

# Church and State in Albania

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Immediately after a communist regime was established in Albania, official policy towards the Church was ambivalent as was the case in many other East European states. Freedom of conscience and religion was constitutionally guaranteed, but the Albanian Party of Labour (APL) almost immediately moved to suppress religious activity, particularly that of the Roman Catholics. The Muslim and Orthodox organizations, both much larger than the Roman Catholic Church, received similar treatment, and it is generally agreed that by 1967 organized religion had been eliminated in Albania.<sup>1</sup> However, during the past decade a campaign has been launched to suppress more than organized religion: this operation has sought to eradicate all religious thought and to eliminate what Party journals denounce as "religious manifestations" and "backward customs" associated with the three Albanian religious communities. This effort has been pursued with a rhetorical intensity unique by contemporary East European standards.

The campaign began with a speech by Enver Hoxha on 6 February, 1967 in Tirana in which the APL chief called for a "major battle to further revolutionize the Party". The revolutionary communists sought by Hoxha were to "deal destruction on everything that is wrong and decrepit" – a broad concept which includes any vestiges of Albania's once active religious organizations.<sup>2</sup> Hoxha's speech was followed by a series of mass meetings and confrontations throughout the country which were designed to expose any individuals whose behaviour did not keep to the APL's Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist norms. In addition a campaign in the mass media was organized to make all citizens more aware of the "menace" still posed to Albania by "religious ideology".

The nature of many of the confrontations ordered by the APL was seen a few weeks after Hoxha's speech when the cloister of the Franciscan order in Shkoder was burned and four monks were killed. Shortly after this the Catholic cathedrals in Tirana, Shkoder, and Durres were defaced and converted into museums. At this time the Party also prevented workers from taking advantage of the religious holidays still celebrated before 1967.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, after several years of this anti-religious campaign, the Party was still not satisfied. In 1973, the APL daily, *Zeri i Popullit*, disparaged those who believed that religion had disappeared, and complained that "even some secretaries of Party organizations and bureaux have fallen into these positions". Atheist propaganda, it charged, was not going well and the "under-estimation of religious *weltanschauung* and rites" was in itself becoming a major problem. The new anti-religious campaign, *Zeri i Popullit* declared, must pass "from discussion and confrontation to action and realization".<sup>4</sup>

The specific objectives of the APL's anti-religious propaganda were to stimulate a continuing "revolutionary spirit" against religion and to uncover individual acts of faith still common among much of the population. A major APL theme stressed that in spite of the elimination of churches and mosques, religion continued to be a threat to the regime. Although the destruction of formal religious establishments was not disputed, there was apparently disagreement over what remained of religion. In 1976 the Democratic Front decried activists for considering that religious beliefs were unimportant and dying out. Such a loss of "revolutionary vigilance", it charged, helped reactivate certain religious ceremonies in Mat and several other districts.<sup>5</sup> The Party rejected the view that the persistence of such customs was a minor concern, even when they were practised in private, as was usually the case. On the contrary, according to a 1976 report, they were described as "dangerous because they are underestimated and unnoticed".<sup>6</sup>

While officials stated that the overwhelming majority of the population were "detached from religious influences", they admitted the existence of a differentiated scale of detachment. Some people showed a "stable detachment", others an "unstable" one. Still others were attached to certain rules and religious rites, but not generally to major tenets of faith. Finally, certain groups and individuals had a stable attachment to major dogmas of faith.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on the extent of what the regime views as a serious problem, a publication of the APL Central Committee complained in 1975 that "there are many who . . . now actually retain their belief in the dogmas of the faith"; and this publication identified the "declassed elements with a bad political stance" as the most likely offenders.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Arif Gashi, a Party specialist on religion, added those "touched by the government for political and ordinary crimes and the elderly" to the list of people who retained "religious prejudice".<sup>9</sup> Numerous accounts cited former priests as the principal "declassed elements" who were still actively involved in performing religious rites, while others described the elderly as the main culprits. Yet it was also admitted that young people could be attracted to religion – a fact which particularly alarmed the Party. In 1975 Dr. Gashi wrote about the impact which religious ideology had on Albanian youth, particularly within the family circle where those ideas were "still strong and influential".<sup>10</sup>

What events have stimulated this concern? A survey of the Albanian press over the last few years provides an interesting catalogue of religious customs and rites which have been preserved despite three decades of anti-religious pressure. Among the Muslim population fasting for Ramadan and the celebration of Bairam are frequent occurrences, and Muslim graves still face Mecca in some districts. To eat Halva when someone dies and to dig deeper graves for women than men are other expressions of religious belief.<sup>11</sup> The funeral ceremonies which continue to be observed have caused the regime considerable concern. Although requiems are no longer performed at the time of burial, neighbours will frequently observe the custom of offering consolation to the family on the 3rd, 9th, and 14th day after the death. Wooden crosses are sometimes placed on graves, and at a funeral in the Shkoder district a cross was actually carried in the procession. Eating habits with religious connotations attract considerable attention: there are frequent official complaints about drops in the consumption of milk and yogurt during Lent and the increased purchases of sugar on the eve of St. George's day in certain communities. The refusal to eat pork is also cited as a frequent problem. Easter has been observed according to reports: for example, at the Drenove Agricultural Cooperative nobody, including APL cadres, reported for work on Easter Day in 1973, even though they were in the middle of the spring planting.<sup>12</sup> The press has also called attention to the practice of circumcision, which is described officially as a "horrible act with religious significance".<sup>13</sup> In the APL's view, the continuing activities of faith healers threaten the health of the population. When a Muslim faith healer was exposed in Lushnje in 1972, he was denounced by name for the next year while activists were repeatedly warned about the problems posed by such individuals.<sup>14</sup> To wear amulets, to refuse to wash the floors of one's home, to give a wedding feast, and for a bride to wear a veil are other frequently censured vestiges of religious belief.<sup>15</sup> Last but not least, religious expressions are used by Albanian citizens when they speak; these as well as words with some remote religious significance are cited in the press as terms to be avoided; and in the lower grades of schools teachers are urged to be aware of and combat such habits of "bad speech".<sup>16</sup>

Currently the main responsibility for the anti-religious campaign rests with the Democratic Front, a key element in the control mechanism of the APL, which works through local activists and expresses itself through its daily newspaper *Bashkimi*.<sup>17</sup> This campaign uses two major approaches. The first is a massive educational programme which is designed to show the futility and danger of religion. According to *Bashkimi*, this programme has been described as "our educational work of persuasion", work that "must continue without interruption".<sup>17</sup> To prevent interruption, the Front demands that citizens participate through lectures, photo-

graphic exhibitions, and scientific sessions. As recently as July, 1977 a series of scientific sessions were held throughout Albania: their main theme was the "struggle against religion".<sup>18</sup> Stage, film, and art are also mobilized and required to stress anti-religious subjects; frequent poster campaigns are also used to further popularize atheistic ideas. Special institutions, such as the atheist museum at Shkoder, have been established. The Shkoder museum, it is claimed, demonstrates "the inhuman acts committed by those who have worn cassocks or carried the Koran".<sup>19</sup> The educational programme is supplemented by research into the "psychological motives" of believers and by surveys which are designed to determine the social, economic, and personal characteristics of those still following religious teachings.<sup>20</sup>

The second major technique employs a variety of "popular actions". The most common of these are the "confrontations" and "accountings" which are frequently cited in the press. For example, one report notes that "sound social opinion called for an accounting and took a stand against the two people in the village who observed Ramadan".<sup>21</sup> Given the context and tone of the report, there can be little doubt that at least some physical violence was involved. Demands to increase the pressure on individuals are seen in calls for "collective concern for intimate matters of the family". The press implores citizens to expose "infringers of morality", even if they are friends, neighbours, or relatives, and it praises or censures individuals depending on whether they accept or reject this special obligation of an Albanian citizen.<sup>22</sup> The involvement of young people in this campaign is emphasized. The students of the Naim Frasheri school in Durres have been singled out as "initiators of the ideological assault on religious ideology". *Zeri i Popullit* notes that the "entire student body" debates Party decisions on religion and has unanimously condemned "liberal attitudes" towards religion. The students have also demanded that textbooks be used more effectively in the anti-religious campaign and that the debate against religion be extended into the family. *Zeri i Popullit* describes a leaflet campaign which was launched by students who wanted to spread the anti-religious struggle throughout the community.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the APL has undertaken overt steps to "replace the old with the new" by offering new "patriotic festivals" to replace religious holidays. This project, especially important since 1967, has promoted such events as Border Guard Day and the Festival of Electric Light.<sup>24</sup> The Party has also demanded that places with religious names should be renamed: for example, in the village of Kabash, St. Nicholas Plain has become simply "wheat field". Teachers are urged to point out these changes to students so as to demonstrate that "the old is giving way to the new even in the assignment of place names".<sup>25</sup>

To make the point more explicit, the APL links all religious practices

with the activities of Albania's foreign enemies. Priests are denounced as foreign agents and the Party press reminds readers of the relative freedom with which the Church operates in Poland and the USSR. Because religion is practised in capitalist and "revisionist" countries this means, according to the APL, that "religion has been and remains an inseparable part of the organism of the exploiting classes . . ."<sup>26</sup>

From our geographical position, it is difficult to determine the success of the APL's most recent campaign. It would be reasonable to assume that the remnants of religion could be swept away in this fashion. The Churches, of course, have been destroyed and under Article 55 of the new constitution all religious organizations are forbidden. Yet to assume that this campaign has been completely successful may not be warranted, as the author of a recent study of the Church in Eastern Europe has concluded. According to Alfred Schickel's research, "religious feeling is astir in Albania and youth in particular is seeking deeper answers than the Albanian communists provide".<sup>27</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Area Handbook for Albania*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1971, pp. 96-99.

<sup>2</sup> Enver Hoxha, *Speeches 1967-1968*, Tirana, Naim Frashëri Publishing House, 1969, pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Area Handbook for Albania*, p. 78 and pp. 100-1.

<sup>4</sup> *Zeri i Popullit*, 5 May 1973, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Bashkimi*, 20 July 1976, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 May 1976, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Zeri i Popullit*, 12 January 1974, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Rruga e Partise*, April 1975, pp. 68-74.

<sup>9</sup> *Zeri i Popullit*, 12 January 1974, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 June 1975, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Bashkimi*, 8 May 1973, p. 3, 25 January 1973, p. 3, and 13 October 1973, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 January 1973, p. 3 and 18 September 1973, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Zeri i Popullit*, 1 June 1975, p. 2 and *Bashkimi*, 30 January 1973, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Bashkimi*, 21 December 1972, p. 3 and 28 October 1973, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 February 1975, p. 1 and 13 October 1973, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Mesuesi*, 2 April 1975, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Bashkimi*, 17 December 1974, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Tirana Home Service radio, 16 July 1977.

<sup>19</sup> *Zeri i Rinise*, 15 August 1973, p. 5 and *Puna*, 11 October 1977, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Puna*, 21 August 1973, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Bashkimi*, 17 December 1974, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 October 1975, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Zeri i Popullit*, 28 February 1974, pp. 1-3.

<sup>24</sup> *Bashkimi*, 18 April 1974, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Mesuesi*, 1 September 1977, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Zeri i Popullit*, 6 May 1973, p. 4 and *Bashkimi*, 29 August 1973, pp. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> *Rheinischer Merkur*, 24 June 1977, p. 21.



A symbol of socialist Albania : this statue of an Albanian holding a rifle and pickaxe, stands outside the museum of Figurative Art in Tirana, capital of Albania. Although by 1967 all organized religion had been eliminated in Albania, that year a virulent campaign was launched to eradicate all remaining "religicus manifestations". (See article pp. 148-52).



*Above right* Chapel dedicated to the first Christian martyr, St Stephen, found during excavations in the Roman Arena at Durrës, Albania.

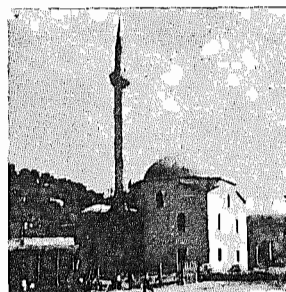
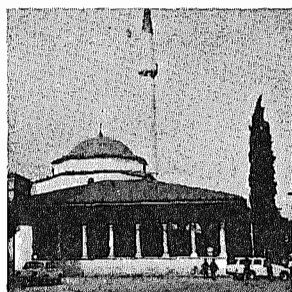
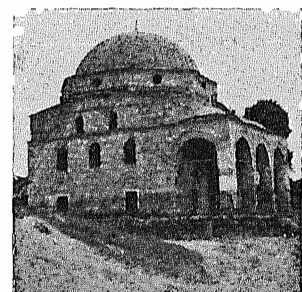


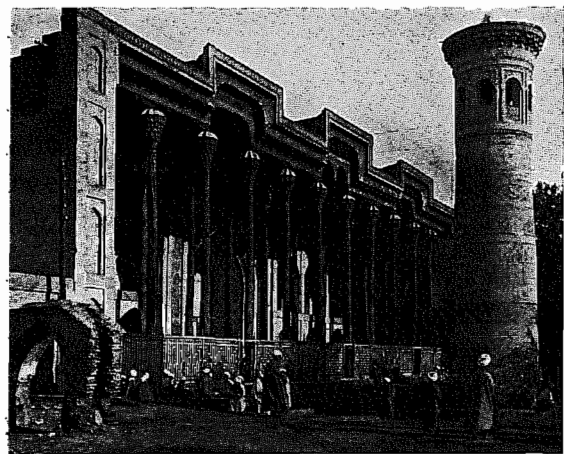
*Right* A Byzantine church in Albania, now a museum. Copies of the icons and frescoes in this church were made when the originals were taken to a central museum. These can still be seen in this church. One of the frescoes depicts the Ascension of Christ.

*Below left* A closed church in Albania, now described as a "Monument of Culture".

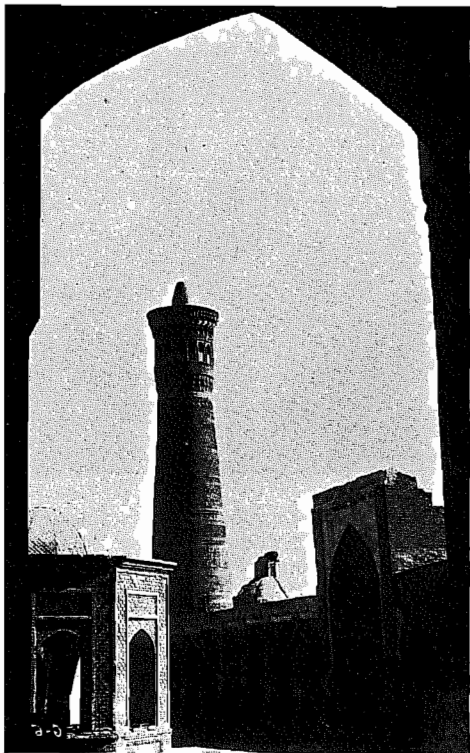
*Below centre* A mosque, now closed, which stands in the main square of Tirana, capital of Albania.

*Below right* A mosque in Berat being restored as a cultural monument.

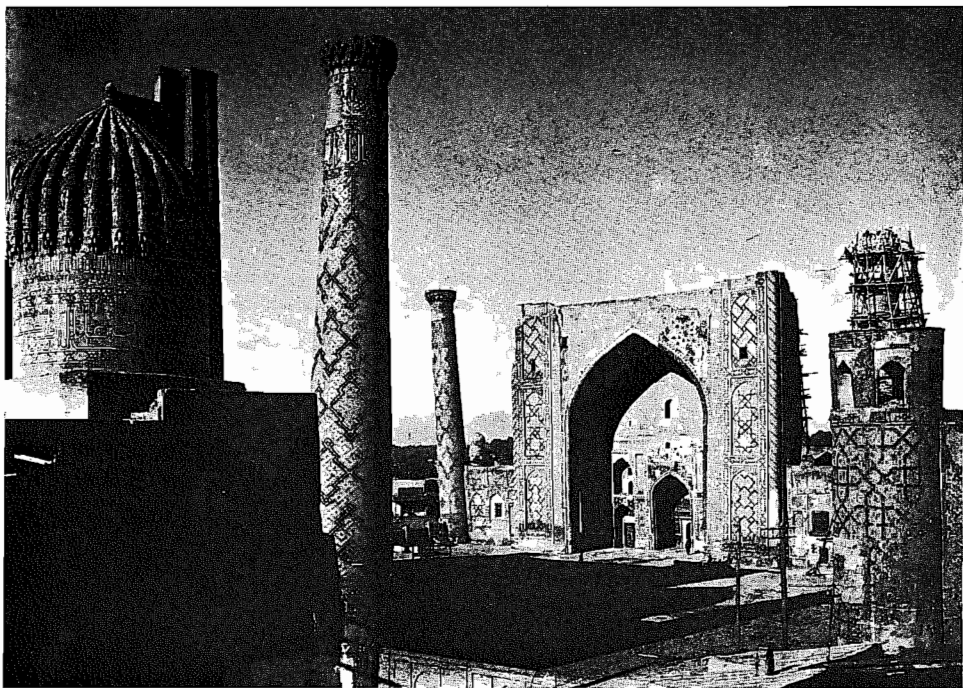




The "Belo-Khauz" mosque in Bukhara (Uzbekistan) which was built in the 17th century. Less than 300 "working mosques" remain for the large Muslim population of the USSR, as compared with 24,000 before 1917. Today the USSR is the fifth Muslim power in the world (see article pp. 153-61).



A 12th-century minaret in Bukhara.



The great square—the Registan—in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) which is flanked by three *medressehs* (Muslim institutions for training religious leaders). Only two *medressehs* now function in the Soviet Union, and from these only 50 students graduate each year (see article pp. 153-61).