

ALBANIANS AND ISLAM – A BRIEF SURVEY

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Abstract

This study explores the historical and cultural relationship between Albanians and Islam, analyzing both meta-historical perspectives and key aspects of its spread throughout Albanian territories. Unfortunately, there are historical data somewhat contradictory concerning this matter resulting from the influence of daily politics; nevertheless, the fact remains that Islamic culture is present among this people both as a religion and a civilization.

The text emphasizes that, contrary to common stereotypes, the Islamization of Albanians was not imposed by force but often occurred voluntarily, particularly among the poorer social classes and segments of the local elite. The author argues that the presence of Islam played a crucial role in preserving Albanian national identity by preventing ethnic and cultural assimilation by neighboring peoples. Islam is presented not only as a religion but as a civilization that significantly influenced the formation of Albanian unity and culture. It remains an important spiritual component that can support the future progress of Muslim Albanians when harmonized with contemporary development and values.

Keywords: *Religion-culture Relationship; Islam; Islamic civilization; Balkan history; National identity; Cultural unity; Spiritual tradition.*

Introduction

The history of the Balkan peoples is intertwined with vague notions of their ethno-genesis. Long-standing attempts to extract the constituent ethno-genesis of any Balkan people have been confronted with the impossibility of having a clear scientific picture, which would be in accordance with the mythological and epic notions; thus a psychology of knowledge resistant to reexamination from the perspective offered by science itself has been created.

As for the Albanians, they are an indigenous people in the Balkans and “descendants of the ancient Illyrians” among the most well-known indigenous peoples in the ancient history of the Balkans are undoubtedly the Illyrians, the Thracians, etc. The Illyrians, as heirs of the Pelasgians, are among the most ancient inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula. The Illyrians formed their culture, language and anthropological features in their own land, in the western part of the Balkan Peninsula, where ancient authors mention them in their works. The territories of the Illyrian population are quite extensive; they include the entire western part of the Balkan Peninsula, from tributaries of the Danube, the Sava and Drava rivers in the north to the Gulf of Ambracia – Narta or Preveza, in the south, and in the east to the territories around Lake Lyhndos (Lake Ohrid). Separate groups of Illyrians also settled in Southern Italy. The ethnic name Illyrian appears in ancient works since the 5th century BC by Homer, but the time of the formation of the Illyrian ethnos is much more ancient. The beginnings of the Illyrian origin go back to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, the Middle Bronze Age, when the Illyrian ethnic features began to form, (Akademia e Shkencave e RPSSH, 1985); (Opća enciklopedija 3 (JLZ), 1977); (Meydan-Larousse, 1990); (Stipčević, 1984); (Andrea, 1987).

who have inhabited these lands since ancient times, before our era, at least during the Mediterranean-Pelasgian historical period. All these data speak of the fact that Albanian culture, traditions, mores and customs have their roots in ancient times. The spiritual and material culture of the Albanian ancestors served as a basis for the development of the spiritual and material cultures of the neighboring peoples settled in the Illyrian lands (Pirraku, 1982); (Stojanović, 1896); (Ushaku, 1981).

The way of formation and development of the Albanian nation has many elements similar to the way of formation and development of other Balkan nations. In addition to the common elements, there are also particular ones

that have a specific character for each Balkan nation, i.e. for the Albanians (Hadri, 1969), like the language, which in spite of the fact that it belongs to the Indo-European language group, it largely distinguishes from them. Tradition or culture has in itself a mysterious force, which is related to the civilization as a whole and which determines every dynamic of a form. That force creates the style of the traditional civilization, a style which cannot be imitated outwardly, but also cannot be understood when external approaches have no regard for its language; that force keeps alive the forms that do not change, which are created and disappear. The distinct beginnings of the culture of the Albanian nation are to be found in the medieval Albanian culture and mainly in the late Middle Ages, respectively at the beginning of the new era. This transitional phase in the history of the Albanian people coincides with the time of the Humanism and Renaissance movement. According to Aleks Buda, the beginnings of culture of the Albanian nationality of Arber are to be found in the 12th century and developed until the 18th century as “the culture of a population with ancient traditions and innovations.” According to this scholar, the main components of this culture, the unity of language and the community of culture as such in the first place, of the popular masses, were shaped in the 7th-12th centuries, when the basic ethnic characteristics of Albanian culture were crystallized (Pirraku M. , 1989).

Before moving on to the history of the emergence of Islam among this ancient Balkan people, we consider appropriate to consider the phenomenon of religion itself, something that each and every people experiences in its own ontological and meta-historical perspective, which is also the substance of this topic.

Religion appears within human history as an inner call and as a goal to find God on one's path, respectively in one's life. This is in fact an attempt to give a final answer to the fundamental human goal, to reach the Infinite through the limitedness of the human being. It grows from man's insatiable need to transcend himself, to find a meaning and, as a created and innocent being, to bow to God as the Creator of the universe.

From this, in fact, arises the impossibility for man, with his mind and discursive knowledge, to fully and completely answer the first questions of our youth and the last question of our old age. Yet for the believer, it is not only that, but it is also a question of integral life, a question on which his whole life depends.

Religion is that form of human existence in which man knows that he is determined by that greatness called God or the indefinite Divine greatness. That is, man knows that he is determined in relation to something that is different, much greater and more original than himself. If religion is a form of human existence, then that form of existence is constituted beginning from the non-human, the divine. This constitution can occur in different ways, but always in such a manner that within the religious form of human life God or the Divine is the primary and final party of the religious relationship (Rahman, 1983).

Regardless of whether we understand religiosity or religious behavior as God's revelation and man's response to it, or as a human pre-tradition, or even as a "social product," it is always present in human experience as a reality of a superhuman origin, as something supra-rational that includes reason and that in its entirety cannot be included in the discursive form of thinking and, accordingly, cannot be objectified in its entirety (Šušnjić, 1982). Religion and religiosity are not phenomena that in themselves and completely can be understood through human mental knowledge, but they are a mystery, a secret in which the believer is involved. In man's life experience, the field of religion is not like some other fields of action; it is a completely privileged field – the field of experiencing the Holy. Religiosity has to do with what is the mysterious and secret field of man's relationship with his God, respectively with those deepest and most intimate dimensions of human existence. This way of interpreting the phenomenon of religion is a topic that has been elaborated upon by many authors of Islamic origin, as well as by philosophers (Hanafi, 1986). Man in his life is a much greater researcher and his soul is not at all satisfied with just seeing something as "how" – as the lawfulness of action. He wants to dive even deeper and reach far to the broader, more complete and more meaningful answers. The specific relationship of the believer towards the Absolute, despite all theological, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and scientific attempts at interpreting and explaining, remains nevertheless primarily a mystery, a secret. But this does not mean that one should give up questioning or researching, or be satisfied with scientific positivism and reductionism while investigating the phenomenon of religion and religiosity (Čimić, 1992).

This is particularly true regarding questions of religion and religiosity or religious behavior, the relation of people with religion and the religious institution. look only at religious objectifications: Scriptures, myths, rites, religious language

of symbols, religious teachings (doctrine, science) and customs. First of all, it would be good to look at the actual situation itself, namely the process of the religious occurrence, the relationship and religious behavior of the one who believes, prays and sacrifices. It is here that religion and religiosity are given to us as a relationship of man to God, the Divine and the sacred. In Within such a relationship, all other human relationships, the very human life as a whole, are shaped. In reality, the essence of authentic religious experience “face to face” with God, the Transcendent, the Other Being, which is “something completely different,” may even resemble to a complete devotion through pious liturgical acts and prayer. Hence, religion encompasses the entire human world, the macro and microcosm, while religiosity implies a full range of religious expressions, motives, and behaviors – as man’s outward behavior. Considering the awareness of participation in the religious act, religiosity can be divided into active and passive. Passive religiosity is found in naming the children, where the child is not aware of this, but as a religious phenomenon it is quite present, such as reciting the call to prayer (adhan) in newborn’s ear, etc. But in the terminology of European religion this is considered a passive phenomenon of religion. It is simply not possible to process all religious phenomena and the nuances of religiosity within the framework of history. It is also impossible to give a complete answer to what a person thinks about all of this, because a religious person thinks differently from a scientist, a phenomenologist from an historian, etc. No one, in reality, can be pulled out from the historical situation, to be able to judge such truly historical and religious phenomena with sufficient correctness. All this can be explained and understood, as positivist scientists think, with the man’s psyche, his history, his relationship to himself, to others, to the society and culture in which he lives. The believer, on the other hand, considers that those secrets have been forever delivered to God and eternity, to God who “descends” into this human temporality in order to raise man and place him in the state of eternal realization, that is – love. This is a return home from where he once fled and got lost. In his wanderings he has lost his connections with the Sustainer, he has forgotten his origins. In seeking a way out of this difficult situation for himself, he has given many answers which have also been lost in new questions. The intervention of God himself became necessary. For this kind of interpretation (Šušnjić & Belić, 1993); (Eliade, 1991). So many diverse expressions of religiosity, of the relationship with the world, so many religious formulations and systems, sects that have created their own religious systems, such a great

diversity of ideas, thoughts, rituals, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and experiences can rarely be found in other spheres of human activity. However, revealed religions, or “religions of scriptures,” as they are called in religious literature, since the religious worldview is contained in the holy scriptures (the Bible for Jews and Christians, and the Qur’an for Muslims), have their origin from God and have been given to people not as an obligation, but as *a call and guidance*. “Fjala huden asht verb ‘masdar’ qi don me thanë: I. Me të rrëfyte udhen e drejtë. II. Me të rrëfyte udhen e drejtë edhe me të dërgue më të.” (“The word *huden* is a ‘masdar’ verb meaning: 1. To show the right path; 2. To tell the right path and to guide to it.”) (Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu, *Ajka e kuptimevet të Kur’ani Qerimit*, p. 31 (Footnote)., which do not enter into the soul with one’s own efforts, meditations, physical exercises, but with acceptance through faith. They are calls to faith, and this means a powerful and intense encounter with God (Nasr, 1981); (Schuon, 1963); (Schuon, 1991).

Of course, Islam cannot be encompassed by any description. It is always something more than what we know or may know. Therefore, here we do not intend to present any new description of Islam; in fact, our aim is to show that Islam is not what most people think of it, that it is not what is taken as a premise in the view of phenomena related to Islam. Reducing it to human history or to a part of it, which lasts about fourteen centuries, goes beyond precisely what Islam clearly says about itself and what Islam recognizes itself in. According to this, a Muslim is the one who follows the call of Muhammad, peace be upon him, in whose example the call to all to become aware of themselves is fully summarized, a call that is timeless and does not accept the disunity of humanity. This appellation, furthermore, means belonging to civilization, which is defined by the forms created in Islam and by Islam. Other possibilities for understanding belonging to Islam on the world level derive from the so-called “scientific definition of Islam.” In fact, Islam is reduced to a religion in the same way as it has happened with other heavenly religions. Accordingly, in general, it cannot be accepted either more or less than what has been accepted for other religions (Mahmutčehajić, 1991). The spread of Islam in Europe muslims firstly arrived in Europe in the 7th century, when Muawiyah and Abdullah ibn Sarkh conquered Cyprus under the banner of Tariq ibn Ziyad and Musa ibn Nusayr in 711 and in 712 with the conquest of Spain. Then, with the conquest of Lyon and Bordeaux in France in 725, 731 and 732, with the conquest of the Mediterranean 827 and 837-841, where

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The second contact of Muslims and Islam with Europe, and the first with the Balkans, occurred in the Vardar-Thessaloniki region in the 9th century. These were the Vardar Turks, Muslims of Slavic origin according to some authors, whom the Byzantine king Theophilus (829-842) forced to migrate from Asia to the Thessaloniki region. Muslims of Slavic origin also had influence in Bulgaria. Lujo Thaler emphasizes that at that time there were many Muslims in Bulgaria. With the distribution of books, attempt was made to encourage them to embrace Islam. However, despite such a large number, these Muslims were assimilated, converted and exterminated.

After that period, in the 11th century we have the emergence of Pecheneg Muslims in the Balkans, who inhabited Hungary and Slavonia. In the 13th century, it is worth mentioning the appearance in the Balkans of Sari Saltuk, who in 1261, along with about forty Turkmen units, settled in Dobruja, Romania. Saltuk has been presented to us as a true missionary of Islam. Muslims from Christian countries secretly joined him and fasted and prayed with him. Thanks to that, Islam first strengthened in Srem, Machva and northeastern Bosnia. An epic called *Saltuknamah* was also sung about this character. Received its greatest impetus with the arrival of the Ottomans. The Ottomans first set foot on European soil in 1345, than continued in 1354 with the conquest of Gallipoli, Edirne in 1361, Sofia in 1382, and Niš in 1386. in these areas. The first massive contacts of Albanians with the Ottomans, according to the most authentic data, took place in 1387 with their arrival in Albania.

It is difficult to determine the exact date when the Islamization of Albanians began, since at the beginning this phenomenon was not so widespread. However, it can be said that Islam among Albanians took place on a massive scale at the beginning of the 15th century. At first, Islam was mainly embraced by local princes. Of scientific importance is the fact that, at least in the beginning, Islam was not imposed by the sword or by pressures of a political and religious nature. Objectively speaking, Islam was embraced everywhere; symbolically

speaking, voluntarily and mainly by the masses exploited by the churches in the pre-Islamic period.

It is worth noting that Albanians, by accepting the religion of Islam, gained political space to highlight their Albanian identity. "*Raca shqiptare është raca më e ndritshme / Të parët e mi kanë qenë princa të Dukagjinit / E gjithë familja ime jeton nga shpata...!*" ("Albanian race is the most enlightened race / My ancestors were princes of the Dukagjin / My entire family lives by the sword...!") (quote in Ottoman language by Yahya Dukagjini from 16th century) (Kaleši, 1957); (Pirraku M., 1989).

The research of Ottoman documentation clearly shows that the degree of Islamization of the Albanian population in Macedonia began around the 15th century, though in symbolic figures. According to the data in the register of names of the Dibra, Gollobërdë, Reka and Çermenika wilayet, dated 1467, it appears that in the wilayets of Upper Dibra and Reka, up to that time, no Islamized inhabitants were registered. However, this does not mean that the phenomenon of Islamization was completely unknown in the region. The officials and employees of the local administration, among whom there were many Albanians, constituted the contingent of the Muslim population of the region... See "Suret-i defter-i vilayet-i Dibri ve Dulgobrdë ve do Reka," (Malizeden Mudevver, no. 506; also Ferit Duka, "Vështrime rreth islamizimit të shqiptarëve të Maqedonisë, shek. XV-XVII," in *Shqiptarët e Maqedonisë*, Skopje 1994, p. 146.) In continuation of this phenomenon, according to historical data, on the religious structure of the population of the Tetova district, from 1450, one may learn that in this city there were more than 60 houses of Muslim origin. This was the beginning of the Islamization of the Albanian population in this area, because the number of inhabitants of Christian origin was greater. Registered, where gradually in terms of percentage the number of Muslims, compared to Christians, grew rapidly. Also, embracing the religion of Islam by the Albanian population of Kërçova (Kichevo), Prilep and other cities in Macedonia was not insignificant. During the second half of the 16th century in in Kosova and Macedonia, as well as in other parts of Albania, Islam was no longer the religion only of the nobles and the administrative and educational classes, but also of a considerable number of heads of urban and rural families, in addition to the broad masses of the people (Pirraku M., 1989).

The trend of Islamization of the population in some Albanian regions, such as Kosova, can be noticed from some data that show that in the eighties of

the 16th century, according to Selami Pulaha, “about 50% of the inhabitants of Kosova and the surrounding territories had converted to Islam. In the early nineties of the 16th century, about 65% of the inhabitants of the towns of Kosovo were Muslims...” (Pirraku D. M., 1991)

One may say that the spread of Islam precisely in areas inhabited mainly by Albanians shows that the phenomenon of Islamization implies in itself an attribute of this population and determines its distinction from other peoples who did not accept the religion of Islam. In the historical aspect, the presence of Islam and its spread throughout the Albanian lands, as a new but not an alien religion. We often notice in many writings dealing with the history of Islam, namely that of embracing Islamic religion, some formulations such as “alien ideology,” “alien religion,” which is unacceptable by the concepts of religion itself, as well as by the Scriptures and further. It is established that heavenly religions do not belong to anyone, neither Christianity nor Islam have owners on earth. These are religions revealed by God to man. Here we will provide a quotation which, among others, says .. The greatest misfortune of this part of the Slavic (read: Balkan) population lies in the fact that it is unknown, except according to the reports of its enemies. Do not ask Christians for their opinion about Muslims...” “because they say the non-truth” (Hadžijahić, 1990), since Islam was nobody’s property and had a universal character, was of great importance for the Albanian nation. Islam disrupted the process of ethnic alienation of the majority of the Albanian population. With the conversion of the Albanians into Islam, the process of Slavic cultural and ethnic leveling in the areas inhabited by Albanians was put to an end. The “new religion,” as it was more vital, presented an important factor for the national integration of a large part of the Albanian population, as well as of the Vlachs in the Albanian-speaking area. Likewise, Islam was a factor in forging of Albanian unity and creation of a new culture and civilization.

As a determining factor in the historical formation and as a fullness of life, founded upon the Divine Revelation and its various temporal expressions, Islam offers the possibility for a complete understanding of historical forms, which have at their foundation the timeless “universal sacred civilization,” without which, of course, any phenomenon based on it cannot be understood and judged only “outwardly,” only from the perspective of European academism. Based on such an approach, which sets off from the transcendental unity of religions, the further development and progress of Muslim Albanians

can be ensured only if their spiritual source in Islam is encouraged and brought into interaction with the entirety of contemporary progress and development.

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