Religion and Gender in Albania 1967-2009

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Introduction

This paper[^1] analyses gender relations and religious affiliations in Albania. The first part of the paper covers the communist period, 1967-1990, the second the transition period, 1990-2009. This paper aims to understand to what degree the ideology and politics of the Party of Labour of Albania (PLA) had an impact on the religious institutions, and how, and to what degree, this situation was mirrored in gender relations and women’s lives in 1967-1990. The transition section intends to explain the new situation, which followed the religious revival in the country, and how religious women adapted themselves to transition issues, focusing on the oscillation between the private and public realm.

1967 was selected as starting point, because in this year the PLA, influenced by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, initiated a series of ideological, political, economic, and social reforms, which aimed at strengthening the control of the party-state over the life of the country’s citizens. Different from other communist countries of East Europe, which began to experiment with forms of liberalization in the late 1960s, in Albania the PLA switched to a radical stand, which had direct impact on gender policies: “revolutionary” steps towards the emancipation of women were launched, initiated and directed from above, which spread out across the country. This was accompanied by the prohibition of public exercise of faith, as well as the closure of religious institutions, economic reforms, reforms of health care and culture, and an intensified battle against enemies of the socialist order.

The political, economic and social reforms, which were initiated at the beginning of the transition period, created legal requirements for women to organize themselves and to practice religion publicly again. Simultaneously, the transition period in the former socialist countries and in particular in Albania confronted women with new challenges. The quick transition from public to private economy, the lack of foreign and local investments, the fragile activity of the new state institutions, the weakening of the educational and health care systems, and the worsening of the living conditions, especially in the rural areas, led to an increase of women’s unemployment, and weakened their status in family and society. This was accompanied by a re-traditionalization of gender relations, expressed by a decrease of their participation in social and public life. Gradually, with the stabilization of the economic, political, and social life in the country, the organized women’s movements and their cooperation with state institutions on gender issues expanded and consolidated. In implementation of obligations for EU integration, the National Strategy on Gender Equality was drafted and efforts have been made to implement it in the fields of education, employment, participation in leadership and decision-making, and to ensure the freedom of

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In Albania there are four officially acknowledged religious communities: Sunni Muslims, Bektashi Muslims (a kind of Sufi mystical order that deviates from Sunnism in various aspects), Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Approximately 70% of the population are Muslims, 20% Orthodox and 10% Catholic. Additionally various religious sects have emerged, which were imported from other countries after the fall of communism. In this study only three religious communities are analysed: Sunnis, Catholics and Orthodox. The Bektashi have to be left out because of the lack of data. The social history of religion is not well developed in Albania and the relationship between religion, family and gender relations has not yet been investigated. Those studies that at least touch upon this topic tend to focus on one specific religious community or a single denomination and usually stress the harmony and the religious tolerance among Albanians. Only in recent years have efforts been made to challenge this myth of religious tolerance.

Socialist Period

The studies on religion during the socialist time period, especially since 1967, can be characterised generally as having a deeply ideological, critical, and sceptical bias. According to most of the studies, religion was harmful to the Albanian family, and the religious impact on society and especially on women was considered very regressive because of its conservative ideology. From 1965, the year when Enver Hoxha spoke on the need to improve women’s life and opposed religious dogmas and practices in every-day life vigorously, the so-called period of the “revolutionarisation” of life, education and women’s status began. The propaganda machinery declared the necessity of fighting all backward customs and beliefs. Religion was considered hostile to the new socialist society. Religious education was also considered obstructive for the new path (the Party’s path) that Albanian society would pursue. Parallel to the demolition of many sacred sites, the government, under the pretext of fighting “religious prejudices,” made relentless atheistic propaganda, especially directed toward the youth of the country. The state repression of religion culminated 1967, when Enver Hoxha, mimicking his Chinese ally, started the Albanian “cultural

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3 Worthy of mention are the publications of the Albanian journal Përpjekja (Endeavour) and the editing book “Albanian Identities” by Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer.


5 Secretary General of the Labor Party of Albania (LPA) and the Albanian dictator from 1945 until his death, on 11 April 1985.


revolution”. The state propaganda focused mostly on the necessity to educate the “new socialist man”, on the class struggle and on the fight against “old traditions and mentalities.” The Constitution of 1976 abolished the exercise of religion in public and Albania was declared an atheist state.

In the framework of the movement for women’s emancipation the solution proposed by Albania’s communist leaders circled around one central idea: the Marxist-Leninist theory of society. The emancipation of Albanian women, they believed, should be guided by the Marxist-Leninist theory of the economic development of society. This means above all that women must break out of their confinement at home and participate in the production process. For the “new socialist woman” emancipation would mean waging war against traditional customs and beliefs. Religion was considered harmful to gender equality and to women, as religion was “a masculine hierarchic ideology and practice” and stressed women’s inferiority in society. The religious dogmas and rules were considered as invisible spiritual “handcuffs” that glorified women’s social slavery and their oppression in society and within family in the name of God. Emphasis was put on the allegedly negative role of religion on people’s family habits and customs, as only marriages within the confessional community were blessed and inter-confessional marriages were prohibited. The only path to be followed according to the PLA leadership was that of communist ideology, which meant the building up of an atheist state and society.

In fact, not everything went without opposing the state policy. In several regions people protested and wanted to protect their sacred sites. Thus, in 1967 in Himara the town’s Orthodox women protested against the closing of their church and against the removal of the holy icons from the church. In this case the PLA’s Central Committee advised the local authorities not to exercise violence, but to persuade people of the necessity of actions against religion, as religion was opposed to women’s emancipation. Despite the efforts to extinguish religion from everyday life, in some remote regions in the highlands some people did preserve their beliefs and rituals. Many Albanians continued to practice their religion by “adjusting” themselves to the new conditions. This however was very difficult, since the state authorities were watchful to the point, where even children were asked in class what feasts are celebrated at home or what kind of menu was served at a (abolished) religious feast. In a gender perspective, the secret exercise of beliefs and rituals by women was obviously more pronounced than by men. Usually women wore crucifixes, small icons or religious symbols hidden under their clothes. They prepared religious dishes such as hallva, grur and ashure, inked eggs at Easter and secretly distributed them to the other believers.

16 Typical religious food used usually during religious fests by the Moslems, Christians and the Bektashis.

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All this contributed to the survival of religious beliefs during the socialist period in a rudimentary form.

Transition, Religion and Gender between Public and Private

In 1990, Albania abolished the law on prohibition of religious propaganda. The so-called “revival period” of religion and religious institutions began. People were finally free to exercise their beliefs. The economic and social changes in the beginning of the 1990s had most important impact on the Albanian family. After the demise of Communism, however, as Duijzings asserted, faith has regained some of its previous importance in the lives of ordinary Albanians. Traditional cultural and social values experienced a revival. But it is too early to assess their impact on gender relations.

In the early phase of transition many women withdrew from political and public life; gender equality in the socialist period was discredited. Religion was pushed into the private realm and tended to reinforce women’s domesticization by becoming the guardian of private life and family values. At this stage religious institutions became involved in discussing social problems and challenges of transition, such as the loss of moral values and spiritual virtues as well as divorce, abortion, and domestic violence. Contemporary family problems were linked to the apparent decline of faith. The importance of family values was stressed for overcoming the social problems caused by the post-socialist economy.

Recently, the religious leaders began to encourage religious women to enter the public and non-religious spheres. Both Muslim and Christian heads participated in public discourses on transition and its impact on women’s religious life. According to them “this is the right moment for religious women to be assigned the deserved contribution in politics, public and intellectual life”. According to them society needs “woman’s love” for human beings. The Christian spiritual leaders attribute to the presence of woman in society the image of the mother and in the Church the image of the Virgin Mary and her image of humility, purity, beauty and constancy, saving the society from aggressiveness. It seems that the idealization of motherhood is especially powerful, partly because of the particular popularity of the devotional cult of Mary among Catholic and Orthodox believers and partly because of the general valorization of motherhood in public opinion. The religious women activists in Albania are still making efforts to clear up the clichés on beliefs and religious women and to promote women’s integration in economic development and the increase of their participation in the public and political life, which, according to them, will contribute to heal the gender inequalities of Albanian society. Examples of the attitude to go public came also from women who are active in religious NGOs. For them nowadays it is normal going out to religious gatherings or rituals. They attend professional courses (on tailoring, computing, foreign language, nursing etc.) managed by their religious institutions. Some Christian


activist women serve as office workers, nurseries in Christian clinics, and in religious cafeterias and organise summer courses and camps.

However, as Woodhead pointed out, women face a tension when they decide to enter public life. According to them, in general religion became a natural environment for the articulation of the lives and desires of women, whose lives centred on home, family, children and husband. Women who moved into public life by (for example) exercising a profession, however, would experience tension between traditional religious values and the values of their public/professional lives. When speaking with religious activists this tension was confirmed as they pointed out the difficulties faced with their husbands due to their desire to follow several courses or opening their own business. The husbands felt neglected as their wives were not at home caring for them, cooking for them, and looking after children. Many women feel themselves independent from their husbands since they make their own money. One feels the tension also when they complain for having so much to do, and still have to provide for the husband: “Hell, I have to go home and cook for him! (dreq, duhet të shkoj në shtëpi të gatuaj per të!)

Conclusions

In the course of the last two decades of the communist regime (1967-1989), the PLA conceived and led the movement for the continued emancipation of women at various fronts. The movement against religion, banning the exercise of religion and the activity of the religious institutions was developed also alongside the movement for the emancipation of women. This affected greatly the rights of women to practice religion and religious rituals, and affected their rapport with the society, family and state. In general, religious women used a form of passive resistance against these measures by observing religious rituals in hiding and preserving cultural objects, becoming thus an important element of preserving religious values in Albanian society.

The transition of society at the beginning of the 1990s to market economy and a political pluralist system created new venues for the Albanian women to take part in public life and free market activity. The law of the right to exercise religion and the establishment of religious institutions has created opportunities for women to practice religious rituals and to take part in the reestablishment of religious institutions and to organise themselves in religious NGOs. An evolution of religious institutions took place especially within the Muslim communities with regard to admitting and involving women in public religious life.

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27 In Tirana several religious women opened their own shops and trade for their religious clients.