

THE REVIVAL OF RELIGION IN ALBANIA AFTER 1990: THE MUSLIM, ORTHODOX AND CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

After the overthrow of the communist regime, which was a materialistic spirit and based all development and life on its own forces, the cultural-religious life resumed. The people in this chaotic religious beginning despite having religious objects and knowledge of their religious background were still very limited in their religion.

During this time many missionaries of all religious beliefs, tendentious groups, different sects took place in Albania proclaiming their platforms using many methods to attract the youth towards them. In this direction, neither words nor numerous investments were spared in the direction of initiating the youth to become part of them. During this time, the well-known religious leaders and representatives who, because of their religious attitudes, spent part of their lives in communist prisons, resumed their mission.

Considering the importance of this topic the aim of this paper is to highlight the steps that were undertaken by religious communities in Albania after the end of the communist era, to revive the religious life in the country. Another important objective is to unveil the tortures and persecution that religious clergy faced from communist leaders and representatives.

Actually, in Albania there are five official religious communities, but in the scope of this research paper are Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic communities.

Keywords: religion, revival, Islam, Christianity, communism

Introduction

For centuries, Albanians have been living in interreligious harmony and coexistence, which is already the main ethnotype of our nation. With the establishment of the Albanian state in 1912, in addition to many values that the statesmen attached importance to, among them prominent Muslim and Christian clerics, one of these values was freedom of belief, as one of the basic human rights. in any democratic society. It was part of Albanian society until the installation of the communist regime in 1944.

With the advent of communism, this process took a turn, as many Muslim and Christian clerics, who were aware of the struggle of Bolshevism and

communism against religion, had warned. The communist state was not a purely secular state, but a state that aimed at the total secularization of society and its transformation into an atheistic society. In the first phase, the violence exercised against the clergy by the communist regime limited its authority in the community and gradually made its existence impossible. Later, in 1967, the campaign to close churches and mosques made Albania the only country in the world without the rights and freedoms of practicing religious beliefs.

The revival of religious beliefs from grace, right after the fall of communism, has had as many difficulties as the establishment of the pillars of a free, civil and democratic society. After an

unprecedented persecution and genocide of the semi-patriarchal structure of the Albanian society with the disruption, submission and terrible totalitarian surveillance, through the infamous class struggle, for the sake of the masterpiece of socialism "young man", the impression was created that God no longer returns to the land of samples and that with the "young man" rinsing seemed a finished process.

That is what communism had decided. But a popular saying goes: "*man decides, God moves*". Thus, the recovery of the edifice of faith began from its ruins, in a state of pronounced theological and doctrinal bankruptcy and with a prejudiced and indifferent psychological background. If today we can boast of the great influential power of religious communities in society, this is without question the work of those spiritual leaders who bore a great and difficult burden in man's lost ties with God. And the opening of paths is always, it is known, as important as that of those who follow these paths.

The Albanians, who were not guilty of anything, were isolated from society for almost half a century, subjected to political oppression, economic warfare, violence by the political police, innocent sentences by the courts, the prohibition by law of religion and any religious rite, etc.! All this period had significantly affected the society of the country where many had come to terms with this bitter reality while many others continued their attempts at resistance. One of the most important issues that kept alive the desire to oppose a destructive system like communism was precisely religious sentiment.

Many clerics had been unjustly imprisoned and died in their cells as a result of cruel torture, and some of them had successfully completed their sentences and gained their missing freedom. The end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s would mark the great turning point in the history of Albania. The communist system was already in its final throes and society began to see light at the end of the tunnel. After the fall of communism, there were many reforms that were undertaken, such as the democratization of the country, reforms in the economy and reforms for the reopening of religious institutions.

It is the end of 1990 that would mark the beginning of a new life for Albanians. This is full of challenges and unknowns due to the isolation that the country had gone through, which had caused the backwardness of society compared to neighboring countries and Europe. Albanian society still suffers today from the consequences of the "*young man*" created by the communist system. It aimed to be a man without religious affiliation, without faith in God

Religious revival in Albania and the challenges of transition

With the prohibition of religion by law in 1967, Albania was already the first and only country in the world declared as an atheist state with a constitution. Despite all the attempts of the communist regime it is noticed that they never managed to remove from the hearts of the people the desire to believe. For this reason, in the early 90's we talk about the rebirth of the faith which for fifty years "*lived imprisoned*" in the hearts of the people. Immediately after the fall of the dictatorial regime, all religious communities took concrete steps to reopen, rebuild, restore and revive religious life in the country.

The dictatorship, with its savagery, banned the teaching of religion from schools, closed all schools aimed at preparing religious staff, suspended the religious press and publications, seized all personal libraries with religious literature, banned the operation of religious facilities, and hindered the development of rites. religiously, he turned mosques into warehouses and stables and destroyed and razed most of them. Out of 1127 mosques that were in 1967, in 1990 only a few were counted. He imprisoned and shot the most prominent imams, and interned some of them, leaving them unemployed, forcing them to take off their religious garb and deny their views. In short, he tried every means to destroy everything that had to do with the religion and the religious feelings of the people. (Demetja, 2021).

The reopening of the first church and mosque in Shkodra and Albania in November 1990, after a long ban of almost a quarter of a century, was an expression of interfaith harmony and brotherhood in the face of the communist regime still in power.

The young Muslim and Catholic boys cooperated in preparing the ground for the development of the first mass in the Catholic cemetery of Rrëmaj. Someone said that the police forces were coming and would arrest the young people who were working. One of the Catholic boys said to his Muslim friends: *"Get away! You at least save. We are determined to die here under the shelter of this church."* *"If it's about dying for this sake, we will die together,"* the Muslim boys replied. *"We are not moving any step until they kill us."*

All this is an indication of how Albanian society perceived religion and what role they recognized in the human brotherhood, respecting basic rights, such as belief in God, religious practices, etc. To speak in more detail, it is precisely these two precedents that make it possible to lay sound foundations for the revival of the faith. Initially, the first public mass took place on 4 November 1990 in Rrëmaj, and the first priest to held the preach was Dom Simon Jubani from Shkodra. Secondary, the reopening of the Lead Mosque in Shkodra took place on Friday, 16 November 1990 held by Hafiz Sabri Koçi¹ who started his speech by saying *"dear Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox brothers, and above all Albanian brothers"* (MCA, 2017).

Regarding this significant day, the former mufti of Shkodra, H. Faik Hoxha, writes, among other things: *"Five years ago, a group of citizens, mostly young, took the bold initiative to open the mosque, to pray on Friday, to renew religion, to regain the right to freely practice one's religion. Commemorating this landmark historical event, we face that great popular rally with about 60,000 participants from town and village, of all ages, gathered with their free will and desire, who expressed hatred for the dictatorship and the feelings of for their religion."* (Hoxha, 1995)

As for the reopening ceremony of the Lead Mosque, during an interview, Hafiz Sabri was asked: *"Did you think about the consequences you could have in conducting this ceremony?"* He replied: *"Remembering all the suffering and hardship, I had nothing to lose. Supported by the*

boys and invited by the wonderful youth of Shkodra, I felt superior to those I should have feared." (Luli, 1996) These are clear proofs that the Albanian society had never abandoned the belief in God.

In addition to places of worship such as mosques or churches, the respective communities gave special importance to education and upbringing of generations where the reopening of 8-year or secondary education institutions was encouraged, such as the case of Tirana Madrasa which was closed by communist government decision. In addition, concrete steps were taken for the opening of new educational institutions where among them it is worth mentioning those that date back to the earliest, to leave the country further following the later developments in this field. In fact, Albania is one of the few countries with a pluralistic religious distribution and a pronounced lack of conflict and the presence of social peace. Saying this as a model example for the most developed countries in the region and beyond. All this is indicative of a good religious perception, sound knowledge and model representation.

The case of Albania is the most beautiful model of building social peace through trust. Let's go back to the revival of faith after the 90's where Albania had already left behind a completely dark and alarming period. It was now time to find the old man whom the system had transformed and alienated. Religious communities were the first to be re-established and reopened, bringing to the forefront human consciousness and feelings of faith which had been lacking for more than 23 years due to the 1967 prohibition of religion by law.

The truth is, Albania was all in search of the lost identity during the years of communism. It is the Muslim Community of Albania led by Hafiz Sabri Koçi who would take religious and humanitarian initiatives for individuals in society. Exactly among the first initiatives was the stabilization of the religious life in the country, turning into mosques objects that had been alienated from the

¹ Hafiz Sabri Koçi was the first leader of Muslim Community of Albania (1990-2003)

system, appointing muftis and imams in different cities of Albania.

Religious education as a key factor in the revival of religion in Albania.

Education is an “*institution*” founded by people in order to respond to the needs of today and the future and formed to complete the development of society along with its continuity. So does religion, it owns a space of culture and knowledge that affects every person, regardless of whether he believes or not. Religion and education, which come together at the point of educating man and forming him in accordance with specific objectives, have many aspects in common, and it is impossible to think of religious education outside of general education. In fact, even today's discussions are not about whether religious education should be part of general education or not, but focus on “how much” and “how” of this participation (Altaş, 2015).

It is important to determine whether religion, and therefore faith, is necessary for man or not, in order to understand whether religious education and training is necessary or not. In this regard, many psychologists and anthropologists emphasize that religion and faith are a reality in human life and fulfill an important need (Yavuz, 1998), because in man there is a desire to accept a supreme being. It has been observed that the feeling of faith constitutes the foundation of religious faith since the first man. (Hamann, 1970).

It is precisely this reason that kept alive the feeling of faith of the Albanians, who, regardless of the fact that they spent 45 years under the harsh communist dictatorship, never lost their sense of faith. And then after years of being characterized by atheist monist despotism, the Albanian government has not allowed the United Nations Declaration on Freedom of Religion to be made public. However, the impact of this Declaration began to show its signs only four years after the death of Enver Hoxha in 1985. With his death on April 11, Ramiz Alia takes over the country. Rules on religion remained the same until freedom of religion was allowed in the country after his visit to the United States. With the fall of the

communist regime in 1990, religious institutions in the country were given permission to operate, reopening mosques, churches, and other places of worship and institutions to reopen.

I believe it is important to elaborate on religious education as a concept and its types. Based on the extensive literature we encounter two forms of this education, formal and informal. We must first emphasize the fact that formal religious education in Albania is offered only in religious schools established by the respective communities such as the type of “madrasah school” and the informal education which is taught through various courses, periodic meetings in mosques or churches etc. Despite the attempts from the ministry of education to implement and adapt the subject of “religious culture” in public schools, until now it has been only a pilot test in some rural schools. All religious communities have done an important job in the field of educating young generations with religious and universal values.

In this part of the scientific research, we will dwell in detail on the steps taken by religious communities in the field of reviving religion in post-communist Albania.

Muslim Community of Albania (MCA)

The Muslim community constitutes the largest population of the country. Among the first steps taken on this regard was the re-establishment of the institution of the Albanian Muslim Community which would be the locomotive of many wagons for a single purpose, education, education and revival of faith in the hearts of Albanian believers.

The first step in the re-establishment of this institution was made on 16.11.1991, immediately after the end of the ceremony held in the Lead Mosque of Shkodra. A group of initiators consisting of 20 people, led by Hafiz Sabri Koçi, gathered and took the decision on the establishment of the proposed name: *Albanian Islamic Community*. (Faik, 2010) Based on the official statute of the Muslim Community of Albania (chapter 1, article 1), the Community includes all the sects compatible with the basic principles of the Islamic religion. (Lederer, 1994).

Albania in 1991, as in all areas, even in the religious aspect was miserable. The 1600 mosques that functioned in the past were all flattened to the ground and any that remained as a building were turned into a warehouse, club, or left at the mercy of humidity and time.

And so, the work began everywhere: in Shkodra, Tirana, Durres, Kavaja, Berat, Elbasan, Vlora, Korca, Peshkopi, in every town and village, from Koplík to Konispol and slowly, with a careful work full of sacrifices began to open the first mosques, to repair what was left when they were handed over by the authorities, halls were opened to perform occasional prayers and sermons, new mosques were built.

The reopening of madrasas required the necessary staff, required the teaching material base, required students, required relevant regulations curricula and textbooks. All was lacking, except the desire, passion and willingness to get started. (MCA K. M., 2015)

Based on the meeting of January 21, 1991, a request was made for the reopening of the Madrasa of Tirana, where the former teacher of this school would write: "On October 16, 1991, the Madrasa of Tirana opens its doors to first year students of secondary education. Mr. Ibrahim Balla is initially elected in charge of school affairs, who is appointed director of the madrasa a year later by the Muslim Community." (MCA, 1991).

On 12.12.1991 the madrasa "*Haxhi Sheh Shamia*" was opened in Shkodra and several other madrasas were continuously opened in the districts of Kavaja, Berat, Korça. Regarding religious subjects, the madrasas relied on the former students of the High Madrasa of Tirana, who, despite their age, were ready to teach.

In addition to religious schools, of course, there was a need to organize a religious press and religious books, because since 1944 no magazines or newspapers were published, no religious books were allowed to be published. Therefore, on October 7, 1991, Hafiz Sabri Koçi addressed the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports with a letter, where, among other things, he asked them to allow the publication of a newspaper.

On January 10, 1992, the first issue of the magazine "Drita Islame" was published. Regarding this, Nasuf Dizdari would note: "*These were the historic days of 1991, when the first meeting of the Directorate of Culture took place in December and it was decided that in January 1992 the newspaper "Drita Islame", as a bi-weekly periodical by a structure of the Muslim Community Albania.*

The activity of the Muslim Community did not stop there but continued by paving the way for the education of the younger generations through the education they received in the madrasas of the time but also those that would open later such as Madrasa "Liria" in Cerrik, Madrasa "Hafiz Ali Korca" in Kavaja, Madrasa "Hafiz Abdullah Zemblaku" in Korça, and other Madrasas in Berat, Gjirokastër etc. In addition to educational institutions and the press, MCA has paid special attention to the reopening and building of mosques in all areas of Albania.

Also, the Muslim Community of Albania since October 2012 turns into activity one of the most important bodies in the intellectual field, the scientific journal "Zani i Naltë" which was founded in 1923. "*Zani i Naltë*" magazine contains genuine scientific articles with academic treatments in the fields of various Islamic sciences, such as Fiqh, tafsir, hadith, but also in social sciences, such as sociology, philosophy, psychology, history, etc. which serves as a reliable source of information for those who want to read and study Islam.

Muslim Community of Albania would crown its activity in the field of education with the establishment of the Beder University in 2010, where in addition to the main programs in the field of social sciences and humanities, one of the departments is that of Islamic Sciences. With the opening of this university, the only one of its kind in the country, the Community already offered the Albanian society the opportunity to study Islam in Albania, without having to go to other countries such as Turkey, Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, etc. to study Islamic religious sciences.

Today, the Muslim Community of Albania is spread in 35 cities of the country and follows the religious activity through the respective muftis. It

has over 942 mosques, 4 Madrasas in the districts of Tirana, Durrës, Shkodra and Elbasan, as well as Beder University College in Tirana.

According to one of the most recent censuses, 56.7% of Albanians in Albania are Sunni Muslims, and thus Muslims are the largest religious community in the country.

Christian Community

Orthodox Church

As were all religious communities, the Orthodox one was in a very bad situation in many dimensions. Demolition of places of worship, lack of religious clerics, lack of religious knowledge from the adult society under the dictatorial system. All of this required a great deal of effort to put on the rails and once an entire community. The first official movements began on 24th of June 1992 with the election of Anastasios Janullatos as Archbishop of all Albania (Ejdersten, 2015).

During the years 1992-1998 important steps were taken where among them we can mention the establishment or formation of ecclesiastical structures, which consisted of a council composed of several bishops and Metropolitan headed by His Grace Janullatos. These were the initial steps but in fact very important in the whole process of reviving the faith after the fall of the communist system in Albania.

Later the Orthodox community took over the opening of educational institutions such as kindergartens, 9-year schools and high schools. In addition to these, the Autocephalous Orthodox Church has under its management since 1992, the Orthodox Theological Academy "Resurrection of Christ" in the monastery of Saint Vlash, Durrës in which clergy and new cadres are trained for catechism and services in various activities of the Church, which starting from year 2020 is part of the University College Logos, an institution that is under the Orthodox church's management. As well there two high schools "Holy Cross" in Gjirokastra and "Holy Cross" in Sukth (Durrës), and a Byzantine Music School in Tirana that aim the theological education of Orthodoxy (Orthodox Church of Albania, 2022). Based on the Church

data, there are 20 kindergartens: in Tirana (2), Durrës, Kavajë, Elbasan (2), Cërrik, Gramsh, Shkodër, Berat, Vlorë, Lushnje, Gjirokastrë (2), Sarandë, Dervic, Përmet, Tepelenë, Korça, Pogradec.

The church also manages several other schools such as: "Protagonists" (kindergarten, 9-year school, gymnasium); in Durrës and Gjirokastrë, the 9-year Albanian-Greek schools "Frymë Dashurie", as well as gymnasiums; in Korça, "Plato" gymnasium; in Mesopotamia, the gymnasium and vocational high school "Apostle Paul"; in Bularat, the dormitory "Untouched Rose" for high school girls; in Saint Vlash, Durrës, the orphanage "Orthodox House of Hope". From 2000 - 2010 it operated in Tirana - with a branch in Gjirokastra (in 2002 - 2011) - Institute of Vocational Training "Spirit of Love". As well as starting from October 2008, in Tirana operates the University College "Logos" (Tirana Judicial District Court, 2009)

It is worth mentioning the fact that the Orthodox Church has an important contribution in the field of health where in 1994 dates the opening of the first Orthodox clinic named "St. Luke", which later in 1999 would be replaced by the Orthodox Diagnostic Center "Evangelization", a polyclinic with all the necessary conditions and services. (Kisha Orthodhokse, 2012)

In addition, there are several polyclinics in different cities with activity until 2015 as follows: Primary health care centers (Polyclinic) in Kavaja, Korça, and Lushnje, as well as diagnostic centers in Jergucat (Gjirokastra).

We also see an important expansion in the sector of press, media and communication with several different channels such as: printing house "Ngjallja", children's magazine "Gëzohu!", Youth magazine "Kambanat", periodical magazine "Kërkim", magazine "Tempulli", "Our Enoria" bulletin, "Fjala" student bulletin, "Ngjallja" radio station. (Orthodox Church of Albania, 2022)

Catholic Church

The fall of the communist regime in Albania presented a positive challenge for the Catholic Church in the long road of material and spiritual reconstruction of the country; many efforts have

been made in this direction, however, the journey started years ago is only the beginning and every day new problems appear that undoubtedly add to the number of unresolved issues. The Catholic Church has accepted the challenge of human and material reconstruction of this country torn apart by internal divisions, structural poverty and cultural poverty.

The official reorganization of the Catholic church began on 25 April 1993, with the visit of the Pope John Paul who stopped in two main cities such as Shkodra and Tirana. During his visit he declared the new hierarchy of the Church naming four new bishops, Monsignor Frano Illin, Monsignor Rrok Mirdita, Monsignor Robert Ashta, and Monsignor Zef Simoni.

Like other communities (Muslim and Orthodox) the Catholic Community or otherwise called the Catholic Church immediately took important steps to revive religious life in the country. They had a very important support from the Vatican, where qualified religious personnel would immediately be sent to fill the void created by the long period of communist rule in the country.

Among the first important actions, we can mention the opening of Seminaries for Catholic theological studies in Shkoder by Jesuits and Franciscans. For the sake of truth, it was not only the Vatican that found you close to the revival of the Catholic faith. There were many sisters and priestesses who came from Kosovo, Yugoslavia, Italy, Malta, the USA to help restore the values of this faith as well as to restore to function the Catholic churches and institutions that had survived the communist regime.

The visit of Pope John Paul II to Albania in 1993 was a strong signal for the support that the Vatican is giving to Catholicism. He also brought with him several copies of the sacraments and various lectures/messages translated and published in Albanian. Moreover, the year 1993 would also mark the year when it became possible to translate the main documents that came from the Vatican.

It is true that the Catholic press was of a special dimension in the pre-communist period and therefore its absence was felt in social life. Thus, another important step was the re-establishment and launch of publications, where in 1996 the

translation and publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church was carried out.

His Grace, Mikel Koliq, was consecrated as the first Albanian cardinal by the Holy Father on November 26, 1994. Following the restructuring of the dioceses in the Albanian Catholic Church, His Holiness John Paul II founded the Diocese of Rrshen (Mirdit) on December 7, 1996, replacing the abbey of Oroshi. He also named Father Angelo Massafra as the first Bishop of Rrshen and apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Lezha. Father Massafra was formerly the Parish Priest of Troshan and Councilor of the Albanian Franciscan Province (Catholic Church, 2022).

Following the restructuring of the Catholic Church's hierarchy in Albania, Pope Benedict XVI named three new bishops on January 25, 2006: Monsignor Dod Gjergji, bishop of Sapa, Monsignor Ottavio Vitale, bishop of Lezha, and Monsignor Cristoforo Palmieri, bishop of Rrshen (Catholic Church, 2022).

In addition to the important developments in the completion of the religious clergy as well as the provision of a significant literature in the Albanian language, in 1993 Caritas was established in Albania, which from that time until now has a continuous activity. (Marku, 2019)

After the fall of the communist regime, the Jesuits immediately returned to Albania and in 1992 reopened a small school in Shkodër in a temporary house with a group of young Catholics. In 1994 the Jesuits were given back their old property, on which a state school had been built. Exactly, the school was located in this building, taking the name of Father Pjetër Meshkalla, a Shkodran Jesuit, who in this city remains a symbol of faith, culture and freedom. In the 1998-99 school year, the "Atë Pjetër Meshkalla" school was open to young men and women, meeting the needs of many Christians and Muslims families in Shkodër regarding the education of future generations.

In the school year 2009 - 2010, another change begins with the transition from 4 to 3 years of the study cycle in secondary education teaching. This change is accompanied by the start of work on the new structure. Even that it is not under a direct supervision of the Catholic Church of Albania, the Catholic University of Our Lady of Good Counsel

is part of this dome, which educates young generations in various fields and disciplines.

Conclusions

Albanian people have been distinguished over the centuries for a unique inter-religious tolerance, which is also related to the history of the presence and coexistence of different religious beliefs in the lands polluted by Albanians. It must be said that the activity for the revival of faith and the re-establishment of religious institutions has not been an easy process, which requires calmness, consistency and foresight.

With the fall of communism, the true consequences of this fatal change in the life of religious communities would also appear. Freedom of belief found the faiths in a tragic state. Religious beliefs began to reorganize on traditional bases, having as a nucleus the few cults object that had resisted the communist destruction and the few clergy who had resisted the communist terror. Practically in the first attempts all faiths tried to tie up the thread of interrupted religious tradition. But very soon the small groups of remaining clergies found themselves in circumstances quite different from those of 46 years earlier. Moreover, the needs to rebuild the structures of spiritual life brought a new dynamic to the life of the communities, which made the old clerical elites feel powerless to determine the flows and developments within their religious communities. Many foreign foundations would come to their aid, which helped in the re-establishment of religious institutions, the reconstruction of cult objects, as well as a considerable number of educational institutions, social centers, health centers, asylums, orphanages, etc.

Muslim and Christian clerics sacrificed themselves for their beliefs, loyal to God and the faithful until the end. They were also imbued with the love of the faith of the motherland and did not accept any compromise with the regime, remaining loyal to the religion and the nation, for which their spirit always remained free. Those who survived, after the fall of communism, dedicated themselves to the explanation of religion to believers and their followers.

The religious leaders of Islam and Christianity who were influential and who had suffered in the prisons of communism for their religious attitudes during this time began their work in the discourse of their faith, in the revival of religious buildings, their reconstruction as well as the construction of new religious buildings in settlements with a lack of them. Because the state did not provide any financial support for the reopening, reconstruction or construction from scratch of cult objects, all these activities were developed with self-financing or contained by religious organizations from outside Albania, each containing its own religious group.

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