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## Letters to the Editor

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor:

Thank you very much for the copy of Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, Vol. III, No. 3 (April, 1983). I read it with much interest.

I noted with regret however that the Churches' Human Rights Programme, in its statement on "Albania and Religion," issued in Geneva, September 1982, commits a number of errors.

To begin with, the name of Albania's leader is misspelled. It is Hoxha (pronounced HO-dja), not Hoxcha. That is a minor point. More important are the following:

The opening paragraph (p. 7) says that Hoxha, after declaring Albania to be the world's first atheistic state, "has expressed the hope that the rest of the world would follow his example." I hold no brief for Hoxha or atheism, but I doubt the authenticity of the charge. I have followed developments in Albania for a long time, and I have never seen anything to that effect, though it can be assumed that privately Hoxha may indeed cherish such a hope. We have a right therefore to ask: What is the source for the charge?

In paragraph two (p. 7), it is said that Hoxha's anti-religious stand stems in part "from his own personal early memories of seeing Christian and Muslim communities in southern Albania engage in bloody family and clan vendettas in the name of religion." This too is an unsubstantiated charge. I have read half a dozen biographical accounts of Hoxha, and I have not found any data in support of such an allegation. In fact, the vendetta tradition in prewar Albania applied to northern, not southern Albania where Hoxha was born and grew up.

The claim on p. 8 that the Hoxha government declared in 1944 that "the existence of the different religious communities was a danger to national unity" is likewise unfounded. Again, what is the source for the charge? None is given. The fact is that the Albanian leadership was far too sensitive at the time to the religious sensibilities of the Albanian public to even consider such an impolitic declaration. Plainly, such a declaration would have amounted to political suicide, and the Hoxha government was not about to do away with itself right after having come into power.

In the same paragraph it is said that the Albanian Orthodox Church severed its relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople in 1949. Not true. The Albanian Orthodox Church became an autocephalous church on April 12, 1937, by virtue of a decree issued by Patriarch Benjamin in Constantinople.

The Churches' statement errs again when it alleges that the Albanian government "makes no effort to preserve ancient Byzantine church buildings." The government, though atheistic in nature, has acknowledged the cultural and esthetic value of certain religious edifices, and has declared them to be monuments of national culture. To that end, much restoration work has been done on many old churches, including the Church of St. Triadha and the Church of St. Nikolla in the city of Berat, the Church of St. Mary in the village of Pojan, and churches in the town of Voskopoja.

It is clear that in issuing its statement on Albania and Religion, the leadership of the Churches' Human Rights Programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act did not act with a sense of responsibility and respect for truth.

The government of Albania is indeed open to criticism for its policy on religion. But any such criticism has to rest, it seems to me, on indisputable evidence, not only for the sake of truth, and not only to win the respect of the informed and the judicious, but in order to be effective, as well.

Respectfully yours,  
Peter R. Prifti

University of California at San Diego  
July 10, 1983

[Editor's response:

This is the first letter which we received on an issue of substance and we are gladly sharing it with our readers. The statement "Albania and Religion" of the Churches' Human Rights Programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act impressed me as moderate, balanced, and sympathetic toward Albanian national interests. This is why the statement was selected as a complement to the otherwise scarce literature on the religious situation in Albania. But we are equally eager to publish your correctives which will help the readers to get a more comprehensive insight into the situation. Your expression of concern is appreciated. Your letter has been forwarded to the World Council of Churches in Geneva. I hope that other readers will take the cue from you and write responses to our articles which will shed more light on a given subject-matter.]