



A BRIEF HISTORICAL EXCURSION ON ALBANIA

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Abstract

To fully understand the secular soul of Albania, or the lack of devotion and religious spirit, as some scholars define it, it is extremely important to know its painful history, little known in the international arena. This history is made up of centuries-old struggles to achieve freedom, especially in recent centuries in which invaders, aggressors and winners have implanted their own cultures, customs and religions, often stripping them not only of individual conscience, but also of national identity. An important aspect is the fact that in five centuries of invasion by the Ottoman Empire there was a progressive Islamization of the people. The Ottoman administration used many mechanisms, one of which was taxation as a means of conversion from Christians to Muslims. However, the reasons that led Albania to bend to the religion of the invader are still today the subject of debate between Christians and Muslims.

Keywords: Freedom of religion; Principle of secularism; multiculturalism

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1. The Pagan Roots of a Multi-Religious Country

Durham notes that the Albanians wanted freedom more than anything (Durham, November 8 1990, p. 22)¹. This reality is also highlighted by Di Ruffia who underlines how “no state in Europe has had to fight like Albania to make its national identity known”².

Regarding religious affiliation, it has been observed by historians that the ancient Albanian people were the *Illir* (Cuaz, 1996, pp. 87-103) they were polytheistic pagans and believed in many divinities, they practiced the cult of the Sun and the Serpent³, and only after the extension of the Roman Empire into south-eastern Europe did they consequently become Christian⁴. For this reason, as early as 53 AD, from the first centuries of life, Christianity penetrated and consolidated in the country. This is also found in the writings of Saint Paul where he narrates that “from Jerusalem and around Illyria, I preached the Gospel of Christ”. In fact, on his travels to reach Rome, Saint Paul would have passed through Durazzo where he would have preached the Holy Scriptures in the land of Illyria⁵.

From Vatican sources it emerges that five popes have ascended to the throne of Saint Peter from the Illyrian provinces⁶. The Orthodox religion arrived a few centuries later, during the Byzantine period, around 323 AD.

Twelve centuries later, in the 15th, we find the small Christian country not only divided between Catholics and Orthodox, but also busy fighting against the invasion of the Ottoman Empire. Despite the close anti-Turkish resistance of the

¹ So The Author writes that the Albanian people stated that “we want freedom and are ready to accept any religion that recognizes our right to own a rifle”. This is also highlighted in the writings of F. Cordignano, *Religious conditions of the Albanian people, in Albania*, edited by the Institute of Adriatic Studies, p. 939.

² (Di Ruffia, 1985, p. 5), with the collaboration of F. Besorti, Milan, Giuffrè.

³ The oldest temple is that of Artemisia in Apolonia, built around the year 525 BC.

⁴ Cf. Z. MIRDITA, *Gjashte shekujt e pare te krishtenizmit ne trevat illiro-shqiptare*; See also P. XHUFI, *Krishterimi roman ne shqiperi, shek. vi-xvi* (Il cristianesimo romano in Albania, sec. vi-xvi), in (AA.V.V., 16-19 November, 1999, pp. 35-67).

⁵ It is said that Paul, after being cleared of the accusations in Jerusalem, went to Spain, then to Belgium, Switzerland, Lyricum, Macedonia and Asia. Thus in Acts of the Apostles (19th century), chap. 29.

⁶ See (Kolgjegja, 1999). The Author notes that the first Pope of Albanian origin who ascended the throne of Peter was Eleutherius (182-193) from Nicopolis of Epirus. The second is Pope Caius (283-296), the third Pope Innocent (401-417) from the Illyrian tribe Albanoi (Alban), who lived between Durazzo and Dobra, the fourth Pope John or Johann (640-642) from Dalmatia, and the last, Clement XI. (1700-1721). It should be noted that the latter promoted many initiatives for the protection of the Catholic language and religion in Albania invaded by the Ottomans.

Principality of Albania (1443-1479), which lasted twenty-five years, after the death of Giorgio Castriota known as Scanderbeg¹, the country's destiny changed profoundly, consequently also transforming the religious panorama. An important aspect is the fact that in these five centuries of invasion there has been a progressive Islamization of the people (Jotga, 2004; AA.V.V., 1994). The Ottoman administration used many mechanisms, one of which was taxation as a means of conversion from Christians to Muslims (Ndrecka, 8 September, 2012).

We also note an interesting element from a legal point of view which is the model of administration based on tolerance, not only in Constantinople, but throughout the Empire. In fact, the Sultan recognized freedom of religion for Christians and Jews and tolerated them, granting them the freedom to profess their faith, even if they were considered second-class subjects. As can be seen, the conversion mechanisms used were not forced and one could maintain one's religion, with the obligation to recognize the authority of the Ottoman emperor, at the expense of political, social and cultural privileges (Ferrari, Durham Jr, & Sewell, 2004; Karandera, 2004, p. 32).

Religious tolerance was granted in exchange for heavy tax burdens (*gisje or harac*) and it is believed, in fact, that one of the factors that contributed to the Islamization of the Albanian population was precisely this. However, the reasons that led Albania to bend to the religion of the invader are still today the subject of debate between Christians and Muslims².

During the centuries of Ottoman rule (15th-19th), particularly the 17th-18th centuries, a greater number of conversions to Islam was noted. It is no coincidence that this period is defined by scholars as "*the dark ages*" because, as Misha also observes; there is a "*crisis of the identity of the people*" (Misha, 2002, pp. 35-36), which not only changes its religion from Christian to Muslim, but also its historical name,

¹ Prince of Albania and Epirus, in Albanian Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu (1405-1468), is the Albanian national hero. He defended not only Albania but also Europe from the Turkish invasion, hence the reason why he was nominated by Pope Callixtus III as Athlete of Christ and Defender of the Faith, because during his leadership of the principality of Kruja he protected moral values and Christian religious not only from Albania but also from Europe. See in particular M. BARLETI, *Histori and Skënderbeu*, trans. S. I. PRIFTI, Infobotues, 2005, (the first edition in Latin entitled *Historia de vita et gestis Skanderbegi, epirotarvm Principis*, was published in 1508-1510 in Rome; Cf. (Brahaj & Sina, 1967)

² Cf. (Zefi, 2000; Mirdita, 1998); Cf. S. Delvina, *Dhuna fetare, tentative e pasuksesshme/ Religious violence, unsuccessful attempt*; F. DUKA, *Momente te kalimit ne Islam te popullsisë shqiptare ne shekullin XV-XVII* in (AA.VV., 2003, pp. 47-65)

from Albania to Shqipëria¹. It cannot be ruled out that the identity crisis of religion has also had an influence on the country's identity crisis.

All this resulted in a phenomenon of immigration, where part of those who refused to embrace Islam as their religion settled in Southern Italy, the so-called. *arbëreshë*, who today represent an ethno-linguistic minority² and they still retain the Christian religion of the Greek-Byzantine rite, with a Catholic minority of the Latin rite³.

Another phenomenon that occurred among the Orthodox community was *crypto-Christianity*, that is, false Muslims replaced their names with Islamic ones, declared in public life that they were Muslims and behaved as such, but, in secret, maintained the customs and the faith of origin (Christopoulos, 2000).

It is also noted that in addition to the Church of Rome, which made a very important contribution to the containment of Islamization in Albania, the so-called Kanun by Lek Dukagjini (1410-1481)⁴, or the Northern Code of Customary Law, which at the time was considered a sort of *magna carta libertum*⁵.

2. Final Considerations

Despite the Turkish occupation, the *Kanun* remained in force in the Catholic community of the north, which constituted a stronghold for this minority, given that the invader's legal system had not penetrated because it was harshly rejected. Furthermore, in the Kanun, a series of special benefits and protections are envisaged for the Church, such as the recognition of property and the legal status of religious officials. Even the women of the northern community had not bowed to the shari'a,

¹ On this point see in particular (Halimi, 2010, p. 2).

² See in particular (Belegiorno De Stefano, 2015)

³ See *Arbëreshë: cultura e civiltà di un popolo/Arbëreshë: culture and civilization of a people*, a cura e con introduzione di P. Bruni, *premesse di Francesco Sicilia e traduzione di Evis Kruta*, s.l., s.e, 2004; V. DORSA, *Sugli albanesi: ricerche e pensieri*, Napoli, 1847; *Studi Albanologi Balcanici, Bizantini e Orientali*, Leo Olschki Editore, Firenze, 1986; (Cimbalo, 2014); Cf. (Altimari, 2007; Mandalà, 2007; Nardin, 2008).; F. Altimari, *Riflessioni sul Mezzogiorno. Comunità arbëreshë e Risorgimento italiano/ Reflections on the South. Arbëreshë Community and the Italian Risorgimento*, edited by M. BRUNETTI, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2004.

⁴ The Kanun collects the customary rules of civil and criminal law of northern Albania. It was created to regulate social relations in a context where the entity of the State was not known. See in particular (Del Re, 1995-1996; Malcolm, 1999; Koliqi, 1944; Valentini, 1956; Resta, 1996).

⁵ In these terms (Valentini, 1944), the Author highlights that according to customary law "the tribal Albanian is a free man, so much so that he knows no true authority other than God and the law, nor responsibility towards any other man, except in the case of some obligation assumed voluntarily".

refusing the Islamic veil because it conflicted with the traditional popular costume they wore (Ndrecka, 8 September, 2012).

This aspect of the *Kanun* is also noted by De Stefano, who underlines that “*it must be considered autonomously as a customary code and a normative heritage of a people who, based on their own social sense, created a legal system independent of the law imposed by the various conquerors, that is, a 'Constitution' of a stateless society*”¹.

D'Istria highlights that, despite the conversion to Islam of a good part of the population, there is collaboration between the Catholics and Muslims of the country (D'Istria, 1866, pp. 382-418). Probably, due to the fact that Albanian Muslims did not devoutly respect religious dogmas, the Author was convinced that, with the end of the Ottoman Empire, the converted Albanians, not feeling the imposed religion as their own, would return to their original faith, i.e. Christian, which in reality never came true.

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¹ See (Belgiorno De Stefano, February 2014, p. 3)

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