is witnessed in all of the writings about the Albanian Bektashi during this period; it is described as a religion whose main principle was fraternity and love for the humankind. It believed in the fact that religions should collaborate and inspire harmony among each other for the sake of the national interest safety. (Swire, 1937, 254)

A relatively new religious faith that is reported to create a sustainable community in Albania in the early thirties, is *Protestantism*. It is not frequently mentioned, and it seems like not frequently witnessed by the foreign visitor. This may be due to the fact that the above five God worshiping forms had left very little space for the Albanian to involve himself in an international spiritual communication. The Albanian reading of the Bible and Koran had long cling to the national tradition and was used as a means that inspired power and safety in their motherland context. Yet, when the first American missionaries introduced the idea that God can listen to you, especially if you talk to him in schools of your mother tongue, Protestantism was embraced by the education lovers in Albania, who thought it could contribute to the spread of education in the Albanian tongue. Edwin Jacques was one of these American missionaries who arrived in Albania with the aim that some direct solution should be introduced to the many problems of the daily life in this country. The Evangelic Mission headquarters were set in Korçë after the year 1936, where it offered a Saturday School, in which 400 children were regularly enrolled. One year later, the Mission opened a reading room, of mainly biblical literature, which opened its doors to the young boys. Even though, their discussions were not reported to be always about religion, at least, according to Jacques, this leisure activity kept them away from the street and club influence. (<http://reforamtion.edu/albania/pages/protestantism-albania.htm>) In spite of the efforts of the missionaries to enlarge their religious influence in other regions, social strata and directions, it became more and more difficult for them to face the pressure of the Albanian government. At the beginning of the year 1937, the later approved a decree of law which controlled strictly the publications that "threatened the national unity, or that were against the principles of the moral, the customs and the national regime in Albania". (*Ibid.*) Even though the decree was launched to restrict the communist writings that had started to circulate frequently in the country, it affected somehow the position of the Mission. The fact that the government arrested four Albanian young boys who wanted to be baptized according to the protestant rites, showed that this faith had not yet earned the trust of the government, who was too busy trying to provide enough space to the other five religions in its small territory.

- *The social and political state of the religious groups*

If taken into consideration the above description, it is quite difficult to escape the thought that there was full tolerance in Albania between the various religion sects. Even though this is the general view of the people who had visited it, the description of various situations in their writings reveals a particular attitude with the way the formal bodies of the religion in this small country managed to worship God in the way their religious principles inspired, and still bring it close to the very particular way that the Albanian were used to worship God.

The late twenties and the early thirties are described as years in which the government of King Zog I, tried to establish the formal bodies of the three main religions, in order to make them recognizable from their counterparts in the neighboring countries. It was not an easy issue to handle, due to the fact that religion had long been considered by them a means for territorial expansion. The King helped the Albanian Orthodox community to get the autocephalous tomos from the Patriarch in Istanbul. (Vickers, 2001, 135) He also encouraged the organization of a congress of the Moslem representatives in Tirana, which concluded that the Albanian community was independent form the Caliphate of Istanbul and declared that "the Albanian Moslem owned their faithfulness primarily to their motherland." (Swire, 2005, 329)

On the other hand, in order to flag impartiality and to diminish the chance of religious interference in the governmental issues (a common practice at the time), the Parliament passed a law in 1930 which declared that Albania was a nonsectarian country; this "gave the right to the State to control all of the religion communities and (...) to require the religious leaders of the formal bodies to be of the Albanian origin and to be able to speak Albanian language." (Fisher, 2004, 169) The aim of these measures was to settle the contradictions between the religious faiths, contradictions that were becoming more and more evident in the middle and upper classes of the Albanian society during the twenties. The reasons for these went beyond religious principles themselves and were mainly economic; willingly or unwillingly the government could not escape the partiality. Back in the early twenties, Harry Eyres (the British government representative in Albania) wrote to the Foreign Office in Britain a declaration in which the following paragraph appeared: "I have been talking to ministers and they insist on the fact that there should not be any difference between the two main religions. (...)"

"Yet" they say, "we Moslems constitute the majority, and as a result, we should have the power". The Christians of the other hand (...) claim that they would submit to a government which represents the majority, not the superposition". (Cited in Vickers, 2001, 108)

This attitude was gradually reflected in the political treatment that was being done to the Christian population of the south. There was an economic approach of the way the government was building its relations with each of the religious sects. The government was aware of the fact that most of its income was generated out of the fertility and the economic activity of the south-eastern Albania. The economic relevance of Korça and Gjirokastra was undisputable and that's where most of the state income was generated in the form of taxes. Yet very few investments were done in these areas on the behalf of the government. Being mostly orthodox, the inhabitants of these areas were time after time revolting against "the privileges and the benefits that the Moslem landowners of the central Albania were receiving by the government. They were also dissatisfied with the employment of many clerks of mainly Turkish education, who most of the time made personal profits from the administrative functions they had. (Swire, 2005, 324) The Christians were increasingly hoping that their political power would increase in proportion to the civilization trends, their European education or their increasing economic power; however, this was still a utopic dream for the situation that ruled in Albania at the time.

- *The religious cults and rites*

The above political and economic description of the discrepancy between the religious sects in Albania is part of the analysis of most authors whose focus was on the economic and historical perspectives of this small country at the time. Yet, other people who visited Albania during the first half of the last century, and especially those who chose to travel across it territories, introduce another point of reference for what is generally described as "the Albanian religious tolerance". R. W. Lane visited the northern territories and she entered a lot of Albanian houses of the three religions. In her diary that was later published in the book "Peaks of Shala", she writes about a much softer inter-religious communication. The reality she visited was much different from the one she had been used to see in other countries, or had earlier read about Albania. She came to know that what mattered in an Albanian house was honor and hospitality and that "as long as you believed in God, it did not matter through which religion you did it." (Lane, 2004, 59) This is why religion in those territories was mostly concerned with the daily problems of the Ghegs. It had understood that when the Ghegs referred to God and to the Cross their veneration went first to Sun. (Swire, 2005, 39) The Church did not even try to change much of the ancient traditions of the Albanians; even when it did, it had resulted useless. The Ghegs were ardent Catholics and they attended the Mass regularly; however, they still buried their people without putting them in a coffin, taking care to put three apples on their chest and carving on the gravestone a cross on a symbol related with the Sun background.

The above practical approach of the way the Albanians believed in God, was the reason why most of the reflections of the writers who dealt with this life issue traced it back to the symbolism of the pagan origin of their ancestors. They claim that due to the fact that the northern territories were remote places, isolated by the communication not only with the outside world, but also with the rest of their country, their inhabitants were gifted the right to preserve customs which the global communication had changed entirely in the rest of the Balkans. Maybe this was the only advantage of their natural and social isolation. Since there had been little invasions of these territories, they had not intersected their race with others so as to change the genetic characteristics. According to Carleton Coon, the Albanian Ghegs preserved physical characteristics of the Aryan race, thanks to the lack of the intercourse with other races for a significantly long period of time in their life for centuries. This was the main reason why the pagan elements that accompanied most of the religious symbols were obvious in many of the daily practices of the Ghegs. Rosita Forbes wrote in 1929: "Both Christians and Moslems worship a particular catholic faith; this is due to the fact that they relied on their ancestors' gods and involve themselves in the interspiritual migration without much effort. (...) They put a coin to the mouth of a dead body to help him cross Styx (the river of the afterlife) (...) The new Moon and the Sun are part of the prayer rituals as symbols of the light and darkness, and in some regions the Stone is even holier than the Cross." (Forbes, R. "Ne token e Ligjt te Pashkruar" The Sphere, 16 nentor 1929). This point of view was earlier supported even by Edith Durham who noticed that in the tattoos of the males of the northern families the cross was accompanied by a half-moon on top or sometimes below; the side wings of the cross might also end in small circles, or the cross itself had the form of circle of the Sun. The author concluded that the cross was there to reveal their Christianity, while the other elements represented the sun, the light, and the goodness. When the men were Moslem, their tattoos had the form of a star shaped by triangles, which she claims stood for the sun rays. In the Moslem graveyards, it was common to come across a circle (which stood for the sun) and a sickle (which stood for the moon). Durham concludes: "The Albanian Moslem has never fully detached itself from the Christianity, he has rejected the cross,

but has kept the ancient pre-Christian symbols: the Moon and the Son". (Durham, 1990, 474). The author traces the above veneration back to the Illyrians' cult of the Sun; they worshiped it as the God of health, of fertility and the source of life.

Another pagan common practice in Albania, used by both religions, was "the blood brotherhood"; this is described as a ceremony when two members of different families without blood relations, become brothers after the ritual of drinking each-other's blood. After that their heirs could not engage in marriage relationships with one another and could take respective responsibility in case of honor and bloodfeud. The Albanians of the '20s and '30s did still believe in prodigy and divinity. They also practiced the rites of "the godfather of hair" and "family welfare foretelling" out of home farm animal bones.

From the point of view of the social anthropology these rituals were explained as a means to preserve the social equilibrium of the Ghegs. It should be understood that the modern tools of the birth and death control were an unthinkable perception for the time. Mothers had to give birth to many children, preferably sons, since very few of them survived childhood due to very bad sanitary life conditions or due to high rates of the bloodfeud. The rites were psychological tools of strengthening the ties between families and tribes that had no other way but the Law of Lek to feel part of a community. They engrained the old customs and adapted the Gheg attitude to the geographical and social feature of their living context. Since they satisfied the particular social needs of the Ghegs, they are reported to be more powerful than the church or the mosque sermons and to be worshiped by both religions indiscriminately. This is why most authors conclude their explanation of the above phenomenon with statements like the following one, which has been removed from J. Roucek's analysis: "The Albanian does not cling tenaciously to the religion and the religion is not an inhibition to the social brotherhood between the Moslems and the Catholics in this small country". (Roucek, 1939, 86)

- Conclusion

The above idea seems to have been forged during the centuries due to the need that the Albanians had had to feel part of the same nationality in order to survive the territorial greed of frequent foreign invasions. While the invaders used the formal religion bodies and policies as a means of denationalization, the basic principles of the religion used by the population did not aim to deepen the national geographic divisions and neither to retrograde the principle of individual distinction due to religious faith in a national rank. In 1939 J. Roucek wrote: "Albania is the only country in the Balkans where the religion and the nationality cannot be perceived as synonymous". (86) In a very particular observation in a monastic house in Delvine, the orthodoxies of the south had taken care to hang in the wall, above the fireplace, the picture of the Skenderbeg (the national hero), that of King Zog I and some others of the orthodox personalities. Coon noticed that sayings of the kind "Albanians are not religious people" were commonly heard in daily discussions. It was a proud statement since an otherwise management of three religious faiths in such small territories would definitely threaten the political unity of the country. To a certain extend that was a true reflection because the Albanians of the time were not religious devotees. The Sunni Moslems practiced the full rites of their prayers only in the Mosques and you could rarely see them pray at home, in the street or in the workplace. Most of the British and American writers reported that few of the Albanians were concerned about their spiritual salvation through religion. The very well-established inherited customs were shaped so as to directly contribute to the spiritual chastity and this diminished the role of the religious preaching in this aspect. Coon (1950) wrote: "The Albanian is a devout of his "blood" and his family, whose safety he fights to preserve at all costs". (37) The uniqueness of this particular worship moved the Albanian faith away from the foundation principles of his religion. His approach was more practical, more focused, more earthly. He inclined his faithfulness to a more national God, who spoke Albanian and who had made himself usefully available to his ancestors. Therefore, even though he swore by putting his hand on the Cross, he knew that his oath would only be available if it was done over a stone, his sacrament symbol. In a word, the Albanian way of worshiping God seems to have been shaped by life pragmatism, social equilibrium and personal honesty. The modern perception can find in it useful particularities that may enable a better understanding of the way its attitude has been shaped throughout the centuries.

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