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ISLAMIZATION--SEED OF DISCORD OR THE ONLY WAY OF SALVATION FOR ALBANIANS?

by Anton Kolë Berishaj

Anton Kolë Berishaj (Roman Catholic) was born in 1954 in Prifite, Montenegro. He graduated in 1957 in philosophy and sociology at the Philosophical Faculty in Prishtina, Kosovo. In 1980 he became assistant at that university and after completion of graduate studies at University of Zagreb in 1987 became a lecturer in sociology at Prishtina. He is currently lecturing on Albanian at the parallel school system in Kosova.

Islamization as a mode of adjustment under conditions of slavery--preceded by emigration--is another new phenomenon which belongs to the Turkish heritage. The majority of the Albanian nation was subject to it. However, though all the previous censuses lack reliable figures regarding religious affiliation of Albanians, it is a common belief that there are about 70% Moslems, 20% Orthodox, and 10% Catholics. These estimated figures reveal quite a mixed composition unusual for small nations. These religious differences have always been considered as great potential of disintegration processes, intolerance, and hatred among the Albanians. The Albanian political leadership most probably had that in mind in issuing a decree banning all public or secret expression of religious beliefs during the Communist period. But it turned out that the same argument was used also a pretext for introduction of a 'new religion' of totalitarian uniformity, forging the triad into a monolith and monotony. Under the disguise of inauguration of a new, better, and happier society bereft of any differences stemming from national virtues and values, a complete isolation resulted, unprecedented in Europe. The ultimate degradation and decadence took place instead of development, and divisions based on loyalty to the regime tore up the population, while the new religion appeared to be itself an 'opium' with a radically stronger effect. Fortunately, the worst predictions of the escalation of religious conflicts after the weakening of the Communist regime and the subsequent transition period never came to fulfillment. This, in fact, shows that a precarious tradition of religious respect and tolerance has survived among the Albanian people.

The impacts of the former legal ban of all religious expression has been obvious in almost all scientific disciplines. The most prominent scientists and institutions in Albania wasted their precious energies in search for new arguments justifying the banning of religion, instead of doing scholarly work. A witch-hunt of Catholic clergy--partly seen as a potential 'Trojan horses' of Western influence via the Vatican and partly for their better than average education--clearly showed that the authorities were determined to implement their weird ideas to the very end. Under such circumstances, a kind of strange silence engulfed the scholarly community both in Albania and in Kosova.

A stubborn silence of the Albanian intelligentsia regarding specific religious features of its own nation could be partly explained by the fact that any discourse of the kind would have inevitably resulted in public disputes about the legal ban of religious expression within the country and that the topic itself was a very sensitive problem under the Communist regime. Only recently some half-heard and shy discussions of this taboo appear now and then. In the first place, there is a controversy regarding the role of Islam in the preservation of national identity. There are those who claim that Islamization may be seen as a mode of identification with the conqueror, a seed of discord among the Albanians, and a surrender of their own traditions, culture, language, etc. Their opponents claim the opposite, arguing that Islamization was the only way to preserve the ethnic kernel, being an assimilation shield used similarly also by Greeks and Slavs.

Dr. Lush Gjergji is the leading advocate of the first view. He claims that Islamization was followed partly by a neglect of tradition, culture, and language. Until recently the majority of Albanian Muslims felt themselves as Turks because of the common religion, and they even communicated in Turkish among themselves.¹ In his study of the Albanian family he devoted attention to the position of women as a reliable indicator of Kosova reality, finding in it many fresh traces of the Turkish heritage. Veil, isolation, and something close to imprisonment, distrust, legalized bigamy, common levirate, sororate, etc. are only some of the many features indicating a slow hard decay of the tradition.²

For Lush Gjergji Islamization is the beginning of a process of identification with the conqueror, after which follows a fatal form of acculturation of a subjected community. From the historical clash between two cultures, the Albanian-Catholic and the Turk-Muslim, the contemporary Albanian culture and tradition were born. It was an acculturation process with all the phenomena which, according to Rendfield, Linton, and Herskovits, arise in

¹Lush Gjergji, Roli i femrës shqiptare në familje dhe shoqëri (Sarajevo, 1977), p. 97.

²The socio-economic position of any group within a society, including women, is determined by the type of social structure, social development, political system, cultural values, etc. and not solely by the historical past and tradition.

direct contact of two groups of different cultures. If the contact is a lasting one, original cultures of one or both groups occur.³

In his argumentation, L. Gjergji refers to Marta Olivetti Bellardinelli⁴ and her understanding of identification with the conqueror, within a broader study of four types of identification: cognitive, analogical, with the aggressor, and sostitutive. Among many definitions the author offers, I point only to certain specifics: "Identification is a way by which a subject tries to transcend anxiety (angoscia), which emerges as a threat of the model."⁵ In L. Gjergji's view, the importance of this type of identification lies in the fact that it actually is an unconscious mechanism. "It is the most unconscious form of identification,"⁶ which prevents an individual from understanding the circumstances under which one could consider himself inferior. "On the contrary: in most cases inferiority finds its expression in an outstanding pride, sometimes turning even to fanaticism--as an adequate defense mechanism from frustration."⁷

Thus, identification is mainly the process resulting in

. . . elimination of differences between two beings, groups, cultures . . . so making them closer. To become unconsciously the aggressor, to lose aggression, feeling of injustice, to feel 'good' even when you are bad, to become 'strange'--'to sell yourself as an individual' unconsciously . . . are only some of essential functions of identification as such, and especially the one with the aggressor.⁸

In the situation of decisive superiority of the model, a permanent endangerment, conflict, and bivalent state, L. Gjergji argues that the role of identification with the aggressor becomes a very important defense mechanism, which pushes the subject to complete merging with the model's behavior, saving him from fears, threats of difference, etc.⁹

L. Gjergji mentions no other alternatives to the solution he so ruthlessly criticizes, no other *modus vivendi* which would have saved this nation from being constantly blended except a flight to the distant mountains, where in any case not all of them could have found shelter. And still Gjergji cannot get over the loss: "They are gone, but the culture, mentality, and most of all their general understanding of life are still among us." L. Gjergji's approach

³Catenario Armando, Linee di antropologia cultura (Kapeli editore, 1972), p. 785.

⁴Marta Olivetti Bellardinelli, Identificazione e proiezione (Kapeli editore, 1971), p. 47.

⁵Ibid., pp. 49-50.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 99.

⁸Ibid., p. 100.

⁹Ibid.

could yield plausible and correct interpretations, but it suffers from too much theorizing. He tends to observe all the phenomena here and now, without any necessary feeling for the chronological and spacial framework which produced them. Therefore, in all exclusive approaches, in this case a psychological one, are simply components in a complex process. L. Gjergji's interpretations are dominated by the logic of *fait accompli*, as well as a too rigid approach to his subjects as if they were chemical elements which oxidise under certain conditions, resulting in fatal corrosion. Fortunately, both of us are witnessing a process of awakening, although under complex political conditions and by the undesirable processes of national homogenization. Still this is a process of decisive severance and loss of this consequence of identification with the aggressor. This turning point may be easily observed, if one is only willing to recognize it. The advocates of the other view see Islamization as a salvation mechanism of the Albanian nation. Their arguments will be discussed below, but it should be stressed that they are more numerous.¹⁰ Their approach is mainly historiographic and ethnographic, with due attention paid to those inter-ethnic communications that are dominated by destruction and violence. Having in mind that a number of Albanians were then Orthodox like their neighbors, Slavs and Greeks, the danger of assimilation was permanent.

Selami Pulaha's ethnographic study of socio-political situation led him to the conclusion that in the old censuses religious affiliation dominated the ethnic one. Thus, the administrative concept of the Orthodox church and state in the Middle Ages regarded Albanians as Serbs, just as Islamized Albanians were later to be considered Turks.¹¹ In the Albanian territories under the Serbian administration supported by the Serbian Orthodox church, consolidation and strengthening of the Albanian feudal class were considerably curbed, preventing it from entering the political scene as an ethno-cultural factor.

A new, Ottoman Turkish conqueror based the establishment and strengthening of its rule in the destruction of the Serbian administrative and church apparatus, finding support for it in local population and the suppressed feudal class. The Turks used the same method in other parts of their empire as well. With decline of the Serbian occupational authority, the power of the Serbian Orthodox Church also waned, especially so after the confiscation of its property. In these circumstances, S. Pulaha sees decisive break in the process of Serbization

¹⁰See Selami Pulaha, Shqiptarët në trojet e tyre verilindore gjate shek. XV-XVI. Kultura popullore, 2 Tiranë, 1992, p. 63; Muhamet Pirraku, "Shkaqet e kalimit në islam te shqiptarët," Përparimi, No. 2, (1991), vit. XLV, pp. 184-228; J.N. Tomić, "O Arnautima u Staroj srbiji i Sandžaku," (Belgrade, 1913), p. 48; V. Čubrilović, "Osnovi nacionalnih preporoda Hrvata i Srba," JIC (Belgrade), Vol. I, No. 4, (1986), p. 61.

¹¹S. Pulaha, op.cit., p. 63.

of the Albanian population.¹² A double rejection characterizes the position of Albanians during the period of changing their overlords. They simply chose the lesser of the two evils. "Under these circumstances Islamization deepened the process of ethnic differentiation with the Serbian minority, which was no longer able to influence the ethno-cultural assimilation of Albanians, as much as it had prior to the Turkish occupation."¹³

S. Pulaka shows considerable reservation in his approach to the Islamization process, especially when compared to other religions because he situates it within a broader context. That Islamization had stopped the Slavization process does not mean that with it the process of formation of a homogenous feudal state was also completed. Thus he expresses his reservation saying: "The enforced Islamization was for the Albanian population in the North-East regions, in comparison to their compatriots of other confessions, also a negative factor, for it further endangered the unity of their liberation struggle."¹⁴

Much more persistent and therefore radical in advocating this thesis is Muhamet Pirraku. His energies have been so completely devoted to this topic that it could be considered his preoccupation. His basic approach is that Islamization was voluntary and not the result of the repressive campaign of the conqueror. "The majority of the Albanian *spahija*, teachers, and Albanian masses, already infected with different heresies, opted for Islam in order to survive."¹⁵ When he finally realized that the claim about voluntary repudiation of tradition, cultural and ethnic values, etc. could be hardly justified under conditions of occupation, and therefore no serious scholar could ever support it, Pirraku contradicted himself in an attempt to moderate his original thesis. Thus he explained the motives of the privileged strata by the fact that conversion to Islam better secured their feudal class interests.¹⁶ Still, even in such an interpretation their conversion was far from voluntary, and even more so was the conversion of the masses.

The support for his theses M. Pirraku tends to find in observations of various accidental passers-by and travelers, whose papers presented mostly shallow impressions. Thus, for example, G. Hanotau writes that the Slavs, Greeks, and Vlachs value their religion above

¹²Ibid., p. 64.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁵Pirraku, *op.cit.*, p. 196.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 97. Pirraku rejects as unfounded the theses of Ali Hadri and Stefanaq Pollo that the conversion to Islam was the result of powerful pressures by the military-feudal Turkish system (See Ali Hadri, "Rilindja" Prishtinë, March 7, 1981) and that by converting to Islam a process of ethnic cleansing began by Turcization (Stefanaq Pollo, "Konferenca kombëtare e studimeve etnografike," 28, June 30, 1976, Tiranë 1977, p. 44.

freedom, while Albanians sacrifice everything, even their religion for freedom.¹⁷ These hardly plausible, ungrounded, and biased claims do fit Pirraku's scenario, though they add nothing to his credibility. My argument is quite simple: I do not understand why should ever exchange inclusive freedom for the mere right to pray.

The stubborn insistence on the above view goes far beyond Pirraku's sincere attempt to interpret conversion as a sin or indecent deed. In doing so he even refers to the most staunch Albanophobes, such as Čubrilović, Djordjević, Andrić, and others.¹⁸ In his persistent insistence on his basic thesis, M. Pirraku affirms the Albanophobes' well-known views on "Arnauts"[a somewhat derogatory Serbian term for Albanians] as an ethnos inclined to slavery.

Naturally, there is no space in Pirraku's texts for such highly credible explanations as that of Gjergj Gjergji-Gashi about "the Albanian martyrs of 1846-1848," of the terrifying tortures of the Kosova Albanian Catholics because of their resistance to the Islamization process. "In their persecutions the Turks went so far to punish all those whose names had anything Catholic, or more precisely, any of the Albanian content. The Ottoman empire was based on the same principle as other empires: *Cuius regio, illius religio*--"Religion of the emperor is the religion of the people." "The Turks identified religion with nation."¹⁹

It is unbelievable how an ambitious scholar such as Mr. Pirraku could oversee facts of everyday Kosova reality. The majority of local Turks could be only "a gift" of that very "salvific" act of which M. Pirraku and similar interpreters insist. Crypto Catholics (Laramani) also point to the involuntary conversions to Islam. On the other hand, to interpret the conversion to Islam as an act of a somewhat apathetic ethnos is as ungrounded as are claims that with the coming of the Turks "heaven opened up" for Albanians. This is what Pirraku thinks, but he forgets that the successful resistance to Turks and Islamization is what made Gjergj Kastriot-Skenderbeg a legend. It is therefore absurd to condemn Skenderbeg for his struggle and for hindering the arrival of the "saviors" of his nation.

Frequently quoted traces of Slavization of the Albanian population in territories that now are Montenegro (Kuci, Bjelopavlići, Piperi, etc), as well as many among the South Serbian population²⁰ support the latter thesis; while the traces of Turkization and Islamization in

¹⁷G. Hanotaux, L'Albanie, No. 2 (Lausanne, Switzerland). October 1, 1915, p. 9 as cited in Pirraku, op.cit., p. 96.

¹⁸Pp. 205, 210 in *op. cit.*

¹⁹Gjergj Gjergji-Gashi, op.cit., p. 23.

²⁰M.S. Milošević found in the 1850s 950 Albanian homes in Kuršumlija while in the vicinity of this little town he found 200,000 Albanians (Putopis dela Stare Srbije (Belgrade, 1871), pp. 112-113 cited in Pirraku, op. cit., p. 210.

Kosova, Macedonia, Sandzhak, Rozhaje, Plav, Tivar (Bar), and Tuzi support the former.²¹

Such a clear stalemate position deprives of any meaning all one-sided interpretations of history. While psychological perspective leads the advocates of the first thesis to one extreme, M. Pirraku wants to persuade us that even an occupation could preserve one's dignity, even if it is five centuries long. Here I have a short comment: a nation to which only such an occupation could bring salvation, even a potentially positive one is in poor shape.

²¹Frljukčiči, Otovići, Dačovići, Skrijelji, Vukelji, Kastratovići, etc. are the greatest example as to how by way of the process of Islamization, i.e. becoming Muslim one cleans an area of Albanians.