

Kosovo: the Role of Religion in the Current Situation

Daut Dauti

What are the dynamics of religions in Kosovo today? In communist Yugoslavia there was a liberal religious policy compared to that of other communist countries, but religion didn't play any role in society. Religion gave a flavour to the Kosovo war of 1998-99, but it wasn't a defining factor. The Kosovo Liberation Army tried to keep religion out of the agenda because they had seen what had happened in the earlier wars involving Croatia and Bosnia. This was an outcome of their coming later into armed conflict. We should remember that Albanians were always historically divided among three faiths, without any strife among them. But since the war religion has been growing as a factor. Now Wahhabis (Muslim fundamentalists), with financial backing from Saudi Arabia, are trying to gain converts among Kosovans. Mosques are being built by Wahhabis, huge, in Saudi style, but in places where people don't use them. Traditional Islam in Kosovo, influenced by the Bektashi Sufi movement, is very liberal: few hijabs are to be seen, and alcohol is available; there are a few minarets, but no visible signs of religion. One specialist observes that Kosovans practise Islam but think like Europeans. When Wahhabis arrive and say 'you can't be Muslims like this' the Kosovans say 'yes we can, we've been like this for 600 years'. Lord Byron said Greeks don't recognise Albanians as Christians, but the Turks don't recognise them as Muslims either. Bektashis are despised by Wahhabis for their liberalism, including their equal treatment of men and women. In Tetovo in 2007 a Bektashi house was seized by force by Wahhabis armed with Kalashnikovs. But, to repeat, this religious intolerance has developed *since* the war of the 1990s, especially since 1999. At the same time considerable numbers of people have been turning to neo-Protestantism and New Religious Movements. The religion which is losing ground in Kosovo is traditional Islam.

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Discussion

Rigels entered a caveat: we mustn't forget that Wahhabis are demonised, and that there is a much smaller number of them than one might think from all the publicity about them. Since about 2000 more money has started coming to

Albania from Turkey, where the Islamic tradition is similar to that of the Balkans, so the religious danger from Saudis and Wahhabis has receded. On the question of mutual destruction of mosques and churches, Daut said that the last time this had happened on any scale was in 2004, when there were riots amid the general fear that Kosovo was about to go back under Serbian rule.

The question of pan-Albanianism was raised. Rigels said that one of the aims of the nineteenth-century Albanian nationalist programme had been to reunite all Albanians, and perhaps the idea still exists, but Albanians are very pragmatic, and deal with reality. One factor is that while the state structure has always been powerful in Albania itself, in Kosovo the state has always been an alien entity, and tribal and family ties have been the structures for getting things done. Also nowadays there's no need for political unification because there is de facto no border between Albania and Kosovo. Nowadays North Albanians go to Prizren in Kosovo to work rather than to *Tiranë*. The economic unity is already a reality. No mainstream political party in Albania has ever had reunification as part of its programme. As always there are two branches of any political programme: the romantic and the pragmatic. In Kosovo the pragmatic has always prevailed. But who can say what might happen in the future? If for example Russia and Serbia united to threaten Kosovo with invasion, this might bring extremists to power with irredentism as their aim, as in Germany in the 1930s.