



**HAL**  
open science

**GOD IN THE “LAND OF THE MERCEDES”THE  
RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIA SINCE  
1990**

Nathalie Clayer

► **To cite this version:**

Nathalie Clayer. GOD IN THE “LAND OF THE MERCEDES”THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIA SINCE 1990. Peter Jordan, Karl Kaser, Walter Lukan et alii. Albanien, Peter Lang, pp.277-314, 2003, österreichische Osthefte. halshs-00189819

**HAL Id: halshs-00189819**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00189819>**

Submitted on 22 Nov 2007

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**GOD IN THE “LAND OF THE MERCEDES”  
THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIA SINCE 1990**

**Nathalie CLAYER  
(C.N.R.S., Paris)**

In ten years, Albania, the “Land of the Eagles”, has become the “Land of the Mercedes”. The breakdown of the former socialist regime has been followed by tremendous political, social and economic transformations. The increase of the number of cars on the Albanian roads (among which the proportion of Mercedes is striking) illustrates some of these main transformations : the opening of the country, the new freedom of movement, the building of an economy partly linked with traffic networks and, for the population, the lure of gain, the call of the material well-being and of the consumer society which it had been deprived of. It is in this context that another significant socio-political change took place : the rehabilitation of religion which had been banned in 1967, during the so-called “Albanian cultural revolution”. In fact, the first signs of the softening of the anti-religious fight already appeared before the collapse of the regime, after Enver Hoxha’s death, and especially in 1988-1989<sup>1</sup>. In 1990, the rehabilitation of religion was one of the measures taken in order to defuse the general crisis.

The revival of religions in Albania proved to be more complex than in other countries of the Eastern Block, even if some phenomena are comparable. The multi-confessionality, the twenty-three years of official atheism, and the presence of a Muslim majority make of this country a particular case in Europe. Analyses of the religious “revival” in Albania often concentrate either on the quantitative and organizational aspects (structures of the religious Communities<sup>2</sup>, number of places of worships and of clerics), or on some trends which are supposed to characterize all or part of it, such as “tolerance” or “fundamentalism”. Here I

---

<sup>1</sup> Clerics of Albanian origin, including the famous Mother Theresa, were allowed to visit the country (see Nathalie Clayer, *Islam, State and society in post-Communist Albania*. In: *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, ed. Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki (London 1997) 115-138 [see 120] and Stephan Lipsius, *Der Demokratisierungsprozess in Albanien mit historischen Rückblick* (=Diplomarbeit, Universität Marburg 1992) 41-43). And some former clerics were released from jail. According to Stephen R. Bowers (*The Islamic factor in Albanian Policy*. In: *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 5/1 (January 1984) 123-135), already in 1981-1982, a first step in the softening occurred for diplomatic reasons. For example, in late 1982, the Museum of Atheism in Shkodër was closed down (see 132).

<sup>2</sup> Here I shall use “Community” (with a capital) for the religious organizations, and “community” (without capital) for the social groups.

propose to study the phenomenon with an emphasis on its social and political aspects. For this, I shall first give some characteristics of the religious communities in Albania until 1990. Then I shall describe the former and new principles according to which the religious scene has been generally developing in Albania since that time. Finally, I shall examine for each of the main religious groups the dynamics of development in the present socio-political context.

### **A former atheist country, with a Muslim majority, but without an official religion**

The Albanians are often depicted as a people which has a particular attitude vis-à-vis the religion : both a kind of indifference and an exceptional tolerance. In fact, as for other issues, it is not possible to speak in general terms. There have always been great disparities concerning the place of religion in the life of the different groups of Albanians, and the absence of great concern for religion may be true for some Albanians. It is particularly the case now, after years of State atheism (at least as far as the practice is concerned). On the other hand, it is also true that the phenomenon of conversion to Islam has taken particular proportions in that part of the Balkan Peninsula. However, the Mirdites, the main Catholic tribe of Northern Albania, have always been fervent defenders of Catholicism. It is also well-known, equally among the Albanians themselves, that Albanians in Macedonia in general are, even today, strongly attached to Islam. We have also testimonies from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the “fanatism” – to use the term of that time – of city dwellers in central and northern Albania.

Thus, we can wonder why we have this image of the Albanians. The answer is in the national identity building process. There are a lot of myths concerning the religion in Albania, due to the problem of multi-denominationalism that the Albanians have to cope with. How to build an Albanian nation out of several religious communities ? Since the end of the nineteenth century, the main trend of the Albanian nationalist discourses tend to play down the importance of religious identities in comparison with the national identity. The problem arises when this kind of discourse – reinforced by the atheist propaganda of the communist period – is taken as the reality. Let us take the example of Vaso Pasha’s famous slogan “The religion of the Albanians is Albanianism”. In fact, he meant that the Albanians had to recognize themselves first as Albanians and not as “Muslims”, “Orthodox” or “Catholics”, and was denouncing at the same time the pre-

eminence of the religious identities<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, religious identities as social identities have always been very strong among the Albanians. Thus, we have to be very cautious in analysing common discourses concerning religion in Albania.

Since its creation in 1913, Albania is a country with a Muslim majority. Approximately 70% of the population of the lands included within the frontiers of the new State were Muslims. Whereas these Muslims were scattered all over the country, the Catholics (around 10% of the population) were concentrated in the North-western part and the Christian Orthodox (approximately 20%) in the Southern part of the country. Among the followers of Islam quite numerous were the members of various mystical brotherhoods<sup>4</sup>. One of them, the Bektashi order of dervishes, tended to become a separate religious group from the beginning of the 1920s on, because of its strong heterodox doctrine, because of the special role it played in the development of the Albanian nationalism and because of the important number of its followers – especially in Southern and central Albania<sup>5</sup>. This religious equilibrium did not significantly change until the Second World War<sup>6</sup>, despite the hope of some Christian missionaries to reconvert the Muslim Albanians or the idea of certain intellectuals to promote Bektashism as a “bridge between Islam and Christianity”<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the large Muslim majority, Islam was not recognized as state religion, the country being declared without any official denomination. In the society, the status of Sunni Islam was even undermined. Three factors contributed to this. Firstly, the unity had to be obtained on the ethnico-national level, and not on the religious level, because of the important proportion of Christians. Secondly, the Bektashis began to form a force distinct from the Islamic

---

<sup>3</sup> Vaso Pasha, high Ottoman official, was a Catholic Albanian. Cf. Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening, 1878-1912* (Princeton 1967) 169-170.

<sup>4</sup> See Nathalie Clayer, *L’Albanie, pays des derviches* (Berlin-Wiesbaden 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nathalie Clayer, *Bektachisme et nationalisme albanais*, in : *Bektachiyya. Etudes sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach*, ed. A. Popovic and G. Veinstein (Istanbul 1995) 277-308.

<sup>6</sup> The last figures are those of the Italian census conducted in 1942. At that time, among the 1 128 143 Albanian citizens there were 69,1% of Muslims, 20,6% of Orthodox and 10,3% of Catholics (Peter Bartl, *Religionsgemeinschaften und Kirchen. In: Albanien*, ed. Klaus-Detlev Grothusen (= *Südosteuropa-Hadbuch*, Bd. VII, Göttingen 1993) 587-614 (587).

<sup>7</sup> For the case of the Protestant Missionaries, see the article of C. Telford Erickson, with an evocative title : “Albania, the key to the Moslem world”, the objective being the conversion of the Muslim World (*The Moslem World* 4 (1914) 115-119). About the call to conversion by the Vatican, see Alexandre Popovic, *L’islam balkanique* (Berlin-Wiesbaden 1986) 19. As for Bektachism, for example, Margaret Hasluck concluded one of her articles, saying that “In these circumstances this nonconformist Moslem sect can hardly fail to fulfil the prophecy that it will conquer Albania” (*The Non-conformist Moslems of Albania. In: The Moslem World* 15 (1925) 388-398).

community. And lastly, a secularist trend existed among the intellectuals and officials of Muslim origin who had studied in the West or in the Ottoman capital where Western ideas – notably positivism – had penetrated. In the 1930s, three intellectual trends were competing in Albania among the Muslims, concerning the issues of “modernity” and “tradition”, as well as on the subject of religion : the “Elders” (*Të vjetër*), were rather “orientalists” and continued to be attached to Islam ; the “Young » (*Të rinjtë*), as “occidentalists”, were advocating the rejection of religion, especially of Islam considered as a ‘barbarian denomination’ ; and the “Neo-Albanians” (*Neoshqiptarët*), in favour of the highlighting of the Albanian essence and culture, opposed to the religious divisions, but not to religion as such, being sometimes particularly in favour of a Bektashism closely linked with Albanian nationalism<sup>8</sup>. As for the Christian intellectuals, either they were close to the « Young » or to the “Neoshqiptar”, or they were for the promotion of Christianity (Catholicism or Orthodoxy, according to the case).

Politically, there was often a will to have a representation of each religious community. For example, between 1920 and 1925, the Regency Council was made up of four members : a Sunni Muslim, an Orthodox, a Catholic and a Bektashi. And during Zog’s time, the members of the Parliament had to represent proportionally the confessional composition of the population. Similarly, in the composition of most of the governments, this principle was partly applied. Religion, as a social affiliation, was also a component of the relationship between the political power and the society. In order to touch the population, political authorities tried to use the religious hierarchies – which had been reorganized and ‘nationalized’ in the cases of the Sunni Muslims, the Bektashis and the Orthodox<sup>9</sup>. And the population – for which religious, family and regional identities remained primordial, compared to a rather weak national identity – considered the political power according to their socio-religious belonging. This was particularly true for the Catholics who did not want to lose their special status and the quasi-autonomy

---

<sup>8</sup> See Viron Koka, *Rrymat e mendimit politik-shoqëror në Shqipëri në vitet 30 të shekullit XX* [The trends of the political-social thought in Albania in the 1930s] (Tirana 1985) ; Michael Schmidt-Neke, *Entstehung und Ausbau der Königsdiktatur in Albanien (1912-1939)* (München 1987) 250-253 ; *Illyria* (Tirana) 28 (1935), 5 and 37 (1936) 3.

<sup>9</sup> After the transformation of the Albanian Republic into a kingdom (1928), all the religious Communities were driven to definitively organize themselves on a national level : the Islamic Community had already split off from the Caliphate which was abolished later ; the Bektashis had also become emancipated from the centre of their brotherhood in central Anatolia, which was closed down in 1925 by Atatürk ; the autocephaly of the Albanian Orthodox Church had been proclaimed in 1922, but will be recognized by the Istanbul Patriarchate only in 1937. Only the Catholics did not respect the political will, keeping close ties with the Vatican. See Alexandre Popovic, *L’islam balkanique*, and Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, *Nazione e religione in Albania (1920-1944)* (Bologna 1990).

they had under the Ottoman administration. The government of Tirana, against which several revolts broke out, was often considered as that of the « Turks » (i.e. of the Muslims). The secularization of the state was not well accepted also by a part of the Catholic clergy, which did not want to abandon the prerogatives the “*millet*” status was giving to them. In 1939, the majority of the Catholics welcomed the Italian occupants, their coreligionists. Finally, in 1944-1945, they opposed a strong resistance to the new Communist power<sup>10</sup>. As for the Orthodox, they generally remained outside the administration and the state apparatus, preferring other activities such as trade, and feeling as politically dominated by the Muslims<sup>11</sup>.

When the Communists came to power in 1944, a fight against religion began as in other Eastern countries : the autonomy of the religious Communities was severely hindered and numerous religious leaders were killed or imprisoned. However, it took a proportion which was unknown elsewhere when, in 1967, religion was totally banned, even in the private sphere<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, Enver Hoxha’s regime worked for the strengthening of the national identity. But, for several reasons, the system did not erase the primordial community identities, such as family, regional or religious identities. As far as religion is concerned, for example, the mixed marriages remained rather rare, except among the urban elite<sup>13</sup>. However, a change occurred in the balance of power between religious communities, numerically, as well as politically and socially.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Albanien. Stammesleben zwischen Tradition und Moderne, ed. Helmut Eberhart/Karl Kaser (Wien 1995) 24-25; Pietro Kuaroni, Valixhja diplomatike [The diplomatic bag] (Tirana 1993) 212; Michael Schmidt-Neke, Königsdiktatur 83-87; Morozzo della Rocca, Nazione 122 ff. ; Bernd Jürgen Fischer, King Zog and the struggle for Stability in Albania (New York 1984) 111-112.

<sup>11</sup> M. Schmidt-Neke, Königsdiktatur 81 and Anila Habibi, Politische Eliten und Klientelismus : Albanien in der Zwischenkriegszeit. In: Eliten in Südosteuropa. Rolle, Kontinuitäten, Brüche in Geschichte und Gegenwart, ed. Wolfgang Höpken und Holm Sundhaussen (München 1998) 143-173 (see 155-156). According to Abas Ermenji (Vendi që zë Skënderbeu në historinë e Shqipërisë [The place taken by Skanderbeg in the history of Albania] (Tirana 1996<sup>2</sup>) 490-491), this feeling of being numerically and politically “dominated” by the Muslims would have been one of the reasons of their enrolment in the ranks of the Partisans.

<sup>12</sup>The situation in China, where the religious activities were banned between 1957 et 1977, was very close to that in Albania (and it is not by chance : the two countries were ideologically and economically linked between 1961 and 1978). However, atheism was never officially inscribed in the Chinese Constitution. On the religious Community in Communist Albania, see Peter Bartl, Religionsgemeinschaften.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in 1980, in the district of Shkodër, only 5% of the marriages were mixed (see Stephen R. Bowers, Islamic Factor 129). These mixed marriages could be : a sign of adhesion to the Party’s line ; a sign of the emancipation from the tradition mostly in urban areas (but urbanization remained limited) ; or traditional mixed marriages respecting a certain rule (a Muslim man with an Orthodox wife) in some rural areas of South Albania,.

The demographic transition has been only partial in Albania during the communist period. Statistics show that the Northern areas, with a Sunni Muslim and/or a Catholic population, experienced a very high population growth rates during the 1970s and 1980s. On the contrary, in the areas with an important Orthodox population, these rates were much lower<sup>14</sup>. It means that the confessional equilibrium has certainly varied in favour of Catholicism and Islam, if one only takes into considerations the original religious affiliation of the individuals. This, however remains a hypothesis, since no census including the religious denomination of the population was taken after 1942.

In other respects, the undermining of Islam and of the Muslim identity became more pronounced. With the destruction of the traditional power, the Muslims lost a great part of their political and social supremacy. Besides, the communist elite came mainly from the South of the country, predominantly Orthodox and Bektashi. Furthermore, the Marxist culture has erased the Islamic culture more than other religious cultures. In schools for example, the history and literature programs were prepared in accordance with the European Marxist model, in which no reference to the Muslim World and to its culture is made. In the daily life, the consumption of pork, strictly forbidden by the Islamic religion, was largely promoted during the five communist decades<sup>15</sup>. Independently of the local social transformations, the Italian television that the Albanians tried to watch in order to be relieved of their “iron collar”, also promoted a model very far from the Islamic culture<sup>16</sup>.

On the contrary, the Christians – especially the Orthodox, as a consequence of their commitment in favour of the Partisans during WWII – became integrated into the administration and into the ranks of the elite, on a scale without

---

<sup>14</sup> For example in the Catholic district of Mirdita, the growth rate of the population between 1970 and 1990 was 93%, those of Pukë (Catholic and Muslim) and Skrapar (Bektashi) were over 70%, those of Kukës and Tropojë (Muslim) were over 60%, whereas those of Gjirokastrë, Korçë and Kolonjë were around 30%. See *Monographie par pays. Albanie 1993 (= Statistisches Bundesamt-Eurostat, Bruxelles-Luxembourg 1994)* 37.

<sup>15</sup> About the positive symbolical value attached to the consumption of pork among the Muslims of Devoll (near Korçë), see Gilles de Rapper, *La frontière albanaise. Famille, société et identité collective en Albanie du sud (=Thèse de doctorat en ethnologie, Université de Paris X - Nanterre, 1998, 2 vol.)*.

<sup>16</sup> So I do not agree with the thesis defended by Stephen R. Bowers in his paper (Islamic Factor), which stresses on the Islamic factor in Albanian policy. Informations given by the author on the perpetuation of religious practices and principles are extremely relevant, but the comparison of the different religious influences is not very pertinent. For example, the birth rate policy banning abortion could fit in with Catholic or Orthodox principles, as much as with Islamic values. And above all no reference is made to Orthodoxy in this paper.

precedent<sup>17</sup>. More generally, the status of Christianity seems to have become higher than that of Islam, as can be observed, for example, through the change of the rules practiced in the mixed marriages (Muslims give now their daughters to Christians)<sup>18</sup>.

### **Former and new dynamics of the Albanian religious scene since 1990**

Important transformations occurred within the Albanian society during the Communist period, such as modernization, industrialization, development of education, “atheization” and inversion of the status for the Islam and the Christianity, as mentioned above. The collapse of the regime has introduced even more radical changes : appearance of political competition and the opening of the country (i.e. the possibility for the Albanians to go abroad, as well as the possibility for foreigners to come to Albania). It has also strengthened the idea of an “Albanian space” with the “brothers” from Kosovo and Macedonia. On the other hand, there are permanencies. For example, the predominantly rural structure of the population remained, as well as the principle of solidarity networks linking members of the same family, the same village, the same region, the same professional sector or the same religious community. There is also the memory of the older generations.

In consequence, since 1990, the new religious scene and the relationship between religious communities in Albania has been developing, following some processes which existed previously, but also in accordance with new dynamics. The result of this combination seems sometimes to be paradoxical. For example, religion in Albania appears now to be both marginal and central. There is an individualization of the faith, but religion remains an element of importance in collective representations and on the political scene. The articulations of religious identities and collective identifications are now multiple and sometimes contradictory. National affirmation is a necessity for all religious communities, as much as the assertion of an international dimension. Even the process of reconstruction of the religious scene rely on former, as well as on new elements, and on local, national and international actors who differ in their actions and motivations.

---

<sup>17</sup> Tonin Gjuraj writes : “Another claim was that an Orthodox dimension in state composition and matters was a conspiracy which interacted with political processes which, in turn, shaped state policies. Orthodoxy dominated politics and gave the Albanian state an Orthodox profile. One can hear both Moslems and Catholics saying : ‘We are governed by Orthodox’”. Tonon Gjuraj, A Stale Ecumenical Model ? How Religion Might Become a Political Issue in Albania. In: East European Quarterly, XXXIV, n°1 (March 2000) 21-49 (see 40).

<sup>18</sup> See Gilles de Rapper, La frontière.



*Marginality and centrality of religion in the Albanian society*

Religion is marginal because, as in other former communist countries, the secularization of the society is very pronounced. The elite was trained at the “Marxist school”. And the younger generations, which, on account of the demographic development, constitute the majority of the population, have grown up in an atheist environment which often seems to them natural. The religious practices continue to be rather limited, although the places of worship have blossomed again all over the country<sup>19</sup>. Peter Bartl noticed that among the Catholics, for example, the numbers of baptisms and of marriages registered by the Church in 1995 were still extremely low<sup>20</sup>. Generally, the religion does not occupy a large place in the public sphere. The press, for example, do not often open their columns to religious subjects as such. And religious literature is hard to find in common kiosks and bookshops. Above all, most people are first motivated by the necessity to survive or by the wish for enrichment. Young girls and boys prefer to talk about music and sport.

However, in some respects, religion is not so marginal in the “Land of the Mercedes”, and it can even be central or, at least, closely linked with central issues. The restoration of religious freedom in 1990 was one of the most significant reforms the former political power granted at that time. With the opening of the country, the Albanian scene was filled with crowds of missionaries of all kinds – Christians, Muslims, Bahais, Scientologists, etc., to such an extent that, for most of the Albanians, a foreigner present in Albania is either a journalist or a missionary. Religious symbols began to spread in the private sphere. Icons have been hanged up in houses, Korans have been placed on shelves, crosses have been put on, in order to affirm an identity and/or to be under divine protection. Some religious practices with a social dimension are current again, more than the frequenting of places of worship<sup>21</sup>. Generally, religious feasts are celebrated as social and family events.

---

<sup>19</sup> According to a survey made by the University of Tirana, 33% of the persons of the sample very rarely go to a place of worship, 30,5% at least once a year, 23,9% at least once a month, 9% once a week, and 3,1% more than once a week (Gjergj Sinani, Fenomeni fetar në Shqipëri [The religious phenomenon in Albania]. In: Shqipëria në tranzicion dhe vlerat [Albania in transition and the values] (Departamenti i Filozofi-sociologisë, Universiteti i Tiranës, Tiranë 1999) 67-108 (see 80).

<sup>20</sup> Peter Bartl, Albanien. In: Kirche und Katholizismus seit 1945, ed. Erwin Gatz, Bd. 2, Ostmittel-, Ost- und Südosteuropa (Paderborn 1999) 29-40 (cf. 38-39).

<sup>21</sup> It is the case of the *mevlud* for the Muslims, a reunion which usually takes place in mosques, *tekke* (dervish lodges), but also in private houses, at various social occasions, including retirements. Relatives or friends (sometimes, only the women) gather and hear the recitation of the religious hymn in honour of the Prophet.

As a value, religion seems to be important for the Albanians, and the proportion of atheists is not so important<sup>22</sup>. However, it is above all on the social, identity and political levels that religion shows its importance. As I already mentioned collective identities based on religion remained strong (like family and regional identities) and the society is partly structured according to denominational affiliations<sup>23</sup>. At least, the religious origin of each is known by every body. The consequence is that, although there is among the youngest a clear individualization of the faith and although different trends of conversion exist making the frontiers between non stable religious groups, religion often appears in the way of behaving of individuals and, even more, in discourses which reveals the socio-political developments. Thus, for example, conversions to Christianity are often a means to express an adhesion to the Western world, as we shall see. The reaffirmation of a Muslim identity is often more a demand for a reevaluation of a socio-political status, than a religious affirmation *per se*. On the other hand, the rejection of Islam is reinforced by the social opposition between the city dwellers and the villagers and mountaineers who are immigrating *en masse* to the cities.

On the official political level, the secularist policy has been renewed. Already in 1991, the “Law on the most important constitutional rules” stated in its article 7 that « The Republic of Albania is a secular State. The State respects the freedom of religion and creates the conditions for its exercising »<sup>24</sup>. The Constitution, finally adopted in 1998, states :

“Article 10 : 1. In the Republic of Albania there is no official religion. 2. The state is neutral in questions of belief and conscience, and also, it guarantees the freedom in their expression in public life. 3. The state recognizes the equality of religious communities. 4. The state and the religious communities mutually respect the independence of one another and work together for the good of each of them and for all. 5. Relations between the state and religious communities are regulated on the basis of agreements entered into between their representatives and the Council of Ministers. These agreements are ratified by the Assembly. 6. Religious communities are juridical persons. They have independence in the

---

<sup>22</sup> The survey mentioned in footnote number 19 (Gjergj Sinani, Fenomeni fetar, 75 and 88) shows that for more than 70% of the persons composing the sample, religion is very important or quite important, and that 90% of them believe in God. Another survey shows that, among peasants, religion is considered as the value the most important, after the family, the work, the friends, and before leisure and politics (Artan Fuga, Identités périphériques en Albanie (Paris 2000) 210-211).

<sup>23</sup> As it can be observed in the matters of matrimonial alliances. Furthermore, according to a survey conducted in 1996 in different regions of the country, around 10% of the persons questioned would prefer to work under a chief belonging to their own religious group (see Artan Fuga, Zyhdi Dervishi and Rasim Gjoka, Toleranca dhe zhvillimet demokratike në shoqërinë shqiptare (në dritën e të dhënave të një anketimi) [The tolerance and the democratic developments in the Albanian Society (in the light of informations from a survey)], Pajtimi II/1 (Janar-Mars 1997) 7-22).

<sup>24</sup> See Peter Bartl, Albanien, 36-37.

administration of their properties according to their principles, rules and canons, to the extent that interests of third parties are not infringed”.

Besides, the religion was ignored in the census conducted in the spring of 2001, in spite of a harsh and decade long debate on this subject. It is not really easy to see who is for and who is against the inclusion of religion in the census. Some “defenders of Islam”, such as Abdi Baleta (the leader of the right-wing Party of the National Recovery), are opponents and accuse those in favour of the census of wanting to “desislamize”, and to “atheisize” or “christianize” Albania<sup>25</sup>. The organization “*Omonia*” defending the right of the Greek minority, was against a census which let aside religion and nationality, arguing that it was a negation of the existence of the minority. Small religious groups, like Protestants, which experienced a certain development, seem to have also been in favour of the counting. In fact, the discourses left aside, the absence of information on the actual percentages allows each religious group to overestimate its own numerical importance. The Orthodox Community, for example, asserts in its Calendar that one fourth of the Albanian population is Orthodox<sup>26</sup>. The Catholics claim to be at least 15%<sup>27</sup>. The Muslims often present the rates of 80% or 85% in Albania, and even give 90% for the Muslims in the totality of the “Albanian space”<sup>28</sup>. And “non traditional” religious groups are doing the same.

Despite this displayed secularism, religious belonging is sometimes taken into account in the political life, as in the past. For example, during Berisha’s presidency, there was an implicit representation of the three main religions in the distribution of the highest posts in the state hierarchy. Berisha himself was of Muslim origin, the Prime Minister, Aleksandër Meksi, was of Orthodox origin

---

<sup>25</sup> Abdi Baleta, Shqipëria as ishull, as depo e municionit islamik, por kopësht i harmonisë fetare [Albania, neither island, nor Islamic ammunition dump, but garden of religious harmony], *Drita Islame*, 6(67) (April 1995) 4.

<sup>26</sup> Kalendarit Orthodhoks. Orthodox Calendar, 2001. This figure is probably too high. The demographic trend has probably made the percentage of the Orthodox drop, but there are now conversions to Orthodoxy, especially among migrants in Greece.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Bartl, Albanien, 38. The author rightly asserts that the attraction of Muslims and Orthodox for the Catholics Church is not so important to explain the change from 10,3% to 15% of the population, but he does not take into account the important demographic growth in Catholic districts.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Drita e dijës (Shkodra), 25 (Maj 2001) 4. In his book on Islam in Albania, Ali M. Basha, the present President of the General Council of the Islamic Community, gives figures for each district (and for each of them, figures concerning the city and the countryside) which were collected by the local authorities with the help of the muftis at the beginning of the 1990s. The results give the percentage of approximately 77% of Muslims in the country (73,6% in cities and 78,9% in the countryside). See Ali M. Basha, Islami në Shqipëri gjatë shekujve [Islam in Albania with the passing centuries] (Tiranë 2001) 214-216.

and the President of the Parliament, Pjetër Arbënor, was of Catholic origin<sup>29</sup>. In the State Committee for the Cults, which replaced the former State Secretary of Religion in 1999, the different religions are represented through the origin of its members, although each of them is officially responsible for a sector and not for “his” religious community as it was the case in the former State Secretary. This trend clearly corresponds to a former dynamic, the “traditional religions” being taken into account only in such distributions. According to the same logic, “traditional religions” *de facto* enjoy a special status. In June 2001, the Albanian authorities unofficially recognized four “Communities” (Muslims, Bektashis, Orthodox and Catholics<sup>30</sup>), and around 60 “Associations” [*shoqatë*] (among whom 12 were Islamic “Associations” and around 50 “Christians Associations”<sup>31</sup>). *De jure*, the Communities, as well as the Associations, are officially recognized as religious, charity or charity-religious associations before the Court of Tirana.

More generally religion is used in the political game and the politics is not beyond being instrumentalized by religious leaders. The reading of the newspapers shows that, although there is generally no place for religion as such, the question of religious belonging is quite often associated with political matters. Also some religious periodicals sometimes are not hesitant about tackling political issues<sup>32</sup>. However, as we shall see more in detail, it would be a mistake to consider each religious community as politically homogeneous. In order to go further into details, let us first examine the three-dimensional mechanisms according to which the religious scene develops, in this very special case of a post-atheist period.

#### *Local, national and transnational dynamics*

In the evolution of the religious scene there is a triple dynamics : firstly from below (from the people), secondly from above (from religious and/or political authorities), and thirdly impulses from abroad (foreign missionaries, religious

---

<sup>29</sup> The representation of Bektashism was not so clear, because of the intention of the political authorities at that time of not weakening the Muslim community, as I shall explained below.

<sup>30</sup> There were only a few Protestants in Albania before the Second World War, and Protestantism is not considered as a “traditional Community”, as we shall see later. There was also a small Jewish community, notably in Vlorë. However, except a few individuals, they all left Albania for Israel in 1991.

<sup>31</sup> Bahais are generally included among the « Christian Associations ». As for scientology, it has been banned from the country.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Artan Fuga, *Ikja nga kompleksi i Rozafës* [The escapes from the complex of Rozafa] (Pejë 2001) 160-168.

networks and Communities). The “revival” is the result of a complex combination of these different dynamics. For example, the local actors use the help of external actors and adapt to their need the offer of the foreigners who have their own motivations, while the authorities try to use or to control the impulses from below. The local dynamics seems generally to be very strong. The former “maps” of the Albanian Islam, the Albanian Orthodoxy and the Albanian Catholicism reappeared very quickly with their contrasts in a broad framework, although it is not exactly the same forms of Islam, Orthodoxy and Catholicism as in the past that develop, and although there are now conversions and new religious groups. Compared to the local dynamic from above, the local dynamic from below seems to have been stronger at the beginning, perhaps due to the impulses which first came from the province, and not from the elites of the capital moulded in the atheist spirit of the communist era.

The dynamic from below corresponds to a search for liberty<sup>33</sup>, values, sainthood and protection, as well as a search for identity affirmation. For some families or individuals, there is also the wish to revive a tradition and/or to recover a past social prestige<sup>34</sup>. At the end of 1990-beginning of 1991, some people have formed informal initiator groups in order to make the religious life start again. This was first a provincial phenomenon. In Shkodër, the first Catholic mass and the first prayer in a mosque were celebrated in November 1990. One of the first Orthodox masses was celebrated in the village of Dervişan, near Gjirokastër on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1990. The first Orthodox initiator committee firmly established was that of Korçë<sup>35</sup>. Everywhere in the country (especially in the countryside), the *türbe* (saints’ mausoleums) were rebuilt in a short laps of time. For example, the *türbe* of a local Baba, next to the *tekke* of Melan, not far from the Greek border, was rebuilt between January and April 1991<sup>36</sup>. In the same manner, in Kruja, a Bektashi stronghold in Northern Albania, almost all of the *türbe* were rebuilt by the local population in 1991, notably the famous sanctuary of Sari Saltik, at the top of the mountain overlooking the town<sup>37</sup>. The dynamic

---

<sup>33</sup> Especially at the beginning, the freedom of religion was certainly a symbol of the newly acquired liberty.

<sup>34</sup> Many students registered in religious schools come from families which have had in the past at least one member trained for a religious profession (priest, imam, shaykh, etc.).

<sup>35</sup> Dhimitër Beduli, ed. Kristofor Beduli (= Botim i Kishës Orthodokse Autoqefale të Shqipërisë, Tiranë 1999) 64-65, 69-71.

<sup>36</sup> See Frances Trix, The resurfacing of Islam in Albania. In: East European Quarterly, XXVIII/4 (January 1995) 533-549 (see 542-543).

<sup>37</sup> See Dervish Hysni Shehu, Shenjtore të Ehli-bejtit [The saints of the People of the House] (Tiranë 1999) and Nathalie Clayer, Les hauts lieux du bektachisme albanais. In : Lieux d’islam.

from below generally corresponds to actions of the local community and families, but it is more and more the result of individual moves. Indeed the choices, especially in the case of the young city-dwellers and of the emigrants, are more and more personal. This dynamic has been continuing, but it is confronted to other dynamics, from above and from abroad.

Relatively quickly, groups emerged ; they formed the first religious authorities recognized by the political power. Despite the strength of the provincial dynamic, the leading groups of the new hierarchy were formed in the capital<sup>38</sup>. They tried to organize and to control the religious activities. All of the Communities had to face the same problems : to organize themselves ; to train new clerics ; to rebuild places of worship ; to obtain or to edit religious literature. Lacking funds and enough clerics, they naturally used the help of external actors who arrived very quickly. They also sent abroad students, and they opened seminaries and schools in Albania. Then, the religious Communities began to function on a very similar model, conducting a quadruple mission : religious, educational, humanitarian and sometimes also economical. The population segments aimed at are the youth (the majority of the population), the intellectuals and the poor. So, the main Communities have set up organizations for the Youth, for Women and for Intellectuals, summer camps for young boys and girls, health institutions like the Annunciation Orthodox Diagnostic Centre in Tirana, orphanages, dispensaries, clinics, etc. ; they have opened seminaries, schools and courses, and publish journals and books, and they also conduct small economical projects<sup>39</sup>. The main difference between the principal Communities lies in the articulation between on one hand their structure and activities and on the other the actions of the external actors who are helping them.

Being aware of the political changes, different kinds of foreign actors began to come to Albania and got involved in the religious “revival” process. Albanians from abroad, be they from the Diaspora (U.S.A., Europe, etc.) or from the

---

Cultes et cultures de l’Afrique à Java, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (=Autrement, Collection Monde HS 91/92, Paris 1996) 168-183.

<sup>38</sup> The Islamic Community was first formed in Shkodër, but Hafiz Sabri Koçi, its head, was convinced of the advantages of settling in Tirana (see Faik Luli and Islam Dizdari, *Një jetë në shërbim të fesë* [A life in the service of religion] (Tiranë 1996) 64-77). It is only in June 1991 that a circular was sent to all the Church Councils specifying that Tirana will remain the centre of the Albania Autocephalous Orthodox Church (see Dhimitër Beduli, 75).

<sup>39</sup> About the Orthodox Community for example, see *Kalendari Orthodox 2001* and *Ngjallja* 7(106) (July 2001) 6-7. As for the action of the Catholic Church, see *Le ali della farfalla. Progetti di sviluppo nel Paese delle Aquile* [Les ailes du papillon. Projets de développement au pays des Aigles] (= Caritas Albania, Bari 1995). For the smaller missionary groups (Christians or Muslims), English and computer courses are a must.

neighbouring countries (Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia or Greece), came to Albania in order to assist their “brothers”. Missionaries and members of transnational networks also arrived and relations with other religious Communities abroad were struck up. In this way, all the communities became again part of a broader external religious scene, and in Albania a new local scene was set also with new religious communities. The lack of material resources of the local actors and the freedom of action gave to these external actors an important weight, even for the “traditional” Communities. For example, at the beginning of the 1990s, 90% of the budget of the Islamic Community came from foreign sources<sup>40</sup>. The same phenomenon is to be observed for the Orthodox Community whose activities are mostly financed by donators from abroad, who have connections with the Greek Archbishop Anastas Janullatos sent by the Patriarchate of Istanbul. All the *medrese* (college with a complementary religious program) are managed by foreign Islamic groups<sup>41</sup>. In 1995, only 14% of the Catholic clerics working in the country were Albanians from Albania<sup>42</sup>.

All the groups and individuals involved have their own aims and strategies, which sometimes concern not only Albania. They generally keep a certain autonomy, just as the local actors<sup>43</sup>. It means that there are collaborations, synergy, but also competitions between networks and individuals.

For the Orthodox Church, it seems that the official hierarchy tried to centralize most of the help from abroad and to monopolize the activities on the field, despite the fact that, at the beginning, several groups had competed to give their own impulse : the Albanian Orthodox from USA, with the priest Artur Liolin, who proposed the furniture of religious literature and a help to structure the Church ; the Italo-Albanians – Catholics of Greek rite –, who were accompanied by Jesuits, and thus were perhaps too close to the Catholic

---

<sup>40</sup> See Nathalie Clayer, *Islam, state*, 121-122.

<sup>41</sup> Among the seven *medrese* which could continue to function after 1996, that of Tiranë is sponsored by an organization from Qatar, that of Shkodër is helped by the Islamic Relief of Birmingham, that of Durrës by Kuwaitis, those of Berat and Gjirokastër are managed by the Vaqf al Islami, which is based in Holland, and those of Kavajë and Cerrik have been set up by the Turkish Fethullahcis.

<sup>42</sup> Le ali della farfalla, 10. The great majority (198 on 380) of the clerics came from Italy, an important group (50) were Albanians from Kosovo, 21 came from India (probably the sisters of the congregation founded by Mother Theresa), 11 came from Croatia and the others came from diverse countries.

<sup>43</sup> On the autonomy of the foreign and local actors in the case of Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina, see the two contributions of Alireza Bagherzadeh (*L'ingérence iranienne en Bosnie-Herzégovine*) and Jerome Bellion-Jourdan (*Les réseaux transnationaux islamiques en Bosnie-Herzégovine*). In: *Le nouvel islam balkanique. Les musulmans, acteurs du post-communisme 1990-2000*, ed. Xavier Bougarel and Nathalie Clayer (Paris 2001).

hierarchy ; the Romanian political authorities who worried about the situation of the Orthodox Vlachs ; the Greek Church, which received several Albanians in its seminaries near the border ; the Patriarchat of Istanbul, which sent an Exarch ; and even the Greek Red Cross which was active in Albania<sup>44</sup>.

As for the Catholic Church, the activities could appear to be also relatively centralized, because they are backed by the Vatican or the new Albanian hierarchy directed by Mgr Rrok Mirdita, an Albanian from Montenegro who served as priest twenty years in New York. However, they are conducted by different kinds of actors having a certain autonomy : the Caritas organizations (especially the Italian Caritas, and the newly created Albanian Caritas), various Congregations (Franciscans, Jesuits, Sisters of the Charity, Salesian Fathers, etc.), the Community S. Egidio and volunteers<sup>45</sup>. There are also individual initiatives of émigrés who finance the reconstruction of the churches in their native villages.

The case of the Islamic Community is more complex, because there are different forms of Islam and due to the seemingly greater diversity and autonomy of the actors. As we shall observe below, there is a politico-religious stake concerning the relations between the Islamic Community and the Bektashi Community. There is also a competition between Bektashis and other mystical brotherhoods present since a long time (Halvetis, Kadiris, Rifais, Sadis, Tidjanis, etc.), with the Bektashis tending to monopolize all the “mystical scene”<sup>46</sup>. However, there is also an important re-composition of Albanian Islam due to the arrival of various Islamic groups from the neighbouring Balkan countries, from Iran, Arab countries, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia and from the European and American Muslim Diaspora. Each of them bring its own version of Islam, its own financial power, its own networks, its own pieces of religious corpus from which the local actors can draw according to their sensibilities, their needs and their interests. Furthermore, other competitions, like that between Iran and Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the Muslim World, operate also in Albania. Iran and the Shiite groups try to use the presence of the Bektashis and other mystical

---

<sup>44</sup> See Dhimitër Beduli, 69-79.

<sup>45</sup> See Le ali della farfala.

<sup>46</sup> This “monopolization” has several reasons : there is generally (for the foreigners, but also for many Albanians a confusion between “dervish” and “Bektashi”, as if all members of a mystical brotherhood were Bektashi ; the beliefs and practices of other mystical brotherhoods have become very close to those of the Bektashis ; and the Bektashis have a more important numerical and political weight. Consequently, for example, Bektashis try to control many saints’ tombs which were linked in the past with other dervish orders.



brotherhoods with which they have some beliefs in common<sup>47</sup>, but at the same time have no hesitation in paying court to the Islamic Community as well. Wahhabi and Salafi (fundamentalist) forms also began to be spread, especially among young people. Turkish neo-brotherhoods like the Fethullahcıs and the Süleymancıs also got a foothold in the country. In these conditions, the Muslim Community is not able to control all the activities and the evolutions induced by the different groups and networks, despite the fact that a Co-ordination Committee was founded within the Islamic Community in order to co-ordinate, or rather to distribute the activities among some of the Islamic organizations (mostly Arab n.g.o.)<sup>48</sup>.

The case of the Protestants and other new religious groups was different at the beginning, because the first impulse came from foreigners. However, after some years, there appeared also a local dynamic among their new Albanian disciples.

### **The religious Communities and their flock in the social and political dynamic**

Beside the dynamic induced by religious actors, the different religious groups are developing also in function of social and political dynamics.

#### *The Islamic community : a numerical majority in the situation of a “minority”*

It is not by chance that Kavajë and Shkodër, which were former strongholds of the Sunni Islam – and also stronghold of Catholicism for the second –, were cities where took place the first demonstrations against the communist regime. Indeed large population segments from regions in Northern and Central Albania with a strong Sunni Muslim majority did not easily integrate into the communist State. They were politically marginalized. The mountainous and rural areas, such as Luma and Tropojë, where they are living, often became overpopulated during the 1970s and 1980s and suffered economically more than others. The group of the Çam émigrés, driven out of Greece at the end of the Second World War and for whom Islam was an important identity marker<sup>49</sup>, was also politically marginalized. For all these populations, the expression of their Muslim identity went hand in hand with the need to rehabilitate their collective identity (family or regional) and with the desire to raise their political status. These demands were

---

<sup>47</sup> Bektashis are not Shiites, but like the Shiites they give a central place to Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>48</sup> The diversification of Islam and the loss of monopoly previously enjoyed by the official Islamic hierarchy are phenomena common to all the Balkan countries (see *Le nouvel islam balkanique*).

<sup>49</sup> It seems that, even after the banning of religion in 1967, some Çams were secretly fasting during the month of Ramadan.

used by the new political force led by Sali Berisha, himself of Muslim and North-Eastern origin (from Tropojë).

Indeed, Sali Berisha and his Democratic party, along with other “right-wing” parties<sup>50</sup>, used regional and religious solidarity in their political strategy, in order to obtain to ensure the political support of a theoretical majority. For that, Sali Berisha worked for the rehabilitation of Islam, but also for the promotion of values of the patriarchal system, particularly strong in Northern Albania<sup>51</sup>. He let the Çams express their claims<sup>52</sup>. To a certain extent, he favoured the Islamic Community, supporting it for example to avoid a clear separation from the Bektashi Community<sup>53</sup>. His closeness to the Islamic Community had also an aim of foreign policy : to tie links with the external Muslim World. This was carried out in different ways. The most well-known was the decision to make Albania a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which provoked stormy debates in the political circles and in the society because of the Muslim character it gave to the country. Less visible was the establishing of a parallel network, headed by the Chief of the Secret Services (SHIK), Bashkim Gazidede, who had been President of the Association of the Muslim Intellectuals just before his nomination at this post. It is probable that the Head of the State Secretary of Religion also played a role in this network aimed at the consolidating of Sali Berisha’s internal power<sup>54</sup>. Close relations were also established with Turkey, Turkish schools being the first private schools opened in the country<sup>55</sup>, and with other Muslim States, even if globally speaking the foreign policy turned to the West weighed more.

---

<sup>50</sup> Here we can mention especially the Party of the National Recovery (*Rimëkëmbja Kombëtare*) of Abdi Baleta, whose newspaper is ‘The Recovery’ (*Rimëkëmbja*) and the Republican Party (*Partia Republikane*).

<sup>51</sup> The newspaper of the Democratic Party of Albania, *Rilindja Demokratike*, is generally favourable to the rehabilitation of the Muslim identity in order to oppose the Socialist party, which on this point remains rather on the line of continuity with the communist period.

<sup>52</sup> In Tirana, the organization Çamëria, founded for the defence of the rights of the Çams, has its headquarters inside the building of the Islamic Community.

<sup>53</sup> It seems that this was rather an instrumentalization, than a clear support, because, on the other hand, the Islamic Community had difficulties in recovering its properties. In 1996, the government did not hesitate to close down three *medrese* after the Incident of Voskopojë, when young Albanian Muslims in a summer camp managed by an Islamic organization, vandalized old frescos in a nearby Orthodox Church.

<sup>54</sup> See Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain, Albanie. Les enjeux de la réislamisation. In: *Le nouvel islam balkanique*, 133-176 (see 158-160).

<sup>55</sup> These schools were opened by the Fethullahçis, movement inspired by Fethullah Gülen (see Ferhat Kentel, *Les Balkans et la crise de l’identité nationale turque*. In *Le nouvel islam balkanique* 357-395 (see 386-394).

This political game favoured, to a certain extent, the « revival » of Islam and Islamic values. Numerous Islamic entrepreneurs – local people, Albanians from abroad and foreigners – were involved in this process, and various forms of Islam developed simultaneously as already observed. Local Islamic entrepreneurs often began to rehabilitate the Muslim identity through its association with the national identity, making a kind of «Albanian-Islam » synthesis. It mainly consists in systematically linking “religion” with “patriotism” and in affirming that the Albanians’ conversion to Islam hindered their Slavization or their Hellenization, and thus preserved their ethnic and national identities. Sometimes it is even claimed that the Albanians converted to Islam in order to preserve their national identity<sup>56</sup>. The synthesis is also made by stressing the weight of the Muslim population within the whole ‘Albanian space’ : more than 90%. In this way, Islam becomes an identity marker for the whole Albanian nation. This is naturally often linked with pan-Albanian visions, and some Albanians from Kosovo or Macedonia who became active in Albania are among the promoters of such ideas<sup>57</sup>.

Other Islamic entrepreneurs who are less involved in the political game and more interested in the development of Islam as a religion or as an ideology prefer to underline their Muslim identity, as being more important than their national identity. They are a minority, but this appears to be a view spread among small groups of Muslims, rather young. They generally expressed themselves on media like Internet. They consider that Sali Berisha has manipulated Islam, that the Muslims in Albania are not sincere. And, in certain cases, they can go so far as to say that Islam does not recognize the nations, nor states, and that “Islam is their blood”<sup>58</sup>.

However, the undermining of Islam which began in the inter-war period and was strengthened under the Communist regime made the process of Islamic “revival” not so easy. On certain levels now, it places the Muslim community in a

---

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Hysen Çobani, *Refleksione në Islam* [Thoughts on Islam] (=Botim i shoqatës intelektuale shqiptare “Kultura Islame”), Tiranë 1993. The second part of this booklet is entitled “The Muslim belief is one of the basic elements of the Albanian nationalism”. In the same spirit, Kasem Biçoku wrote a chapter of a book entitled “The safeguard of the national identity in the framework of the massive islamization of the Albanians” (*Falangat që rrezikojnë kombin shqiptar* [The phalanxes which endanger the Albanian nation], Tiranë 1999, 23 ff.).

<sup>57</sup> An example is the politologist Hysamedin Feraj, who published a book entitled “Skicë e mendimit politik shqiptar” [Outline of the Albanian political thought] (Tiranë 1998) and who is the author of numerous articles in “right-wing” newspapers. See Nathalie Clayer, *Islam et identité nationale dans l’espace albanais (Albanie, Kosovo, Macédoine) 1989-1998*. In : *Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions*, 2001, 115 (juillet-septembre 2001) 161-181 (see 180).

<sup>58</sup> See [www.albasoul.com](http://www.albasoul.com) (Forumi shqiptar).

paradoxical position, that of a numerical majority in a kind of intellectual, social and political “minority” situation<sup>59</sup>. A part of the Muslims in emigration are directly or indirectly induced to convert to Catholicism or Orthodoxy<sup>60</sup>. In Albania itself, to pronounce the word “Islam” generally provokes virulent reaction among the Albanian intellectuals. Conversions to Protestantism seem to concern more the Muslims than the Christians. At least in the South of the country and in the big cities of central Albania<sup>61</sup>, the inversion of status of Islam and that of Christianity is now clear. Consequently, according to Gilles de Rapper, in regions like Devoll (near Korçë, in South-East Albania), “The Muslims always answer to those who are suspecting them to be Turk that, as all the Albanians, they were Christian, and that the fact that they are today Muslims is a historical accident that does not hinder them to be fundamentally Christians, thus Albanians”<sup>62</sup>. From the social point of view, the rejection of Islam is also linked to the present social opposition between city dwellers and country people and mountaineers who came to the cities. The problem clearly appears in the capital Tirana, where the population has more than doubled in ten years, through the arrival of people originated especially from more conservative Sunni Muslim regions of North-Eastern Albania. It even happens that the new-comers are called « Chechens »<sup>63</sup>. Ervin Hatibi, a young Muslim entrepreneur, complains that the Muslims are considered as the « cousins » of the province, who spoiled the reputation of the Albanian people<sup>64</sup>. As a matter of fact, the opposition is extremely strong because of the newness of the phenomenon. There had been no massive rural depopulation during the communist period, except just after WWII, when people coming above all from South Albania came to be the cadres or the agents of the new regime<sup>65</sup>. In addition, the process took place very quickly, marking the social contrast more acutely, and this is not without having consequences on the political scene<sup>66</sup>.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ervin Hatibi, a defender of Islam and of the Muslim identity, asserts that the Muslims in Albania have to hide their religious identity. See Ervin Hatibi, *Rilindja Demokratike* (1), 31 janar 1999 (web version).

<sup>60</sup> After some years, there can be however an opposite reaction. And Islam can be used as an alterity marker vis-à-vis the Greek or the Italian society, especially among the older generation, to a lesser extent among the children who are now frequenting schools in these countries.

<sup>61</sup> It is not always true for Northern Albania.

<sup>62</sup> Gilles de Rapper, *La frontière albanaise* 429.

<sup>63</sup> See Gjergj Sinani, *Kosova në gjeopolitikë* [Kosovo in the geo-politics] (Tiranë 1998) 81.

<sup>64</sup> See footnote 59.

<sup>65</sup> Tirana had around 200 000 inhabitants in 1990, while the total population of the country amounted to around 3,5 millions. The current population of Tirana is said to have rose to more than 700 000 souls.

<sup>66</sup> See Gjergj Sinani, *Kosova* 80-84.

This tendency became stronger in the public sphere with the political swing over of 1997. Back to power, the Socialists got down to dismantle the « Islamic networks » of Sali Berisha. They « froze » Albania's membership of the OIC (without cancelling it officially). Bashkim Gazidede's network was probably cracked with the flight of its leader to the Near East. The new power indirectly eliminated within the Islamic Community the elements who had been too close to the Democratic Party. Young Albanians of the first generation back home from the Muslim countries were promoted to replace them. The newspaper of the Community, *Drita Islame* (The Islamic Light) stopped conducting religious-political polemics. Besides the "depoliticization" of the Islamic Community, the State Secretary of religion was transformed, as mentioned. On the other hand, the security forces and the Secret services led a campaign, in collaboration with the CIA, to dismantle Islamist networks which came closer to Oussama Ben Laden. Several Islamists, who were living in Albania and working for Islamic N.G.O., were arrested and extradited to Egypt, just before and after the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania (august 1998). At the same time, a violent campaign was launched against the "Islamic fundamentalism", implicitly or explicitly associated with Berisha's rule.

This weakening of the Islamic Community on the political scene seems to have consequences in the affirmation of a religious component, including by small more radical Muslim groups. For the Community, where young graduates from Islamic Universities play an important role, the fight is now the defence of Islam *per se*, as in the case of the affair of the veil at the beginning of the year 2001. Islamic groups which have a relative autonomy, like in Shkodër, have begun to criticize the religious authorities. Even more significant is the initiative taken by young Muslims students to create on Internet a chat in December 1998, in order to tie links between the Albanian Muslims and to solve their common problems. They say that they were motivated by "the events and particularly the incidents of the last years which befell the Muslim population and groups in Albania, as well as by the weakness and the weak organization of the Islamic Community"<sup>67</sup>.

Parallel to the changes imposed to the Islamic Community by the new Socialist power, Bektashism, as a particular form of Islam, was promoted.

*Bektashism, the other "Muslim" or "Albanian" religious alternative*

---

<sup>67</sup> See <http://www.egroups.com/list/alb-muslimstudents>.

Bektashism acquired a specific place on the Albanian religious and political scene since the end of the nineteenth century. It became *de facto* an independent religious Community within the framework of the Albanian state, as already mentioned. The consequence of this singularity was the weakening of the (Sunni) Islamic Community in the country. That is why a polemic broke out already in 1929-1930 about the organic relation the Bektashi Community must have with the Albanian Islamic Community<sup>68</sup>. Since 1990, the same issue reappeared, not without a political dimension. The independence of a Bektashi Community reduces the power of the Islamic community on a numerical as well as on a political level. It can also be a means of promoting “another Islam”, a “religion” interpreted as a “bridge between Islam and Christianity”, or even as an “Albanian religion”. Since 1990, the two trends – for or against an organic tie between the two Muslim Communities – are coexisting and are instrumentalized by the political authorities.

During Sali Berisha’s time (1992-1997), unlike the Islamic Community, the Bektashi Community had no privileged links with the highest political authorities. The group around Baba Reshat Bardhi (the *Kryegjysh* or head of the Community), which was in favour of an independent status, won the leadership of the Bektashi Community. On the occasion of the 6th Bektashi Congress held in Tirana in July 1993, Baba Selim, the head of the *tekke* of Fushë-Krujë, expressed the opinion of the other trend, more in accordance with the will of the Democratic party, but representing only a minority within the Bektashi community<sup>69</sup>. Berisha’s party could only rely on small groups of Bektashis (like in Lazarat, a Democrat stronghold near Gjirokastër), because members of the brotherhood are often natives of Southern areas which were communist strongholds. It is striking that, although Berisha’s government was not visibly unfavourable to Bektashism, it is only with the return of the Socialists to power that it experienced a significant evolution<sup>70</sup>.

Indeed, since 1997, the Bektashi Community has been trying to transform itself, on a national as well as on an international level. As a consequence of these changes, the conflict between Baba Reshat Bardhi’s entourage and Baba Selim

---

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Goliku, Bektashizma. In: Demokratia n°241 (8/2/1930) 1. In the Regulations of the Community published in 1930, the Bektashis were officially recognized only as a “sekte”, that is to say as a brotherhood within the Islamic Community. See Rregulore e Bektashijvet Shqiptarë [Rules of the Albanian Bektashis] (Tiranë 1930).

<sup>69</sup> In order to stress on his stance, Baba Selim built a mosque next to his *tekke*.

<sup>70</sup> It is also true that Bektashism had difficulties to recover, since it could not have a strong help from abroad, as the other “traditional religious Communities”.

(probably backed by right wing circles<sup>71</sup>) intensified. This conflict, more than a doctrinal dispute, is a fight for power within the Community with an external political dimension. In 1999, both sides published books to expose their positions<sup>72</sup>. Baba Selim charges the leading group of the Community of wanting to transform Bektashism into a “semi-religious” brotherhood, a “politico-moral organization” or a “charitable organization, anti-orientalist, pro-Orthodox, or more exactly half Christian and Half Muslim”<sup>73</sup>. On the other hand, probably supported by some socialist circles (the Prime Minister Ilir Meta is himself of Bektashi origin, from Skrapar), the leading group of the Bektashi Community began to promote Bektashism as a “non-fundamentalist” and “non-political” version of Islam, that is to say as the opposite of Sunni Islam which is sometimes suspected of having a fundamentalist dimension and which was politically used by Sali Berisha. There is also a clear trend to make of Bektashism a “progressive thought”, “a symbol of spiritual service with nobility of soul turned to people, for the spiritual quietness, for peace among people, for fraternity and kindness”<sup>74</sup>, a “bridge between Islam and Christianity”, a national product or simply a channel of Albanianism.

At the same time, the leading group of the Community wants to promote Bektashism as a World wide phenomenon with its centre in Albania. To this end, it has strengthened its bonds with foreign groups and networks : the Haji Bektash Research Institute of the Ankara University, or Shiite oriented groups, like the Saadi Shirazi foundation created in Tirana by Iranians or the World Ahlul Bayt Assembly with its ramifications in Turkey, in the Balkans and in Europe<sup>75</sup>. In order to have a common central reference with these groups (Shiites, Alevis, etc.), along with the notion of “Bektashi”, that of adherents of the “Ehl-i beyt” (“People

---

<sup>71</sup> For example, he has published a book in the publishing house Koha, which is of the right wing.

<sup>72</sup> Baba Selim published in 1999 a book entitled “Histori e Bektashizmit si sekt mistik islam” [History of Bektashism as an Islamic mystical path]. The Bektashi authorities quickly replied to Baba Selim through a book written by Sokrat Ahmataj, Bektashizmi në smogun e një libri [Bektashism under the smoke of a book] (Tiranë without date).

<sup>73</sup> Baba Selim Rexhep Kaliçani, Testamenti Bektashian (Tiranë 2000) 6 and 59. According to Baba Selim, the existence of a reformist group inside the Bektashi Community already existed at the beginning of Enver Howha’s era. The progressives (*përparimtarët*) were close to the political authorities. They were in favour of the abolition of celibacy. They wanted to approach Bektashism to Christianity. They were “anti-orientalist”, diminishing for example the importance of Arabic, the language of the Koran. They were in favour of the statute of Community for Bektashism. And they thought that the fatherland was more important than religion (Baba Selim Rexhep Kaliçani, Dede Ahmeti i gjallë mes nesh [Dede Ahmet alive among us] (Fushë Krujë 2000) 35-36).

<sup>74</sup> Nuri Çuni, Tomor, o mal i bekuar [Tomor, o blessed mountain !] (Tiranë 1999) 18.

<sup>75</sup> All these groups were represented at the “7th International Bektashi Congress”, held in Tirana on the 23-24 September 2000.

of the House [of the Prophet]”) is promoted<sup>76</sup>. The fact that the same phenomenon can be observed for other mystical brotherhoods in Albania, which also have contacts with Shiite oriented groups, seems to prove that it is partly the result of the politics of the successful penetration of these Shiite networks<sup>77</sup>.

The new form of Bektashism, which results from these transformations, has been expressed through the new Statutes set up during the 7th Bektashi Congress held in Tirana in September 2000<sup>78</sup>, and through a new doctrinal corpus which is being elaborated. In order to attract a younger and more urban public and to have an audience among intellectuals, the priority is given to the organization of scientific, historical and cultural sessions or to add a scientific component to traditional ceremonies, during which a “human, precise and scientific argumentation” is developed<sup>79</sup>. An effort is also made to present the “scientific progressive Bektashi thought” through the media and publications. In other respects, in the newly elaborated corpus, the proportion of pieces from the Shiite literature is not negligible. In the journal of the Community (*Urtësia*, The Wisdom) for example, texts of various Iranian thinkers are edited. Some of them are translated from the journal of the World Ahlul Bayt Assembly, entitled *Risalat-u-Thaqalayn*. The Shiite inspired iconography, especially concerning the Qerbela [the battle during which Hüseyin, the grand-son of the Prophet, perished as a martyr] and the Family of the Prophet, is even more widespread. One can find it in every *tekke* and *türbe*.

Besides this Shiite influence, the new Bektashi corpus has an inner dynamics, related to the need for a social and politico-religious positioning and for a local legitimization. This is mainly made through the sanctification of the poet Naim Frashëri, died in 1901, in order to crystallize the new intellectual, national and scientific trend of Bektashism. Naim Frashëri was a Bektashi layman working as official in the Ottoman administration. At the end of the nineteenth century, he

---

<sup>76</sup> During the Congress mentioned in the previous footnote, the representative of the World Ahlul Bayt Assembly stressed that there were 350 millions of disciples of the Ehl-i Beyt in the World. See Kongresi 7 Botëror bektashian. 23-24 shtator 2000. Tiranë (= Komuniteti Bektashian, Tiranë 2001) 47.

<sup>77</sup> For example the Kadiris of Tirana are distributing a series of books of the Ayatollah Es-Seyyid Muhammad Shirazi, translated by a young Albanian in Lebanon and published by the Freemuslim Organization. In September 2001, they were also distributing advertisements for the newly opened Iranian college in Tirana.

<sup>78</sup> The Statutes of 1993 were practically the same as those of 1950 (only the references to the popular power were left out).

<sup>79</sup> In 1999 for example, two ceremonies called “Dritë Bektashiane” (Bektashi Light) were organized in Kruja and Elbasan, which maybe were elaborated on the model of the “Ehl-i beyt ışıği” of the Ehl-i Beyt Vakfi from Turkey. See *Urtësia* [The Wisdom] 18 (mars 1999) and 20 (july 1999).



wrote, among other things, a booklet on Bektashism and an epic on Qerbela. In these texts, he introduced nationalist themes, in order to develop nationalist feelings among the Albanian Bektashi people. Recently, Naim Frashëri was elevated to the rank of “honorary baba” (*Baba nderi*) of the *Kryegjyshata*, the main Bektashi centre in Albania, situated in Tirana’s suburb. In March 1999, his bust was inaugurated in the courtyard of this *tekke*, during the feast of Sultan Nevruz. In the growing literature celebrating this figure and his work, he even appears as the founder of an “Albanian Bektashism”: “Naim Frashëri understood what benefit our nationality could draw from Bektashism... He deserves to be considered as one of the founders of the Albanian Bektashism”<sup>80</sup>. Some formula, such as “the message of the Naimian light for the blossoming, the dignity and the identity of the Albanian nation”<sup>81</sup>, even make of him a kind of saint or prophet.

Furthermore, in the spring of 2001, a book dedicated to Naim Frashëri and Bektashism appeared under the title “The third eye” (*Syri i tretë*). Written by an intellectual, Moikom Zeqo, the director of the National Museum<sup>82</sup>, it seems to have an important impact in Albania, even on the non Bektashi public. In September of the same year, the book was reviewed by a daily newspaper, where the author’s thesis was summed up as follows : “Naim Frashëri, as an apostle of Bektashism, searched what is called the Third Way ; it means a faith which could unite the two great faiths of the Albanians, and could accept Christianity and Islam, so that, as a synchronized ideology, it strengthens Albanianism”<sup>83</sup>. Thus, the new central figure is as much the symbol of a religious group (the Bektashis), as the symbol of an ideology, a special Albanianism, which try to put the personality of the Albanian people forward, combining Eastern and Western influences, without rejecting the one or the other, as the Neo-shqiptars did in the inter-war period. “The Third Eye is Naim Frashëri himself, between the eye of the times gone by and the eye of the times to come. The Third Eye is Bektashism between the eye of Christianity and the eye of Islam. The Third Eye is Albania between the eye of the East and the eye of the West”, writes Moikom Zeqo<sup>84</sup>.

### *The orthodox community : minorities and neighbourhood of Greece*

<sup>80</sup> Nuri Çuni, *Tomor, o mal i bekuar*, Tiranë, 1999.

<sup>81</sup> Kujtim Ahmataj. In: *Kongresi 7 Botëror Bektashian*, 28.

<sup>82</sup> Moikom Zeqo, from a family of Libohovë (near Gjirokastër), is a member of the former communist élite. His grand-father was a Bektashi.

<sup>83</sup> Bektashizmi e Naim Frashëri në Syrin e Tretë [Bektashism and Naim Frashëri in the Third eye]. In: *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 6 September 2001, 12-13.

<sup>84</sup> Moikom Zeqo, *Syri i Tretë. Naim Frashëri dhe Bektashizmi* [The third eye. Naim Frashëri and Bektashism] (Tiranë 2001) 262.

The Orthodox community in Albania has the particularity of being the less homogeneous religious community, ethnically speaking. The Orthodox can be Albanians, Vlachs (Aromanians), Greeks or, to a lesser extent, Slavs (i.e. Macedonians, Serbs and Montenegrins)<sup>85</sup>. So, inevitably, Orthodoxy is linked with the question of minorities in Albania : the Greek and Slav minorities which were recognized by the State, and the Aromanian “minority” which has never been officially recognized and which, like in other Balkan countries, has a kind of chameleon way of self identification<sup>86</sup>. Orthodoxy is also at the very centre of the relations between Albania and Greece for the following reasons : because of the neighbourhood of Greece where an enormous proportion of Albanian citizens (about a half million) were led to go in order to find a work and had to adapt to a rather intolerant Orthodox society ; and because of the central place of Orthodoxy in the definition of Greekness leading sometimes to the equation Orthodox = Greek, or even = Greece, like in the case of the Vorio-Epirote Propaganda led, among others, by the Archbishop Sebastianos of Kastoria.

The nomination of a Greek citizen at the head of the Orthodox Church of Albania could only lead to make these problems more acute. Even the specific question of the Orthodox Church came to focus the whole series of problems, and this also because it was instrumentalized in the local political game. As in the case of Bektashism, the Democratic party used some groups in an attempt to change the course of the events. However these groups remained limited because, for the most part, the Orthodox community does not care about this kind of problem, and certainly also because the majority of the Orthodox are of Socialist sensibility. Let us remember that, contrary to what is sometimes said, during the Communist period, the Orthodox community was integrated into the Albanian State, as it had never been before, even in the case of the Greek minority,<sup>87</sup>.

In January 1991 (during the time of Ramiz Alia and of its government of stability), Anastas Janullatos was appointed Exarch by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Istanbul. In August 1992, he became Archbishop of Tirana, Durrës and the whole of Albania. As I explained above, several groups and individuals from Albania, from America, from Greece, from Rumania, etc.) were involved at the beginning in the “revival” of the Orthodox Church. It is interesting to note that

---

<sup>85</sup> It is difficult to give exact figures for all these groups, because there are many speculations and the frontiers are not so clear between each of the groups due to mixed marriages and to changing identifications.

<sup>86</sup> Several personalities of Aromanian origin were fervent Albanian nationalists.

<sup>87</sup> In the case of Aromanians, some feel now to have been persecuted by the regime, because they were not allowed to speak their mother tongue.

Ylli Popa (who will become President of the Academy of sciences under the Socialist government) was among them, becoming a close collaborator of Anastas Janullatos<sup>88</sup>. This nomination, considered as being in contradiction to the autocephaly of the Albanian Orthodox Church, immediately provoked the reaction of small groups instrumentalized by the Democratic Party which had gained the power some months before, in March 1992.

A “National Committee for the Defence of the Autocephaly of the Albanian Orthodox Church”, including also Muslims and Catholics, was created in order to denounce the nomination of Janullatos. Its members could easily voice their point of view on television. They were mainly arguing that the Statutes of 1929 did not allowed a foreigner to be at the head of the Community and they accused Janullatos of being the “Trojan horse” of Hellenism in Albania<sup>89</sup>. The Albanian-American group of Artur Liolin also opposed to Janullatos, but the reverend himself was himself not ready to take charge of the Church of Albania<sup>90</sup>. These groups seem to have some supporters mainly in Tiranë, Korçë and Elbasan. The Democratic party also played the “Romanian-Aromanian” trend against the “Greek trend”. Already at the beginning of 1992, Romanian political and religious actors were involved in Aromanian affairs in Albania. For example, the Romanian ambassador met the Council of the Orthodox Church in order to notify them that a meeting of all the Aromanians with the participation of priests from Romania was scheduled, that they will give money for the church of Selenicë (near Vlorë) and that it would be good to establish relations between the Albanian and the Romanian Churches<sup>91</sup>. In fact, the Aromanians/Vlahs, which organized themselves culturally, quickly split in two factions : a pro-Greek and a pro-Romanian trend, the latter, with its centres in Tirana and Korçë, tending “to identify itself with the ruling Democratic Party”, at least until 1997. The

---

<sup>88</sup> See Dhimitër Beduli, 78.

<sup>89</sup> See their newspaper, which came out irregularly under the title « Autoqefalia Ortodokse shqiptare » (The Albanian Orthodox Autocephaly). As far as I know, it was published at least between 1992 and 1995. In fact, conversely, Anastas Janullatos is accused by some Greek circles of being too open to the Albanians and Albanianness. About this subject and about the multiplicity of trends among the Greeks, see Lambros Baltiotis, Tasos Telloglou, Konstantinos Tsitselikis and Dimitris Christopoulos, *Ektesi i ellinika meionotita tis Alvanias* (Rapport about the Greek minority of Greece), Athens-Salonica June 2001.

<sup>90</sup> See Ngjallja [The Resurrection] 10(25) (October 1994) 5 and 10 ; *Autoqefalia Ortodokse shqiptare*, 11 (october 1994) 3. Here we have to notice that the Albanian Orthodox in the United States are not united : some are rather “Albanians”, others have closer connections with Greek milieus.

<sup>91</sup> Dhimitër Beduli, 78.

Aromanian priest of Korçë himself is said to have been a member of Sali Berisha's Party<sup>92</sup>.

Besides the use of all these groups, according to a Communist practice, the Democratic political authorities also reacted by having the Institut of History of the Academy of Sciences organize in September 1992 a "scientific" symposium about the "70 years of the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church". In the proceedings published in 1993 with a foreword by Sali Berisha, the historian Kristaq Prifti wrote :

"The efforts of the Patriarchate to place at the head of the Albanian Orthodox Church a Greek Exarch are illegal, in contradiction with Article 16 of the Statute of the AAOC of 1929 and contrary to the decree of the very Greek Patriarchate signed on April 12, 1937. The activity of the envoy of the Patriarchate, A. Janullatos, weigh heavily upon the autocephaly of the Albanian Orthodox population and constitute an interference in the internal affairs of the Albanian State. His activities are combined with the anti-Albanian propaganda campaign which is being revived lately in Greece, making territorial claims on the lands of Southern Albania, the so called Vorio-Epir, and led by Greeks bishops of the Sebastianos breed as spiritual leaders. The attempts to place the AAOC under the control of the Patriarchate constitute a political act, a threat to the territorial integrity of the Albanian State".<sup>93</sup>

This text clearly indicates the interference of the political authorities, through a scientific medium, in religious affairs. Kristaq Prifti further proposed to call for a General Pan-Orthodox Congress, "which would select a General Council of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church whose duty would include the formation of the synod, the revision of the Statute of 1929, and the preparation of church personnel from the priests to the bishops. During the transition period, the Council might decide to appoint as a temporary head of the Albanian Church an Albanian cleric independently of his ecclesiastical rank"<sup>94</sup>.

In fact, no such Congress was convened and the relations between the Albanian authorities and the Orthodox Church became even more strained. In 1993, the Archmandrit Chrysostomos, accused of preaching Enosis (Union) with Greece, was expelled from the country<sup>95</sup>. In reaction, the Greek government, which also mixed politics and religion, expelled from Greece several thousands of Albanian workers. Besides the non restitution of some monasteries and the

---

<sup>92</sup> See Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, *The Albanian Aromanians' Awakening: Identity Politics and Conflicts in Post-Communist Albania* (=European Centre for Minority Issues Working Paper # 3, March 1999) 9 ; and Thede Kahl, *Ethnizität und räumlich Verteilung der Aromunen in Südosteuropa* (=Münsterische Geographische Arbeiten, Heft 43, 1999) 73-77.

<sup>93</sup> Kristaq Prifti, "The Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Brief History (1922-1992)", 70 vjet të kishës ortodokse autoqefale Shqiptare (= Akademia e Shkencave – Instituti i Historisë, Tirana, 1993) 93-103 (see 102).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>95</sup> The following year, after the attack of a police station near Gjirokastër by the Greek group MAVI, members of the Organization "Omonia" of the Greek minority were also accused of anti-Albanian propaganda.

“harassing” action of the “Committee for the Autocephaly”, the tensions grew again in 1994 because of the Constitution project proposed to the Albanians through a referendum. Indeed, the Orthodox authorities rose up against the paragraph 4 of the article 7, which stated: “The heads of the principal religious communities have to be Albanian citizen, born in Albania and living permanently in the country the twenty last years”. They considered this as being contrary to the secularism of the State, criticizing the double standard vis-à-vis the main religious communities and the others, and finally claiming that the clause was overtly turned to the Orthodox Church<sup>96</sup>. The disapproval of the Orthodox Authorities, if not the only factor, was certainly one of the reasons of the rejection of the Constitution project. After this failure of Sali Berisha, the wrestling match between the Democratic government and the Orthodox Church continued, when, in summer 1996, the Albanian authorities refused entry to three Greek bishops appointed by the Patriarchate.

With the Socialists’ return to power, of course the things changed, although the religious authorities are complaining about the “atheist indifference” of the political circles. The Church succeeded in completing its organization, with the creation of a Holy Synod in July 1998. In November 1999, the Patriarch Bartolomeo came to visit Albania. However, the Democrats or other right-wing sympathizers also went on criticizing the Orthodox authorities, and dissents continued to exist within the Community. In Elbasan, the priest Nikolla Marku is still in conflict with the Hierarchy. He was first trained in Kastoria in the first years of the 1990s and later in the theological Academy of Durrës, from where he was expelled. Then, he was invested priest in the Republic of Macedonia. Since November 1995, with the support of right-wing forces and of some Albanian-American circles, he is leading a community in Elbasan against the will of the highest hierarchy of the Orthodox Church which instituted a law suit.

When the Socialists launched in 1998 a campaign against the “Islamic fundamentalism”, the Democratic Party retorted in denouncing the “Orthodox fundamentalism”. For example, publications came out, like those of Sherif Delvina – “Pa pavarësi fetare nuk ka pavarësi kombëtare” (Without any religious independence there is no national independence) and “E vërteta mbi Epirin” (The Truth on Epirus)<sup>97</sup> – or the book of Kasem Biçoku “Falangat që rrezikojnë

---

<sup>96</sup> See Promemorie, Ngjallja 10(25) (October 1994) 1-2. The application of this article would have forced Anastas Janullatos to leave his post.

<sup>97</sup> These books are collections of articles published in right-wing newspapers, such as Rilindja demokratike, Kombi, Balli i kombit, Patrioti, Liria, Atdheu, Rilindja, Republika, Albania, Rimëkëmbja.

kombin shqiptare” (The Phalanxes which endanger the Albanian nation). These extreme stances are closely akin to the more moderate intellectual trend which tends to reject Orthodoxy as “oriental”, as we shall see below. However, in large areas in Southern Albania, Orthodoxy is considered as the “true Christianity”, as the Muslim’s original religion and as the form of Christianity practised in Greece, in the new environment of the emigrants. Thus, the attraction of Orthodoxy is non negligible, but the question remains its complex association or not with Greekness (this means with its ideological, but also with its concrete material aspects, it implies to work and to live in better conditions). There is also the question of its association or not with the idea of “minority” and “minority rights”. For example, Thede Kahl writes that the Aromanians he met were considering that “minority” meant belonging to the Orthodox population, but that being Orthodox was not in contradiction with being Albanian<sup>98</sup>. As well, there is the problem of its association or not with a political force. In certain cases (mostly for the pro-Romanian trend), as we have observed, the association can be with the Democratic Party, but generally it is with the Socialist Party or with the “Union for the Human Right” Party of the Greek minority, which tries to attract other (Orthodox) minorities and even the Albanians working in Greece<sup>99</sup>.

*The Catholic and Protestant Churches : the “call of the West”*

In the eyes of the Albanians who are coming out of a long period of isolation, more than the Orthodox Church, the other Christian Churches – Catholic or Protestant – embody the West (that is to say Western Europe or America). Consequently, these churches are undergoing a certain development as a result of the religious and cultural attraction they exert through their doctrine, their practices and through the contact with Western men and women, on people who want to adhere to a more “occidental” form of belief. However, as one of the “traditional” religions of the country, the status of the Catholic Church is totally different from that of the various Protestant groups. Being associated to different

---

<sup>98</sup> Thede Kahl, *Ethnizität* 73.

<sup>99</sup> One can find in the newspaper of the Party some articles which defend Anastas Janullatos, the Orthodox Church or the Orthodox in general. In the issue of the 17th of October 1999 (*Democratia*, VI/41 5), an article explained that the Orthodox Church helps materially and spiritually (religiously) people in jail in Tirana, as well as their families. In the issue of the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1999 (*Democratia*, VI/21 10), a letter sent by the “Group of the Orthodox volunteer women” from Tirana, who were standing up for Anastas Janullatos, was published. On the same page, the newspaper was denouncing “The islamist” (*islamiku*) of the F.S. Noli University in Korçë, who had dismissed professors and workers among whom more than 90% were Orthodox. And the words were illustrated with a photography of Oussama ben Laden !

models (European or American, Latin or Anglo-Saxons, etc.), Catholicism and Protestantism also embody the West in different ways.

The position of the Catholic community in Albania is somewhat particular. It is the smallest community (10% in 1942, probably more today) and it is concentrated in the north-western part of the country, especially in the city of Shkodër, in the capital, and in high mountains where the social structure is tribal. Like Sunni Muslims groups of the same areas, and even more than them, the Albanians Catholics were generally not well integrated into the communist State. Several factors contributed to their difficult insertion : their collaboration with the Italian fascist authorities between 1939 and 1943, their strong anti-Communism, Enver Hoxha's obsessional hostility to their links with the Vatican and, in the mountainous regions, their resistance to the collectivization which was achieved only at the beginning of the 1970s. So the Catholic clergymen, many of whom were foreigners, were persecuted, the customary law (*kanun*) in use in the mountainous regions was fought against and greatly depreciated, and the Catholic community was politically under-represented.

With the advent of pluralism, the Catholic community naturally sided rather with the new political forces, and the Democratic Party of Sali Berisha used its anti-communism. Some Catholics of Shkodër founded a small party, the Christian Democratic Party (*Partia Demokristiane*), which was officially sanctioned although the political parties with religious or ethnic basis are normally banned. This formation is far from obtaining the votes of the Catholic Community, since, for example, it secured only about 1% of the national votes in the first round of the elections in 1997<sup>100</sup>. In order to counterbalance its weakness, the party often entered into electoral alliances with the Democratic party. In his strategy of opening towards Europe, Sali Berisha certainly instrumentalized Catholicism. He went on with the policy of reconciliation with the Vatican which had been already resumed in 1991 upon the re-establishment of diplomatic relations. Sali Berisha was received by the Pope, on the 9th of April 1992, only some days after his electoral victory. One year later, on the 25th of April 1993, the Pope came to Albania, accompanied by Mother Theresa.

Fortified by this dynamic and by the help from Italy and the Catholic émigrés' milieus of America, the Catholic Church quickly re-structured itself around Rrok Mirdita, the former pastor of an Albanian Catholic Church in New

---

<sup>100</sup> Shinasi A. Rama, Failed Transition, Elite Fragmentation and the Parliamentary Elections of June 29, 1997. In: The International Journal of Albanian Studies, I/1 (fall 1997) 82-125 (see 111).

York, who was appointed Archbishop of Tirana and Durrës<sup>101</sup>. The fact that the majority of clergymen are not Albanians does not seem to be a problem, in contrast to the situation of the Orthodox Church headed by a Greek citizen. It is true that some of Italian clerics are Italo-Albanians (*arbëresh*), but, as I could observe myself in Tirana, the Italian language is currently used and roughly translated in Catechism and other sessions. With the economical power represented by the humanitarian and educational actions conducted by Caritas and other Catholic groups, the Catholic Church entered a phase of proselytism in the 1990s. Even, missions were sent in the South of the country, and in Elbasan, Basilian monks (Catholics of Greek rite) have settled in order to guide a small community<sup>102</sup>.

All things considered, with the exception of the Christmas mass which attracts many Albanians – be they Catholics or not –, Catholicism has a rather limited importance in the religious and political life of Albania. However, there is an important gap between the real numerical and political importance of Catholicism in Albania and its image. Catholicism enjoys a great prestige in the sphere of culture and in the identity construction. For example, the Catholic community is often presented as the main force in the historical development of Albanian nationalism, and this even by non Catholics. This does not really fit with the reality<sup>103</sup>, but in this way the Albanian nation acquires a more European (and sometimes Christian) dimension. Christianity, understood as Catholicism, is promoted by an intellectual trend which rejects the Islam and presents Catholicism both as the original religion of the Albanians and as the only religion and culture which allow Albania's integration into Europe. Ismail Kadare, who belongs to this trend despite his Muslim origin, wrote at the beginning of the 1990's :

“I was convinced that Albania would lean towards the Christians' religion, because it was linked with the culture, with the memory and with the nostalgia of the period before the Turks. Year after year, the Islamic faith, more belated, imported among the luggage of the Ottomans would be weakened (first in Albania, then in Kosovo). Whereas the Christian faith, or more exactly the Christian culture, would hold one's own in the country. In that way, soon, from an evil (interdiction of religious practice in 1967) would rise a good. The

---

<sup>101</sup> The administration of the Catholic Church is divided in two dioceses - Shkodër, with four suffragan bishoprics, and Tirana-Durrës. There is also an “Apostolical Administration” for the South of the country (with six churches and twelve cures). See Peter Bartl, *Albanien*, 39.

<sup>102</sup> *Le ali della farfala*, 10. About the attempts to promote Uniatism in Albania during the Italian occupation, see Roberto Morrozo della Rocca, *Nazione*, 189-195.

<sup>103</sup> The works of Catholic writers from the North of the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries generally cited have nothing to do with the development of Albanian Nationalism, even if Albanian nationalists of the 19<sup>th</sup>-beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century considered them as proofs of an affirmation of the Albanian nation.



Albanian nation would proceed to this great historical rectification, what would hasten its union with the mother continent : Europe »<sup>104</sup>.

Aurel Plasari, another intellectual, considers that the two mentalities – the Western and the Eastern mentalities – which, according to him, coexist in Albania since the scission of the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire, have reappeared in the country with the fall of Communism. In his book where he interprets the Albanian history according to this principle, he constantly associates Catholicism with the Western mentality, as well as with culture, nationalism, national unity, etc., and Islam and Orthodoxy with the Eastern mentality<sup>105</sup>.

In a way, one of the facets of Berisha's (foreign) policy was closely akin to this trend. He allowed the construction of a Catholic Cathedral in the very centre of Tirana, whereas no authorization was given for the construction of an Orthodox Cathedral, nor for a mosque<sup>106</sup>. His speech, pronounced at the occasion of the Pope's visit to Albania, was very explicit : "Your visit, holy father, represents great moral and political support for Albania in its efforts to be integrated into Europe and to endure the sacrifices necessary for the building of a different future"<sup>107</sup>.

The case of the Protestant and other proselyte groups coming from the West is different. They are not considered as professing "traditional religions" and their influence does not interfere with the internal political national game. The presence of Protestant missionaries and believers in Albania is not new. The Protestant community had a few hundreds of people at the beginning of the 1940s. It means that the ambition of the Protestant missionaries to convert all the Albanian population, as expressed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was far from being achieved. After the collapse of the Communist regime, missionaries came back, exercising this time a real attraction and proselytizing on a large scale with, it seems, a greater success than before the Second World War.

---

<sup>104</sup> I. Kadare, *Printemps albanais. Chronique, lettres, réflexions*, Paris, Fayard, 1991, p. 50-51. These are the words that Ismail Kadare would have told to Ramiz Alia, President of the Republic of Albania, in the autumn of 1990, before leaving the country. About the polemic triggered off by these words, see Nathalie Clayer, "The issue of the conversion to Islam in the restructuring of Albanian politics and identities" (to be published in the proceedings of the symposium "The Ottoman legacy in the reshaping of politics and identities in the Balkan societies" (Istanbul, 16-17 June 2000)).

<sup>105</sup> Aurel Plasari, *Vija e Theodosit [The line of Theodosius]* (Tiranë 1992).

<sup>106</sup> The authorizations were given to the Orthodox Community and to the Islamic Community at the beginning of 2001, by the Socialist Prime Minister Ilir Meta.

<sup>107</sup> Cited by Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, *From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity. Albania* (London 1997) 110.

When the first Western missionaries arrived in Albania at the beginning of the 1990s they were welcomed as missionaries, but above all as Westerners, as “emissaries” of the free Western world. They embodied the American or the European model, even if the missionaries themselves did not completely adhere to these models<sup>108</sup>. With them, it was possible to practice English, to hear songs and music, and eventually to get jobs. With time, Protestant churches came to be places of choice, for example, for marriages. This fashion is generally a way to express both an economic success and an integration into the Western culture as it is assimilated from the American television series<sup>109</sup>. However, beyond the cultural attraction and the fashions, the Protestants knew how to present their dogmas and practices in a favourable light against traditional forms of Christianity in Albania. All the converts will repeat for example that Catholicism and Orthodoxy contain too many dogmas and idolatry, that it is stupid to kiss the icons and the hand of the priests, thereby showing that they made a well thought-out choice, for a religion in phase with the present and the future.

The success of the Protestant groups is also due to their important presence, to their organization and to their intense activity. According to Linford Stutzman, in 1994, there were about sixty-five groups, with more than 300 long-term missionaries, and approximately a hundred other evangelical missionaries. The different groups created an umbrella organization under the name "Albanian Encouragement Project" (AEP). In order to gain a foothold and a legitimacy in the country, they published a book on Gjerasim Qiriazhi, one of the first Albanian Protestant missionaries of the end of the nineteenth century, and they formed in 1992 the “Albanian Evangelical Alliance” (*Vëllazëria Ungjillore e Shqipërisë*, VUSh). One of the main tools they use is the “Jesus Film”, shown in every towns and villages, and at the television. As other religious groups, Evangelicals are involved in numerous educational projects. Mormons are also involved in economical projects. As for the Jehova’s Witnesses, they seem to be more aggressive in their from door to door propaganda.

Generally, the main target of Protestant proselytism are the young people. Shortly after the beginning of the political changes, for example, the international organization Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC) sent a team to the University of Tirana, where it founded the “*Instituti Jeta e Re*” (Institute The New Life) and

---

<sup>108</sup> See Linford Stutzman, To win the hearts and minds : evangelical mission activity in Albania as a global culture war. In: Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 33/1 (Winter 1996) 44-58.

<sup>109</sup> Shekulli, 14/9/2001. In fact, it is also fashionable to marry in other churches, but it is less expensive in the Protestant Church.

organized Bible hours in the dormitories. In a second step, the target was the rural population. In 1994, a common project named “Albania Evangelical Rural Outreach” (AERO) with the aim to show in summer the “Jesus film” in all possible villages and to create there Bible-circles.

Among the population, the Muslims arouse a particular interest, because they form a majority, but also because they are not considered as “strong Muslims”. The Jehova’s Witnesses distribute booklets with quotations from the Koran. Evangelists seem to have made of the Bektashis a special target, as “Muslims who are not entirely Muslims”. In a booklet entitled “The Bektashis and the Christ”, it is written :

“We wrote above that Albanians who were true believers in God and who searched for a spiritual experience of him, often were members of the Bektashis. You, reader, if you are searching for God with sincerity, don’t look for him where he is not to be found, but search for him in his Son, Lord Jesus Christ ; and God promised that you will find the eternal life.”<sup>110</sup>

In the same spirit as the idea expressed a century ago by the reverend Telford Erikson that Albania can be “the key to the Muslim world”, one of the obvious objectives of the Protestants was to form Albanian missionaries of Muslim origin in order to use them later not only to evangelize the rest of Albania, but also other Muslim countries. Several dozens of such Albanian missionaries were trained, and since 1996, some of them are said to be active in Turkey, Lebanon and since 1999 in Kosovo (in particular at the Prishtina University).

However, the competition with other Christian Churches is also taken into consideration, as the arguments put forward by the new converts show. This is also particularly true when the proselytism appeared among the Albanian emigrants. For example, in an issue of its newspaper edited in Albanian, the Free Church of the Pentecostal Apostles of Greece emphasizes the true Christianity it represents itself, the compatibility of Christianity with science and the life of people who became disciples<sup>111</sup>.

*Eleonora’s Holy Mission : an “Albanian elaboration” influenced by the West*

The Western influence in the religious field is not to be observed only in the settlement of Protestant organizations. For example, among the new religious groups which emerged during the 1990’s on the Albanian soil, one is particularly interesting because it is, in a way, a “local product” with Albanian roots, but

---

<sup>110</sup> Bektashinjtë edhe Krishti [The Bektashis and the Christ] (= Albanian Evangelical Mission, Penybryn) 6.

<sup>111</sup> Krishtërizmi [Christianism] 191, 4.

certainly is also influenced by Western trends. It was founded by a woman named Eleonora Bregu who began to be famous already at the end of the 1980's for her thaumaturgical powers<sup>112</sup>. She claims to be since 1987 regularly in spiritual contact with the soul of a Bektashi saint, Abdyl Baba Qesaraka who lived around 1800, and to be the transmission channel for his messages and powers. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, she was acting as a kind of Bektashi mediator<sup>113</sup>, healing a lot of people coming to her. However, since she could not (and maybe also because she did not want to) integrate into the Bektashi network, she has progressively formed a particular group with a special doctrine and a special ritual, inspired by energy, meditation and cosmos theories, which resembles more a Western sect, more than a Muslim mystical brotherhood,<sup>114</sup>. Despite some references to Hadji Bektash Veli, the “founder” of the Bektashi order of dervishes<sup>115</sup>, and some elements of ritual practices inspired by Bektashism, Eleonora's elaboration now is far from Bektashism. She claims to offer an “integral culture, synthesizing science, spirituality, philosophy and art”<sup>116</sup>, giving to her mission, at the same time, a popular and an elitist character.

Her success seems to be non negligible. She built one centre in the outskirts of the capital and two filial centres in Southeast Albania, in her native region Kolonjë and in Devoll. As all the religious leaders, she largely exaggerates the weight of her influence. She claims to have more than one million followers in Albania and abroad (in Greece, Italy and in the U.S.A., so probably among the Albanians émigrés). What is certain is that, among her disciples or sympathizers, there are intellectuals and personalities, like the professor Kudret Çela, former Minister of Justice. That gave her, for example, the possibility to escape the consequence of a law suit for usurpation of lands. Besides, she pretends to play a role on the Albanian political and social scene. She would have minimized the

---

<sup>112</sup> Born in 1953 in the region of Kolonjë (South of Korçë), she was a worker in Tirana's textile Kombinat.

<sup>113</sup> She was dressed with a special costume, being reminiscent of that of Bektashi babas, with a kind of *tadj* (specific head-dress), a *teslim tash* (twelve corner stone, symbolizing the twelve imams), the green and white colours, etc. See Misioni Shenjtëror Eleonorë. Zonja e shpirtit në veprimtarinë Misionare [The Holy Mission Eleonora. The Lady of Soul in her missionary activity] (Tiranë, without date) 28-29.

<sup>114</sup> Her Mission was registered as a religious-charity association in 1994, under the name « Vakëfi i Shenjtë i Lidhjes Hyjnore » (Holy Fondation of the divine link), but was renamed “Misioni Shenjtëror Eleonorë” (Holy Mission Eleonora). In 1997, Eleonora Bregu published a first book entitled “Njeriu përballë Qenies” (The human being facing the existence). In 2000, the Mission edited some issues of a newspaper called *Zëri i Kosmosit* (The Voice of the Cosmos) and a second book of Eleonora came out under the title “Kosmosi dhe ne” (The Cosmos and us).

<sup>115</sup> *Zëri i Kosmosit* 2, 7

<sup>116</sup> Misioni Shenjtëror , 14.

number of killings during the troubles which broke out in Albania in 1990, 1997 and 1998, and she claims that, with her Mission, the country will be integrated into Europe in 13 years and 6 months, whereas without it, it would have taken 78 years and 2 months<sup>117</sup> !

### **Conclusion**

Between 1942 (date of the last census taking into account the denominational belonging) or 1967 (date of religion's banning) and 2001, the geographical distribution of the religious communities in Albania has strongly changed. The reasons are first demographic : groups of population, mainly from Southern Albania, came to urban settlements of central Albania in favour of the institution of the Communist regime ; during the 1970s and 1980s, Northern Catholic and Sunni Muslim areas have certainly experienced a higher growth rate than Southern Orthodox areas. Since 1990, there were very important population movements, from rural and mountain areas towards the cities (especially in central Albania, i.e. Tirana and Durrës), and from Albania towards Greece, Italy and many other countries. Secondly, also since this date, as we have seen, new religious trends developed and changed the Albanian religious scene. Different types of actors – local, national and international – are participating in the building of the religious life. And the new religious dynamics result from practice of collaboration, exploitation and competition by all of them. The influence of external actors is certainly important. Nevertheless, the new scene is rather the product of what the local and national entrepreneurs are making of the external offer.

The place of religion in the society has also strongly evolved, first with the secularization, the promotion of atheism, and the individualization of the belief, consequences of the Communist policy, and then with the upheavals of the 1990s. Today in Albania, the religion is both marginal and central, and different ways of living religion are now closely coexisting, as the case of the young woman, secretary of a Protestant Church, I met in Tirana in June 2001, shows. According to her own explanations, she is of Muslim origin, half from Tirana, half from Shkodër . Her conversion (which she probably does not feel as a “conversion”) was, as she asserts, a deliberate choice after due reflexion. When I asked her how her adherence to Protestantism was considered in her family, she answered that her parents, who are not fervent worshippers at all, say that “it is all the same thing” : “there is only one God”. On the contrary, she believes that religions show

---

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

their differences through their doctrines. One of her uncles, who was a student in Italy when he joined the Partisans during WWII tries to explain to her that to believe in God is stupid, while other relatives in Shkodër think that she “betrayed” by leaving the “Muslim community”.

The religious “competition” which involve the individuals and the society is closely linked with political and social changes in the country and abroad where the Albanians form now important colonies of emigrants. This is another reason why it is extremely difficult to draw exactly the present religious map of the country. As I have shown, Islam – especially Sunni Islam – seems to be on the defensive, while Christianity in its various forms – Catholicism, Protestantism and even Orthodoxy – gained a superior social status and now appears to appeal to some Albanians in their quest for “Western values” (or for work). However, it is difficult to say if the equilibrium between Islam and Christianity will drastically change, and to what extent the disinterest for religion will persist for a fringe of the population. Already after ten years of activity, the rush of the Evangelicals or of the Bahais seems to have slow down. The Catholic Church does not register so many baptisms. On the other hand, Islam can be a marker of alterity of different segments of population vis-à-vis the countries of émigration or vis-à-vis other segments of population in Albania itself. The weight of Islam also grew in importance with the opening the country towards the neighbouring regions where Albanians, mostly Muslims, are living (Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro),.

As a collective belonging, religion is often used in the political field, through relationships or discourses, as it has been brought to the fore in the previous pages. The political changes have shown that the “right-wing” circles more than the other generally instrumentalize Islam and do not want to consider Bektashism as a separate entity, while the “left-wing” circles use Orthodoxy to a greater extent and are in favour of the promotion of Bektashism as the basis of a separate community, as well as a form of nationalism. Catholic circles are closer to “right-wing” milieus, but they can be instrumentalized by more important groups in their relationship with the West. This does not mean, of course, that religious communities are politically homogeneous, and often these instrumentalizations are parallel to uses of regional belonging (small regions against small regions, or North against South).

It is in this context that the denouncement of fundamentalism (“Islamic” and “Orthodox”) appeared in the internal political fight. However, vis-à-vis the outside world, “fundamentalism” is said to have nothing to do with the Albanians for whom this phenomenon, if it really exists, was imported by foreigners, since

the Albanians are by tradition exceptionally tolerant people. In fact, the discourse about “the tradition of religious tolerance” is linked to the multiconfessionality of the Albanian nation. Multiconfessionality is considered as a proof of the exceptional tolerance of the Albanians. It is a common discursive element directed towards foreigners, and it is generally associated with the slogan “the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism”. The image of the Albanian nation is that of a “tri-denominational nation”. The question of the compatibility of the Muslim identity with a European identity is also related to this concept, because this type of discourse seems to be in use more among Muslim entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs of Muslim origin, who want to give of Albania another image than that of a “Muslim country”.

However, despite the common discourse about the tradition of religious tolerance – set as a marker of the Albanian identity –, in the internal debates in the “Land of the Mercedes” (as in Kosovo and Macedonia), there is now a multiplicity of discourses about the religious component of the national identity which is not so often “areligious”, as it was in the past. It is interesting to observe that, in this respect, there is a kind of continuity with the intellectual trends of the 1930s. “Occidentalists” (who reject Islam), “multiconfessionalists” and “Albano-Islamists” are competing, just as the “Young”, the “Neo-Albanians” and the “Elders” of the époque of Zog<sup>118</sup>. In reality, the spectrum is more complex and many combinations are possible, between these main trends. Furthermore, there are differences between the present situation and that of the inter-war period. Social and political statuses of Islam and Christianity have been practically inverted making of the Muslim community a majority in the situation of a “minority”. However, there is no an opposite dynamic, that of the Albanian national building process, which is now observable in the whole “Albanian space” and where Ghegs – Albanians from Northern Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia – and Islam are taking a greater part than that enjoyed a hundred years ago<sup>119</sup>.

N.C.

---

<sup>118</sup> About this topic, see Nathalie Clayer, *L’islam, facteur des recompositions internes en Macédoine et au Kosovo*. In : *Le nouvel islam balkanique*, 177-240 (228-232).

<sup>119</sup> On this move of the centre of gravity of the nation building process (from the South to the North), see Nathalie Clayer, *Islam et identité*, 178-180.