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## **ALBANIA: AN ATHEISTIC STATE?**

**By Finngeir Hiorth**

Dr. Finngeir Hiorth is professor of philosophy at Oslo University, Norway. He has been born in Indonesia where he lived until 1946 and since then has lived mostly in Norway. He received an M.A. from University of Oslo and a Ph.D. from University of Münster, West Germany. He visited Albania several years ago.

In 1967, Albania officially proclaimed itself to be "the first atheistic state in the world." All religious institutions were closed and religious officials were forbidden to exercise their function.

But is Albania really an atheistic state? What do experts on religion in Albania know about this? This paper intends to present a summary of and commentary on what is known about religion and atheism in Albania, particularly stressing the period since 1944 when the Albanian Party of Labor (the Communists) took power.

In 1938, the religious affiliation in Albania was about as follows: 10% Catholics, 21% Orthodox, 54% Sunni Muslims, and 15% Shiite Muslims. Of the Shiite Muslims most belonged to the Bektashi dervish order.

The Albanian Party of Labor (ALP) under its leader Enver Hoxha came to power in Albania in November 1944. Immediately, a wave of persecutions against real or imaginary political enemies started. It was obvious that the ALP aimed at a total control of political, cultural, and economic life in Albania.

The conflict between church and state in Albania began during the partisan struggle for power during World War II. The tensions between the Albanian Communists and religious circles worsened in the post-war period. The Communists now characterized clergymen as class enemies and regarded any religious outlook as incompatible with their version of Marxism-Leninism. Clergymen who dared to have an opinion different from the Communists were executed or imprisoned.

To begin with Muslims and the Orthodox were still supported financially by the state because of their social services. But the Catholic Church was immediately attacked as a foreign element and as an exploiter of the people. It was perceived as anti-Albanian through its link to a foreign center, the Vatican. Foreign Catholics were expelled. Most of them

were Italian. Houses and churches were searched, printing offices were confiscated, and schools and homes for children were nationalized.

Religious instruction was forbidden, and education became the responsibility for the state alone. All religious communications had to be approved by the government before being made public. The state exercised control over the election and appointment of all religious personnel. Last but not least, a land reform in 1945 deprived the religious communities of most of their property. These initiatives met with resistance from the part of the clergy, and the Communist party responded by indicting, arresting, trying and executing the recalcitrant clergymen.

Although the oppression of the Catholic Church was particularly savage, the Communists in no way were lenient in their attitude to the Orthodox and the Muslims. In a few years the church leadership of the Orthodox Church was virtually eliminated. Similar purges took place in the Muslim community. In the case of the Orthodox, the Communists could find a church leader who had supported the communists during the war, and he was made archbishop.

In the Albanian Catholic Bulletin vol. 6/1985/pp. 48-9 a list of 164 names of bishops and priests has been published. This list contains the names of clergy known to have died in the period 1943-1979. The list of Muslims contains twenty-eight names. Two of these died in 1943, twenty-two died during the years 1944-47, whereas four died during the years 1950-53. The list of Orthodox dead contains seven names, of whom one died in 1946, one in 1949, and the others in the period 1951-73.

The longest list is that of the Catholics, containing 129 names. Most died in the period 1945-60, but some died afterwards. The circumstances of the deaths are not known in all cases, but a number were executed, and many others died in prisons or camps for forced labor. The names of many Muslim and Orthodox clergy who perished were never recorded in one place. The exact number of Albanian clergy who have perished since 1944 will probably never be known. Anyhow, the Communist Party's drive against the clergy resulted in the virtual elimination of the religious leadership of the various denominations. According to a report of the Free Albanian Committee in New York, by 1968 some 200 clergymen had been executed or sent to labor camps.

Already in 1949 the religious communities were seriously weakened. They hardly could function effectively. Still, this was not enough for the Albanian authorities. On 26 November 1949, the government issued a decree on religious communities which made it mandatory for all religious communities to profess loyalty to the Communist Party. On 4 May 1950 new statutes were approved for the Muslims and the Orthodox. At this time the Albanian constitution still allowed freedom of conscience and religion. Then, on 30 July 1951 the government approved the new statutes for the Catholic Church. These statutes

implied that the links to the Vatican were severed. From now on contacts with the Vatican were illegal for the Albanian Catholics.

After 1951, for many years little was heard about religious life in Albania. At this time the Albanian authorities were satisfied with religious communities living in the outskirts of Albanian society, completely unable to influence anything of importance in Albania, and just sufficient to cater to the needs of the old and the dying. Possibly the communists expected religion to die out of itself.

On the whole, the Albanian authorities seem to have believed that a thoroughly materialistic and atheistic education would lead to an atheistic society. But there was also some officials who wanted to hasten the process of the death of religion by active information and propaganda. In April 1955, a meeting of the party plenum stressed the need to "strengthen the materialistic and scientific world outlook among the workers" and to combat religious beliefs and backward customs which were hindering "the spread of... socialist culture among the masses."

Some leading Albanian Communists were aware that religion is a phenomenon which cannot easily be isolated from traditional customs, moral values, education, family life, and other social relations. In their opinion, the offensive against religion had to be prolonged and many-sided if it was to be efficient. But other leading Communists, and probably most of them, were rather indifferent in their attitude to religion. For them it was sufficient that religion could not play any meaningful political role.

This situation continued until 1966. At that time Albania was allied with China where the cultural revolution became a major issue. This cultural revolution also stimulated a fervent atmosphere in Albania. The Albanian cultural revolution started in March 1966, but even at a party congress at the beginning of November 1966, the question of religion was hardly touched. In his speech at the congress, Enver Hoxha paid less than one minute's attention to religious beliefs and backward customs, and this short mention of religion did not contain any warning about the events that were to follow.

On 18 January 1967, the Albanian newspaper Zeri i Popullit still emphasized freedom of religion in Albania. In an article directed against the Vatican, the newspaper wrote: "The Albanian Catholic Church is independent and has no connections with the Vatican. And that does not worry the Catholic believers at all because they can practice their faith. The power of the people respects the religious convictions of people whatever the religion to which they belong. That is guaranteed by the constitution and our laws."

Less than three weeks later, on 6 February 1967, Enver Hoxha held a speech which was to lead a new policy in relation to the religious communities. In his speech he attacked liberal and bourgeois tendencies in society. Just in passing he also mentioned the "backward

customs," of a religious kind. He mentioned some examples of "backward customs", one of which concerned a worker of Durres.

The next day the speech was printed in Zeri i Popullit and the example of a "backward" worker from Durres reportedly led pupils and teachers of a local school to take action. Religious institutions in Durres were closed or demolished. The day after Zeri i Popullit celebrated the event as a revolutionary feat.

It is not known whether the events in Durres were spontaneous or organized at the instigation of leading party officials. Enver Hoxha certainly did not like "spontaneous" actions which might counteract his policies. At this time he was firmly established and few dared to initiate actions which might incur his disfavor.

In any case, the events at Durres were soon followed by similar actions at Gjirokaster, Enver Hoxha's birthplace, and other places. By May 1967, all remaining churches and mosques had been closed or demolished. In November 1967, the Albanian literary monthly Nendori announced that 2,169 religious buildings had been closed and that Albania thus had become "the first atheistic state in the world."

On 22 November 1967, the government published a decree which annulled the religious charters and all laws pertaining to state-church relationships. All religious rites were prohibited, and grave penalties were imposed on violators. The few remaining priests were sent to forced-labor camps for "re-education." At this time the constitution still guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion. But this was changed in 1976 when all religious organizations became illegal according to the constitution.

Since 1967, it has been forbidden to own religious literature and religious objects. All kinds of worship, even private worship have been forbidden. Baptizing a child can lead to severe punishment. Remaining religious buildings have been turned into sports arenas, dance halls, movie theaters, workshops, museums, or apartments.

But has religion disappeared altogether? Observers agree that this is not the case. The religious beliefs of individuals cannot, of course, be eradicated. Nor is it possible to enforce any prohibition of individual prayers in private. It is also known that some believers still meet for communal prayers or hold pilgrimages. Some believers stop work on important religious holidays and hold to the rules of the fasts. Marriages across religious borders remain rare: about 4% of the newlyweds.

Openly organized forms of religion have for the time being come to an end. As far as there exist rudiments of religious organizations, these exist only underground, and it is not known how many such clandestine organizations may be in existence. Social and political control exclude the widespread occurrence of clandestine organizations. It is not known how many Albanians now are atheists and how many are religious believers. Any assertion as to

the percentage of atheists and religious believers under present circumstances remains pure guesswork.

Observers of Albania have suggested that the destruction of organized religion in Albania has been possible as Albanians have never taken religion seriously. But it is also true that philosophical materialism and atheism, as explicit faiths, have been almost non-existent among Albanians prior to the communist takeover in 1944.

In religious circles, it is sometimes suggested that religious people in Albania have been persecuted more than non-religious people. Perhaps this is true. But Albanian communism under Enver Hoxha has been strongly authoritarian, and Hoxha's ruthlessness has also hit quite a number of fellow-Communists. His ruthlessness has been directed at everybody who has tried to oppose him, whether the person in question has been religious or not.

Among examples of Communists or other people who have supported the regime and who have been persecuted, the following may be mentioned. In 1956 Liri Gega, a member of the Party's central committee, was executed after being accused of having been a Titoist agent. In 1961, the commander of Albania's naval forces, rear-admiral Teme Sejko, was reportedly tried and executed. In the mid-1970s general Bequir Balluku, Minister of Defense, and a number of other persons were reportedly executed. Further, it is widely believed that Enver Hoxha in 1981, murdered or executed his close collaborator for thirty years, Mehmet Shehu. In November 1982, Enver Hoxha then announced the arrest of Fecor Shehu, Minister of the Interior until 1982. In 1983 sources outside Albania claimed that Fecor Shehu had been executed together with Kadri Hazbiu, a former defense minister, and two other senior officials.<sup>1</sup>

These executions were only the last in a long story of terror which started in the 1940s. Soon after the Communist victory in November 1944, a wave of terror swept the country. Hundreds or thousands were summarily executed for alleged collaboration with the enemy, and various crimes were invented by the new rulers to destroy their opponents.

In 1955, the U.S. government submitted a report on "Evidence of the Existence of Forced Labor in Albania" to the U.N. The report listed some forty persons, labor camps, and places of internment which, it said, had been in operation in Albania at various times between 1944 and 1954. Some 16,000 persons were said to have perished in them. The number of political prisoners was estimated to be 18,000 at the end of 1947, whereas in 1954 there were supposed to be 10,000 political prisoners and another 10-1,5000 persons in labor camps.<sup>2</sup> The number

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<sup>1</sup>See the Amnesty International Report on Albania, 1984, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>Amnesty International, Albania, 1984, footnote pp. 33-34.

of political prisoners in 1975 has been estimated to be about 12,000 in some eighteen labor camps or prisons.

In its 1984 report, Amnesty International said that it had the names of about 400 political prisoners. Important prisons or camps could in the 1970s until at least 1982 be found at Ballsh, Spac and Burrel. These institutions had 2,000-2,700 prisoners at the beginning of the 1980s. In addition Amnesty International believed that there were political detainees in or at Tirana, Berat, Vlore, Fier, Shkoder, Elbasan, Fush-Kruje, and Lac. The number of prisoners at these places was not known, so Amnesty International did not attempt to estimate the total number of political prisoners at the beginning of the 1980s.

When we consider this information from Amnesty International and other sources, it is clear that not only religious people have been persecuted in Albania. It is not even possible to say that religious people have been persecuted more than non-religious people. It seems likely, though, that of the religious people the Catholic clergy and the Muslim Bektashi have suffered most heavily. The information about the Orthodox and the Sunni Muslims is rather scanty. Apparently the Sunni Muslims and many of the Orthodox have been better able to adapt themselves to the Communist regime than the Catholics and the Bektashi. In this connection, it may be recalled that Enver Hoxha and most other leading Communists had an Islamic background.

The developments in the field of religion after Enver Hoxha's death in 1985 suggest a very slow liberalization. Under Ramiz Alia, Hoxha's successor, Albania has entered a period of gradual reform which to some extent represents a continuation of trends which had started even under Hoxha. The Hoxha cult has continued but with diminished strength. Representatives of the government have started to suggest that Albania is in favor of freedom of religion.

Among the signs of liberalization may be mentioned that a few former missionaries and Albanian clergymen from abroad have been allowed to visit the country in 1986 and in 1988. The most remarkable of these visits was that of the very reverend Arthur E. Liolin of the Albanian Orthodox Diocese in America. He toured Albania for three weeks in July and August 1988. During his visit Liolin was allowed to wear clerical garb and he visited more than twenty private homes. He spoke freely with many people and was able to pray at seven cemeteries before individuals of thirty and forty at a time. He was also allowed to speak over Radio Tirana in Albanian.

Thus, there are a few indications that the Albanian authorities are starting, very slowly, to respect freedom of religion. But they have certainly a long way to go before Albania

becomes a liberal country with due respect for the full scale of human rights. And in this connection, we should not forget that Albania has a long tradition of illiberal regimes.<sup>3</sup>

#### Postscript

The paper "Albania: An Atheistic State?" was written in August 1989. In January 1990, I received a letter from Mr. William B. Bland, the secretary of the Albanian Society in Great Britain. In his letter Mr. Bland objected to my use of the term "persecution." In his opinion "No one has ever been executed or imprisoned [in Albania] for holding an opinion, only for actions prescribed by the law. In the 1940's and the 1950's, a number of clergymen were tried and found guilty of serious criminal acts." One of these was "Anton Harapi, who was well-known as a Regent under the Nazi occupation, and was charged with treason." According to Mr. Bland, such cases are misrepresented if they are called "religious persecution."

Mr. Bland also maintains that the Albanian view is that "many of the precepts of religion are unethical" and that "as Albanian scholars see it, Christianity serves the interests of the exploiting classes, . . . Albanian lawyers, therefore, claim that the prohibition of religious propaganda is not a violation of human rights, but it is necessary to protect human rights."

According to Mr. Bland, "individual religious worship is not illegal . . . and that no lay person has ever been prosecuted under the law prohibiting religious propaganda and public religious worship." Mr. Bland also denies "that the mass campaign against the churches in 1967 was carried out on Hoxha's initiative." Hoxha and his partners "endorsed the 'popular action' post facto."

Mr. Bland takes exception from calling Hoxha "a dictator" and believes that Mehmet Shehu in 1981 committed suicide. In his opinion my paper "does not present an objective study of the Albanian position on religion, but mainly reiterates the anti-Albanian propaganda of the Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches."

There are some excerpts which are intended to present the gist of Mr. Bland's criticism of me in his letter of 12 January 1990. I do not want to polemicize against Mr. Bland's views. Mr. Bland knows about Albania and has been close to the Albanian authorities. In many cases, he presents the views of the Albanian authorities in a better way than the authorities themselves. I think, therefore, that one should have a summary of his views.

In this postscript it may also be mentioned that the Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee (430 Marquette Avenue, Suite 402, Minneapolis MN 55401) in

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<sup>3</sup>For assistance in preparing this paper I would like to thank William B. Bland, Arthur E. Liolin, Paul Mojzes, Gjon Sinishta, and Nikolas A. Stavrou. They are not, of course, responsible for errors or for my views.



January 1990 published a 186 pages long report on Human Rights in Albania. Chapter 7 in this report deals specifically with freedom of religion. This chapter is almost identical with Barbara Frey's paper "Violations of Freedom of Religion in Albania," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe vol.9, no. 6, pp. 1-18.

The dramatic events in Eastern Europe in 1989 have so far had few repercussions in Albania. According to newspaper reports, the National Assembly in Tirana on 9 May 1990 decided to reintroduce freedom of religion. However, details of this decision have not been available to me, and it is still too early to say what this means, if anything.

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