

INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY OF ALBANIANS THROUGH CENTURIES

SHYQYRI HYSI

Eqrem Çabej University, Gjirokastër, Albania

ABSTRACT

The course of historical events, has demonstrated that the religious faith has been a permanent factor in molding the characteristics of cultural and educational identity of Albanian people. In Albania, there are four religious communities which are officially recognized (Muslim and Christian faith) and some sects deriving from them. Those religious communities have continuously influenced the identities of Albanian through centuries, they have cultivated culture, art, literature, tradition and their influence are an integral part of our national history and culture being enriched and directed by their influence. Besides being influential in the historical events, the religious communities in Albania, they witness an air of harmony and coexistence.

UDC & KEYWORDS

■ UDC: 94 ■ Religious faiths ■ Religious communities ■ Albanian history ■ Religious institutions and religious coexistence

INTRODUCTION

Three religious faiths in Albania are closely connected to the nation and its self-existence (Kadare, Ismail, International conference; "Religions and civilisations in the new millenium, Albanian case", page 17).

Religion in itself is a visible cultural component. According to Father Anton Arapi, the treatment of the religion issue is one of the most delicate ones for Albanian's life (Coauthors, "Rrugët e bashkimit kombëtar", Onufri, New York, 1997, page 22). During the course of historical events, religious faith has been a permanent factor in molding the characteristics of cultural and educational identity of Albanian people, sometimes being dominant and restraining due to neighboring intervention. However, F. Noli has considered Albanian church in USA as a "crèche of patriotic molding" ("Dielli" newspaper, August, 1919).

The political and ethnic Albanian territory has witnessed some religious faiths because of political, educational, cultural, philosophical, military, sociological and economic factors. Historical changes have proved that like other nations Albanians have passed from one religious faith to the other ("History of Albanian people", volume I, TOENA, Tirana, 2002, page, 55). Polytheist faith in Albania begins with Paleolithic and comes up to the first century of our era (its remnants exist today), (Delvina, Sherif, "E vërteta mbi Epirin", "Fillad", Tirana, 1999, "Shqipëria atdheu i tolerancës fetare", page 299 – 319 or "Rilindja" newspaper, 18 March, 1994), by the time when the first monotheist community Christian, (Konica, Faik, "Shqipëria kopshti shkëmbor i Evropës juglindore", Konica, Vepre), was created in Durrës. It has already been confirmed that Christianity dates back to apostle times, a fact which aligns Albanians among the first people to embrace Christianity (International conference, Tirana, 1999, "Krishterimi ndër shqiptar", Shkodra, 2000, page 67). The scholar, Roberto Marko Della Roka in his work "Nationality and Religion in Albania in 1920-1944" emphasizes: "It was Christianity that strengthened the identity of Albanians, involved in epochal

changes and geographical migration", (Roka R. dela Marko, "Nationality and religion in Albania, 1920 – 1944", Elena Gjika, Tirana, 1994, page 37).

Religion faith and identity

In Albania, there are four religious communities which are officially recognized (Muslim and Christian faith) and some sects deriving from them. Chronologically, they are: Catholic ("Christianity and Albanians", International symposium, Shkodra, 2000, page 188. Catholic institutions: churches, monasteries. Catholics in Albanian were members of these catholic groups: Benedict, Dominican, Jesuit dhe Franciscan), Orthodox, Muslim and Bektashi community. Different scholars think that every community has created a "mother" identity or otherwise "intermediate identity", "mixed identity", which sociologist label as a "fluid identity", (Misha, Pirro, "Arratisja nga burgjet e historisë, ç'do të thotë sot të jesh shqiptar", Toena, Tirana, 2008, page 39).

It is true that the presence of religious communities has hindered the National Movement development. Till the XIX century Greeks, Turkish, Serbs and Italians did not recognize the Albanian nationality. In the middle age, ottomans divided Balkan people in what they called "milet", whereas Greeks thought that Balkan people were orthodox. These confusing concepts and neighboring intentions to establish extended states were destabilizing factors for Albanians.

Institutions, faith, culture, tradition, religion, rituals, customs, psychology, philosophy and architectural construction style those communities have continuously reflected through centuries, are an integral part of our national history and culture being enriched and directed by their influence. (Pollo, Stefanq, "Ne gjurmët e historisë", vol. II, Tirana 2003, pg.105). Missioners, clerics and religious communities along with the practice of the respective faith, have also cultivated art, culture, literature language, tradition, lifestyles, architectural model, psychology as well as the permanent pressure on ethnic identity. From the XVII-XVIII century, religious culture has influenced the character and national features Albanians have always displayed (T. Mark, "Kontributi i klerit katolik ne kerkim te etnokultures shqiptare International symposium, Christianity and Albanians", Shkodra, 2000, pg. 553 – 564). Religious faiths in the Albanian country have been able to establish solid and real relationships with the Albanian nation self-existence. In general, clerics and religious institutions have been considered a starting point in the fight for independence, identity, culture and education.

There have frequently been held assemblies in these religious institutions such as: Cathedral of Lezha (1444), tekke of Demir Hani Tepelena (during Tanzimat), Tekke of Frasheri (1789). Treating the religious issues and the national identity in Albania, intellectual Kristo Frasheri emphasizes: "In spite of religious belonging, Albanians embody a range of common virtues like courageous character, human manners, bravery, hospitality, generosity

and an unbreakable faith" (Frashëri, Kristo, "Historia e qytetërimit shqiptar, KRISTALINA – KH, Tirana, 2008, pg. 183).

Influence of the religious culture

Religious culture has not only been present in education, literature and architecture, but also has demonstrated a dominant influence on human society education, even generation's spiritual education. The following educational functions, religious faiths have demonstrated, have made an impact on the national identity:

- Religious faith has an influence on the degree of national harmony (unity). Geographical and political location of Albanians has made them a target of historical Balkan conflicts; moreover still continue to be at the center of the field where the game of Balkan future is being played. Surrounded by various faiths, policies, ideologies and culture, Albanians have profited and been endangered simultaneously.
- Although Albanians have a diversity of religious faiths, they do not recognize "Saint Bartholomew's night". Albanian believers enjoy the harmony and respect the religious feelings, rituals and relevant celebrations.
- With the help of clerics and their institutions, religion has led to a better understanding of life, its style and how to considerably improve it.
- Religion has directly maintained self-control of society, even in times of lack of state function.
- Religion and its institutions have had an impact on literary works, culture, customs and tradition, interweaving the traditional factors with the nature of particular religious faiths.
- Religion has been influential in historical, political, social, economic, military and educational development (Dervishi, Zydi, Sociologjia, ShBLU, Tirana, 2003, pg. 162).

Since the ancient times, religious faiths have considerably influenced the cultivation of Serbian, Persian, Arabic, Latin and Turkish language. This language cultivation has proved to be a novelty towards integration, an opportunity for civilization and education, on a national and broader scale. The traces of the above mentioned languages appear to be present in the Albanian language. Archeologists have discovered about 200 inscriptions in Latin language and approximately the same number in the old Greek language. Actually, dozens of records in Latin, Turkish and Persian language can be found in the Central State Archive.

For centuries the major books of religious faiths: Bible and Koran have led the education of the Albanian society. The Bible (the Old and New Testament) as a universal book for the Albanian Christians has transmitted educational and instructive messages. To illustrate we extract:

- "He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows frivolity will have poverty enough" (Bible, 12:11, pg. 892).
- Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but counselors of peace have joy (Bible, 12:20, pg. 892).

Koran is a universal book for mankind as it demonstrates an extraordinary educational value. The main principle that Koran cultivates is: May Good take its own way and evil be kept away. Koran is an inexhaustible, moral and educational source. It commits the educational principles for the mankind, races, special categories and all countries including Albania. Koran introduces the main principles of

three aspects of education: a) moral education b) personal education (individual) c) family education (Hoti Vehbi, "Idetë edukative të Kur'anit", International symposium: "Feja kultura dhe traditat islame ndër shqiptarët", Pristina, 1995, pg. 59 – 67).

Koran educates the individual with the sense of the most superior creature characterized by honesty and with the conviction that he inherits good qualities rather than evil ones. He should himself make attempts to change his state. The man is ordered to judge personally, fairly, actively and placidly: "If ye did well, ye did well for yourselves; if ye did evil, (ye did it) against yourselves" (Koran 17:7); If anyone does a righteous deed, it ensures to the benefit of his own soul; if he does evil, it works against (his own soul). In the end ye (all) be brought back to your Lord (Koran 45:15).

Koran requires certain norms, rules and principles to be followed by everyone as they appear to be at the core of a civilized and well-educated individual's behavior.

In this context the acquisition of saint books (Koran and Bible) through centuries has ennobled the Albanian's spirit. Religious faiths have had a great impact on architectural style in Albania.

- Scholars mention as an example of inherited architectural values the Velipoja basilicas: Saint Mary (1712), Saint Kolli (1721), Saint Mehili (1722), Saint Mary's Cathedral in the Castle of Berati (1797), The church of Ardenica monastery as well as the church of Saint George in Libofsha, Fier ("Histori e popullit shqiptar", Vol. I, Toena, Tirana 2002, pg. 716). Due to their architectural values they represent, a considerable number of catholic and orthodox churches have been declared monuments of culture ("2000 vjet art e kulturë kishtarë në Shqipëri", KOASH publication, Tirana, 2003, pg. 24).
- In this context we mention the buildings of Islam cult: mosques and tekkes being constructed during XVI-XVIII century. Their architecture is obviously a combination of Albanian tradition and Muslim recognized style. Some are declared as monuments of Albanian culture.

The Institute of Monuments has declared a list of about 30 religious institutions as monuments of Albanian culture. Among them we point out: Mirahori mosque (1496 in Korça), Mbret mosque (the end of XV century in Elbasan), Plumbi mosque (1553 – 1554 in Berat), Muradije mosque (XVI century in Vlora), Nazireshta mosque (1600 in Elbasan), Daut Pasha Mosque (1605 in Prizren), Plumbi mosque (XVII century in Shkodra), Ethem Beu mosque (1794 in Tirana) etc. Among tekkes we mention: Jelveti tekke (built at the end of XVIII century in Berat), Frashëri tekke (XVII century in Frashëri), Zalli tekke (1620 Gjirokastra), Melan tekke (XIX century in Gjirokastra) etc. ("Histori e popullit shqiptar", vol. I, Toena, Tirana, 2002, page 771).

Besides sculptures, the frescos were other elements of church culture. Onufri, was the most talented painter of the middle age. He was from Elbasan. Some of the frescos have been handed down to present times. Two of them: "David" and "Women under the cross" actually found in Shpat, are pictures which demonstrate a step ahead the Byzantine style ("Frashëri, Kristo, Historia e qytetërimit shqiptar, nga kohët e lashta deri në fund të Luftës së Dytë Botërore", Tirana, 2008, page 147).

An authentic literature came into being with the catholic cleric as the first representative (XVIII century) and later with bektashi. Almost all writers of the middle age and the ensuing trends have been clerics (Kombi, Onufri, 1997, page

23). Among them we mention: Lek Matrënga (1567 – 1619), Pjetër Budi (1566 – 1622), Frang Bardhi (1606 – 1643), Pjetër Bogdani (1630 – 1689), Dhimitër Delvina (XVIII century), Pjetër Mazreku (XVIII century) etc. Bektashi tekkes were centers of the flourish of “oral literature”, otherwise called “bektashi literature”. Several scholars considered the name inappropriate. The literature was printed in eastern languages: Persian, Turkish and Arabic. Later, it was translated by Renaissance scholars in Albanian language. Some representatives of bektashi literature are: Nezim Frakulla, Sulejman Nebi, Hasan Zyka Kamberi etc.

Schools, madrasak, maktab and special courses for learning the culture of the respective religious faiths, were established nearby religious institutions (churches, mosques and tekkes). Mosques, tekkes and religious institutions have played a vital role in the development of national and religious education. Albanian catholic cleric has the recognized merit in cultivating the written language, education and Albanian literature (Ministry of Science and Education, “Histori e Arsimit dhe Mendimit Pedagogjik Shqiptar”, Nënë Tereza, Tirana, 2003, pg. 477). The catholic cleric education came up to the college or high school level such as: Saveria College and “Ilirikum” high school in Shkodra.

During the XVI-XVII century Catholic Church opened schools with the intention of cleric's educational preparation. Initially the language used in schools was Latin. However, the education in a foreign language proved fruitless for Albanians. Therefore, Albanian language was also used later in the schools of that time. Albanian historiography confirms that: “In 1628-1675 in Pedhine, Blinishte (Lezha), Kurbin and Himara (1670) there existed schools opened by the church. Albanian language was used in these schools”. (Ministry of Science and Education, “Histori e Arsimit dhe Mendimit Pedagogjik Shqiptar”, Nënë Tereza, Tirana, 2003, pg. 705). The church continued the activity of opening new schools during the XVIII-XIX century in the following places: Shiroka (1873), Troshan (1882), Bajza and Kastrat (1883), Kelmend (1891), Troboin (1893), Pllane (1889), (Historical studies, nr. 2, 1974, page 77. Prendushi “Vështrim historik mbi gjendjen dhe zhvillimin e arsimit në gjuhën shqipe dhe të huaj në Shkodër e shek. XIX”, Shiroka (1907), Rus (1920) and Dajë (1924) etc. (Elsie, Robert, Historia e Letërsisë shqipe, page 185).

Jesuits and Franciscans have made a special contribution to the opening of new schools. They profited from:

- a. Austrian - Hungarian agreement with the Ottoman Empire in 1839.
- b. Permission that Pope issued for Austria in 1855.

This gave Austria the right to have the protectorate over Albanian Catholic interests. The same thing did the Supreme Gate in 1859 giving Austria “the freedom to control the Albanian Catholics” (Jacques, E., Shqiptarët, vol. I, Kartë e Pendë, Tirana, 1996, page 370). Religious education development continued even during King Zog's regime and World War II. Due to the educational reform applied in March 6, 1946 some of the religious schools were closed. Consequently, religious education was banned in August 1946 to be restarted in 1991.

The orthodox cleric, especially after Constantinople invasion, has worked intensively for the spread of Greek schools in Albanian territory. Under the reign of Sultan Mohamed II, the Patriarchate of Istanbul signed an agreement that would ensure its exclusivity for the opening and administration of Greek language schools for all Balkan

orthodoxy (Greeks, Bulgarians, Romanians, Serbs, Macedonians and Albanians).

By means of a decree issued by Mehmet II, patriarch Genadius got education control over all orthodoxy and the possibility of Greek language spread in Balkan. In Voskopoja during XVIII century we can see the flourishing of an education and culture not only of religious background. The educational development culminated with the opening of “New Academy” in 1744. Illuminist ideas were flourishing at that time represented by orthodox Albanian pioneers: Method Antikrati, Theodor Kavalioti the rector of “New Academy”, Grigor Durrësaku, Theodor Haxhifilipi (Dhaskal Todri) etc. (Frashëri, Kristo, “Historia e qytetimit shqiptar, nga kohët e lashta deri në fund të Luftës së Dytë Botërore”, Tirana, 2008, pg. 178).

Bektashi community and clerics have traditionally considered education of a significant importance. Bektashi clerics and institutions have given a remarkable contribution to the national educational development transferring tekkes into educational centers, especially at the end of XIX and the beginning of XX century. The imam of bektashi tekkes organized regular courses and classes of learning Koran and foreign languages, bektashi religious culture, Albanian history, Albanian language, culture and religious institutions' managing. Bektashi clerics were the first to introduce the ABC-book and opened courses of learning the Albanian language. The first Albanian language school was opened in the tekke of Koshtan, Tepelena, 1908.

Religious education continued until the end of World War II. During the academic year 1945-1946, the postwar government was not able to get a command of educational system reform, but managed to control elementary educational level. The religious community was informed by the issue of the official document nr.761.d.19.04.1945 signed by the minister of the time Prof. Kristaq Cipo saying: “Cabinet of Ministers decided: All elementary schools in Albania will be state schools” (Central State Archive. F.882.v.1945.D.63..pg.19). The educational reform of August 1946 finally banned religious education in our schools.

Albanian state consolidation in 1912 enabled legal establishment of religious faiths and its relationships with state, school, culture, national identity, other religious communities etc. There are two laws concerning the religious communities: the first was enacted in June 1929 decreed by the king in August 8, 1929 (Hysi, Shyqyri, Histori e Komuniteteve Fetare shqiptare, Mësonjëtorja, Tirana, 2006, page 197 – 201). After World War II, Albanian state enacted the second law, nr.743, in November 26, 1949 (CSA, F. 890, 1949, file. 561, page 3, “Bashkimi” newspaper, November 27, 1949).

Conclusion

Religious faiths in Albania are part of our national history. They have influenced the general national culture and identity.

During the national Renaissance, the independence and the period of the Albanian state existence, they have turned into a positive factor as well as playing a first hand role in the consolidation of the national values and Albanian state.

From the point of view of the harmony and coexistence of four religious communities as well as the relationships to the state, the message Albanians deliver to European family and further is: religious cultural coexistence, harmony, kindness, and understanding according to Mother Teresa concept of ecumenism.

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