

Krishterimi ndër Shqiptarë. Simpozium ndërkombëtar, Tiranë, 16-19 nëntor 1999. Christianity among the Albanians. International symposium. Tirana, 16-19 November 1999. Ed. Nikë Ukgjini, Willy Kamsi & Romeo Gurakuqi. Shkodra: Konferenca Ipeshkvnore e Shqipërisë / Episcopal Conference of Albania 2000. xxvi + 588 pp. ISBN 99927-690-0-9.

All public expressions of religion were banned under the Communist regime in Albania in 1967. Article 37 of the Albanian constitution of 1976 stipulated, “The State recognises no religion, and supports and carries out atheistic propaganda in order to implant a scientific materialistic world outlook in people.” The ban was maintained until the end of the dictatorship and the law was first rescinded accordingly in December 1990.

It is no wonder therefore that there has been much interest in religion in Albania in recent years, not only among foreign missionaries intent on restoring traditional order and structures in a once atheistic state, but also among the Albanians themselves. This interest is not to be confused with religious fervour, which is still rare in Albania. It comes rather from a sense of need to recover a lost identity... or many lost identities.

The majority of Albanians are nominally Muslims, but about 30% are of Christian background, two-thirds of whom, primarily in southern Albania, are Orthodox and one-third, in and around Shkodra, in Ulcinj and here and there in western Kosova, are Catholic. It is to the culture of this 10% Catholic minority that the present book is devoted.

Compiled by the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Albania, this thick volume assembles the papers submitted to a three-day conference held in Tirana on 16-19 November 1999 on “Christianity among the Albanians.” It comprises 42 papers in five languages (Albanian, German, Serbo-Croatian, Italian and Polish). In the Albanian-language papers, which make up the absolute majority, it can be noted in passing that there is wide discrepancy in the very use of the term ‘Christianity.’ Some authors use *krishtërimi*, others *krishterimi*, *kristianizimi* and *krishtenizmi*.

After the introduction (p. v-viii) and the obligatory words of greeting (p. ix-xxvi, 1-34), the first major section of the book is devoted to papers on history and archaeology, which serve to trace the early and little-known centuries of Christianity in Albania.

Christianity arrived early on Albanian soil. First to have preached the gospel in Albania may have been Saint Paul himself, who stated: *So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ* (Romans 15:19). The Apostle Andrew is also believed to have preached in Epirus. By 58 A.D. the coastal port of Durrës is said, at any rate, to have been inhabited by seventy Christian families. It was a prominent religion in Albania in the fourth and fifth centuries, long before there were any traces of the Albanian people as we know them today.

The first four papers deal directly with the dark history of the earliest centuries of Christianity in Albania. In *Gjashtë shekujt e parë të krishtenizmit në trevat iliro-shqiptare* (The first six centuries of Christianity on Illyrian-Albanian territories, p. 35-68), linguist Zef Mirdita of Zagreb focusses on the birth of Christianity in Albania. He also reviews the controversial new hypothesis of Gottfried Schramm (see below) in a balanced manner. Gëzim Hoxha deals with the early spread of Christianity in the province of Praevalis, i.e. northern Albania, in his *Procesi i kristianizimit në provincën e Prevalit deri në fillimet e shekullit VII* (The process of Christianisation in the province of Praevalis up to the beginning of the 7th century, p. 69-89). Pëllumb Xhufi of Tirana, the author of numerous articles on the Byzantine period of Albanian history, covers a broader period in *Krishtërimi roman në Shqipëri, shek. VI-XVI* (Roman Christianity in Albania, VI-XVI cent., p. 89-99), dealing among other things with the effects on Albania of the great schism, i.e. the inevitable split between western Catholicism and eastern Orthodoxy. The earliest centuries of Albanian Christianity are also the focus of the paper by Markus Peters, a theologian and art historian from Mainz: *Die*

ekkesiale Geographie Albaniens bis zum Ende des 6. Jahrhunderts - Beiträge der christlichen Archäologie auf dem Territorium der heutigen Republik Albanien (The ecclesiastical geography of Albania up to the end of the 6th century: contributions to Christian archaeology on the territory of the present-day Republic of Albania, p. 100-119). He gives a good overview of sources and the main episcopal centres of Christian Albania.

Of the many other informative papers in this section, mention may be made in particular of *Kisha e kuvende të Shkodrës me rrethina në Mesjetë* (Churches and convents in Shkodra and its surrounding area in the Middle Ages, p. 120-130) by Willy Kamsi of Shkodra, the first Albanian ambassador to the Holy See. He provides many interesting details not included in the classical writings on the subject by Cordignano, Jirecek and Ippen. Bozidar Sekularac of Montenegro concentrates on the significance of the sixteenth-century 'Chronicle of Cetinje' by Vladika Vasilije Petrovic in *Albanija i Albanci u cetinjskom ljetopisu sa posebnim osvrtom na odnose sa Crnom Gorom* (Albania and the Albanians in the Chronicle of Cetinje with particular regard to their relations with Montenegro, p. 153-163). A solid overview of the spread of Catholicism in the northern Albanian mountains is provided by Fran Luli of Shkodra in his *Vështrime historike rreth përhapjes së kishave dhe emrave shenjtorëve ndër zonat e Mbishkodrës* (Historical observations on the spread of churches and of saints' names in the upper Shkodra area, p. 188-208), concentrating on regional toponyms from the late Middle Ages. Peter Bartl of the University of Munich reviews once again the significance of ecclesiastical reports to the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide by Catholic bishops, archbishops and apostolic visitors to the country in *Die Diözese Alessio während der Türkenzeit im Spiegel der geistlichen Visitationsberichte* (The diocese of Lezha during the Turkish period as reflected in spiritual visitation reports, p. 235-249). Also from Munich is Konrad Clewing who presents a broad view of the decisive years in the final establishment of the Albanian Autocephalic Orthodox Church in his *Nationalität und Glaube. Stimmen für und Wider die Autokephalie in Albanien 1922-1937* (Nationality and religion: expressions for and against autocephaly in Albania, 1922-1937, p. 303-316). The establishment and final recognition of an independent, i.e. autocephalic Orthodox church in Albania was intrinsically linked to the rise of Albanian nationalism, the creation of an independent nation in 1912 and the desire felt among Orthodox Albanians in particular for a break from the often heavy-handed tutelage of the Greek Orthodox Church. It was a controversial step and has remained so to the present day, at least for the neighbouring Greeks. In his *Persekutimi i kishës katolike në Shqipëri nga 1944-1990* (The persecution of the Catholic Church in Albania from 1944 to 1990, p. 368-391) Father Zef Simoni provides a moving account of the appalling and for Europe certainly unprecedented persecution which the Catholic Church and its representatives in Albania suffered under the Stalinist regime of Enver Hoxha.

The remaining papers in this section on history and archaeology are: *Pagëzimorja e Butrintit në dritën e gërmimeve arkeologjike* (The baptistry of Buthrotum in the light of archaeological excavations, p. 131-136) by Gjergj Saraçi, *Krishtërimi në shekujt V-VI dhe roli i tij në proceset integruese në territoret e Ilirisë së Jugut* (Christianity in the 5th and 6th centuries and its role in the integrating processes in the southern Illyrian territories, p. 137-144) by Skënder Muçaj, *Monumentet e kultit katolik gjatë mesjetës në Kosovë* (The monuments of the Catholic cult in Kosova during the Middle Ages, p. 145-152) by Jahja Drançolli of Kosova, *Albanija i Albanci u istorijama Crne Gore do kraja XIX vijeka* (Albania and the Albanians in Montenegrin historiography up to the end of the 19th century, p. 164-179) by Branislav Kovacevic of Montenegro, *Fenomeni i laramanizmit në vazhden e islamizmit ndërshqiptar në dritën e relacioneve kishtare* (The phenomenon of Crypto-Christianity during the process of pan-Albanian Islamisation in the light of church records, p. 180-187) by Shan Zefi from Kosova, *Origjina dhe zhvillimi historik i Eparkisë bizantine arbëreshe e Ungrës në Kalabri dhe mbrojtja e identitetit arbëresh (1439-1919)* (The origins and historical evolution of the Byzantine Arbëresh Eparchy of Ungra / Lungro in Calabria and the defence of Arbëresh identity in 1439-1919, p. 208-225) by Antonio Bellusci of

Cosenza, *Katolicizmi në Shqipëri përballë Shteti Osman (shek. XVI-XVIII)* (Catholicism in Albania facing the Ottoman State, 16th-18th cent., p. 226-234) by Petrika Thëngjilli, *Konkordat izmedju Crne Gore i Vatikana 1886. godine s posebnim osvrtom na položaj albanaca katolika* (The Concordat between Montenegro and the Vatican in 1886, with particular attention to the situation of Albanian Catholics, p. 250-267) by Serbo Rastoder of Montenegro, *Uniatizmi i krishterë shqiptar dhe politika kishtare greke në Shqipërinë e Mesme (1900-1904)* (The Albanian Christian Uniate Church and the Greek church policy in central Albania, 1900-1904, p. 268-276) by Shkëlzen Raça from Kosova, *Aspekte të qëndrimit të klerit katolik shqiptar në agimin e pavarësisë shqiptare (mars 1911-maj 1914)* (Aspects of the stance of the Albanian Catholic clergy at the dawn of Albanian independence, March 1911 - May 1914, p. 277-296) by Romeo Gurakuqi of Shkodra, *Roli i klerit katolik shqiptar në Konferencën e Paqes në Paris (1919-1920)* (The role of the Albanian Catholic clergy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919-1920, p. 297-302) by Valentina Duka of the University of Tirana, *Vatikani dhe Shqipëria: përpjekjet për nënshkrimin e Konkordatit* (The Vatican and Albania, efforts to sign the Concordat, p. 317-329) by Simon Lufi, *Le comunità religiose nell'Albania del Novecento* (Religious communities in twentieth-century Albania p. 330-343) by Roberto Morozzo della Rocca from Italy, *Toleranca në marrëdhëniet midis komuniteteve fetare në Shqipëri dhe ndikimi i tyre në jetën shoqërore në periudhën midis dy luftërave botërore* (Tolerance in relations between the religious communities in Albania and their influence in social life in the period between the two World Wars, p. 344-354) by Qazim Xhelili, and *Shteti komunist dhe kisha katolike (1945-1967)* (The Communist State and the Catholic Church, 1945-1967, p. 355-367) by Ajet Shahu.

The second major section of the book is devoted to language, literature and culture. The first paper of his section is *Konvertimi i shqiptarëve dhe prejardhja e shqipes: disa vërejtje rreth dy monografive të kohëve të fundit* (The conversion of the Albanians and the origins of the Albanian language: some remarks concerning two recent monographs, p. 393-402) by István Schütz, a Hungarian scholar from Budapest. Schütz reviews two recent publications here, firstly a controversial new theory about the Bessian origins of the Albanians, launched by Gottfried Schramm in his *Anfänge des albanischen Christentums: die frühe Bekehrung der Bessen und ihre langen Folgen* (The beginnings of Albanian Christianity: the early conversion of the Bessians and its long-term effects, Freiburg im Breisgau 1994). The Bessians were a Thracian tribe from what is now the Serbian-Bulgarian border region who converted to Christianity in the second half of the fourth century under Bishop Niceta of Remesiana and, according to Schramm, were forced westwards towards Albania in the early ninth century, bringing their Christian religion with them. This hypothesis has been hotly contended by Albanian scholars, not so much for historical reasons but primarily on nationalist, ideological grounds because it contradicts the prevailing dogma of the Illyrian origins and the sacrosanct autochthony of the Albanian people on its present territory. Schütz, too, is critical of Schramm's book, as he is of the other monograph under review in support of a Thracian origin for the Albanian language: *Obarsia tracica a romanilor si albanezilor. Clarificari comparativ-istorice si etnologice / Der thrakische Ursprung der Rumänen und Albanesen* (The Thracian origins of the Romanians and Albanians: historical, comparative and ethnographic clarifications, Cluj-Napoca 1995) by Romanian historical linguist Ioan Iosif Russu. The English summary here (p. 402) is erroneous. Tirana linguist Kolec Topalli reviews the whole range of Albanian religious terminology in *Lashtësia e krishterimit ndër shqiptarë sipas dëshmive të gjuhës shqipe* (The antiquity of Christianity among the Albanians according to evidence in the Albanian language, p. 403-410) and comes to the conclusion that Christianity had an early and pervasive influence not only in Albania as a geographical entity but also among the Albanians as one of the ethnic groups in the country at the time. Kosova scholar Anton Nikë Berisha, now at the University of Cosenza, offers the literary study *Hyu dhe mbretëria hyjnore në poezinë shqipe* (God and the kingdom of heaven in Albanian poetry, p. 420-432)

which provides a synthesis of the, for Albanian culture, quite unique poetry anthology he published recently, *Burim drite e dashurie, antologji e poesisë së përshpirtshme shqipe, 1618-1998* (Source of light and love, anthology of Albanian spiritual poetry, 1618-1998 (Prishtina 1999). Austrian ethnographers Karl Kaser and Robert Pichler of the University of Graz contribute an ethnological study on: *Religion und die traditionale [sic] Organisation von Familie und Gesellschaft in Albanien* (Religion and the traditional organization of family and society in Albania, p. 522-539), dealing with the role of patron saints, ancestor cults, exogamy, adoption and the role of the family in northern Albanian tribal society.

The remaining papers in this section on language, literature and culture are: *Jezu Krishti si personazh në letërsinë e vjetër shqiptare* (The character of Jesus Christ in old Albanian literature, p. 411-419) by Engjëll Sedaj of Prishtina, *Elementi biblik në këngët popullore shqiptare* (The biblical element in Albanian folk songs, p. 433-439) by Agron Xhagolli of the Tirana Folklore Institute, *Frymëzimi kristian në letërsinë shqipe* (Christian inspiration in Albanian literature, p. 440-444) by Shkodra writer Stefan Çapaliku, *Kontributi i klerit katolik në leksikografinë shqiptare* (The contribution of the Catholic clergy to Albanian lexicography, p. 445-456) by Simon Pepa of the University of Shkodra, *Il cristianesimo tra gli Albanesi all'alba del terzo millennio* (p. 457-469) by Eleuterio F. Fortino of Rome, *Gjendja aktuale fetare shqiptare, shqyrtim psikologjiko-shoqëror* (The current state of religion among the Albanians: a psychological and social examination, p. 470-493) by Lush Gjergji of Kosova, *Roli ekumenik i Kishës Katolike Arbëreshe* (The ecumenical role of Arbëresh Catholic Church, p. 494-497) by Ercole Lupinacci of Ungra (Lungro) in Calabria, *Dëshmi të hershme të pikturave murale në kapelën bizantine të amfiteatrit antik të Durrësit* (Ancient testimony of the murals in the Byzantine chapel of the ancient amphitheatre of Durrës, p. 498-503) by Hasan Nallbani, *La Chiesa arbëreshe e l'Albania: gli apostoli del passato, i profeti del futuro* (p. 504-512) by Zef Chiaramonte, an Arbëresh scholar from Santa Cristina Gela in Sicily, *Krishterimi dhe mjedisi gjeografik* (Christianity and the geographical environment, p. 513-521) by Trifon Ziu, *Zarys historii społecznej i religijnej chrystianizmu w Albanii* (Outline of the social and religious history of Christianity in Albania, p. 540-552) by Polish scholar Tadeusz Czekalski, author of the recent monograph *Zarys dziejów chrześcijaństwa albanskiego w latach 1912-1993* (Outline of the annals of Albanian Christianity in the years 1912-1993, Kraków 1996), *Kontributi i klerit katolik në kërkime të etnokulturës shqiptare* (The contribution of the Catholic clergy to the exploration of Albanian ethnic culture, p. 553-565) by Tirana ethnographer Mark Tirta, and *Në gjurmët e historisë së muzikës në Shqipëri* (In search of the musical history of Albania, p. 566-571) by musicologist Tonin Zadeja.

The papers submitted to the 1999 conference on Christianity among the Albanians are, in their great majority, works of scholarship of a higher level than we have seen in the past from Albania. While some Albanian authors for the early period of Christianity in Albania still do not distinguish sufficiently between Albanian as a geographical term and Albanian as an ethnic term (the first five centuries of Christianity in Albania, at least, had most likely nothing to do with the Albanian people at all), we do find in almost all papers efforts of original scholarship rather than the traditional compilation 'rehash' of the type "The contribution of... in..." which was standard fare in Communist Albania. For those who may be intimidated by the linguistic diversity of the contributions, it may be added that virtually all the papers are followed by one-page English-language summaries in good, readable English (which is another step forward for Albanian scholarship).

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