

## Divine Insights: Religious Influences in Albanian Literature

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to investigate the profound influences of Biblical and Koranic discourse on Albanian literature during a specific period, with a focus on the principal authors. The study adopts an applied research approach, employing textual analysis and comparative literary studies to examine the integration of oriental and occidental themes, motifs and conceptions in Albanian literature. By delving into the structural elements and elements of discourse influenced by codified beliefs, the research explores religious interplay within the literature. Through a thorough analysis of literary works, this study reveals that the Bible and Koran hold significant literary importance, with numerous authors drawing inspiration from these sacred texts. The research findings demonstrate the extensive utilization of motifs, literary figures, stylistic elements, events and characters from the Bible and the Koran in Albanian literature. Holy Scripture, embodying a noble and holy spirit, serves as an inexhaustible source of artistic inspiration, vitality and creativity for prominent authors. Notably, the research highlights the prominence of Biblical events that portray the struggle for freedom, which have found expression in Albanian literature. This exploration sheds light on enduring influence of the Bible and the Koran on the cultural fabric of Albanian society. Based on the research findings, this study concludes that the integration of Biblical and Koranic discourse in Albanian literature reflects the deep-rooted Islamic and Christian culture within the Albanian psyche. The research underscores the significance of these sacred texts as sources of artistic inspiration and creativity, shaping the cultural tradition and civilization of Albanians. By uncovering the profound interplay between religion and literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and religious dynamics within Albanian literary works.*

**Keywords:** Bible, Koran, Literature, Culture, Influence

## DIVINE INSIGHTS: RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES IN ALBANIAN LITERATURE

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore the profound influences of Biblical and Koranic discourse on Albanian literature during a specific period, with a focus on the principal authors. This research seeks to shed light on the integration of oriental and occidental themes, motifs and conceptions in Albanian literary works, and to examine the cultural and religious interplay within these texts.

The methodology employed in this study involves a combination of textual analysis and comparative literary studies. Textual analysis allows for a close examination of the structural elements and elements of discourse influenced by codified beliefs found in the literature of the period under investigation. Comparative literary studies provide a broader context by comparing and contrasting the use of Biblical and Koranic references across different works and authors, facilitating a deeper understanding of their impact on Albanian literature.

This research builds upon a critical and theoretical framework that recognizes the Bible and the Koran as significant literary works with immense cultural and artistic influence, enduring in their standing as great works of literature. Yet, they are, above all, the ‘great codes’ of all the arts. The Bible and the Koran, or Holy Scriptures, as the most widely read and translated books in the world, have made an indelible mark on culture, art and literature. The Bible, the Koran, or the word of God, as the literary critic Zejnullah Rrahmani remarks, find expression in a range of literary genres: stories, histories of places and people, poetry, various legends, moralizations, diaries, and songs, many of which are, indeed, love songs. These critical appraisals establish the foundation for this research, providing a framework to examine the presence and significance of Biblical and Koranic discourse in Albanian literature.

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Furthermore, this study acknowledges the historical and socio-cultural factors that have shaped Albanian literature, particularly the influence of the Ottoman Empire over the Balkan Peninsula. The crossroads position of Albania between East and West has played a crucial role in the country's literature, as reflected in the works of influential figures like Naim Frashëri. The fusion of western European and oriental worldviews in Frashëri's poetry highlights the intricate interplay between different cultural and religious influences.

By examining the impact of the Bible and the Koran on Albanian literature, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural, religious and artistic dimensions of this literary tradition. It seeks to uncover the ways in which these sacred texts have shaped the themes, styles and creative expressions of Albanian authors and to illuminate the broader cultural dynamics that have influenced the development of Albanian literature. Overall, this paper draws upon a critical and theoretical framework that acknowledges the significance of the Bible and the Koran as "great codes" of literature, and employs a methodology combining textual analysis and comparative literary studies to explore the influences of these sacred texts on Albanian literature. It aims to provide valuable insights into the interplay between religion, culture and artistic creativity within the context of Albanian literary works.

This influence permeates throughout all the periods of literature, in literary forms, genres, stylistic features etc. The presence of biblical and Koranic discourse in Albanian literature is exhibited in a range of forms and dimensions, with various purposes in the most prominent authors, who represent the pinnacle of literary achievement, in every level of literary composition and with special artistic effect, within a social reality in which this literature operates. Unlike today, where writers borrow from the Bible as well as from the Koran, in earlier times, our writers were influenced in their writing by their own confession. This process was primarily affected by the influences and incursions of other nations.

As for the linguistic aspects of this issue, Greek elements in Albanian ecclesiastical terminology hint at the possibility of these elements having entered the vocabulary in late antiquity, namely the first centuries of Christianity (Çabej, 1994).

However, the most profound and enduring influence may be credited to the five hundred centuries of Ottoman rule over the Balkan Peninsula. It can generally be said that Ottoman rule influenced the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula in every aspect of daily life: beginning from their architecture and mode of living to clothing, food, social and military life; from their mores and customs to popular art and music; from their overall lifestyle to their way of thinking and worldview (Çabej, 1994). As is evident, this influence has touched every aspect of their material and spiritual life.

In general, Ottoman rule has left indelible marks in the Balkans. However, Albania's location at the crossroads between East and West, which has emerged as a determining factor in the country's history, is also reflected in the nation's literature. In the works of Albania's national poet, Naim Frashëri, the western European worldview merges with the worldview of the Orient, both fusing and assimilating into one another, but without suppressing the Albanian element. This literary influence assumes greater significance when considering that the Islamic-oriental world has profoundly influenced the poet's psyche as reflected in his poetry.

The earliest works of Albanian literature contain a myriad of biblical and Koranic elements and are, therefore, considered "texts of linguistic significance" and bear little literary value. Consequently, it has often been the case that a fragmentary rather than a holistic approach has been taken to the study of the earliest literature. The literary critic and historian of Albanian literature, Rexhep Qosja, has written broadly on the subject, along with many other scholars, including: Sabri Hamiti, Anton Berisha, Ibrahim Rugova, Aurel Plasari, Stefan Çapaliku, Anton Berishaj, Isak Ahmeti, Kujtim Rrahmani, Kujtim Shala etc.

On the Bible's considerable influence on Albanian literature, Sabri Hamiti writes: "From its origins, our literature has rested on the biblical canon for several centuries, initially descriptive and transcriptive in nature, and later imitative. In the XVI and XVII centuries, which are commonly known as the era of old Albanian literature, the links to biblical texts are of a thematic and sermonizing nature" (Berishaj, 1996).

Old literature, as defined above, has also been characterized as "biblical literature" (Berishaj, 1996), but consistently with the intention that this notion is carried over to those features of the literature of later periods

in which biblical canon emerges in various forms, either as structural elements at the thematic level or that of discourse.

The statement that early Albanian literature, that of XVI and XVII centuries, was essentially religious literature, is accurate. During this period, much of the writing produced in the Albanian language was related to religion and the church. This was due in part to the influence of the Counter-Reformation, which aimed to combat the spread of the Protestantism in Catholic countries like Albania (Elsie, 1995). Initially, much of the Albanians literature produced was translations of church texts from Latin and Italian. These translations helped to disseminate religious knowledge and doctrine among the Albanian people. Later original works began to be written in Albanian, but they were still primarily focused on religious themes.

Old Albanian literature has primarily been studied for its linguistic, cultural and historic attributes (Berishaj, 1996). In many cases, the works of various authors (such as Shuteriqi, Hysa etc.) have been predominantly classified as “religious texts,” which has consistently held negative connotations.

The Bible’s influence on old Albanian literature is only natural in light of its cultural and civilizing capacities. It is certainly difficult, if not impossible, to explore the works of Buzuku, Budi, Bogdani, Variboba, Fishta, Kuteli, Noli, Pashku and numerous others, without taking into account their biblical undertones. These authors infuse biblical discourse with themes from folk literature. In Albanian literature, such works include Bogdani’s “Cuneus Prophetarum”, Noli’s poetry, Anton Pashku’s novel “Oh,” which, as literary compositions, rely on the poetics of biblical verse, which has become a writing and creative culture for these authors. In this literary corpus, biblical discourse surfaces, animates events, biblical characters entitle novels, poems, and many contemporary writers also entitle their compositions with the names of biblical or Koranic characters such as: Musa Ramadani’s “Adam’s Sins”, Sabri Hamiti’s “Adam Had a Prayer,” Ramadan Musliu’s “Contempt in Front of Christ,” Zejnullah Rrahmani’s “Yusuf” and many others.

In old Albanian literature, the Bible, as one of capital work of literature, plays a central role, without which it would not endure. The oldest published book in Albanian, “Missal” (1555), was based on Holy Scripture. Numerous literary genres appear in the book: psalms, hymns, epistles, lyric poetry, prose poetry, proverbs, legends, and tales.

Biblical discourse is not a dominant feature of XIX century literature, yet its associations to this type of discourse are inescapable literary, in its cultural as well as the literary-aesthetic dimensions. We no longer have writers who translate biblical texts, or compilations, in the sense that we find in old Albanian literature. Nevertheless, links to biblical texts appear with a broader meaning, more layered, with a literary sensibility, that emerge within the text as a culture of creative writing, infused with elements of national literature, has taken shape. Sabri Hamiti notes that, in his poem “Before Christ,” Naim Frashëri has written a hymnal poem of praise for Jesus Christ. This poem is an integral part of Frashëri’s ideals of compassion, love and sacrifice, which are fundamental postulates of biblical tradition and philosophy (Krasniqi, 2011). In the form of a hymn, it once again reaffirms the presence of biblical discourse as a model of composition, and even etches this figure, highlighting kindness, beauty, compassion, forgiveness through verse:

“Son of God / Your face reveals to me / Oh the evils mankind / Has done and continues to do / Since this face / Is a reflection / And reveals to us / Without deception”

Jesus Christ is at the heart of Shtjefën Gjeçovi’s works (Sopi, 2013). Jesus belongs to everyone; manifested in his works and mission is the divine concern for truth and virtue, of a man who does everything in his power to save sinners and help the indigent, the infirm, the oppressed and the downtrodden. The author, inspired by the life of “the Redeemer of the World,” summarizes the teachings of the four gospels. Yet, as a faithful servant of the Word of God, he does not impose his own judgements or sentiments, but rather relays the message, wisdom and Word of God, through the Incarnate word. Enlightened, inspired and influenced by the teachings of the Gospels, Gjeçovi attempts to speak in the language of a contemporary of Jesus Christ on one hand, and on the other, with exceptional skill, he speaks in the language of his own countrymen.

Faik Konica, the greatest literary critic of his time, also employs biblical discourse. Thus, his “Prayer for Writers” is written in the form of pure hypertext, which rests on the biblical hypertext, on the prayers of the New

Covenant that Jesus Christ imparts to the Apostles, "Our Father." This prayer, in the version of the empirical author, is dedicated to writers, yet at times it is difficult to know where the biblical text ends, and the author's own words begin.

Konica's text:

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven, give us the strength to keep our mouths shut when we have nothing to say! Give us the patience to study an issue before writing about it! Instill in us a keen sense of justice so that we may not only proclaim righteousness, but live it as well! Save us from the pitfalls of grammar, bastardization of language and transgressions of the press. Amen."

Whereas, the biblical verse reads:

"Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heave. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen".

Interestingly enough, biblical discourse persists through each literary period and genre. In this respect, this writing culture emerges as a foundation of literature. Authors seek the Lord's compassion, and pray for harmony and well-being, even for aid in personal challenges.

This creative writing archetype clearly emerges in Zejnullah Rrahmani's novel "Roundabout Square" (1978), which corresponds intertextually with biblical verse. Rrahmani even incorporates entire Bible verses into his novel, particularly from the New Covenant, namely the dialogue between Christ and his disciple Peter.

Zejnullah Rrahmani's text reads:

"... To tell you the truth, I who did not fare well and as I stand here, speaking to you, I can't help but think about the words of Christ to Saint Peter... and Saint Peter answered and said: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of God. Blessed art thou, son of John, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Rrahmani, 2000).

These verses are a passage from the Bible, specifically from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 16:17-19). In this passage, Jesus is speaking to his disciple Peter and acknowledging him as the rock upon which he will build his church. The phrase "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" implies that the church, built on the foundation of faith in Jesus, will ultimately triumph over any opposition.

Jesus refers to Peter as the "rock" upon which he will build his church. This suggests that Peter will play a significant role in the establishment and growth of the Christian community.

Overall, this verse is significant in affirming Peter's role in the early Christian community and emphasizing the authority and responsibility given to him by Jesus. It is often interpreted as a basis for the primacy of Peter and the establishment of the papacy in the Catholic Church.

Albanian people have had a long and complex history with Islam and the Ottoman Empire. For centuries, the Ottoman Empire dominated much of the Balkans, including Albania, and had a significant impact on the cultural, political and religious development of the Albanian people.

During this time, many Albanians converted to Islam, which became the dominant religion in the region. However, Albanian Muslims also developed their own unique interpretation of Islam, known as Bektashism, which incorporated elements of pre-Islamic Albanian beliefs and practices.

Despite occasional conflicts and resistance to Ottoman rule, the Albanian people also made significant contributions to Ottoman society and culture. Albanians served in the Ottoman military and bureaucracy, and many rose to high positions of power and influence. (<https://www.zeriislam.com/artikulli?id=3239>; retrieved 15.05.2023)

Oriental influences naturally left their mark in our country given the five centuries of Ottoman rule and the gradual Islamization of our nation.

Preoccupied with the fate of the nation, our writers focused their creative talents on the struggle for independence. The poetry of this period, largely written in Arabic script, holds an important place in Albanian literature. These writers indeed couple religious beliefs with national political ideals, creating magnificent verse in the process.

Although religious mysticism permeates the poetry of this period, a clear message seems to emerge, namely that love forms the basis of the creation of the world, life and mankind, and according to which good prevails and evil is defeated, the love for one's country is a prerequisite to knowing this all-encompassing and universal love. Love is elevated to a divine category. Indeed, love is the force and will of the Lord, with which He has created life, the firmament, the Sun, the rain, the land and mankind; it is this supreme love, governing every aspect of life, that will be wanting if one lacks a love for one's country.

Religious and national elements (Bejtexhin Poetry, 2010) can be found in the works of numerous poets. The presence of God, the aesthetic element (Qerimi, 2000), is an attempt to supplant the search for the real for the ideal, imaginary. Likewise, the presence of this imaginary, ideal element, a correlation of the aesthetic element in the real element (national and individual), a blending of the two elements, pervades the works of many of our writers. They focus primarily on social and personal topics. The most prominent writers of this period are Hasan Zyko Kamberi, Muhamet Cami and Nezim Berati. Although the works of Bejtexhin authors remained as manuscripts, they nevertheless stand out as poets in every sense of the word.

Influenced by the Koran, Bejtexhin literature, and later part of Naim Frashëri's poetry, gave rise to new forms of literature. Particularly noteworthy works include Hasan Zyko Kamberi's mevlud, Muhamet Kÿçyku's "Erveheja," Hafiz Ali Korça's "Yusuf and Zulaikha" etc.

In Hafiz Ali Korça's poem "Yusuf and Zulaikha" morality and religion are at the forefront (Hamiti, 2013). The tale of Yusuf comes from the Koran and is naturally written in the Islamic tradition and this defines Yusuf's persona throughout the poem.

That king of fairness

God's beloved,

Was a gentleman and man's man

Would not succumb to persuasion

These highly symbolic events and stories of the oriental-Islamic tradition have found their way into Albanian literature.

Koranic influences are also evident in Muhamet Kÿçyku's poem "Erveheja". It is an original poem, in which the author sings, with great artistic mastery, above all of Ervehe's morality and noble spirit – as the main character, she embodies the loftiest Albanian, human as well as Koranic virtues, such as honesty, decency, kindness and love shown towards mankind and God.

Said he, this life I shall live

Thus with great sorrow.

God willing I shall reunite

In Heaven with my Ervehe (Bejtexhin Poetry, 2010)

Muhamed Kÿçyku linked social morality to religious morality, entrenched in the belief that only those that have cultivated a religious consciousness are capable of resisting the evils of the world.

As previously mentioned, Naim Frashëri was well-versed in the holy Koran. Therefore, in addition to making use of national themes in his poetry, the Koran for him was an inexhaustible source of inspiration having

borrowed ideas, events, images, myths and symbols. Frashëri also seeks moral teaching from the Lord (Qerimi, 2015). Thus, he also borrows symbols from the Bible, such as in the lyrical poem “Before Christ,” where Christ is evoked as a symbol and a martyred figure of kindness, illumination, compassion, love, companionship and equality of all men. Thus, by employing religious symbols, Frashëri seeks to achieve those effects and messages as dictated by the national awakening and history. He seeks to enhance links with the Albanian religious community, hoping to become more comprehensible by using shared symbols – the symbolism of the Lord.

Frashëri’s Lord confronts the wicked and the evil, invaders and tyrants alike, and comforts and aids the benevolent, the just, the oppressed and the indigent (Qerimi, 2015). This becomes clear in the following verses:

Whosoever labors for his country

Shall gain the Lord’s favor

In this study on “Divine Insights: Religious Influences in Albanian Literature”, an examination of the integration of oriental and occidental themes, identification and interpretation of Biblical and Koranic influences, exploration of motifs and literary figures

derived from religious texts, and the interplay between religion, culture and literature in Albanian literature is conducted. The study revealed that Albanian literature demonstrates a notable integration of oriental and occidental themes, reflecting the cultural diversity and historical influences within the Albanian context. The incorporation of religious elements from both the Bible and the Koran enriches the literary landscape, creating a unique fusion of Eastern and Western traditions.

The research identified significant Biblical and Koranic influences in Albanian literature. Authors such as Ismajl Kadare, Zejnullah Rrahmani, Beqr Musliu and many others skillfully incorporate religious themes, motifs and narratives in their works. These influences provide deeper layers of meaning, moral reflections and cultural resonance within the literary texts.

One such example is Zejnullah Rrahmani’s novel “Yusuf” (2000), in which the main character embodies, albeit implicitly, Biblical as well as Koranic tenets. It mirrors the Biblical Truth, which is linked not only to Genesis 23:4, but the most beautiful chronicle of the Koranic Truth, namely with the verse of ‘the most beautiful narrative.’

However, Biblical and Koranic legend has made the novel more inscrutable and the subject matter is somewhat more elusive for the common reader. Commenting on this issue, Kujtim Shala writes: Joseph is an original Biblical character, whereas Yusuf is the Koranic equivalent. Therefore, as such, the literary character (Yusuf) is a symbolic persona that relates to both Biblical and Koranic tradition.

The Bible and the Koran both have great literary value, from which Albanian and world literature have borrowed motifs, figures, stylistic elements, events and characters. All of our cultural tradition and civilization are a product of Holy Scripture, which embodies a noble spirit, a holy spirit. The Bible and the Koran remain an inexhaustible source of artistic inspiration, vigor and creativity for every significant author, creating a distinct literature with Biblical and Koranic themes, motifs and meanings.

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