



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT *with* RELIGION *and* FAITH *in the* 21ST CENTURY

Youth Engagement with Religion and Faith Challenges and Opportunities in Albania

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INTRODUCTION

“Youth is for taking risks, good risks, risks full of hope. It is meant to be staked on great things. Youth is meant to be given away, to help others to know the Lord. Don’t keep your youth to yourselves: get out there! Don’t keep the faith. Spread it around!”

Pope Francis, 37th National Convocation of the renewal in the Holy Spirit, 2014¹

Even after almost 30 years of transition, after the period of dictatorship in Albania, the importance of family and society remain stable tools of emotional and economic support for Albanian youth. The relationship of Albanian youth with the values of the family and society is slowly changing due to a combination of traditional experiences with modern

ones. Opportunities for independence in economic opportunities that pave the way for young people to get rid of family power are, mainly, concentrated in the capital and in a few relatively large urban centers. Albanian youth consider friendship a way of life and social relations as an important element of their social identity. Daily contacts with their social circle are of a real and virtual nature, thanks to social media, which has helped create stereotypes and provided communication platforms for the exchange of ideas and opinions. Relationship with society constitutes a significant feature of the social behavior of young people and has a special role in their lives.

During the school years, youth create a civic and professional identity, which helps them face the realities of the national, regional, European and global labor market. The issue of employment remains an internal concern for young people, a new reality

where ideas and the promised (or expected) reality for the education-employment ratio collide, there is no certainty. “Rule” by insecurity, the relationship that young people create with their work and professional careers constitutes a point of special importance in their lives. Youth participation in political life, which begins with respect of state and law, with an understanding of the role of politics in developments of society and of each individual, with preference, membership, and voting for political parties. State institutions are instruments with a significant impact on the lives of young people in Albania. Trust or young people’s distrust of political developments are essential for their participation in this process. Historical experience worldwide proves that young people are powerful actors, that bring about change and accelerate political processes. Their political involvement or apathy is closely related to the quality of the policy itself and the institutions it creates. The shaking of faith, apathy, disappointment, and “loss” of hope push young people towards leaving Albania in search of a better life. The influence of centuries-old religious affiliations and beliefs has not affected the vast majority of youth. But the opening of a self-isolated people who are isolated for almost half a century, to the influence of free media, free movement, and current globalization have influenced and stimulated the sporadic emergence of radical religious elements. Among them, few have become more “known” for participating in the ranks of ISIS, rather than with activities in the Republic of Albania.

Methodology

Analysis of studies by the US Department of State for Religious Freedom in Albania, European Union studies on impact and engagement of youth in religion in Albania, research in the activities of the Inter Religious Council of Albania, and the personal experience of these activities being also part of the Women’s and Executive Board in the Interreligious Council of Albania.

RELIGION AND IMPACT OF COMMUNISM ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN ALBANIA

Young people see their personal future much more optimistically than the collective future of society. Engagement in social issues, starting from something as simple as volunteering, should be taught and encouraged on those platforms and environments where it is most likely to succeed, such as schools. Meritocracy is disappearing as a value in Albania, because it is more difficult to learn, if not widely practiced by institutions. Weakening from the non-institutional implementation of meritocracy is becoming a model for young people who complain but have no desire to commit to change and that can lead them to become future passive citizens. These are real risks for democracy and development of a country like Albania, which still has to conclude a difficult transition in both directions².

Religion and impact of communism on religious freedom in Albania today is totally different from the period during the Hoxha communist dictatorship.³ Enver Hoxha, soon after taking leadership of the Democratic Front in 1945, instituted drastic changes. Under the August 1945 Agrarian Reform Law, Albania’s arable land was redistributed to put an end to large land ownerships and to increase farm output. Properties of religious institutions were among those nationalized, and the holdings of monasteries, religious orders, dioceses and the like were limited to 20 hectares. Many of the clergy and religious followers were tortured and executed. In 1946, all foreign Roman Catholic clergy were expelled—a crippling blow for the numerous Catholic schools and welfare institutions in the country. “A stable ecumenical model? How religion might become a political issue in Albania”⁴

The anti-religious period of the Hoxha dictatorship reached a high point with the 1976 Constitution.

Article 55 banned “fascist, anti-democratic, religious, war-mongering, and anti-socialist activities and propaganda...as well as the incitement of national and racial hatred.”

The common history of persecution in the totalitarian period⁵

Despite communist propaganda, especially after the closure of churches and mosques and all religions were all treated as foreign, people continued to secretly practice their religious beliefs. For almost 45 years the communist regime implemented a sophisticated and complex system of atheist indoctrination. The dictatorship boasted that Albania was the only atheist country in the world. The frontal war against religion, including the annihilation of prominent religious figures, the constant persecution, the banning of rites and the closure of religious institutions, aimed at creating a new “religion,” Marxism-Leninism, and the worship of new idols (from Marx to Enver Hoxha) instead of respect for Christ and Muhammad. They also replaced the word “God” with the abstract notion “Mother Party.”

Despite the severe blows that religion received, it did not disappear and was not uprooted from the pressure that was put on it. The declared atheism remained artificial, a superficial illusion and only recorded in state files. Through a well-organized propaganda system, including in the media and movies, the dictatorial state denigrated the clergy, targeting them as backward, negative influencers in society, agents affiliated with the west, or even dangerous members of armed groups, who sought to take power by force. But despite the state’s commitment to destroying religious institutions, burning holy books, imprisoning and executing clergy, many Albanian families continued to practice their faith in secret. It was precisely these sparks, which were never extinguished in the hearts of believers, that would ignite the fire of freedom of religion and the collapse of the most brutal communist system the world had ever known.

In 1990 the long-suffering Albanian people were eager for freedom of religion where youth that participated the most in reopening of the cult objects. Thousands of Muslim and Christian Young believers, inspired by the love of God and the longing to pray and pray freely, raided the few standing cult objects, ringing the bells, performing the first Mass and praying on Fridays. This was the triumph of belief in denial; it was the triumph of freedom over the shackles and chains of a dictatorial regime.

VALUES, RELIGION AND FAITH IN ALBANIA

Young people in Albania are generally much more optimistic about their future, but quite sceptical about the future of Albanian society.⁶ The main concerns and fears of Albanian youth are: being poor, unemployed, and a victim of corruption. Young people trust their families, but almost do not believe in no one else. The younger generation in Albania is showing more and more signs of acceptance and tolerance of illegal practices especially to solve personal problems and to find a job. Most Albanian youth, more than 62 percent, when asked if they identify with one of the main beliefs religious, acknowledge that God has an important place in their lives. However, in the Albanian youth, religion is still an element of identification and feeling spiritual, traditional and family rather than a set of practices and rituals. Less than 15 percent of young people regularly attend religious rites. As in previous years, Albanian youth are already showing one set of conservative and traditional values, as well as a lack interest in being active in civic affairs. In addition to healthy eating, which for personal reasons is quite important, for them they are also very important loyalty to friends, partners and employers as well having a successful career.

RELIGION AND EDUCATION

At the legal level Albania has entered a new constitutional and legal path,⁷ which is characterized by the assertion of human rights and, in this context, by freedom of religion. It currently is established the freedom of religious belief, of the activity of institutions, and even of many religious associations, of raising from them cultural and educational structures up to university levels. In a place with multiple ethnicities, it might be necessary to draft a special law regulating relations of religion and state. But, based on historical tradition (traditional religious plurality in ethnic Albanian territories), the Constitution of the Republic of Albania requires the regulation of relations of the state with different religious communities by bilateral agreement between the respective community and state ratified by the Assembly. So far, the Albanian state has signed agreements with five communities: Catholics, Muslims, Orthodox, Bektashis, and Evangelicals. But for the further of the relations of democracy with religion, it is also important to know the world experience for arranging such relationships. It is understandable that the state should not interfere in matters of religion and the issue of faith should be a private matter of the free will of the citizens. It is necessary to emphasize such a thing if we take into account the fact of coexistence history of the three religions in Albania. At the dogmatic spiritual level, religious communities can and should influence exaltation spirituality of Albanians.

These are three basic problems on the solution of which will depend, to a large extent, not only the role of religion, but also the moral and social health of Albanian society. Religious pluralism in Albania has existed before the political one and, historically, this plurality has not endangered the existence and national identity. We can say that this plurality is a very important historical and cultural result, which deserves to be respected and not used in function of destabilizing factors of social peace. Thus the

glorification of one faith to the detriment of other beliefs does nothing but add to the aggravated political and social problems of the Albanian society. We live in a world where isolation is no longer possible. We live in an era, characterized by mobility of peoples and a mixture of different cultures. We are all interdependent and we have a common responsibility, which we cannot hide, to create a new society of based on pluralism.

As a very important cultural element, religion in Albania has a very big role in the cultivation of values and those forms of life, which respect the vision for the world of every culture and religion. In some cultures, religion has represented the highest aspirations of human existence. In other cultures, religious traditions have been institutions that claimed to bring about perfection. Due to historical and political factors, religion in Albania did not rise to such levels, but now has every opportunity to assert her values.

Religions are known to have contributed to peace, just as they have fostered division, hatred, and war. Religious communities in the Albanian territories, historically, have been inclined towards peace. Understanding, cooperation, and religious tolerance in Albania, exemplary beyond the Balkans, constitute an imperative for Albanian society.

But religious belief promotes and forms mainly “peace” within itself. We can and should resolve conflicts without resorting to violence, and we can achieve this through education and practice. Justice is the cornerstone of civil society, said St. Augustine. Non-discrimination, respect for human dignity, human rights, acceptance of the other, and tolerance are what Albanian society needs most. Religions do not have to be identified with political, economic, and social powers in order to be free to pave the way for justice and peace. Religious communities in Albania should be careful that religious zeal not to be confused with fanaticism. Not only will it endanger social peace, but it can damage even the very foundations of religious

doctrines. Religions in Albania can contribute to the creation of a culture of peace based on tolerance, dialogue and mutual understanding.

INTERRELIGIOUS COUNCIL OF ALBANIA A CONSOLIDATED INSTITUTION

The Interreligious Council of Albania (IRCA) was established on October 22, 2007 by the four leaders of the traditional religious communities in Albania, Hajji Selim Muça, His Beatitude Anastasios Janullatos, Mons.Rrok Mirdita and H. Dede Reshat Bardhi, and it was also registered at the Tirana District Court. At the meeting of the Presidency Council held on October 22, 2018 full membership of Evangelical Alliance of Albania was also adopted, thus making it the fifth member religious community of the IRCA.⁸

The IRCA was inaugurated on October 22, 2009 in the presence of the then President of the Republic of Albania, Prof. Dr. Bamir Topi, who said *“It (IRCA) marks the institutionalization of religious tolerance in Albania. This is our common value and our rare virtue, which we will not only export wherever we can, but we will gladly share it with other countries and peoples around the globe. That is why I am here today; not only to celebrate the establishment of a Council so necessary and beneficial to the maintenance of interfaith relations in our country, but also to assure you of my unwavering personal and institutional support for this valuable and significant undertaking, in service of peace, welfare, coexistence and interfaith tolerance.”*⁹

At the promotional activity of IRCA establishment, clergymen from all religions assessed the council as an organism that will coordinate regional activities on the problems religious coexistence.

Interreligious Council of Albania awarded the highest medal “Honor of the Nation”¹⁰

The President of the Republic, H.E.Mr. Ilir Meta bestowed the IRCA with the High Medal “Honor of the Nation” on March 22, 2021. The president noted *“In appreciation of the comprehensive contribution to preserving and promoting the spirit of harmony, understanding and coexistence between religions in Albania. For clear messages addressed to the believers of Albanian politics to aim the peace, unity, progress and orientation towards patriotic values for a common and optimistic life; as well as for the important role in raising the Albanian model of inter-religious dialogue in the international arena.”*¹¹

YOUTH IN INTERRELIGIOUS COUNCIL OF ALBANIA¹²

The Department of Youth in IRCA consists of two young representatives from each religious community, members of the Interreligious Council of Albania, who are nominated by each community and approved by the Council of the Presidency. The Department of Youth meets no less than twice a year. The Youth Department is led by the Secretary General of the IRCA. A representative of the Department of Youth reports at least once a year to the Presidency Council on annual activities within the department. All members of the Department of Youth exercise this duty voluntarily.

In case of resignation of one or more members, expulsion or written replacement by the community they represent, or the led bodies of IRCA, he/she must be replaced by another member nominated by the respective community.

The Department of Youth in the Interfaith Council of Albania has the following duties:

- Organize interfaith youth sectors in different countries of Albania.
- Organizes meetings and conversations with students in order to strengthen interfaith dialogue and harmony among the younger generations.
- Develops cultural and sports activities in cooperation with the youth sectors of religious communities in the country.

Symposium and Interfaith collaboration

Numerous activities, symposia and conferences are held by young people from universities of religious communities in the framework of interfaith dialogue, interfaith harmony and a fruitful university cooperation that has its early roots rooted in the culture of religious harmony and tolerance that has historically existed and still continues in the 5 leaders of religious communities. One of them is the VII Academic Interfaith Symposium: “*Maria / Mary, as a symbol of virtue*.”¹³ It brought together leaders, lecturers, students and representatives of three educational institutions: the department of Islamic Sciences at the University College “Bedër”, the Orthodox Theological Academy “Resurrection of Christ”, St. Vlash, Durrës, and the Catholic Theological Institute in the Seminary Interdiocesan “Lady of Good Counsel” Shkodra.

Different Youth Activities organized by IRCA

Department of Youth conduct third National Consultations¹⁴

On June 18, 2020 were held the third National Consultations on the Department of Youth of

the IRCA. In the meeting lead, by the Secretary General of IRCA Dr. Genti Kruja, members of two departments of the Council attended. Convened in an unusual situation, where our country and the world is locked, to avoid the spread of the COVID-19 virus, they discussed issues and projects that apply to and will be implemented by the Department of Women and the Department of Youth.

Youth Department in Interreligious Council of Albania in help of hundreds of families in need¹⁵

IRCA, in the framework of humanitarian activities, has started the initiative to be near of hundreds of families in need. This project has started with the help given to families of orphans in the earthquake zone in the district of Kurbin, as well as many other families in difficult economic situation in the area. Durrës and Tirana, affected by the damage of the earthquake happened on November 2019, were placed in even more in trouble due to the spread of virus COVID-19 in our country.

This humanitarian project comes as a collaboration of IRCA with international partners, such as the world’s largest organization in the field of peace and dialogue, accredited by the UN, “Religions for Peace” based in New York, USA. Young Muslims and Christians, members of the Department of Women and the Department of Youth in the IRCA, are implementing the project. The initiative was launched with the distribution of aid to the families of orphans in Laç, an activity developed by IRC of Albania in cooperation with the National Association of Orphans of Albania. Representatives of religious communities, leaders of the municipality of Kurbin, civil society, and media representatives attended the event. Afterwards, IRCA youth volunteers continued to distribute food packages to homes and families in need in Kurbin, Durrës, and Tirana.

IRCA is already pursuing several projects of humanitarian, social, cultural, and wider character in the framework of interfaith cooperation, increasing the capacity to activate Muslim and Christian women and youth, as a force for positive change and promotion of interfaith dialogue Albania and beyond.¹⁶

Youth Department of IRCA conducts a social and cultural activity with orphan children of the earthquake zone¹⁷

On the 10th anniversary of World Interfaith Harmony Week, the Department of Women and the Department of Youth at the IRCA organized a socio-cultural activity with orphaned children in one of the key areas affected by the November 2019 earthquake. During that time thousands of people were affected economically and psychologically by the devastation caused by the earthquake, where the most affected were the orphan children of one of the areas that needed not only economic but also social and psychological support, such as the district of Kurbin.

In this regard, Muslim and Christian women and youth took the initiative to organize a social and cultural activity, where besides the festive activity, children were given books, gifts, and a lunch with leaders and representatives of religious communities in Albania.

Project: “We believe and take care”

Considering the spread of COVID-19 virus in Albania and the increasing number of infectivity, hospitalizations, and fatalities, the Department of Women and Youth of the Inter-Religious Council of Albania aim to implement an audio-visual advertisement on anti-COVID-19 measures and precautions to be taken. The message of the advertisement would aim to raise community awareness on COVID-19 prevention for this outbreak to slow down and hopefully end. Each religious community will give its message in the advertisement

by its representatives chosen to be part of it and will call on understanding and establishing prevention measures in everyday life. These will broadcast on religious community radios, other radio stations, TV, and social networks with various representatives of religious communities and embassies.

CONCLUSION

With the fall of communism, the real consequences of this fatal change in the lives of religious communities would be seen. Freedom of religion found itself in a tragic state. Religious beliefs began to be reorganized on a traditional basis, with at its core the few cult objects that had resisted communist destruction and the few clerics that had resisted communist terror.

In the first attempts, all faiths tried to tie the thread of the discontinued religious tradition. Religious communities will be assisted by many foreign foundations, which have helped reorganize religious institutions and rebuild religious objects, and a significant number of educational institutions, social and health centers, asylums, orphanages, or social projects for the needy. The 30th anniversary of freedom of religion finds religious communities in Albania consolidated and working closely together for the good of the country and society. Today, they are important contributors to the social peace in the country, as well as at the forefront of any initiative aimed at the well being and prosperity of Albanian society.

Given the historical background of religions in Albania, as well as the period of the communist regime, the question arises as to what problems the reaffirmation of religion faces. The most important is to clarify and resolve the dogmatic level. This is about the variety of problems that pertain to religions themselves, namely how to make the teachings of the scriptures as accessible and integral as possible the soul of the believers. This issue is of particular

importance for the very identity of religion and its role in Albanian life after 30 years of official ban, as well as its role in moral and spiritual life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With a view to co-existence and building of inclusive societies with youth at the centre, some of the recommendations for Youth of Albania can be presented as follows:

- Knowledge about religions and beliefs can reinforce the appreciation of the importance of respecting the rights of every human being to freedom of religion or belief; can promote democratic citizenship and promote the understanding of social diversity and, at the same time, strengthen social cohesion.
- Knowledge about religions and beliefs contains a potential to reduce the conflicts that are based in the lack of understanding of other faiths and encourage respect for their rights.
- Knowledge of religions and beliefs is an important part of quality education, as it requires that better understand history, literature and art and can help broaden horizons cultural and deepening in the study of the complexity of the past and the present.
- Learning about religions and beliefs becomes effective when combined with efforts to inculcate respect for the rights of others even when there is disagreement about religions and beliefs. Right for freedom of religion or belief is a universal right and contains the obligation to protect the rights of others, including respect for the dignity of all human beings.
- An individual's religious (or non-religious) beliefs do not constitute a sufficient reason to exclude

that person from learning about religions and beliefs. The most important considerations in this connection relate to professional expertise as well as to basic attitudes towards human rights in general and, in particular, freedom of religion or belief.

- Reasonable adaptation of policies to religious needs may be required to avoid violation of the rights to freedom of religion or belief. Even when not strictly required as legal issues, this adaptation contributes to creating a climate of tolerance and mutual respect.
- Even when there are mandatory courses about religions and beliefs, they should be sufficient neutral and objective and no one taking part in these courses should have their rights violated religion and belief.

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publication are those of the individual Authors. None of
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ENDNOTES

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