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ALBANIA: RELIGION ON THE UPSWING*

by Heinz Gstrein

Neumarkt, Styria, Austria

The farmers met under the oak where they usually met to talk or celebrate. The church was the focal point of the village; but no one would have thought to meet there were it not for the shade-giving oak tree. For years now men had not believed in God except for a few old men and women. Since no one went to church anymore, the priest would come out and listen to the discussions about lectures on artificial insemination or evolution (how men's ancestors were apes). During these moments the pastor¹ thought with a heavy heart, "As far as I'm concerned, man could as well have evolved from the devil as long as he goes to church so I can earn money for the children.

This description of the church's presence in an Orthodox southern Albanian town in 1961 - six years before the banning of all religiosity from public life - comes from the pen of the Albanian Deputy Minister of Culture and Education, Anastas Kondo.² At first glance this appears to be the usual trite communist criticism of the church. This text would not cause much interest anywhere else behind the Iron Curtain had it come from a high official. But for the Socialist People's Republic of Albania, which celebrated in 1984 its establishment forty years ago and its liberation from Italian occupation (1939-1944), there is a difference. In 1987 the "Shipetares," as they have called themselves since the days of their national hero "Skanderbeg," could be celebrating twenty years since the creation of their homeland as "the world's first atheistic country." Many things point to the fact that this may not be the case.

The Re-discovery of Religious Heritage

Today one finds evidence of a step-by-step change in direction from an aggressive animosity toward faith to the first signs of the re-establishment of separation of church and state. Mosques, cloisters, churches and monasteries destroyed at the end of the 1960's are being repaired. The Atheistic Museum of

*Translated from German with permission of the publisher Orientierung (Zürich), Vol. 21, No. 48 (November 15, 1984), pp. 231-233.

Shkodra has been closed and the saints' pictures are appearing again in the National Gallery as well as on postcards. This change in direction has begun with the ascent to the government of Anastas Kondo (born in 1937), a successful author and Secretary of the Association of Albanian Writers and Artists. Shortly afterwards he published the novel Zbulimi ["...Between Two Fires."], the book from which the afore quoted passage was taken. In this work religious matters are called by name for the first time after fourteen years of silence. Certainly this occurs from an exaggerated, arrogant and church critical vantage and concerns itself with a plot set in the Albanian cultural revolution of former years. The author, however, cannot completely hide, through the manner of his presentation, a certain sympathy for the old-fashioned piety which he describes. Often he draws on Christian comparisons which are not only understood by his broad audience of "Albanian atheists" but also welcomed:

We stopped. The scars of war could still be seen. In the middle of the village there were the open ruins of houses witnessing to the fact that once there must have been complete homes here. From the women's black clothes and kerchiefs one could see that dead had been mourned here. So many women wore black, in fact, it seemed as though it were not a village at all but a cloister with an awful lot of nuns.³

At one point, after twenty-three years of communism, the Undersecretary for Culture of atheistic Albania witnesses to the continued national popularity of the church and her servants even after their complete destruction in 1967:

In the afternoon the women happily returned to the village. The next day the village had created a new legend about the phosphorescence. "Our women have outwitted the Moroccans," the well-traveled said. "They have driven the world mad," said others. "Our blessed-by-the-Lord mountain!" praised the priest connecting the mountain treasures with his vocation. "Say mass tomorrow," suggested the men. Although not pious they enjoyed listening to the priest's sermons.⁴

Meanwhile the culturemaker in a small country one and one half the size of Switzerland no longer stands alone in his well-meaning occupation with the religious heritage of Albania. What is noteworthy in this is the fact that the representatives of this tolerant course in the government and the Party all come from Orthodox families. In contrast, the unswerving antagonists who propagate a collision course between church and state are generally of Islamic origin. This fact will be reflected upon later.

It would go too far to estimate the liberal groups as "pious." Although Vanjel Moisiu, a former associate of Kondo, professes an explicitly ideological atheism, he admits the historical legacy of Albania with equal emphasis. That which other religious and sociological groups in other times have brought forth must be preserved and cared for after the revolution.

The most important witnesses to this Albanian "historicism" are devoted to the memories of the re-discovered freedom fighter, George Kastrioti, called Skanderbeg. Born circa 1405, Duke of Kryja in central Albania, he was raised Muslim by the Turks who had held him hostage. In 1443 he returned to Albania and to Catholicism. Afterward in 1444 he revolted against the Turks and successfully defended the freedom of his country and Christianity, both Catholic and Orthodox, until his death on January 17, 1468. Skanderbeg's relations with the Pope and the Curia were for the most part reserved. In spite of the fact that much money was collected in Western Europe to support his struggle against the Turks, the funds instead of reaching Albania, disappeared into Roman treasures. The Albanian symbol of the double eagles (originally Byzantine) and the Albanians' self-appointed designation as "Skipetares" originate with him. Before that they called themselves "Arberesh," a name still borne today by the 250,000 odd Catholic and Orthodox Albanians of southern Italy.

Alexander Moissi (1880-1935), who became famous as an actor in Switzerland and was buried in Lugano, was from this lineage on the maternal side. His father was an ancestor of the second greatest Albanian national hero, Moisi Golemi Komnenos who, though Orthodox, fought with the Catholic Skanderbeg. In the wake of the "historical renaissance," there had been a personal cult built around "the greatest Albanian actor," although in the West he was known as an Italian or a Jew. The State Theater and House of Culture in Durrës have been

named after him and in Albania those today who are even related by marriage to the Moissi family can hardly save themselves from the sympathetic well wishes of everyone they meet who hears the name. The former Greek Orthodox High School situated next to the library housed in a renovated mosque in Durrës (in ancient and Byzantine times called Dyrrachium) thanks its preservation and forthcoming restoration this fall to the fact that Alexander Moissi spent his first school years there.⁵ On the other hand it is not permitted to visit Moissi's birthplace in Kavaje. The reason might be the fundamentalist Muslim movement to return to the veiling of women in this former stronghold of Muslim potters and weavers. This matter of dress has already proven itself as a powerful political act of protest during the Algerian and Iranian revolutions. Even though there have been no independent reports to this effect, this interpretation is supported in that Kavaje was omitted from the last few public appearances of State and Party head, the late Enver Hoxha.

The most noticeable evidence for a new Albanian policy on culture and even religion, by the way, is related to Hoxha himself. It was his daughter, educated in Paris, who designed and decorated the round church-like monument to Albania's hero Skanderbeg in the mountain stronghold of Kruja, complete with a chapel and a copy of the first Albanian Bible kept in its library.

Current Trends in a Historical Novel

The second literary monument to the propensity for pre-revolutionary heritage is the almost epic novel "Skenderbeu" by Sabri Godo. Although the 725 page book enjoyed limited publication in 1975, it was, significantly, first published on a large scale last year. A German translation of the second Albanian printing appeared in 1983.⁶ Sabri Godo, born 1929, is one of the few Albanians with a Muslim background who has struggled through a period of militant atheism to a rather positive evaluation of religion. In doing so he is continuing in the tradition of Albanian nationalistic philosophy of the 19th century.⁷

At the same time, however, Godo's point of view is reminiscent of the tolerant "religious harmony" of Albania's considerable Bektashi Derwish community. Their religious pluralism rests not in indifference, but rather on

the early Islamic principle of harmony of all earthly enlightenment through their source in one pre-existing so-called heavenly book. (Umm al-kitab) [Mother of all Books] or (Asl al-kitab) [Original Book]. Sabri Godo, who comes from a Bektashi and not a Sunnite family, reads like a secularized Derwish master. He sees Skanderbeg not only as the military teacher, lawmaker, and unifier of the country but also as an ideal Christian coming into conflict with Rome because of his forthright nature.⁸ Godo honors Skanderbeg especially as the originator of the first Albanian form of baptism and for his efforts to permit lay baptisms in Albania:

Skanderbeg rose and stood in the middle of the hall where he looked at Pal with unshakable eyes. His voice sounded friendly and his face expressed determination. "Perhaps it is time for Albanians to make their own worship service." Pal⁹ was shocked, "Who will give Albanians this right?" he asked. At the same moment he sensed the answer and again went pale. "Your eminence," answered Skanderbeg, "so that no soul should be lost." Pal's head was spinning and he held himself up on the chair. "Then we must create a new form of baptism," Pal said. "Your eminence, you are a farseeing man. Compose this form," Skanderbeg directed him.¹⁰

Besides the architectural and literary evidence for a renunciation of the former need to destroy all Albanian traditions there is even philatelic verification; the two commemorative stamps in honor of the American-Albanian Orthodox bishop, theologian, and politician, Fan S. Noli (1882-1965). All these mosaics were brought together in the fall of 1984 to confirm what has been said before in Tirana, that between the Skutari Lake in the north and the Greek border to the south, between the Adriatic and the Drin River, the worst times for Catholic, Orthodox, Sunnite and Bektashi believers were over with the departure of Mehmet Shehu from the Albanian leadership. Mehmet Shehu and his "ex-islamic" Wing of the communist Unity Workers' Party had persecuted all believers with the same fanatical ferocity that they had once been taught to show unbelievers according to the Sharia code in the Qur'anic school.

Official Re-evaluation of Religion

Enver Hoxha, too, actually came from the Sunnite tradition. He did not allow himself to be personally quizzed on his change of mind; he did, however, furnish a pre-publication of his book still in progress concerning mideast and Islamic questions.¹¹ It becomes evident that in the course of forty years as a leading party official, Hoxha has not only outwardly but also inwardly changed from a normal functionary to a thoroughly spiritual patriarch. In excerpts from his diary from 1958 to 1983, the rediscovery of religion appears first in 1979 during Khomeini's Iranian revolution.¹² Since then the foreign policy of Albania has stood on the side of Teheran and the Afghan Islamic guerrillas as it had once supported the communist Arab separation of church and state of Abdul Nasser.

The awakening to a completely new evaluation of Islam and, indeed, religion came during Hoxha's summer vacation in Pogradec on the Ochrid Lake in 1983. The entries for July and August in "A Political Diary" contain an obvious attempt to acquire a vision of the whole Islamic tradition in its enduring values and, indeed, in values beyond Islam in order to establish criteria from the past, even from religion, with goals to chart new beginnings for a self-determining communist course for Albania. With the first title chosen for his 1984 publication, "Le glorieux passé des peuples ne peut être ignoré," Hoxha gave his personal blessings to the efforts of those like Kondo, Moisiu and Godo.¹³

But does this change come too late for Albania's religious groups? After seventeen years of aggressive atheism is there even a remnant left that would make a new beginning or renaissance possible? The Albanians themselves examined their own religious behavior during the early 1980's and their impressions confirmed the image of the enduring position of the family in Albania's communist society where Christian and Islamic life and beliefs are permitted to continue despite the absence of religious officials and the outward signs of religion. This phenomenon has even produced a closing of ranks among Christians and Muslims.

Re-awakening of Religious Customs

Before the total communist takeover in 1946 and in part until the complete suppression in 1967, there were 1,127 mosques, 17 educational mosques and 1,306 Sunnite clergy in Albania. The Bektashi sect counted 260 Tekke cloisters with 65 Baba abbeys, 468 celibate Derwish monks and 128 burial shrines of famous sheiks. It is no longer possible to estimate the number of disciples who have chosen duty as novices or "trainees" (Chalwa) in Tekke, or have belonged to the basic community of a Chedma. Their numbers are probably larger now than before 1967, which seems to point out how, as in early Christianity and Islam, communes serve a suitable purpose as forms of religious organization during times of crisis and persecution. As shown in Albanian statistics, it is mostly members of the Bektashi-Chedmas group who are intermarrying with those formerly registered as Christians. These Christians had over 844 Orthodox and 147 Catholic churches before the cultural revolution. There were 3 major archbishops, 6 other archbishops, 638 priests and 70 cloisters. In the cities and villages of 1917, Christian and Muslim communities were completely separate, working together at only 412 places of public life. Today old religious groups are growing closer. It can be noticed not only by the mixed marriages but also by the first names being given. If in the past the religious identity of any Albanian could be determined by a latin first name or even last name (for example misja from missa), or a Byzantine saint's name or an Arabic-Turkish name; today, especially in mixed marriages, names of neutral Albanian-Illyrian derivation are preferred.

How is the recent or recurring drawing together of Christian-Islamic religiosity in atheistic Albania to be recognized? Cemeteries play an important role in this. Whereas churches, cloisters, mosques and tekkes were vandalized by the Party's "Red Youth" during 1967 and 1968, generally speaking the graves of families and family groups (Chedmas) remained untouched. Today the sheik graves of the Bektashis are a focal point for the combined pilgrimage piety of Christians and Muslims. The whole religious custom of venerating the dead, also recognized by Albanian researchers, cannot be stopped even by the most confirmed atheists. Durrës, Tirana, Shkodra and Korca are full of posters with public funeral announcements, sympathy visits, invitations to commemorate the anniversaries of deaths, and announcements of actual house

services with lay sermons -- this all mixed Catholic, Orthodox, Islamic. The call by Shehu to create May 1st as a communist All Saints' Day was a disaster. Still another sign of returning Albanian religiosity can be seen by the fairs and traditional market days being held, though under new names, on the traditional Christian saints' days and on Muslim holidays. They are beginning to take on the character of popular religion. Instead of the forbidden icons, newly printed postcards are sold in mass.

That which is being prepared under the surface in Albania cannot yet be determined. But one thing is certain, churches and mosques have not only been strengthened by the years of persecution but will also go forward enriched along a new path.

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Footnotes

1. In the authorized German translation (in Albanian originally "pope", i.e. priest)
2. Anastas Kondo, "...between two fires." (original title Zbulimi), Tirana, 1981, p.134.
3. Ibid., p. 186.
4. Ibid., p. 248.
5. Compare Vanyjel Moisiu, etc. "Alexander Moisiu." Tirana, 1981.
6. Sabri Godo, Skanderbeg, Tirana, 1983.
7. Compare with the report by Renate M. Erich, "Kontakte in Albanien" in Orientierung, 1982, p. 75. In this article the first signs of a less strict policy on religion were noted.
8. The encounter of Skanderbeg and Pope Paul II is described in pp. 608-614.
9. Pal Engjelli, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Durrës, was one of Skanderbeg's close associates.
10. Sabri Godo, op. cit., p. 481.
11. Enver Hoxha, "Reflections sur le Moyen Orient."
12. Ibid., pp. 202-234.
13. Ibid., pp. 458-481.