

Religious Persecution in Albania

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Albania is one of the most ancient lands of Christendom. There are thought to have been about seventy Christian families in the harbour town of Durrës as early as the time of the Apostles. It seems possible, according to ancient sources, that the Apostles Paul and Andrew — independently of each other — were active in Epirus, present-day Albania. The archbishopric of Durrës may even have been founded by the Apostle Paul and would thus be one of the oldest bishop's seats in the world.

Scientifically authenticated traces of Christian life in Albania date, however, "only" from the second century. The list of Roman martyrs includes the name of St Astio, who was Bishop of Durrës. When the Roman Empire was divided in AD 395, Albania remained under Constantinople for administrative purposes but came under the jurisdiction of Rome as far as the Church was concerned. Although the Popes tried to maintain their patriarchal rights in the Illyrian ecclesiastical provinces, these came more and more under the influence of Constantinople. In AD 733, Leo III seized these provinces — and thus Albania too — from the Roman Patriarchate and put them under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople. After the schism of 1054, the northern parts of Albania came under the jurisdiction of Rome again and many old bishoprics were re-established. By about 1250, the regions around Pulti, Arbeniya and Kandaviya had been fully re-Catholicised through the activity of Dominicans, Benedictines and finally also Franciscans. At the time of the Turkish invasion at the end of the 15th century, northern Albania can be regarded as being overwhelmingly Catholic, while mid and southern Albania were mainly Orthodox.

With the Ottoman conquest of Albania, the propagation of Islam commenced immediately. It took place over the course of centuries in various waves, the intensity of which depended on the political circumstances prevailing at the time. Albanian nobles were the first to convert to the religion of the new rulers in order to save their feudal tenures and concomitant privileges. The sons of these feudal lords played a special part in this since immediately after the fall of Albania they were taken to live as hostages at the Sultan's court and were there instructed in Islam. Many of them soon assumed important positions in the administration and army.

During this first phase of the Islamicization of Albania the ordinary people were able to retain their Christian beliefs because there was clearly little interest in such classes of people at the Sublime Porte. But as early as 1610, the Archbishop of Bar* noted in his report on his visit that about ten per cent of the population had converted to Islam. This trend intensified noticeably when the Turkish authorities demanded higher taxes from the Christian population than from Muslims. Particularly in the coastal plain and in the towns, more and more Albanians converted to Islam. Thus, for example, at the beginning of the 17th century the number of Catholic Christians in the diocese of Lezha dwindled by a half in only two decades. In the diocese of Pulti, the number of Catholics fell by as much as four-fifths in the same period. In contrast, the mountainous regions have remained partly Catholic even to the present day.

From the very beginning, various Dervish Orders played a part in the Islamicization of Albania. Thus, for example, the Shiite sect of the Bektashi — probably the most important Dervish Order for the history of the country — can be traced back to the beginning of the 15th century in Albania. This Order, which was organized as a religious secret society, was founded in Asia Minor in the 13th century. The beliefs of various Christian, Muslim and pagan groups of peoples in the Middle East have been incorporated in its teaching. Before the second world war, Bektashi adherents occupied central positions in Albanian public life. From their ranks came a great number of intellectuals, who were most of all involved in educating the people and with social concerns. They also achieved influential positions in political life, right up to the level of Minister. Apart from the western-orientated Catholics, it was the Bektashi who repeatedly attempted to introduce modern technology into backward Albania. The Catholics and Bektashi are, incidentally, the two religious communities which have suffered particularly severe persecution under Enver Hoxha's régime.

If one takes as a basis the results of the 1938 population census — the last year of Albanian independence before the beginning of the war — then roughly the following proportions emerge as regards religious affiliation today: about ten per cent of Albania's current 2.8 million inhabitants are Catholics, 21 per cent are Orthodox, 54 per cent are Sunni Muslims and 15 per cent are Shiite Muslims. In addition to the normal Sunni community, the Sunni sects of the Kadri, Tixhani, Rifai and Sadi are also found in Albania. The great majority of Shiite Muslims belong to the previously mentioned Dervish Order of the Bektashi, but there are also the small yet politically very influential Shiite sects of the Halveti or Khalwati and Rrufai in Albania — not to mention several Shiite secret societies, not even the names of which are known.

*Bar was in one of the small coastal enclaves belonging to the Republic of Venice which did not come under Ottoman domination. Today it is situated in coastal Yugoslavia, close to Albania's northern border — Ed.

The ethnic areas of dispersion of Albanians beyond the borders of Albania show a different religious distribution. Among these, two particular regions should be mentioned:

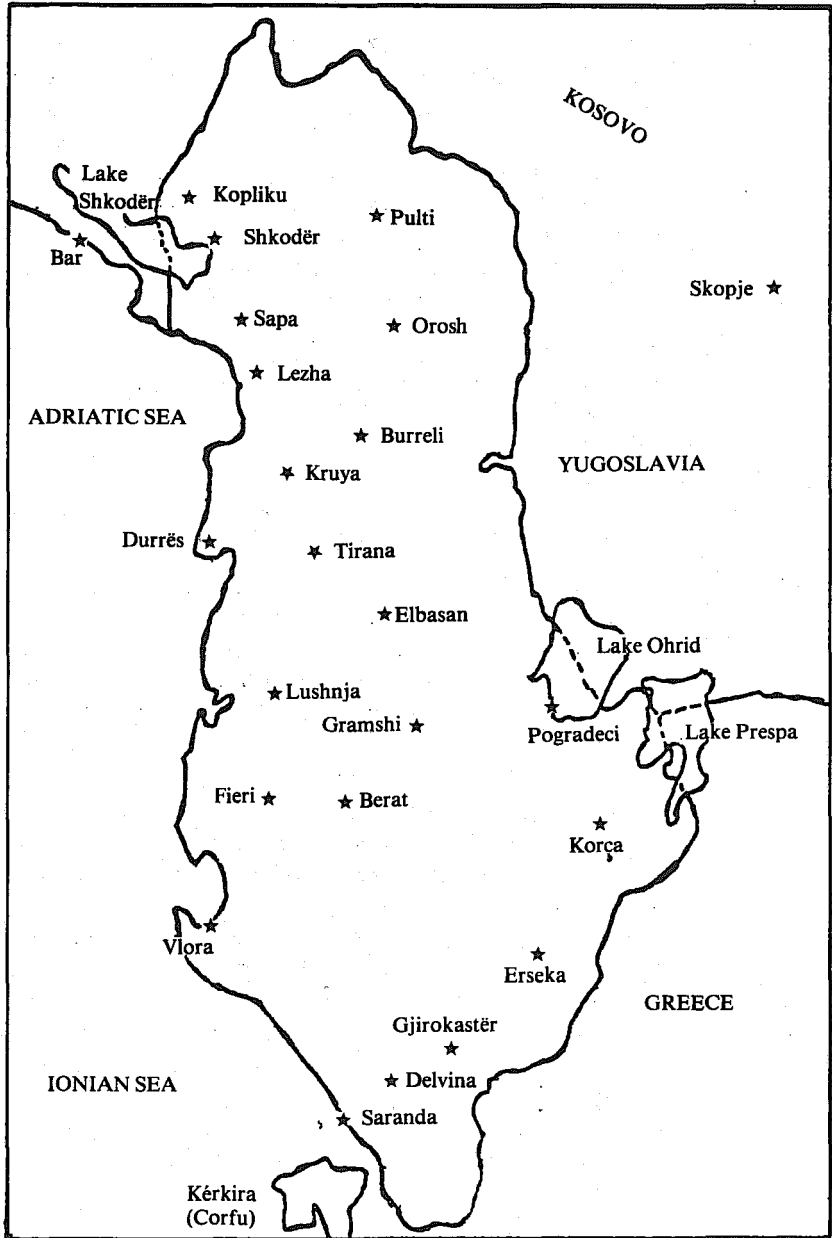
1. The autonomous province of Kosovo in the Republic of Serbia, and parts of Macedonia and Montenegro, a geographically unified region which formed part of Albania before the Slavs annexed the Balkans in the 6th century AD. Of the 1.7 million Albanians now living in this region, approximately 93 per cent are Sunni Muslims and 7 per cent are Catholics.
2. The Albanian settlement in southern Italy, namely in Calabria with Cosenza as the centre and in Sicily with Palermo as the centre. The Italian-Albanians — who call themselves “Arbëresh” — have been living here since the end of the 15th century, when their forefathers fled before the Ottoman advance, particularly from southern Albania and what is now north-western Greece. These two hundred thousand or so Italian-Albanians are Catholic, but they follow the Orthodox rite — partly in Albanian and partly in Greek.

Before the (communist) Party of Labour of Albania proclaimed in 1967 that Albania was the “first atheistic state in the world”, the Catholic Church consisted of the following dioceses:

1. The archdiocese of Shkodër, headed by the Metropolitan.
2. The archdiocese of Durrës.
3. The diocese of Lezha, with Kallmet as the provisional centre and a suffragan of the archdiocese of Shkodër as Bishop.
4. The diocese of Sapa (or Sappo), with Nenshat as the centre and a suffragan of the archdiocese of Shkodër as Bishop.
5. The diocese of Pulti, with Kodër të Shën Gjergjit as the centre and a suffragan of the archdiocese of Shkodër as Bishop.
6. The independent abbacy of Nullius in Mirdita, with Orosh as the centre.

The Orthodox Church of Albania, which has been autocephalous since 1923 (and is still under the anathema of the Patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul) on account of its unilateral declaration of autocephaly), was divided into the following dioceses:

1. The archbishopric of Tirana-Durrës, headed by the Metropolitan and sub-divided into the local church districts of (a) Tirana; (b) Durrës; (c) Shkodër; (d) Kavaya; (e) Elbasan.
2. The bishopric of Berat, sub-divided into the local church districts of (a) Berat; (b) Vlora; (c) Fieri; (d) Lushnja.
3. The bishopric of Gjirokaštër, sub-divided into the local church districts of (a) Gjirokaštër; (b) Pogoni; (c) Delvina; (d) Saranda; (e) Himara; (f) Përmeti.



Adapted from the map on p. 21 of *The Fulfilled Promise*, Gjon Sinishta, Santa Clara, California, 1976.

4. The bishopric of Korça, sub-divided into the local church districts of (a) Korça; (b) Kolonya; (c) Leskoviku; (d) Pogradeci.

Since the Sunni community does not have such a clearly defined spiritual hierarchy as the Christian Churches, other criteria must be followed in ascertaining its sub-divisions. The determining factor here is the office of Mufti, that is, the Islamic jurists who in areas under their jurisdiction are entitled to proclaim a *fatwa* — i.e. an interpretation of secular legislation from the point of view of the Shariyat (Islamic religious law) which is binding on all believers. According to this definition, the Sunni community — not taking account of the sects — was divided into four main centres which were each led by a Head Mufti. These main centres were:

1. Tirana, with the following sub-centres, each under the leadership of a Mufti: (a) Tirana; (b) Elbasan; (c) Durrës; (d) Peshkopiya.
2. Shkodër, with the following sub-centres, each under the leadership of a Mufti: (a) Shkodër; (b) Kukës.
3. Korça, with no sub-centres.
4. Vlora, with the following sub-centres, each under the leadership of a Mufti: (a) Vlora; (b) Gjirokastër; (c) Berat.

In addition to these main and sub-centres, there were also a great number of local Muftis whose seats of office had traditionally been extremely important. They were divided into two "classes". The Muftis of Durrës, Berat, Elbasan and Gjirokastër were "Muftis of the First Class", while those of Kukës and Peshkopiya were "Muftis of the Second Class". Subordinate to these Muftis were "Sub-Muftis", who were likewise divided into two "classes". The Sub-Muftis of Kavaya, Kruya, Lushnja, Fieri, Lezha, Delvina, Konispoli, Peqini, Saranda, Pogradeci and Bilishti were "Sub-Muftis of the First Class", while those of Burreli, Shiyaku, Puka, Bicay, Tropoya, Kolonya, Përmeti, Librazhdi, Leskoviku and Kopliku were "Sub-Muftis of the Second Class".

In contrast to the Sunni Muslims, the Shiites, like the Christian Churches, have a very clearly defined spiritual hierarchy. This is particularly true of the Bektashi, who constitute more than 90 per cent of all Albanian Shiite Muslims. The hierarchy of the Bektashi can best be compared with that of a Catholic Order. At the summit is the *Dede* (roughly, great-grandfather), who is the head of all the 7.5 million Bektashi in the world, most of whom live in Asia Minor. His seat is Tirana. Subordinate to him, there are the following six "grandfathers" and their "dioceses" in Albania:

1. Kruya, with the monastery of Fusha-Kruya as the centre. The jurisdiction covers the administration areas of Durrës, Shkodër and Peshkopiya.
2. Elbasan, with the monastery of Xhefai Babay in Elbasan as the centre. The jurisdiction covers the administration areas of Elbasan and

- Gramshi and the district of Martaneshi.
3. Korça, with the monastrey of Turani as the centre. The jurisdiction covers the administration areas of Korça and Erseka.
 4. Gjirokastër, with the monastery of Asim Babay in Gjirokastër as the centre. The jurisdiction covers the administrative areas of Gjirokastër, Tepelena and Saranda and the district of Kuçi.
 5. Berat, with the monastery of Tahir Baby in Prishtë Skrapar as the centre. The jurisdiction covers the administrative areas of Berat and Përmeti.
 6. Vlora, with the monastery of Kuzum Baba Sulltani in Vlora as the centre. The jurisdiction covers the administrative areas of Vlora and Fieri.

The persecution of the religious communities began with unaccustomed ruthlessness directly after Enver Hoxha seized power in November 1944. The persecution was not, however, directed formally against the religious institutions. Rather, the party practised individual terror — even to the extent of open murder and torture — against the clergy and believers, so that the work of the institutions was “only” indirectly affected. Along with all other civil rights, the practice of religion was also guaranteed without restrictions in the Constitution and the laws of the country, a guarantee which existed only on paper and was broken daily in the most crude ways — often involving bloodshed. The two most important articles relating to religious freedom in the Constitution of 1946 could in fact — if they had been practised — have served as an example to western-style parliamentary democracies. They read:

Article 15: All citizens are equal, no matter to which nationality, race or religion they belong. Any action which gives privileges to or restricts the rights of individual citizens on account of their nationality, race or religion, is contrary to the Constitution and will lead to the penalties laid down by law. Any provocation which is likely to sow hatred and strife between the nations, races and religions, is contrary to the Constitution and will be punished in accordance with the law.

Article 18: All citizens are guaranteed freedom of opinion and belief. The Church is separated from the State. All religious communities are free in matters concerned with their faith as well as in its practice and outward expression. It is forbidden to misuse the Church and religion for political purposes. Similarly, political organizations with a religious basis are forbidden. The State can give religious communities material support.

The first legal limitation of these constitutional guarantees came about with the enactment of five religious decrees. These were:

1. Decree No. 743 of 26 January 1949 "On Religious Communities".
2. The "Statute of the Albanian Muslim Community", Decree No. 1064 of 4 May 1950.
3. The "Statute of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania", Decree No. 1065 of 4 May 1950.
4. The "Statute of the Albanian Bektashi Community", Decree No. 1066 of 4 May 1950.
5. The "Statute of the Catholic Church of Albania", Decree No. 1322 of 30 July 1951.

In the general Decree "On Religious Communities", the constitutional guarantees were again reaffirmed and reference was also made to the penalties laid down in the penal code for violations of these constitutional decrees. However, once the Statutes which had been forced on the religious communities were enacted, all the penalties which served religious freedom were removed from the penal code.

The right of believers to follow religious precepts and to practise their religious convictions had, moreover, already been restricted in the general Decree by the stipulation that these religious precepts and convictions should not contravene "the laws of the State, law and order and good customs". What was to be specifically understood by the concept of "good customs" was not defined, so that full licence was given to arbitrariness in the interpretation of this stipulation. The religious freedom that was formally allowed was restricted exclusively to the place of worship and the holding of religious services. All pastoral letters and any other announcements by religious communities required approval from the authorities. Although organizations "with a religious-moral aim" could be founded, they were subject to the regulation in clause 23, para. 2:

The activity of religious associations and organizations must take place on a national basis, in that it should serve the interests of the people and the State, and their officials must be loyal to the people and the State.

According to Art. 31 of the Constitution, the State alone was entitled to educate children and young people, and accordingly the founding of youth groups as well as religious instruction for children and young people was forbidden.

The general Decree on religion had stipulated that each of the four religious communities should present the Council of Ministers with a draft Statute. A time limit of three months as from the enactment of the general Decree on 26 January 1949 was set. Clearly, none of the religious communities complied with this demand, so the Statutes were finally dictated by the Council of Ministers. The Catholic Church evidently presented the greatest difficulties since its Statute was passed only some considerable time after the other three. However, it was the Catholic Church which had to

accept the greatest curtailments of its rights. The demand for "nationalization" of the religious communities was of course included in all four Statutes, but beyond this, according to clause 1 of the imposed Statute, the Catholic Church was not permitted to "maintain any organizational, economic or political relations with the Pope". By contrast, the head of the Bektashi, whose seat was in Tirana, was expressly called on to maintain contact with non-Albanian believers abroad (clause 7). In this case, the spiritual authority of the head of a religious community was to be used to enhance the international standing of the State and the régime.

The slightly greater freedom enjoyed by the Orthodox Church was also motivated by considerations of foreign policy. Thus the relevant Statute (clause 5) reads:

The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania will report connections or co-operation with the Orthodox sister-churches who practise the high principles of the Gospel with regard to peace and true brotherhood, and every activity and attempt to destroy peace, love and brotherhood among the nations of the whole world.

What is hidden behind this extremely unclear formulation is the fact that only those Orthodox Churches which belonged to Stalin's "socialist camp" could be considered as "sister-churches". The inclusion of clause 5 in the Statute was tantamount to subjugating the Albanian Orthodox Church to the Moscow Patriarchate. Archbishop Kristofer Kisi had persistently opposed this subjugation until he was removed from office in August 1949 and was tortured to death in prison. It had also proved possible to break the opposition of the other religious communities only by ruthless terror against the clergy. On 15 February 1976, the Tirana weekly paper *Drita* (Light) in retrospect portrayed the situation at that time in the following way:

The reactionary Bektashi said stubbornly: "The Statute we made should not come into effect because it does not give us the rights we would like to have." The heads of Catholicism did not, under any circumstances, want to sign the church Statute and continue to operate as a national Church. They put up political resistance in order to keep the schools in the clutches of the clergy, they demanded from the Government the recognition of the "right" to connections and co-operation with the Vatican under the pretext that "rebellion against the Pope was synonymous with rebellion against Catholicism", that "nobody was Catholic without the connection with the Pope", etc. — all kinds of demands which, if granted, would have resulted in the clergy not only working as spiritual oppressors of the working masses but also as a legal political tool of that centre of world reaction.

The last phase of the persecution of the religious communities to date was introduced by Enver Hoxha, First Secretary of the Party of Labour of

Albania, in his speech of 6 February 1967, which appeared the following day in the daily party paper *Zëri i popullit* (Voice of the People). Pupils and teachers at "Naim Frashëri" school in Durrës were supposedly fired with so much enthusiasm by this speech that they quite spontaneously boarded up all the churches and mosques in the town. Then, according to the official story, more youth groups and groups of pupils throughout the whole country followed their example, until even the older people had "caught" the anti-religious fervour of the youngsters. They too, it is said, from then on renounced all manifestations of religion. Moreover, this is all supposed to have happened without any pressure at all, and even the last Catholic priests in the country are claimed to have "voluntarily taken off their cassocks".

By May 1967 all 2,169 religious establishments had been boarded up or demolished. Then on 13 November 1967 all the Decrees on religion were abolished. Religion was thus forced into illegality, even though the practice of religious observances was not expressly declared illegal until the new Constitution was introduced in 1976. The two relevant articles of the new Constitution (Arts. 37 and 55 respectively) read:

The State does not recognize any religion at all and supports and develops atheistic propaganda in order to implant in mankind the scientific-materialistic worldview

and

The formation of any organization of a fascist, anti-democratic, religious or anti-socialist nature is forbidden. Fascist, religious, warmongerish, anti-socialist activity and propaganda are forbidden, as is the incitement to hatred between peoples and races.

In clause 55 of the new penal code of 15 June 1977, religious activity is expressly stated to be liable to penalties. Under the heading "Agitation and Propaganda", it says:

‡Fascist, anti-democratic, religious, warmongerish and anti-socialist agitation and propaganda, and also the production, distribution or storage with a view to distribution of literature of this kind, aimed at undermining or weakening the rule of the proletariat, will be punished with imprisonment of between three and ten years. If these actions occur in time of war or if they have caused particularly serious consequences, they will be punished with imprisonment of not less than ten years, or with death.

All the phases of religious persecution in Albania were marked by bloodshed and terror against clergy and believers. As reliable accounts about the individual measures taken by the Hoxha régime are rare, the extent of the atrocities can only be estimated. The most frequent sources relate to the Catholic Church, and of all the religious communities in Albania, it is probably the Catholic Church which has suffered the most.

In 1939 there were 141 indigenous and 62 foreign priests and priests in orders, 16 indigenous and 16 foreign monks, and 73 indigenous and 60 foreign nuns in Albania. One of the first blows against the Catholic Church was the expulsion by the Hoxha régime of all the foreign priests, monks and nuns. All the monasteries and priests' homes were searched, the church presses were confiscated, and schools, orphanages and kindergartens were taken over by the State. Countless priests were murdered by mobs of people who had allegedly gathered spontaneously, as, for example, the Superior of the Franciscan Seminary in Shkodër and the Jesuit Father Superior.

However, the "spontaneous" murder of priests was the exception. As a rule, the elimination of the clergy took place by way of show trials before the Albanian courts. The first victim was the Franciscan priest Fr Anton Harapi, who together with one representative from each of the other three religious communities had formed the regency council during the period of Nazi occupation in order — according to the Albanian understanding of the then Constitution — to ensure the continuity of the sovereignty of the Albanian State and to avert the imminent division of the country between Yugoslavia and Greece after the end of the war. Although Fr Harapi had protected not a few communists from the hounding of the German forces, his activity in the regency council was interpreted as "collaboration with the enemy". Like Harapi, the young priest-poets Lazër Shantoja and Andrea Zadeja were also sentenced to death. On 28 August 1945, the Jesuit priest Fr Jak Gardin and Professor Gjergj Vata, also a Jesuit, were given long prison sentences after they had taken part in public in ideological discussions during which Hoxha's followers had been very hard pressed.

In December 1945 members of the "Albanian Union" (a mainly Catholic, legal political organisation prior to the first parliamentary election) printed anti-communist leaflets on the press of the Franciscan Seminary, without the knowledge of the Order's leaders. The Hoxha régime used this incident as a pretext for sentencing to death not only Professor Gjelosj Luli and theology student Mark Çuni, the two leaders of the "Albanian Union", but also Fr Daniel Dayani (the Rector of the Seminary), Fr Gjon Fausti (the Jesuit Deputy Father Superior), Fr Gjon Shllaku (editor of the influential Franciscan journal *Hylli i Dritës*) and five other people, none of whom had been involved in the incident in any way. The sentences were carried out on 4 March 1946 behind the Catholic cemetery in Shkodër.

Immediately after the executions, the Jesuit Order was banned in Albania. The blow against the Franciscans followed in January 1947: the "Sigurimi", the Albanian state security force, secretly planted a supply of arms and ammunition in the Franciscan church at Gjuhadol. The "discovery" of this "conspiracy" led to the banning of the Franciscan Order and the execution of more priests. By the end of 1946, a total of 20 Catholic priests had been executed and over 40 had been imprisoned.

Still more priests were executed on Easter Saturday of 1948 on the pretext

of having spied for the Vatican and the Anglo-Americans. Among them were Bishop Frano Gjini (acting Nuncio), Prelate Nikolla Deda, and the Franciscans Mateu Prendushi and Ciprian Nika. After Archbishop Gaspër Thaçi of Shkodër had died in a concentration camp as early as 1946, four more bishops were executed in February 1948. In the same year, Archbishop Prenushi of Durrës was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. He died shortly afterwards in unknown circumstances. Only the then 75-year-old Bishop Bernardin Shllaku, whom the Communists tried in vain to persuade to form a National Church, remained physically unmolested though he was no longer permitted to carry out the duties of his office.

Although the Catholic priests are supposed to have "voluntarily" taken off their cassocks and embraced atheism after Enver Hoxha's speech of 6 February 1967, there continued to be new trials. In 1967, for example, the Franciscan Gega Lumaj was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. A year later, the young priest Zef Biti was shot. The two Franciscan priests Mark Hari and Zef Plumbi were sentenced to 10 and 20 years' imprisonment respectively. In 1971 Bishop Nikolla Troshani, who was ordained bishop only after the war, was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. And in February 1972, 74-year-old Fr Shtjefen Kurti was executed for baptizing the child of a woman fellow-prisoner in a labour camp. It is believed that in spring 1971 there was a total of only 14 Catholic priests still alive in Albania, 12 of whom were in concentration camp or prison, and two in hiding. One of the two priests living in hiding was probably discovered in 1973. At any rate a report appeared at that time in the Albanian press to the effect that a Catholic priest who had converted his house into a chapel had been arrested whilst "stealing corn-cobs".

A particularly infamous show-trial was staged by the Hoxha régime on 24 April 1959 in Shkodër against a "group of spies and traitors in the service of the Yugoslav UDBa" (the Belgrade state security service). The accused were Prelate Ded Mala and Fr Tom Gjon Marku (Konrat Gjelay) and the Catholic laymen Lazër Simon Parubi, Gjon Simon Barubi, Lulash Tom Petali, Gjeto Luc Badashay and Llesh Zef Toni. The High Court — consisting exclusively of Muslims — under the chairmanship of Lieutenant-Colonel Mustafa Qilimi and with the assistance of judge Lieutenant-Colonel Sotir Spiro and Major Hidai Beya, condemned this group to death for allegedly co-operating with Yugoslavia since 1952 and for betraying military, political and economic secrets. This accusation was of course a complete fabrication, since in the first phase of persecution, until 1948, the UDBa had in fact vigorously persecuted the Catholic Church not only in Yugoslavia, but also in Albania. As early as the end of 1944, the UDBa had tortured the young Franciscan priest Lek Luli and two of his fellow brethren to death. This happened in the province of Kosovo, which adjoins Albania and is predominantly populated by Albanians. In reality, therefore, the group of Catholics condemned in 1959 in Shkodër died as "a band of spies and

traitors" simply because Enver Hoxha wanted to oppose the opening up of Albania towards Tito's Yugoslavia, which Khrushchev was demanding. Such an opening up would have forced the Albanian party leader to relinquish his office as it would have led to the rehabilitation of the Tito supporters in his party whom he had liquidated in 1948-49. In order to oppose Khrushchev's instructions, he had to be able to "prove" the Tito régime was "dangerous" for Albania, and death sentences were a support for this "proof".

The anti-religious propaganda of the Party of Labour of Albania shows it has not the slightest concern for a spiritual conflict with religion or with man's belief in God. Admittedly religion is compared with the "obscurantism of the Middle Ages" and Marx's anti-religious slogans are used in a purely routine way, without the least attempt at explaining their meaning. The party has just as little interest in analysing the history of the four religious communities. Committed to their duty to be "partial" in the Leninist sense, the historians of the Hoxha régime treat the data and facts of history very arbitrarily. They select only those which suit their propaganda purposes and give them an ideological slant. Since all pre-war Albanian publications, as well as all foreign works are forbidden, no-one in Albania has the opportunity to check the quotations or to provide himself with supplementary information. However such biased propaganda does not always have the desired effect, because it is too crude. At the beginning of the academic year 1976-77, for example, school text-books were publicly and strongly criticized by many teachers. They complained that the authors restricted themselves to the monotonous repetition of certain phrases. Textbooks on the history of literature had given considerable space to the portrayal of nature by the Rilindja poets without describing the ideas of these poets ("Rilindja" is the name given to the age of the spiritual renaissance of the Albanian nation between 1836 and 1912). A particular shortcoming, according to the critics, is the lack of any explanation of the historical conditions under which these literary works were created. Despite the relevance of these criticisms, there has been no change in the presentation of the official works of history.

Great endeavours are now being made in Albania to present the four religious communities of the country as "exploiters" in the Marxist-Leninist sense, especially since the two Christian Churches and the Bektashi community have for centuries been in spiritual opposition to the ruling religion, the Sunni Muslims with the Sultan as their leader. This is not easy, since, as Enver Hoxha himself said in a speech on 14 July 1947, before the communist takeover all four religious communities of Albania together owned only 1.26 per cent of all the land and through nationalization this proportion had shrunk to just 0.2 per cent by 1947. In order to brand the religious communities as "exploiters", the propagandists have had to fall back on the idea that religion as a world outlook has always been the "supporter of the ideas

of the exploiting classes”.

The main theme of the anti-religious militance of the Hoxha régime lies in its nationalistic worldview. The other Balkan peoples — Greeks, Serbs, Montenegrins and Bulgarians — had been able to form their own nation-states in the 19th century after centuries of occupation by the Ottomans, because ecclesiastically they were united by Orthodoxy. Their church leaders, who were anti-Islamic and consequently anti-Turk, were simultaneously their political leaders in their struggle for national independence. The Hoxha régime can see that religion has played a positive role for them, but believes that the situation is different for the Albanians: because their nation was split into several religious communities, religion is considered the main obstacle to the achievement of national unity. This idea was fostered by many representatives of the Rilindja movement. The constant battle-cry of the Hoxha régime “the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism” was first formulated by the Rilindja poet Vaso Pascha (1825-1892). Historically it may be quite true that the existence of four religious communities in the historical conditions of the 19th century has acted as an obstacle to the emergence of the Albanian nation, but this is by no means the only or even the greatest obstacle. This view ignores the fact that it is the Catholics and the Orthodox above all who, through their religious literature, have kept the language of the Albanian people alive for centuries, and with it their national character, despite the Ottoman occupation. Moreover, the propagandists of the Hoxha régime ignore the fact that priests of all religious communities have taken an active and leading part in all the national independence struggles.

Although the so-called “first atheist state in the world” has kept its propaganda machinery in full swing throughout the 15 years of its existence, and although every public profession of God is punished by imprisonment, the Hoxha régime has not succeeded in exterminating religion. On the contrary: today believers still meet for communal prayer and even hold pilgrimages, they stop work on important religious days and hold strictly to the rules of the fasts.* As a secret identification mark, many young people scratch a cross or a half-moon on their ring finger.

It seems that these signs of religious belief may perhaps be declining and becoming “isolated cases”, and certainly the Albanian party press is very intent upon describing them as merely “remnants” of religion. On the other hand, the Albanian press has published statistical data which very clearly reveal the true role of religion as a determining social factor in Albania. In the summer of 1980, in fact, an Albanian sociologist complained publicly, on the party’s orders, about the young generation’s attitude to marriage. In particular, the party sociologist criticized the fact that in the last ten years, in the villages only three per cent and in the towns only five per cent of all new

*The pilgrimages and refusal to work were mentioned in the newspaper *Bashkimi* (Union), Tirana, 21.7.73 and 29.12.73.

marriages had taken place between people of different religious backgrounds. Since two-thirds of the Albanian population live in the country and only one-third are in towns, the nationwide average for mixed marriages among newly-weds is between 3.7 and 3.8 per cent.

Thus although the atheist State has for decades striven intensively, for the sake of the "unity of the nation", to efface the boundaries between the four religious communities, in more than 96 per cent of cases the respective Catholic, Orthodox, Sunni Muslim and Shiite Muslim marriage partners come from the same religious background. It is unlikely that in any country in Europe today, religion still has such a strong influence on the social institution of marriage as it does in the "first atheistic State in the world". Even in Albania itself, there was never such a high percentage of marriages with people of the same creed in earlier times. But the wrongly applied might of the Albanian State against religion and the constant atheistic propaganda have quite obviously had an integrating effect on the religious communities, in that believers consider it prudent to maintain the purity of their faith by segregating and insulating themselves from outside influences. The defeat of the Hoxha régime could not be greater.

*Translated from German by G. M. Ablitt
and Anne Atkinson*

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