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THE CURRENT SITUATION OF RELIGION IN ALBANIA

by Peter Prifti

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The question of religion in Albania has been a focus of interest, even fascination, to the world abroad ever since 1967, when public worship and religion as a social institution was officially abolished, and the country became "the first atheist state in the world." The nature and degree of interest differs in accordance with one's attitude or motives to this singular event in the realm of religion in our time.*

In general, for the public media in the West, the abolition of religion in Albania is newsworthy chiefly for its uniqueness and as a "curiosity," but not as an event of real import to the rest of the world. Political and ideological friends of Albanian socialism, in particular "Marxist-Leninist Parties" and groups, support Albania's stand on religion. They see it as a genuine expression of the ideology of Communism, which after all is atheistic. In contrast, the two major centers of Christianity in Europe; namely, the Vatican and the Greek Orthodox Church, have been and continue to be harsh critics of institutionalized atheism in Albania. Two examples follow.

In November, 1981, L'Osservatore Romano, official organ of the Vatican, published a Resolution of the Church of Greece denouncing the "persecution" of "four hundred thousand Orthodox Greeks" in Northern Epirus (Southern Albania). The Resolution, dated October 7, 1981, appealed to Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, the United Nations and other associations to "intervene with Government of Tirana" (sic), to put an end to the persecutions.1 In the same month (November, 1981), Humberto Cardinal Medeiros of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, and the late Bishop Mark I. Lipa, head of the tiny schismatic Albanian Orthodox
Church in America—a rival of the historic and broadly representative Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese in America—issued a Declaration voicing a "plea for the reopening of churches, mosques, and religious institutions" in Albania.2

In reply to such attacks, Albania's leader, Enver Hoxha, rather astutely turned around the very arguments of his critics, and used them to justify Albania's policy on religion. "To believe or not to believe," he said, "is a personal right, a question of conscience and not an institutional question." Further he said that, "religion cannot be imposed" by the clergy.3 Questioning the zeal, if not the integrity, of critics of Albanian atheism, Hoxha said that there are hundreds of millions of people in the world who do not believe in religion. Why then all this astonishment at socialist Albania? He closed his defense by saying, "Our state is atheistic by the will of its people."4

The will of the Albanian people is, of course, the crux of the matter. At this point, the neutral observer is faced with a difficulty. Since no public opinion polls are available in Albania at present, it is not possible to ascertain accurately what percentage of the population is for or against atheism, for or against theism. Still, a measure of evidence, some of it open and direct, some private and indirect.

The Albanian press is one obvious source of news on the subject. From time to time, it publishes articles, letters or statements from individuals or groups, especially rural people, giving their views on life in atheistic Albania. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a statement by a group of farmers in southern Albania, issued in October of 1981.

"What were we like 37 years ago?," i.e., at the end of the war. "Poor and hungry peasants, who thirsted for a drop of drinking water, let alone water to irrigate farms... For the land belonged to landowners, the churches and monasteries. Our wretched women worked those lands from morning until late in the evening just to keep body and soul together, and to feed the children."5

The statement then went on to say that their lives changed radically for the better under the current socialist government. "Under the leadership of the Party," it said, "we gained salvation from the misery of the past; we are enjoying our happiest days and see bright perspectives
ahead."  

In November, 1982, an old Albanian woman was quoted as saying to a Western correspondent in Albania:

"Neither the church nor the priest did anything to save me from the aghas and the beys." The reference is to the big landowners in Albania. "When they held sway, they gave me neither bread to eat nor water to drink, neither electricity to light my home nor a school for my sons and daughters... That is why I love the Party and not the priest."

Sentiments such as the above are not uncommon in Albania today. They testify to the common people's dire condition in the past, their yearning for social and economic change in the country, the indifference or impotence of the religious establishment to bring about such change, and the obvious relief among the suffering masses when their lot improved under the current government, albeit an atheistic one. A clue why atheism found support among the Albanian people appeared in an article on Tirane, the capital of Albania, in December 1982. The article noted that before the war "Tirane had 120 mosques and only 16 elementary schools". It can be surmised that in such circumstances, religious worship for broad segments of Albanian society was largely a meaningless ritual.

In addition, reports on the situation of religion continue to filter out of Albania from tourists, journalists, scholars who go there to attend conferences or for vacations, as well as from escapees. Such reports conflict sharply with one another, and tend to cancel each other out. Nonetheless, there seems to be a consensus that religion has lost ground with the younger generation of Albanians. Even before the abolition of religion in Albania, visitors to the country noted with surprise that young people, with few exceptions, did not attend church services. An Albanian-American known personally to this writer, who visited Albania fairly recently, quoted relatives and friends of his in a village deep in the countryside as saying that Enver Hoxha was an angel "sent to us by God." How is that for a paradoxical and ironic remark?

Other reports say that many people in Albania continue to adhere to religious beliefs, in spite of the absence of churches and mosques. This is true, it is said, of members of the older generation, and also of some young people. Some believers apparently manage to practice their religion
indirectly, in the privacy of their homes, or in ways that conform to the religious tradition, but yet do not violate the law banning public worship. Christian faithfule reportedly keep at home material symbols of their faith, such as medals, crucifixes, ikons and rosaries. Reports of this sort appear occasionally in the Albanian press as well.

It remains to discuss briefly the position on religion in Albania of Albanians abroad, in this instance the Albanians in America. America is the home of the Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese, found in 1908 by the late Bishop Fan S. Noli, America is also the home of the Albanian Islamic Center, the Albanian Bektashi Tekke, the Albanian Catholic Information Center, and several Albanian Catholic churches. It is interesting to note that Noli never rebuked the Albanian government for its policy on religion. The Albanian Church in America has been reluctant to engage the Albanian leadership on the issue of religion, out of concern that strong, open criticism would further the cause of Greek chauvinism and damage Albania's national interests.

This concern became manifest recently in connection with the October, 1981 Resolution of the Church of Greece that was mentioned earlier. Commenting on the Resolution, the Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese in America said that the Albanian people are entitled to the "elementary human freedom of religious expression," but called the Greek Resolution "regrettable and unjust." It rejected the claim that there are 400,000 Greek Orthodox in Albania, and asserted that "there are no more than 35,000 Greek-speaking nationals throughout Albania today." The statement of the Archdiocese accused the Greek Bishops of engaging in "political maneuverings," and said their action was "an affront to Albanians everywhere regardless of political ilk or religious persuasion."

Similar statements were issued by the other Albanian religious bodies in the country. While approving of the religious spirit of the Resolution, they questioned the number of Greek nationals in Albania alleged by the Resolution. The Bektashi statement called the allegation "propaganda," and added ". . . we solemnly declare that we reject without reservation the Greek claims as being false, and deceitfully ornamental." The statement of the Albanian Islamic Center said that the purpose of the Resolution was "to advance the cause of . . . Greek chauvinism," and therefore
constituted "an unforgivable offense against the entire Albanian nation". Similarly, a statement by the Albanian Catholic Information Center in Santa Clara, CA., said it was an error to refer to "Albanian Orthodox as Greek nationals," and for this reason regretted the Resolution of the Greek bishops.

It is obvious that the question of religion in Albania has become politicized. Sensitive to threats of partition by their neighbors, Albanians react with alarm to declarations on religion in their country by Greeks, Italians, and Yugoslavs that seem to them to be motivated by politics. In such instances, they see atheism as a lesser threat to the welfare of their country than the threat posed to Albania's independence by its neighbors. One suspects also that the vehement attacks on Albanian atheism by the Greek and the Roman Catholic Churches may be inspired, in part, by the desire to prevent possible movements toward atheism in their own areas of influence and jurisdiction.

To summarize, there are believers and there are atheists in Albania. But since the majority of the population is young, and since religion has lost much ground with the youth, the probability is that most Albanian at present are atheists. Such a supposition may shock some people in the West. Yet, it should be remembered that the abolition of established religion in Albania did not occur in a historical vacuum. Important segments of the population became disillusioned with their faith for pressing socio-economic reasons, as well as for historical, national and political reasons. In that context, doctrinaire communism, including atheism, apparently became an attractive alternative to a significant number of Albanians. In any case, the status of religion in Albania is likely to remain the same as long as Enver Hoxha is in power. The true state and strength of religion and atheism in Albania will presumably be known when Hoxha departs--and perhaps not even then.
FOOTNOTES

1Resolution of the Holy Synod of the Hierarchy of the Church of Greece, "L'Osservatore Romano, Nov. 21, 1981.


4Ibid., p. 39.


6Ibid., p. 2.

7Zëri i Popullit [Voice of the People], Tiranë, Nov. 11, 1982, p. 3.


9"Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese Responds to Holy Synod of the Church of Greece on the Question of 'Northern Epirus'" Liria [Liberty], organ or the Free Albania Organization, Boston, Jan. 1, 1982, pp. 1, 2.

10Dielli [The Sun], organ of the Pan-Albanian Federation of America--VATRA [The Hearth], Boston, Feb. 16, 1982, p. 4.

11Ibid.

12Ibid.

*Editor's Note: For a fine overview of the development of the Albanian state's attitude toward religion since 1945, see Peter Priftis "Albania--Towards an Atheist Society," in Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, ed. by Bohdan R. Bociurkiw and John W. Strong (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975) pp. 388-404.