

Chapter 18

Religious Peace in Albania

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ABSTRACT

This chapter brings the example of religious peace in Albania, a small country in the Balkan Peninsula. The people of Albania today follow four major religions. They can be Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox, Bektashi, or atheists. This religious colorfulness has been a trait of the country for many centuries. Nevertheless, it has not ever caused any religion-based conflict between the people nor has it been a criterion of unfairness. Albania has been and is today the picture of harmonious coexistence of different religions. This chapter is aimed to make the Albanian example more visible to the world.

INTRODUCTION

Religious tolerance is always a timely topic. It has particularly emerged as a necessity during the last decades. Our world is made up of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, Jews, as well as others who follow other religions. In order for all to get along and live peacefully, religious tolerance is a must. It is an important means to build respectful relations with others, be they citizens of our city or neighboring states.

This chapter discusses religious peace and harmony in Albania, a small country in the Balkan Peninsula of Europe. The people of Albania today follow four major religions. They are Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox, Bektashi, believers without denomination or atheists. This religious colorfulness has been an Albanian feature for many centuries. Nevertheless, it has never caused any religion-based conflict nor has it been a criterion of inequitable treatment in society or accessibility to services.

This study argues for Albania being the closest possible model of a utopian picture of harmonious coexistence of different religions in a modern state. For this reason this chapter explores the Albanian example in order to draw out some insights for others to adapt in their respective countries. The paper starts with a general history of the major religions and the way they entered the country. To illustrate this coexistence of different religions it describes relevant customs and traditions that are both products of natural tolerance and cultivators of it. The author brings many tales of foreign travelers who have visited the country in different eras and have always been astonished by this characteristic of the people.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3001-5.ch018

Naturally, a considerable part of this chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the reasons, both historic and socio-cultural, that contributed to this way of being. The way the state has regulated its relations with the religious communities is of equal relevance in this analysis. Finally, the author illustrates, with practical examples, how Albania is able to maintain this harmony.

About Albania

The origin of the Albanian people is linked to that of the ancient Illyrians. The Illyrians are descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the Balkan, the Pelasgic people. This heritage line continues in the form of: Pelasgic – Illyrian – Albanian. It is a historically established fact that the Albanian people are autochthonous in their lands (Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 1994).

The Illyrians were not a uniform body of people but a conglomeration of many tribes. They settled in the western part of the Balkan Peninsula, where they created their culture, language and anthropological characteristics. It is in this part of Europe that many ancient authors, like Homer, mention them.

Today, after few thousand years, in a much more condensed part of those same territories live the Albanian people. They share a common culture and speak a language that is a distinct branch of the Indo-European family of languages. However, they don't all live in the same state. There are two Albanian states today: Albania and Kosovo, which is the newest state in the world. Significant Albanian majority lands, due to historical events, are also included as territorial parts of the neighboring states of Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia.

In Albania the population is estimated to be around three million people and in Kosovo almost two million. Moreover, there are almost ten million Albanians living abroad. They reside mainly in Europe and the United States.

Irrespective of where they live, Albanian people today follow four major religions. According to the 2011 census conducted in Albania, almost 57 percent of the population declare themselves to be Muslim. Ten percent say they are Catholic and six percent identify as Christian Orthodox. In addition, the Bektashi Muslim (a Sufi order whose world headquarters are in Albania) constitutes two percent. Believers without denomination are five percent, and almost 14 percent did not prefer to answer (INSTAT Albania).

The data gathered by the census are reported in Table 1.

Despite this diversity, these four communities are a reflection of excellent interfaith relations. The indicated applies to their followers, the clergyman and the respective religious leaders of the different faiths. This rare example of coexistence in Albania has a foundation built through centuries of history.

Albania and Its Religions

1. Christianity

Originally Illyria was pagan. It was under the occupation of the Roman Empire since 168 BC. Christianity became an official religion of the Roman Empire in the beginning of the 4th century AD under the rule of Emperor Konstantin. But Christianity was already introduced to the Illyrians since the first centuries of our era when, it is claimed, that St. Paul himself preached it to the Illyrians. This is on account of the fact that one of the very few letters attributed to him mentions Illyria. On this particular letter sent to the Romans he says,

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