

## 2.4. RELIGION

*“Whenever we’ve tried to contend Catholics against Muslims or vice versa in Shkodër, we’ve had our battle lost because Albanians had their national sensitivity much stronger.”*

*by Mark Milan, Prince of Montenegro*

Religion has played a central role for the survival of Albanians, equal to that of other ancient civilizations, such as the Armenians and Hebrews. Christianity gave Albanians a stronger identity during the times of barbarian and Ottoman onslaughts. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, during Skanderbeg’s leadership, the country became a sacred land. Skanderbeg defended Christianity better than the Pope. It was Islam and Bektashi religions that would differentiate Albanians at the time when their neighbours’ enslaving and Hellenizing policies aimed at assimilating and taking over Albanian territories. The moral common to all Albanian clerics of all creeds, was similar to the ancient apostolic zeal, combined with a fiery patriotic feeling.

Christianity in Albania is apostolic, meaning it has been communicated to the Illyrians (Albanians of the time) directly from the Apostles of Jesus Christ and became widespread in Illyria as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. as a legitimate religion. About 57 A.D, the Apostle Paul writes, “So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ... where Christ was not known”, (Rom. 15:19-20). Besides Paul, many other saints have preached across Illyrian lands, and they would pass to the Balkans along the road Via Egnatia, which started from Durrës (Dyrrachium) to continue eastward. Records state that there were 60 Christian families in Dyrrachium in 58 A.D.



Paleochristian cross with serpents in Ballshi

The earliest Christian bishops exercised their activities in Illyria, beginning with bishop Qesar of Durrës in 70 A.D. and later, with St. Asti in 98 A.D. Emperor Trajan and the local ruler Agrikoli sentenced St. Asti to death in 116 since at this time Rome prohibited and condemned Christian practices.

The first Christian centres established for the preaching activities of Apostles and their Illyrian supporters during the 1<sup>st</sup> century



Fragments of Mosaics in Butrint and the baptising water location

A.D. to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (when Christianity became a legal religion) can be found across cities like Dyrrachium, Butrint, Onhezm (Saranda), Jeriko, Vlora, Apollonia, Amantia, Bylis (Ballsh), Antipatrea (Berati), Skampis (Elbasan), Scodra (Shkodër), Lyhrid (Ohrid), etc. Among mosaics and old church structures such as those in St. Nicholas's Church in Kurjan of Fier and Ballshi's basilica, early Christian symbols are preserved in the shapes of heart vegetation leaves (see Butrinti's mosaics and elsewhere), crucifixes in Saranda's mosaics, fish in Ballshi's wood carvings and other mosaics like that of Lin in Pogradec and elsewhere.

The sign related to the name of Jesus Christ (1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.) is found only in some antique Illyrian and Roman Basilicas. This sign is formed from the crossing of seven lines and one arch. Such evidence testifies that since the beginning, Illyria was one of the main regions propagating Christian religion for several reasons: ancient and wide expansion of the Illyrians, considerable urban development with cities like Dyrrachium, Apollonia and Shkodër, and its very favourable geopolitic position, as a natural corridor between East and

West, for transmitting Christianity's moral values and transporting an endless host of armies and battles.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D, Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity an official religion, hence it was codified in the Bible and he



Basilika of Butrint

established churches and monasteries. Its bishops, archbishops, abbots and their dioceses with their headquarters in Rome set the foundations. The conversion of today's Albanian territories to Christianity was carried out during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century.



The Bible of Illyrian  
St. Hieronymus

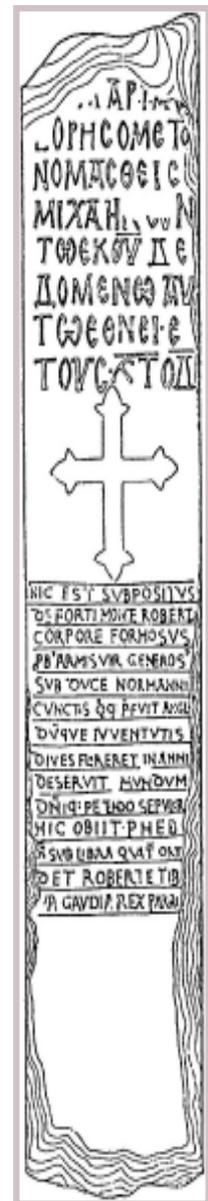
Illyrian-biblical space can be found within a broader "biblical space". The Illyrians were evangelized in the early period of the Christianity, and while there are no historical documents about the people who were Christianised during this period, there are accurate documents for the Christian people in a later period. The Illyrian area recognized the apostolic Christianity, and in the Scriptures, St. Paul is cited to state, "I preached Jesus of Jerusalem in Illyricum." In the "Illyricum Sacrum" a bishop called Ceasar was mentioned. He lived in Durres in 56. In 118 the Illyrian Saint Asti was made a martyr.

The first Christian temples of worship in this space were set

up as early as the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. (the church of Lin and that of Tushemisht). In the Illyrian-Albanian space certain personalities were formed who established Christian literature of the Roman ritual. The chief millenarian prayer of Western Christianity “We praise Thee, Lord” - “Te Deum Laudamus”, which was composed by St. Niketa of Dardania (otherwise St. Niketa of Remesiana) was spread in several variants in Western Europe after 525 and is today one of the main values of Christianity. According to reliable sources of archaemusicology, including those British, French and Italian, Niketa has written, “he was Dardanian” (“dardanus sum”). The first translation of Bible from Hebrew into Latin, known by the name “La Vulgata”, was carried out in 405 by another canonized Illyrian, St. Jerome Eusebius (Hieronymus, also styled as “St. Gjeri”). St. Niketa and St. Jerome, who enriched the culture of Western Christianity, worked on the same lines as other contemporaries and followers who made great contributions to the enrichment of Eastern Christianity through translations of the Gospels in Old Greek and in manuscripts of the “codex” type.

Constantine the Great (272- 337 A.D.), being in war with the barbarian tribes, gave orders to build several magnificent basilicas. These basilicas consisted of a rectangular floor, whose decoration with mosaics was preferred. In their outer sides, there were pillars whereby the church’s portico was set. Such types of basilicas have been found in Albania as well, in Butrint, Bylis, Antigone, Tepe in Elbasan and elsewhere.

During late antiquity, church hierarchies were organized on a provincial basis (Dardania, Prevalit, New Epirus and Old Epirus), with each having a metropolis at their head to which bishoprics were subordinate. Until the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Illyrian church was directly subordinate to Rome. For this reason, Albanian church terminology and words such as mass, eucharist, priest, saint, baptism, bishop, cross and malediction are of Latin origin. This also shows that from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century, when such phenomena as church language was sanctioned, the Arbërs were present in these places. After the division of the Empire, they were included in the East Illyricum zone, whose church subordination would shift between Rome and Constantinople. By the year 731, following Leo the Isaurian’s decision on the re-division of Eastern dioceses from the Western dioceses, Illyrian territory (already known as the land of Arbërs) was divided into zones subordinate to Constantinople’s Patriarchate, and zones subordinate to Rome. It is commonly held that the River Mati might have been the dividing line between Byzantium and Rome. The separation of the Eastern church from the Western church was aggravated by historical events, such as the emergence of Gauls (prior to the French), Charles the Great (in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and Normans or Angevins, who ultimately led to the official and complete separation in 1054. During 731 to 1054 and onward, the examination of abundant archived records demonstrates the rivalry between Rome and Constantinople, each



Ballshi inscription on Bulgarian baptizing

contending to put Illyria/Arbëria's dioceses under its own influence, which often resulted even in bloody battles.



The map of the 8 Crusades, date?

The Bulgarian foray into Albanian lands caused the area to be isolated from the Patriarchate, but the native population maintained their Christian practices. Furthermore, the King of Bulgarians, Boris was baptized together with his people at the Ballshi church in the Arbërs' lands in 866. From heathen people, Bulgarians were converted to Christians. Understanding the importance of the new faith in the lands he had occupied, Boris sought to associate himself with the Pope of Rome to ask advice on how to secure a correct ecumenical administration. Various authors state that Boris ought to have appealed to Constantinople, but when one is baptized in an old place such as Illyria/Arbëria where Christianity had been brought by Paul himself, it is too natural for one to look to Rome as the first official metropolis. Constantinople's hostility towards the Bulgarian King continued and reached its climax in 1018 when the Byzantine Emperor Vasili II defeated Tsar

Samuel. In 1100, Vasili II re-organized Ohrid's diocese by placing Greek bishops in its leadership, such as Theogilikati, with the intention of including the whole Arbëria and even Southern Italy under his authority.

Meanwhile, until 1303, the Rome Patriarchate, being self-styled Papacy (a French influence), continued to intensify its struggle to win as many dioceses as possible in Dalmatia and Arbëria through Ragusa's bishops, but also by punishing several priests (of Tivari and Ulqin in 1167 and 1303) for their preaching according to Eastern rites. Such practices were also used in the framework of efforts to unify the Christian Church.

The Norman landings, first taking place in 1081 and again in 1105, as well as the first Crusade in 1095, disrupted Byzantium in its efforts for the unification of the Christian Church. Constantinople's occupation by the fourth Crusade in 1204, for 60 successive years under French rule, brought the French Benedictine monks to Arbëria in 1230s, who were initially settled in Shirgj and the Bunë river near Shkoder and later, after 1250, in Durrës and Shkodër under the protection of Charles of Anjou. It is said that just at the same time the Franciscan Order was established, intensifying thus the return of Christian Arbërs to the old centre, Rome. The principality of Arbërs

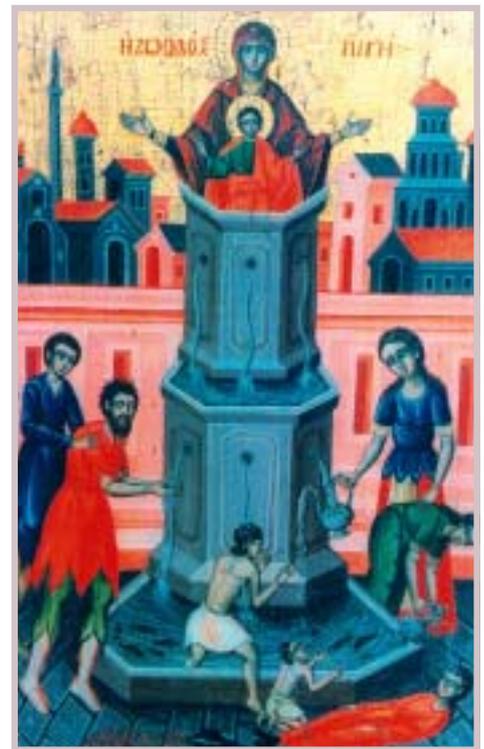
supported these developments and there is evidence of the correspondence held in 1208 between Dhimitër and Pope Innocent III whereby the Pope was asked to help the Christian army.

As Pope and Patriarch struggled in the Balkans for power, the Ottoman Turks emerge in the events by occupying Ohrid in 1408 and Constantinople in 1453, where they made havoc of and subjugated the Patriarchate, and central Tivar (subordinate to Rome) in 1571. Nevertheless, a treaty was reached between Sultan Mohammed II and the new Patriarch of the Patriarchate Gjergj Skalari wherein the Ottomans agreed not to destroy churches to make mosques out of them. Marriages and funerals could continue to be held in church and the festival of Easter could continue being observed.

*At this time, the only Christian place not yet subdued and paying nothing to the sultan was Arbëria. Gjergj Kastrioti - Skanderbeg, a son of Kruja's prince, nicknamed "Champion" and "Athlete" of Christendom, defeated Ottoman armies for 25 years in succession, thus enthusing the Christian world with his achievements and receiving the gratitude of the whole Christian community wherever it was.*

Skanderbeg and the Pope established close relationships with each other with a clear view: to defend and promote the holy church. This relationship with the Pope and the West matched the ideas of Skanderbeg and his nobles for the kingdom of Arbërs' fate with the Balkans and Europe. After Skanderbeg's death, the sultan launched a Muslim conversion campaign against Christian Arbërs by employing the package of privileges and obligations, as well as taxes such as "defshirme" (blood tax) by which the youngest son of every family was taken away never to return home again, to be trained to become a *janissary* (sultan's soldier). Very often, such a tax forced entire villages to emigrate. Some of them converted by only changing their names while maintaining and observing their Christian rites in secrecy. Instances are also documented in 1637 by Frang Bardhi, where members of the same family (brother or husband and wife) practiced different religions with the sole aim of avoiding taxes or obtaining privileges.

There are traces of religious resistance to Muslim conversion in Shpati of Elbasan, affirmed by the frescoes painted by Onufri of Neokastra (Elbasan) in 1558 in St. Nicholas' church and St. Premte's church. In such a climate of Islamization, the use of the Albanian language in church became an urgent need and it was strongly supported by patriotic Albanian priests such as the Archbishop of Durrës Pal Engjëlli, a close associate of Skanderbeg, who used the "Formula of Baptism" for baptizing in 1462. It is a short sentence in Albanian which reads, "*Unte paghesont premenit Atit et birit et spertit*



"Fountain of Life" (with two mosques on the background) by Johan Cetiri, 1812

*senit*” (I’m baptizing you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”, and was found in a circular (pamphlet) written in Latin.



The frontpiece of the “The Christian Doctrine” (1618) by Pjetër Budi

During a visit to Mat, Pal Engjëlli noticed irregularities in religious practices and before his departure he left some directions and recommendations with the Catholic priest, namely the aforementioned blessing, which could be used by parents in baptizing their children in case they could not do it in church or there was no priest available. The formula is written in the Latin alphabet in the northern dialect of the ghegs (gegërisht).

Taking advantage of the Papacy’s Counter Reformation and with the permission of the Holy See to consolidate Christianity, in 1555 Gjon Buzuku published the “Missal” which was a translation of the main parts of Catholic liturgy into Albanian. It contains services for the main religious holy days of the year, comments from the book of prayers, parts from the Testament and parts from the ritual and catechism. (see chapter on “Albanian Language”)

The “Missal” by Gjon Buzuku is written in the northern dialect (gegërisht), in the Latin alphabet, and contains some additional letters. The book has a relatively rich vocabulary and its orthography and grammatical forms seem to be established, which is indicative of an earlier tradition of writing in the Albanian language.

Lekë Matrënga, an Albanian priest in Italy, published in 1592 “E mbesueme e krishterë” (“The Christian Faith”). It is a booklet of 28 pages containing the translation of a catechism. The book is written in the southern dialect, in the Latin alphabet, and includes additional letters not found in Latin.

In the following decades, Pjetër Budi translated “The Christian Doctrine” (1618), “The Mirror of Confession” (1621) and “the Roman Ritual” (1621).

Having endorsed the practice of Albanian language in church, the Holy See in Rome decided in 1634, that the Franciscans should be settled once and for all in the regions of Shkodër, Zadrimë and Lezhë, so as to counter the spreading of Islam.

In the meantime, the **Orthodox Church** administered by Ohrid’s autocephalous Patriarchate, had under its authority Berati’s diocese.

**The Ottomans** established religion as the only feature to distinguish nationality, hence they considered all the Muslims as Turks and all the Christians as Greeks. There’s a lot of evidence that even certain extremist Hellenic networks of the Patriarchate had long been applying this irreligious principle by seeking to Hellenize all the Chris-

tians. It's understandable that as a response to this, but also for seeking areas of influence, the Holy See would send many delegations to Arbëria in order to renew the Rome-centered Christianity. Rome, however, did not intend the assimilation of Arbëria, which is testified in the endorsement of Albanian language usage in preaching and this might have been one of the reasons for prince Dhimitër in 1208 and Scanderbeg in mid-14<sup>th</sup> century to be West-oriented, towards Rome.

The “Arbërs’ Convention” or “Arbërs’ Council” held in Mërqi of Zadrimës on July 20, 1703, under Tivari’s management, and with the blessing of Pope Clement XI (of Albanian origin), took important decisions on consolidating the Catholic church in Albania, such as the ban to conceal religious belonging; the barring of priests from preaching in secrecy for such crypto-Christian people, etc. In this convention, the Catholics spoke their mind against the Orthodoxes.

Though the Jesuits came to Albania in later times, they were able to grasp quickly the Albanian personality and culture. Their patriotic magazine “Leka” is an obvious example. Among the Franciscans, Father Gjergj Fishta was distinguished as a patriot; he was considered a national poet and founder of the Albanian alphabet at the Congress of Monastery. The controversy or competition between Jesuits and Franciscans never reached to a crisis for the Catholic Church in Albania, rather, they always united their efforts to ensure powerful supporters such as Austria, which had exercised its influence with the Porte to defend Catholic interests and had subsidized Albanian Catholic Church.

In a precarious post- World War I situation for Albania’s destiny surrounded by its neighbours’ greed, a delegation headed by Catholic bishop Bumçi, went to Versailles and the Holy See, in an effort to be supported by their influence, to make sure that Catholic Albanians did not want to live separated from Muslim Albanians, bearing in mind a possible division after the war.

It must be emphasized that in 1861, just as in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, contrary to the practice of the Eastern Church, the Catholic Church fostered the use of Albanian language in a Franciscan Order seminar, and excelled at exhibiting an unprecedented patriotism. Through this patriotism, the Catholic bishops had to jointly write King Zogu in 1933, *“We’ve been staying here in Albania for two thousand years, then being Catholics and today being Catholics, then being*

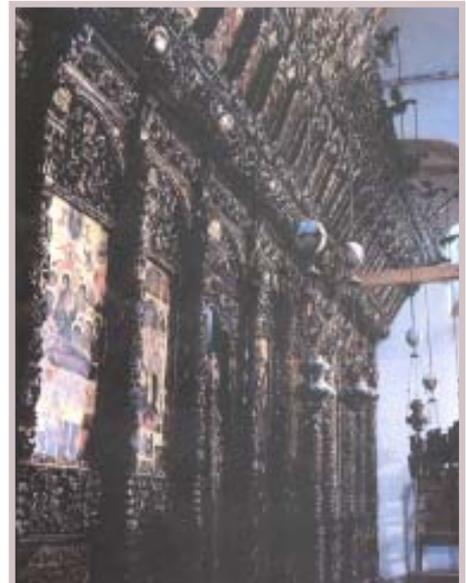


The construction of the Catholic Cathedral in Shkodra. Photo by Marubi, 1898.

*Albanians and today and forever being Albanians.*” The two Catholic magazines of the 1930s, “Drita” and “Leka”, harmonize the religious doctrine with the Albanian context and advocate both religious tolerance and possibilities of co-existence between religions.

With the merge of Ohrid’s Patriarchate and the transition of subordination of the **Orthodox** Church directly to Constantinople, following January 1767 (also under the influence of Russian-Turkish Wars’ outcome), the Orthodox Church intensified its efforts towards Hellenizing the Balkans by increasing the number of Greek schools and important religious and learning centres such as in Voskopoja, where the “The New Academy” was established in 1744 (an Enlightenment institution to which Greeks, Rumanian-Walachians and Albanians like Kavalioti gave their contribution), printing presses, etc.

But religious Albanian patriots and educated people took advantage of this religious and cultural infrastructure to produce works to the benefit of Albania’s future, such as the trilingual dictionary by



Cathedral and Iconostasis  
of Berat 1797-1817

Kavalioti published in Venice in 1744. Thus, Voskopoja became an enlightenment, arts and patriotic centre. Ali Pashë Tepelena gave a patriotic devotion to the Albanian Church, by charging his physician Vangjel Meksi to translate the New Testament for Albanian believers from 1819 to 1827, to be later continued by Kristoforidhi’s translations in 1872.

**Ottoman occupation** and the spread of Islamism heavily damaged the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church. With the rise of national awareness in the struggle against foreign rule, several known personalities from the domestic clergy became known, such as Pjetër Budi, Frang Bardhi, Pjetër Bogdani etc., who played an important role in Albanian culture. During the National Renaissance, there were Christian clerics who laboured in the interest of the country and national culture, like Papa Kristo Negovani, Ndoc Nikaj and Nikollë Kaçorri.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Albanian Diaspora, mainly Orthodox, understood soon enough that to oppose Greece's Hellenizing policy and practice, an Albanian Autocephalous Church needed to be established. The first endeavors to achieve this aim, were done by the Albanian patriot Nikollë Naço, of Bucharest descent, but without success.

The legitimate right for being **autocephalous arose in the Albanian Orthodox Church** as early as November 28, 1912. With the proclamation of Albania's independence from Turkey, the Orthodox Church of Albania could not be lawfully protected by the Patriarchate, which was under the jurisdiction of the Turkish government. This was the case with other Balkan populations as well, which had been occupied by Turkey. So, the Greek, Bulgarian, Rumanian and Serbian Orthodox Church had already proclaimed their autocephalousness.

In the United States, such efforts had begun in May, 1907, and the cause that gave momentum to this issue occurred in August of that year when a young man died in Hudson. As his body was carried to the Orthodox Church where Orthodox Albanians usually performed their rites, the Greek priest refused to perform the funeral service as the young man was known to be an Albanian nationalist, and he was automatically "excommunicated".

This event gave rise to the incentive to create an Albanian religious association in September, to elect a commission in charge of associating Wooster's association with immigrants in Natick, Marlborough, Boston, etc and was named "Albanian Honor". It was the first step towards an independent Orthodox Church with the participation of Albanian emigrants in the U.S.A.

Since Albanians there did not have a legal priest ordained by a bishop, they decided to call a priest from Albania. Among other candidates, Fan S. Noli, one of the most distinguished men Albania ever had, was chosen and after a series of tribulations hatched up by the Patriarchate, was ordained a legal priest in March, 1908. Three bishops, a Russian, a Ukrainian and a Romanian, ordained him.

This event was cheered by all Albanians wherever they were and was followed across the press of the time. The newspaper "Drita" of Sofia, published by Shahin Kolonja, the



Fan Noli on his mission towards an independent Albanian Church. Photo by Marubi, 1914.

“Shpresa e Shqypnisë” (Hope of Albania) and other Albanian newspapers of Egypt and America wrote of this event.

Fan S. Noli gave the first mass in the Albanian language on March 22, 1908.

Thereafter, a wave of rapid constructions of Albanian Orthodox churches began in America. This initiative was undertaken by Stavri Seminaku from Berat and Father Naum Cerja, a priest from Rehova of Kolonja. In 1919, the Church of St. Mary was built in Natick, Massachusetts.

For the needs of the new and independent Albanian Church, Fan Noli translated in succession all the necessary ecclesiastic books beginning in 1908 with “The Services of Holy Week”, “The Book of Holy Services”, “The Book of Great Holy Days”, “The Prayer Book”, etc.

Noli made these efforts for an Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church with the intention of creating an Albanian Orthodox bishopric in America, whose throne was to be carried to Albania in the future.

One of the most remarkable events about the Albanian Orthodox Church was the Convention of March 16, 1919, where the Albanian Diaspora from America and Canada was brought together. The Convention requested the Russian bishop to create opportunities for them to establish the Albanian Bishopric of America and to ordain for them their first bishop. To this end, many such petitions were sent to other archbishoprics. The Russian bishop promised three times to ordain Noli as a bishop and the three times he recanted. Under these circumstances, on July 26, 1919, Noli addressed to those who were present at St. George’s Church in Boston: “Who ordained the very first bishop?”. And people replied, “It was people who appointed the very first bishop”. “The same is with me, the people will ordain me because I am just the very first for the Albanians”, said Noli. In the course of such events, the Convention of July 30, 1919 proclaimed the Albanian Orthodox Church of America autocephalous and Fan Noli its first bishop.

At the time of these events in America, Albania had turned into a battlefield and Greek metropolitans were prevailing, such as Jakovi of Durrës and another in Korçë. There were reports that terrorist gangs of “holy organizations” were setting riots in Albania; they killed Papa Kristo Negovani in 1904, terrorized the population of southern Albania in 1914, and killed Father Stath Melani in 1917. After all these obstacles, on April 28, 1921, Father Vasil Marku gave the first mass in Albanian language at St. George’s Church in Korçë.

The greatest event by far for the Orthodox Church of Albania was the holding of a pan-Albanian Congress in Berat on September 10, 1922, which approved the city of Korçë as the headquarters of the Orthodox Church of Albania. The Congress decided that the liturgical

language at the Albanian Orthodox Church should be the Albanian language. The Congress of Berat closed on September 19, 1922.

On November 21, 1923, the 1st Synod, founded in Berat, proclaimed Fan Noli an archbishop. The ceremony was performed at St. George's Church in Korçë.

As Noli has written, **the 1<sup>st</sup> Synod** of the Albanian Orthodox Church was created after 500 years since 1478, when all of Albania (Arbëria) fell under the Ottoman yoke. This Holy Synod was composed of Hireotheu, Metropolitan Bishop of Korçë and Gjirokastër; Kristofor Kisi for Berat and Vlorë, and Fan Noli for Durrës and Tirana. According to what Noli has written, this Synod continued until December 24, 1924, when he was forced to leave Albania.

With the government support, Father Visarion Xhuvani became the head of the Albanian Orthodox Church, who was thus proclaimed an archbishop. In 1929, the Synod and its metropolitan sent him to Anastas of Koshavac.

From there he was summoned to Tirana and together with the Serbian bishop of Shkodër and two other bishops, Evthim Ikonomi and V. Çamçe (Agathangjeli), created the **2<sup>nd</sup> Synod of the Albanian Orthodox Church** with Visarion Xhuvani as its archbishop. The Ecumenical Patriarchate opposed this synod. It must be emphasized, however, that V. Xhuvani demonstrated great vigour. During this time while he was in charge of the Church, he called the Second pan-Orthodox Congress in Korçë on June 16, 1929.

Under the motto: "A free church in a free country, a church divided from the state", Article 16 of the Statute was formulated to read: "Archbishop, bishops, local deputies, the Great Deacon Mitrofor, Synod's Secretary General, as well as ecclesiastic assistants and deputies of the archbishop and bishops must be of Albanian blood and language and have Albanian citizenship."

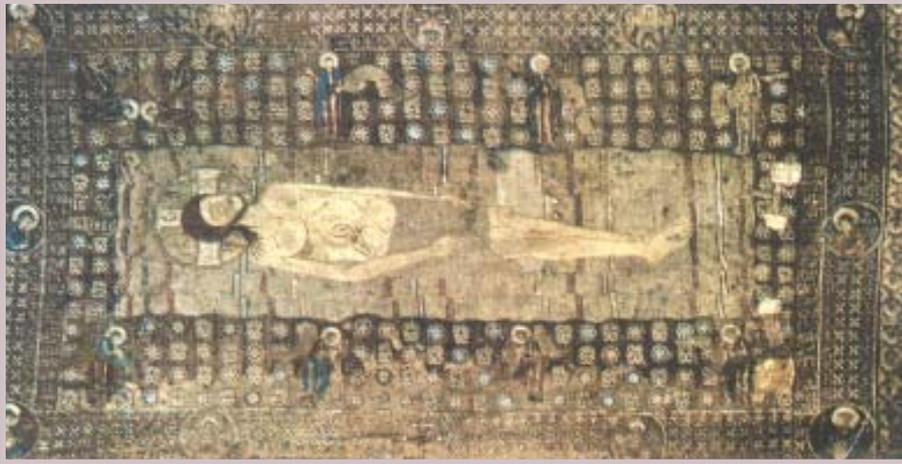
The 2<sup>nd</sup> Holy Synod of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, as yet unrecognized by Ecumenical Patriarchate, was composed of Archbishop and bishop of Tiranë and Durrës, V. Xhuvani, his Eminence Çamçe, his Eminence Ambrozi and his Eminence Eugjeni. Afterwards, this synod was complemented with the Great Deacon Mitrofor and Father Vasil Marku.

**During his efforts to create political stability in Albania, King Zogu** pursued a neutral policy in relation to different religious creeds in Albania, by separating political power from religion, supporting the independence of the Orthodox Church and preferring Albanian religious leaders to foreign ones. For three years in succession (1933-1936) he was involved in a conflict with Catholic schools, which he closed and opened again. This was made within the framework of educational reform. There are interpretations, however, that this movement of Zogu was also intended to keep a religious balance and put a limit to the overall Italian expansion in Albania.

The self governing of the church was one of the crucial issues for the King Zogu as well, who sent his Orthodox minister Kotta to Istanbul, twice, to hold negotiations and also, to put forth threats. In 1933, King Zogu's government put pressure on Xhuvani which led him to resign. Kristofor Kisi was then charged to create the 3<sup>rd</sup> Synod of the Albanian Orthodox Church. On February 20, 1937, it became

possible for the Albanian government to send Kisi and the layman Josif Kodhi as delegates to Athens.

On April 12, 1937, the Albanian Orthodox Church was proclaimed *autocephalous*. The high ecclesiastic decree, Tomi, was conferred on Kristofor



Jesus Christ in the Epitaph of Gllavenica, 1373. An embroidery of gold, silver and silk.

Kisi. On this occasion, the Patriarchate sent a message to the Minister of Justice Thoma Orollogaj, King Zogu and the Prime Minister, Koço Kotta.

Thereafter, this Church would make its own decisions both legally and canonically, would decide its own organization, appointment of bishops and bishoprics, translation of liturgy and service books in the Albanian language, etc.

On its part, the Patriarchate maintained the powers to explain and interpret the Orthodox dogma and requested that among eligible bishops enthroned by the Holy Synod of the Autocephalous Church of Albania, two of them ought to have an Orthodox theological background received in Greek schools and, in addition, to have lived abroad, i.e. in Greece and the Holy Mountain, for a period of time. This was the only condition the Patriarchate laid down.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Synod of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania was made up of Kristofor Kisi, archbishop and metropolitan of Durrës and Tiranë, Agathangjel Çamçe, metropolitan of Berat, Evllogji Kumila, metropolitan of Korçë, and Pandeli Kotoko, metropolitan of Gjikastër.

## Islam in Albania

Albania's encounter with the Islamic world is relatively later than the greater part of Europe. Islam appeared first in the Europe by the end of the first millennium (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century).

From the contacts of the Spanish with the Arabs and their culture, the epos of Cid emerged in which the main conflict is between Hispanic knights and Moors (Arabs).

The national epopee of French people “The Song of Roland”, in which the conflict develops between the Moors (Arabs) and the natives, originated from the contact of Franks with Arabs. Some centuries later, the Arabs would be present in Shakespeare’s tragedies (Othello, “the black Moor”, in the homonymous tragedy).

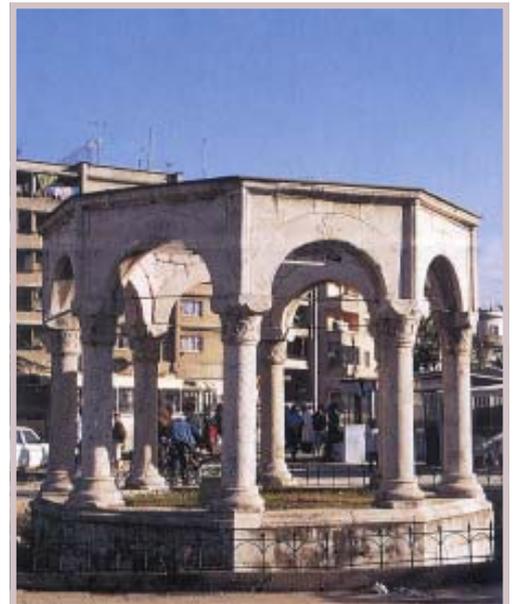
By this time (the end of Byzantine period and threshold of Ottoman invasion) the Arabs first appear in traditional Albanian culture in the ballad of a brother who rises from his deathbed to defend his sister’s honour from “a black alien” (or a “black Moor”) coming from the sea. Historically, cross-border conflicts between Christian Albanians and pilgrims as propagators of Islam date from the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first missionaries of Islam arrived in Albanian territories under the name of Orthodoxy. One of these missionaries who brought Bektashism in Albania is known by name of “St. Spiridoni” and corresponds to the figure of Haji Bektash Veli. Before Ottoman imperial armies occupied the country, the concealment behind Orthodoxy made the acceptance of Islam easier (initially in the form of Bektashiism). This first period represents the stage of a peaceful selective Islam.

Islam in Albania was presented as a variation of “European” Islam. With the Ottoman occupation, the phase of Islamization with coercive measures through implementing a privileged system of taxes and duties on Muslims, begins as opposed to a disadvantageous system to non-Muslims (those who changed their religion were excluded from economic impositions, recruitment in the army, etc.).

From the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards, important cult institutions of Islam (mosques, shrines, and tekkehs) were set up in the main cities of Albania. Islam spread mostly in Central Albania. At the initial phase, most Albanians were holding Islam faith formally, and actually exercised Christian rites. This stage bears evidence of underground (some literally under the ground) churches. The holding of two religions and two names (crypto-Christianity, i.e., Christianity concealed or covered under an outer Islam) continued until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Islam had a religious and cultural bloom in Albania. This period is marked by the Albanian literature using Arab alphabet, known as the “literature of doggerelists”, which scholars compare to the “alhamiado” literature that had previously evolved in Spain. Islam left its traces in the customary life of Albanians through introducing certain laws of Sharia. But Sharia never became a prevailing custom for Albanians.

The acceptance of Islam by Albanians can be explained with the role this religion seems to have played for the differentiation of



Muslim cult building in Tirana

Albanians from Slavs (Kosova region) and Greeks (Çamëria region), who in particular, after the 18<sup>th</sup> century had begun an assimilating policy towards Albanian people. A majority of Sunni Muslims and a minority of Bektashi order have marked Islam faith in Albania.

In the circumstances of an independent Albanian state after World War I, the Sunni Muslims were re-organized in 1921 into a national Muslim alliance. In 1923, the Sunni community would separate itself from the Caliphate of Istanbul by electing Tirana's Mufti as its chairman. In these years, a reformatory zeal appears in Albanian

Islam resulting in polygamy being formally forbidden, Albanian translations of Qu'ran becoming active and the Muslim MPs requesting for women to lead a social life just as that of men, which was not to materialize until 1937, when the law banning women from wearing veils was passed. In 1923, there appears the magazine "Zani i Naltë" (High Voice) which was marked by noticeable patriotic and reformatory feelings.



View of mosque in Tirana of 1848 painted by E.Lear

A congress of Sunni Muslims was held in 1929, taking decisions on exclusively practicing Albanian language in services, reducing the number of mosques to keep only the chief ones, unifying the schools, etc. There is room to believe that Zogu might have had an implication in this reform with his goals to unite and occidentalize Albania, so as to eliminate once and for good the image of an Islamic country. It is said that Attatürk, the greatest reformer of those times, might have become jealous of the reformist spirit of Zogu, as he didn't like the latter to outshine him in this respect.

**Bektashism** derives from a mystical doctrine of Turkoman fathers of the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Caspian Sea and was founded by Hajji Bektashi under the influence of the Persian mystic Ahmet Jasevi to be strengthened as a Muslim sect in Turkey after its relation to the *janissaries* (who were of Christian descent). Bektashiism worships Ali, as much as Mohammed. Because of the conflict with Muslim religion itself, Bekatshiism developed some religious tolerance towards the Christian faith, having in common with it even some interface in religious practices. They preached equality between man and woman and they would drink liquors and other drinks that were quite loathsome to Islam. As to this tolerant attitude of Bekashiism

and the patriotic role many Bektashi have played, domestic and foreign researchers and politicians of all times have maintained that Bektashiism could have well been an appropriate religion for Albanians. One among them is the great national poet Naim Frashëri.

In Albania, Bektashiism appeared at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1925, when Attatürk undertook severe government laicizing reforms for the creation of a modern Turkey, *Albania became the World Headquarters of Bektashiism, remaining such to the present day.* It is interesting to note that even during the period of atheism in Albania, there were no claims from any other country, where there are Bektashi believers, to assume the role of international headquarters.

The Bektashi community of Albania was declared *independent* in 1921.

Many Bektashi *tekkiehs* became resistance centers against Italians and Germans, such as Father Fejzo and Father Faja, and it should be noted that there were 6,000 Bektashi organized during the war.

The History of the **Evangelical Protestant Church in Albania** originates on October 18, 1873, when Messrs. Byrd, Jenny and Marsh settled as missionaries in the city of Manastir. These noble missionaries created the first Evangelical Community. Among the first members of Manastiri's Evangelical Community was Gjerasim Qiriazhi, who after receiving his education in Bulgaria with the help of these missionaries, came back to Albania in May, 1883 encountering many hardships and sufferings. He showed interest on the city of Korçë and in the Albanian School of that city, where he made his first preaching on May 3, 1890. Being a patriotic missionary, he set himself the goal of awakening his people and considered it a patriotic duty to proclaim the Word of Christ.

Gjerasim Qiriazhi and his sister Sevasti opened the girls' school on October 23, 1891. There were three girls in total. Afterwards, resisting the fight the Patriarchate waged against the school, the number of girls was increasing and many girls graduated from the school.

On November 14, 1892, the "Evangelical Brotherhood" community was founded, part of which were Gjerasim, Gergj and Sevasti Qiriazhi, Grigor Cilka, Herakli Bogdani, Vaso Pasha from Pogradec, Fanka Evthimi and probably Petro N. Luarasi.

This Evangelical association ran its own press, called "Brotherhood Paper", whose first issue was published in Korçë in November, 1892.

## Religion during 1944-1990

The Albanian political power of 1945 targeted to attack especially the Catholic Church of Albania describing it as a lair of foreign

agents in Albania. The Communist government sent his Eminence Prennushi, a cleric and poet, to 20 years of imprisonment. His Eminence Gaspër Thaçi was shot to death. After much suffering in prison, his Eminence V. Prennushi, bishop of Durrës and Tirana, died in prison in 1949. 30 Franciscans, 15 Jesuits and many seminarians were arrested. Some of them were shot, and some died in misery in the concentration or forced labour camps. In 1945, Dom Ndre Zadeja, a poet and patriot, Frano Gjini, Gjergj Volaj and Father Ciprian Nika were executed. In Shkrel, Nikollë Gazuli was sentenced to death and was shot in 1946, followed by many others. Their last words were *“Long live Christ, King of heaven! Long live Albania even without us!”*

In 1950, Bernardin Shllaku was proclaimed archbishop of the Albanian Catholic Church, and he was strictly surveilled by communist regime. Meanwhile, Catholic schools and monasteries were closed everywhere. Foreign Catholic clergy serving in Albanian dioceses had already been banished since 1948.

In 1967, Zef Bici was also shot because allegedly had hindered the atheist enterprise of young people. Archbishop Ernest Çoba had been imprisoned since 1964, sentenced to 25 years in jail. He died in a Tirana hospital 1980. At that time, Mikel Koliqi who was also imprisoned, for all his sufferings, he was released from prison alive and died a cardinal in 1997.

These people and many others like them, were the martyrs of the Albanian Catholic Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Synod of the **Autocephalous Orthodox Church** lasted until 1949, when Archbishop Kristofor Kisi resigned. Kisi died on June 16, 1959.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Synod of Autocephalous Orthodox Church was founded on August 25, 1949, led by Paisi Vodica, who was proclaimed Archbishop of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church and bishop of Durrës and Tirana. Qiril Naslazi was appointed the metropolitan of Berat; Filothe Duni metropolitan of Korçë; and Damjan Kokoneshi metropolitan of Gjirokastër. Sofron Borova was proclaimed a suffragan bishop.

Paisi Vodica immediately advised the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople about the new Synod, but the Patriarchate considered it uncanonical and did not recognize his office. For political reasons, Vodica had linked the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania with the Russian Communist Patriarchate. So, the 4<sup>th</sup> Synod assumed a conspicuous political character. Thus, the Patriarchate sent to America the bishop Marko Lipa of Lefkë with the mission to prevent the Albanian Orthodox Church in America to relate to politics as the Church in Albania.

In **1967, in the frame of Cultural Revolution, religions** and their institutions were forced to close and abandon their activities. To

this end Albania was officially the only state in the world where religion of any kind was banned. This status continued until 1990, when the new democratic movement started.

The movement against religious institutions fostered by the dictatorial Communist government was carried out as a youth atheist movement. Many churches were turned into public halls for sports, some were changed to livestock sheds, and some were completely destroyed. In total, 2,169 cult buildings including churches and mosques were shattered. During that period, 217 clerics were imprisoned on the charge of exercising terror, many of whom died in prisons or were shot to death.

The Penal Code of 1977 convicted religious propaganda and the propagation of liturgy. Not only clerics, but even common people who prayed as well, were sentenced by this Code.

The proclamation of Albania as the only atheist country worldwide was shocking. Yet, the Vatican would never cease to support its own believers, who practiced their religion in secrecy, this time persecuted by the dictator Enver Hoxha.

Despite the harsh Communist regime, the Albanians never failed to participate in all religious festivals according to their methods which were as old, as they were modern, during an extreme poverty, where people were supplied with food based on ration cards until 1990. In such an illegal and fearful situation, religious tolerance became stronger.

## Religion after 1990

After the collapse of the atheist regime in Albania, on November 4, 1990, Father Simon Jubani who had been in prison for 26 years, and Karlo A. Sevilla who had been banished from Albania since 1946, gave a mass for the living and the dead at the small chapel of the graveyard in Shkodër, which was used instead of an altar. Participation in the mass was extraordinary. On the same day, at the Leadern Mosque in Shkodër the Muslims held a prayer.

Emissaries of the Catholic Church of Albania, missionaries and apostolic envoys of the Holy See, among whom were also Albanian Catholic clerics, that had survived the prisons, such as his Eminence Mikel Koliqi, his Eminence Frok Mirdita, all returned home.

Orthodox clerics, who were still alive, began to commit themselves to church activities that had remained undamaged, and restored some of them. The Ecumenical Patriarchate sent its missionary bishop Anastasios Giannoulatos to Albania on June 1992, who tried to re-establish the destroyed Orthodox churches and reconstitute their stolen properties.

Pope John Paul II visited the Shkodra Cathedral on April 25, 1993. Christian Churches of Albania has undergone a significant renewal in Albania and Kosova.

People attending Pope John Paul II on April 25, 1993 in Shkodra Catholic Cathedral (reconstructed )

Pope John Paul II and his autograph from the same day



**Religious Albanians can be found wherever there are Albanians**, but the prevalence of representatives of a given religion differs from region to region in Albania, the Balkans and the world. The northeastern region of the country (the districts of Tropojë, Has, Kukës, Dibër and Mat), the highlands of Tiranë and Krujë and those of Mallakastër, the highlands of Kërrabë, Kurvelesh and Skrapar, those of Kosova, and the western part of Macedonia are mainly inhabited by Muslims. Mainly, the Catholic Christians reside in the Alps regions, Mirditë and Pukë, the highlands and lowlands of Lezhë, Kurbin, Shkodër and the Arbëresh of Italy.

Areas of Myzeqe Plain and Berati region, the valley of Drino River, Lunxhëri, Pogo-Zagori, the Ionian shores, the lowlands of Përmet and partially the southeastern region and lowlands of Delvina are inhabited by the Orthodox.

Most of the cities of Albania have a diverse population of various religions. In these cities, one can encounter also new religions spreading in Albania such as Bahaimism, Protestantism and so on.

However, it is important to note that there are very few people who really practice religion in Albania. When we refer to a Muslim or a Christian in Albania it is mainly related to the origin of the family name; i.e. my family is Myftiu and I am "classified" as Muslim, but I do not practice any Muslim religion what means that I do not pray, I do not go regularly to mosque, and I do not keep fast during Ramadan etc. This is for majority of the Albanian population either in urban or rural areas. Many foreigners that visit Albania for the first time are shocked by the lack of religion atmosphere in Albania because they

have read (tourist information!) that in Albania 70% are muslim, 30% are Christian etc etc.. And after they stay some days in Tirana capital they say to you that they have discovered that Rome or London are/ look much more Muslim than Tirana. It is true! This is what tourist propaganda is about.

### Religious Tolerance

Albanians have distinguished themselves for a unique inter-religious tolerance, which is related to the historical presence and co-existence of various religions in regions inhabited by Albanians where was the division of Christendom in two parts, the *Roman (Western) ritual and the Byzantine (Eastern) one*, by means of "Theodosius' line" passing somewhere between the Rivers *Shkumbin and Mat*, and then

*their embracing of Islam mainly to resist assimilation from the Slavic and Greek intolerants the end of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

The Albanians have been tolerant and have never shed blood for religious disputes. The Prince of Montenegro Mark Milan asserts, "Whenever we've tried to contend Catholics against Muslims or vice versa in Shkodër, we've had our battle lost because Albanians had their national sensitivity much stronger." The existence of religious tolerance was also noted by the Italian fascists who developed a new strategy to maintain this balance.

By the end of the Middle Ages and onwards, Albanian territory was a balancing zone between the two most powerful empires of the time, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empire. Between these two empires several agreements have been signed, called "Capitulations", which regulated the equality of influences, recognizing the West the right of auspices for the Christian shrines by means of the doctrine "cultus protectorati" — the protection of clergy.



Heads of four main religions in Albania, shaking hands



Mother Teresa in the meeting with all the religious communities

In Albania, one can frequently encounter *two religions (Christian and Muslim) in one and the same family* (Lurë, north) or *two religions in one and the same person* (Shpat, Elbasan) who holds two first names, one Christian and one Muslim, and attends the rites and celebrations of both religions.

Religious conflicts in Albania, even in incidental forms, were never known. One of the most important authors of Albanian classical literature Pjetër Bogdani, in his work *“The Band of Prophets”* quotes *Calvin and Avicenna* side by side. The first translator of the Muslim Holy Scripture, *Qur’an* (Koran) was a Christian (Ilo Mitkë Qafëzezi). Albanian Muslims celebrate St. George and St. Mary, others also celebrate St. Nicholas and Christmas, while Christians pay friendly visits to Muslims on their festivity, *Kurban Bayrami*.

There have been many situations, according to people’s experience, when the priest has been obliged to sing *suras* from Koran to honour the dead Muslim if the *khoja* and the mosque were far off, or there was snow or bad weather. In cities like Shkodër, where the population is made up of Catholics and Orthodoxes, even non-Muslim

shopkeepers would stop selling pork in their shops during the Ramadan days. In Shkodër again, it was the noble Muslim families who defended the construction of a Catholic Church, when a few fanatics began to destroy its foundations at night. The construction of the church could go on only when the Muslim nobles publicly said “No one dare touch these foundations, as they are mine”.



Mother Teresa in a Catholic church in Tirana

Religious festivals in Albania of both Christian and Muslim communities retain traces of the polytheist mythological times. Catholic Albanians of the northern regions celebrate the “Buzmi” on Christmas day, but the cult of fire, too, forms a substratum of this festival. St. Mary’s day concurs with Fairy’s Day. The Bektashi observe the cult of mountain Baba Tomorri (Father Tomorri), which is similar to the mythological cult of Greek Olympus. One Christian poet titled his book “Baba Tomorri”. This and other examples indicate that Albanians support the cult of nature, celebrate the day of the summer (14 March), keep the serpent and goat as totems (protecting gods) to our present days, and have a cult for the fire, water and bread, the road and guest, the earth and sky.

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