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**REFLECTIONS ON THE RELIGIONLESS SOCIETY:  
THE CASE OF ALBANIA**

By **Denis R. Janz**

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From the time of its inception as a discipline, the scientific study of religion has raised the question of the universality of religion. Are human beings somehow naturally religious? Has there ever been a truly religionless society? Is modernity itself inimical to religion, leading slowly but nevertheless inexorably to its extinction? Or does a fundamental human religiosity survive and mutate into ever new forms, as it adapts itself to the exigencies of the age? There are as of yet no clear answers to these questions. And religiologists continue to search for the irreligious society, or at least for the society in which religion is utterly devoid of any social significance, where the religious sector is a tiny minority made up largely of elderly people and assorted marginal figures. Some today put forward Iceland as the best example, on the basis that only 2% attend church (Tomasson, 1980; Swatos, 1984). Others, basing themselves on International Social Survey Program results from 1991, suggest that the former East Germany, the Netherlands, and Slovenia are the most secular countries (Greeley, 1993: 52). However we interpret such results, the question remains: has the time come for us to begin to speak of "the religionless society"?

In the context of questions such as this, the case of Albania is of extraordinary interest. It was the first and only country to criminalize all religious practice and to officially proclaim itself an atheist state in 1967. Though no surveys have been done, there are strong indications that by the end of Albania's communist era in 1991, the death of religion had indeed occurred here. And it may well be that today religion in Albania remains the weakest of all. This essay surveys the important factors that contributed to this radical secularization, all of which were unique to Albania: the "hyper-Stalinism" of Enver Hoxha, the most extreme policy of isolationism in Eastern Europe, and perhaps the harshest repressive measures against religion in the world. It then inquires into the religious situation of post-communist Albania and into the relevance of this for theoretical considerations.

## Enver Hoxha

Until it was pulled down in 1991, the stature of Joseph Stalin was the focal point of Tirana's main city square. Here, in 1953, First Secretary Enver Hoxha knelt and wept when he heard of Stalin's death and vowed undying loyalty to his memory (Sinishta, 1976: 24). It was not an empty gesture. From the time when he became the leader of the Albanian communist party in 1941, through liberation in 1944, to his death in 1985, Hoxha was utterly convinced that Stalin alone could lead humanity to a brighter future. And since Hoxha was, from 1944 to 1985 the sole, undisputed leader of Albania, the entire life of this nation was built on the principles and personal example of Stalin (Schnytzer, 1982; Pipa, 1987-88).

By the mid-sixties Hoxha seems to have wearied of the mundane day-to-day business of governing. After two decades of haranguing workers to meet production quotas, he now envisioned a more exalted role for himself on the world-historical stage. Consequently, he began to commit his thoughts to paper, and the result is the multiple volume set of his collected writings, translated into several languages. Signs of megalomania are not absent: Hoxha clearly envisioned himself as a world leader. But his lifeless prose and endless repetition of Stalinist dogma is enough to daunt even the most avid researcher. Nevertheless we must dip into these volumes if we are to understand Hoxha's inspiration.

The first of Hoxha's *oeuvre* worthy of our attention is his 1967 Report on the Role and Tasks of the Democratic Front for the Complete Triumph of Socialism in Albania (Hoxha, 1974). When he comes in this work to the subject of religion, Hoxha repeats in an almost perfunctory way the standard Marxist objections. In summary, Hoxha says, "the religious world outlook and the communist world outlook are irreconcilable. . . . they express and uphold interests of antagonistic classes" (quoted in Prifti, 1975: 393). But there is a second reason why religion must be eliminated, and here Hoxha is more emphatic. Religion stands in the way of modernization. In Albania backward customs and oppressive prejudices block social and economic development. And these, Hoxha argues, have a religious basis. Uprooting these foundations would be a gigantic step in the march toward modernity (Hoxha, 1974: 34, 69). Most important of all though, is the third reason Hoxha gives in this book for struggling against religion. Throughout their history, the Albanian people have had religion imposed on them from outside. That is why, Hoxha says, the clergy have always "made common cause with the invader" (Hoxha, 1974: 26). The "revolution" which he calls for is not primarily a struggle between different classes in Albanian society. Rather for Hoxha it means "to uproot alien customs, traditions and influences, religious superstitions" (Hoxha, 1974: 51), etc. Since religion stands on the side of the foreign oppressor, the revolution must necessarily attack it. Here xenophobia is added to megalomania.

That same year, 1967, Hoxha wrote another work in which he thoroughly ventilated one of the "backward customs" for which religion was responsible, namely the appalling treatment

of women in traditional Albanian society (Hoxha and Alia, 1967). Women's place in this society is summed up in an old Albanian proverb: "A woman must work harder than a donkey for the latter feeds on grass while a woman lives on bread" (Hoxha and Alia, 1967: 25). Such a degrading view is directly due to the influence of Christianity and Islam, according to Hoxha. Citing the fiercely misogynist John Chrysostom and the somewhat milder Thomas Aquinas, Hoxha argued that sexism is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition (Hoxha and Alia, 1967: 10). He acknowledged that it was the "'Kanun of Lek Dukagjin"--the ancient Albanian code of tribal law--which allowed husbands to beat their wives and demanded that women kneel in reverence before their husbands. But the churches, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, advocated the continuation of this legal system (Hoxha and Alia, 1967: 15). Religion thus sanctions and legitimizes primitive customs that demeans women and stand in the way of progress. If modernization is to take place religion must be pushed aside.

One of Hoxha's most revealing literary efforts is his 1979 panegyric to his mentor, entitled With Stalin (Hoxha, 1979). Here, long after Stalin's other disciples had abandoned him, Hoxha ardently defend him against all those "slanderers" who now dare to call him a "bloody tyrant" and a "murderer" (Hoxha, 1979: 14). This "brilliant mind and pure soul" (Hoxha, 1979: 16) was "just and a man of principle" (Hoxha, 1979: 36). While all others have betrayed his memory, Hoxha says, "I bow in devotion to Joseph Stalin" (Hoxha, 1979: 41).

The book goes on to give a full account of Hoxha's five personal meetings with Stalin. What is striking throughout is Hoxha's groveling for approval, his servile flattery, his obsequious fawning in the presence of one whom he believed to be a hero of world-historical dimensions. Especially interesting is the account of the second face-to-face encounter in March, 1949. Stalin approached the subject of religion by asking if Hoxha ate pork, and he took Hoxha's positive reply to mean that he had left his Muslim roots far behind (Hoxha, 1979: 121f). Hoxha then laid out his plan for the handling of religion in Albania, and Stalin gave his approval (Hoxha, 1979: 122, 156f). Just how much this approval meant to Hoxha became evident in subsequent years in his single-minded pursuit of a Stalinist society. Grief-stricken by Stalin's death in 1953, Hoxha signed an oath on behalf of the Albanian people "to guard the teachings and instructions of Stalin as the apple of its eye, as a historic behest, and [to] carry them all out consistently" (Hoxha, 1979: 220).

Hoxha's dogged persistence in this policy despite the rest of the world becomes clear in his 1980 book Eurocommunist is Anticommunism (Hoxha, 1980). Here Hoxha took the position that all of the world's communist parties had betrayed Stalin and had thus in effect repudiated Lenin and Marx as well. Unlike these "revisionist traitors," the Albanian Party of Labor alone remained faithful to Stalin. And its destiny, Hoxha is convinced will be to lead the ultimate and inevitable triumph of Stalinist Marxism throughout the world.

There is no doubt that the literature of the Party reflected Hoxha's views as accurately as his own writings. As an example we can take a 1983 article in the Albanian journal Studime Historike (Beqja and Rama, 1983). The goal of education, the authors state, is to transform human consciousness by eliminating the religious "mildew of the old world" and thus to produce an authentically atheist society (Beqja and Rama, 1983: 42). But this will not be a simply matter. What is required is a "merciless, life-and-death struggle" against religion (Beqja and Rama, 1983: 41). The result will be the world's first religionless society, something "never before seen in the history of humanity" (Beqja and Rama, 1983: 42). For the sake of the progress of the human species, the radically secular society would be pioneered in Albania, if necessary by force.

With this glimpse into the mind of Enver Hoxha as background, we can now turn to a crucial element in his policy, the elimination of outside influence.

### **Isolation**

Without cutting itself off from the international community, it is doubtful that Albania could have advanced as far as it did towards its goal. To understand this, some historical background is helpful.

It was only at the beginning of this century that the national consciousness and language of Albanians began to assert itself. This, combined with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, led to independence in 1912. What preceded was centuries of servitude to foreign powers. It is a telling fact that even in the nineteenth century, the only languages of instruction in Albanian schools were Arabic, Greek, and Italian (Pollo and Puto, 1981). Even after independence, Albania constantly fell victim to Italian, Greek, and Serbian intrigue. The brutal Zog, proclaiming himself king in 1929, openly allied himself with Italy. In 1939 Mussolini's troops overran Albania, and in 1943 Hitler's troops took over the fascist occupation of the country. Thus a long history of constant and unrelenting foreign domination left a deep imprint on the national memory. It inspired the nationalist resistance of Hoxha's partisans, and after liberation in 1944 it became a potent contributor to Albania's isolationist policy.

The fear and hatred of foreign domination in the Albanian national consciousness is inextricably tied to religion. At the time of liberation, it was commonly held that 70% of the population was Muslim, 20% Orthodox, and 10% Roman Catholic. But none of these religions were native to Albania. Turkish invasions had brought Islam. It was under Greek domination that Orthodoxy entered Albania. And Italian aggression had included the introduction of Roman Catholicism. Thus all these religions were associated with the interference of outsiders. Albanians had throughout their history accepted the religions of the oppressors: sometimes this had been expedient, sometimes necessary for survival. But

almost always it had been half-hearted. None of these religions ever really became an integral part of the Albanian national character. Already in the nineteenth century, the proto-nationalists' slogan had been "The religion of the Albanian people is Albania" (Prifti, 1975: 397). No wonder then that xenophobia and hatred of religion here went hand-in-hand.

Thus cutting ties with the "imperialist West" meant that already in 1945 the state demanded that all Catholic connections with the Vatican be broken, the Apostolic Delegate was sent back to Rome, foreign priests were expelled, etc. (Sinishta, 1976: 9). It meant that when Tito's "revisionism" in Yugoslavia became clear in 1948, he was denounced and diplomatic relations were broken off. As for the Soviet Union, relations became increasingly strained after 1953, as Soviet leaders distanced themselves from Stalin's legacy. They were finally broken off entirely in 1960. By this time Albania had achieved almost complete political and cultural isolation. Only a very few outsiders were allowed to visit Albania, and then under tightly controlled conditions. Realizing however that such total isolation had its drawbacks, Albanian leaders gradually began to develop relations with China. And when the Cultural Revolution took hold there in 1966, the alliance was cemented. China thus became for a time the eager but remote guarantor of Albanian sovereignty and almost its sole trading partner.

Attempts by foreigners to break Albania's cultural isolation met with furious response. In 1983, for instance, the Pope had stood on the shores of the Adriatic near Bari and denounced "atheistic Albania", adding that "Albania is in my heart." Hoxha's party newspaper, Zeri i Popullit, fired back, castigating "Pope Vaytila" for his blind anti-communism, and reminding him that every foreign oppressor including Mussolini had said, "Albania is in my heart" (Zeri i Popullit, 1983). Religion had always been the weapon of the occupying enemy.

There were other attempts. Vatican Radio beamed an occasional mass into the country. Protestant fundamentalists set up loudspeakers along the Greek border in an absurd attempt to shout religion into Albania. Others wrapped Bibles together with candy in plastic containers and floated them down rivers from the north into the country. Of course, the effect of all such attempts was minimal. For all practical purposes, Albania had made itself into a hermetically sealed laboratory, shutting out external cultural and religious influence. It was by far the most isolated society in Eastern Europe and remained so until 1991. Here was a necessary condition if the goal, the death of religion, was to be reached.

### **Religious Repression**

Repressive measures against religious practice in post-war Eastern Europe varied in their degrees of severity, as is well known. In some countries they were mild to non-existent

while in others they were draconian. In Albania they were the harshest of all, perhaps the most extreme in the world.

The anti-religious efforts of communist Albania have been documented elsewhere at great length (Sinishta, 1976; Prifti, 1975; Minnesota Lawyers, 1989; Gardin, 1988; Puebla Institute, 1989; etc.). Here only a brief overview can be given. The struggle against religion began almost immediately after liberation. In 1945 much of the church-owned property in the country was confiscated by the government (Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 6). It was a sign of what was to come. And yet the new constitution of 1946, like the Yugoslavian constitution of that year, guaranteed equality to people of all faith (Article 15), and granted "freedom of opinion and belief" (Article 18) (Minnesota Lawyers, 1987: 5). Moreover, three Muslims were allowed to take their seats in the People's Assembly of 1945 (Minnesota Lawyers, 1987: 4). But even these positive signs could not hide the Party's real intentions. For at the same time clergy were being expelled, imprisoned and even executed. But the end of 1946, it is estimated, half of all Catholic clergy were in prison, and some twenty had been shot or tortured to death (Sinishta, 1976: 8). Most were accused of having collaborated with the enemy during the fascist occupation, and some were accused of fomenting subversive movements. In some cases, the charges were substantially true (Prifti, 1975: 392), while in others they were clearly fabricated. The ideological campaign against religion which followed left little doubt about the Party's goal. And in 1949 the general direction became unmistakable: all penalties for those who violated the constitutional right to religious freedom were removed from the penal code (Minnesota Lawyers, 1987: 7).

By 1950 the three religions of Albania were only shadows of their former selves. From then until 1966 there was continual ideological pressure, the occasional arrest, and harassment of clergy, all of which gradually weakened these religious institutions further. A network of prison camps and forced labor camps was developed around the country: Sac, Ballsh, Burrel, Tirana, Tarovic, Bulquize, Maliq, Kaveje, Kucove, Fier--an Albanian gulag for criminals, dissidents, and there is no doubt, believers who resisted the Party policy.

But even this, in historical retrospect, looks like a mere holding action in comparison with the full frontal assault that was to begin in 1966. It was a movement which observers, regardless of their political or religious views, have called "unprecedented in history" (Pollo and Puto, 1981: 280f). Inspired by China's Cultural Revolution, the Party met in its Fifth Congress in 1966 and issued an urgent call for completing the construction of socialism in Albania. This meant above all the final annihilation of religion (Pollo and Puto, 1981: 276ff). Popular and spontaneous anti-religious agitation grew, and this was legitimized when Hoxha, on 27 February 1976, made public a text entitled "On the Struggle Against Religion, and Religious Conceptions and Customs" (Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 7). Houses of worship were

now closed; public beatings of clergy were common, and the forty remaining Orthodox priests in the country were publicly denounced and humiliated.

In April of 1967 the campaign was advanced on the legal front. Government Decree No. 4236 mandated the expropriation of all properties used for religious purposes. By September all churches monasteries, mosques, etc., had been closed (Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 9). In November, Decree No. 4337 announced that from now on religion would have no legal status whatsoever. At the same time Radio Tirana triumphantly proclaimed Albania the "first atheist state in the world" (Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 10). All vestiges of religion, humanity's great scourge, were to be swept away: religious personal names were to be changed; religious symbols to be removed from cemeteries; linguistic allusions to religious were to be dropped; a new calendar replaced religious holidays with Builders' Day, Miners' Day, Printers' Day, etc. (Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 9; Prifti, 1975: 401). The radically secular state had made its debut on the world-historical stage!

This final attempt to crush religion was accompanied by an unprecedented mobilization of ideological weapons. The masses had to be convinced of religion's disastrous impact on society. The titles that now poured forth from Tirana's publishers indicate the scope of the assault: "The People and Religion"; "Medicine and Religion"; "Darwinism and Religion"; "The Miracles of Religion"; "The Harm of Religious Rites and Festivals"; "On the Origin of Religion"; "The Reactionary Core of Islam"; "The Priest, the Goat and God"; "Religion Stripped Naked"; "We Accuse Religion"; etc. (Prifti, 1975: 401). The list could be extended, but the point of this literature is already clear. Religion is the enemy of humanity and the source of all misery.

In the years following, people who publicly expressed their religious beliefs were imprisoned and sometimes executed. To mention just one group, by 1971 there were only fourteen Catholic priests left in the country, and of these, twelve were in prison and two were in hiding (Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 10). There is documented evidence that in 1972 a priest was executed for baptizing a child (Sinishta, 1976: 15).

From a legal point of view, the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom was still on the books. This was remedied in the new constitution of 1976. Article 55 now made all religious activity illegal:

The creation of any type of an organization of a fascist, anti-democratic, religious, or anti-socialist character is forbidden. Fascist, religious, warmongering, anti-socialist activity and propaganda are forbidden, as is the incitement to hatred between peoples and races. (Quoted in Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 11).

A year later the penal code laid out the penalties: three to ten years for possession of religious literature, for example, and death if such offenses are deemed to be "serious" (Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 11).

The period of terror for religious believers, with its imprisonments and executions, did not end with the death of Enver Hoxha in 1985. His successor, Ramiz Alia, while perhaps more pragmatic than Hoxha, kept up the pressure on religion (Pipa, 1989). Thus, in 1988 for instance, a man received five years for wearing a cross and another received ten years for possession of a Bible (Minnesota Lawyers, 1989: 15f). Only in 1990, after public unrest and student riots over deteriorating economic conditions, did Alia lift the legal ban on all religious practice, on May 9. Albania's concerted attempt to erase religious sentiment from human consciousness was over.

What remains is the question of how successful the experiment was. Unfortunately, there are no scientific data available. But it seems safe to say that by 1990 religion in this country had been devastated. Signs of this were everywhere at the time. When the first public mass was celebrated on November 4, 1990, the crowd of five thousand that showed up included many elderly Catholics, few of whom could remember this central rite of the church. It also included substantial numbers of Muslims, apparently unaware of the differences between Islam and Christianity. Here then was sign of the campaign's success: few retained religious feelings, and of those that did, most had forgotten almost everything. The forty-four year absence of religion had left this country a religious wasteland.

In November of 1994 I visited this country to assess the situation and to look for sign that religion was making a comeback. Still, there were no scientific data, no sociological surveys, etc. All I was left with were the impressions and opinions of the experts I talked to (principally Professors Adem Mezini and Gëzim Hadaj of Tirana University). They agreed that two generations of Albanians have grown up in a religious vacuum and therefore interest in religion today is minuscule. Western Christian fundamentalist reports of a "deep hunger for religion" in Albania are wild exaggerations. True, churches and mosques are being re-opened (mainly with foreign funds) but many of them stand empty. For the vast majority, religion is a curiosity of the past which is utterly irrelevant to their current struggles.

The partial exception to this may be the northern city of Shkodra, traditionally the Catholic center of the country. Here some Catholics now attend mass regularly, but most under the age of fifty have only the vaguest idea of basic Christian beliefs. Then too, it must be remembered that traditionally the population is 10% Catholic. Today perhaps half of those practice their faith. Far fewer from Muslim or Orthodox backgrounds practice theirs. If this is substantially correct, it means that only a small fragment of the population has retained any religious sensibilities whatsoever.

Will religion make a comeback? The many foreign missionaries who now flood into Albania hope so (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Danish Pentecostals, American fundamentalists, etc.). But again, the experts are skeptical. A few of the curious come to Bible study meetings, for instance, but their numbers are insignificant. A major evangelistic

rally in Tirana, with all the hype of Disneyworld, attracted a very thin crowd. The Pope himself, on his 1994 visit to Tirana, drew at most 1000 people. All these are signs that no vigorous re-birth of religion seems to be taking place here.

### **Theoretical Questions**

If we can legitimately speak of "the religionless society" in the Western world of late modernity, we will not go far wrong in holding forth Albania as its prime exemplar, even in the absence of hard data. For religiologists, this case is of particular interest because it prompts us to reconsider some of the fundamental assumptions of the discipline and to re-open some basic theoretical questions. Here I can only briefly suggest what some of those questions are.

First, are human beings naturally or innately religious? If we grant that Albania is now a religionless society, and if religion does not make a comeback here, we may have to conclude that religion is solely a social construct, handed on from one generation to the next in a complex process of socialization. Though this has gone on for eons, disrupting the process of transmission for a mere two generations effectively eliminates it. From this perspective, religion is far from being one of the permanent elements in "human nature," but rather a very fragile and quite dispensable component of human consciousness.

Second, a whole complex of questions arises when we compare the case of Albania with other Western countries put forth as "religionless societies." What do Albania, Iceland, Slovenia, and the Netherlands have in common, if anything? Neither economic nor educational levels seems to be relevant factors: the extremely low rates of religious participation are roughly the same in the richest and the poorest, the most educated and the least educated. Such comparisons also re-open the much-discussed issue of whether Eastern European "real socialism" was more corrosive for religion than Western capitalism. Did not the most militantly anti-religious Marxist regimes (such as Albania) end up more or less exactly where pro-religious, non-Marxist systems (such as Iceland or the Netherlands) did, with the religionless society?

Third, from its inception as a discipline, the sociology of religion has in almost every case sought to understand levels of religiosity in terms of secularization theory. In a word, this theory holds that as societies become more educated, scientifically oriented, technologically competent, economically affluent, etc., they become more "secularized", i.e. "religious institutions, actions, and consciousness [lose] their social significance" (Wilson, 1982: 149). Hence the advance of modernity dooms religion to eventual extinction. The great anomaly which now tempts religiologists to abandon this theory is, of course, the United States where religious participation is today higher than ever. The case of Albania may present new problems for secularization theorists. According to this theory, religion should make a

comeback in Albania, since it was more or less eliminated by force, and this society remains relatively undeveloped in education, technology, scientific thinking, etc. But it may not make a comeback and there is little evidence after five years that it will. Hence the case of Albania may be a new challenge to secularization theory.

Fourth, the main theoretical perspective now vying to replace secularization theory encounters similar difficulties when confronted with the case of Albania. This is what is known as "supply-side theory" (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994). It focuses on "religious economies" understood as systems consisting of a market of religious customers, religious firms serving that market, and the different religious products being offered by those firms. Low levels of religious practice, according to this theory, do not reflect weak demand. Rather they reflect "an unattractive product, badly marketed, within a highly regulated religious economy" (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994: 232). The more competitive and pluralistic the religious economy is, the greater the level of participation will be. While this theory makes better sense of the American situation than secularization theory, it falters in the cases of Poland and Ireland. But what about the case of Albania? Supply-side theory would assume that while demand remained constant, the "suppliers" were eliminated, and hence religious practice declined. But with the return of an abundance of suppliers since 1990 and free market competition, this theory predicts, religious participation should recover. And this is precisely what is unclear, even five years later.

The final question to be raised here lies beneath all the others and indeed beneath all discussion of the "religionless society." It is the fundamental question of the definition of religion. Religion can, of course, be defined in terms of participation in a certain institution, or as adherence to a set of beliefs, or as specific acts such as prayer or church attendance. Using a definition of this type makes it possible to speak of a "religionless society." But it may be that religion should be defined more broadly, as that which concerns the depth dimension of human existence, as ultimate concern, as the search for meaning and values, as the longing for ultimacy and direction in our lives. If religion is understood along these lines, it moves beyond the reach of social scientific methodology, and all talk of a "religionless society" becomes problematic. For surely, whether in Albania, the United States, or Croatia, this kind of human quest is universal.

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