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## THE THEOLOGICAL EFFORT OF HAFIZ ALI KORÇA\*

By Ismail Bardhi

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### Abstract

Hafiz Ali Korcha's work and activities in the fields of theology, literature, and education can be viewed, from the historical-theological perspective, as a reflection of his theological effort. This is the central category, containing as it does all of Korcha's cognitive-theoretical, axiological, and cultural-theological speculations, as well as his views on science, literature, cultural policy, and religion. In his entire theological opus, one feels the fragrance of the Qur'an and of the life of Prophet Muhammad a.s. Theological effort, as understood by Korcha, differs from theology in that it is the source of theologizing and is a primordial tendency of the human mind. Theologizing is in the function of life and is an expression of overall experience. Indeed, it is identical with the feeling of life. Preoccupied with the question of the possibility of the realization of the tasks of theology in the history of human thought, Korcha regarded theological effort as an expression of human spirituality and, as such, a factor of integration and humanization, reaching to the very core of the idea of true theology and the human being as a cultural and historical being. Finally, this central idea inspiring Korcha's work reconciles in itself his experience and thought; it applies equally to

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\*Hafiz Ali Korça (1873-1955) was born in Korça, Albania. He was Adviser and Director General at the Ministry of Culture; a teacher and a connoisseur of the Arabic language. He wrote in Turkish and Persian. He finished his studies in Istanbul. For a better insight into his theological and intellectual work we will mention some of his works: *Tefsir i Kur'anit* (“Tafsir of the Qur’an”); *Mevludi* (“Mawlud”); *Treqint e tri fjalë të Imam Aliut* (“Three hundred and three sayings of Imam Ali”); *Ferrëfenjësi – Morali* (“Ilmihal – Moral”); *Alfabeti arabisht* (“The Arabic alphabet”); *Abetari arabisht* (“Arabic Spelling Book”); *Muslimania* (“Muslimhood”); *Bolshevizmi – shkatërrim i njerëzimit* (“Bolshevism – the Destruction of Humanity”); *Muhammed Hanefiu me Gjylnarin* (“Muhammad Hanefi and Gulnihar”); *Jusufi me Zelihanë* (“Yusuf and Zoleyha”); *Gjylistani dhe Bostani* (“Golestan and Bostan”); *Besimet islame dhe filozofitë e feve të ndryshme edhe partitë në fenë islame* (“Islamic Beliefs and Philosophies of Various Religions and Parties in the Islamic Religion”); *Gramatika - syntaksa shqip-arabisht* (“Albanian-Arabic Grammar – Syntax”); *Ilmi bejani* (“‘Ilm al Bayan”); *Shtatë ëndrrat e Shqipërisë* (“Seven Dreams of Albania”); *Logjika* (“Logic”); *Historia e shenjtë – poezi* (“The Sacred History – Poetry”); *Përhapja e fesë islame* (“The Spread of Islamic Faith”) etc. See: *Disa fetar patriot musliman shqiptar* (“Some Albanian Muslim Patriots”), pp. 111-119. Also: “Kultura islame” (Islamic Culture), No. 3-4/1941, p. 102.

art and law, or religion, becoming their concept, an universal intellectual force and the form and content of life.

One of the most renowned personalities of the Muslim cultural history and theology in the Albanian-speaking territories is, undoubtedly, Hafiz Ali Korça, a thinker who has not been yet synthetically reviewed and whose work has no global appraisal. The same is true about that specific theology, which lacks overall critical and objective review.

Hafiz Ali Korça is a personality who was born, raised and educated during the Ottoman Empire and became a post-Ottoman *âlim*. In his writings, one notices his great love for knowledge and Islamic culture, as well as the great sorrow about the decline and fall of a very important power for the Muslim corpus. This is clearly noticeable in his works, and he experienced the fall of the Ottoman Empire, as Kierkegaard has put it, in fear and trembling. Before the eyes of this great scholar began the exodus, destruction, and impoverishment of the Muslims corpus. All that terror and people's suffering left an unforgettable trace in Hafiz Ali Korça's memory.

Nonetheless, under the shade of love and fear, he begun his work, according to the Qur'anic imperative: "Work, so Allah will see your work and (so will) His Messenger and the believers..." (9:105). His beginnings were translations of the religious literary works, well-known and valued during the Ottoman Empire, because the elites of that time could not live without Yusuf and Zoleyha, without the Mawlid of the Rasulallah a.s. But, unfortunately, the main obstacle for creation and development of a vivid and modern theology came from among the theologians of the time. in those times there was nothing else but *haram* (forbidden); *haram* were both translation and interpretation of the Qur'an. And Hafiz Ali Korça was the one who started both translating and interpreting the Holy Book of Islam. In his translation, we see modern interpretations, with easy and acceptable proposals and

advices for the time, aiming at coexistence and cooperation between heavenly religions, something so sacred that it is a Qur'anic imperative.

I do not belong to the generation with personal memory of Hafiz Ali Korça, nor of those who continued to follow some of his teachings or views, or as direct successors, nor did we indirectly continue some of his initiatives. Here, I think of a number of renowned names, historians of literature, writers, theologians, philosophers, philologists, linguists, lexicographers, psychologists, publicists, translators, etc.<sup>1</sup> This is why the personal reading of Hafiz Ali Korça, with the appropriate approach, chronologically, thematically and historically, will fragmentary underline one, according to my opinion, of the key moments of his thought which appears as a central place of thought in general.

The theologian must do by himself two things: be a man of life and be a man of practical performance. The theologian must leave the former in front of the door. And the later, as an instrument of knowing and reasoning, analysis and observation, is accessible only to the theologian.<sup>2</sup>

In both his creative–theological (his works) and social-cultural activity (his many positions), I am interested primarily in analyzing that dimension of his thought, with which

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<sup>1</sup>Hafiz Ali Korça belonged to a plead of Albanian Muslim theologians who were witnesses and participants of great historical events. He was deeply touched by the destruction and separation of his homeland both by foreign and internal forces, and he himself was persecuted and not understood by all: he was punished by the Ottoman authorities (at the end of its rule), and convicted and humiliated by those for whom he fought. The time in which he lived was a period of pogrom and persecution of many Muslim theologians. During his life he was associated with many renowned personalities of the Albanian Renaissance: Sait Najdeni (Hoca Voka), Kadri Hoca, Ismail Ndrochi, Hasan Chosya, Sheyh Kazim Hoca, Yunus Bulichi, Haki Sharofi, Hacı Dashi, Ihsan Cheresniku and others, as well as with theologians such as Hafiz Ali Ulchinaku, Hafiz Ibrahim Repishti, Hafiz Adem Kazazi, Hafiz Ibrahim Daliu, Hafiz Ismet Dibra, Hafiz Imer Bakali, Hafiz Shefket Borichi, Hafiz Halim Haydari, Hafiz Musa Derguti, Hafiz Neshit Spahiu, Hafiz Ali Kraja, Hafiz Esat Muftia, and Hafiz Ali Kruja. For further details see: *Drita islame* (“The Light of Islam”), publication of the Albanian Muslim Community, Vol. I, No. 3, Tirana 1992; Hysni Myzyri, *Shkollat e para kombëtare shqipe* (“First Albanian National Schools”), Tirana 1973, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Like the works of many theologians from our past, those of H. Ali Korça too are unfortunately not analyzed from their theological aspect, because in most of the works where their names appear, they are being mentioned only as patriots. This is the reason why the works of theology, as well as theological philosophy in Albanian language, have remained marginalized. Ismail Bardhi, “Teologjia dhe teologu sot” (Theology and Theologian today), in ‘Gjendja dhe perspektivat e sistemit arsimor fetar ne kuader to Bashkesise Fetare Islame’ (The situation of the religious system of education within the Islamic Religious Community) (round table), Skopje 2006, p. 127.

he touched the signature of the spirit of time, as an *effort*, in which we can distinguish that thought which Korça himself constructed and proved speculatively, as well as a theological effort.<sup>3</sup>

What Korça talked about on many occasions in his speeches, as well as in the function that religion and culture have in building the individual, and then in the life of people, generally is a pretext for affirmation of the idea of humanitarianism. The scientific spirit as a base for managing the cultural politics, and as foundation built within the goals of establishing the institutions, demand previous cultivation of all kinds of science. The critical-valuable drive leads the spirits of encyclopedianism—the preservation and cultivation of knowledge as an ideal world of values. “The function of science is to present the variety of existence in a sensible relation,” and further, “In all fields of cultural work an ideal sphere is developed, which signifies their sensible unity.”<sup>4</sup> The cultural program of knowledge, the reciprocity of the logic of the idea and the logic of the act exclude mere scientism, and mean that program of knowledge encircled by theology as *hikmah*, thus enabling the creation of scientific capital. In such unifying spirit, the theological effort and the cosmopolitan spirit of science come together (science has no homeland, but the scientist does.)<sup>5</sup>

Since in the reality of the theological/philosophical speech, one notices the effort for the primordial unity of the human being and history, we can get the true picture of it through the totality of Korça’s academic, educational speeches, debates, studies on various religious issues, literature, arts, science, cultural politics as well as in his historical-philosophic references. Understanding of what Korça himself calls effort, according to his worldview, is not possible without reconstruction of the totality of his opus and worldly-historical horizon

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<sup>3</sup>Here I primarily mean his reformatory engagement, because his translation of the Qur’an and its commentary in Albanian language were challenging for his time. See: Ismail Bardhi, *Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu dhe ekzegjeza e tij kur’anore* (“Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu and his Qur’anic Exegesis”), Logos-a – Skopje, 1418/1998, pp. 108-136.

<sup>4</sup>Ismail Bardhi, “Theology and Theologian today”, pp. 122-123.

<sup>5</sup>“Zani i Naltë” (“The High Voice”), 1/1927, p. 383.

of his thought, as an issue of the possibility for realization of the task of theology (*ilmud-din*) in the totality of human thought.<sup>6</sup>

Reading Korça's message today in such context is to be performed in the same way he does with the reading of the *reflective heritage*, namely through *dialogue* with the human spiritual history as a totality of the cultural event of the epoch—or, through investigating the relation between theological creativity and life, the question of the very purpose, or need for theology, as a constitutive part of living in community.<sup>7</sup>

By reading morally-philosophically, with the ethos of human act, historically evaluating, selecting, and systematically presenting the domestic and European Muslim reflective heritage, and searching the peculiarity of domestic thinkers through the continuity of the cultural work and responses, through the issues of arts, politics, popular culture, religion and aesthetics, Korça reflects upon the history of ideas and their carriers. Since permanence belongs to the ideas “that move people and nations” and since they are not “mere visions, but vivid forces of development,” Korça understands and interprets ideas as programs of genuine activity that have their impact upon life. To him, the value of ideational goals in creation of the reality of life becomes the base of the cultural aim of the people.<sup>8</sup>

As a certain type of thinker, historically, Hafiz Ali Korça participates in the historical arena of his time, directing his forces on unification of knowledge, as a precondition for the establishment of overall cultural-theological work, sometimes from secret and inconceivable, but always from sacred and just purposes. The reality of that time was characterized by an overall crisis, conflicts, international and domestic political events, social and cultural misfortunes, and change of governments, positions, generations with the transformation of people, visions, worldviews and above all, the creation of a new society.

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 7/1924, p. 208.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 212-214.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 8/1924, pp. 238-245.

In the plurality of ideational currents, views and concepts, social-political, aesthetic, literary individualisms and collectivisms, nationalisms and cosmopolitanisms, rationalisms and spiritualisms, positivisms and idealisms, and finally attachment to the traditional, or to the new, between the “old” and the “new,” the need for implementation of the ethical and cultural ideals of the “pupils” of ideational heritage of Abduh, Rida, Alagiç is openly expressed, through the work of cultural-educational, scientific and artistic institutions as an expression of the general effort for the universalism of culture, its openness and general democratization.<sup>9</sup>

In that real climate Korça’s theological love, his Ikbalian experience of theology and philosophy in the function of life was formed. At the time of fundamental dualism of the spiritual culture expressed through the dilemma individualism-historicism, Korça appears from the horizon of the modern world, from the position of the need for justifying the need for *universal theological communication* with the history of theology, not only as a mere sum of interpretative samples, but ever more expressed awareness about the historical development of spiritual phenomena, including culture in general and the theological in particular. Korça is aware that the individualized culture of humankind, as embodied by the culture of nations, is the only chance for its development, because every nation is cultured inasmuch it influences the development of the general human culture. By this understanding, Korça feels the chance for the uniqueness of culture.<sup>10</sup>

During his lifetime, Korça showed no ambition for voluminous editions. He even opposed such an idea, as it would seem that he expressed doubt in the knowledge of those who intended to realize such an idea, doubting in its cultural and educational importance vis-a-vis the spirit of the time, the circumstances and position of culture, the very beneficiaries who are few, and who are mainly illiterate. According to him, supporting the ideas about

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<sup>9</sup>Bardhi, *Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu...*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>10</sup> Ismail Ahmeti, “Hafiz Ali Korça – život i djelo”, (Hafiz Ali Korça – His Life and Works) Logos-A, Skopje 1999, pp. 220-221.

voluminous works would mean publishing them to idle on the shelves of public libraries or to serve as decorations in salons. He preferred reformist, progressive publications of Islamic culture and theology, which is proven by his works. His translation and interpretation of the Qur'an at that time were evidence to this end, although he suffered grave consequences because of that.<sup>11</sup>

Korça already draws attention about the individuality and differences in the history of theological effort; as a totality of knowledge, theology becomes a factor for integration and humanization. The theological living, like the philosophical and artistic, provides the highest goals of the spirit, while arts and science become correlatives of the theological truth, regardless of injustices done to Islam by those who themselves culturally belong to this “healthy” religion—*fe shëndetësore*, as he calls it.<sup>12</sup> For Korça, the theologians, as servants of humankind, like the writers, the secretaries of the spirit, work on the same task, searching for the lost values and moving in a labyrinth, looking after the lost unity of humans, world and nature: “The history of human thought is a chain of efforts to get out of the labyrinth of world and life.” In such space of the great common spiritual culture, there is also place for such efforts which, although not important to the *great cultural world*, “decide a lot in the life and spiritual movement of certain Balkan peoples.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 205-224.

<sup>12</sup>The isolating and primitive tradition, in particular the one in service of “Secret” “thoughts” and groupings caused a lot of damage to the Albanian people. Here it is important to mention the mystical faction of Bektashism, which calls itself an Islamic sect, but without holding to any of the Islamic dogmatic principles, and is supported by an “elite.” Bektashism has become a ridicule by those who themselves “belong” to it, due to its primitivism and deep ignorance, which is not compatible with the culture of this people who aspires towards an universal world culture. Such apocryphical interpretation is not only a matter of the Muslims of this country, but of the Muslims in general. To this Hafiz Ali Korça tried to respond thorough the following verses: *Allahun, Muhammed – Alinë / i njohin si Perëndinë / Te Aliu thon' u fut Zoti / si idolarët që moti / Tritimi i Hindistanit / iu fut në shpirt muslimanit* (The accept Allah, Muhammad and Ali / as Deity / In Ali, they say, God entered / like did the polytheists long time ago / The Trinity of Hindistan / Entered in the soul of the Muslim). Hafiz Ali Korça, *Historia e Shenjtë edhe katër Halifet* (“The Sacred History and the Four Khalifs”), Tirana 1900, p. 200.

<sup>13</sup>Participation in many congresses, like the ones in Dibra, Elbasan, and Manastir and Korça's speeches prove the above mentioned. Abdyl Ypi, *Kongresa e Dibrës* (“The Congress in Dibra”), p. 11; *Alfabeti i gjuhës shqipe dhe Kongresi i Manastirit* (“The Alphabet of the Albanian Language and the Congress of Manastir”), Tirana 1972, pp. 101-106; Hysni Myzyri, *Shkollat e para kombëtare shqiptare* (“First Albanian National Schools”), p. 197; “Shqiptari”, Istanbul 1911, pp. 54-55.



The idea for *genuine theology* is not a matter of school, or debate of a group of the learned; it is an idea correlative to the idea of life: in Korça's understanding, life has meaning as the creation of reality. From this central concept, which reconciles the oppositions of individualism, formalism, social ethics and conceptions of human life that does not take place at any ready stage, appears the notion of humanity and the idea of a theology that should become the guide to a more humane world. This is why pure pragmatism was strange to Korça, like radical nihilism, as well as pure rationalism—so he found at the theology of life an exit from scientific positivism. Reality is at the end of the road, and theology is a constant direction towards grasping the essence. His theological conquering of the world is in relation to intellectual aristocratism. Theological effort goes beyond the discursiveness of thought, it is a primordial aspiration of the very human spirit. The meaning of life as an effort becomes a task of the cultural subject—and there lies the dominant role of knowledge and education. Theological effort distinguishes Korça from theology. Like an artist, the theologian too, through the *internal contact*, experience, poetical, creative act finds the way to the fulfillment of the personal being: “the source of theological thought is in the religious, moral and artistic experiences and it is equally created by poets, religious reformers, social movers, and not only by man of knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> It is not only a quintessence of knowledge, but rather a concentrated expression of the entire experience. Theological aspiration is scientific, but it cannot be learned, like the artist who can not learn to create.

Korça stresses the mission that should be undertaken by *madrasahs* and the highest religious institution should as well, as the meaning of art and science, in the life of a people. By affirming the spiritual and cultural emancipation, Korça engages for the possibility for organizing a free development of science, for rewarding scientific work and for the autonomy of the institutions for higher education.

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<sup>14</sup>Ideas like the afore mentioned can be noticed in his most known poetically expressed works like the *Shtatë ëndrrat e Shqipërisë* (“Seven Dreams of Albania”), *Myslimania* (“The Muslimhood”) and *Treqind e tri fjalët të Imam Aliut* (“Three Hundred and Three Sayings of Imam Ali”).

The theological thought of Hafiz Ali Korça--within his understanding of the culture of people and objective creations of science, which becomes a fragment of humanism, precondition for organization of happiness, and cultural policy--is not a mere policy of occurrence. It is the cultural awareness that can be regulatory of the social circumstances; not an additive to life, but the one that penetrates it. Hence, the carriers of the cultural policy are and must always be creators.

The theological effort of Korça assumes the dignity of the historical, regardless of the outcome. In such spiritual adventure of the cultural being as a historical one (the present not lost in the past, and the past included in the present), the aspired totality of cognition is enabled. If the human being, in our eternal aspiration could come to the end to reap the fruit of realizing the good and bad, then we would have not anything else to do. Then he could die. But, we are “the exiled from Paradise,” to work and accordingly live for eternity.

The planetarianism of the theological effort of Hafiz Ali Korça, guided by the vision of a spiritualized human society, of the human as a part of world’s household, is an effort for the realization of the idea of humanity, and reveals an author of universal, encyclopedic culture, which comes always at the end and thus can reach the longed for unity of word and deed, an act commensurate to the idea, to theology not as a science for life, but a living theology.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, one may notice that the culture and Albanian-speaking Muslim scholars themselves have been left under so much dust, and we, today’s generation, have not given them their proper and deserved place, knowing that this nation has given great scholars who have defended and presented God’s Word and the Islamic culture in the most dignifying way. Hopefully, that dust will be removed and the memory of them recovered, so great

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<sup>15</sup>“Zani i Naltë”, 8/1924, pp. 238-245; 1/1925, pp. 402-433; 10/1924, pp. 304-307; “Kultura Islame”, 3-4/1944, pp. 201-203.

personalities like Hafiz Ali Korça will assume their deserved position and their theological effort duly recognized.