

## RELIGION IN REGARD TO ALBANIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

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### **Abstract**

During the research conducted, we have noticed that many authors have dealt with the treatment of the Albanian National Movement (in Albanian 'Lëvizja Kombëtare Shqiptare'). However, we have few works at our disposal which deal with the treatment of philosophical aspects, respectively ideas, criteria or platform on which stands Albanian nationalism. In this context, religion as a decisive element in the creation of many nations in the region and beyond, to the Albanian people will not take place as a pillar of the establishment of the nation-state. Albanian people during the nineteenth century was divided into three religious communities: Muslim 70%, Orthodox 20% and 10% Catholic. To all neighboring nations, the movement for the formation of their nation began by the part of the population, most of which was comprised from the people with the same religious affiliation. Unlike other nations, the idea for nation formation came from Orthodox Albanians with 20% of people's composition, only later were joined by other religious communities. The abovementioned circumstances created such situations, where religion was seen by stakeholders as inadequate for being one of the pillars on which Albanian National Movement could stand. Such a handicap that makes religious participation impossible in a process quite important for people, can cause instability not only in the stage of nation formation, yet worse during his journey in the future. Such a determination by the ideologues of the movement caused a confusion to the people, for which, we can freely say that the Albanian national vision or nationalism among Albanians came after the creation of the nation-state.

**Keywords:** *movement, religion, nation.*

### **Introduction**

For the 'nation', many different thinkers from different fields of knowledge have spoken, however today there are two concepts that prevail upon others about the formation of the nations.

The first one perceives the formation of the nations as a link between a population that possesses nearby territories, same traditions, cultures and symbols, and common historical past. This concept belongs to the Marxist-Leninist philosophical thought.

The other concept that belongs to the opinion of the authors' mainly from Western countries who links the nation and its formation with citizens' interests to whom provides the necessary security. According to this view, nation makes sense at the moment that sovereignty belongs to the people and in no other way.

The peoples of the Balkans, a region that stretches between East and West during the nineteenth century, were oriented towards the Italian and German concept, while the meaning of the nation knew only intellectual elites.

During the twentieth century, due to expansion of communism in the Balkan Peninsula, the influence of Marxist-Leninist idea of the nation was noticed enough. Despite subsequent perception, creation of national platforms in the Balkans took place in the nineteenth century,

as a result of domestic developments in the Ottoman Empire and external influences. Even the idea, respectively platform of nation-building among Albanians, is rooted in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Greater impetus why exactly during the nineteenth century the nationalist movements began on the Balkan peoples, were: first, the Tanzimat reforms, which played an opposite role of what they had as intention for the extinction of religious divisions in the Ottoman state through the Ottomanisation, and the second was the impact of Enlightenment and French Revolution.

As noted from above, we see that the trigger of the movement of all peoples of the Balkan for the formation of their nation-states was religion, where exactly in the name of religious equalities; demands for national autonomy were born.

Albanian efforts to initially form concepts for their nation was with much difficulty, since it was inspired more by the danger of chauvinism of their neighbors than by self-initiative. Therefore, because of the circumstances in which Albanians were at that time, the concept of nation ideologists was unique from others. National concept of Albanians did not possess exclusive elements for those who feel themselves as Albanians, and religion was not included as the pivot of the nation, because of the Albanian religious affiliation.

Albanian National Movement had its successes despite the skepticism of the many thinkers of the time, however, this concept was not perfect and the most favorable one, because she often brought headaches, inefficiencies and the impairments to the movement. Still a depreciation of this handicap was played by religious currents of Bektashism and Protestantism, one that is skewed towards Islam and the other towards Christianity.

So in this paper we have been focused more on the activity of members of these two subsidiaries of the Great Religions.

Our aim of study was to bring more results about Albanian National Movement in time before it's created. Our study included in two lines, the first dedicated to West theory about nation and second line talking about Marxist Theory in front of nation.

This papers' area of the research is 'RELIGION IN REGARD TO ALBANIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT', with the focus in movement's particularities, especially in religious coexistence.

Our research aimed the following objectives:

- Description of the particularities that characterize the Albanian National Movement.
- Presentation of the values of religious coexistence.

Our research questions are:

- What role did religion play in the formation of the Albanian nation?
- What role did religion play in the formation of the Albanian nation?
- Was there a religious coexistence between Albanians during the years 1840-1912?
- Is there historical evidence for religious conflict among Albanians during the years 1840-1912?
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In our research we have used document studies as a scientific method for data collection. We have used e Internet Explorer web browser as a data collection tool.

This papers data sources were:

Archival funds – These funds were accessed in the Historical Institute of Albania, and  
Historical dossiers – Dossiers of period of Albanian National Movement, found in the Historical Institute of Albania.

## **Protestantism and Bektashism in front of the National Movement**

In terms of time, the protestant movement, starts by the end of XVIII century and by the beginning of XIX century, in areas lived by Albanians. As it seems, first they took place at the Albanian Pasha of Tepelena, who even though that he was a Bektashi, he welcomed them in his Princedom, because many of their rites had things in common. Ali Pashe Tepelena, noticed some democratic qualities to the Protestant Ideas, as far as the religious plan and the cultural progress are concerned. It was him, that Lord Bajron, doctor Henry Holand, ordnance colonel, and diplomatist and albanologist Lik, gave the opportunity to develop a diplomatic activity and, why not, the symbolic extension of protestant ideas to Korfuz.

So, from the Biblical Society invasion, there were some benefits for Albanians in general, especially for the orthodox ones. They, for the first time, get to know with the New Testament's translation into Albanian, made by Vangjel Meksi (most probably the first Albanian employed among the Biblical Society). Another benefit of that translation into Albanian, even though with Greek letters, was that it provided the limitation of Greek Clergy in Janina's Pashallek, and also a successful start in the process of consciousness among Albanians, in these areas.

Authors of the Albanian Education initiatives, who acted within and out their homeland, as the main objective they had the improvement of culture and Albanian Language, focusing in this element that united all Albanians. As mentioned above, the ideologists did not use the exceptive element as other Balkan nations did, because Albanians were divided into several religions, so religion wasn't used as a unite element and it almost was tended to be left behind even though it is the most appropriate pivot that can be used in these kind of purposes, but they tried to leave its place in language aspect, which was in common for the catholic Albanians, as for the Muslim ones. Our first Rennaisant Naum Vecilharxhi in the letter sent to his nephew Jani Cali, among others he says: "...How didn't you catch the idea by comparing all the other nations, that a nation like that of Albanians, created in the same time as the other nations were, takes a specific place on earth, that has language qualities, rules and habits, how is it possible for it to not have its mythological centuries..." (Hyseni, 1981).

It's known that the Albanian Rennaisants of whichever religion, they were always persistent for the written Albanian language, but Protestants are the ones that mostly helped in this direction (Luarasi, 1974), one of them was Naum. Because he lives in Rumania he reached to know best the illuminist ideas and those of French Revolution. He was enough persistent in improving the national culture and to bright the Albanians' consciousness. In this purpose he made the first ABC-book, called 'Evetari', which was well spread in Albania. But when it comes to the opening of Albanian schools and holy books' translation, it can't be forgotten the fact that maybe those protestants had it easier to contribute in this aspect, because they had the support of English and American people, as for the financial aspect and the politic one as well. Therefore, I think that one of the main reasons of Protestantism penetration among Albanians, even among some rennaisants, it's the tolerance phenomena and the great usage of Albanian language among Protestants.

One of the main missionaries of Protestantism, Sir Robert Pinkerton (E. Jacques, 2000), in the first years of Protestantism extension says: "These Albanians, have not even a single word of god in their language", so he orders for the catholic holy books to get translated into Albanian. This was one of the main reasons that enabled a very appropriate situation for

protestants in Albania, knowing that, Muslims, orthodox and Catholics (during this period) considered as banned their holy books translation into Albanian.

As far as the sermons in native language and tolerance in general are concerned, even the 'Muslim protestants' were not left behind. Then the bektashi people, weren't respecting at all the Kur'an statements for foods and drinks. The only animal they weren't eating was rabbit. Also they weren't applying the five main obligations of Islam. So, by the second half of XIX century there were attempts by the bektashi renaissance that in the bektashi shrines to be used Albanian Language, instead of Arabian-Turkish. A great impact in this aspect, I think, had Protestants, because of the fact that after the New Testament's translation by Protestants, bektashi sect started to think this way, which means the usage of Albanian language in shrines.

As another connection with Protestants is that the bektashi attitude towards Catholics, was characterized by a greater tolerance, then Christian religions were penetrated into bektashi lessons and doctrines. So, bektashi knew a kind of dinner with wine, bread and cheese, also the story on sins salvation, a kind of wafer called dinner dedicated to love for God, for his brotherhood etc.

The Christians and bektashi visited almost the same holy places, e.g. in Albania St.Naum at Ohri Lake and Tomor top. Even though, from chronological aspect bektashi in Albanian homeland are much earlier than protestants. They showed up in these areas together with Sultan Murat's the 2nd armies (1421-1451), but the most exact news EvliaCelebi gives us, who during staying in Albania writes that in Kanina there was a shrine dedicated to Haxhi Bektashit.

Despite the above mentioned arguments, bektashi weren't welcomed in the beginning by the Albanians, until they were not separated from the High Port. Then, they were too popular and this order was spread too much in Albania that based on some information there are by 20% of population. Bektashi were spread mostly in Kruja area, Tirana, in south, in Mallakstra etc. Whereas, their main holy place was Sari Salltek in Kruja.

That the national ideas of Bektashi were close, understandable and even, crucial for their extension is obvious by the westerners that have traveled in Albania or worked there as consuls. Albania's Bektashi, according to the travelers, differed with two things from the world bektashi: a) They didn't have the aristocratic feeling for Islamism; b) they were Albanians before being Muslims (Bartel, 2006).

When the repression and extension of books and newspapers in Albanian were banned, many bektashi that worked as guardians in foreign embassies, did their passing contraband and the distribution.

Bektashi in their shrines did the housing of the people that were fighting against ottomans, but sometimes even they were those fighting, like the case of Maliqbej, from Frasher.

For Bektashi contribution in national issue also talks Eqrem Bey Vlora, who declares: 'Their lessons create such a unison breath, that for a population like Albanians it could have a great importance. They consul, instruct for help between people; they prepare in their meeting places, shrines, homeland and create the base for national purposes' (Bartel, 2006).

Even though, if you talk about Bektashism today, it is impossible to not think about the apostils of national issue, brothers Frasheri, especially Naim, a personality that not only with bektashi descent, but also one of the planners of several books with the theme of the above order. One of his well-known books is this field are: 'Qerbelaja' and 'Bektashi Notebook'.

He, in his book "Bektashi Notebook", declares like this: 'They don't want Bektashi among them, but also with all humans are brothers and soul. They love like their own soul

other Muslims and Christians, and go well and great with each other and all mankind' (Frashëri, 1986).

He called Albanians to be united, to raise over the religious divisions, especially the Albanian headquarters, the so called "Guiders": 'Let's work with the headquarters and the Elders to save Albania, for the smart ones and cities of their Nation and Homeland, for their language and success...' (Frashëri, 1986).

Naim was a great supporter of education in Albanian language, he even proposed for the religious ceremonies to be made in Albanian and the assembly to be Albania and Anadoll. He replaced also some special Turkish expressions with Albanian names, like: baba-ate; dede-gjysh; dervish-varfe etc.

While, as above mentioned some facts related to the given help from the protestant rennaisants for Albanian improvement, in the other side, with the formation of neighboring countries in the beginning of XIX century, they were added the assimilation pressure, by misusing the orthodox belonging of a part of our population, especially in the south of Albania where the bektashi and e protestants were almost in the greatest mass concentrated. To face this double pressure, our patriots except the love for the country, they had to make sacrifices in the way of increasing the souls and intellectuality among Albanians. So, the issue with the religious translations indicates a new beginning on the long and hard way of National Renaissance (Xhuvani-PavliHaxhilazi, 2005), as far as Betashi and Protestants are concerned.

To notice how valuable the usage of Albanian language would be in all aspects, and how much impact would it have for that time, Isac Lowndes, shows us, the representative of association for Malta and Mediterranean, who in 1853 was proposed by the center of Biblical Society to visit Albania. This visit was realized in 1857, when he visited Preveza, Arta and Janina, places that were lived by Albanians and Greeks. He saw their lack of Albanian schools, and sermons in native language. Orthodox used the Greek language as a liturgy language, and its believers were considered as Greeks regardless their ethnology outside church. The existence of several religions among Albanians of that times, it also has its consequences, because if they would have been in only one religion<sup>1</sup>, naturally they would have been more compact in realizing their goals. In the condition that they were, they always saw competition to each other, as far as religions were concerned.

In this context, it's not wrong the estimation that the Russian consul gives in Manastir, sent to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he says: '... Disunity of Albanians is a result of the great change gege-toske, the hostility among tribes, the different grade of cultural development, the lack of only one religion and Albanians' personal qualities...' (Raport i Konsullit Rus në Manastir, 1910). Although, rennaisants weren't uninformed in this aspect, so not only by case the bektashi gave the idea to form a common bektashi state for Albanians of Balkan, but again this idea was never realized.

In this context, the protestant rennaisants were accused from those Catholics, that making Protestantism as a new religion wasn't positive for Albanians. But, for the spreading of Protestantism in Albania, Protestants used the mistakes of Catholics, Muslims and orthodox, by giving opportunity to Biblical Society that through this way to go in Albania, even with much easiness to all Albanians. This mistake wasn't enough for orthodox Albanians, and so without leaving much time to go by, they replaced the mistake with another mistake, where their clerk moved away the ideologists of Movement (N. Veqilharxhi, K. Kristoforidhi, etc.).

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<sup>1</sup>The presence of the Orthodox religion as the only religion among Balkan Slavic states, prompted the ruling class along with church people and clergy work together toward realization of their demands for the formation of the state. Orthodox Church during the Ottoman period had its own autonomy and was the only place where people piled and organized around her.

Except for the conversion cases, we have also cases when many Muslims have learned reading and writing in Albanian from Protestants, amongst them the famous imams of that time (Ministrisë së Punëve të Jashtme të Austro-Hungarisë nga Konsulli Kral Manastir, Raport nr: 45, 1900). This declares himself the Austro-Hungarian consul in Manastir, Kral, who among other says ‘...With increasing encourage of the public and the Qiriazi efforts led to the opening of a girls school in September 1891, which, although it had a Christian character, soon gained a great popularity among the Mohammedan Albanians’ (Ministria e Punëve të Jashtme të Austro-Hungarisë nga Konsulli Kral Manastir, Raport nr:47, 1899).

Bible Society representative, Alexander Thomson wrote in 1871: ‘... not a few Muslims from East Albania have learned to read and the best educated ones accepted national literature as the only means to ensure national unity and progress’ (Domi, 1975).

Protestants were the owners of the several educational institutions, as Gymnasium "Zosimea" in Janina, which was the center of the Bible Society, with A.Davidson as a leader, from which came many familiar names of the National Renaissance. Then the schools in Korca led by the Qiriazi (Shkodra, 1984), etc. Here's an example of how the school of Qiriazi operated based on the data you provided by documents: Kral consul of Austria-Hungary's Foreign Ministry reported on the functioning of the school, saying among other things ‘... In accordance with the true goals of Qiriazi, the school syllabus envisioned primarily the Albanian spirit with a qualitative education and with learning of the Albanian language, and only in this direction she claimed and gained real success. Evidence for this is the fact that while Beys appreciated the activities of this useful Christian teaching institute, they sent their girls in it and they could not agree with the government's prohibition orders issued in this regard that year’ (Ministrisë së Punëve të Jashtme të Austro-Hungarisë nga Konsulli Kral Manastir, Raport nr:47, 1899).

What was stated above, which coincides with the main stance of Albanian League, that the existence of the nation will depend on whether the Albanian language will be written down or not. For this purpose on November 25, 1879, in Istanbul, the Istanbul meeting was set between the Istanbul Committee and the Bible Society. The Albanian request from the side of Bible Society was the publication of a grammar and a dictionary of the Albanian language. But, enemies of the national issue never stood idly when it came to Albanian cooperation between each other. Orthodox Church excommunicated our Renaissance activists, the Sublime Porte, will support Albanians only when there was danger and immediately after the risk passed away, she took actions to close the Albanian schools and cultural societies.

Albanians, despite this divisive tendency responded with the establishment of the organizations that had as a unifying element the national affiliation. Thus, members of the Istanbul Society were of the three religious denominations: Sami Frashëri, Zija Prishtina, Seit Toptani, Hoxha Tahsini, Pandeli Sotiri, Koto Hoxhi, Pasko Vreto of Vasa (Qosja, 1990).

Istanbul meeting urged the two sides to a fruitful collaboration. At least three members of the Society of Istanbul will cooperate intensively with Bible Society. Thus, in 1879 the New Testament is published in Tosk dialect, processed by Konstandin Kristoforidhi with the help of an Albanian named Konstandin Kolea. While in 1880, are translated and published various parts of the Old Testament (E. Jacques, 2000). The publication was in adopted Greek Alphabet. Konstandin Kristoforidhi and Bible Society were vitally interested that Albanians have a unique alphabet. Sadly, his name will not figure in the drafting committee for alphabet of the Society of Istanbul in 1889 (Osmani, 1999). Also, his name is not found neither in canonises of the foundation of ‘Shoqërisë së të Shtypurit Shkronja Shqip’. It is known only that the Society of Istanbul 1882, decided to publish the dictionary, but for unknown reasons this precious treasure will not see the light of day. Perhaps, this was one of the reasons which Kristoforidhi in his writings did not use the new alphabet, except in

two cases in 1889. Bible Society has not used the approved alphabet of Istanbul, because they wanted to see how much extension and life will get the alphabet of Istanbul, and therefore did not want to jeopardize the additional investments for special printing press. To the second request made by the Committee of Istanbul, which dealt with the help of publishing a grammar of the Albanian language, they responded positively. In 1882, Bible Society and its representative Alexander Thomson helped Kristoforidhi to publish the grammar of the Albanian language. In fact, Mr. Thomson, the money collected from the Nice Protestant church addressed to the publication of a work, which was not religious, but which had great importance for the making of the Albanian language, a written language (Quanrud, 1998).

When it comes to opening the boys' school in Korca 1887, led by Naim Pandeli, Naim is he who at that time was working as an officer in the Ministry of Education of the Ottoman state and managed with great efforts to provide permission (Iradah) (Koliqi, 2001) of the state for opening of this school. While in its classrooms, Gjerasimi every Sunday would organize religious services in Albanian, being more convinced that, Korca could become the main center of the Protestant mission and culture.

Either way Albanian National Movement had already entered the path of full consolidation. This confirms the relevance and the contacts of Bible Society, but also of Gjerasim's, with our most prominent activists, as Jani Vreto, Nikolla Naço, Sami Frashëri, etc. Although Vreto, would later criticize Gjerasim, as well the Bible Society for the risk of the introduction of a new faith among Albanians.

Although the National Movement was already consolidated, the dream of Renaissance men for ethnic state was not yet realized. With the weakening of Ottoman state, Albanians, day by day were in a higher danger of extermination from neighboring states. This required the organization of Albanians in all aspects, as in the cultural, political, economic and military.

Protestant religious Renaissance men are recognized for their contributions more in the cultural field; as we said above, their works belong to linguistics and openings of schools in Albanian language. Since the N. Veqilharxhi, which began with the first primer, then translations of sacred books in Albanian language, preparation albanian dictionaries from K. Kristoforidhi up to the opening of the school in Korca by Pandeli Sotiri and Gj. Qiriazhi, we can talk about a cultural activity mainly by Protestants which was with a great importance for that time.

Even the Bektashis were directly involved in this direction, and the works of Naim are known which were dedicated to the school of Korca, 'Për mësonjëtoret e para', then other works devoted to the motherland, where one of them is 'Bagëti e Bujqësi', and many works of Naim and Sami ('Shqipëria ç'ka qenë, ç'është dhe çdo të bëhet'), where rightfully are considered major contributions to the nation. But not only that, Bektashismade significant contributions in other areas as well, and in this case they exceed their Protestant compatriots. The word is especially about Abdyl's efforts for the establishment of the League of Prizren, which had the main purpose to protect Albanian territories from its partition and the establishment of an Albanian state.

Abdul Frashëri was elected deputy<sup>2</sup> in the Ottoman parliament in November 1877, and in that period along with other Albanian patriots formed the Committee of Istanbul, as a basis for the formation of his political platform which served Abdyl's ideas. This committee was the first and main cell of forming the League of Prizren, where its ideator was Abdyl. So, many foreign scholars do not say for nothing that Abdyl was Haxhi Ymer Prizreni's right hand, the heart, the brain and the soul of the League. It was formed entirely on his own initiative, he was everywhere as in Janina, as in Prizren, as to the sultan in Istanbul. Out of love for the country of origin sometimes he carried fiery speeches, as is the case of General

<sup>2</sup>Abdul Frasher' harsh discussions in the Ottoman parliament are well known.

Assembly, according to several testimonies he delivered a fiery speech, saying among others ‘We Albanians descended from the Pelasgians. So, we are the oldest people in the Balkans and the Slavs came later.... There were enough robberies which were made upon us, but they require even today, to detach us other lands’ (Shpuza, 2006). This statement, according to participants, left deep impressions.

But despite such speeches in this assembly, as always, the religion had influence itself, in which case it was attempted to give the League an Islamic character, but at the insistence of patriotic group headed by Abdyl, this thing was simply not allowed and the League of Prizren became Albanians League, where protection of the interests of Albania, was in the first place. Abdyl not only dealt with the internal organization of the League, but he also dealt with diplomatic missions to raise awareness for the Albanian issue.

Abdul Frasher along with Mehmet Ali Vrioni performed an extraordinary diplomatic mission. Given the situation and circumstances which reigned over the Albanian territories of that time, they made the necessary preparations and so at the end of March 1879 they went to Rome, Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna and Istanbul.

For intention of their journey testifies the best the telegram of Turhan Bey, the Ottoman ambassador in Rome, which among other things says ‘Albanians that I mentioned in my telegram dated March 27 came here and made a visit today ... They said that their trip here, in France and Austria, intends to seek the inviolability of Albania within the Ottoman Empire’. Abdyl further said that the Albanian people were willing to fight as a single body, in the event that Europe will make Greece's annexation of Albanian territories (Prifti, 1978).

Other trips for the awareness rising of international opinion were taken many times by other Albanian personalities with the aim that the question of the future of the Albanian nation to be secure; however, many problems will accompany the path for the stabilization of the Albanian nation.

## Conclusions

Albanian National Movement while having its specifications as every other movement, is characterized by its confrontation with many difficulties that often these difficulties from disadvantage returned in favor of the Movement.

Albanian religious division caused an almost secular orientation of the Albanian national movement.

Religious coexistence of Albanians is not characterized by the existence of religious conflict within the Albanian people.

Formation of Albanian national identity is closely linked to the events in the Ottoman Empire i.e. the Tanzimat reforms.

Albanian National Movement is one of the first movements in the Balkans, however, is the last that managed to finish the formation of the national state.

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