

ALBANIA – THE COUNTRY OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Albania is a multi religious country, in which, for many centuries, have coexisted four traditional religious communities – the Moslems Suni, the Orthodox, the Catholics and the Moslems Bektashi (in Albania is established the Holy See of World Bektashism). The relationships between them are very good ones, characterized by peace, harmony and collaboration.

Also, in Albania there have been, for many centuries, some Moslem tarikats(sects) – Halveti, Rrifai, Kadri, Saadi, Xhelveti, Gjylsheni, Tixhani and Hajati, which have their particularities in the practices of the Moslem faith. Geographically they are extended all over Albania. The Alevian Tarikats had a very important role in defending and promoting interfaith harmony as well as in the emancipation of the Albanian Society. The Albanian moslems are European Moslems with their originality.

The four traditional religious communities are tolerant and collaborative with other religious groups, which have been established in Albania since the year 1990, when religious life restarted and our country was opened to the World. Amongst them are the Evangelical churches, which are organized under the umbrella of VUSH (Albanian Evangelical Brotherhood). The evangelical churches began their activity in Albania in the XIX century and are now present all over Albania.

Also, present in Albania are: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Baha`is, the Jehovah`s Witness, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamat in Albania and some others.

Many religious and/or humanitarian foundations and associations, local and foreign, practice their activities in Albania, helping and supporting the people in need (orphans etc.). They work also on education of Albanian young men and women, on improving the infrastructure in rural areas of our country, on defending the health of the people etc.

In Albania, more than 98 % of the population have their religious identity within the four traditional religious communities – Moslems, Orthodox, Catholics and Bektashi, which are not conditioned by the percentages of the believers of a definite faith. Despite the difference in their numbers, all

believers feel themselves equal and they are equal factors in the life of the country. The four traditional religious communities and the other ones, enjoy the respect of the believers and of the Albanian opinion in general. At the same time they enjoy all the freedom and space for practicing their religious mission. **In this sense Albania is a small America, where any foreign visitor finds his faith, taking with him the message for wonderful religious relations.**

During all its very ancient history, there have never been significant religious conflicts in Albania. Even when, in certain moments of our history, any delicate problem has appeared, the believers and the intellectual clergymen have been able to resolve them peacefully. I would like to mention here the wise act of the well known monk and great Albanian writer, Father Gjergj Fishta, who, in the 1930s, in a moment of tension, linked the belfry of the Cathedral of the city of Shkodër with the minaret of the main Mosque by a twinkling cordon of electric lights, meaning peace and harmony between the religious communities and the end of the disagreements.

Albanians protect this very precious treasure of interfaith harmony, with care and love, as an authentic, extraordinary value that Albania offers to the world history and culture.

The excellent interfaith relations in Albania radiate even in other Balkan countries where Albanian populations are present, as in Kossova, Macedonia, Montenegro etc.

Albania was the most damaged country by the communist regime. In the year 1967 it was the only country in the World where religion was legally forbidden and all the religious institutions where closed. 302 clergymen (most of them had studied in different countries of the Occidental or Oriental Countries) were condemned to death, to prison or to deportation, because they believed and defended their faith. Many religious buildings were totally destroyed or were used as stables, stores, military unit residences or sport halls.

But the traditions of the Albanian religious life were not lost. The Albanians are grateful to many other countries, especially to the United States of America, where they found all the liberties and the space to freely perform their faiths, which was an important support for the resurrection of the

religious life in Albania after the collapse of the communist regime, in the early 1990s. 101 years ago, in the year 1908, in Boston, was opened the first church of the Albanians in USA, by the great Albanian intellectual and clergyman, Fan Noli. Afterwards there were built up mosques and other religious cults objects.

From then until now, in USA there are built up 35 religious institutions, of which half are Moslem, where the Albanians practice their respective religions. The particularity is that these buildings are constructed with the contribution of the compatriots of all religions, who worked with the same zeal and have donated with the same generosity, without distinction. It is a continuation of this tradition the donation by the Albanian compatriots in USA of the funds for the building up of the Catholic Cathedral in Prishtina. Until now they have donated around one million USD, nearly half of which by Moslem compatriots.

For many centuries, Albania has been a country where different cultures, civilizations, religions and faiths have crossed and coexisted. This is reflected in an impressive way in the cultural religious heritage of our country. More than 180 ancient old religious buildings, which are a very important part of the cultural heritage of our country are a testimony of the religious history of Albania. These monuments have immense historical, religious and cultural value. In Albania are situated the vestiges of many paleochristian churches, dating to the first centuries of the history of the Christianity.

Taking into account the above mentioned resources, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports of Albania, in collaboration with many religious communities, has elaborated the strategy and the respective project for the development of the religious tourism in our country, aiming to promote the well-known interfaith coexistence in Albania. For the implementation of this project the Government has accorded special funds. This project will last also in the next years.

Part of this project is the improvement of the road infrastructure leading to the holy places where the people go for pilgrimage or religious holidays. It is very significant that in these pilgrimages or holidays are present not only the believers of the respective faith but also many others of different religions. Among these holy places the more known are: the Saint-Anthony Church in Laç, the holy place of Abaz Ali on Tomori Mountain, the Saint-John

Monastery in Voskopojë, the Tyrbe of Dervish of Luzha in Tropojë, the Teke of Frashër in Përmet etc.

The relationships between the State and the religious communities in Albania are very good ones and are characterized by comprehension, collaboration and partnership.

In October of the last year in Tirana were signed the Agreements between the State and the traditional religious communities, which were ratified by the Parliament in January 2009. Also, in the framework of the completion of the legislation on the religion in Albania, in May of this year the Government presented the Law on the Financing the Religious Communities by the State, which was also ratified by the Parliament. By this Law the democratic Albanian State will compensate, partially, the incalculable damages that the communist State caused to the traditional religious communities in Albania.

In Albania the State considers the religious communities as very important partners in working for the protection of the moral health of the Albanian society, because they educate the generations with the best human virtues, such as the belief in God, love, tolerance, the will for progress etc. The State has created all the spaces for the normal and free activity of all the religious communities.

The State Committee on Cults is the state structure founded for helping the creation and the management of the relationships between the state and the religious communities in the Republic of Albania. This Committee helps and supports the religious communities in their activities. The last appreciations of the international factor have confirmed this reality.

(The speech of the Chairman of the Albanian State Committee on Cults, Av. Rasim Hasanaj in the Brigham University Symposium, in Provo, on October 4, 2009)