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CHRISTIAN CHURCHES THRIVING IN REVITALIZED ALBANIA

By James R. Payton, Jr.

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Over the past 15 years, I have had the privilege of traveling to several countries in the Balkans—a few of them on multiple occasions. But none of the academic or inter-religious/intercultural conferences or personal trips which took me to Southeastern Europe during that time had brought me to Albania. When I retired this past summer as Professor of History from Redeemer University College, where I taught Eastern European history and church history for 30 years, I did not expect ever to get to Albania. As it turned out, though, I spent the first week of November 2015 in Tirana, Albania – with a side trip on one of those days to Durrës. This trip not only gave me the opportunity to participate in a significant consultation; it also offered me the opportunity to see how this most repressed of all the Communist states of Eastern Europe was faring a little more than two decades after the end of the Hoxha regime.

Indeed, the consultation was held in Albania because of a major component of those repressions – namely, the hostile opposition exercised by the Communist authorities against all of Albania's religious communities. In 1967, Enver Hoxha declared Albania the first officially atheist state in the world. All religious practice, public or private, was adjudged a crime against the state and could be punished with the approval and power of the regime. Churches, mosques, and monasteries were destroyed; priests, monks, nuns, imams, and pastors faced arrest, trial,

incarceration, torture, and execution if they did not recant; and the same hostilities could befall laypersons whose religious commitment was detected. Thousands of faithful, clergy and lay alike, became confessors or martyrs. At this consultation, participants honored their memory and delighted to witness the resurrection of religious practice and liberty since the collapse of the Communist regime in 1992.

The consultation was sponsored by the Global Christian Forum [GCF]. A recently established ecumenical venture, the GCF is the broadest of ecumenical bodies: it includes Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and African Instituted churches, along with the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the Pentecostal World Fellowship.¹ Approximately every four years, the GCF holds a world-wide gathering focused on some issue that engages all or most of the constituent bodies. In the November 2015 meeting, the consultation had as its theme: “Discrimination, Persecution, and Martyrdom: Following Christ Together.” The leadership of the GCF decided to hold this consultation in Albania for at least two reasons. For one, since the GCF would welcome representatives from around the world, including from churches which in the present day are encountering discrimination, facing persecution, and enduring martyrdom, the location of the consultation could offer the comfort that such hostility can come to an end. For another, having the meeting in Albania allowed the Christian communities of the country to give witness to their resurgence and the positive role they were playing in the revitalization of their homeland.

1 In 1998, at the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the Rev. Dr. Konrad Raiser, WCC General Secretary, spoke in favor of establishing a wider, more inclusive network of churches and Christian organizations which could embrace the considerable diversity of expressions of Christianity more effectively than any then-existing ecumenical body. His suggestion resonated with many leaders in Christian denominations and ecumenical entities. Discussions of the proposal ensued, and four years later, in 2002, a basic plan was agreed to by representatives of the diverse groups mentioned above, and the Global Christian Forum came into existence. For further information (including the Guiding Purpose Statement, Guidelines for GCF endeavors, how GCF works, list of the GCF staff and committee, reports from the GCF global gatherings in 2007 and 2011, and regular newsletters), see: www.globalchristianforum.org

The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, the Albanian Evangelical Alliance, and the Roman Catholic Church in Albania cooperated to host and coordinate this GCF gathering. Each of the consultation's meeting days (November 2-4) began with an opening worship service in the respective major churches of these Christian communities (in the order noted above). In these services, the consultation participants joined with the host communities in prayer, hymn, and message, seeking guidance and blessing for the work to be done. Each consultation session (held in the magnificent conference center in the complex of the impressive Resurrection of Christ Orthodox Cathedral) began with Taizé chant, meditation, and reading of Scripture in various languages.

The gathering brought together, from all six of the inhabited continents, some 145 people – many from churches facing extreme hostility toward their faith in their respective national or local situations. The consultation was well structured to facilitate genuine learning by personal interaction among participants. At the opening plenary session, we received presentations from spokespeople for the respective constituencies of GCF and heard welcomes from the host Christian communities in Albania. In subsequent plenaries, participants learned about current research and assessment of data regarding persecution around the world, heard presentations on biblical and theological perspectives on the questions, and were advised on human rights and religious liberty issues. In further plenary sessions, we listened to representatives from churches around the world which were facing persecution and martyrdom, heard from ecclesiastical and other Christian organizations working in solidarity with those churches, and wrestled with drafts of a statement arising from the consultation experiences by which GCF would address the conference theme and call for ways to respond to it.² Daily meetings of small groups of delegates

2 The consultation message was adopted in the final plenary session, held November 4, 2015. Its final form has been distributed to participants (in English, French, and Spanish), but it has not yet (as of this writing) been

(eight to ten per group) allowed participants to get to know others from around the world, each with his or her respective church setting, whether of religious liberty or persecution. All in all, the consultation achieved what it had hoped to do; GCF intends to have its executive evaluate what has eventuated from the meeting and the initiatives it began there within two years, to assure that progress is being made on the intended outcomes.

For the purposes of this journal, this is backdrop to considering how religion is faring in Albania at present. It should be noted that this meeting showcased the Christian churches in Albania; the Muslim community in Albania was not part of this consultation. Even so, it was obvious both in Tirana and in the trip to Durrës the day after the consultation ended, that mosques had been rebuilt and that Muslims were practicing their faith openly. At the Tirana International Hotel, situated at the apex of Skanderbeg Park in the city center, GCF participants heard every morning just before 5:00 a.m. the broadcast sound of the muezzin's call from the large mosque, which was beside the park and adjoined the Tirana city government hall. The trip to Durrës the day after the consultation (November 5) allowed us to see several other mosques and witness numerous Muslims along the way responding to the calls of the muezzin by interrupting what they were otherwise doing to pray toward Mecca. At the Monastery of St. Vlas, where Orthodox clergy are trained, a picture of a significant interfaith meeting between Orthodox and Muslim leaders hangs prominently on the wall. It would appear, from the limited opportunities available to us, that inter-religious relationships go well in Albania in the present day. Even so, long-standing tensions nearby in Kosovo and more recent hostilities that broke out in 2015 in neighboring Macedonia, between Albanian Muslims and Slavic Orthodox, threaten to disrupt these relationships.

published or put on the GCF website. It will doubtlessly appear there in the near future; the forthcoming "GCF Newsletter 2015, No. 4" will carry reports on and pictures from the consultation and will either offer the consultation message in printed form or give an internet link where it can be accessed.

Among the Christian communities, interactions seem to be open and respectful. At the consultation, the stewards – young people from the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and evangelical churches in Albania – cooperated with each other admirably, offering the hope that the collaboration and respect which allowed the Christian communities to work together for the consultation can continue as many of these young people move toward leadership roles of one kind or another in their churches. While there are and doubtlessly will continue to be tensions which come to the surface in one way or another as these quite different Christian traditions interact in present-day Albania, the respectful cooperation which has developed in the country in the years since the end of Communist repression in the country, which both allowed and invited the GCF to consider holding the consultation in Albania, holds the promise of ongoing peace among the Christian churches as they call their faithful to worship and service in their common homeland.

Unsurprisingly, at the consultation there was a certain jockeying among the three Christian communities for special recognition of the horrors their group had endured under Hoxha's regime. What is not in doubt among them, though, is that each suffered persecution and martyrdom, but that each is now enjoying the freedom to participate vigorously in the renewal of their country.

Of the three, the Albanian Evangelical Alliance is the smallest and the one with the shallowest historical roots, having only received official government recognition in 2010 (although evangelical congregations had been present in the country for about a century). At present, there are some 160 churches affiliated with the alliance. Diverse groups – from Pentecostals/charismatic churches through a fair range of other Protestant groups – are affiliated in the body.

The Roman Catholic Church in Albania has been renewed in the post-Hoxha era. The largest concentration of Roman Catholics is in the Archdiocese of Shkodër-Pult in northwest Albania. During the 1993 visit of Pope John Paul II to Albania, Rrok Kola Mirdita was consecrated Archbishop of Tirana-Durrës. Archbishop Mirdita helped to design St. Paul Cathedral in Tirana, the center of the diocese. The cathedral is a beautiful contemporary building in a triangular shape, intended to recognize the threefold religious heritage of Albania – Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim. The archbishop was involved in the planning for the GCF consultation but was unable to be present, owing to failing health. On December 7, 2015, he passed away.³ The trip to Durrës after the consultation offered the opportunity to visit the cathedral there, currently under renovation, and to hear vivid accounts of the martyrdoms of a few Roman Catholic leaders during the Communist period; the retelling of the persecution and eventual martyrdom of one nun was especially horrifying.

The best known story of renewal in Albanian Christianity is that of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, under Anastasios Yannoulatos, Archbishop of Tirana, Durrës, and All Albania. He was already a highly regarded former missionary to Africa, scholar of world religions, and leader within both the Orthodox world and within the World Council of Churches when he was appointed to this position by the ecumenical patriarch in 1992. Archbishop Anastasios has led the Orthodox Church in Albania in a remarkable period of rebuilding edifices and offering services. Since his consecration, 150 new churches have been built, 60 churches and monasteries (designated as cultural monuments) have been renovated, and 160 churches have been restored; more than 70 buildings have been purchased or built to serve as preschools, schools, youth centers (more than 50 of them at present, in various cities and villages), health

3 I am indebted to my good friend, Prof. Dr. Angeli Ines Murzaku, of Seton Hall University, for this information; her family were good friends with the archbishop, whose passing, as Ines noted, will be a real blow to the Roman Catholic Church in the country.

centers, hospitality homes, orphanages, workshops, or soup kitchens for the needy. Altogether, this has amounted to some 460 building projects – making the Orthodox church one of post-Communist Albania's most serious investors and job creators.

Beyond these building-related activities, schools at all levels have been established, from pre-schools through post-secondary institutions – including, notably, the Logos University in Tirana and the Monastery of St. Vlas, where men are trained for the Orthodox priesthood and women (almost a third of those enrolled) for various roles in Orthodox churches. Health care initiatives, agricultural development, humanitarian work, ecological programs, and numerous cultural contributions all indicate the wide expanse of vision for Orthodoxy in the country.

The designation for the archiepiscopal see in Tirana is fitting: “Resurrection of Christ Orthodox Cathedral.” It is a magnificent structure, adhering to historic practices of Orthodox church structures, but also including contemporary motifs which speak to the world of the present day. It will hardly be a surprise to anyone who knows the story of Archbishop Anastasios to learn that in this regard he offered advice and insight as to how the building should be constructed, in both regards.⁴

With all this, one can see that the Christian churches have made a remarkable comeback in little more than two decades since the world's first atheist state came to its end. Albania had become, under Enver Hoxha, a hermit regime, sealed off from the rest of the world as thoroughly as his repressive measures could assure. But beyond the resurrection of Christianity in the country, it was easy to see that Albania itself is experiencing renewal in many ways. I will mention three that struck me in the short period I was in the country.

4 I have drawn the information above from two publications of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania which were made available to the GCF participants: “Creative Efforts: From 1991 until today,” and “The 'Resurrection of Christ' Cathedral, The See of the Holy Synod, the chapel 'Nativity of Christ', The Cultural and Conference Center.”

First, as I walked the streets of Tirana and ventured into various establishments, and as I interacted with Albanian citizens at the consultation events, I found that most people could understand and respond to spoken English. I mention this, not to urge special place for the English-speaking world, but in recognition that English proficiency has become as common now as proficiency in Russian would have been during the Cold War. With the restricted access allowed to the non-Communist world under the Hoxha regime, this speaks volumes as to how Albania has moved out from under the heavy arm of the former government.

Second, as has often been noted, Communist practice throughout Eastern Europe had restricted building colors to grays and browns. Whatever supposed social-psychological purposes that was intended to serve, the pattern was notable in the various countries dominated by Communism in the post-World War II world. I noted in both Tirana and Durrës, as I have in virtually all the other post-Communist countries I have visited, how colorful the facades of many public buildings were. The celebration of freedom, expressed also in dramatic splurges of color in the city, was evident.

Third, in our trip to Durrës, our tour guide – an American man who has lived in Albania for a few years and has learned the language well – made sure to point out to us that the four-lane, divided highway we were using for the trip had been built since the end of Hoxha's regime. During the Communist period, the “road” had been only a crater-scarred dirt passage. He and the Albanians were justifiably proud of the considerable progress they have made in little more than two decades. Albania may still be the poorest country in Europe, but it is making significant strides in its attempt to work its way into prosperity for its citizens.

Albania is being revitalized, and the Christian churches there are thriving.