

The Preservation of Religious Tolerance, a Key Element of our National Security

By Xhavit Shala

The Albanian model¹ of inter-religious harmony is one of the most valuable treasures of our culture and national heritage. It was created by our people through the passage of centuries and it was passed on from generation to generation as the model of religious tolerance that is worthy of an ancient and civilized European people.²

But the cultural treasures of a nation, if not looked after, can come under threat. To ensure their preservation, the institutions must identify and counter the effect of the factors that may harm them. The value of religious tolerance, as one of the treasures of our national heritage, even though created and resisted through centuries should be categorized as an endangered patrimony. The preservation and promotion of our religious tolerance would provide a positive investment for our national security. The value of religious tolerance should be preserved not only in Albania, the motherland, but in Kosova and the Albanian inhabited areas of Macedonia and Montenegro as well.

The Albanian people through their long and difficult history have experienced many hardships and adversities but they have never experienced internal religious conflicts. There are a number of reasons why the Albanian religious communities have preserved their tradition of tolerance and kept themselves free of fanaticism, extremism and religious fundamentalism. At the foundations of the identity of the Albanians stand their common language, culture and traditions and not their religious affiliation. The presence of a moderate version of Islam which is further moderated by the presence of the Bektashi faith, a tendency to reject any intolerant version of Islam such as Wahhabism, the forced estrangement from religion during communism, the success in preventing any economic and social conflict from becoming a religious one and the tradition of Albanian political forces that have historically never sought to establish an electoral appeal based on religious differences.

From the moment Albania became independent, the Albanian patriots paid serious attention to the issues mentioned above because they were fully aware of the impact it would have on the new country that they were trying to build. In 1923, Visarion

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² - Remarks delivered at the symposium "Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, a prerequisite for World Peace." Given the presence of religious leaders from across Albanian inhabited lands, I used the remarks to draw the attention of religious leaders to the dangers confronting religious tolerance. The material was published on the 34th issue of MAPO.
(<http://revistamapo.com/print.php?faqe=detail&kat=Kulture&id=521&PHPSESSID=d05d2a2578d0e56c9f75221fea978976&PHPSESSID=d05d2a2578d0e56c9f75221fea978976>)
(<http://www.acnss.com/html/studime/0809siguria.htm>)

Xhuvani, who was later to become the Archbishop of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, said that, "Religious issues [in Albania] have always been and will remain complicated. All of you know how much they cost the state. God forbid that these issues become tools [in the hands of others] in the future."³ Mehdi Frashëri, speaking about these issues, says, "It is for this reason that I say that the government should be little bit more inside religions."⁴

The establishment of such principles like the laicite of the state, the freedom of religion and the right to change it, the equal treatment of religious faiths, the detailed regulation of the manner of appointment of religious leaders and provision of funds have all helped strengthen the traditional religious tolerance of the Albanian people and the internal cohesion of the country. Since the beginning of the Albanian state, the Albanian leaders worked hard to establish the principle of equal treatment for all religious communities. This principle is the foundation stone of inter-religious dialogue and tolerance in our country.

It is because of the specific nature of religious communities in Albania that the one community's problem cannot be considered as pertaining to it alone. Issues of concern within the Albanian Muslim Community are of concern for all the people. And the same applies for any issue of concern within the Orthodox, Catholic and Bektashi communities. This is the foundation of religious tolerance in our country and problems facing one community concern the whole country.

But the religious harmony and tolerance has come under threat from phenomena that have been imported from abroad. "Traditionally tolerant in religious affairs, the society is nonetheless subject to a range of external influences...., as forms of Islam and Christianity, new to the country, seek to take root," the 2004 International Religious Freedom Report says⁵. This report is published annually by the government of the United States as part of its efforts to promote human rights around the world."

The uncontrolled penetration into the country of a number of religious groups that undermine the right of the Albanian to continue to practice their faiths in accordance with their country's traditions and who present a threat even for countries that are more developed and consolidated requires that greater attention needs to be paid to this issue. Our religious communities, civil society and law-enforcement structures in particular must follow these developments very carefully. It is their duty not only to ensure the respect for religious freedoms but also to make sure that our national security is not undermined in the process. All these actors must work together to neutralize the danger presented to our religious communities by this phenomena.

Unfortunately, the Albanian lawmakers, unlike the Albanian patriots of old, have so far failed to pass a law on religious communities that would provided the Albanian

³ AQSH, (Central State Archive) Index no. 246, D-68, Fl. 471, Year 1923.

⁴Ibid, pg. 637

⁵ "International Religious Freedom Report." - A publication of the U.S. State Department, November 2005. "Shekulli," November 09, 2005.

religious communities with the protection they need to face these threats. The Albanian state should move away from a position of passive neutrality⁶ (employed during the last 15 years) and assume a more active policy on the matter. Our edifice of religious harmony is as great as it is fragile. "It takes only one serious rift, it takes only the radicalization of only one of our religions, for the edifice to come down," our great writer, Ismail Kadare,⁷ has said

These dangerous religious sects made headways into the country under the cover of non-governmental bodies. The following are a number of the reasons that allowed various religious sects that were banned in their countries of origin to come and expand their influence in Albania:

-The crisis experienced by the country, the social, economic, and financial instability of the transition years (1991, 1992, January-March 1997, and September 1998); the absence of the rule of law and the serious breakdown in law and order; the lack of financial support from the state and the financial opportunities provided by foreign groups; the absence of a law on religious communities; the favorable geographical position of Albania, as a country with a Muslim majority situated on the crossroads between the East and the West; the absence of efficient state structures that would manage the relations and the reciprocal obligations between the state and the religious communities

Many of these NGOs took advantage of the legal vacuum and made targets of their work the children and teenagers of the country. The introduction of these groups of the population to twisted religious education, boosted by the provision of economic aid by suspicious organizations, opened children up to manipulation and made them tools for illegal intentions. Under the effect of these teachings, these young people may soon present a serious threat to the preservation of religious tolerance in our country.

Taking advantage of the opportunity provided by their education programs, these NGOs selected individuals whom they considered of potential for expanding their ranks through scholarships and visits to holy places⁸. These programs made it easier for them to recruit [members] and provide them even with military training. The criminal prosecution in Egypt of what became known as "the Arabs of Albania" demonstrated that these terrorist organizations had recruited Albanian students into their ranks.⁹ If we are to believe their own statements before the Egyptian authorities, these Albanian students are now "conserved" and can be put in action at any moment's notice. Members of these organizations have maintained their contacts with members of the

⁶ Xhavit Shala - "National Security and the Challenges of integration," page. 107. Tirana May 2003. A publication of the Albanian Center for National Security Studies.

⁷ Ismail Kadare – Remarks delivered at the International Conference "Religions and Civilizations in the new Millennium – The case of Albania," held in Tirana in November 14-15, 2003.

⁸ In 1999, Abdyl Myneim Hussein, of the WAMY association, carried out the selection of the selafi candidacies that were to go to hajj. He was later to be arrested and deported to Egypt as a member of an international terrorist network.

⁹ According to Ahmet Ibrahim Al Nagar: "There are young people recruited all across Albania. These young people were very passionate and revolutionary and even more active than the main exponents of jihad and were ready to fight at any moment ... These men are ready to overthrow the Albanian government"

Selafi group in Albania. And the fruits of their work were soon to surface. Now such former students have become the main agitators against the legitimate representatives of the Muslim community and inciters of the divisions there¹⁰.

The introduction of religious education into our public system of education, according to the framework provided by the country's principles of laicite and secular education would help strengthen religious tolerance in our country. The government should also make plans to open a faculty of theology that would provide training for Albanian clergy within the country. This faculty could also become a center for providing training for clergymen from other Albanian inhabited areas in Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro. Leaving religious education into the hands of foreign associations and foundations would be of negative consequences for the security of our country.

And no religious community can be considered immune.

Islam as the faith of the majority of the population in Albania has played a key role in the establishment of religious tolerance in our nation. Islam in Albania, while remaining a universal religion, has incorporated certain features from the history of the people where it has spread. Albania as a European nation imparted into Islam certain values that when compared today with Islam in Arab countries appear striking. This is not meant to say that Islam here has been nationalized. It only means that this faith has incorporated certain autochthonous values that are appropriate for a European culture.

The calls to preserve the autochthonous values of Islam in Albania have become more and more common. These calls reflect the concern that is spreading today in the Albanian press regarding the penetration of extremist wahaby groups into the Islamic communities in Albania and the region. Wahhabism, a fundamentalist religious current, has also been rejected by other Muslim populations in the region.

The call to preserve the identity of the Albanian Islam does not aim at making Albanians give up their faith. It only aims at preserving it from outside influences that go against its character. Preserving the autochthonous nature of Islam will also indirectly help preserve the image of Albania. We should be aware of the decades-long effort of our Orthodox neighbors who have tried to present Albanians as Muslims that do not belong in Europe and the region. This propaganda has become more intensive on the eve of the determination of the Kosova status.

Wahhabism should also be looked at from the perspective of the threat that it presents to our national security and our democracy. Wahhabism has nothing in common with the Albanians but they have nonetheless put the Albanian traditional Islam into their focus. Wahhabism rejects not only the other non-Muslim faiths, such as Christianity, but also the Islamic faith as practiced by the Albanians. Any symbol and national festival that is not religious in nature is unacceptable for them.

¹⁰The Muslims, 1000 signatures against their leaders in Tirana – "Gazeta Shqiptare," November 18, 2004, page 17.

Albania, while part of the Ottoman empire, located far away from the zone of wahaby influence continue to practice the Islamic faith introduced by the ottomans that was much more tolerant than the type of Islam that the wahabies were trying to spread. In their history, the Albanians have given a key contribution to the effort to fight off Wahhabism. The complete defeat that the wahabies suffered under the hands of the Albanian ruler of Egypt Ibrahim Pasha is an example of this. After communism fell in the 90s, 260 years after the example mentioned above, the wahaby movement reawakened its ambitions over the European Islam, which had according to them abandoned the prophetic tradition. One could think that their desire to penetrate the Muslim faith in Albania and their persistence in executing this design is an attempt to take revenge for the defeat they suffered in the hands of Ibrahim Pasha, a few centuries ago.¹¹

The attempt of Wahaby groups to expand in the area is not unique only to Albania. With the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, wahaby groups attempted to expand their influence among Muslims in Bulgaria, Bosnia, Albania, and Macedonia. These groups became particularly active in Kosova after 1999 with funding provided from Persian Gulf countries. The goal of this movement is the Arabization of Islam in the Balkans¹². Allowing them room for action in the Albanian territories would indirectly mean that we are lending support to the anti-Albanian propaganda launched by the darkest Slavic-Orthodox circles. By narrowing their room for action, we would not only help preserve the nature of traditional Islam in Albania, but also help further the process of Euro-Atlantic integration and protect our national security.

“My dear Vizier, I was informed of your concerns. We will look at what measures we need to take.” This is what the sultan, Selim III, tells the Ottoman ruler of Mecca, who was requesting the intervention of the Supreme Porte to stop the wahabies that were threatening to take control of the holy places.¹³ The initial spread of the movement was not properly dealt with by the Ottoman authorities and the intervention came too late. The fires that were soon to burn the whole of the Ottoman Empire could no longer be put out.

The Muslim Communities in Albania, Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro are facing a challenge of such proportion that it will determine their future. The challenges they face, however, does not concern only them but the Albanian society as a whole. The seriousness of the matter calls for effective actions to be taken not only by the Muslim Communities but also by the Albanian law enforcement agencies. The soon-to-become Kosova state and the Albanian political factor in Macedonia and Montenegro must pay special attention to this challenge. We must all together put out the wahaby fire before it burns us.

¹¹ Arber Xhafferri – Religion, Politics and the Albanians – delivered at Religions and civilizations in the new millennium – the case of Albania, Tirana, November 13-14, 2003, page 68.

¹² Xhavit Shala: “The Muslim Community and Wahaby fire”, “Korrieri”, June 15, 2005;

<http://www.acnss.com/html/studime/bashkesia.htm>

¹³ Tarihte Vehabi.

The Albanian Orthodox community is very important part of the Albanian religious landscape. The Albanian patriots headed by Fan Noli were able to achieve the independence from the Greek Church in 1922. The Albanian Orthodox Church was recognized as autocephalous in 1937. Since the fall of communism, the Albanian orthodox community has received considerable assistance from the Greek Orthodox Church that has helped rebuild its institutions and provided many of its clergymen.¹⁴ This situation of a dependence on the Greek Church created after 1990 led many people to put in question the autocephalousness of our Church. The most recent example that further fueled these suspicions was the involvement of local figures of this church in the incident surrounding the exhumations of former Greek soldiers in Kosina, Permet.¹⁵

There have also been cases when certain segments of the traditional non-Muslim communities in Albania have tried to expand their presence and raise their profile by putting up religious symbols in public land and in outside their places of worship. This practice has had nothing in common with the established Albanian traditions. In addition to the cross that was put up on the road to Elbasan, two large crosses were put up in the village Xarë in Saranda and in Fikas of the same region. Three large crosses, symbols of the Catholic faith were also put up in three hills surrounding the village of Bushat in Shkoder. Amidst the provocation that they sparked, the media helped give these incidents a national profile.

The incidents over the religious symbols aim at painting a picture that present the Christian communities in Albania under attack. In the wake of the incidents, official reactions were quick to come. A day after the incidents of the cross of Bushat coming down, "L'Osservatore Romano," the official paper of the Holy See, issued a serious protest referring to the incident as an "episode of intolerance that targeted the Catholics."¹⁶ The Presidency of the European Churches also issued a release, [which strongly enough distributed by the Greek Embassy in Tirana], where they expressed their concern about incidents of a religious character in the south of the country.¹⁷

¹⁴ "From neutrality to active laicite"- Gazeta Shqiptare", march 13, 2005,"Express", March 15, 2005

¹⁵ Xhavit Shala: Vorio-Epirus, a buried illusion, published in the daily "SHQIP", June 9, 2006
<http://www.acnss.com/html/studime/vorio.htm>

¹⁶ "L'Osservatore Romano", the official paper of the Holy See wrote the following: "We shall never allow anyone to take the cross from us." This episode of intolerance is directed against the Christian believers." The article then quotes the Pope John Pole II who while on a visit to Austria in 1998 had said, "We can never allow for the cross, the symbol of our salvation, be taken away from us by others." "The cross was situated on an area heavily populated by catholic believers," the paper said. "The cross has been a cause of fiery controversy between the catholic believers of the village where it is located and the Muslims of the surrounding villages." Furthermore, "L'Osservatore Romano" notes that the incident took place on the day that President Moisiu was visiting Shkoder on the Muslim holiday of Eid. (The daily "Korrieri" carried the story, January 12, 2006).

¹⁷ A press statement released by the Greek Embassy in Tirana and published by the daily "Koha Jonë", of December 23, 2005, said that "the Conference of the European Churches, that was held in Geneva from December 14-17, 2005, was informed with concern about certain local cases in Albania, like in Permet,

Aside from the level of irresponsibility demonstrated by local government structures that allowed the crosses to be put up on public land and without permission, these incidents also demonstrate an unhealthy tendency among these religious communities. In addition, other foreign factors are also interested in undermining the religious tolerance in the country. Unconfirmed sources from the Albanian Secret Services said that it is very likely that on the case of Bushat “operational cells of the secret services of a northern neighboring country are attempting to spark tension to shift attention away from the important developments that are taking place in the region.”¹⁸

On several occasions in the past, reliable sources from our intelligence services have reported that Serb Secret Services have incited radical actions in our religious communities. These services have been working for many years now on pushing forward an agenda that pour fuels into the fire of radicalism. These same services have been engaged in continued campaign of propaganda that has aims at presenting Albanian as radical Muslims. Their goal is to compromise the progress of Kosova towards independence because it would allegedly undermine the stability of Europe. It seems likely that these actions are part of a larger Serb strategy that makes use of both the Secret Services and the media to advance their agenda.

The Albanization [having Albanian clergy serve in Albanian religious communities] of the religious hierarchy in the country would also provide an important contribution to the cause of preserving religious tolerance in our country. “The faith will never get from a foreigner a service that is better than the one provided by the native. Because the faith is the Word. When the Word is not spoken clearly, when it is not spoken like the people speak it. The people will not understand it. Regardless of how capable of a philosopher one may be, when you speak in a different tongue you are not able to convey things properly to the people. It is fifteen years now that the people are not hearing the Catholic clergy deliver the Word in Albanian,” father Zef Pëllumbi,¹⁹ a co-worker with those who made Dante speak in Albanian,

Lukovë, Libohovë, Kodra etc., where the restitution of the places of worship was no allowed or was revoked by local authorities ... Respect for the freedom of faith and human rights present a culmination for European democracy, international law and regional stability. The Conference of the European Churches and World Church Conference will continue to follow closely developments related to this ,” the fact that the statement was released by the Greek Embassy may imply that the Greek government will continue to pay “special attention” to the religious rights and the restitution of properties to religious communities in Albania.

¹⁸ “The cutting of the cross that was situated in the hills of Bushat is suspected to have been carried out by people with close links with the Serb Intelligence Service, a senior police officer in Shkodra said. The police officer who refused to be acknowledged told the paper “that this is one of the primary investigation leads that they are following.” The regional Intelligence Department has collected information since months ago that such an incident was likely. “The perpetrators may have used the recent controversy between the Muslim Myfti’s office and the Catholic Church over the church in the Rozafa castle as a cover for their actions.” “Gazeta Shqiptare,” January 11, 2006.

¹⁹ In an interview, titled “Albania taken over by foreign priests” given to daily Shekulli on December 23, 2005, the 83 years old Franciscan father Zef Pëllumbi, expresses his concern at the unreasonable increase in the number of foreign priests at the Catholic Church, that as father Pëllumbi says has never happened before since the times of Buzuku, Budi, Bogdani dhe Kazazi. He criticizes the Vatican, the Albanian

says in a daily. It appears that Archbishop Jannullatos is in agreement with Father Zef Pëllumbi when he told a weekly some time ago that Albanian clergy are now ready and well prepared to replace him.²⁰

In spite of these developments, there is room for optimism. Our state structures, the media and the religious communities have demonstrated a great level of awareness and have recognized the threat these incidents present to religious tolerance in our country.

The work under way to sign the agreements between the religious communities and the Albanian government²¹ and the work to prepare the first draft of the law on religious communities are both developments that give reason for optimism. These actions are opening the way for the Albanization of the religious hierarchy in our country and help put the remaining religious issues on the right path of resolution.²²

government and society that does not react against the rule of the foreign clergy who for 15 years now do not speak to their believers in Albanian.

²⁰ Interview with father Zef Pëllumbi published in the weekly ABC, 16th issue.

²¹ <http://www.shekulli.com.al/news/49/ARTICLE/10419/2007-05-24.html>;

²² Albania: Working Group Finalizes Draft Accord Between Governments, Religions: "Committee Chairman Rasim Hasanaj said that the project has drawn upon on past experience, his institution's resources, and the opinions of academic circles. The basic documents used for the compilation of the draft agreement were the Constitution and the laws of the country, as well as the international conventions signed by the Albanian State. Hasanaj said that the experts, including Prof. Dr. Aurela Anastasi, lawyer Krenar Loloci, Argita Maltezi, Dr. Arta Vorpsi, Brikena Kasmi, Alma Vokopola, and Blerta Selenica, all lawyers, as well as Prof. Dr. Gjergj Sinani and Xhavit Shala, both well-known scholars of religious problems, did a great deal of work within a short period and prepared a quality draft. This is the first time that the state will have offered a standard agreement to all the country's religious communities.(Un-attributed report: "State Committee for Religious Worship: Experts Complete Project" Originally published on 7/19/2006 by Rilindja Demokratike in Albanian)

