

Religious Diversity and The Influence of Religion on Albanians During Different Stages of History

Veton Zejnullahi¹, Denis Çelçima², Antigona Gashi³, Donikë Krasniqi⁴ and Votim Hanoli⁵

Abstract

The paper aims to investigate the role and influence of religion on Albanians in all ethnic areas, as well as show the role and influence that religions have had on the Albanian nation since their appearance, especially the influence they have today. In this research, authors reiterate that religious tolerance, cultivated for centuries, has now gone beyond acceptance and tolerance, and has advanced in religious harmony and coexistence, which is often taken as an example by other peoples. However, the religious conversions taking place within the ethnic Albanian territories, it is assumed to be a consequence of the economic situation and the decline in the level of education. Still, there are also some other reasons because many circles are trying to introduce disunity and division among the Albanians. The religious aspect, among others, an absurd accusation by the Special Court of The Hague, which at one point mentions the mistreatment and torture caused by the KLA fighters against Catholics, forgetting the fact that within the KLA there were many fighters of the faith Christians, who have never been identified as such, therefore this absurd decision to treat Catholics as a special category within the Albanian nation, which for us as a nation, is as insulting as it is tendentious and unacceptable. In this research, in addition to other research methods, we created a survey on the Google platform, trying to include citizens of all ages, ethnicities, and religions, because only in this way would the picture be more complete.

Keywords: Religion, Religious Harmony, Albanians, Special Court

INTRODUCTION

"Albanian, above all, is Albanian" (Durham 2015)

Edith Durham

Although we have entered the third decade of the 21st century, and after many discoveries, especially in the field of Information Technology, the role and influence of religion both in the World and among Albanians has not decreased, on the contrary, it has increased even more. Today's world, with a few exceptions, is deeply religious, perhaps even more so than before. (Berger 2008)

From a historical point of view, the Illyrians, the ancestors of the Albanians, were the oldest people in the region, just as all the other peoples of the time were pagan people and believed in many gods. It is worth noting the beliefs in the Sun, Water, and the Mother, in a word, the Illyrians believed in those who created and developed life. The southern tribes also believed in the snake. According to mythology, it was considered a protector of health because its poison was used for healing.

After the appearance of Christianity until today, the issue of religious faith among Albanians is characterized by different time stages that mark periods from complete faith to the denial of faith and the closing of religious cult objects as happened after 1967 in the communist Albania of Enver Hoxha, in which case thousands of religious objects were destroyed. Despite the destruction of many buildings, some buildings have withstood time and are very special, and that strongly testify to the religious harmony of the Albanians, such as the case of the mosque in Delvina, which is the only one of its kind in the whole world, because it bears the name Christians, specifically the Mosque of Gjin Aleksit (<https://www.radiokosovaelire.com> 2023)

¹ Professor at UBT College Kosovo Orcid no:0000-0001-6727-1196. E-mail: vetonzejnullahu@gmail.com

² Professor at UBT College Kosovo Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9956-1446>. E-mail: deniz.celcima@ubt-uni.net

³ Lawyer at Legal Office. E-mail: gashidr23@gmail.com

⁴ E-mail: krasniqi.donike@gmail.com

⁵ Professor at UBT College Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0537-4258>. E-mail: votim.hanoli@ubt-uni.net

— It is very important to say that even the first document of the Albanian language is on a religious basis from 1462, the baptismal formula *Unte paghesont premenit Atit et birit et spertit senit*. (I baptize youname of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit) which was found on November 8 in the "Laurenziana" library in Florence by the Romanian historian Nikola Jorga and was published by him in 1915. (<https://www.kultplus.com> 2024)

METHODOLOGY - during the research we used research methods and techniques which we think are fully compatible with the most modern scientific research methodologies. We are based on the historical and descriptive methods that have helped us with the chronological treatment of the development of religion among Albanians in all stages of development. We have also used the comparative method to show the differences between Albanians and other peoples when it comes to religious harmony. Another method that we have used is - a survey on the Internet on the Google platform and in focus we have citizens of different ages and religions and from different parts of the Albanian ethnic areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of religion and its impact on individual peoples as well as the global impact have been dealt with by many foreign and local researchers and authors, whether those of social sciences or even clerics of different religions in the various stages of the development of human society. because religion has been a co-traveler of the whole development until now, starting from the first presentation of religions until contemporary times. This is also the case with Albanians, starting with their Illyrian ancestors, then the appearance of monotheistic religions, and up to the present day. It is very important to emphasize that the Albanian national hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu best reflects the religious harmony of Albanians because he belonged to all three religions to which Albanians belong. "The historical fact that he was born Orthodox, grew up Muslim, and continued his life as a Christian, alongside the Pope and the Patriarch at the same time, only strengthens his nationwide image without distinction. However, to see this as division and not unity is inappropriate and not in our national interest" (Bido 2018) writes Ardit Bido the director of the State Archive and the author of a study on the Orthodox Church in Albania, adding that Skënderbeu belongs to all of us, regardless of religion.

The religion of the Albanians is reflected very well by Edith Durham who, among other things, writes "When I passed through Rumeli, I asked people: What are you? - Catholic - answered one. - Protestant, answered the other. In Bulgaria, I asked: What are you? - Orthodox. In Serbia, I asked: What are you? - Orthodox... So as I was drowning all over the people's idiotic dogmas, I entered Albania and asked: What are you here? - Albanians - they all answered me. At last, I said, - here I escaped from fanatics and god-followers (Durham 2015)

1. No one else has this spiritual miracle, except Muslim Albanians. Only Muslim Albanians initiate, allow, and support the construction of the Cathedral in a city with 99% Muslims and atheists, no one else. The Cathedral of Pristina has no enclosures. Its door is open at all times. There is no guard either because it is guarded by the conscience of 99% of Muslims and atheists. But the absolute majority of our people want to see that Cathedral only as a religious object and cultural institution. Not more. Not beyond...! (Shtufi 2023)

"Albania would not have existed, if we did not have tolerance between Muslims and Christians" and "it was our difficult life that made us understand the logic and need for tolerance" (Kadare 2021), says, the world-famous Albanian writer Ismail Kadare.

Even the neighbors of the Albanians have written about the religious harmony of the Albanians, and in this regard the Serbian writer Vuk Karadžić, speaking about the Albanians and religion, said: "We Serbs should take the example of the Albanians who belong to them - three religions consider each other fellow countrymen and the Muslim Albanian kills 10 Turks for one Christian Albanian, while the Catholic Albanian kills 10 Italians for one Muslim Albanian or orthodox and also the orthodox Albanian kills 10 Greeks for one Muslim Albanian or Catholic". (Karaxhiq 2012)

Of all the authors who dealt with the issue of religious tolerance, it is best explained by Fan Noli who, responding to various statements, declared that "From all accusations, prejudices, and mistakes, with which they seek to burden their shoulders ours, this is the most unfair and baseless. Although the Muslim element is

the majority in Albania, there is nowhere to be found such a population where religious tolerance reigns as much, to the point of indifference, as among Albanians. The proof of that is the fact, for which All Albanians are rightly proud, that the head of today's Government is, an orthodox bishop, the phenomenon of unknown also about Orthodox states" (Puto 1990).

Prominent Albanian Religious Personalities

Throughout its history, the Albanian nation has been distinguished for numerous personalities from various fields such as science, art, culture, and other vital fields for human life. Even religion is one of the fields where many prominent national figures dressed under the cloak of religion acted in the service of the national issue but also on a global scale since many Albanian personalities served humanity while simultaneously being religious personalities. Here, first of all, we are talking about the Catholic Church because according to sources from the Holy See, four popes (<https://www.ocnal.com>, Vatican Confirms 4 Albanian Popes by Origin 2014) were of Albanian origin and who greatly influenced the spread of the Catholic religion.

Even on the internal national level, in all the major events of our nation such as the Albanian League of Prizren in 1878, then the declaration of national independence in the Assembly held in Vlora on November 28, 1912, many prominent religious personalities were side by side along with Albanian patriots and intellectuals such as Avdyl Frashëri, Sylejman Vokshi, and others, there was also Myderriz Ymer Prizreni, who was later elected Chairman of the Albanian League of Prizren, while in the movement for independence in 1912 they stood out: Haxhi Vehbi Dibra i who was the first President of the eldership or the government senate as well as the first mufti of independent Albania (<https://www.islamgjakova.net> n.d.), then Hafiz Sherif Lëngu as well as Dom Nikollë Kaçorri who were just some of the patriotic clerics who engaged in the Albanian movement that was crowned with the proclamation of the state independent Albanian.

Among the prominent personalities, some marked entire areas in the countries where they served, becoming global figures who received high religious titles from the beatification and then the proclamation of them as saints by the Catholic Church based in The Vatican, as is the case of Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, the Albanian woman from Skopje known globally as Mother Teresa*, founder of the order of honorary sisters who served in Calcutta, India, but also in all the poor countries where the need arose. Mother Teresa is a modern example of a long tradition of Christianity and Roman Catholicism among Albanians and the peoples of the Balkans (Anđelković 2020).

Another prominent personality who has left a big mark on Albanian history is the intellectual, diplomat, writer, and former Prime Minister of Albania Fan Noli, who is the founder of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. The autocephaly of the Albanian church acquired in 1937 is of particular importance because the liturgies were already held in the Albanian language and by the Albanian clergy thus removing the influence of foreign churches, especially the Greek one. Fan Noli with his foresight, giving importance to the use of the Albanian language in religious prayers, would say "Sing the prayers as you know in Albanian, then God arranges them." (<https://www.kosovarja-ks.com/> 2020)

Interpretation Of Survey Results

To obtain the most reliable results for our research, and to obtain a clear overview of the attitudes of Albanians on many issues related to religion and its influence throughout our national history, as well as for the present and that is inevitably related also to the future, we have compiled a survey, and we have put the same on the Internet, for different people, such as age, gender, level of education, as well as residence, to answer and express their opinions about with this issue for the Albanian people, knowing the fact that there is religious diversity and how exemplary religious relations have been preserved, rising from tolerance to a religious harmony and coexistence that is characteristic of Albanians and an example that should be followed by other peoples.

To understand the results as easily as possible, in addition to the interpretation, we have also placed the figures as generated by *google.com/forms*, clearly seeing the percentages obtained from the responses of the respondents.

(https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1_Hi6eSjTfRWde3Xz9Rr9LfH2lB7nchqv4yqkjYyflY4/edit#responses
n.d.)

1006 people answered the survey.

In the first question regarding age, it ranges from age up to 18 to over 65 years old.

Frequency Table

		1. Age			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		4	.4	.4	.4
	18-35	269	26.7	26.7	27.1
	35-55	338	33.6	33.6	60.7
	55-65	69	6.9	6.9	67.6
	18	306	30.4	30.4	98.0
	Over 65	20	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

The reason that the completion of the survey started from the age of 18 is because we wanted to see the opinions of school youth especially high school graduates who represent the age of maturity because, in the conditions of globalization, they may have other attitudes, but from the answers of the survey we see that the youth is also following the footsteps of the ancestors in terms of religious harmony as something that is planted in our DNA and it is an encouraging fact for us as a nation

In the second question, we set gender as a criterion because the gender aspect was one of the focuses of this survey.

		2. Gender			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		4	.4	.4	.4
	Female	489	48.6	48.6	49.0
	Male	513	51.0	51.0	100.0
	Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

We wanted both genders to be included, knowing the fact that, among other things, there are questions about interreligious marriages, and the opinion of the female gender has special importance and weight for us, therefore we can say openly and with pleasure that the survey was successful and achieved its goal since the percentage of female respondents is 49.8%. Given that the survey is about very important issues of national identity, this gender equality shows inclusiveness but also high emancipation of Albanian society in all ethnic areas, because women, in addition to others, are increasingly taking on leading roles and decision-makers in Albanian society across ethnic territories.

A special and very interesting point for us was the level of education of the respondents.

		3. Education			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		4	.4	.4	.4
	Doctorate	66	6.6	6.6	7.0
	University	277	27.5	27.5	34.5
	Master	245	24.4	24.4	100.0
	High School	348	34.6	34.6	75.6
	Primary	66	6.6	6.6	41.1
	Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

In the survey, it is noted that 50% of the respondents have a faculty and a master's degree. The number of participants with secondary education is also significant and the number of participants with primary education is smaller. It is encouraging that 68 doctors of science or 6.5% responded to the survey, which represents the added value of this survey. This participation with different levels of education has its importance in the results of the survey, because the more diverse the educational level, the more clearly reflected are the thoughts and concepts that unite us with our national identity because we receive responses from all layers as and from all levels of education, which was one of the main objectives.

4. Which part of ethnic Albania are you from?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		4	.4	.4
Chamëria		9	.9	1.3
Kosovo		307	30.5	31.8
Presheva Valley		59	5.9	37.7
Montenegro		44	4.4	42.0
North Macedonia		53	5.3	47.3
Albania		530	52.7	100.0
Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

Based on the data collected from the survey, what stands out is the participation of Albanians from all regions. The Albanians of Albania and the Albanians of Kosovo are considerably included, but this survey has aroused interest among the Albanians of North Macedonia, the Presheva Valley, Montenegro, and Chameria. This involvement shows the awareness of our people to be unique and united for the national issue and why fragmented for centuries.

5. What is your common knowledge about religion?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		4	.4	.4
None		7	.7	1.1
Very little		58	5.8	67.8
A little		390	38.8	62.0
Some	223		22.2	23.3
A lot		324	32.2	100.0
Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

Regarding the question of knowledge about religion, the figures speak very clearly. It can be noted that most of the respondents have considerable knowledge about religion in general. It is seen that the majority of the respondents are of the Islamic faith, under the statistics.

Also, the findings continue to be statistically consistent with the Christian and Orthodox beliefs. Some have declared themselves atheists, the expected phenomenon as a result of the previous system that declared Albania as the only atheist state in the world. As for other beliefs, they exist, but the most important ones are those that stand out in the survey.

6. How can you explain the interactions between different religions?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		4	.4	.4
Harmony		497	49.4	49.8
Forbearance		226	22.5	72.3
Intolerance		24	2.4	74.7
Tolerance		234	23.3	97.9
Hate		21	2.1	100.0
Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

The results of this question are impressive and represent quite well the values and traditions of the Albanian people. Almost all respondents chose the positive aspects of religious relations such as harmony, tolerance, and understanding. Negative comments, such as impatience and hatred, are in a very small percentage.

7. Do the marriages between different religions create any burden?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		4	.4	.4
Absolutely no		658	65.4	65.8
Absolutely yes		28	2.8	68.6
Do not know		59	5.9	74.5
Yes		194	19.3	93.7
No		63	6.3	100.0
Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

Responses in favor of marriages between people of different religious affiliations once again confirm the value of religious tolerance. It is seen that the number of respondents who chose the answer "absolutely no" is very

large and if we add the answer "I think not", this includes the majority of respondents. The responses against these marriages are of a very small percentage.

8. When is the national issue in question, where should Albanians unite around?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	4	.4	.4	.4
Religious Flags	15	1.5	1.5	1.9
Political Parties Flags	1	.1	.1	2.0
National Flag	957	95.1	95.1	97.1
No answer	29	2.9	2.9	100.0
Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

The question of which flag Albanians should unite is the highlight of this survey and the very high percentage of Albanians uniting is precisely the success of the purpose of this survey. As you can see, 95.6% of the respondents, or 1002 respondents have chosen that Albanians unite around the national flag. The rest of the selections are in a very small and insignificant percentage with 1.4% or 15 respondents around religious flags and 0.1% or only 1 respondent around party flags. This unanimous selection best confirms that the national ideal is the most important and highest ideal for Albanians.

9. Do you think that historically the role of the religious clergy has been at the service of the national issue?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	4	.4	.4	.4
Absolutely No	49	4.9	4.9	5.3
Absolutely Yes	350	34.8	34.8	40.1
Do not Know	186	18.5	18.5	58.5
No	151	15.0	15.0	73.6
Yes	266	26.4	26.4	100.0
Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

Although the percentage is divided in all the answers, the positive aspect of the religious clergy in the service of the national issue still stands out for about 60% of the respondents. The percentage of respondents who chose the option "undecided" 18.4% is slightly higher than the percentage of respondents who think that the clergy does not influence the service of the national issue 14.8%. And the number of respondents who categorically exclude the clergy from the national question is very small.

10. In the political elections in the Albanian territories, what program-oriented parties would you vote for?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	4	.4	.4	.4
Democrat Party	165	16.4	16.4	16.8
Religious Party	26	2.6	2.6	19.4
Liberal Party	68	6.8	6.8	26.1
Nationalist	77	7.7	7.7	33.8
Citizens Party	666	66.2	66.2	100.0
Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

Regarding the selection of respondents on the parties they would vote for, the largest percentage 67.2% is the party with the direction "Citizen", the other largest parties percentage 16.3% is the party with the direction "Democrat" followed by the "Nationalist" and "Liberal" parties. It is seen that the "Religious" party has the smallest number of votes in percentage 2.5%, reinforcing the above result of the organization of Albanians around national issues and the national flag.

11. Do you agree with the introduction of religious education in the curriculum?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	4	.4	.4	.4
Absolutely No	173	17.2	17.2	17.6
Absolutely Yes	326	32.4	32.4	50.0
Do Not Know	135	13.4	13.4	63.4
No	168	16.7	16.7	80.1
Yes	200	19.9	19.9	100.0
Total	1006	100.0	100.0	

Regarding the issue of religious education, 33.3% of the respondents think that it is necessary, supported positively by 20% who approved this initiative. Here we have a difference since all the alternatives have gained a percentage. 16, 8 think that religious education should not be included, followed by 16.7% who thought it was not the right decision or initiative, 13.2% of respondents remain undecided

12. Do you think that the economic aspect of poverty has an impact on religious conversions-change of religion?					
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	4	.4	.4	.4	
Absolutely Yes	97	9.6	9.6	10.0	
Absolutely No	311	30.9	30.9	41.0	
Do not Know	126	12.5	12.5	53.5	
Yes	239	23.8	23.8	77.2	
No	229	22.8	22.8	100.0	
Total	1006	100.0	100.0		

Being considered the current scourge of society, poverty has a very large impact on religious conversion. This is reflected in the answers and the obtained percentages. 31.7% of respondents approved that poverty has an absolute impact, followed by 22% who thought that 23.6% of respondents think that poverty does not affect religious conversions

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the article provides a comprehensive exploration of the role and influence of religion on Albanians, including historical, cultural, and contemporary perspectives. Despite the advancement in information technology and the passage of time, the article argues that the importance of religion has not diminished; on the contrary, it has strengthened. The historical context, from the pagan beliefs of the Illyrians to the challenges they faced during periods such as the communist era under Enver Hoxha, is detailed to illustrate the dynamic nature of religious belief among Albanians.

The methodology used in the research, including historical and descriptive methods, as well as a survey conducted on the Google platform, adds credibility to the findings. The literature review highlights the views of different authors, local and foreign, on the religious landscape of Albania. The mention of the national hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu, who embraced different religions, symbolizes religious harmony among Albanians.

The article also delves into the contributions of prominent Albanian religious figures throughout history, emphasizing their roles in various fields. The inclusion of religious personalities who served the nation, such as the case of Imam Ymer Prizreni, who is the first Albanian president, then Fan Noli, founder of the Autocephalous Albanian Orthodox Church, who is also the first democratic Prime Minister of Albania, up to the missionary of the Church Catholic Mother Teresa, who is the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and the first Albanian saint consecrated in the Vatican, shows the interweaving of religious identity with wider national and global influences. The interpretation of the survey results further enriches the discussion, providing insights into Albanian attitudes towards religion, interfaith marriages, national unity, and the role of religious clergy. The emphasis on inclusion, particularly gender equality and the diverse educational backgrounds of respondents, adds depth to the understanding of the religious landscape. This paper proves that the religion of the Albanians is an asset and not a reason for division, and it is also clearly seen that the Albanian nation overcame tolerance a long time ago, advancing in harmony and coexistence and that in any case, regardless of which religion they belong to, Albanians unite strongly around the national flag.

In general, the article presents a nuanced and multifaceted picture of the relationship between religion and the Albanian people. It highlights the sustainability of religious harmony, tolerance, and coexistence, underscoring their importance in shaping national identity and serving as an example to others.

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