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THE THEOLOGICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGINS OF PROTESTANTISM IN ALBANIA

By David Hosaflook

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Abstract

The Albanian Protestant Movement has both a theological and a geographical origin. Theologically, the movement could only begin after parts of the Bible were translated into Albanian, because the Protestant doctrine of “Sola Scriptura” demands that believers understand the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, in Protestant missions to the Ottoman Empire, Bible translators usually preceded evangelists and the founding of churches. In 1827, the publication of the first Albanian New Testament was a significant achievement, but it was practically useless to most Albanians, who were illiterate (especially in their mother tongue). Hence, the Protestant missionary endeavor included linguistic and educational efforts to help Albanians learn to read their new Bibles. Geographically, the Albanian Protestant Movement originated in Bitola, where, in 1873, American missionaries arrived and began interacting with the Kyrias family. Gerasim Kyrias—Albania's first Protestant reformer—became a Protestant in Bitola, studied theology in Samokov, preached in Bulgarian in Skopje, preached in Albanian in Bitola, was married and ordained as an evangelist in Salonica, and then began an Albanian school and church in Kortcha. From these theological and geographical origins, Protestantism grew into one of Albania's traditional faith communities.

Protestantism in Albania has a 200-year history, which this month has been recognized in the context of the celebrated 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 theses and the Protestant Reformation, commemorated in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. In

Skopje, the Speaker of Parliament hosted a four-day Balkan Conference on the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, sponsored by the Balkan Institute for Faith and Culture, the Institute for Albanian and Protestant Studies, the Institute of National History in the Republic of Macedonia, and the Institute for Cultural and Spiritual Heritage of the Albanians in Macedonia. In Kosovo, there was a “Reformation Week,” sponsored by the Kosovo Protestant Evangelical Church, including events such as a National Library exhibit, media events, the issuance of a postage stamp, the inauguration of Kosovo’s first Protestant cemetery, and an academic conference with speakers from all over the world; whereas in Albania, there have also been several commemorations, including an exhibit at the Albanian National Library, sponsored by the Library and the Institute for Albanian and Protestant Studies. This exhibit included all the Albanian Bibles from 1824 through the present, as well as hymn books, children’s story books and other items.

As early as 1883, an Albanian named Gerasim Kyrias established a small Albanian Evangelical church in Bitola¹—this was not the Macedonian church of Bitola led by the American missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions who arrived in Bitola in 1873.² Gerasim preached there in that church too, in the Macedonian language, but 1883 was the year of the first Albanian-speaking Evangelical church. Later, in 1892, 125 years ago, Kyrias founded another Albanian church, in Kortcha, and also established the Albanian Evangelical Brotherhood.³ This is significant to Albanian history because it marked the establishment of a native Albanian-led religious community, with liturgy in the Albanian language, nearly 40 years before the declaration of the Albanian

¹ Alexander Thomson to Rev. T. W. Brown, July 15, 1884, Alexander Thomson Correspondence Inward.

² ABCFM Annual Report 1873, p. 9; ABCFM Annual Report 1874, p. 8; ABCFM *Missionary Herald* 1874, p. 58.

³ “Kanonizma e Vëllazërisë Ungjillorëvet ndë Korçë” (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit, Tirana, F 65, D 209). Compare with: “Fraternal Epistle written at Kortcha, Year I, November 1892, Summary”, enclosure in: Shipley to Blunt, March 25, 1893, “Evangelical and Linguistic Movements in Albania”, Public Records Office London, FO 78, 4492. See also chapter 12 in: Quanrud, John. *Gerasim Kyrias and the Albanian National Awakening, 1858–1894*. Tirana: Institute for Albanian and Protestant Studies, 2016.

Autocephalous Orthodox Church (1922, recognized by the patriarchate of Constantinople in 1937), and also 40 years before the first translations of the Quran into Albanian (parts were translated in 1921 and the entire Quran in 1985). Consequently, the Albanian Protestant tradition, even though its adherents are fewer than in the Muslim, Orthodox, Bektashi, and Catholic traditions among Albanians, has been recognized as a historical and traditional Albanian faith, not merely something imported by western missionaries in the 1990s. In order to understand Protestantism among the Albanians, we must understand its theological and geographical origins. First, let us consider the theological origins.

The distinctives of Protestantism theology has been discussed thoroughly in other forums. But we must emphasize here that no one can properly understand the source materials of the American and Protestant missionary movement without understanding the basics of Protestant theology, especially the Evangelical Awakenings in Britain and in the United States, and the missionary organizations that were created. Unfortunately for independent scholarship and for the freedom of conscience, 50 years ago, in 1967, Enver Hoxha declared Albania the world's first officially atheist state. After this time, Albanian historians were obliged to write carefully. They were censored. They attacked religion or avoided religious topics, and interpreted unavoidable facts in a way that supported the communist regime's narrative and the atheist viewpoint.

Therefore, nothing religious, and certainly nothing American or British, could possibly be viewed as good for Albanian nationalism and patriotism. Thus, if an Albanian patriot was discovered to be preaching the Gospel, his true purpose was interpreted not as preaching the Gospel, but as advancing the Albanian language—indeed deceiving the British and the Americans to use their money to advance the national cause. Additionally, American Protestant missionaries were interpreted as having been spies of the U.S. government.⁴

⁴ Enver.Hoxha, *Rreziku anglo-amerikan për Shqipërinë*. Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1982, p. 13.

One unfortunate, if not humorous, example of how this bias produced bad scholarship is the case of a hymn that Gerasim Kyrias had translated from Bulgarian, which had itself been translated from English. The song is: *Work, for the Night is Coming*. The text of the hymn is based on the words of Jesus, who talked about building the Kingdom of Heaven. But communist scholars interpreted the song as having been authored by Gerasim to be a patriotic hymn about building modern Albania.⁵

Ironically, it was the Protestant theology of *Sola Scriptura*, *Solus Christus*, and *Sola Fide*, that led to the development of the Albanian language as a literary language. If Scripture was the only true authority for understanding matters of life and death, then the Scriptures must be read by every person in his or her mother tongue, regardless of age, gender, or social status. This belief was the impetus for the Albanian Bible translation project; the Albanian translation project was the impetus for the development of written Albanian; and the development of Albanian as a literary language was among the key forces that united the Albanians at the time the Ottoman Empire was weakening and other Balkan neighbors were rising and consolidating as nation states. This is so significant that even Ismail Qemali, the first leader of independent Albania, in 1913 thanked the Bible Society personally in London for helping the Albanian cause with their Bibles.⁶

It must be clearly understood that the Bible Society had no intention to create an Albanian nation. The Society had one goal—“the Bible for the world.” The Bible Society was not the only group working with Bible translation. Elias Riggs was an American missionary linguist and hymn translator, who, spent 69 years as a missionary in the Ottoman Empire and worked extensively with many languages, including Bulgarian and Albanian.

⁵ “100 vjet këngë patriotike shqiptare: Luftë, poezi e këngë”, MAPO 1 tetor 2016 (<http://www.mapo.al/2016/10/100-vjet-kenge-patriotike-shqiptare-lufte-poezi-e-kenge>, lexuar më 1 mars 2017); krhs.: Luarasi, Skender. *Gjerasim Qiriazi: Jeta dhe vepra*. Tiranë: Naim Frashëri, 1962, p. 52.

⁶ Correspondence, Charles Woods to J. H. Ritson, 17 May 1913, Instituti i Gjuhësisë dhe i Letërsisë, arka 3, kutia 1, dosja nr. x, “Pjesë nga korrespondenca për botimet e viteve: 1909–1913”.

Why? What motivated the missionaries to adopt new countries as their homes, for little pay and with great personal sacrifices? Theology motivated them. They sincerely believed that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the only way to salvation. And if Jesus had come to earth as a missionary to make a sacrifice for all mankind, then Christians should give their lives back to Jesus in missionary service as an expression of gratitude. James Barton, secretary of the American Board, wrote: “Wherever missionaries have gone, they have been architects of grammars, vocabularies, and Bible translations ... It is only the missionaries, as a class, who have had a motive strong and permanent enough to carry men and women of the highest intelligence and training into the uttermost parts of the earth and there hold them at the task of language study until it eventuated in an extensive and orderly literature.”⁷

When we consider Albanian regions, we must remember that before the Bible Society began its work in 1817, there was no evidence that any one of the 66 books of the Bible had ever been translated into Albanian. This is almost incredible when considering the many centuries of Christianity in these regions. Without religious texts in their own language, there was obviously little theological understanding among the Albanians. In fact, 300 years ago, in 1717, Lady Mary Montagu, a baptized Anglican and the wife of the British ambassador in Constantinople, wrote a letter about her travels, and mentioned the Albanians. She wrote:

These people, living between Christians and Mahometans, and not being skilled in controversy, declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best; but, to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth, they very prudently follow both, and go to the mosques on Fridays and the church on Sundays, saying for their excuse, that at the day of judgment they are sure of protection from the true prophet; but which that is, they are not able to determine in this world. I believe there is no other race of mankind with so modest an opinion of their own capacity.⁸

⁷ Barton, James L. *Human Progress through Missions*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1912, p. 28–29.

⁸ Montagu, Mary Wortley (ed. Lord Wharnccliffe). *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, vol. 1. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1861, pp. 287–91.

One hundred years later, in 1816, the Scottish Protestant missionary, Robert Pinkerton, met Albanians in Vienna, learned about them, and wrote a long letter to the Bible Society in London. He pleaded:

The furnishing of the Albanians with a New Testament at least, in their own language, is an object highly worthy of the attention of the British and Foreign Bible Society... Most of the Albanians are professed Christians, belonging to the Greek communion; others are so deeply sunk in ignorance of the principles of Christianity, that they have embraced the Mohammedan faith. Their service is performed in the Greek language, which is quite unintelligible to the people, and even to most of their priests. They have still no part of the word of God in their own tongue ...⁹

Pinkerton also acknowledged a distinct problem. There were no Albanian books in circulation, no recognized Albanian alphabet, and very few Albanians who could read *any* language. The Albanians found by the Bible Society who were educated lived in the South of Albania and had been educated in Greek-language institutions. For this reason, the Bible Society chose the Greek alphabet, with modifications, for the Albanian text. Additionally, the Bible Society decided that the first Albanian Testament should be a diglot—with Vangjel Meksi's Albanian in one column, and Hilarion's modern Greek text in the other column.

This two-language version was not a political statement, but rather a theological expression. It was not a disguised effort to hellenize the Albanians or to albanianize the Greeks. It was a theological consideration. That is, if the Bible was the authoritative Word of God, and if the Bible was the only means through which people could understand the Gospel, then the first question was how to achieve *maximum readability among a mixed population*. Without the Greek text, many Greeks would not be able receive the Gospel message; and without the Albanian text, Albanian priests would not be able to introduce the Bible to the Albanians in their churches for the first time in history.

So, the Albanian-Greek Testament was printed in 1827, with 2,000 copies. This achievement, intended for spiritual enlightenment, had cultural and political ramifications. It

⁹ BFBS *Annual Report* 1817, p. 93–94.

allowed foreign philologists to study Albanian for the first time as a literary language and began to create a greater awareness of the Albanians as a unique people group within European Turkey at a time when Albanian Muslims were commonly known as Turks and Albanian Orthodox were commonly known as Greeks. Despite the achievement of the first Albanian New Testament, we cannot say that it started a Protestant Reformation in Albania.

It was not until 1857, 30 years later, that we discover a documented case of an Albanian converting to Protestantism. His name was Constantine Christophorides, a well-educated man from Central Albania, who is considered by Albanians to be the father of the Albanian language. Christophorides joined a Protestant church in Smyrna (Izmir),¹⁰ then studied Protestant theology in Istanbul and in Malta, and later joined Alexander Thomson of the Bible Society, in Constantinople, in a project to translate the Bible again into both the northern and the southern dialects of Albania, Gheg and Tosk, as was happening for the eastern and western Bulgarian dialects.

Again, we must acknowledge the theological convictions of the Protestant missionary actors. Their goal was not to unify their people's language but to produce as many texts as necessary to make sure that everyone could understand the Bible. This was true for Luther for Germany and for Christophorides in Albania, and articles were published comparing these two men.¹¹ Despite the literary work of Christophorides and the fact that he is currently the first documented Albanian Protestant, he is not usually considered the catalyst or father of Albanian Protestantism, because the body of his life's work appears to have been more focused on the development of the Albanian language and the unification of the Albanians rather than the advance of the Evangelical Protestant faith. It is Gerasim Kyrias, an Albanian from Bitola, who is considered the founder of Albanian Protestantism, due to the immense amount of documentation of his Evangelical Christian writings and activism.

¹⁰ Turkish Missions Aid Society *Annual Report* ("The Gospel in Turkey") 1857, p. 12–13, 20–21.

¹¹ "Lutheri e Kristoforidhi", *Gazeta e re*, 28 dhjetor 1928.

Because Gerasim Kyrias spent time and had significant moments in cities located in today's countries of Albania, Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey, we may turn our attention to the geographical origins of Protestantism in Albania. Below is a rudimentary timeline of the geographical progress of the American Board, from its beginnings until its arrival in Albanian-inhabited regions.

Advancement of ABCFM towards Albanian regions	
1810	ABCFM established
1819	Establishment of Mission for Palestine
1822	Establishment of Station in Malta (printing press)
1827	Establishment of Mission for Western Asia
1827	Establishment of Mission for Greece
1831	Establishment of Station in Constantinople
1833	Establishment of Station in Smyrna (printing press)
1844	Establishment of Mission for Armenians
1858	Establishment of Station in Adrianople
1859	Establishment of Station in Philippopolis
1859	Establishment of Station in Eski Zagra
1860	Establishment of Western Turkey Mission
1862	Establishment of Station in Sofia
1867	Establishment of Station in Bansko
1869	Establishment of Station in Samokov
1870	Establishment of European Turkey Mission
1872	Establishment of Collegiate and Theological Institute in Samokov
1873	Establishment of Station in Monastir

As has been demonstrated, Protestant missionary interest in the Albanians began with the Bible Society,¹² but as more Protestant missionary agencies became involved in European Turkey and Greece, they began meeting Albanians, learning and writing about them, and appealing for more missionaries to work among them. In 1859, missionary Elias Riggs and Rev. Theodore Byington made a tour together to European Turkey and reported that Skopje could be the perfect center from which Serbia and Albania could be reached.¹³ The vision for working among Albanians was only realized sporadically, until 1873, when American missionaries arrived in Bitola and began interacting with the Kyrias family. There, Gerasim Kyrias became a Protestant Christian. He later studied theology in Samokov, had interaction with the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance (*Bulgarskoto Evangelisko Druzhestvo*), read the Bulgarian-language evangelical and educational newspaper *Zornica (Morning Star)*, and was sent to preach the Gospel in Bulgarian in Skopje. He soon toured the territories of what is now the Republic of Albania, then preached in Albanian in Salonica, and in 1883, began preaching in Albanian in Bitola. In Salonica, he married Athina Michaelides, daughter of the Wallachian-Greek Protestant preacher Stavros Michaelides. In 1890, he was ordained as an evangelist in Bitola at the annual meeting of the ABCFM for European Turkey, and soon thereafter began an Albanian girls school and evangelical church in Kortcha. From these origins, Protestantism grew into one of Albania's first traditional and native-led faith communities, simultaneously with its growth as one of Bulgaria's and Macedonia's traditional faith communities.

¹² Although the British and Foreign Bible Society avoided using the term "Protestant" in its name to avoid schism, it was Protestant in ethos, most of its founders and workers identifying themselves as Protestants.

¹³ "Narrative of a tour made in company of Theodore L. Byington in European Turkey, 1859 Sep.–Oct." by Elias Riggs. Records of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, affiliates, and successor organizations. Turkey and the Balkans, 1825–1999. ARIT-I, United Church of Christ, SALT Research.

As evidenced by the facts presented in this paper, the Albanian Protestant Movement in the Balkans was not a purely-Albanian phenomenon. Rather, it unfolded in a context of coexistence and cooperation among multiple ethnicities, during times of peace and war and during changes in borders and ruling powers. As such, it cannot be understood without cooperation among Balkan scholars. Conferences such as this, sponsored by the Institute for Sociological, Political, and Juridicial Research, is a welcome example that Balkan historiography is emerging from the isolated, balkanized, and politicized narratives that were often crafted to serve nationalistic agendas, and is now maturing into a more rational science where healthy cooperation is not only recognized as essential to understanding both our local and mutual histories, but also is being promoted in practical measures that, we believe, indicate hope for an even greater cooperation in the future.