

# Islam and the Albanian Periphery Lands

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Since the division of the Albanian people at the time of the emergence of the national state during and after World War I, the problem of religion within the Albanian people has rarely been important to Albanians themselves. Yet at the same time, majority Muslim Albanians have interacted with their mostly Christian Orthodox neighbours in Greece, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia in a variety of ways, involving coexistence, minor conflict and local violence, up to and including major wars, as in Kosova in 1996–1999. These have been the periphery lands, where the settled patterns of generally tolerant religious adherence in the national state based on Tirana have not been of relevance. Albanian national aspirations have crossed religious boundaries, as in Kosova where Roman Catholic and Muslim Albanians have always cooperated in promoting the national agenda, but their Orthodox neighbours have generally seen the threat of Albanian nationalism as a predominantly or exclusively ‘Islamic’ movement. In general this remains the case today, certainly as popular level in society, in Greece, Serbia and the Republic of Macedonia. Even within the educated elites, little is generally known of Albanian history or culture, and there is little incentive for attitudes to change.<sup>1</sup>

The periphery lands could be defined as the margins of northwest Greece, Threspotia in Greek terminology, Cameria in Albanian, the interface between the overwhelmingly Muslim ethnic Albanian communities of western Macedonia and their Slavophone and Orthodox neighbours, the Serbian-Albanian nexus in Kosova, and the ethnic Albanian communities of southern Montenegro (mixed Roman Catholic and Muslim). In some cases, a de facto periphery stretches much further, particularly in Greece and Italy, where the very large numbers of Albanian migrant workers interact on a minority community basis with Christians in most of the larger Greek and Italian cities and in many rural areas. In the instance of migrants, research and anecdotal evidence suggests that religion is not very important at popular level, where Albanians are simply seen as an inferior group on the basis of culture and behaviour but religion enters the calculations of state definition, with a much easier visa regime for Christian Albanian migrants than Moslems to Greece.

These settlement patterns depend, of course, on both recent and distant historical events. Albanians became converts to Islam under the Ottoman Empire, although the methods used and the degree of coercion applied has been the subject of much recent debate among historians.<sup>2</sup> Albanian historians have tended to stress the factors linked to coercion, while outsiders have seen more value in emphasising the economic and social advantages attached to profession of Islam. The most important element in the

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the problems of school and university history teaching investigated in ‘Clio in the Balkans – The Politics of History Education’, Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in South East Europe, Thessaloniki, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> For background see ‘Islam in the Balkans’, H.T. Norris, C. Hurst and Co, London, 1991.



heritage for modern life is that undoubtedly the sixty per cent or so Muslim Albanians held onto both their Islamic belief and also their commitment to the failing theocratic Empire more longer than some other groups. These nationals, such as Serbia and Greece, attracted much support from foreign Christian nations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a result. This was, of course, largely as an element in the geopolitical calculations of British and French imperial expansion in the development of colonial empires, the fabled 'Eastern Question' of what was to happen to the lands in the Balkans of the failing Ottoman Empire.

The development of the national movement in the late-Ottoman period was a highly complex process, but many of the Diaspora centres which were so important in the national revival Rilindja period after about 1860 were actually still within the Ottoman world, primarily Constantinople itself, and some of the earliest leaders of the new Albanian state, including King Zog, had been partly or wholly educated there. Virtually all these people were from the Ottoman bey class, and were Muslim landlords in Albania, and some, such as Ismail Qemal, had held high rank in Imperial officialdom. There was thus a continual tension between the religious assumptions of the old theocratic state and modern national development, something the enemies of the Albanian people have not been slow to exploit.<sup>3</sup> Personal profession of Islam was not an obstacle to Albanian political elite activity in the national agenda in the late-Ottoman period, unlike the situation in most neighbouring states which had already freed themselves from Ottoman rule. Yet in Albanian eyes, in this period, the national agenda was never fulfilled, with the disastrous results of the international conferences before and after the First World War leading to a truncated national state and the consequent division of the Albanian inhabitants of the southern Balkans between no less than six future state entities, namely Albania itself, Kosova, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and what later became the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, after World War II, and the Republic of Macedonia in 1991.<sup>4</sup> In later, communist eyes, one justification for this came to be seen as the lingering presence of Islam and religion generally, in the Albanian consciousness and social practice. The Muslim beys who were the social foundation of the Zogist state and were left undisturbed by Mussolini in the annexation period in the 1930's were in the end ruined by World War II, Axis occupation and finally the Albanian communists.

The history of the repression of all religion by Enver Hoxha after 1967 has yet to be written in even a mildly professional way, but it is clear that it was not simply the whim of an eccentric dictator (although that element was certainly present) but also the culmination of certain deep rooted tensions in national life. Hoxha believed that the end of religion was part of the process of constructing communism, at a public level, but he also said that it was a factor in the unification of Albanians.<sup>5</sup> However grotesque, this concept did indicate the displacement of nationalism under communism into the false chimera of the 'atheist state'. He also clearly feared the development of oppositional movements based on religion, which given the politics of the nation, were likely to be

<sup>3</sup> Thus, as an example, in both the Cham expulsions in 1943-44 in northwest Greece, and in much of the popular discourse of the early ex-Yugoslav wars after 1991, the Muslim protagonists, whether of Albanian or Slav ethnicity, were often referred to as 'Turks' in conventional discourse. Even educated Greeks with some knowledge of the subject sometimes refer to the Chams as 'Turks' and are unaware that many Chams of Albanian ethnicity were actually Christian Orthodox i.e. the Suliote tribes who were so important in the Greek War of Independence.

<sup>4</sup> See Stavro Skendi 'The Albanian National Awakening 1868-1913', Princeton University Press.

<sup>5</sup> See 'Our Enver', by his successor, Ramiz Alia, 8 Nentor, Tirana, 1985, and Hoxha's own writings on religion.



focussed on the Catholics of the northwest.<sup>6</sup> The eventual collapse of the one-party state in and after 1990 bore out these fears, with the violence in Shkodra in December 1990 with its large Catholic population a harbinger for what was to come elsewhere during the next twelve months. While there was never a clerical-led opposition to communism of the Polish type in Albania, there was always a strong input of Catholic energy into the opposition, something that was aided by the elevated status of Mother Teresa throughout the Albanian world.

### **Displacement and the Nation**

After 1990, the role and institutions of religion in both Albania and the periphery lands began to revive, but with very different experiences in different places for the Islamic majority of the Albanians. In Albania itself there was notable cooperation between Moslems and Christians in reopening mosques and churches for public use, even involving the shared use of buildings for a time if there were problems of physical dilapidation of some buildings. Hundreds of new and restored churches and mosques appeared on the landscape in the 1992–1996 period, without any local controversy in the vast majority of instances. In western Macedonia, the historic experience was different, with the most formally Islamic part of the Albanian world having had formal constitutional rights but many practical conflicts with the communist authorities during the late-Titoist period, and an awkward relationship with the neo-communist government of President Kiro Gligorov after 1991. In Kosova the repression of Islam was a central ideological factor in the Serbian martial law regime under Milosevic after 1990, and although Moslem practice was not formally banned or attacked, the mosques existed in an atmosphere of the general repression of all ethnic Albanian and cultural institutions, and against the background of the so-called 'Karic' programme of politically inspired Serbian Orthodox church building. In Montenegro, the more Moslem parts of the Albanian polity are the hilly regions around Plav and Gusinje, while the coastal areas, such as Tuzi municipality are more Roman Catholic. In Greece, the growing number of Albanian migrant workers after 1991 did not have any opportunity at all to go to a mosque if they wished to, apart from a few rural areas such as Thrace. A name changing practice soon developed, with many of those who wished to become migrant workers 'converting' to Orthodoxy and losing the Muslim forms of their names, and often any sense of a Muslim cultural identity. Thus all generalisations about the nature of Islam among Albanians in the periphery lands which interface with Christian Orthodox majorities and state power are likely to be doomed to be wrong, or at least highly misleading. In the years since the end of the one-party state there has been a rich variety of historical experience of Islam in the periphery regions, but within a general framework of tolerance and respect for secular state institutions. Even when in situations of extreme stress, as in the Kosova and Macedonian armed conflicts between 1996 and 2001, there was a noticeable absence of any ethnic Albanian turn to Islamic radicalism, and the 'outsider Islamic fighter' element of the Bosnian war between 1993 and 1995 never appeared in Kosova. The Kosova Liberation Army was never included on international lists of terrorist or quasi-terrorist organisations, and managed to be seen in most of the international community as a legitimate local de-

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<sup>6</sup> The Greek Minority of the southwest were all Orthodox, and also fought for religious freedom at that time, but on a much more integrated basis within the political elite than the northern Catholics.



fence force against Yugoslav security apparatus aggression. Offers of help from more radical Islamic sources were refused by the Kosova Liberation Army leadership, even in terms of issues like small arms transfers which could probably have been conducted without outside discovery. But this did not stop the mosques, Moslem schools and Islamic libraries from taking the brunt of the Yugoslav army offensive and many buildings and archives were completely destroyed. After the war, much reconstruction work was financed by the Saudi Joint Relief Committee but although there were disputes about Wahabi influences on new mosque design and decoration in some places, on the whole the rebuilding programme went smoothly and the buildings were returned after reconstruction to local communities without external interference in the religious practice within them.<sup>7</sup>

Quite a significant number of young men and a few women are now recipients of scholarships to study in Islamic states, and some religious schools have been developing, largely, it would appear, modelled on those in Turkey. Such activity is of course known in the neighbouring majority Christian states, and gives rise to current views that the emergence of an independent Kosova state will be a new 'Muslim' state in the region. This would appear to be very unlikely given the very strong influence of the United States in all Albanian communities in the Balkans.

In the same way, in the conflict in Macedonia in spring and summer 2001, the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army has a strictly secular character and *modus operandi*, although no doubt the great majority of its soldiers would have had at least a nominal Muslim cultural and religious identity. As in Kosova, there has never been any demand for a party in Macedonia with a radical Islamic identity, or which might want to try to include elements of a programme for a restoration of Sharia law or practice. The culturally conservative moderate Islam of those rural communities has always included both Bektashi and Sunni Moslems (and other minor sects), who have coexisted peacefully for a very long time. The strong support current in the contemporary international community for the independence of Kosova is a recognition of these realities, and it indicates that the risk of displacement of the national agenda in an Islamic radical direction in the event of independence being refused has been well understood, particularly in Britain and the United States. In this context of the hoped-for and long delayed resolution of this major regional problem, there is reason to hope that ethnic Albanian Islam will retain its current complex and multi-faceted nature and be a barrier to religious extremism in the future. But in a world climate of Islamic revival, it is foolish to suppose that the Balkans will be immune from radical influences, and the future may also depend on the adoption of satisfactory development and financial models for the Albanian polity within Euro-Atlantic institutions that recognises the unique political experience of the Albanian people and the difficulties that have often been experienced with their neighbours.

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<sup>7</sup> See 'Kosovo/Kosova As Seen As Told', OSCE, Vienna, 2000, and various publications of the Kosov Council of Mosques.