

Religious tolerance in the eye of foreign travelers

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Abstract:

For religious diversity and religious tolerance as unique phenomenon, fellow inherent in the history of the Albanian people have written not only travelers, politicians, Albanologists, but also representatives of different religions.

Details of his toric documents constitute proof of the existences after tolerance and coexistence of Albanians smoothly different faiths. This is clearly evidenced in many writings and historical documents, but in accordance with the contents of the topic will focus on foreign travelers and their opinions about this phenomenon. It is clear from Mazreku Petër Catholic missionaries in a report of its own sent the Holy See of Rome in 1633, in which clearly expresses this phenomenon.

Byron stayed in the court of Ali Pasha in Ioannina, found that not all Albanians were Muslims, some tribes were Christian, but religion did not change their behavior and habits. Said the same thing 30 years Grisebach in the nineteenth century: "The Albanians are a population that cannot stand the appearance than many Muslims and Christian are". Not that Albanians did not know or did not practice religion, but they had proper respect for each other on issues of common religious life. With the spread of Islam in Albanian areas, deepened religious diversity. Like Christianity and Islam among Albanians generally remained a popular religion away doctrinal into tolerance and bigotry.

Key Words:

religious tolerance; religious Diversity; Christianity ; Islam; historical documentation

“As they continuously stand together, many Christians learn a lot of stuff from the infidels (Muslims-author) example how to celebrate on Friday, which is the main feast of the Turks (Muslims) and other infinite superstitions. Turks (Muslims-author), as descendents of Christians, preserve many of the Christian’s customs; regarding to feasts, they invite each others in death ceremonies, among celebrations and weddings. Many of these Christians by giving and taking, believe that they are redeemed (getting healthy), if they perform some bad ...”

(So writes Peter Mazreku a Catholic missionary in a report of his own sent the Holy See of Rome in 1633)

Many personalities at any times and from different countries have talked about religious tolerance unique phenomenon of the Albanian people. A lot of scriptures have been published not from foreign travelers curious about this unknown or little known country, either by the Western and Eastern civilization or Balkan politicians, Albanologists, ambassadors of foreign countries, representatives of religious beliefs. The curiosity of these personalities stood not only in the recognition of nature, traditions, social customs, Albanian outer features but also in the existence of these people who had resisted time by surviving. This survival was achieved thanks to their centurial efforts by putting national interests above everything. The existence of those

four religious beliefs became an obstacle in achieving the ultimate goal in the creation of the Albanian state in 1912.

The historical documentation summarized in the monograph or interesting data summarized in personal diaries of foreign travelers constitute the clearest evidence for the existence of tolerance and of a smooth coexistence between Albanians of different religions. In accordance to the scope of the topic which we have chosen to present today in this scientific conference we will try to present evidence of some foreign travelers who have set foot on the Albanian land.

The existence of religious beliefs in Albania and the religious affiliation of the Albanians regardless of their choice, didn't become an obstacle when the country and nation were at risk, and we can say strongly confirm that they all came together in solving the duties and taking decisions when it was the right moment under the motto that They were all Albanians. Regarding this feature of the Albanians Gabriel Louis-Yaray mentions that "The religious issue bothers the upper layers (Beylers) less than the political difficulties. I think that I am presenting the situation in Albania truthfully and faithfully, when I say that Albanian Beylers try to coordinate their adjuration for the Muslim religion with a sincere tolerance towards the Catholic and the Orthodox faith.... I saw the Imams surrounded by a special respect. I felt all the respect that the Beylers had for Albanian Muslim order of Bektashi sects. I also noticed that those Beylers really intend to make the Muslim religion a kind of state religion, but they frankly want, apparently, to provide a complete and true freedom to Orthodox and Catholic Albanians, for the clergy and their religious institutions. I heard them showing remorse for religious divisions, condemning all of them who promoted these, welcoming with an open heart and with respect all the

present Orthodox and Catholic delegates (referring to the delegates of the First Congress of Elbasan). One of these Beylers told me in a jargon half French, half Turkish: "He is Catholic, he is Orthodox, and I am Muslims, but we are all Albanians". (Gabriel Louis-Yaray, *Unknown Albania*, 2006:148-149)

Gabrie Luis Yarai during his memoirs mentioned also the fact that the Albanians regardless of what faith they belonged to, when it came to the state national symbols they were responsive and unique in their opinions, because for them this was the most important and primary thing for their own existence as a nation. "What has survived in the spirit of people from all over the ancient past of this old breed, it is Epic of Skanderbeg. The Independent Albania has found precisely his flag, which was once waving in his the capital Kruje, a red flag with a black double-headed eagle. Ismail Qemali didn't leave a cross on the flag, while Esat Pashe Toptani put the half-moon above the Eagle, but each one of them called this flag a living symbol of the reborn nation." (Ibid:148-149)

Nationalism was primary for the Albanians and according to the author all the others were inconsiderable. He mentions that: "... of all the "nationalism" that have survived during the Turkish invasion which were re-inspired in 19th century by the immeasurable strength of ideas, the Albanian nationalism was the most prominent one. All of them can be known by a single feature, that is neither the language nor tradition, history, religion, but the national consciousness".(Ibid:203) – The author further states that: "... the only nation in Europe and Turkey, which withstood and didn't dissolve, was the Albanian nation. Some of the Albanians were Christian, while most of them converted to Islam. But unlike the others the Albanian Muslims always

remained an Albanian..... an excellent example of the depth and strength of the Albanian national feeling".(Ibid:204)

According to Hugo Adolf Bernatzik in his book "Albania the country of Albanians", another foreign traveler, who had traveled in our country like many others, hadn't missed noticing the phenomenon of tolerance among Albanians. He says: "Patience of Albanian, apart from a matter of money or marriage, is attributed also to religious matters. Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Muslims live in peace in this small country, and often live together even villages. Religious wars are unknown and inconceivable for the Albanian. In Saint-Anne, a small mountain village with a chapel, which is built on the ashes of St. Anthony, I saw a church celebration in which hundreds of people attended but more than half of these were Muslims. However, they were treated with a special affection. Gifts, small memories, biblical quotes, etc., were originally given to them..."(Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, Albania, Albanian's country, 2003:154, 163)

The perception of the French politician Justin Godart regarding the unique phenomenon observed in Albania, the religious tolerance, expressed in his latest book "Albanian Savants March 1921-December 1951", is similar to the idea of Father Gjergj Fishta that between Christians and Muslims in Albania there is peace and harmony. Quoting the words of Fishta, Godarti in his book mentions that: "When we were discussing about religious tolerance, Fishta told me that in some villages in Eastern, Muslims go in front of the Church and await for the Catholics to go out of the church and then they celebrate together. This graceful behavior was returned to them by the Catholics, even with the rifle shootings in the air, when Muslims were leaving the mosque for Fiter

(Bayram)."(Justin Godart, Albanians diary, 1921-1951, 2008:36-37)

regarding the the faith had to national unity, what Godarti had observed was that in Albania: "Nothing can stop or hinder this union and especially religious issues. All people are concerned about this unity and they claim that this unity stands above all religious beliefs, which have no fanatical followers (Ibid:47) ...national unity is not afraid of the impact of the religions..."(Ibid:49)

During his visit in the city of Korca, Godarti was assured by the local authorities that: "...in Albania now you couldn't notice at all any religious issue. Albania is a country of free thought, where everyone worships and loves his neighbor, no matter of what religion he is. Even here Christians and Muslims make mutual visits for Easter and Fitr (Bayram)"(Ibid:75). "Whenever you are called by their Motherland, the Albanians of all religions have unanimously come together and fought side by side" - had noticed the prominent French scholar Justin Godard.

"In different testimonies of these centuries (XVI-XVIII) it is indicated that they are very shallow in their Christian cult, they were said to have Christian name, but no faith. (Cherub)". (Mark Tirta. Mthology among Albanians, 2004:39) The most serious scholars who knew those people well, the oldest in the Balkans, who had eaten with them in their dining tables and enjoyed the sweetest Albanian language, tales and epic verses, explained this phenomenon, not due to the lack of religion, but due to the primary commitment towards the nation and their clan, and then to spiritual faith.

Edith Durham in her book "Balkan sorrow" expressed that the Albanian had embraced religion or different religions in order to reach their final goal, the struggle for survival and not falling under the rule of

foreigners. According to this, Durham quotes this information collected by Albanians put at the service of the Ottoman Empire. According to their testimony: "...We Albanians, have some special ideas. We must have freedom; we are ready to take up whatever religion that can be served us provided that it allows us to keep a rifle. Just for this we are today a population of Muslim majority. The goal of each chairman was to keep his position and expand his lands. Few people in the older provinces remain Christians, most of them embraced Islamism and after a few time of this Turkish "invasion" the Albanian power spread".(Edith Durham, *Balkan's sorrow*, , Tiranë 2009:50:51)

Durham in her writings mentioned also another characteristic of the Albanians, that of being primarily an Albanian regardless of religion, while the wars that he has fought were mainly among the Beys opponents. There was no war between Christians and Muslims in Albania but: "... an Albanian Christian pursues a Slavic Christian Slavic and this due to centuries of racial hatred ... Albanian Muslims and Christians, join forces in front of a common enemy. Some nations are shaped differently due to religion. Albanians as a race don't want to know about them. Mohammedanism and Christianity are not so important to them, and indeed in his heart the fierce Albanian highlander was guided more by unwritten beliefs that have derived from the beginning of the world"(Ibid:219:220)

According to Durham, despite their regions and religions Albanians remained unique in the ideas and purposes. "In the north matters were different; the northern tribes that didn't convert to Islam have always been loyal to Rome. Therefore they had the possibility to be more independent. But neither in north nor in the south did the religion affect the Albanians..."(Ibid:221)

"Albanian people are above all Albanians"- said Edith Durham (Ibid:221). She relied to the testimonies of the locals in order to reach this conclusion and she noticed: "Kajmekani, a young Albanian that spoke good French, came twice to meet me and expressed some liberal views. All religions for him, led on the same path; in order to go to a place we must follow a path; go through the path of the church or the mosque this makes no difference. God is always the same. When I have to go somewhere, I go to the mosque, but what we must remember is that we are all Albanians."(Ibid:234)

Later in her book Durham concludes: "... Albanian people don't seem to submit to the circumstances, they force the circumstances to submit to them more. They have embraced Christianity and Mohammedanism superficially, and apparently this made no effect ... I spent many days in a row, in the company of Muslim and Christian boys and I saw no sign that they pray ...Under the membrane of the Albanian Mohammedanism there is a thin layer of Christianity. In many Muslim villages there are still shared red Easter eggs and I have seen those making pilgrimages to Christian chapels. I have been told that some swear even today to the Virgin Mary.

Within a family there are often Christians and Muslims... In the foundation of all these lies a rigid prehistoric pagan bed, which is, perhaps more influential in their lives than all of these.... (Ibid:222) Albanians honor the religious objects of each other. In countries which are mainly populated by people you can encounters old crosses placed on the side of the road, with a cash box next to it." (Ibid:325)

According to Durham during her visit in the city of Elbasan, the most important thing she noticed was that "the nationalism in this country is fiery, more than the religious doctrines".(Ibid:299) The phenomenon of

differentiation or crypto Christianize or two beliefs was typical according to Durham in the mountainous areas of Albania. One of this phenomenon she notices in the Shpati region: "The Turks call me Suleiman, but I am baptized Constantine All had two names and used them when needed".(Ibid:310)

According to Lord Broughton in his book "Travels in Albania and in other provinces of Turkey", the author in the status of a foreign traveller who visited Albania noted that: "... as long as I can recall Albanians have never been noted as fanatics Mohammedan or have never been regarded as true Mohammedans". Furthermore, this traveler in his memoirs writes that: "Just like the Mohammedans even the Christians drank wine made out of grape and a kind of strong drink made by themselves which they called "raki" but not "whiskey"(Ibid:38). Still this author further cites Mrs. Montague (This thing was also noticed by a foreign observer in Istanbul, who in 1717 would write about Albanians), that talking about Albanians and their behavior says: "These people who live in between Islamism and Christianity, proclaim that they are completely unable to judge which religion is better, so they often choose to pursue both. They together go to the mosque on Fridays and to church on Sundays giving as reasons that on the judgment day they will have the protection of the true prophet; But they are not able to determine in this world who this true prophet is going to be."(Ibid:42) Through this the author shows the tolerant spirit of the Albanians, and appreciates such as thing, as a true value of these people. Albanian people according to the author: "... immensely love their place and when it comes to independence they minimize religious differences which is not the case in many countries which hold themselves as more civilized than the Albanians. When

they are asked about What they are, they respond that they are Albanians and non-Muslims or Christians. It is traditionally known, that religion has no deep roots among Albanians... Marriages between different religions have been and are normal even nowadays."(Ibid:42)

Lord Bayron that stayed in Ali Pasha's court in Ioannina, found out that not all Albanians were Muslims, some tribes were Christians, but religion did not change their behavior and habits. The same thing also was also mentioned by Grisebach in the years 30s of the nineteenth century: "Albanians aren't people who are clearly distinguished by their appearances if they are Muslims or Christians". Not that the Albanians did not know or did not practice religion, but they had proper respect for each other in matter of religion and those of ordinary life.

Margaret Haslluk another foreign scholar and traveler who had the opportunity to stay in Albania, has written a lot about the diversity and religious tolerance. These phenomena were subjected of treatment by many of her various writings and printed material, which later would be published. It was the "Brotherhood" that she found among these people, whether they were Christians or Muslims. Margaret concluded that: Albanians in general were known for their tolerance and religious harmony, which according to her was one of the main causes of the survival of these ancient and noble people, who had endured throughout their history, lots of extermination waves from various invaders. For this reason, this place often became object of recognition and attracted the attention of many researchers and foreign travelers.

In her research which were made in Elbasani region of Elbasan. Margaret clearly noted a specific phenomenon, which appeared in some parts of Albania,

especially in the area of Shpati in Elbasan. Precisely it is about the phenomenon of crypto Christianity or the phenomenon of the two beliefs. According to Ms. Haslluk in Albania each of the family members had its name defined mainly by the respective religion.

According to Haslluk: "Sometimes it happened that Catholics put Muslim first names to their children," (Margaret Hasluck, *Kanun* unwritten Albanian law, 2005:43) and this because of personal whims. This might have also happened because of friendships or sympathies that these people might have had for other people. This proves that the spirit or religious bigotry was not fundamental in the psychology and soul of the Albanians, but was dictated by the circumstances in which they were located.

The Phenomenon that sparked Haslluk's interest, as mentioned above, so crypto christianism, was noticed by her in forty-three Orthodox villages in Shpati near Elbasan, where elders had two names, one Muslim which they used in public and another Orthodox, which they used in the family environment.

According to Hasluck, which referred even to history, this phenomenon was observed several decades before Albania was liberated from the Ottoman rule. These villages under the pressure of the Elbasani's Muslims were forced to abandon their Christian faith in order to save their life and religion, converting to Islam and performing all the rituals of Islam. Here we can mention fasting for Ramadan, etc., But not performing the rite of circumcising.

According to Hasluck, this was only done on the surface, because in their family life, they practiced other religious rites. Hasluck

states that: "Time to time, they called an orthodox priest from Elbasan at night -- who came into a dark barn in order to put a wreath to young couples according to Christian Rite and baptized the newborns".(Ibid:43)

According to Hasluck the religious persecution ended when Albania gained independence.(Ibid:43)

From what we have introduced above, we can conclude that religious tolerance among Albanians as an evident phenomenon in centuries invariably continues even today. This phenomenon was evidenced during the visit of the Holy Father Pope Francis, in the capital of Albania, Tirana. Once he touched the Albanian soil, the Holy Father was greeted with the words of the Albanians inherited today from centuries: "Our house (Albania) is the place of God and friend" a very significant phrase very significant in a population where there are four religious beliefs.

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