A Message of Hope: Peaceful Co-Existence is Possible!

Korça (south Albania): Orthodox Christians and Muslims celebrate Orthodox Easter together.

Decisive Factors that have Contributed to a Centuries’ Long Harmonious Relationship between Muslims and Christians in Albania.

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Foreword

The research for this thesis consisted largely of two parts: firstly, conducting interviews among Albanians and among foreigners with a thorough knowledge of the Albanian situation; and secondly, literature study. As can be seen in the samples of three integral interviews at the end of the thesis, the type of interview was an in-depth interview, not a standardized questionnaire. This means that the result is not in the form of statistics, but in the shape of a well-argmented and well-researched theory – but without empirical proof. Apart from my own personal preference for in-depth research, also the main focus of the research played a role in this decision: even if historical facts on certain phenomena and developments are available, the interpretation remains a relatively subjective matter. One has to weigh factors, to combine pieces of factual information, to analyze phenomena and opinions, and so on. By giving a detailed account of my process of fact-finding, analyzing and interpretation, I hope to have met with the required scholarly standards.

Globally, the method I used was as follows:

- Determining a topic; formulating a central question and hypotheses;
- Searching (advice concerning) relevant literature [in this searching process bibliographies in scholarly books, as well as specific bibliographic works have been useful as well];
- Obtaining permission and advice from the supervisors concerning the above (also in an earlier stage);
- Networking in Albania; preparing my research and stay before departure; reading some of the literature already;
- Conducting (14) interviews in Albania / the Netherlands;
- Organizing and cooperating with typists to transcribe / type the digital audio files; in the meantime: reading the largest part of the literature;
- Selecting relevant passages from the interviews;
- Translating all selected passages that were in another language than English (so, in French, Dutch, German, or Albanian; in case of the last mentioned language, I had already used an interpreter during the interview itself) and recording voice-overs for these;
- Organizing a montage (by the technician) of the selected fragments, including the voice-overs;
➢ Writing comprehensive commentaries and theoretical chapters; recording them, so that they could be added to the final montage;

➢ Drawing conclusions: affirmation or refutation of the earlier hypotheses;

➢ ‘Finishing touch’: adding footnotes, appendices; checking all the material.

About the audio documentary and its paper version / addition: this edition is meant for scholarly, and internal use only. (Not to be copied or distributed)

As agreed upon earlier, I will hand over extra copies* of both the audio documentary and its paper version / addition after having adapted the current version to a radio documentary, and it having been broadcasted by the radio station. This agreement (of postponing the handing over of extra copies) has been made in order to respect broadcasting rights of the radio station(-s) in question.

*) For the Faculty administration etc.

In the chapters, a normal letter type is used for the interview fragments; a bald letter type is used for the commentaries and theory, written by myself; italics have been used for interview texts in translation (voice-overs). Angular brackets [] have been used to indicate my personal commentary as distinguished from the rest of the text, which is usually a quotation from the literature, in that case.

Foreign and special terms have been indicated in italics. Their meaning can be found in the Glossary.

Out of practical motives, most of the chapters consist of theory first, followed by the selected interview fragments. Because of the fact that the final result would be an audio documentary in the first place (the paper version being only secondary) and because of the time consuming work of the montage of all fragments, voice-overs, etc., it turned out to be unfeasible for this moment to spread all the separate fragments throughout the theoretical parts, as might have been the case in a primarily written (paper) version, without an audio product.

The choice for English as the main language is because of three reasons: most of the conducted interviews were in English, so this gave the best opportunity to present the listener with the maximal amount of original material (without voice-overs); it meant less extra work in the terms of translation, recording voice-overs and montage; and thirdly, it will give more opportunities to have an (only slightly) adapted radio documentary broadcasted somewhere in Europe (not only in the Netherlands).
Overview of the informants (interviews Albania)

NB. Because of an explicit request concerning privacy of some of the person involved, the list below does not give all the family names.

- A = Arben, ca. 40 years old; profession: tourist guide and musician (classic); religion: Catholic; Albanian living in Albania.
- B = Besnik Mustafaj, ca. 70 years old; profession: former Minister of Foreign Affairs; Religion: Muslim (Sunni); Albanian living in Albania.
- D = H. van den Dool, ca. 50 years old; Dutch ambassador in Albania; religion: none.
- G = Gerta Kastrati, ca. 35 years old; profession: administrative and financial employee; religion: Muslim; Albanian living in Albania.
- H = Kjell Hobraaten, ca. 50 years old; profession: consultant in finances and real estate; religion: none; Norwegian living in Albania.
- ‘H’ = Myrteza Shini, ca. 40 years old; profession: consultant in finances and real estate; religion: Muslim; Albanian living in Albania. (H and ‘H’: interviewed in a double-interview)
- I = Ilir Dedej, ca. 60 years old; profession: Chief International Relations of the World Center of Bektashism; religion: Bektashi; Albanian living in Albania.
- J = Johani Pelushi, ca. 45 years old; Metropolite (= Bishop) of the Orthodox Church in Korča and scholar, Albania; religion: Orthodox; Albanian living in Albania.
- K = Klodian Kushova, ca. 30 years old; profession: tourist guide; religion: Bektashi / atheist; Albanian living in Albania.
- L = Luli Sinani, ca. 60 years old; profession: dervish in a tekke; religion: Bektashi; Albanian living in Albania.
- M = Marta Kolczynska, ca. 30 years old; profession: researcher / scholar on the Religion in the Balkans; religion: Catholic; Pole living in Poland and Albania.
- P = Adriatik Pataj, ca. 40 years old; profession: worker in a factory; religion: Muslim / Orthodox; Albanian living in the Netherlands.
- Q = Qastriot, ca. 60 years old; profession: retired military; religion: Muslim (Sunni); Albanian living in Albania.
- S = Petrar Simsija, ca. 60 years old; priest; religion: Orthodox; Albanian living in Albania.
W = Dolf Went, ca. 80 years old; profession: retired touristic operator for Albania, researcher on Albania; religion: Protestant; Dutch living in the Netherlands.

The selection criteria were: a balanced total of men / women, higher / lower educated, northern Albanian / southern Albanian / non-Albanian, young adults / seniors, Muslims / Christians / atheists, religious vocation / secular professionals. Language was not a decisive factor, as interviews could be translated. The only criterion I have not entirely met [in a balanced total] was the division of men / women.
Chronology (of Albania)\(^1\)

**Before the Common Era**
By the seventh century BC, the Illyrians (the apparent ancestors of the Albanian nation) settle in what is now Albania. In 229-168 BC the Romans defeat the Illyrians and establish the protectorate of Illyricum.

**4th Century**
The Roman Empire is divided in 395 AD, and the territory of today’s Albania falls into the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire.

**14th Century**
The Ottomans invade what is now Albania in 1385. Their rule lasts for more than 500 years.

**15th Century**
Skanderbeg, the Albanian leader, wages a war of independence against the Ottomans starting in 1443 and enjoys remarkable success in keeping them at bay until his death in 1468.

**19th Century**
In the 1830s, the Ottomans crush Albanian autonomy. Uprisings break out over taxation policy in the 1840s. After Russia (partly) defeats the Ottoman Empire, the Prizren League is founded in 1878 to fight for autonomy and against the partitioning of Albanian territory.

**20th Century**

**1990**
After the totalitarian regimes collapse everywhere else in Eastern Europe, Communist Party leader Ramiz Alia announces cautious democratization in March. Reform comes slowly. The People’s Assembly rescinds the ban on religion and on travel abroad in May. On December 12 the Democratic Party is founded, Albania’s first non-communist party in the postwar era.

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\(^1\) Historical overview by Silvia Çaushi, Tirana: TIYP / Gazmend Haxhia, 2011.
Nine days later, the authorities dismantle the statue of Stalin in Tirana.

1991
In February, students at Enver Hoxha University launch a strike, demanding reforms; weeks of protests culminate in the toppling of Enver Hoxha's statue at Skanderbeg Square. Waves of refugees flee the country in March. On March 31 the first multi-party elections in 68 years result in a victory for the communists. In June the faults in the economy become clear when thousands of Albanians seeking asylum in Italy commandeer ships. An estimated 100,000 Albanians had fled the country in the previous 12 months.

1997
Collapsing pyramid schemes spark months of rioting and lawlessness throughout Albania in January. In June, parliamentary elections, held amidst nationwide unrest, result in a landslide victory for the Socialists. President Berisha, blamed for allowing the pyramid schemes to flourish, resigns.

1999
In response to Serb attacks on ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, NATO launches an air war on Yugoslavia on March 25. The war turns Albania into a NATO base of operations, and by May 500,000 Kosovars have flooded into the country.

2001
In October, Edi Rama, a former art lecturer and painter supported by the Socialist Party, is elected mayor of the capital Tirana and initiates a series of projects that change the face of the city.

2005
In July, Sali Berisha's Democratic Party wins the national elections from Fatos Nano's Socialists. The election results are delayed after allegations of voting irregularities and three deaths. OSCE monitors report that the elections only partially complied with international standards. Novelist Ismail Kadare wins the first international version of Britain's Man Booker Prize.

2006
Albania signs the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU, the first step towards closer cooperation with the EU.

2007
In June, US president George W. Bush gets a hero’s welcome on his visit to Albania, where he is allegedly robbed of his watch during a meet and greet with the crowds in Fushe Kruja.

2008
March 15— An accident in a factory used for defusing old munition causes a series of explosions, wiping out the village of Gërdec (at 14 km from Tirana), killing 26 and wounding nearly 300 people. The explosions destroy hundreds of houses, shatter windows of cars on the highway, and are heard as far away as Skopje. The defence minister resigns.
2009
In April Albania joins the NATO. In June Berisha’s Democratic Party of Albania narrowly wins the tight-fought national elections, which were marred by many irregularities. A political stalemate ensues when the opposition Socialist Party boycotts parliament after a ballot recount is refused, and continues to organize many demonstrations.

2010
December— After delays due to dodgy Albanian passports, the EU finally announces visa-free travel for Albanians to Europe’s Schengen countries, starting just before Christmas. On the day itself, there is no huge increase in cross-border traffic.

2011
January 21—The political problems which to the frustration of many Albanians have been dragging on since 2009 lead to a violent protest. Demonstrators attack the Prime Minister’s residence, and nervous guards shoot at them, killing three protesters. Foreign ambassadors continue to call for calm, dialogue and compromise to solve the problems. Yet, even after this, politicians shamelessly continue their blame games.
Some facts about Albania and the region: maps

Map 1. Albania
Some facts about the Albanian population

M2: Well, actually, there are three major religious groups; or some people say that actually it is four; although the last census was done in the 1990s and there are no new statistics available, you can say that some 70% of the Albanians are Muslims, spread all over the country, 20% are Orthodox who live mainly in the south and some 10% are Catholic who live mainly in the north2. Within the group of Muslims there are also two sub-groups: the majority is Sunni and there is also a big minority of Bektashis. (E: Can you give percentages of Sunnis and Bektashis?) It is difficult to estimate. I would say that of the whole population of Albanians some 50 to 60% are Sunnis, some 10 to 20% are Bektashis, then 20% are Orthodox and 10% are Catholic. (E: Then you are speaking about nominal followers, not about practicants?) I am speaking about self declaration, because one important thing to understand is that in Albania people do not consider religion purely in terms of faith and practice; they consider religion more in terms of their traditional family background. (…) The idea of atheism is practically nonexistent. I’ve never met with anyone, or talked to anyone who said he was an atheist or agnostic.

M3: (…) The vast majority of Muslims in Albania do not practice their religion; as for Catholics, I would say that a higher percentage of Catholics do practice their religion.

2 Conform the statistics given by Apostolov, 2004, p.60 and Young, 2001, p.3-4
Introduction

‘The oil of religion must never be used to flame conflicts, but to sooth hearts and heal wounds’.

This motto of Orthodox Archbishop Anastasios of Albania has become a classic statement, not only in the Orthodox Church worldwide, but in wider circles as well. I have chosen this quote as the motto for my thesis: it indicates the twofold, and paradoxical working of religion – an inspiring and healing working, nourishing the soul and establishing peaceful and meaningful relationships, over against a detrimental and destructive effect, if manipulated and abused.

So it is not self-evident that religion is a constructive factor in society and in individual lives. In Albania, however, it has constituted a remarkably positive driving force throughout the centuries. Especially if compared to most of the neighbouring countries in the last few decades, and even in comparison to many Western European states nowadays, Albania can be viewed as an impressive role model for harmonious interreligious relationships.

Ever since I read my first novel on Albania, over 25 years ago, this mysterious – and at that time: still hermetically closed off – Southern European country intrigued me. I hoped I would be able one day to pay it a visit and to explore some of its mysteries and strong traditions. When I first heard about its noteworthy interreligious harmony, my interest was aroused even further. Finally, in Summer 2011 I have been travelling extensively in Albania, doing the research for my Master’s thesis over there. This intensive acquaintance with the former spearhead of the Ottoman Empire, a bridge between East and West, with its stunning nature and warm-hearted population, has made a lasting impression on me.

It is my hope and deeply-felt wish that the outstanding example of Albania where interreligious co-existence is concerned, will remain unaffected in the future; and equally so, that other countries in the world can learn [and apply!] important lessons from this model.

Central question and hypotheses

The central question of my research is:

What is, or has been, the influence up to the present, of the communist, dictatorial and [since 1967:] explicitly atheist regime in Albania (1945-1991) on the interreligious relationships between Muslims and Christians in contemporary Albania?

Which other possible factors do contribute decisively to the fore mentioned relationship?

NB: On the basis of preliminary research [before my departure to Albania] I started from the assumption that the interreligious relationships in Albania would be fairly – or even: outstandingly – good. Naturally, I needed to check this assumption more thoroughly while

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3 Concerning Albanian Jews: see my comment in the introductory remarks at the beginning of chapter 1.
conducting my interviews and taking through the relevant literature. The initial assumption has only be affirmed very strongly.

The **hypotheses** I formulated before starting my actual research, run as follows:

The present-day (relatively?) good and harmonious interreligious relationships between the forementioned groups in Albania are specifically the result of:

1) The situation of shared suffering and persecution during a period of over forty years – a persecution which was explicitly directed against religious persons and leaders;

2) The complete isolation of the country and its population during the dictatorial regime: any possible influencing by external interreligious tensions must be considered negligible. [Counter-argument: after the discontinuance of the state of isolation in 1991 there were still many very strong interreligious and interethnic tensions and conflicts present elsewhere in the Balkans];

3) In Albania moderate forms of Islam and Christianity are present/dominant – a.o. Bektashism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. [Counter-argument: elsewhere in the Balkans the interwovenness of the state with the Orthodox Church rather contributed to interreligious conflict];

4) The Ottoman period (14th-early 20th century) provided a centuries’ long lasting trial-plot for peaceful co-existence;

5) In contrast to the situation elsewhere in the Balkans the religious groups in Albania are not divided along ethnic lines (as well): Christians as well as Muslims consider themselves and the other religious group as Albanian;

6) The strongly-felt obligation of hospitality (a.o. because of the *Besa*), also – or: specifically – towards the stranger, has resulted in the fact that Albania, next to Denmark, has been the only European country that categorically and effectively refused the extradition of any Jew during World War II. A comparable tradition or feeling of honour and hospitality towards the ‘strange other’ might play a decisive role apart from war-time circumstances as well.
1. Harmony

The (tentative) presupposition of my research, namely that the interreligious relations in Albania would be harmonious in character, has been affirmed unequivocally and unanimously by all the persons in Albania I asked about this subject: both the officially interviewed informants and the informal contacts stated unambiguously that the interreligious (and interdenominational) relations in the country are excellent. For this matter, there was no difference in observation between native Albanians or foreigners in Albania: they all replied in the same way. Many of them also stressed the fact that this interreligious harmony has long, historical roots. The peaceful coexistence between the distinguished religious groups stems at least from the last five hundred years since the introduction of Islam by the Ottomans, some claim it to have lasted for the last ca. three millennia, so as a characteristic attitude of the ancestors in the area (Illyrians), even before the introduction of Christianity and Islam.

NB: Already before travelling to Albania to do my research, Summer 2011, it became clear to me (through literary study) that the scope of my research would not include Judaism as a third religion of significance in Albania: the Jewish community in Albania, already very limited in number before World War II, was decimated after (not: during!) the war, because of emigration to Israel. All the sources emphasized that the reason for emigration was only economical, as Jews in Albania had not suffered any discrimination or persecution before or during World War II. Like nearly all the inhabitants of Albania, also the Jews had the wish to escape from the extreme poverty in the country; the distinguishing factor was that the Jews (in contrast to the other Albanians, in most of the cases) had a country where they would be welcomed and where they could easily acquire a residence permit: Israel.

Interview fragments:

E9: I would like to ask you what your opinion is on the Christian-Muslim relationships here in Albania?

G9: For this I can say that it is a very warm, a very good relation. [...] 

E4: What is your opinion on the relationships between the religions, here in the country?

K5: The relations, starting from the ancient period, continuing till now, are quite good. We are a brotherhood and we respect the people; e.g. there are conservative people, they

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4 See e.g. Young, pp.45-6, 52 (n.18); cf. interview with Ilir Dedej in August 2011: interview fragments E 21 – I 23, in chapter 2.

5 Cf. Townsend, cited in Morris, p.278: ‘Muslims [in Albania] are pleased to meet Christians, fellow-believers in the One God.’ (Underlining not in original)
are practicant, whatever their religion would be - we respect those who are practicant and those who are not. We live in harmony with each other. We used to live like that and we continue like that. […]

I1: The dialogue and tolerance between the four communities in Albania: Sunni, Bektashi, Orthodox and Catholic, is a tradition – not just now, but it is a real tradition, it is an old tradition – even in difficult times they had a great relation between them and we never had conflicts or extremes in this. […]

D5: In my opinion Albania has an unusual level of religious harmony. This religious harmony is something positive and impressive to watch for many foreigners, not at least for Dutch visitors. This religious harmony could be an Albanian export product, in some way or another. It is really something that the rest of the world could take as an example. […]

E40: I would like to know how your relationship is with the mosque here in Gjirokastër, do you have a good relationship and do you see each other regularly?

L40: The relationships between the different religions here are very, very good. When there is a celebration of us, the Bektashi, here in our tekke, the [Sunnis] come here; and when there is a celebration of the [Sunnis], we go and visit them. […]

E7: I saw there is a mosque opposite, over there. How are the relationships with the Imam over there?

S7: The relation is the best you can imagine. In all Albania, but especially in Berat. It is harmony. So, for example, when the church of Goriza [neighbourhood in the town of Berat] was opened in 1990, there were so many people that went over there, so nobody knew if it was Orthodox, or Catholic, or Muslim, it doesn’t matter: everybody came to the church. The same happened when the mosque was opened, two weeks later: the same people went there.

E8: Also during religious festivals, like Christmas, or Ramadan, or ‘Id al Fitr: do people visit each other’s religious service?

S8: For example, we have Christmas Day, we have office here, we have a guestroom for people who come, who are important. All the Muslim people with their leader, the imam or the mufti, come to greet us, in that office. The same things happen to us: if they have Ramadan, we have of course the office there, these meetings, the gathering, we go there. Not only if we have religious holidays, but even on a normal day, we go there; we go there like friends. We are having coffee with them, so it is really a good harmony. […]

A26: I have a friend, an old man of 74 years old, he’s an imam, serving in a village here, in Kutshi, five kilometers away from Shkodër and he stands in such a good relationship with the priest of the neighboring village that the priest invites him... the Catholic
priest invites the imam to take some lessons in the church. And the imam also invites the priest to the mosque, to speak to the Muslim people. They are friends and the communities are looking at them how they are inviting each other in their respected institutions. This is something they are doing actually, which is having a very good impact on the population. Also when it was the Albanian Independence day; we have here just some meters away the main mosque of Shkodër – have you seen the main mosque? (E: Yes.) Just here – and if we go a little bit to the left we have an Orthodox church, and some meters behind a Catholic church.

E27: So all very near.

A27: So the three towers – I’m just calling it ‘tower’, meaning the minaret and the Catholic [and Orthodox] bell tower – the three towers were connected with flags and bulbs, electric bulbs, to celebrate and to show that Albanians, in spite of the religion, are connected as a triangle.

E28: Beautiful.
2. **Harmony: factors**

My research has focused on the question **which factors** have been decisive for the historical and contemporary interreligious harmony in Albania.

From the selected interview fragments below, I will distil circa thirty – sometimes: interrelated – factors, which supposedly contributed to the mentioned harmony. In later chapters I will investigate some of the most essential factors more thoroughly, also in relation to the leading question of my research [i.e. the specific contribution of the atheist / communist regime] and in relation to the hypotheses that I formulated in the initial stage of the research [see the overview of hypotheses, in the Introduction].

**Interview fragments:**

E10: What do you see as the main factors that contribute to the good relationships between the religious groups here in Albania? How do you explain them [these good relations]?

K11: Love to each other. So we are all together. Since the ancient period we love the country like it is, we don’t separate it, like: Muslims in that part, Orthodox in that part, Catholics in that part. So we have never done these things. So: love between each other – I don’t know – that must be the main reason. We never ask [what the religious background of a person is]. Economics could never make this harmony happen, just love. (E: And respect perhaps?) Yes, love and respect, normally. [...]

E10: What do you see as the main factors that contribute to the good relationships between the religious groups here in Albania? How do you explain them [these good relations]?

I22: One [thing] is the tolerance, dialogue and co-existence between the four communities; and the second [thing] is, that every community – I am from the Bektashi community, but the Orthodox, Catholics, Sunni do the same – that all religious communities, and all people, when in World War II the Nazis came and wanted to find them and to send them to a camp, to Auschwitz, e.g. they came from Yugoslavia – because they came country by country, and they stopped in Albania. (E: The Jews?) The Jews, they stopped in Berat, in El Basan – and the Albanians never gave them to the Nazis. They said – the Nazis had spies, of course – they’d say: ‘No, they are my children.’ They would never give them. This was very dangerous. They could be killed, their home could be burnt, but none would be killed. Especially Bektashis; the [Jews] could be [hidden] in a tekke, or in a Bektashi family, and none of them would be killed.

E22: So that is very special. Denmark was the only other country in Europe where no Jew was handed over to the Nazis; so this was the case only in Albania and Denmark.

I23: Yes, so this was also a value of our people, who love other people and respect and protect them. (E: Also hospitality?) Hospitality is one of the Albanian traditions:
hospitality, generosity, respect of foreigners, loyalty [while they are our] guests. We would never fail to protect them, wouldn’t let them in a bad position.

E23: That is a very good example [for others]. [...] 

E22: Could you think of other factors that contribute to the good relationships between Muslims and Christians here in Albania?

M22: Maybe the presence of the need of unity of all Albanians, in opposition to the Serbs, and in opposition to the Greeks. And Italians. This kind of unity does not support internal conflict, which would make Albanians weaker, if they were interconflicted.

E23: What kind of threat do Greeks, or Serbs, or Italians pose; what type of threat do they pose to Albanians?

M23: They are strong neighbors. And Greeks have territorial claims to Albania. Italians invaded Albania before World War II and Albania was a protectorate of the Italian Kingdom. And Serbs are related to the conflict of Kosovo. [...] 

H6: I’d give all the credit to Bektashism and the combination of Bektashism and Albanian nationality; plus the credit for Enver Hoxha, because the fact that all religions were put in the same basket for a while has lowered these religious tensions. But I think [it is worth mentioning] the Frashëri family, because becoming Albanian was becoming more important than religion, suddenly [thanks to this Frashëri family]. The Frashëri family was the most unionist for Albania. They are the founding fathers of Albanian nationalism – no discussion. And of course their influence is strong, very strong; because theirs was not an authority that came from somebody with a hammer; they were people with poems, with words, who created a national thinking and who were not rulers. Abdel Frashëri has written a book: ‘Albania, how it is, and how it will become’. So as a pamphlet, it was a manifest of the Albanians, written in the 1880s.

E8: So they really inspired the people to unite. (H: Yes, it was the Renaissance.) So that was different from power that oppresses.

H9: And it was exactly this family that belonged to Bektashism. [...] 

E3: It seems Albania has a relatively good situation compared to surrounding countries, especially if you see the religious situation. Can you confirm or contradict that? How is the relationship between the religions, according to you?

6 Cf. the reverse effect as well, comparable in its strong possible effects (‘the power of language’): hate talk in the media in the period preceding violent conflict, for instance in Rwanda or Bosnia. Likewise, language can have strong positive effects, as in the mentioned example of the Frashëris.
A3: I can strongly confirm that there is a very good situation, a very good relation between the different religions in Albania and there are a lot of reasons why we have this good situation. In Albania, if we look at the history, we can find a lot of reasons, both in the past and nowadays. There are also some entities or states that might be interested to use religion against us. Since twenty years Albania is an open country and everybody can reach Albania and organize activities here. Still, we are able to keep this good relation between different religions; it means that no others affect or influence this good heritage we have in Albania.

E4: How do you explain this good relationship historically?

A4: Well, to explain that good relation we may need to take into consideration more than 3000 years of history in this land, in this area. (...) Actually, first of all I would like to mention the fact that Albanians or Illyrian tribes existed and had a well organized life and culture before the Christian era. So it is not that Albanians started to exist after Jesus Christ. I intend to say with this that the kind of human relationship, this good approach we have towards each other was not built on a Catholic base or Muslim base, but that it was existing previously. And of course in this pre-Christian era we had many gods in Albania: we had a god for the sun, a god for the moon, another god for the water. So in the areas populated by Albanians, we had these pagan beliefs about nature, about natural phenomena, about life, about spirits, about social relations, about marriage, about everything, in this pre-Christian era. So this shows that the social structure has been previously constructed and that it is not only starting from the Christian era.

A7: You know, in a certain stage of development of every religion, we have a dictate or dictator, or whatever we can call it. A kind of total pressure to make everybody believe in the same way, to standardize a way of believing. So, since Albania was not subjected to only one religion to have this dictatorial part that every religion had in history, we were neutralized somehow. So starting from this pagan base in ancient times: what came after was a never uninterrupted religion, but it was a kind of mixture and fighting and concurrence between different religions.

A9: Right in the moment that in the rest of Europe the Catholic religion was growing stronger and stronger and having some close connection with the political power, right in that moment, instead of doing the same in Albania, we were attacked by the Turks and the Islam was starting to be present more and more because of the policy of the Turkish Empire. So if we can see the development of religion in the initial time, the martyrs’ time: first there are martyrs, so in its very beginning no monotheistic religion

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7 The first wave of christianization of Albania took place before 58 AD – in the coastal area mainly; the inlands in the 4th until the 8th century. The second wave must have been somewhere between the beginning of the 7th and the end of the 10th century AD (Bartl, p.39. Cf. Elsie, pp.90-91).
has power and we can see right then, in that moment in medieval times, that the
Christian church was so strongly influencing or being able to dominate and discharge
things in Europe. Right in that moment it was somehow broken in Albania\(^8\) – the pan-
Christian belief – because of the presence of the Ottoman Empire. So it is not that
religion – in my opinion: obviously – it is not that religion itself has to compete with
another religion, but when religion is transformed into a political means, which was
the case for Christianity in Europe in medieval times, right in that moment we had this
change.

A10: And then the Islam was never able, actually, to become a total reality in politics,
because, at a certain moment of the Ottoman period this strong connection between
the *caliphate* and the political power was broken. You know that initially the sultan
represented not only the political power, but also the religion, the Islam. So both
positions, i.e. religious and political power, united in the same person. Then, by the
end of the Ottoman period, it was not the same, so it was divided somehow; the
political power and the power of the religious authority. So that means that right in the
moment that [elsewhere in Europe] religions have been influencing the [political]
power too much, right in that moment in Albania something has been broken, in order
not to permit this very dangerous link between power and religion.

E11: So in fact, looking back on medieval times here in Albania or elsewhere in the Ottoman
Empire there was a stronger division between church and state – or, if you want:
religious and political power – than for instance in Western Europe, according to you?

A11: Yes, according to what history is telling us, yes.

E12: And does that make a more stable or a more easy fundament for religions to cooperate
and to live together peacefully?

A12: Well, in general I believe that different religions can only be *misused* [if they are used]
as tools to reach political goals and in that case, different religions can have a problem
between each other. If we consider religion only as something related to spiritual life,
to beliefs, then there will never be a war between religions *en soi*, [between religions
as such], but only when different religions are being used as political tools, to reach
political goals.

A13: Albanians understood since the beginning that having these different religions present
in Albania, no politician in Albania [should have, or:] had this bad inspiration to use
religion as a political tool.\(^9\) We have to consider what Albania really needs. We have to
think not only for one religion or for people belonging to one religion. So the equation

\(^8\) This contradicts the stereotype, popular in the West, that the western World has always (had) a better division of
the religious over against the political sphere.

\(^9\) Cf. interview fragment Van den Dool D6 (see next page).
for every Albanian politician since the very beginning was to consider the fact that we have different religions but we belong to the same culture, the same nation, etcetera. If you consider the cultural difference between a Catholic in Rome and a Muslim in Dubai, the difference is really great compared with what can be a small or no difference between a Catholic and a Muslim from Shkodër.\(^{10}\)

E14: It is very near to each other.

A14: It is the same people. […]

W24: I went some time ago to Albania with a group and my assistant was the son of a minister [pastor]. He opened my eyes more or less by saying: ‘Well, it is so wonderful that all these religious leaders [here in Albania] celebrate each other’s religious feasts together.’

E25: Yes. So, [he meant that] if it is an Islamic feast the Christians participate?

W25: Yes, I did not notice that before, but he opened my eyes to that. When I took notice of that more and more, I thought: ‘That is typical Albanian.’

E26: You did not see that in other countries?

W26: No. You know, if you take the Netherlands, or rather all these European countries; this big fight. And then the Albanians, that is so…

E27: How do you explain that? That they are living so peacefully together?

W27: What I told you, that is the typical Albanian way how they do that. I asked them once: ‘Well, you destroyed communism and you are free now; you are all very nationalistic and now you ask to be a member of the European Union. Then you will have the dictate of Brussels, what you have to do.’ ‘Mister Went, we will do that in our own way, in our Albanian way, to escape all the rules and all the orders. We have a special Albanian way for it.’

E28: Could you call it pragmatism, a pragmatic attitude? Something like that?

W28: No, it is a special habit, a special aspect in their lives: that you know how to handle this situation, and to escape and still to be nationalist and perhaps a little bit European Union, perhaps a little so. Just enough to be allowed to enter, that is really a very specific Albanian habit.

\(^{10}\) Cf. interview fragment Went W29 (see next page). This notion stands in sharp contrast to the situation elsewhere in the Balkans in recent decades, where a Bosnian Muslim could typically say: ‘I feel more affiliation with a Muslim in Malaysia than with a Bosnian Serb or Croat in my own country.’
W29: (...) that is typical Albanian that they have their own brand of Islam, they have their own Roman Catholicism, they have their own religions, which are very special and different from all the other beliefs in the world just because it is Albanian. […]

E6: You just mentioned an exceptional religious harmony as characteristic for Albania. Do you have any view on possible factors that have contributed to this harmony in the past – throughout the centuries or decades – or perhaps in the present?

D6: Yes. The remarkable thing, when visiting Albania for the first time, is that it is unobtrusive: religion is absent in the streets, as a matter of fact. Of course, you see mosques, you see churches, but not in a very obtrusive manner. With the exception of the two principle religious feasts – Easter for the Orthodox, Ramadan for the Muslims – religion does not manifest itself visibly in the streets. Only after you get acquainted with Albanians, you will notice that people who belong to different religious communities, intermarry, are part of the same family, go out together. Actually, it is a factor without significance. At times, you hear people say – and I doubt if they are completely right: “It is not religious harmony, but actually it is religious indifference: religion is not really an issue.” People consider their faith as something strictly individual, in which no one else should interfere; people also look upon their religion in a pragmatic way, in many cases: someone is a Catholic just because he was born in a Catholic family: or he is a Muslim, just because he was born in a Muslim family. People do not attend prayers in either church or mosque in great numbers. They do attend at times, but there is very little religious fanaticism, from none of the religious groups. In a sense this feels as a relief compared to elsewhere in Europe. Somehow there are some exceptions, of course. I have the impression that the Protestant community, which is rather small in number, is more expressly engaged in their faith. Partly, this could be explained by the fact that the Protestant community is relatively new in Albania, so people have made a conscious choice for it, not just because their parents were Protestants; this in contrast to Muslims or Catholics, in many cases. Where Muslims are concerned, there are some mosques where some slightly more fundamentalist tendencies can be observed, but these are very few, and not taken very seriously by the overwhelming majority of the Muslims. By Saudi-Arabia, by the Arab world, by Kuwait some efforts are made to bring here a slightly stricter form of Islam. These efforts are accompanied by the offering of beautiful mosques and the like. Albanians are not really impressed by it. Since approximately half a year there is an Islamic university, an Albanian college to educate imams, which caused some worries in the international community; until it became clear that so far Albanian

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11 See also Norris, p.276. This is comparable to the situation in Kosovo, where Islam hardly plays any role in the public sphere either (Kołczyńska, 2008, p.6); this stands in contrast, however, with the position of religion in most of the former Yugoslavia.

12 Raxhimi (pp.2 & 7) affirms the need of Albanian theological institutes, as well as the need of an Albanian brand of Islam, independent from Turkish and / or Arab influences.
imams mostly received their education abroad, after which they returned to Albania with a slightly more fundamentalist approach of Islam, in some of the cases. It was the Albanian Muslim community itself that deemed it necessary for the education of Albanian imams to take place on Albanian soil, because here in the country an Albanian type of Islam could be taught. [E: So this is a positive development in itself?] Definitely. I also think that the enormous religious tensions and conflicts that have taken place in the neighboring countries – and sometimes continue to take place – between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, between Christianity and Islam, have been created in many of these cases by political or military leaders with a nationalistic agenda. Such an agenda has never been necessary in Albania. This country is a country, a state; this country does not have the need, the necessity to construct a national identity. [E: Why not?] Because the national identity is there: there is a national unity. Albanians are not nationalistic, but they are chauvinistic. They are proud of their national hero in the 15th century, who kept the Turks at bay for a while. A very famous poetic line says: “The Albanian religion is Albania [or: Albanianism].” In a sense I believe this to be true. Among the Albanian population I see very little tolerance for religious fanaticism, for proselytism, for prioritizing the own truth over other truths – it is just not such an issue.(...) Partly it is also indifference: when you probe a little bit deeper into people’s souls, they might call themselves nominally Muslims or Christians, but they do not practice their religion actively, in many cases.

E 8: Earlier in this interview you mentioned the attitude [of many Albanians who say]: ‘My religion is a private issue. I do not feel the need to evangelize, to promote it at the expense of other religions. Neither do I need to show it in public, in the street.’ You are Dutch yourself, you have a Dutch background: how do you compare this to the way we handle religion in the Netherlands? Because we tend to say: ‘My religion is mine, your religion is yours, and whatever a person believes, is of his own choice – as long as he does not bother me with it or promotes it publicly.’ Is this comparable to the Albanian situation, or do you see important differences?

D 8: I do think there are differences, so I do not entirely agree with the characterization you gave of the Dutch situation in this respect: in my opinion the different religious groups in the Netherlands do not always obstruct each other, but they do manifest themselves very clearly at all times. That applies to the type of Islam which is visible in Holland – for instance Rotterdam really looks different from Albania: the street view is different. [E: The visibility?] Yes. But that also applies to what is called the Bible Belt in the Netherlands: certain Protestant communities, who might not be explicitly active in proselytizing at the expense of other groups, but who do manifest themselves very clearly, very visibly.

E 9: Then you are specifically referring to their dress code?
D 10: Definitely, that is part of it. But I also have in mind the Ramadan of the Muslims, which is much more visible in Holland than here, according to me. And another example – the rather loud calls to prayer from the mosques and the equally loud ringing of the bells of the churches in the Netherlands: this is hardly present in Albania, these visible and audible manifestations of the religions. What is also interesting for me – but it might be just a matter of semantics: people often speak about religious tolerance. That is a word that I personally would not use for Albania: it is not tolerance, but interreligious harmony. ‘Tolerance’ suggests that you tolerate someone else. That implies an unequal relationship, according to me. [E: A hierarchical relationship?] Yes, indeed. That hierarchical relationship is not present here in Albania; it is not an issue, because religion as such is not an issue.

E 10: Could the fact that there are not two ethnically distinctive groups in Albania, with a different socio-economic position play a role as well? And consequently, that there is not one group that can say: “We are not only the economically stronger, but also the dominant group”, and subsequently would exclude or discriminate against the other group; but that the population is more of an indistinguishable whole; or perhaps rather heterogeneous, like a mosaic, without specific larger ethnic groups to be distinguished therein?

D 10: Indeed, I think that this is correct. I consider the Albanian population as ethnically homogeneous. In every country, especially in the frontier districts, some problems can occur now and then. There are some groups that define themselves slightly different than the rest of Albania. I do not have the impression that there’d be much discrimination; irrespective of the Roma – but that is a group that is difficult to grasp anyhow, a group that hardly occurs in official registration or statistics, and that is moreover not confined to one single religious denomination. Albania has a homogeneous population. The socio-economic positions are divided equally. It is not visible to what religious community Albanians belong, if you meet them somewhere. And if there is an iftar, as was the case last week, at the beginning of Ramadan, then it was the mufti of Tirana who organized an iftar dinner. Apart from the Orthodox bishop, the Catholic bishop and the Bektashi baba, who were sitting next to him at the table, there was also the prime minister, whom I know to be nominally Muslim, and the speaker of parliament, who is a nominal Roman Catholic. Last Easter I was in Korça, which is an Orthodox city mainly, but everybody participates in the celebration of Easter, also the Muslims. They do come to the Orthodox cathedral. It is magnificent to see: in the middle of the night light is coming from the cathedral, candle light. All the people have candles with them, so the light is passed on from candle to candle, until there are little flames all over the city. And there are incredibly large numbers of Muslims walking around there with a little flame. [E: Really a unity.] Absolutely.

E 11: During the preparation of this interview, in one of your e-mails, you mentioned the agreements that have been made between the government and the four distinctive
The four religious mainstreams – Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox and Catholic – have an agreement with the Albanian government, and more specifically with the Ministry of Culture. One part of the agreement concerns a tax reduction for religious communities, for instance relating to church buildings; another part of the agreement is the mutual consent not to interfere in each other’s domain: the religious community promises not to engage in politics, and the government will not meddle with religious affairs. From both sides there is a complete freedom of activity, as long as one sticks to one’s own domain.

Okay, can we say that Albanians have a quite pragmatic, a practical attitude towards religion? Just you take it how it comes and it doesn’t matter too much; or is that too strong?

This [former, communist] regime in those days brought with it that the people are a bit cold [towards] or not so familiar with religious practice. But maybe also a factor is: in the public schools ‘religion’ is not a separate subject, nor are the teachers mentioning the religion, nor asking which religion you have or making the segregation, so ‘religion’ is not a word to be used at school at all.

So it is a completely secular school system.

Yes.

In all the schools – both state schools and...?

Public schools.

Ah, public schools. And in private schools it is different?

There are orientations in private schools, yes. Turkish schools, Greek, Italian. So they are free to put religion as a subject or just the orientation.

And is it the same with the state? Like you have secular schools, that also the state is fully secular: is that also a factor?

Yes, the public administration is also non-religious.

And none of the ruling parties is religious?

No.

Okay, that might be a factor as well.

Yes, sure. [...]

religious groups in Albania – can you give some more details, about the content or character of these agreements and about which part of the government has taken the initiative?
E22: The fact that most people are non-practicing in Albania, does that make a difference for the relationship between Muslims and Christians?

K23: No, there is not any difference between them.

E23: No, I mean: if almost all the people in Albania would be practicants, would it be more difficult, that relationship?

K24: Of course, it would be like Kosovo, it would be like – I don’t know – Saudi Arabia, they would not be allowed to do what they want to do, so they would follow those strict religious rules. But here it was never the situation, never. […]

E44: With regard to the factors that contribute to interreligious harmony: does it matter for the peaceful or harmonious attitude of certain Albanians to which subgroup they belong; for instance within Islam, if someone is a Bektashi, or a Shiite, or a Sunni?

P44: No. They are all Muslims, it doesn’t make a difference. The type of jihadists that you may find in some Arab countries doesn’t exist in Albania.

E45: Is it not so, that certain groups of Muslims are more open towards contacts with Christians, e.g. town people more than the people at the countryside, or vice versa; or only the Bektashis, for instance?

P45: It is hard to say. There is a difference between Northern Albania and the rest of the country.

E46: You mean that they live more isolated in the north?

P46: Yes, more isolated. And you see many women with headscarves13 – not that many in town, but rather in the villages. It is a little piece of white cloth that they wear on their hair; mainly just the elderly women wear it.

E47: Is it just like the Middle-East, where both Christian and Muslim women wear headscarves, or only the Muslims?

P47: Both Christian and Muslim women.

E48: Both. So it rather depends on your age than on your religion?

P48: It depends on the age. If you are an old woman you just have to keep your head warm in winter.

E49: Yes, like other Eastern European countries; like Rumania?

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13 Cf. Young, p.99: Once married, rural women [of the highlands in northern Albania] in particular are expected to conform by wearing headscarves. As in other areas of the Balkans these traditional expectations are changing.
P 49: Indeed, it is not out of religious motives.

E 51: Is there any difference, by the way, between the city and the countryside, where the relationship between Christians and Muslims is concerned?

P 51: At the countryside it is a bit more difficult than in the city.

E 52: What is the decisive factor?

P 52: In the villages they are more isolated.

E 53: So they have less experience in daily contact with the other religion?

P 53: Yes, that is correct. But people are always welcome in their homes.

E 54: You mean, hospitality is important?

P 54: Hospitality, yes. Also towards people of another religion.

E 55: Yes. But how do you explain then that yet the relationships between both groups (Muslims and Christians) are slightly more complicated at the countryside?

P 55: It is not really complicated, but they just don’t know better, I’d say.

E 56: They are less open, you mean?

P56: Indeed. […]

B5: [There are certain superficial factors that have contributed somehow to the religious harmony.] but the foundation is far more important and dates back earlier in history. It forms part of the Albanian identity.

E6: And how do you explain that, when you look back upon this history?

B6: Skanderbeg, our national hero of the 15th century, was born an Orthodox; he grew up as a Muslim and died as a Catholic – just to give you an example. Secondly, the line of Theodosius\(^\text{14}\), when there has been this schism, this separation of the two churches [Orthodox and Catholic] goes through Albania. So, since the 11th century, half of the Albanians were Orthodox, half were Catholics. So the Albanians who lived together and who, because of the interior conflict within the church, were separated between the Vatican and Constantinople, have continued to live together in the same manner. This has created a situation, step by step throughout our history, a situation in which nationhood and religion have not been identical. So, slowly, throughout the centuries, a national identity has taken precedence over denominational identity.

\(^{14}\) Politically, this West-Eastern border was drawn in 395 AD already by the Roman emperor Theodosius (Schwartz, p.106).
So, could we say that the fact that Albania was situated somewhere at the frontier between Constantinople and Rome, and that half of the population consisted of Orthodox, and the other half of Catholics, has already given a foundation of co-existence since many centuries?

I think this created a context, a background. So the conflict between the two churches did not reach the Albanians on the ground. They continued to pray in church; here Catholic, there Orthodox...

You mean that it was mainly the hierarchy of the church that was in conflict?

Yes, the hierarchy has not been able to infect the believers, so to say. […]

Following the order (sequence) of the selected interview fragments above, we can distinguish the following factors that supposedly contributed to the interreligious harmony in Albania, historically and / or contemporarily:

1. Mutual love (K11).

2. Tolerance / acceptance of the other (I22).

3. Dialogue and co-existence\(^{15}\) (id.).

4. Respect\(^{16}\) of foreigners, in a literal, or more metaphorical sense: respect of the other, who is different from myself – either ethnically or religiously (I23).

5. The need of unity of all Albanians vis-à-vis strong neighbors, like Serbs, Greeks or Italians, who have conquered (parts of) Albanian territory in the past and who might do so again, if the Albanians would be weakened by internal discord (e.g. unharmonious interreligious relationships) (M22).

6. The creation of a basis of national unity [regardless of religious crossing lines] through literature and pamphlets by the ‘founding fathers’ of Albania, the Frashëri family (H6).

7. The positive influence\(^{17}\) of Bektashism on interreligious tolerance, amongst others through many influential Albanians like the Frashëris (H9).

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\(^{15}\) These are not empty slogans, as they may seem to be at first sight: compare to Kosovo e.g., where dialogue and co-existence [between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs] were largely lacking.

\(^{16}\) Liolin (p.186) mentions in connection to this, the age-old respect among Albanians for the differing beliefs of others.

\(^{17}\) This (Bektashism) is also confirmed by Pelushi (2005, p.92) as a factor positively contributing towards interreligious harmony.
8. A 3000 years-long experience with ‘warm and accepting human relationships’ by the Albanians and their ancestors, the Illyrians (A4) (cf. factor nr 13).

9. Because of a fortunate\textsuperscript{18} coincidence, the Ottomans invaded the area at the very moment that a dangerous amalgamation of religious and worldly power could occur [as was the case elsewhere in (catholic/orthodox) Europe]; so this potential overlapping of political and religious power, with all its possible dangerous consequences, did not take shape in the area of nowadays Albania (A9) (cf. factor nr. 26).

10. In historical, as well as modern times, Albanians tend to look upon religion as something spiritual, not as a phenomenon that could be (mis-) used as a political tool (A12 / A13) (cf. factors nr.17, 22 & 24).

11. The unity in Albania is based on a shared ethnicity\textsuperscript{19} (and language) rather than on religious affiliation (A13 / A14) (cf. D10) (especially since the end of the 19th century).

12. Christians and Muslims (and their religious leaders) participate in large numbers in each other’s religious feasts (E25). Religious leaders appear together in public (J5, cf. Bieber p. 193).\textsuperscript{20}

13. Albanians share the tendency to handle things – ranging from religious issues to international political obligations – in their own, specifically Albanian and pragmatic way (W27).

14. Religion is unobtrusive in Albania: it is present in public life (in the streets or in the media) in a remarkably modest way (D6).

15. Within virtually all social circles (families, groups of friends, colleagues, etc.) in Albania there is a mixed composition of both Muslims and Christians. Mixed marriages are a very common phenomenon in Albania, especially in / since the 20th century (D6).

16. To most Albanians, religion is a factor without [all too much] significance (D6) (cf. factor nr. 20).\textsuperscript{21}

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\textsuperscript{18} ‘Fortunate’ in its consequences; of course we have to realize that the Ottomans did not come as invited guests, but as conquerors. Their presence, however, has not only been viewed negatively, especially not in – gradually Islamized – territories like Albania.

\textsuperscript{19} Albania’s population is one of the most homogeneous in all the Balkans: 91% are ethnic Albanians, 7% Greeks, 2% Vlachs, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Roma and Serbs (Young, 2001, p.1). See also factor nr. 28, mentioned below.

\textsuperscript{20} Also mentioned by Pelushi (2005, p.92) as a factor positively contributing towards interreligious harmony.
17. Generally, Albanians consider their religion as something strictly individual, in which no one else should interfere (D6).

18. Albanians tend to see their religion in a pragmatic way: it rather marks their family background than that it indicates a religious practice (D6).

19. Usually, Albanians cannot easily be influenced by external (f-)actors that might wish to manipulate them (D6).

20. Among the Albanian population there is little tolerance for [or: tendency towards] fanaticism. Partly, this is because of indifference (D6) (cf. factor nr. 16 and E23 / K24).

21. There is no socio-economical gap between the distinguished religious groups (none of the religious groups is economically privileged) (D10). [Neither is/was any of the religious groups within Albania politically privileged; and during the Hoxha regime they all suffered more or less the same].

22. There is a mutual consent, laid down in an official agreement, that neither a religious community nor the government interferes in the other’s domain: there is a strict division between the religious and the political sphere (D11).

23. The public school system is entirely secular as well (E25 / G25).

24. None of the political parties is religious (E31 / G31).

25. Scanderbeg, the Albanian national hero of the 15th century – still very important as a symbol of national unity and pride today – changed religious affiliation several times during his lifetime, which set an example for the later generations: someone’s specific religious identity is often considered as a factor of minor importance in Albania (B6). The fact that religions always arrived in Albania together with the respective conquerors (Christianity with the Greeks

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21 Cf. Durham, p.4: ‘empires came and went, and passed over the Albanian as does water over a duck’s back. In the fastnesses, which he held, he was never more than nominally conquered, and retained his marked individuality and customs [i.c.: religion]. Cf. Pelushi (2005, p.92), who mentions a superficial conversion as one of the factors constituting an obstacle to any alienation between the religious groups [and therefore: contributing to interreligious harmony]. See also: Elsie, pp. 195, 197 and Vickers, 1999, pp.16-7. Liolin (p.183) however, contradicts the assumption of other scholars would not be very pious or that religion would be largely irrelevant to them, by pointing at the remarkably high number of Albanian martyrs in the first centuries of Christianity. He admits nonetheless that formal ecclesiastical structures per se have been somewhat underdeveloped in Albania.

22 Liolin (p.186) mentions an independence of spirit as characteristic for Albanians in general. (See also interview fragment B 35 in chapter 8.)

23 Although the persecution of Catholics during the atheist regime was slightly stronger (than the persecution of other religious denominations): Duijzings, p.164. Cf. Went, p.102 and Held, lemma ‘Religious Policies (Albania)”.
and Romans and Islam with the Turks) may have strongly contributed to this detached\textsuperscript{24} attitude towards religion.

26. The schism of the 11th century between Orthodoxy and Catholicism went right through the territory of today’s Albania. It prevented the complete identification of (one particular) religion with nationhood (B6) (cf. factor nr. 9).

27. Conflicts between the hierarchies of different denominations (like the Orthodox / Catholic schism of the previous point) have not been able to 'contaminate' the believers on the ground (B8).

Four additional factors, derived from the scholarly literature on Albania:

28. The fact that Albania is for ca. 95% ethnically homogeneous makes it (relatively) easier to live harmonious relationships (cf. Slovenia).\textsuperscript{25}

29. Albania had gained independence in 1912 already, so that no claims of autonomy or independence by the Albanians in Albania proper were contested by others, when in the early 1990s ethnic nationalism erupted very strongly throughout the Balkans.

30. On the other hand, nationalism developed relatively late in Albania\textsuperscript{26}. (These two factors, nr. 29 and nr. 30, worked out positively and strengthened each other.)

31. Crypto-Christianity is mentioned by many authors\textsuperscript{27} as an important factor contributing to the harmonious interreligious relationships in Albania.

\textsuperscript{24} Holtland, p.78.

\textsuperscript{25} Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, p.186.

\textsuperscript{26} The rise of an Albanian national consciousness and a subsequent national movement were delayed by a general identification of Albanians with the Turkish identity, ideals and aims. This had as consequences that the Albanians were the last nation to achieve their independence from the Ottoman Empire and that the Albanians were among the last of the Balkan peoples to develop their own type of nationalism and to achieve democracy (Vickers, 1999, pp.VIII, 31 and 255).

3. Balkan: a Comparison

When comparing the relation of the different religious groups in Albania proper to that in former Yugoslavia, it is striking to note first how unique the centuries’ long harmonious religious co-existence in Albania proper turns out to be, compared to the surrounding states or provinces (perhaps with the exception of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and – partly – of Montenegro), and secondly, how meaningful and true the often mentioned factors are that decisively contributed to this exceptional harmony: terms that usually sound only too shallow and general, like ‘mutual love’, ‘tolerance / acceptance of the other’, ‘dialogue and co-existence’, as well as ‘respect of foreigners’ (chapter 2) turn out to be so much more than empty slogans, if we make a comparative analysis of the situation in the neighbouring six former republics of Yugoslavia and that in Albania proper.

Generally speaking, a rapidly rising and aggressive form of nationalism – with unmistakable historical roots – and the phenomenon of ethnoclericalism (see more in dept: chapter 4) both played a major role in the recent armed conflicts in former Yugoslavia. Next to this more general perspective, it may be illuminating to look briefly at the separate republics and provinces of the federation as well, in order to see which factors contributed either positively or negatively towards interreligious and interethnic harmony.

§ 3.1. Slovenia

Supposedly the only of the successor states of the Second Yugoslav Republic in which religion did not become the hallmark of nationhood, Slovenia can moreover be set as an example of – almost – peaceful transition to independence. Crucial factor is undoubtedly the ethnically and religiously almost homogeneous composition of the population (Catholic, Slovenian). Next to this factor also the positive role of domestic Catholicism in assisting the post-communist democratic transition should be mentioned, as well as its restraint from ethnic nationalistic politics. Not decisive, but definitely not unimportant must finally have been Slovenia’s relatively reasonable standard of living – especially if compared to the other republics and provinces of ex-Yugoslavia.

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28 Because of the scope of this research, I necessarily have to restrict my comparison to the constituent republics of ex-Yugoslavia, although the region of the Balkans of course comprises a much larger area, including countries like Greece, Bulgaria and (parts of) Rumania. Also the province of Vojvodina is left out of consideration, because of its lack of significance for the purpose of this research.

29 As Slovenia is almost homogeneously Catholic, it is not mentioned here, because we cannot speak of interreligious co-existence, in that case.

30 By the interviewed persons.

31 See §4.2.

32 Which used to be the case in Croatia as well, for that matter. The fact of constituting the two relatively wealthiest republics of Yugoslav Federation is sometimes pointed at as an explicatory factor for Slovenia’s as well as Croatia’s
§3.2 Montenegro

Although interethnic (and sometimes: [intra-]religious) tensions in Montenegro ran high at times, there has been no violence at a massive scale on Montenegrin territory in recent times. The principal moments in recent history of high intercommunal tension in the area have been consecutively: the aftermath of the Congress of Berlin (1878), where the predominantly Albanian-inhabited southern region (previously part of northern Albania) was ceded to ‘Montenegro’; the assignment by the Powers of even more Albanian-inhabited territory to ‘Montenegro’ (as well as to Serbia and Greece) at the time of the Balkan Wars (1912 / 1913), the rising to power in Serbia and Montenegro of the nationalists under Milošević (1987; reelected in 1990), though without significant help from the Orthodox Church; the process towards autocephaly (from ca. 1990 onwards) of the self-declared Montenegrin Orthodox Church, strongly contested by the Serbian Orthodox patriarchate, exerting power over the Orthodox Church in both republics of the Serbian-Montenegrin Confederation (which lasted till the independence of Montenegro in 2006); and finally: the great risk of spill-over of the bloody conflict in Kosovo (mainly in 1998/99), because of destabilization of the region, the influx of refugees and the close (ethnical/clan) ties between Albanians, dispersed in the different states and provinces, in this case particularly the ties between ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and their kin in Montenegro. Crucial factors in maintaining a relatively peaceful and stable situation within nowadays’ Montenegrin borders have been: the already mentioned historical pattern of social interaction between Montenegrins and Albanians at both sides of the border, which generally contributed positively to the peaceful relationships; related to this: the similarity in clan structures and traditions, as well as the relatively high frequency of mixed marriages and economical interdependence, especially in the border region; the fact that there is no absolute one-to-one relationship between ethnic background on the one hand, and religious affiliation on the other: e.g. Sandjak Muslims are more than double in number, compared to the entire Albanian minority in Montenegro – and also among Montenegrins and ethnic Albanians themselves there is some religious diversity; finally, and presumably the most important factor that contributed to harmonious relationships in Montenegrin society: the fact that the Muslims are only a very small minority, which is even declining in number,
makes that they are not being seen as a real threat by the Montenegrin majority or government.

§ 3.3 Croatia

On May 1, 1991 a war broke out in Croatia, between Croats and Serbs. Tensions had run high for a considerable period of time, and the roots of discord between Serbs and Croats dated from at least the 1930s (according to some, even from the ‘fatal religious split’ in the 9th century between the Serbs and Croats, who had formed one Slavic people – or, at least: two closely related peoples – before, united by the same ethnicity, language and Orthodox affiliation). Yet, nationalistic Serbs in Croatia needed to put quite some effort to prepare the ground for the war they deemed necessary for reaching their aim of secession and the partition of Yugoslavia: from 1984 till 1991 they mobilized local Serbs against their (Croatian) neighbours, following the 1984 Serbian commemoration of the Serbian victims of the Croat (Ustaša) genocide at the Jasenovac concentration camp in World War II. According to some Serbian sources, the main cause of the 1991 Serbo-Croat war was the anger and the fear of the Serbs as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church in view of an eventual resurgence of Croatian neo-Ustašism.

Allegedly, church leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church incited their brethren to take up arms and prevent a repetition of the genocide that had befallen to them in World War II: brief, by evoking the fear of a possible genocide and by instigating local Serbs to take up arms against their Croatian neighbors, they actually started a new cycle of genocide themselves. Usually, the Serbs of former Yugoslavia do not even deny that they struck first, not only in Croatia, but also in Bosnia-

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36 In contrast with the [percentages of] minorities of ethnic Albanians in neighboring countries, which are on the rise – except for the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia.

37 Which lasted until August 1995, if we include the period between the end of 1991 and August 1995, in which Croatia found itself in an intermediate stage between war and peace. Actually, the war in Croatia spilled over to / passed into the Bosnian war of 1992 – 1995 (Donia, p.287).

38 Perica, p.162. Other authors interpret the Serbian actions as an unambiguous striving for a greater Serbia (see e.g. Sells, p.7).

39 As soon as the interfaith dialogue (largely overlapping the interethnic dialogue in Croatia) – already sporadic and mainly at a grassroots level – stopped (1991), the armed conflict started within a few months (Perica, p.XXVI).

40 Of eight million Serbs in the former Yugoslavia, three million were dispersed outside Serbia, primarily in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Udovicki and Ridgeway, p.158).

41 During World War II the Croat Ustaše, the Serb Četniks and the communist Partisans fought against each other, and especially the first two committed numerous atrocities.

42 Perica, p.161.

43 A similar ‘armed prevention of genocide’, initiated by the two churches, took place in 1937 – 1941 (Perica, p.20). See also Coward & Smith, p.227, who signalize the same effect in Kosovo. (Cf. Sells, pp.58, 61, 63, 66, 157.)

Herzegovina (1992) and in Kosovo (1998). However, they justify their repeated initiative by pointing to the threats posed to them by other ethnic groups, both in the past and in the present. From their side, the Croats had elected a strong, rigid and nationalistic leader in the 1990 elections, former general Tudjman, as a counterweight to the strong and nationalistic Serb leader Milošević, who had come to power in 1987 and who was seen as a menace by the non-Serbs of former Yugoslavia. Milošević, in his turn, might not have been elected, if it were not for the worsening crisis in Kosovo: in summary, a climate of fear and political decisions, taken by motives of distrust and anger, provoked fear and similar decisions from the other side, or elsewhere in the region. Very soon after the first signs of collapse of the former Yugoslav Republic, the whole system started spiraling down at an ever accelerating speed. In this process of degradation and (preparation for) armed conflict some factors turned out to be pivotal: firstly, the reciprocal provocation\(^{45}\) of Croats and Serbs and their respective religious institutions, by organizing massive and quasi-religious jubilees, novena’s, pilgrimages and commemorations of past conflicts (not only of World War II, but even dating back as far as 1389 (!) – see also §3.4 and §3.6, on Serbia and Kosovo, respectively) in which they presented themselves as the sole victims; secondly, directly in line with the previous point: the denial by both Serbs and Croats (and others involved) of responsibility for genocide in the past – mainly in World War II – while claiming a unique victimhood\(^{46}\) because of it (as one author on the Balkans states it succinctly: “Genocide committed by all, and denied by all”); thirdly, the Vatican / Catholic support\(^{47}\) of the Macedonian and Montenegrin ecclesiastical schisms and of the Albanian separatism in Kosovo – a support that was interpreted by the Serbs as a provocation and as a threat to their interests and power, and for which they held the nationalistic Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, and the Croatian regime (backed by this same church) responsible; fourthly, approximately half a year after the onset of the Serbo-Croat War, the Vatican (as well as Germany, and other Western countries that followed in their wake) strongly angered Serbia again, by their unexpected move of recognizing\(^{48}\) the self-declared independence of the republics of Croatia and Slovenia. The Serbo-Croatian relation deteriorated even more by these events; fifthly, the unequal position within the Yugoslav federation of the two churches of importance in Croatia: the Roman Catholic and the Serbian

\(^{45}\) The most important of which has been the Marian cult in Medjugorje, a village in a secessionist Croat enclave in Herzegovina, cleansed of Muslims and Serbs, where alleged apparitions of the Virgin Mary attracted hundred thousands of Catholic pilgrims from all over Europe – even (!) during the Bosnian war that raged around the village.

\(^{46}\) The general unwillingness of the rest of Europe to listen to the terrible experiences of Yugoslav victims of atrocities in World War II might have contributed to a large extent to the cultivated victimhood of each of the former warring parties (Četniks, Ustaše, and Partisans) and a one-sided ‘search of truth’ by the parties involved. This presumably resulted in a biased, bitter and resentful rendering of the events, which in its turn sowed the seeds of later hatred and conflict.

\(^{47}\) Perica, pp.12, 145-6, 155.

Orthodox Church — politically, the Serbian Orthodox Church was privileged as the *de facto* state religion; economically, the Catholic Church had the advantage, because of the wealthy Croatian diaspora. The lack of equality incited bitterness from the Croatian side and envy from the Serbian part; sixthly, the manipulation by the Catholic Croats of the perceived ‘Eastern threat’, as posed by the Eastern Orthodox countries with their religious (Orthodox) institutions and/or by the Muslim groups and countries with their religious (Islamic) institutions, as seen with the eyes of many Western countries and governments: by presenting themselves as a spearhead of the Western, Christian/Catholic front against the danger from the East, Croatia successfully secured Western European support against the Serbs (and Muslims, during the brief Croat-Muslim war of 1993-94). Finally, underlying all the mentioned factors — with the possible exception of the second — the most essential element in the Serbo-Croat war might have been the phenomenon of *ethnoclericalism*, which will be worked out more in detail in chapter 4. In relation to the role of *ethnoclericalism* in this specific conflict it can be observed that the hyper nationalistic Catholic Church in Croatia had come to depart from the original line and purpose of the Roman Catholic Church worldwide, by copying the ultra national tendency of some of the Eastern Orthodox Churches (in this case: the Serbian Orthodox Church): as such, the two churches had become like ‘Balkan Twins’. Unfortunately, enmity between two of a kind usually produced the bitterest and worst conflicts in history.

49 Perica, pp. 18, 41-2.

50 Those intent on creating a Greater Croatia and a Greater Serbia respectively, justify themselves before the West using the medieval title of ‘Antemurale Christianitatis’ (‘The Rampart of Christendom’): see Mahmutčehajić, pp.27, 30, 32-3; cf. Sells, p.71. Vice versa, several Great European Powers (Venice, Austria, Italy and France) have justified their meddling in the internal affairs of Turkey, under the pretense of protecting ‘the oppressed and unchampioned Catholic minority of Albanians that did not have a representative at the Porte, the administrative heading of the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople’ (Jacques, p.208). Goldstein (p.V) focuses on ‘how a small European nation [i.e. Croatia] has attempted for half a millennium to fortify its links with central and western Europe; how it has aspired to achieve the living standards enjoyed by its western and northern neighbors.’

51 Perica, pp.3, 191.

52 And during the Bosnian war as well.

53 The ethnicization of the Catholic Church in Croatia (and Bosnia-Herzegovina) started ‘only’ in the second half of the 19th century, whereas the Serbian Orthodox Church became an ‘ethnic’—autocephalous—church as early as 1219. It has been at least since the 18th century that the Serbian Orthodox Church turned ethnic nationalism into a ‘religion’, by fusing the Orthodox faith with the ideology of restored nationhood (Perica, pp. 7-9).

54 Perica, p.217.
3.4 Serbia

Serbia was directly or indirectly involved in the three devastating wars in the Balkans that raged in the 1990s: through its kinship with, and manipulation towards war of its fellow Serbs, who lived as ethnic minorities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and, more directly, through its active role in the Kosovo-war, which took place on (then:) Serbian territory, as Kosovo was still a Serbian province at that time.

As will be elaborated more in detail in § 3.6 on Kosovo, the area of Kosovo has been of tremendous symbolic importance to the Serbs – throughout the centuries and most specifically in the 20th century: for almost the entire Serbian population Kosovo and its 'sacred sites' (Orthodox Churches and monasteries, sometimes dating back to the early Middle Ages) represent a holy place, a sanctuary of the Serbian Orthodox faith, the center of the Serbian Orthodox patriarchate and a tangible symbol of the 'perennial existence of the Serbian (Orthodox) identity'. The so called 'Kosovo-myth' of the Serbian Orthodox prince Lazar who was supposedly defeated by the Ottomans in Kosovo in the year 1389, was given a

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55 Serbia has been independent from the Ottoman Empire since the peace treaty of San Stefano in 1878, in which Russia claimed independency for Serbia, Montenegro and Rumania, as well as the creation of a larger Bulgaria, after the Russian troops had defeated the Turks in that part of Europe. during the congress of Berlin in that same year, 1878, however, some parts of the San Stefano treaty were revoked: Bulgaria was divided, Bosnia-Herzegovina came under the Austrian protectorate and Cyprus came into British hands (cf. De Deugd et al., p.88).

56 Religious symbols have become a means of asserting claims on territory in most post-conflict areas of the former Yugoslavia. (...) The campaign of blowing up Serbian Orthodox churches, aimed at securing power in Kosovo for extremist Kosovar Albanians, had a similar objective: asserting the 'right' to the territory of the province. The destruction of churches and mosques by the belligerents was a consistent practice during the Bosnian war [as well] between 1992 and 1995 (Apostolov, p.125).

57 Vamik Volkan (1997), cited in Rothbart & Korostelina (p.312) refers to the Serbian defeat by the Turks in Kosovo in 1389 as an example of a 'chosen trauma' – i.e. a specific experience that symbolizes a group's gravest threats and deepest fears through feelings of helplessness and victimization. When group members feel too humiliated, angry or helpless to mourn the losses suffered in the trauma, the group then incorporates the emotional meaning of the event into its identity and passes on the emotional and symbolic meaning from generation to generation. [Although it seems rather likely that the event of 1389 was artificially given a new lease of life in the 20th century, after having lain more or less dormant in the preceding centuries.]

58 This defeat, by the hands of the Ottomans, has given an ever-present, anti-Islamic spark to the concept of serb national freedom and the striving after a Serbian nation state, or a Greater Serbia throughout the centuries – as Islam and the Muslims have nearly always been identified [by the Serbs] with the Ottoman Empire, and thus blamed for the fall of the mythologized Serbian Orthodox kingdom in the 14th century (Mahmutčehajić, pp.26-7; cf. Sells, pp.XV, 3, 31, 35-6, 40-52, who adds to this the factor of so called 'Chriosto-Slavism' [the belief that Slavs are Christians by nature], which includes the portrayal [by Serbs] of Slavic Muslims as race traitors, because of their ancestors' choice to convert to Islam, instead of remaining within the – 'typically Slavic' – Orthodox faith. Sells points at two crucial, and highly influential works in Serbian literature: 'The Mountain Wreath', by Njegoš (1847) and 'The Bridge on the Drina' by Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić (1959); two works he considers as propaganda for this mythology of Christo-Slavism, and, in the case of 'The Mountain Wreath' even of instigation towards murder on Slavic Muslims [who are called 'Turks', or 'Turkifiers'] as a sacred act and obligation. Cf. Schwartz, pp.46-7.)
new lease of life by the Serbs in the 20th century, especially around the massive commemorations after 600 years, in 1989. It was through the use and revitalization of such powerful myths that the respective peoples of the Balkan could be mobilized relatively easily for an armed conflict. The very strong link between national and religious identity, as can be seen among not a small number of Orthodox peoples, partly stems from the Ottoman period: the Ottomans had divided religious minorities (i.e. non-Muslims) in certain parts of their Empire into so called millets, units based on a shared religious identity. This implied that the religious identity prevailed over other possible classifications of identity. Especially in the Orthodox millets, this system produced a very strong link between national and religious identity, as was the case for the Serbian Orthodox. In the end, religious identity was made subordinate to the national identity, so that religion as such, as well as the religious institutions had to serve national(-istic) interests, instead of merely being an end in itself.

§ 3.5 Bosnia-Herzegovina

In view of the centuries’ long Bosnian history of co-existence and plurality, it must have been a shock to many to see even this part of the Balkans being

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59 By political and religious leaders.

60 Also among the other ethnic and religious groups in the Balkans powerful myths circulated about the origin of the nation, the national identity, etcetera.

61 Because of the millet-system, religious communities became the primary vehicle for the preservation and transmission of culture and of a national identity (Coward & Smith: p.225). This had as consequence for the Albanians that they did not manage to be recognized as a separate, Albanian entity, because they consisted of different religious subgroups, whereas the Porte only recognized entities on a religious basis (Roux, p.256).

62 In the beginning of the Ottoman period [when the millet-system was not yet very strict, for that matter (Malcolm, p.48)] the national awakening, supported by the Orthodox Church, served as a liberating force, over against the Ottoman ‘oppressor’; later on, when nationalism and religion became more and more strongly interwoven, it rather became an impetus for division and hatred (cf. Pelushi, 2002, p.2).


64 See Perica, pp. 82, 88, 142-3, 210, 241, 248-51.

65 A history in which not any genuinely internal tensions, but the ambitions of larger – external –powers and neighboring states had endangered its existence (Malcolm, p.234). Cf. Donia & Fine (p.70): neither in medieval nor in Ottoman Bosnia there were any significant clashes along ethnic lines. So, to speak of ‘ancient hatreds’ between the ethnic groups [as was often the case e.g. in the Western media, covering the recent Balkan conflicts] proves incorrect. This theory of ‘ancient hatreds’, also called ‘Balkanism’ at times, has often been (mis-)used by the international community to justify their inertia, especially in the case of Bosnia: ‘As the Balkans have historically proved to be a region of incurable ethnic conflict, we can do nothing about it.’ Regarding Bosnia, this misleading theory has been contradicted by a.o. Koller (p.IX), Sells (pp.XIV-XV, 3-4, 124-5, 131) and De Deugd et al., pp.158-9; regarding Kosovo this same theory has been contradicted by a.o. Sells (p.37) and Mertus (pp.4-5). On the very negative role of the international community in the Bosnian war: see e.g. Sells (pp.24-5, 113-124) and Gallagher (pp.235, 265). Already at
plunged into a full-fledged war (1992-1995). Compared to Kosovo e.g., the interethnic and interreligious situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina had seemed to be (and actually: was) far more stable: next to the long tradition of peaceful coexistence, as mentioned above, there was one common – Serbo-Croatian – language for the three different religious groups, there was even a shared (Slav) ethnicity (according to some, but contested by others), there was much more equality between the distinctive groups, there was a remarkably high percentage

As the Bosnia-Herzegovina that entered the Yugoslav state in 1918 was the product of an evolutionary course of nearly a thousand years or more wherein the three Bosnian nationalities that had emerged during the Ottoman Empire shared a sense of identification with their common homeland (M.A. Hoare, pp.98-9).

With, at least until the 18th century, a relatively high degree of development in the domains of literacy and urban life (Begić, p.17).


With the nuance that the interethnic relations in the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina had seriously come under strain during the four decades of Austro-Hungarian occupation (1878-1918) and the period of the first Yugoslavia (1918-1941): see e.g. Lovrenović, pp.151, 159-163 and M.A. Hoare, pp.151, 248, 414. Also: Christian Bosnians turned out to be sensitive in some cases to anti-Muslim propaganda, based on exaggerated portrayal of Ottoman ‘misbehavior’ or ‘oppression’. Mahmutčehajić (p.28) signals a systematic obliteration of the (Muslim) Bosniacs (by Serbs) throughout historical Bosnia for a period of three centuries.

With the Bosnian population even living in mixed neighborhoods, especially in urban areas. (This in contrast with Kosovo e.g.)

With some minor differences in ‘dialect’. For that matter, this very uniformity in language and ethnicity among the substrata of the Bosnian society might equally have posed a threat to peaceful co-existence: as there were no relevant contrasts in language or ethnicity, religion remained the only possible – but also, potentially, a very strong and dangerous – demarcation of contrasting identities (cf. Duijzings, p.31 and Goldstein, p.79). Ter Burg (p.93) points also at religion as the principal identity marker in Bosnia. Mahmutčehajić (p.11), while referring to the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina – of strong uniformity in language and ethnicity among the subgroups within society – speaks about ‘the paradox of opposition between virtually indistinguishable political oligarchies’.

See e.g. Sells, p.13.

Who distinguish the (Bosnian) Croat from the (Bosnian) Serb ethnicity, and may even set apart the Muslims in Bosnia – not only as a different religious group, but also as a distinctive ethnicity.

One of the prerequisites for a real co-existence. (Equality between the distinctive groups was a factor that was largely absent in Kosovo e.g.) Although, from a religious perspective, there was largely no equality: Orthodoxy was the Christian group favored by the Ottomans, because the Orthodox head, the Patriarch of Constantinople, lived in the Ottoman capital, where he could easily be controlled. His whole hierarchy as well lived within the empire. Whereas the Catholic Pope lived in Rome, outside the empire, and was the main sponsor of crusades against the Ottomans (Donia & Fine, pp.38-9; cf. Kołczyńska, 2008, p.1 on the Ottoman attitude towards Christians in Kosovo).
of mixed marriages, especially in Sarajevo, and at least one of the religious groups present (in Bosnia-Herzegovina), that of the Muslims, was the least nationalistic and militant of the different groups in (ex-)Yugoslavia – until the mid-1990s.

However, the virus of fear and suspicion, producing effects like the taking of rigorous, militant and sometimes even aggressive protective measures, which had rapidly spread in the neighboring countries, affected Bosnia-Herzegovina as well: the fight for secession by the Slovenes and Croats and the efforts of Milošević to create a ‘greater Serbia’, as well as the raging war in neighboring Croatia all may have contributed to the decision by the Rijaset in Sarajevo in October 1991 to release a document in support of an independent and sovereign Bosnia-Herzegovina, whereas they appealed to the international Islamic community for support, in case of an eventual future declaration of independence. Anyhow, already during the 1980s the ‘brotherhood’ of the Yugoslav Republic had started to

Later, during the communist period, the Orthodox were also favored, or less oppressed, than the Catholics, in the whole of Eastern Europe (Stricker, p.6). In Habsburg’s Bosnia, however (1878-1918, so the era immediately following the Ottoman period in Bosnia) neither of the Churches was privileged (Pinson, pp.133-4).

Although Islam as such [religiously, not politically] was influential in Bosnia by the end of the 1980s, as contrasted with Kosovo, where the Muslims were [and are] very secular (Perica p.84; Weijis p.10). Coward & Smith (p.228) however, see Bosnia’s Muslims as one of the most secular groups in the whole of second Yugoslavia. In the after-war period the significance of Islam in (young) Bosniacs’ lives has augmented, although they remained as secular [in their religious views] as in the pre-war era.

Perica, pp.88, 143, 241; Coward & Smith, p.228.

Cf. Apostolov, p.71; Sells, p.89 and Horowitz, p.270: the religious distinctions among the Bosnian communities, and bitter memories of violence, were simply used by ethnic entrepreneurs in the mobilization of popular support. Sells (p.7) points at Milošević’s striving after a Greater Serbia as an important – or perhaps even: decisive – factor in the Slovenes’ and Croats’ decision to declare their independence.

National identity often rests on claims of original habitation of the land. Such claims are often used to legitimize control, rights, and privileges (Rothbart & Korostelina, pp. 4, 39). [The type of] nationalism that arose in the 19th century added a new element to the combination of ethnicity and religion: territory. […] For Bosnia-Herzegovina – more than any other part of former Yugoslavia a patchwork of ethnicities, as a consequence of many mass migrations in history – this meant an explosive line of reasoning (Campschreur, p.29).

According to Mahmutčehajić (pp.32, 37, 134) the advocates of a Greater Serbia and a Greater Croatia had deliberately [and successfully, in the end] provoked a more radical and outspoken striving of [political and religious] Bosnian leaders towards a separate Muslim state, so as to have an excuse – and a justification in Western European eyes – for attacking the Muslims, who were the primary obstacle in their way towards a division of Bosnian territory between Croatia and Serbia.

Perica, p.143.

Throughout the Bosnian history – except for the 17th century, when Muslims had been a (slight) majority – Christians always occupied a majority position; if Catholics and Orthodox are being taken together as one group (Donia & Fine, p.41). This minority position of the Bosnian Muslims might have added to their feeling of being threatened [and subsequently: in need of external support and protection] in the early 1990s.
be gradually replaced by a different, and more international type of ‘brotherhood’, along religious lines. In case of the Bosnian Muslims, this process accelerated from 1983 onwards, with the Sarajevo trial of the increasingly militant Muslim leader Izetbegović and twelve others: this trial, with severe sentences of long-term detention imposed on the accused, alienated from the Belgrade government many erstwhile allies in the nonaligned movement and Third World countries while prompting Muslim nationalism at home. It also stimulated international Muslim solidarity at the expense of internal, Bosnian solidarity among the three constituent groups in society. A comparable process of decreased solidarity and unity within society, and an augmenting external orientation, along religious or ‘ethnic’ lines, could be observed among the Bosnian Serbs, as well as the Bosnian Croats: the Bosnian Serbs started to focus more on their fellow-Serbs in Serbia proper, while the Bosnian Croats became increasingly oriented towards the Croats in neighboring Croatia.

It is not astonishing, therefore, to see the 1990 elections being won by nationalist and militant leaders, at least from two sides: the extreme Serb nationalist Radovan Karadžić and the increasingly militant Muslim leader Alija Izetbegović; next to the more moderate and pro-Bosnian leader of Croatian background, Stjepan Ključić. At the background of the 1990 elections in Bosnia, the religious institutions (Serbian Orthodox and Muslim) played a crucial role: the clerical support turned out to have a palpable impact on the outcome of the elections. For the decisive, and most often: very negative, or even destructive, influence of the higher clergy and religious institutions on the developments in the successor states of former Yugoslavia: see also chapter 4.

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82 See also chapter 4 on this issue.

83 Coward & Smith, p.229; Perica, p.82.

84 Because of their alleged efforts to create an Islamic state in Bosnia (Donia, p.286).

85 Of recent, considerations of secession of Bosnia-Herzegovina have come to the fore again, both in Bosnia itself and in the international community (Nenadović, p.30).

86 His moderate politics would soon be overshadowed by the militant activities of the Croat leader in Croatia proper, Tudjman, who meddled in Bosnian internal affairs, and made plans with Milošević to divide Bosnia between Serbia and Croatia (Donia, p.249).
§ 3.6 Kosovo

Even if Kosovo was not one of the six constituent republics of former Yugoslavia, yet it is necessary to include a paragraph on it, because of its very important symbolic meaning throughout history (mainly for the Serbian Orthodox, but also for the Albanians in Kosovo) and because of the Kosovo war (1998-1999) and earlier conflicts in the province, which were closely connected to preceding and subsequent events elsewhere in former Yugoslavia.

In contrast to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina e.g., the war in Kosovo did not come as a surprise. The recent history of the province was one of regularly erupting crises: in 1968, 1971, 1981 and 1989. The last mentioned year was the date of an amendment to the Serbian constitution, through which Kosovo as one of Serbia’s provinces lost its status of autonomy, which it had possessed since 1974. This ran contrary to the Albanian demands throughout the 1980s to be granted the status of a republic, instead of an (autonomous) province – so, demands for more, instead of less autonomy. These demands by the Albanian majority in Kosovo resulted in a rising concern for Kosovo in Serbia, which, in its turn, stimulated the re-emergence of Serbian nationalism and the rise to power of Milošević, as well as the strengthening of the Serbian Church’s role. During the liberal phase of Yugoslav communism, that is, in the 1960s and 1970s, this Serbian Orthodox Church had become the sole carrier of Serbian ethnic nationalism. Underlying the mentioned

87 Although most (Albanian) Kosovars call their (former) province / (nowadays) state ‘Kosova’, I will use the term that has been internationally agreed upon: ‘Kosovo’.

88 But one of the two (part of the time:) autonomous provinces of Serbia, in former Yugoslavia.

89 For a more elaborate description of the symbolic meaning of Kosovo for the Serbian Orthodox: see §3.4.

90 Bieber, pp.2-3. Cf. Roux, p.15: In ex-Yugoslavia ethnic Albanians constituted the 3rd or 4th national group, ranked according to numerical importance; after the Serbs, the Croats, and immediately after the (Slavic) Muslims, or in equal numbers with the latter. [For that matter, the percentage of Muslims among ethnic Albanians is usually estimated at ca. 80%.]

91 Perica, p.145; Bieber p.1.

92 For the supposed contribution of the adoption of Yugoslavia’s third constitution in 1974 – granting a significantly larger autonomy to each of the constituent republics and provinces – to the final break-up of Yugoslavia as a whole, see Cousens & Kumar, p.116.

93 These Albanian demands run counter Serb claims in the 1980s concerning Kosovo: recentralization and reduction of disadvantages for Serbs in Kosovo (Bieber, pp.2-3).

94 Perica, pp.123, 132.

95 For the development from a multi-faceted (secular and religious) nationalism towards an almost exclusively religious type of nationalism in former Yugoslavia: see §4.2.
crises of the 1970s and 1980s, were the long-existing antagonisms, hatred and stereotypes between Serbs and Albanians in the province, their reciprocal wish to live in ethnically pure and separate societies – and actually already doing so to the greatest possible extent: the situation in Kosovo before the war was characterized by an almost complete absence of communication or co-existence between the two communities. As one author described it: 'The Albanians and Serbs lived in segmented territories, realities and time'. The recent history of Kosovo does not show any example of joint governance, only of an ever moving pendulum of domination, alternating between the two groups, and of regular confrontation between them. From the 1970s onwards there had been discrimination against non-Albanians in the province, which naturally contributed negatively to the mutual relationships.

Historically, conflicts in Kosovo had been fought along other than ethnic lines. With the ethnification of society (in the media, politics, but also the religious institutions) the confrontation was now for the first time along the ethnic divide. The roots of this new development supposedly stem already from the Congress of Berlin (1878) and from the legacy of the Balkan Wars (1912 / 1913), which gradually turned the religious divide in the Balkans into an ethnic division. Although the religious institutions played an important role in the Kosovo conflict, it was not so much by the contents of the respective religions – and in the case of Kosovar Islam: not even by the adherence to the faith / the degree of practicing (which was very low) – but rather by their instrumentalization as carriers of ethnic identity and pride and, in the case of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as

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96 Schwartz, pp.14-5, Bieber, pp. XV, 3, 54, 69. (For a toning down of the statements about antagonisms between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo: see the entire book of Duijzings.)

97 Ironically, the Kosovo war has almost perfectly resulted in the fulfillment of the reciprocal wish to live as entirely separate communities: today Kosovo is one of the ethnically most homogeneous parts of Europe (Bieber, p.67) with 92% of the present-day Kosovar population being ethnic Albanian (Young, 2001, p.11).

98 Bieber, p.54.

99 Mainly during the fifteen years of Kosovo’s autonomy (1974 – 1989).

100 Bieber, p.167.

101 See also Malcolm, 1998, p.XXIX.

102 In contrast with Serbian Orthodoxy, where at least the degree of practice rose drastically – whereby one can have justifiable doubts about the quality and the content of the individual faith (Bieber, pp. 5, 187). See also §4.4 on the erosion of religion. In Kosovo as well as Albania proper, Albanian nationalism has been consistently secular in character (Duijzings, p.160; Bieber, p.188).

103 With ca. 70% of the Kosovar Muslims not practicing their religion (Kołczyńska, 2010, p.9). However: Kosovars adhere more strictly to Islam than their counterparts in Albania (Young, p.105).

104 Whereas the Orthodox Churches in the Middle East largely maintained an open attitude towards Muslims and Islam, their counterparts in the Balkans rather manifested a defensive attitude, including a [negative] mythical view of Islam (Nielsen, p.20).
supplier of a, religiously legitimated, national-ethnic myth\textsuperscript{105}, through which the (Serbian Orthodox) population could easily be manipulated and mobilized.

Finally we can mention as factors that also contributed to the onset or acceleration of the Kosovo war: the economical underdevelopment\textsuperscript{106}, exacerbated by an explosive population growth\textsuperscript{107}; the settling (or rather: dropping) of large numbers of Serbian refugee-colonists\textsuperscript{108} in Kosovo (disturbing the ethnic relations even further) and the explicitly negative role of the West / the international community, through the stereotyped coverage\textsuperscript{109} of the war in the western media and through the failure\textsuperscript{110} to include international measures of war prevention in the Dayton Peace Accords for Bosnia, an omission that had an acceleration of the Kosovo conflict as its consequence\textsuperscript{111}.

Almost ten years after the end of the Kosovo war, in 2008, Kosovo declared its independence, which has been recognized by a number of (though not all) European countries.

\textsuperscript{105} On the so-called Kosovo-myth: see §3.4 on Serbia.

\textsuperscript{106} Roux, pp.16, 238.

\textsuperscript{107} The highest population growth in Europe; higher than in Albania (Bieber, p.175). The Serb leaders, in the 1980s and 1990s, manipulated the public opinion, playing with data about the drastically different birthrates between the Albanian Muslim and Serbian Orthodox communities in Kosovo (Apostolov, p.107 and Mertus, p.11). For that matter, this demographic difference between the two ethnic groups in Kosovo was large indeed (Cf. Sells, p.22 and Norris, p.275). For the deliberate – and partly successful – attempts by Serbia to pursue colonization politics [settling Serbs in, and expelling Albanians from, Kosovo – and thereby changing the demographic situation], mainly during the Interbellum: see Malcolm, 1998, pp. 278-88.

\textsuperscript{108} From the Serb-held ‘Krajina’-region and from elsewhere in Bosnia and Croatia, uprooted because of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia (Malcolm, 1998, p.352-3).


\textsuperscript{110} In contrast to the Macedonian situation, for which the international community did provide measures of war prevention (Bieber, p.2). The negotiations in Rambouillet (1998) formed the only comprehensive attempt at finding a – temporary – solution for the status of Kosovo (Bieber, p.4). This lack of effective measures taken by the West does not indicate, however, a lack of interest from Western side: as David Rieff (in Ourdan, 2001, pp.144-159) describes it ironically: ‘It is easy to explain why Kosovo, during and after the crisis, received so much attention and political goodwill from the Western world (...) : the amalgamation of collective culpability felt because of the powerless inertia during almost four years of Bosnian war, the “impossibility” of letting the UN be degraded by Milošević’s regime in Belgrade just before its [the UN’s] 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary, the large number of blond, fair-haired victims, and the wish to see and to depict Europe as a territory where large scale human tragedies belong to the historybooks.’

\textsuperscript{111} Bieber, p.2.
§ 3.7 Macedonia

In February 2001 the Preshevo conflict spread into Macedonia: the start of the fourth – and hereto: last-war that erupted in the wake of the disintegration of former Yugoslavia. It remained a small scale and short war of only a couple of months, fought between Slavic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, divided by confessional lines as well: Slavic Macedonians being mainly Orthodox (94.8 % of them), while Albanians in Macedonia being almost entirely (98.2 %) Muslim. The Macedonians account for 66.6 % of the entire population, the ethnic Albanians for 22.7 %, whereas the remaining 10.7 % is divided over no less than thirty different ethnic groups. The fact that the ethnic Albanians comprise more than one fifth of the total population; that they live almost solely in the north western region as a separate geographic unit with a nearly homogeneous (ethnic Albanian) population; that they are not only ethnically, but also religiously distinct from the Slav majority; and all this coupled to the fact that the ethnic Albanians, even more than the Macedonian population at large, have felt increasingly alienated from the weak, inadequate and rather nepotistic and discriminative state, contributed to an ever stronger enclosing of the Albanian minority on itself, while creating more and more informal networks and paramilitary institutions with next of kin [inside and outside Macedonian borders] as a compensation for the failing state. All this, added to a non-realistic fear of the Macedonian majority that the Albanians within their borders would in the end outnumber them because of a higher birthrate,

112 Perica, pp.XXVII, 12, 145-6.

113 The Preshevo conflict resulted from the Kosovar refugee crisis; a crisis which had a strong impact on the predominantly Albanian-inhabited Preshevo-valley between Serbia and Montenegro. The area had always been part of Kosovo until Titoist communism. After 2000, Preshevo became the most sensitive new point of development in the Albanian national question and a major focus for international concern in the region (Pettifer and Vickers, 2007, pp.242 ff). The threat of the spill-over effect [of large numbers of refugees from Kosovo, coming to Macedonia and Albania, which risked to destabilize these two regions as well] constituted one of the principal motives for the NATO-intervention in Kosovo. (Cf. De Deugd et al., p.286)

114 The original Macedonia has been split in 1878 into three parts: a Yugoslav, a Hellenic and a Bulgarian part. The part that §3.7 deals with, is the formerly Yugoslav part – which is independent to date (Roux, p.23).

115 Bieber, p.309.


117 According to Biberaj (pp.23, 28) ethnic Albanians were the least integrated and most deprived ethnic group in former Yugoslavia, possessing very limited political power.

118 We can mention as an additional factor that the Albanian minority in Macedonia had long-standing grievances against Belgrade: during the inter war period, the Albanian-inhabited lands in western Macedonia had been subject to extensive and planned colonization by Serbs and Montenegrins, as part of a ‘South Serbia’ region within Royalist Yugoslavia (Pettifer and Vickers, 2007, pp.244).

119 Even if the Albanian birthrate (in Macedonia) is higher than that of Slav Macedonians to date, the first mentioned is already on the decline, so the Slav Macedonian fear seems to be without foundation (Bieber, p.309).
produced fertile soil for violent ethnic strife. After the preparation of this fertile foundation, only the spark of nationalism, in the form of politicization of ethnicity, was needed to set the shimmering crisis in the country aflame. Yet, the violence came relatively late (2001), did not last for long and remained limited in scale: it was mainly restricted to violent strife between Albanian extremists (paramilitary) and Macedonian security forces, without involving the common people / citizens. Both internal and external influences played a decisive role in limiting the violence and antagonisms: internally, the unambiguous recognition of the (independent) Macedonian state, also by the Albanian minority, and their choice of conducting their political strife (for equal rights) within the existing state: externally, by the strong support of both Tirana and the international community. Both saw the independence and stability of Macedonia as crucial for the stability in the region: destabilization of Macedonia would threaten the balance in the Balkans, as it would play into the hands of Serbia, with its ongoing ambitions of dominance in the region, and equally set a dangerous precedent of fragmentization for the fragile situation in Kosovo. For the NATO, the most urgently felt threat was the potential conflict that might erupt between two NATO members, Greece and Turkey, in case of Macedonia’s eventual disintegration. Luckily enough, both Tirana and the international community at large have put a lot of effort (with relatively good results) to enhance the stability of Macedonia. Yet, the months of violent conflict, as well as internal political misuse and fanning of ethnic divisions before and after the war have produced more mutual suspicion and aversion than used to be the case of Macedonia.

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120 Ethno-nationalistic activism (e.g. in the case of Macedonia) can often be unmasked as a mere disguise for economical and / or power strivings (Pichler, p.10, n.24).

121 Bieber, p.316.

122 In contrast to the Kosovo Albanians, who chose to boycott Serbia’s political system, and to create a new system parallel to it (Bieber, p.287). See also §3.6 on Kosovo.


124 Cf. Pichler, pp.5-6 (also n.11).
§ 3.8 Comparison with Albania Proper

In the recent histories of the successor states of former Yugoslavia, we can identify some factors that contributed positively to interreligious (and / or interethnic) co-existence. All of these positive factors that apply to the successor states apply equally (or comparable) to Albania proper:

- A high frequency of mixed marriages (in Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina\(^{125}\) before the war): a positive, though not decisive factor, because it could not prevent a long and bloody war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- One common language\(^{126}\) and one shared ethnicity (in Bosnia-Herzegovina; although the fact of a shared – Slav – ethnicity is contested in this case): like the first mentioned factor, this element as well must have contributed positively, but could not prevent a war either.
- One of the subgroups in society (the Muslims, in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina) was not very militant until the outbreak, and even: during, the war. Yet, the two other subgroups, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats, were very militant, so war could not be prevented by only one of the three parties involved being relatively non-aggressive.
- Recognition of the state, also by the religious / ethnic minorities (in Macedonia): no efforts were undertaken to make the state collapse, e.g. in order to achieve independence. This positive factor contributed to the limitation (in scale and length) of the armed conflict in Macedonia.
- The violence during the armed conflict was restricted to extremists and security forces; it did not reach or ‘infect’ the common people (in Macedonia; and largely speaking, neither in the 1997 armed strife\(^{127}\) in Albania proper).
- The positive role of the international community (in the case of Macedonia): supporting the integrity (i.e. non-fragmentization or non-collapse) of the existing state, without any misuse (e.g. by Albania proper) of opportunities to achieve one’s own nationalist goals – as contrasted with Serbia e.g., that misused tensions between local Serbs and other groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina – by causing strife between them – in order to pursue its own nationalistic agenda of creating a Greater Serbia.

Though none of these factors in itself (or in combination) resulted in a successful prevention of armed conflict in the mentioned successor states (with the possible example of Montenegro in the first mentioned example), they undoubtedly have contributed to reduction of tensions and limitation of the atrocities – although we could wonder in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina if the already very bloody war could even have been worse without the positive elements under consideration.

\(^{125}\) By 1990 some 40% of Bosnian urban couples were ethnically mixed (Donia & Fine, p.186; also Pinson, p.2).

\(^{126}\) Also mentioned by Holtland (p.78) as an important factor in the Albanian unity.

\(^{127}\) After the collapse of the Pyramid banking system.
In Albania proper these same elements have hereto been present in society and have apparently contributed to the prevention of armed conflict between the different groups in society.

From the paragraphs § 3.2 through § 3.7 we can also distill quite a number of factors that have contributed negatively to the religious and / or ethnic co-existence in the respective successor states. Actually they all stand – to a lesser, or higher degree – in contrast to the situation in Albania proper:

Firstly, a whole set of factors can be mentioned that have one common denominator, namely a growing ethnification within society:

- Growing sentiment of nationalism
- Politicization of ethnicity
- Deliberately mobilizing groups against others
- Stereotyping the other group
- Inventing and misusing myths about ethnic identity, the origins of the state, etc.
- Conferring symbolic meaning upon the territory itself (especially upon Kosovo, by the Serbian Orthodox)
- Ethnoclericalism (see also chapter 4)
- An almost one-to-one relationship (i.e. an almost complete overlap) of ethnicity and religion
- In direct relation to the previous point: early autocephaly (e.g. the Serbian Orthodox Church was granted autocephaly in 1219, so that Serbian Orthodoxy and Serbian ethnic identity gradually became one, throughout the centuries)
- The creation and maintenance of parallel structures along clan-lines, next to, and replacing state structures, e.g. paramilitary or social welfare (mainly: in Macedonia and Kosovo)
- International ‘brotherhood’ (along ethnic and / or religious lines) gradually becoming more important than internal ‘brotherhood’, that is, within the state (amongst others: in Bosnia-Herzegovina)

In comparison, these factors are almost, or completely, non-existent in Albania proper. For instance: the Albanian Orthodox Church received autocephaly no earlier than the 20th century, so by far much later than the Serbian Orthodox Church. Moreover, the Orthodox – Catholic schism of the 11th century worked out positively in Albania: it prevented the undesirable situation from occurring that one particular church or denomination would totally overlap with the Albanian ethnic identity; or that one particular denomination would become too strongly interwoven with the political power, as was the case with the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Western Europe. The sense of ‘brotherhood’ among Albanians within Albania proper, also crossing religious divides, is very strong, and clearly much stronger than the experienced ties of ‘brotherhood’ with Albanians who live as minorities in surrounding states, even if they share the same religious background. In line with this, the Albanian government in the last decades has
chosen not to focus on the ‘national question’ (of Albanian minorities in surrounding countries)\textsuperscript{128}. Among the Albanians in Albania proper there is no strongly-felt wish for a ‘Greater Albania’ (although vice versa, e.g. among Kosovar Albanians there sometimes is). Concerning nationalism and a ‘founding myth’: there definitely is an Albanian nationalism, especially since the spiritual creation of a national conscienceness among the Albanians by the Frashëris\textsuperscript{129} (the end of the 19th century), and mainly based on a shared language and ethnicity by virtually all Albanians, but so far, this has turned out to be a healthy form of nationalism, not at the expense of others. Historically, communist rule in Albania weakened nationalistic and patriotic feeling among the population, even though not intentionally\textsuperscript{130}. And finally: \textit{ethnoclericalism} did not take shape in Albania at all; the Albanian mentality (in Albania proper, at least) – highly secular\textsuperscript{131}, pragmatic, down-to-earth and warm\textsuperscript{132} towards (different) others – just does not go together with \textit{ethnoclerical} tendencies.

Secondly, in connection to the previously mentioned factors, there is the lack of will to live together (e.g. Slavic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, or Serbs and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo or Croats and Serbs in Croatia or Bosnia-Herzegovina) and sometimes even an actual separate living space, a separate territory for each group (mainly in Kosovo). It is understandable, that these two interrelated factors cannot produce other results than increasing mutual suspicion, stereotyping and hatred. By contrast, in Albania proper, there is not only question of a mixed society (also territorially, especially in the lowlands and urban centers) or a tolerance between the different groups in society, but even a great enthusiasm to live together in a pluralistic society. This wide spread enthusiasm in Albania proper is really striking for an outsider, for instance from Western-Europe, as a meagre tolerance is usually the best we can hope for in our own – Western – countries.

Thirdly, the discrimination of ethnic minorities by the state (of Serbs, in the former province of Kosovo, from the 1970s onwards, and of Albanians in the FYROM, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) has definitely contributed and / or accelerated the armed conflicts. By contrast, in Albania proper there is only some slight discrimination against minorities (for instance against the Greek in the south), but this is definitely not of the scale and intensity as in the forementioned examples.

Fourthly, the factors under the heading of ‘psychological warfare’:

\textsuperscript{128} Bieber, p.291.

\textsuperscript{129} And mainly based on a shared language and ethnicity, by virtually all Albanians.

\textsuperscript{130} Bieber, p.292.

\textsuperscript{131} With a highly individualized, privatized form of religion – if at all.

\textsuperscript{132} Although the term ‘warm’ is not quantifiable, nor scholarly justifiable, yet I use it in this particular case, because it most aptly describes the character of the interpersonal relationships in Albania proper, generally speaking.
• Self-constructed victimhood\textsuperscript{133}: perceiving one’s own ethnic or religious group as the sole victim of previous armed conflict or of difficult situations in society (especially true for Serbs and Croats with regard to World War II and for Kosovar Albanians and Serbs);
• In connection to the previous point: denial of one’s own responsibility for previous violence or discriminative measures;
• Reciprocal provocations, through massive meetings, commemorations, etc.;
• Electing a so-called ‘strong leader’ (in the sense of: rigid, nationalistic, merciless and only protecting narrow group interests) in response to a preceding election of an alleged ‘strong leader’ by the opposite group or party (e.g. electing Tudjman in direct response to Milošević’s election);
• Creating and sustaining a climate of anger and fear.

Although I lack detailed information so as to judge if former communist leaders in Albania, who were responsible for acts against humanity during the Hoxha regime like torture for instance, accounted sufficiently for their misdeeds, it seems that in Albania there is not a comparable phenomenon of ‘cultivated victimhood’ as in former Yugoslavia. If there is, it is a shared victimhood of almost the entire Albanian population, across religious divides. The other mentioned points, like reciprocal provocations, the election of a ‘strong leader’ or a climate of anger and fear hardly seem applicable to Albania proper, although current president Berisha at times displayed some dictatorial traits. The simple fact of always having a common enemy (the fascists or the communists) rather created a sense of unity among the Albanian population.

Fifthly, external influences:

• A negative role of the West / the international community in their handling of the (upcoming) conflicts in former Yugoslavia: through biased media coverage; their failure\textsuperscript{134} to protect citizens in a war-zone (in time, or: at all) – for instance on the basis of their reasoning ‘that the Balkans had always been an intrinsically conflict-ridden region where no external intervention

\textsuperscript{133} Cf. Ashmore et al. (pp.162-3, 171-2); Mertus, p.1 and Sells, p.99: unhealed wounds in a group, owing to past victimizations which lead group members of the group to feel easily threatened and respond with what they see as defensive aggression, make it more likely that (...) a genocidal process unfolds in response to instigation. Next to this direct effect of a continuous (unfinished) state of – perceived – victimhood, another effect of former violence can play a negative role: for those communities with a history of intergroup violence, ingroup solidarity tends to supersede other kinds of identities (Rothbart & Korostelina, p.31), with a strong reduction of the normal multiplicity of group identities, as well as a fortified rigidity of this single dominant category as its consequence. This simplification and rigidization usually apply to the perceived identity of both the ingroup and the outgroup (Rothbart & Korostelina, pp.47, 307).

\textsuperscript{134} Cf. Ashmore et al. (p.163). The passivity of bystanders has the effect of allowing, and even encouraging (!) the evolution of violence.
could be of any significant help’; and by being manipulated by one of the warring parties\textsuperscript{135}.

- **External attempts at influencing religious groups and institutions** (either by the own diaspora, like the Serbian or Croat diaspora in the USA, by missionaries, or by the international community at large) were often directed towards politicization and ethnification of religion, so: towards (mis-)use of religion for political and nationalistic ends; whereas in Albania proper this was not, or much less the case – perhaps also because it was clear to external groups that these Albanians would be much less open towards this type of influence: missionaries from strict Islamic (Sunni or Wahabi) or strict Christian (Protestant) background [instead of trying to politicize existing differences among the Albanian population] were rather focused on bringing a pure, more radical form of individual religious practice, while seeing the average religious practice of most Albanians as far too lax. For that matter, we have to conclude that even this\textsuperscript{136} endeavour to influence the Albanians in Albania proper has utterly failed. Unfortunately, in large parts of former Yugoslavia however, malevolent external groups, especially those aiming at creating ethnic division or chaos, were rather successful.

**Sixthly, miscellaneous factors:**

- The fact that former Yugoslavia was not one state, but a (multi-ethnic) federation meant that the risk of collapse was always present – whereas Albania proper had been a state since 1912.
- The unequal\textsuperscript{137} position of the churches in former Yugoslavia, with the Serbian Orthodox Church as the \textit{de facto} state church, and the Catholic Church in Croatia (and in Slovenia) as the wealthiest created negativity: bitterness on the Croat / non-Serb side, over against envy on the Serb side. In Albania the religious institutions are all on equal footing, both officially and

\textsuperscript{135} For instance by Croatia, which presented itself as a ‘spearhead’ against the ‘Eastern threat’, posed by the Orthodox (thus: Eastern) Serbs, respectively by the Muslims a conception that the West was only too willing to believe and to base its actions upon.

\textsuperscript{136} Apart from possible – rare – attempts (by others) to bring a form of ethnoclericalism, or militant nationalism to Albania, which failed as well.

\textsuperscript{137} Official [i.e. dominant] religion, like official [i.e. dominant] language is a potent symbolic issue, because it accomplishes a double linkage. It links political claims to ownership with psychological demands for the affirmation of group worth, and it ties this aggregate matter of group status to outright careerism. [Belonging to the dominant religious and / or lingual group in society automatically enhances one’s affirmation of group worth as well as one’s possibilities of a successful career.] (Cf. Horowitz, p.222 and Okey, p.225.) The situation of a hierarchical relationship between different [ethnic] subgroups in society produces on the one hand a larger extent of predictability of the relations between these groups – and therefore more stability within society; but on the other hand: when the cement cracks in a ranked [i.e. hierarchically ordered] system, the edifice usually collapses: when ethnic hierarchies are undermined, they may undergo fundamental transformations (cf. Horowitz, pp.28-9).
informally, even a ‘heretical’ group like the Bektashis – although the Bektashis suffer more from the financial consequences of the Hoxha period, as the current government is reluctant to return property to the respective religious organizations, and the Bektashis were pre-eminently the religious group that had by far the greater part of its material possessions inside, instead of outside, Albania. (So the financial consequences weigh heavier upon them than on any of the other religious groups in Albania.)

- Economic underdevelopment (mainly in Kosovo, and to a lesser degree in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia) – turned out to be an important, though not decisive factor: in Albania proper there was, and is, also a considerable degree of economical underdevelopment, but this did not result in war; Croatia was relatively wealthy, but was plunged into war all the same.

**Interview fragments:**

E30: I’d like to turn now to the comparison of the situation in Kosovo and in Albania. Can you indicate some factors that led to the difficult situation in Kosovo, even leading to a civil war, if you compare it to the Albanian situation: why did the Albanians in Kosovo have a war with the Serbs, and not for instance the Serbs against the Albanians in Albania; or some other type of interethnic, or interreligious war?

M30: First of all, in Yugoslavia the Albanians were a minority: everyone, apart from the Albanians, were Slavs – whether Croats, or Serbs, or Bosnians, or Slovenians. And Serbs, with the rise of nationalism in the 1980s, considered them a threat and as an intruder in their country. This was also not a religious conflict, of Albanians and Serbs over Kosovo. This was an ethnic conflict. And for Albanians religion became a secondary factor. The situation in Kosovo is different from that in Albania, because some 95% of Albanians in Kosovo are Muslim and there is a small minority of Catholics; while virtually all Serbs are Serbian Orthodox. So, although this was an ethnic conflict, and a political conflict, inspired by Serbian nationalists, it acquired a religious aspect; just because in practice, most Albanians were Muslims, while Serbs

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138 Cf. Peter Berger, as cited in Perica, p.218-9 and 223, who describes the situation in a.o. former Yugoslavia and its successor states, that did not (and do not) allow space to heretic voices within the established religious institutions; which would only be a sign of healthy bottom-up reform from inside, instead of a superficial and ‘fake’ reform that only aims at politicization of religion [as was, and is, the case now, according to Berger and Perica].

139 The World Center of Bektashism was, and is, in Albania; whereas the other denominations in Albania have their World Centers (Patriarchate, Vatican, etc.) outside the country, so out of reach of the Hoxha regime in the 20th century.

140 According to Ashmore et al. (p.49), conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia were never conflicts over the right to assert one’s ethnic or cultural identity, but were based on competing claims to rights such as employment, welfare, and political influence. Marc Ross (in Rothbart & Korostelina, p.308) however, points to the important nuance that interests and identities are often quite interconnected.
were Orthodox. And also because of the link between the Serbian Orthodox Church with the Serbian State. While in Albania, there are no Serbs. Albania is 95% or more homogeneously Albanian. There is a small Greek minority in the south, and there are problems with Greeks about territorial claims. There are Roma, but Roma do not have a tradition of state[hood], which means that they cannot pose a political threat; and there are some tiny minorities of Macedonians, of Bosniacs, but they are very few, so there was not really an occasion [a motive] for Albania to have a conflict with Serbia.

E31: Because there were no groups threatening them within the borders? (M: Yes.) And is that all there is to it, or are there other factors; e.g. do the Kosovo-Albanians practice or live their religion in a different way, so that they might provoke more aggressiveness from the Serbs, than the Albanians in Albania proper would?

M31: The problem of religion in former Yugoslavia is that religion is linked to national identity, while for Albanians [in Albania proper] it is not. So, Serbs are Serbian Orthodox, Croats are Catholic and Bosnians are Muslim. They all speak the same languages, more or less. There are some differences between Croatian, and Serbian and Bosnian [language], but they are minor. And when you consider the fact that there was a war between Serbia and Bosnia, and between Serbia and Croatia, it was also a political conflict, over power. Religion was used to motivate people to fight. It was not a purely religious conflict, like the Crusades – although I would argue that also the Crusades were wars for political power and resources, and not for faith. So, from the point of view of the Serbs, maybe one of the elements of the conflict was that Albanians are Muslims – especially in the propaganda it was [said] that they are fundamentalists, a threat to Europe’s Christianity, which in fact is not true. Because also Kosovar Islam is very moderate, very tolerant. There were some attempts to plant some fundamentalist Islamic groups – from Saudi Arabia, let’s say – but they were never popular.

M32: Serbs use this argument of these Islamic groups, to say: ‘This is in fact a religious war against the spreading of Islam in Europe.’ (E: So it is misused). It was misused. Like religion in case of almost all conflicts in the Balkans. […]

E 10: (…) If we compare the situation in Albania to that in Bosnia e.g., or Kosovo, Serbia or Croatia, what is the essential difference why….

B10: In comparison to Serbia, Greece or Croatia: these are homogeneous nations where religion is concerned. That’s to say: more or less all Greeks are Orthodox, all Serbs are Orthodox, all Croats are Catholics – more or less. The Albanians by contrast do not have a comparable unifying factor; they do not have one single religion that could create the cohesion of the nation. So, they always had Albania: the language and the native country. So, compared to a Greek, a Serb or a Croat, we see that for an Albanian the religious identity is secondary to the national identity: the national identity prevails. If we compare the Albanians in Albania proper to the Albanians in Kosovo or Macedonia, we
have to conclude that the pure existence of the Serbian Orthodox Church has meant a factor of national assimilation towards the Albanians. They, the Serbs, have tried to use the Church in order to assimilate the Albanians. In these two regions or countries – that’s to say: Kosovo and Macedonia – religion, especially Islam, but also Catholicism, has been a decisive identity marker towards the Serbs (or Macedonians). This explains why there are only so very few Albanian Orthodox Macedonians: because they have either assimilated or they have converted to Islam in order to distinguish themselves from the Serbian “enemy”. In this sense religion, especially Islam, has contained an element of national resistance as well. This makes that in Albania proper, religion – Orthodox, Muslim or Catholic – has not been an element of national resistance, because we always had a common enemy: the Ottomans, the fascists, etc.

B 2: We are the only nation in the Balkans where the people do not identify themselves by religion in the first place. The Albanians are first of all Albanians; and next they are Orthodox, Muslims, Protestants, Bektashis, and Sunnis. This is an Albanian particularity that stems from history. […]

K6: (…) Take the example of Kosovo concerning their religion, because of the problems they [the Kosovo Albanians] have with Serbs; we recognize that they are different from the Serbs, so they are a little bit stricter about [religion], because the Serbs are Orthodox and the Kosovars are Muslims. For that reason they are very strict about religion, (…)  

K8: (…) because of their problems with the Serbs. Starting 1912 they wanted to show to the world: ‘We are different from them.’ And later on they got independence, and they have [always] been different from the Serbs in their customs, in their religion and in their language. So they pushed it hard, these three things. For that reason they are stricter than us. […]

P 59: Well, in Kosovo people are a bit wayward, saying: ‘Things should be done like this, in no other way.’ Look, in Albania we have had the communists, so people have seen the difference between the communist period and the freedom we have obtained now: the situation nowadays (after communism) is better and people stand in a better relationship to each other.

E 60: They appreciate each other more.

P 60: Indeed: there’s more appreciation.
In the following chapters, chapter 4 – chapter 10, some particular subjects, like *ethnoclericalism* (in relation to national identity), as well as historical factors and the phenomenon of intermarriage will be explored more in depth – either by an overview of the available literature (mainly: chapter 4) or by a compilation of selected interview fragments (the remaining chapters).

*A Kula (Protective tower) in Nikaj; drawing by Edith Durham*
4. **(National) identity and Nationalism**

§ 4.1 **(National) identity**

While John Armstrong’s statement that ‘the ethnic group is defined by exclusion’, whereby one ethnic group often constitutes an antithetical duality with the opposed ethnic group might be too strong a generalization, yet it definitely contains an element of truth: in groups with a high salience of in-group identity, we can observe a strong tendency to define the own identity by defining “who we are not”, that is: “who are the Others.” So, in those groups the identity is mainly constructed in a negative way: negative to one’s own characteristics (by stating what one is not), as well as negative towards others, who are being described in stereotypes and negative terms, instead of using diverse, positive and individualized language, as is the case with people with a non-salient ethnic identity, who tend to see people from a different ethnic background as neighbors. Perhaps unwittingly, these latter persons acknowledge that the other’s right to exist is not tantamount to the denial of their own existence. Demonizing the Other and glorifying the in-group is one of the most powerful sources of violent conflict – of which the recent wars in the Balkan are a clear-cut example. But these tendencies are not only among the most powerful sources of armed strife; they can be the unconscious aims of violent conflict as well: in the newly established

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141 What counts, is not whether objective differences are present, but whether they are used to mark one group off from another (Horowitz, p.50).

142 The persons in the other group are viewed as unjust, immoral, uncivilized, or possibly inhuman, simply because of their membership, their assigned social identity (Rothbart and Korostelina, p.36; Sells, pp.14-5). This way of categorizing people – by people from other subgroups – stands in sharp contrast with the approach of scholars like Kołczyńska [see e.g. ‘Some facts about Albania’ in the introductory part of this thesis], who employ principles like ‘self-declaration’ to categorize people within a given society.

143 J. Armstrong, cited in Perica, p.4.

144 Cf. Roux, p.415.

145 Cf. Rothbart and Korostelina, pp.41 and 50. Ashmore *et al.* (pp.163, 167-8) add to this factor the degree to which group members tend to / feel the need to obey and respect authorities.

146 Rothbart and Korostelina, pp.1, 41, 122-3, 322; Pelushi, 2002, p.2; Roux, p.415. See also interview fragments J 17 and J 18 here in chapter 4.

147 This phenomenon is corroborated by recent research of social psychologists. (See e.g. Ashmore *et al.*, pp.17, 35-6.)

148 Everywhere, but especially in developing countries, where the sphere of politics is unusually broad and its impact powerful, collective social recognition is conferred by political affirmation. For this reason, struggles over relative group worth are readily transferred to the political system [and turned into political conflict]. (Horowitz, p.185)

149 Rothbart and Korostelina, p.13; Duijzings, p.33; Perica, p.77.
successor states of former Yugoslavia the mixture and ambiguity of the different ethnicities within one single territory might have been felt as threatening the unity and even the very existence of the nascent states. So, the violence in ex-Yugoslavia could be viewed, not only as the result of opposite and incompatible identities, but perhaps even more as the means to achieve them [i.e. these mutually exclusive identities]. In this way, the violent strife worked out as a self-fulfilling prophecy\textsuperscript{150}.

\section*{§ 4.2 Ethnoclericalism}

\textit{Ethnoclericalism} can be defined as ‘ethnically based nationhood’ and a ‘national church’ with its clergy entitled to national leadership\textsuperscript{151}, but without the accountability faced by democratically elected officials. Usually, \textit{ethnoclericalism} – claiming a religious monopoly – is especially strong\textsuperscript{152} in multi-ethnic societies\textsuperscript{153}, where the threat of other ethnic (‘incompatible’) identities is felt most urgently.

Ethnic churches, as instruments for the survival of ethnic communities, ‘need’ outside threats, and are by definition\textsuperscript{154} anti-liberal, and in particular: anti-secular\textsuperscript{155}. Furthermore, there is a strong interdependence between the (nationalist) state or faction and the ethnic church: they mutually need each other – or they think they do. The role of ethnic Churches is not merely in the background, assisting or instigating the political leaders in nationalistic programs or violence: the three\textsuperscript{156} largest religious organizations of former Yugoslavia, and especially so the Serbian Orthodox Church, can be counted among the principal\textsuperscript{157} engineers of the recent [and sometimes: earlier] crises.

\textsuperscript{150} Cf. Kosovo, that has become one of the most homogeneously populated territories in Europe (Bieber, p.67).

\textsuperscript{151} The religious organizations became co-rulers with the new regimes in all successor states, except Milošević’s Yugoslavia, as Milošević had a rather negative attitude towards religion and its institutions (Perica, p.168).

\textsuperscript{152} It is also specifically strong in the respective Orthodox Churches, because of their close connections to nationhood and national values (Perica. p.6)

\textsuperscript{153} Perica, p.217.

\textsuperscript{154} Because the instrumentalization for survival precludes a liberal or secular line, as this would directly threaten the survival, namely in a pluralistic setting: it would directly impede one’s ability to deal with the threat of the (ethnically) Other.

\textsuperscript{155} Anti-secular: against the separation of Church and State. The concept of religious liberty and equality is alien to this way of thinking, and considered ‘unnational’ (cf. Perica, p.216).

\textsuperscript{156} Namely, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic of Croatia and the Muslims; the latter group being represented by the \textit{Rijasset} in Sarajevo.

\textsuperscript{157} Coward & Smith (p.230) however, tend to minimize the role of the religious leaders in initiating the conflict – at least in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
and conflicts\textsuperscript{158} and as having been the decisive factor in the (nationalistic) outcome of the 1990 elections in the successor states – especially so in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. If we speak about ethnic churches or religious institutions backing nationalist factions and promoting ethnically based nationalism, then – in the case of ex-Yugoslavia – it is mainly the highest\textsuperscript{159} religious authorities, and not so much the lower clergy that is involved\textsuperscript{160}, although this differed in the respective states and periods. Throughout the Yugoslav history of the 20th century, we see a remarkable adversative connection\textsuperscript{161} between nationalistic tendencies (backed by religious institutions) on the one hand, and communist power on the other hand: whereas at the end of World War II Tito’s communism was widely embraced\textsuperscript{162} as a liberation from the religiously backed terror by nationalist groups\textsuperscript{163} (a terror which both the nationalist factions and the ethnic churches\textsuperscript{164} backing them refused to acknowledge so far), in the 1960s the Vatican, in its turn, tried to use\textsuperscript{165} nationalism and ethnicity in its strife against communism and, more in general, against secularism – as a kind of experiment. Just as the nationalist / fascist groups, backed by the higher clergy, had failed to account for their misdeeds (in World War II), likewise the communists failed to acknowledge their part\textsuperscript{166}, both in World War II (though minor in scale and cruelty, compared to the nationalist groups) and after, especially in their post-war retaliation\textsuperscript{167} against the clergy, because of its role in the ethnic cleansing in World War II. Equally, the communists, as the ruling party, defaulted in affording an

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{158} Perica pp.166-7; cf. Bieber, pp.5-6 and 186-7.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Cf. Clark e.g., pp.65-76, 81.
\item \textsuperscript{160} Perica, p.22-4.
\item \textsuperscript{161} With a pendulum-like movement of alternating periods of dominance of either the communists or the (religious) nationalists.
\item \textsuperscript{162} Also because of its appealing slogan of civil brotherhood and unity, which was seen (also by a large part of the population) as a protection against new upsurges of ethnicism.
\item \textsuperscript{163} Mainly the Catholic Ustaše and the Serbian Orthodox Četniks, who committed numerous atrocities during World War II, among which ethnic cleansing.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Except for a few higher Croat clergy (Perica, p.180, 193-4).
\item \textsuperscript{165} Later on, the Roman Catholic Church expressly depicted communism as the allegedly gravest evil of the three evils (Naziism, fascism and communism) that were dominant in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century worldwide. It did so with the aims of: eradicating communism / reducing secularism, softening the Catholic Church’s role in the atrocities of World War II and bringing the Church on the side of the post-Cold War winners, i.e. the Western democracies, in the conclusion of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century ideological conflict between Naziism, fascism and communism over against capitalism and democracy (Perica, p.229-233).
\item \textsuperscript{166} Committed by the communist Partisans.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Perica, p.26.
\end{itemize}
opportunity to the population at large to commemorate publicly the atrocities of World War II in Yugoslavia, and to mourn the victims nationwide\textsuperscript{168}.

This void\textsuperscript{169} could then easily be filled by the (religious) nationalists, who started organizing massive scale World War II commemorations, from 1984 onwards. By purging the secular nationalists in the 1970s, Tito had – unintentionally – procured the religious nationalists with even more room for maneuver and for monopolization of ethnic nationalist causes\textsuperscript{170}. These two mistakes from the side of Tito, coupled with his failure to make a timely\textsuperscript{171} and radical transition towards democracy, as well as his decision to exile\textsuperscript{172} anti-Yugoslavian groups\textsuperscript{173}, all contributed to the rise of ethnoclericalism and nationalist parties in the 1980s and 1990s. In the earlier mentioned civil religion of brotherhood and unity, as propagated by the Titoist regime, the system and the idea were inextricably linked. This meant that any struggle against communist rule in Yugoslavia would involve the destruction of this brotherhood and unity, with the risk of a civil war\textsuperscript{174}. And so it happened. Nearly a decade before the outbreak of the domestic conflict, ‘cultural alliances’ were forged along (perceived) ethnic and / or religious lines, but outside the own province or republic: Serbia with Russia and Greece (along the Orthodox line), Muslims in Bosnia with Turkey and Arab Countries (along the Islamic line) and Croatia with Poland (along the Catholic line)\textsuperscript{175}. These new and ‘natural’ bonds

\textsuperscript{168} Perica, p.97.

\textsuperscript{169} Cf. Coward & Smith, p.227 and De Deugd et al., p.162.

\textsuperscript{170} Perica, pp.55, 63, 73, 97, 123. Cf. Pelushi (2002, p.3): class hatred easily became ethnic hatred (largely in the same people; so, people who had been full of class hatred before, under the communist regime, were largely the same as those who were full of ethnic hatred later on, according to Pelushi. In my opinion, this holds only partly to be true – as there was also a clear anti-nationalistic stance among not a small number of communists.)

\textsuperscript{171} Although it is doubtable if such a timely transition had been possible under the given circumstances.

\textsuperscript{172} Perica, p.123. This exile turned out to have a boomerang-effect: the exiled anti-Yugoslav groups, once they were in diaspora, grew – even more – extremist in convictions and action. They formed an extremely strong and aggressive manipulative force that strongly – and negatively – influenced the later events in former Yugoslavia and its successor states. Specifically on the negative effects of the Albanian diaspora on the situation in Kosovo: see Schwartz, p.129 and Pavlowitch, p.15.

\textsuperscript{173} These exiled groups, together with the religious nationalists, were the only opposition that was left, after Tito’s decision to purge the secular nationalists by expelling or detaining them.

\textsuperscript{174} Perica, p.103. According to Coward & Smith, the rallying [outside the established political channels] of grass root support for its agenda by each ethnicity’s elite in former Yugoslavia was a direct consequence of a federal system that required unanimity among the republics on major issues, whereas the political aims of the different ethnic groups turned out to be incompatible. This situation directly resulted in a stalemate of the political process and a quick destruction of an already fragile mutual thrust among the different ethnic parties and groups. All this directly led to the ethno-religious wars of the 1990s, according to the authors (pp.221-2).

\textsuperscript{175} Malcolm, pp.6,8; Perica, pp.70, 212, 217; cf. interview fragment A 13 in chapter 2.
of brotherhood would replace the Titoist ‘artificial’ form of brotherhood and unity, according to those involved. With the virtual abolition of the Titoist form of brotherhood and unity, the cement between the different ethnic groups in ex-Yugoslavia largely disappeared, so that the edifice collapsed.

§ 4.3 Collapse of former Yugoslavia: the need of new myths

With the breakdown of Yugoslavia in 1990-1991, and the subsequent further degradation of each of the post-Yugoslav successor states, only the growing influence of (nationalistic) myth and religion helped some people believe that the new was better than the old – in sum: it prevented them from utter despair about failing states and huge economical problems, by offering them something (a myth about their ethnic identity), to be – wrongly – proud of. From a psychological point of view, myth strengthens and unifies communities that are based on fear, and solidifies a certain social order by obscuring its contradictions. These reverse or contradictory aspects of that particular social order therefore remain under the surface, to erupt from there unexpectedly later on, like a volcano.

As a matter of fact, the choice of this path of ethnic nationalism meant an abrupt discontinuity with the past: especially in areas like Bosnia-Herzegovina, with over 500 years of experience in peaceful co-existence. With the forced ‘westernization’ of the region, (ethnic) nationalism had been imported to the Balkans, where it proved to be incompatible with the traditions of this region: in the end, the widely embraced myths of ethnic nationalism turned out to be lies.

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176 In this, Okey’s description of the situation in Bosnia might be applied more generally to the overall construct of the (first and second) Yugoslav republic: while modern nations are modern constructions, the historical inheritance sets bounds to the process [of rationalistic, artificial and pluralistic nation building]. In Bosnia religion played a key role. The secularizing intellectual climate of the 19th century allowed only statehood and language to be building blocks of nationhood, but religion was closer to the people and had forged political links [with co-religionists outside the own state] (Okey, pp.254-5).


178 Perica, pp.186, 212, 228.

179 And from the sense of emptiness, created by the spiritual (or rather: ideological) vacuum after the collapse of the communist system (cf. Perica, pp. 4, 94-5, 221; Pelushi, 2002, p.2).

180 ‘Wrongly’, because it concerned a constructed, artificial myth – based on negative premises. (Namely, the construction of a group identity, solely based on the denial of, and opposition against, an out-group; cf. §4.1 on (national) identity.)

181 Perica, p.234.

§ 4.4 Secular religion\textsuperscript{183}, or: the Erosion of Religion

The nationalist leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadžić, stated in a 1990 interview for a Sarajevo newspaper\textsuperscript{184}: “The Church is highly important for all Serbs, and it is irrelevant whether one believes in God or not.” This quote reflects a mode of thinking, and an entire development in the (former) Yugoslavia of the 1980s and 1990s (with its roots going back at least to the liberal phase of communism in the 1960s and 1970s): that of the erosion of religion. Whereas the importance\textsuperscript{185} of the religious institutions in former Yugoslavia increased spectacularly, the trend of secularization (here in the meaning of: the fading away of a personal belief in God) kept easily pace with it. From a number of surveys and in-depth researches conducted in (former) Yugoslavia from the 1950s through the 1990s we can conclude that, while the adherence to religious institutions increased\textsuperscript{186} significantly – especially during the 1980s and 1990s – the number of self-declared atheists\textsuperscript{187} rose dramatically as well, and both scholars and clergy queried the ‘quality’ of faith among the ‘faithful’, who had started to (re-)emphasize their religious identity, apparently without genuine religious practice or spirituality. Religion seemed to have been eroded from inside out: while aggrandizing itself and posing itself as a public phenomenon, its inward qualities and spirituality seemed to have faded\textsuperscript{188} away

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{183} ‘Secular religion’: the more specific and malign form (e.g. as embodied by ethnic nationalism or by Nazism) of the more general and benign ‘civil religion’ (e.g. the rather soft type of communism in former Yugoslavia), which is an alloy of myths, quasi-religious symbols, cults, rituals, beliefs, and practices that secure the nation’s legitimacy and convince the people that the system is ‘good’ (Perica, p.95).
    \item \textsuperscript{184} The weekly newspaper \textit{Nedjelja}, edition 2/9/1990.
    \item \textsuperscript{185} Peter Berger (as quoted in Perica, p.219) signals that this trend (of increasing importance of religious institutions in Yugoslavia) has to be interpreted as a top-down development, whereas genuine religious revival is always characterized by bottom-up movement; which only proves the spuriousness of the Yugoslav ‘religious revival’.
    \item \textsuperscript{186} Perica, pp.131-2, 139, 190, 219 and Coward & Smith, p.237 (n.5). In this respect Slovenia, the only successful new democracy among the successor states of former Yugoslavia, is illustrative: in contrast with all the other successor states, Slovenia has followed the Western European trend of dazzling secularization and religious indifference, rather than the pattern of the Balkan ‘religious revival’ of the 1980s and 1990s (Perica, p.220).
    \item \textsuperscript{187} Cf. Paul Mojzes in \textit{Yugoslav Inferno}, 1995, p.170: ‘The war was being fought largely by irreligious people who wear religion as a distinguishing badge, but do not know what the badge stands for.’ Or Pelushi, 2002, p.3: ‘Many people in the Balkans have ironically dubbed these wars: ‘the wars of the atheists’.’ See also Mahmutčehajić, pp.6,8; Apostolov, p.76; Sells, pp.87,89 and Ramet, pp.140-3 (whose surveys affirm the observation by other authors that practical atheism is strongest among the Orthodox population in former Yugoslavia).
    \item \textsuperscript{188} Whereas ‘the best way to counter religious extremism or manipulation of religion, is with strengthened, more authentic religion, not weakened religion.’ (Gerard F. Powers, quoted in Coward & Smith, p.235.)
\end{itemize}
in a large part of the population, especially among the Serbian Orthodox\textsuperscript{189}. So, we see an instrumentalization of religion, because of which religion ceases to be an end in itself, but is being put to use by nationalistic politicians and religious leaders – and, in their wake, by the population at large. According to the Albanian Orthodox metropolitan Johani Pelushi\textsuperscript{190} this signifies a reversal of hierarchy: the nation no longer serves (Christian) justice, but vice versa, the Church has to serve the nation – and its demonic, nationalistic ends, which finally become the aims\textsuperscript{191} of the Church as well: ideological monopoly, power, the confiscation of former communist property, the creation of new ethnic and antithetical identities, and ultimately, ethnic cleansing.

Interview fragments:

J14: You see, the loss of other ideologies brought only two ideologies: nationalism and religion. People are fighting, fed by these two\textsuperscript{192}. (E: And capitalism perhaps?) Capitalism, but capitalism is more pragmatic. It is not an ideology that can raise people to fight for something, but nationalism and religion, if abused, can bring a lot of disasters.

E15: Speaking about nationalism: if you compare Albania to the rest of the Balkan or to specific countries in the Balkan...?

J15: In Albania it is not so strong, but for sure nationalism has been a plague many times in the Balkans – and in the whole world, but we are speaking of this region – because it has destroyed a lot of values. Every nationalism is exclusive towards another nationalism.

E16: Then the question is: where does healthy patriotism end and where does a sick nationalism start?

J16: You cannot have a border: nationalism cannot stay in itself. So in order to have this border: if it were really an ideology of love, like we preach in Christianity, we use this possibility to build this healthy nationalism. You should love the country where you

\textsuperscript{189} “Serbian Orthodoxy was really a matter of tradition, patriarchal and primitive, with religion playing only a formal part.” (Vladimir Ćorović, an important Bosnian Serb scholar [1885-1941], in his inaugural lecture at Belgrade University in 1919 – quoted critically by Okey, p.232.) Cf. Clark, p.113.


\textsuperscript{191} Perica, p.221.

\textsuperscript{192} Cf. Benedict Anderson, quoted in Ashmore et al., p.60: ‘Nationalism has more in common with phenomena such as religion and kinship than with ideologies like liberalism and socialism.’
live, but this does not mean to hate others\textsuperscript{193}. Unfortunately, sometimes the people measure the love that they have for a country with the hatred that they have for others, but it is not the same. Everybody loves the country where he lives or the city where he lives, but this does not mean to hate the other city or the other country. Nationalism, like we saw in the last two centuries, or in this century that we left here in the Balkans, was not a nationalism that was fed by values: it was a kind of manipulation of the feelings of the people; always having a kind of enemy, trying to mobilize the people against the other group. Unfortunately in some churches they did not understand well that this kind of nationalism was against the doctrine of the Church. In the beginning they perhaps saw it as an opportunity to get rid of the yoke of the Turkish regime, but afterwards it became a kind of boomerang, so we cannot make ideology out of nationalism; making it an ideology means destroying yourself and the others. And you see what happened in the history of Europe.

E17: I was just thinking about this last point of nationalism; if you can make the link with what you said before the interview about the icon ho on, about the construction of identity – it was very important and basic what you said.

J17: Nationalism is sometimes built on this negative identity\textsuperscript{194}, against the other, because it is exclusive towards another nationalism. So you can be a hero in a country and a criminal in another country. So I do not think that nationalism can stay in itself, it cannot be an ideology in itself, because it is destructive. Christianity has always preached love for all, so you cannot make God the chief ethnarc, the chief of the nation; it cannot be just only for this nation, it is for all. Because nationalism will build an ideology that you are the true nation: 'You are special, you are better than all those others'. And if the people believe these things, they can easily kill the others.

E18: Yes, and just to take up what you told me about the story of Moses and the name of God...?

J18: Nationalism is sometimes built on this negative identity\textsuperscript{195}. I believe that there are two identities: there is a positive identity, or God’s identity – in the Scripture, when Moses asked God and said: 'What is your name, so that I can tell it to the elders of Israel?', God

\textsuperscript{193} Cf. Ellens, p.111. The negative effects of national pride and identity are not inevitable (Peacock et al., p.44), neither is the maintenance of self-esteem by means of out-group derogation (Forgas et al. pp. 27-8 and Rothbart et al., p.122); or, in religious, rather than ethnic terms: denial of one sacred tradition by another means that the first has ceased to be sacred, has lost its capacity to achieve holiness for humanity. To join this denial is to join forces with the unreal, which seeks the annihilation of others, to feed its own emptiness (Mahmutćehajić, p.4).

\textsuperscript{194} Cf. Roux, p.415.

\textsuperscript{195} Cf. Peacock et al., p.24, and Rothbart & Korostelina, pp.13 and 31: once conflicts of interest are re-imagined as moral confrontations between the virtuous Us and the diabolical Other, their resolution is inhibited. (Ibid., p.2: 'When hatreds intensify differences are elevated to social ontology.')
answered: ‘I am who I am.’ At the old icons of the Orthodox iconography, you can see this inscription: *ho on*, ‘who is’, or: ‘I am’. And this is the positive identity when you try to give what you have, what you are. The negative identity, or you can call it the devil’s identity, is when you draw your own identity against something else: a person or a group. So: ‘We are against this or that group’. This can be inside religious communities. A negative identity can be among Christians seeing that they themselves are against Muslims or others, or vice versa: the Muslims against those others. The positive identity is when the Christians try to develop and to preach the values that they have, without speaking against the others. I always try to mention this to different people: we are called to preach the good news, and this is *evangelion*, which means good news, not the bad news against the others. And for sure you can convince the people more when you speak for yourself and for everything that is good than by speaking against the others. By speaking against the others, for sure, you will make people build this negative identity and you will always create hatred. And hatred does not come from God. This hatred can be class hatred, like it was under communism, or racial hatred, or religious hatred. Always hatred remains the demon of hatred. And I think the church and all the religious communities should fight against this: we cannot allow that our institutions become a place where we preach hatred. Because if we preach hatred, God is no longer among us. A God of love will not allow the preaching of hatred. All this nationalism, all this negative identity, will always [result in] preaching hatred, because they are being built against somebody else. They cannot stay without an enemy. (E: They even need an enemy.) Yes, and otherwise they will create one. And it is destructive for themselves and for the others. […]

E29: Speaking about nationalism, if you compare it to surrounding countries like Kosovo or former Yugoslavia republics; do you see a different type of nationalism in Albania compared to the other countries?

W29: For the Balkan countries nationalism is a factor without any question. In all the surrounding countries there are also lots of Albanians: in Montenegro, in Macedonia, in Kosovo, in Croatia; the Albanian influence is considerable. The difference between the nationalities and the religions in the surrounding countries is more substantial than in Albania. Albania is an oasis with this special tolerance; that is unbelievable, it is hardly to describe. […]

E37: Would you think that Albanians have a strong feeling of nationality such as: ‘We are Albanians, we are an ethnic group’, or would that not be felt so strongly?

G37: No, for this thing I can say: everyone is proud to be Albanian.

E38: Okay, so that is a strong feeling?

G38: Yes, it is strong; stronger than religion. […]
M5: (...) Albanian national identity is not based on a religion, like e.g. in Poland. In Poland the link between Catholicism and being Polish is very close. If I meet somebody and he asks me: ‘Where are you from?’, and I say: ‘I’m from Poland’, then he will say: ‘Oh, then you are a Catholic.’ While here, Albanian national identity – since the population [consisted of] believers of different faiths – the national identity in the late 19th century¹⁹⁶ was not built on principles of a common religion – as there was no common religion – but on the ideas of common ethnic origin and language. In terms of language, this is a very favorable factor in this situation, because no language around Albania is even similar to Albanian. So the language and ethnic origin were a differentiating factor from e.g. Greeks or Macedonians or Serbs. So people consider themselves first of all as Albanians, and then the religion is part of their family tradition. When we keep that in mind, it is understandable that there are so few religious tensions between Albanians themselves. I wouldn’t say exactly that there a no tensions at all, since people find divisions always a good occasion to argue. And in villages in the north, that are mixed villages – Catholic-Muslim – if there is a conflict and it turns out that one family is Catholic and the other family is Muslim, this division is also used in the conflict. Meaning that the Catholic family engages the Catholic community, and the Muslim family engages the Muslim community. The conflict is upgraded to the level of religious communities, involving the Catholic priest and the Muslim hoja. But from what I know from my interviews with people, religion is almost never reason for conflict itself: conflicts don’t stem from religious divisions. Sometimes religious differences are adopted as part of the conflict, but only later on. (E: Secondarily.) Secondarily, yes. Of course the situation is very different if you consider e.g. the situation between Albanians and Greeks. If there is a conflict between Albanians and Greeks, it is on the level of national identity. So Albanian Orthodox can have a problem with Greek Orthodox, just as Albanian Muslims with Greek Muslims. But also in that case, religion is only secondary.

E6: And if you are speaking about conflicts between Albanians and Greeks, are you then speaking about border conflicts at the Albanian-Greek border, or are you rather

¹⁹⁶ The rise of nationalism of the 19th century in the Balkans, which were part of the Ottoman Empire at that time, was partly caused and influenced by the Tanzimat-reforms in the Empire (De Deugd et al., p.41). Another important historical factor that contributed to the rise of nationalism in the Balkans were the peace treaties like that of the Congress of Berlin (1878), of London (1913) and of Versailles (1918 – 1920) that did not count at all with national aspirations of the regions and peoples concerned: by taking away large parts of their territories, dividing ethnic groups over two or more new states or entities, and hurting their national pride, the Great Powers sowed the bitter seeds of strong nationalism and further ethnic strife (cf. De Deugd et al., p.92-3 and Zajmi, p.1). The long standing, and outspokenly negative European perspective of the population of the Balkans has contributed as well: in an effort to compensate for the negative image among, and their irrelevance for, (western) Europeans, the distinguished Balkan peoples resorted to their ‘glorious past’ in pre-Ottoman times, thereby creating, or reviving, nationalist feelings and mythology (De Deugd et al., p.156-7).
referring to conflicts in the southern region of Albania, where Greek minority groups live in the villages?

M6: I am talking in general about territorial claims, since Albanians say that the Greeks occupied, and are still occupying, part of Albanian lands; and that they are also responsible for the massacre of Cham in the early 20th century, and also now for the problem with the Greek minority in the south. So, basically: throughout the centuries. What I want to point to is that the conflict is on the level of national identity and not on the level of religious identity. Religion is only used as an additional aspect to power relations, since the Greek national identity is so much linked with the Greek Orthodox Church, but this is an ethnic conflict; at least from the point of view of the Albanians it is not a religious conflict. For Greeks there is not such a great difference between ethnic and religious: for them it is the same: ethnicity and religion, the Greek Orthodox Church and being Greek as a nationality, while Albanians have a completely different point of view. (E: So even if they are involved in the same conflict, they view it differently, from their different points of view?) They would say: ‘The Greeks are invading us’, but they would consider it ethnic, community based.

E7: If I get you well, you are saying that basically the relations between Muslims and Christians here within Albania are good, but sometimes they are being used as a secondary factor in a conflict that is already there, that have some different backgrounds?

M7: But only on the micro level, in the village. Not on a state level, between hierarchies and different religions. (E: Then you would say that they are just living in peace and harmony together?) Maybe they do not have that kind of interactions, but there are no conflicts. Especially that in Albania the division between religion and state is strict. (E: You mean a secular state?) Yes. And it is even easier with so many religions. Now that I compare it with Poland again: in Poland there is a division between church and state, but in practice everybody knows that the church has a huge influence on politics; and here it has not.

E8: And if you say there might be not that many interactions between the different groups, do you also imply with that that there might be some indifference towards each other, or towards each other’s faith or denomination?

M8: I’m not sure if it is indifference, because it has a slightly negative meaning. I would say: it is co-existence. All communities accept that the other exists and ultimately they all consider themselves as Albanians; and that’s what counts. You probably heard about Vasal Pasha. He was an Albanian poet and one of the activists in the Albanian national Awakening, the nation building movement in the late 19th century, the Ralindia combëtar Shqiptar. He [Vasal Pasha] wrote a famous poem: ‘Oh Albania, my Albania’, and one of the verses there is: ‘The religion of Albanians is Albanianism’, which was a call for national unity, but it also made people realize that they are Albanians, and
that’s what counts, and religion is only part of their family identity or regional identity; since Catholics live in the north and Orthodox live in the south, and people are very much tied to their region of origin. But ‘The religion of Albanians is Albanianism’ also became the slogan, the motto of the Albanian national movement; and that is actually how it is in practice. […]

H1: To be honest, before 1860, the situation in the Balkans was very close to the situation that you have in Pakistan e.g., where people do not see themselves as Pakistanis; they see themselves based on what religion they live. Maybe newcomers like Serbians e.g. regarded themselves as Serbians, but I think basically Albanians didn’t see themselves as Albanians, but as Orthodoxs, Catholics or Turks [= Muslims].

“H2”: In my opinion it is very important to see the relation between religion as such and the identity. For example, as I told you, I came from Dibra. And Dibra is an Albanian Dibra and a Macedonian Dibra, divided by a border. Let’s say – we have our people living on the other side of the border. We have the same surnames; our relatives live there. But if you see how they practice religion, it is totally different from us. They are [strictly] practicing religion in Macedonian Dibra, [more] than in Albanian Dibra.

E2: So, already in such a small area…

H3: I only have one explanation for that; because for them, being Muslims was part of their identity; distinguishing them from Macedonians that were Orthodox. But for the Dibrans in Albania it didn’t matter, if you were Muslim, or Orthodox, or Catholic; because for fifty years it was forbidden, first of all – and next to that: we have never been in the danger of losing our identity by religion. I think – but I have not done any scientific research, I am just reacting to your question, ‘what is religion for Albanians?’: they are Albanian, I am an Albanian – there is just the border dividing us. But they practice religion much more than we do. And much more than in Kosovo now. Because before it was much more equal in Kosovo and in Macedonia, but now with the tension after Macedonia became a separate state, 60% of the population define themselves as Macedonians. They needed a religion for a state identity and the Albanians were feeling ‘out’, you know: the language was abandoned, while 97% 197 of the population is Albanian.

197 Percentage is not correct, E.S. – see § 3.7.
5. **History: Ottomans and Crypto Christianity**

E10: You were talking about the 19th century and in the introduction you have told me that you are doing research on the Ottoman period, in the region that is nowadays Kosovo – I suppose you could also consider it a bit broader, in the region – once upon a time there were no Muslims at all here, in this region. Then, at a certain moment, they came into this part of the Balkans, this part of Europe. Can you tell me something about that situation: how was the situation within the Orthodox Church, or within the Orthodox and Catholic streams here in the region, and how did the integration with the new Muslim invader take shape?

M10: First of all, before the Ottoman conquests in the Middle Ages, Albania and Kosovo were on the border of the influence zones of the Orthodox and Catholic Church. The mountains of northern Albania and Kosovo were more under the influence of the Vatican, while the lowlands and especially the south of Albania were under the influence of Constantinople. That was more or less the situation when the Ottomans came. Ottomans took control over the region politically, in terms of administration, while they did not force Islam – there were no forced conversions to Islam. Just Ottoman clerks or authorities came to administer cities and regions among the Christian population. Of course when someone wanted to make a career in the Ottoman state, one had to convert to Islam. Since, however, we consider a secular state as a principle now, in the Middle Ages there was nothing like a secular state. Secular states just didn’t exist and the Ottoman Empire was in principle a Muslim state. But the Ottoman Empire was largely tolerant: they accepted and tolerated the presence of Christians and Jews, all monotheist religions. Islam says that Christians and Jews have the status of *dhimmi* and that means that they have simply the right to live and to keep and practice their religion. And that was also the situation in the Ottoman Empire. The only drawback was that non-Muslims had to pay higher taxes, which by time became very high. And now we have another motive to turn to Islam. The first one was to make

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198 The history of religion in Kosovo is closely related to that of northern Albania, as both regions found themselves in the ‘border zone’ between Catholic and Orthodox influences (Kołczyńska, 2008, p.1 and *ibid.*, 2010, p.1).

199 See also Bartl, pp. 52-3, Pelushi, 2005, pp. 82-5, 91, and Kołczyńska, 2008, pp. 1-2. Malcolm (pp. 51-68) distinguishes fourteen factors in the Islamicization of Bosnia, which are roughly the same as in the case of the Islamicization of Albania, with the devşirme system as the primary vehicle of Islamicization. According to Donia and Fine (p.37) Islamicization of Bosnia in the first stages came from migration and settlement from elsewhere, as well as from conversion. In the long run, conversion of locals was by far the major source of Bosnia’s Muslims, the great majority of whom are thus descended from local Serbo-Croatian speaking converts. Recent research (a.o. Norris pp.43 vv and Stoyanov, 171-205) strongly challenge the previously widely held belief among scholars that the so-called Bogomil (Christian) heterodoxy largely paved the way for the Islamicization of Bosnia. They rather ascribe the relatively strong Islamicization of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania to the situation of competing faiths [Catholicism and Orthodoxy] before the advent of Islam in both areas.
a career in the administration, the second was to pay lower taxes, and the third one – I would say – was the wish to turn to the privileged religion. In the cities it was obvious that culture was Islam, since mosques were founded in towns and one could clearly make a link between welfare and Islam. So Islam first spread in cities, and then gradually also in the villages. But Catholicism e.g. remained strong in the mountains, where the Ottoman Empire didn’t have real power. Because the mountains between Montenegro, Kosovo and north Albania were never really conquered. People were living there in a kind of isolation from the lowlands, but they were also free: they didn’t have any authorities above them. And one of the factors that was also important in spreading Islam was that Ottoman Islam was tolerant; especially Bektashis or other Sunni sects whose doctrine is a mix of Islam, with influences of Christianity, Judaism and some pagan beliefs. They were islamicizing the population, but largely nominally. I mean, people were changing their names into Muslim names, they were not going to church anymore because there was a mosque being built, they venerated saints in the same place but the saints got a different name. So on the level of folk religion not much really changed, only that nominally they were Muslims. And that was the character of islamization in the Balkans.

E11: Could you say that in the Balkans a certain number – or perhaps even a majority of them – converted just in name, but remained Christians in their hearts and perhaps even transmitted that to the next generations?

M11: There was a phenomenon called ‘crypto Christianity’ which meant that – [you know,] in the Balkans, at that time, families were huge. And a family was a basic unit for taxation purposes, among others, and was represented by the head of the family. So there was this phenomenon where the head of the family converted to Islam and the rest of the household did not. And since in the Ottoman state Christians had the right of priest visits or service, there was the situation that the priest – let’s say a Catholic – came to serve a family, and that the head of the family, nominally Muslim, also participated.

E12: And if you say: ‘The priest came to serve the family’, do you mean that he made a small mass inside the house, a Eucharist, or so?

M12: Yes. Or the priest came to baptize the children or to bless the household and so on. (...) My hypothesis is that, on the level of folk religion and local customs, it was most important for people to be lucky; in terms of: protecting their health, their welfare, their family. (E: You mean, it was their priority in life?) It was a priority, and they used all the religions that were around to protect themselves. So, even if they were Muslims,

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200 This phenomenon was much more wide spread in Albania than elsewhere in the Balkans (Pelushi, 2005, p.82) and contributed to religious harmony (ibid., p.92). For a similar phenomenon in Ottoman Bosnia: see Malcolm, p.55.

they baptized their children, because maybe it helped. And they had amulets, or some talismans; Muslims had for instance an amulet with Saint George, which is an Orthodox saint. But at the same time they kept for example a note with a Koran verse, written by the hoja, the imam. So, that was on a folk level, on a local level. But I think that in the mind of Albanians it still remained.

E13: So could you perhaps say that they are considering, or using, religion in a kind of pragmatic, or perhaps even an opportunistic way – or is that too strong?

M13: I’d say that it is too strong. But in rural areas, in the end: what’s religion there for? It is something you believe that is moving the world, but it is also something we want help from, when we are in trouble. So, if there is more than one religion around, why not protect ourselves more? And this also contributed to the co-existence of all religions: if there was a holy place, somewhere on the mountain – especially in north Albania you find a lot of pagan elements in local customs – if there was some mountain that was considered holy for some reason, throughout the centuries, and it was a place for pilgrimage for both Muslims and Catholics, it did not create divisions between the communities, because they shared it. Maybe they made pilgrimages on different dates, but maybe [also] on the same date.

E14: We were talking about the history; what the Ottoman invaders found here, when they came, and also what they brought here. A few days ago I spoke to somebody who knows Bulgaria quite well. She told me that, compared to Albania, there were many more forced conversions in Bulgaria – more violence has been used, so the problems between Muslims and Christians have been more intense there, throughout the times. How do you explain that in Albania it went relatively smoothly, do you have any theory about that?

M14: First of all, I think – from what I know; I know more of Serbia, but I think it was also the case in Bulgaria – that the [let’s say] myth of forced conversions to Islam was also created during the Bulgarian national movement in the 19th century. But the difference between Bulgaria and Albania in the Middle Ages, is that Bulgaria had a state tradition, i.e. the Bulgarian Empire – and a state religion, i.e. the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; while Albania never had this. In history there were some princes that are now considered [to having been] Albanians, but (...) the fact is that Albania never had a state that was similar to today’s borders. And there was also no Albanian Church, like the Serbian Orthodox Church, the patriarchate, like the Bulgarian exarchate, or like the Greek Orthodox Church. So, behind Albanians there was no institution or hierarchy that would be crushed or threatened by the Ottomans.

E15: Just for the information of the listeners: the Albanian independence was in 1912, so that was the first time that there was a state in the nowadays form, and – as far as I know – the autocephalous church, is of a later date; or around the same time, perhaps?
M15: It was created around the 1920s, but it was recognized ten years later. (E: Yes, okay. So it all dates from the 20th century.) And one of the differences between Albania on the one hand, and Serbia and Bulgaria on the other hand, is also that religion was not part of an identity. And of course when – let’s say – Bulgarians were invaded by Muslims, the fact of being Bulgarian – or Slavic, at that time – was closely linked to being Orthodox. And suddenly there was a Muslim administration coming. The opposition of the people – not really of the people, but of the church hierarchy – that was motivating the people to uprisings and protests, was much stronger [in these two areas]. In Albania there was nothing like this. I’d also say that Albanians, during the Ottoman Empire, had a largely pragmatic attitude to religion. And there were many cases of Albanians actually achieving the highest levels in the Ottoman administration, becoming vizirs or grandvizirs; making careers, and then coming back as a local administrator, after making career in Istanbul. (E: Former Constantinople.) Former Constantinople. […]

J1: All the Orthodox people in the territory of Albania are part of the Orthodox Church of Albania. For sure the Greek minority does worship in Greek, the Slavic community does worship in Slav, but the majority is Albanian and they do it in Albanian. But all are part of the same Church so it is not that there are different churches here, it is one Church. There is not only one Church in Albania, but the whole Orthodox Church is one Church. Autocephaly is in the administration. So every church that is autocephalous has the right to administrate the church without interference of the other churches, but we are united in the same doctrines, the same belief, so it is one Church.

E2: When did the Orthodox Church in Albania become autocephalous?

J2: In 1937 it was a thomos, a kind of decree from the ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople that gave autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Albania.

E3: And how can we consider the Orthodox Church before that time?

J3: Before that that time we were under the patriarchate of Constantinople. Before, the territory that is now Albania, was under different jurisdictions: until the 8th century we were under Rome, from the 8th century onwards we were under Constantinople. For a short period we were under the patriarchate of Ohrida. Starting the 18th century we were under the patriarchate of Constantinople until autocephaly. […]

E14: If you look back at the moment that Islam entered your country: before that time it used to be almost fully Christian, perhaps some pagan elements. How do you explain that the introduction of Islam could happen relatively peacefully, if you compare it for instance to Bulgaria and other countries where there was much more of a problem with the introduction of Islam and much more force being used?

K15: Even the same things happened here with the coming of the Islam. When they came during the 15th century most of the people were forced to change religion – some by
force, some by high taxes, levied by the Turks. If you were an Orthodox or a Catholic you had to pay more taxes than a Muslim. So the people were forced to change their religion, but they only changed because of this kind of things. Some were aided in these things which means that they started to believe in religion (E: They were really converted in their hearts?). Yes, but some others were forced to do so.

E15: Did the majority continue in their former belief or did the majority really convert inside their hearts?

K16: The majority continued in their former belief, [they had only converted] because they did not want to pay those taxes. So [nowadays] Albania is a Muslim country – some 70 or 80% are Muslim – but not all of those are practicing their religion. [...]

A17: Yes. So all this is actually showing that the religiosity is not something that has a very strong impact on Albanian beliefs. If we consider the average behavior of Albanians: they are still pagans, if we can say that, and the monotheistic religions chose actually some pagan celebration to attach the new philosophy to. So Albanians still feel pagan somehow but accept that they belong to this culture or to this religion; but if you are digging really deep into the Albanian soul, then still some paganism remained inside.

E18: More than in other countries?

A18: Yes. Maybe it is good to make a connection between all the paganism we still have and the Muslim sect of Bektashism. Bektashism was the most liberal wing or the most liberal sect: drinking wine and drinking raki; of course accepting the prophet Mohammed, accepting that there is one God and accepting the Koran as a holy book for Muslims, but in everyday life Bektashis were far from being strict with the rules and regulations that normal Muslims are supposed to follow. So if you read the books written by Bektashi exponents, you can still find these pullulations of paganism because we can say that Bektashi are the most pantheistic people within the Islam and they believe that God can be found in the leaves, in the earth, in stones, everywhere. So if we consider the pantheism of the Bektashi sect this is more or less the same as the old paganism. So that’s why we find the Bektashis in Albania more than in any other country, because it was a kind of compromise between the pagan Albanian original soul and the modern convenience during the era of the Turkish Empire. So within Islam, Bektashism created conditions to feel again as pagans. It is not exactly the same; pantheism is something which includes somehow this ancient paganism.

E19: But is it not contradictory that within Islam there are two so extremely different streams, let’s say so extremely different wings, that they are almost contradictory? Mainstream Islam is saying there is only one God and this is Allah, no other god should be worshipped – that is the main doctrine; and then Bektashism on the other hand is completely the opposite.
A19: *Bektashism* does not say actually that there are many gods, but is saying that this one God we believe in is present in every[thing]. The small difference between paganism and pantheism is that [in paganism there is] one god for [every single] phenomenon; so one god for wind, one god for the water etcetera. So *Bektashis* believe in one God – of course, because they are Muslims – they believe in one God, which is present in every detail of either vegetation or nature or human life. So the same God spread all over.

E20: Yes, so it does not contradict each other?

A20: No. And between *Bektashism* and official Islam there were not only some contradictions, but also a big war. One of the sultans realized that many strong *Janissaries*, the bodyguards of sultan, were from the *Bektashi* sect. At night the sultan killed an enormous number of *Bektashis*. By then the *Bektashi* wing was completely abolished in Istanbul. So all *Bektashis* had to come to Albania.

A25: *Bektashism* is still the best we have from the Islam and *Bektashis* are always thinking of how to build up Albania, not how to destroy Albania. (E: Which is very important). This is very important from the nationalistic point of view. Albania is not a closed country now, it is an open country and of course also some terrorists might try to find a way to influence us, considering the fact that we have a large Muslim majority in our country. But of course these efforts against Albania will never stick in Albanian people actually. But for sure not in *Bektashi* people.

E26: No, it is too much against their convictions. [...]
6. Bektashism\textsuperscript{202}

K31: Bektashism came\textsuperscript{203} here in Albania in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century through the Turkish soldiers. They settled here. Bektashism is a Sufi order. That means it is not really Shi'a, as it would be in Iraq, so it is much more tolerant than any other religion. The difference between Bektashism and Sunnism is: the Sunnis have a mosque with a minaret and the Bektashis have a tekke, which is a dome. When they are praying – they have almost the same way of praying, but they have different rituals, the Bektashis and the Sunnis – the Bektashis are mostly referring to the tombs, more than to the direction of Mecca, as the Sunnis do. Normally the imam is called ‘Father’ [Baba]. There is a mixture: they have dervishes, so the most important is the Father normally, and the Prophet is Ali - comparable to Mohammed for the Sunni. (E: Ali, the cousin of Mohammed?) Yes.

E31: And I heard that there were some Christian and pagan elements in Bektashism, is that true?

K32: Yes, there are a couple of that, it is a kind of mixture. We are tolerant about religion: you can eat a small amount of pork, you can drink alcohol, which in Sunnism is prohibited.

E32: Are there other things that are different?

K33: A lot in the way they dress: that is completely different. (E: Less strict?) The Sunnis are more strict. Even the way that they [the Bektashis] dress, the fashion, [differs] from the Sunnis. The women are not forced to wear, to cover up. They can just go inside and that is it.

E35: In fact a large number of Muslims in Albania are Bektashis, does that also mean that it is an important factor in the religious understanding, in the religious harmony? Let’s say, if there were only Sunni Muslims would it be more difficult to get along with the Christians? Does it help that most of them are Bektashis?

K36: As I said we don’t refer to the religion, we live in harmony with each other, so we don’t mind what kind of religion we are. So the religion is the last thing that we can ask. […]

E4: Can you tell me how Bektashism began? And when it began?

I5: With Hajj Bektash, who had the roots of the family of the prophet Mohammed; of course, generation by generation, one of that family; he went to Turkey and he opened the first tekke there. (E: When?) In 1240. In that time Hajj Bektash opened [the tekke]

\textsuperscript{202} On Bektashism: see also Norris, pp. 82-100, 123-137 and 240-1 and Bartl, pp. 54-6.

\textsuperscript{203} Dervish sects, like Bektashism, had much less impact in Kosovo than in Albania proper (Kołczyńska, 2008, pp. 2).
and people looked at the doctrine of Hajj Bektash. Hajj Bektash was a human being, he was not – some say he was a magister, they put different names. The philosophy of Hajj Bektash is to have tolerance, to love the people and all his philosophy was to be happy with other people’s happiness. Our religion has one name, we call it ‘heart’; in the meaning that if you do something with love and heart, that is the biggest thing, if you do it with tolerance, building a great relation with the others. He always planted the seeds of peace, and to work in the right way, wherever he would come from. He would accept [anyone] in the tekke as a guest, whatever religion he would have, in his sofra. (E: Sofra?) Sofra, that is his table, of his tekke. He considered the tekke as a place where the door is open, and if there was a big rain for instance they could come. He liked to help the poor people, to donate [money] to them. It was a tradition in that time, if a girl had to prepare herself to be married, [it had to be done] with [special] clothes, with things like it was in that time. If she did not have money, then the dervish, without telling them, would send a transport with everything [the expensive bride’s clothes etc.] during the night. And it was not allowed to say who sent it. The dervish was very loyal, he put it in the door of the home and they would never know. So even if it was a very poor family, they could get married. So in the meaning of always helping people and doing good things. This was the principle.

E5: So if I understand you well, Bektashism started in the 13th century in Turkey (I: Yes, in Konya). And how did it develop through the ages?

I6: Then they had a great progress in the Balkans: in Albania, in Romania, in Bulgaria, in Greece, in Macedonia, in Kosovo. Of course this continued to have progress and they would also be in the best part of the army of the sultan, the Janissaries. The Janissaries were Bektashis, they were the most intelligent, brave and loyal [soldiers]. For Christians living in an empire that wanted them to become Muslims, Bektashism opened the way so that they could continue with the Bible, continue to pray to Jesus, to be Christians, but formally: being Bektashis. They could be free. This means that it was just for the rules that were there in the time. Even now, the reason why they sometimes call us Christians, is that many times they see us together. Also when the Jews came from Spain, some of them became Bektashis, in the time of war there.

E6: So either in the case of Spain, with the Inquisition or in the Ottoman Empire when Muslims forced Christians to become...

I7: Bektashism was always more tolerant, more liberal.

E7: So the Christians had two options: either to become Sunni Muslims, or to become Bektashis...
Of course the pressure was that they became Sunni Muslims. Later they [the Ottomans] did not accept the development of Bektashism. The sultan had killed\textsuperscript{204} one million Janissaries and the mother of the sultan said: ‘Don’t kill more’, because he was supposed to kill two millions.

Were they jealous of the development of the Bektashi?

Yes, they were afraid. They liked the progress, as long as it was not dangerous for them.

In which countries is Bektashism spread nowadays?

Unfortunately, after 1923 Salim Aziz Dedej was the last world Bektashi leader in Turkey. When Atatürk was doing the revolution, he said to him: ‘You are an Arrenod, because your mother was an Arrenod.’ (E: Arrenod, is that a name?) Arrenod, in the Turkish language, means Albanian. ‘Because you’re Albanian, for me go to Albania.’ – They had a good relationship with Albanians in that time. Then he came here – king Zog who was a Bektashi was in parliament [by then] – and then he started the World Center of Bektashism here in Tirana. (E: So it was in the 1920s?) Around 1925, they passed it in parliament in 1930.

So before the 1920s the World Center of Bektashism was in Turkey?

Yes, it was almost more than 50% of the Muslims [in Turkey, who were Bektashis at that time]. And then in Greece they have ten tekkes, very big ones. They have it in Macedonia (Harabati Baba Tekke), and they have other maqam, or turbe; in Montenegro, in Kosovo, in Romania, in Bulgaria. So they have many branches and they have a very official relation, like a hierarchy.

(...) They have the principle like Hajj Bektash: helping the people; they like people to go to school, they help them to go to school, they like education very much, they are not just ignorant, no. Baba’s, Khalifa’s know five or six languages and they have a big library, they study at university – I mean they love to have knowledge, to have a great culture and a great education. They love that. And it has nothing to do with keeping people ignorant, no. So this is one aspect of the Bektashis. They also love the family, they respect their wives very much, they pray together, in Medan they go together, they eat together at table, as wife and husband. So they are very tolerant. (E: And no headscarfs?) No, no. You could come and see it: my family is Bektashi; my daughter doesn’t have it, my wife doesn’t. And it is not just me, it is all the others. Of course we respect rules of others, but we don’t like, I mean we don’t agree with extremes, with a fanatic way.

\textsuperscript{204} In 1826 (Montgomery Watt, p.101).
E15: So if a Sunni woman wants to cover her head, you don't object?

I16: They can do it, we don't have anything to do with that. I mean, we shake hands with people. (E: So you, as a married man, can shake hands with a woman?) Absolutely.

E16: I heard from somebody who is a follower of Bektashism, that there were also some elements of the former religions like the pagan religions that were included in Bektashism from the beginning; so that there are some Christian, some Muslim elements, but also some pagan elements. Can you tell something more about it?

I18: Yes, mysticism is a principle they share. (…)

E18: And for instance elements like considering that God is in everything, in every stone, in every tree, that He is present everywhere, do you have that in Bektashism?

I19: We have similar principles – like, we say that God said: 'I made the human being, so you could see Me and understand Me'. So that is: everything is with you, you are with God. You must have a clean spirit, you have the clear task to be good; that is what it means.

E23: [...] Nowadays, what is the percentage of Bektashis, compared to the whole Muslim population, or compared to the whole Albanian population?

I25: 50% of the Muslims. 70% of the people are Muslim; in this 70%, half of the Muslims are Bektashis.

I24: We, the Bektashis, do not have the money and the power other communities have. But we are very flexible, very tolerant – so people love Bektashis and feel comfortable when they go there.

E 25: How do you explain that the religions in Albania cooperate so very well, that they live together so very well – and my specific question is: what is the contribution of Bektashism to this good relationship?

I 26: I think, this is something that did not happen in one year, or ten years, or a hundred years. It is since the time of Illyria, in history, a long time before; there was a strong hospitality, there were people who'd respect their neighbor, who were building good relations, good fellowship, good bridges. This was in tradition, without [before] Bektashism. (E: So it was before Christianity, and before Islam?) This was the area

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205 In contrast with Albania, Sufism (the mystic branch of Islam to which we can reckon Bektashism) is a very marginal phenomenon in Bosnia, the Dervish orders and the activities of the tekkes even being officially prohibited by the religious authorities in 1952.

206 Also Pelushi (2005, p.92) mentions Bektashism as an important factor contributing to interreligious peace in Albania.
here. Albania was not this small. Illyria was bigger: if we see the books on history, we were big, very rich, rich in culture, rich in education. And the education, century by century, gave to us a good relation, a good love for the people. And then, it would bring also tolerance between them. But also – now I am talking about Bektashism – they are a Muslim branch, who loved Christians as their brothers and sisters – they married with them. It is not always that they’d prefer a Muslim. (E: Normally, yes.) This is the truth: Bektashis don’t mind. Other branches of Muslims call us ‘Christians’ – some of them do. Not all like Bektashism, for this tolerance or liberalism.

E26: But normally, you are being considered as Muslims?

I27: We are Muslims. Because our Holy Book is the Koran, and our Prophet is Mohammed. So we are Muslim. (E: One of the twelve branches of Islam.) Yes, we are Bektashis, so we are Muslims. But we are more tolerant, that is the point. We have a great relation with the Sunnis; Baba Reshat [the world leader of Bektashism, stationed in Albania] and the Sunni leader had a great relation – the leader of Sunni here, when Baba Reshat passed away to the hand of God, and we lost our leader in him, he [the Sunni leader] said: ‘We lost the best of us.’ He said this in front of the four communities. (E: Okay, so it was the Sunni leader who said this?) Who said this! It is taped there, it is in a movie; he said: ‘He was my brother, I loved him very much and he was one of the best of us.’ (E: Yes, very beautiful.) He did not say it from protocol – he did feel it; they had a great relation. So this is the balance.
7. **Mixed Marriages and Communism**

In contrast with former Yugoslavia, where a milder form of communism, especially during its liberal phase of the 1960s and 1970s, allowed religions and religious nationalists to flare up, obtaining an ever-increasing importance within society, in Albania proper this was not the case: the already very strict and harsh type of communist regime, which became even outspokenly atheist in, and after the 1960s, did not allow for any religious or nationalistic upsurge – on the contrary. Besides, all religions were treated in an equally bad way, though the Hoxha regime was even slightly more cruel and fanatical towards Catholic clergy than towards others. These two factors imply that none of the religions present in Albania proper could take the upper hand; neither had any form of rivalry between religious groups been propagated or stimulated by the Albanian communist regime.

Cornering the phenomenon of intermarriage, we may presume that this factor contributed significantly towards interreligious and / or interethnic harmony, both in former Yugoslavia and in Albania proper. Therefore, the rather strong decline in the number of mixed marriages in the successor states of former Yugoslavia (in Kosovo for instance already since the 1980s, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina after 1995, so after the war) is a bad omen.

**Interview fragments:**

**E10:** Looking at Albania, what could be a reason why the people do get along together so well, Muslims and Christians; is it an economical reason, or is it a social reason?

**S10:** It is heritated. Also my father did the same thing. Even my grandfather did the same thing. So we do it, even the marriage between each other – we don’t mind; there is no particular reason – it is just because we are like that, so we marry a Muslim woman, or a Muslim woman marries an Orthodox man etcetera, so the religion doesn’t matter at all. […]

**G9:** (...) Many people are even getting married with each other; Muslims with Orthodox or Catholics. So it is not so strict in Albania, that you should get married with someone who has the same religion as you. So if people like each other, it is the last thing to ask of which religion you are.

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209 Perica, pp.169, 209.
E10: So it is really a mixed society here. (G: Yes) Completely mixed – even within the families?

G10: Yes, it is.

G11: My sister is a Muslim, she is married with an Orthodox and we knew it some years later when we started to get this information about the religion – until the 1990s Albania was a bit closed. This matter [religion] was closed, no one mentioned here in Albania. And maybe that's why the people forgot practicing the religion.

E12: Because of the atheist regime?

G12: Yes. It played a leading role in this point, I think.

E13: So, until the day of the wedding none of your family knew what the religion of the bridegroom was?

G13: Yes, and it was not something like: 'How we didn’t know it from the beginning?' It is just a fact, it is just a common fact, that ‘Oh, he is Orthodox. Okay, very good; a very good guy.’

E14: It was not important?

G14: Not important at all. [...]

E18: We were talking about the subject informally before, you talked about interreligious marriages: that it also played an important role. Can you explain something about that?

K19: As I said, we do not mind about religion, we are not really strict about that. So it means that if you show respect to each other, that religion does not count, even in marriage. For instance I am a Muslim, but it doesn't matter if I marry a Catholic or an Orthodox woman.

E19: Neither of you would be obliged to convert by your religion?

K20: No, she can stay Orthodox or I can stay Muslim or I can change to Orthodox.

E20: So it is a free choice, neither your family nor her family nor the religious authorities will press you to change? (K: No) [...]

E21: And do you see any link between the relative high frequency of interreligious marriages and on the other hand the relative large extent of tolerance between the religions?

M21: Yes, of course, the relatively high level of tolerance leads to a higher number of mixed marriages and also the other way round.
E22: Yes, it is a two-sided effect. Could you think of other factors that contribute to the good relationships between Muslims and Christians here in Albania?

M22: Maybe the presence of the need for unity of all Albanians, in opposition the Serbs, and in opposition to Greeks. And Italians. And this kind of unity doesn't support internal conflict, which would make Albanians weaker, if they were interconflicted.

E23: What kind of threat do Greeks, or Serbs, or Italians pose; what type of threat do they pose to Albanians?

M23: They are strong neighbors. And Greeks have territorial claims to Albania. Italians invaded Albania before WWII and Albania was a protectorate of the Italian Kingdom. And Serbs are related to the conflict of Kosovo.

E24: So they are mostly political threats, with the threats of the expansion of their territories? (M. nods) And also in other terms, e.g. that the elderly generation in Albania might fear the influence of Italian lifestyle on the young people?

M24: No, no, no. Albanians are largely fascinated by the western way of life. After the years of being a closed, isolated country under Enver Hoxa's regime, Albanians still received Italian television, although it was illegal. But Italy is so close that the communist authorities couldn't restrict this TV-signal. So Albanians for years were looking at Italy – on their TV's – and all the things that they didn't have and couldn't afford, like e.g. cars. Since, during the 50 years of Hoxa's regime, private cars were illegal, people were not allowed to have cars. So, Albanians were largely fascinated by Italy; in terms of way of life, standards of life, quality of life.

E25: Yes. So there's no perceived threat on that level.

M25: Although Albanians are very much aware and close to their own traditions, they consider themselves as a part of Europe and they want to participate in modern European cultural way of life.

E26: (...) Next to this factor, could you see other factors that might contribute to the harmony between Muslims and Christians here in the country?

M26: I don't know, can't think of anything now. Do you have anything in mind?

E27: I'd suggest e.g. the fact that there are no really very distinguishing socio-economical differences between the two groups for instance, might that be...

M27: That is linked to the fact that, under Hoxha's regime, under the communist regime, everybody was exactly as poor. Another element, which was also connected to communism, is that all religions were banned in 1967, officially. And Albania, according to the constitution, was the first atheist country in the world. With all religions banned and persecuted, all – not all, but most – churches destroyed, most
mosques destroyed, some converted into sport halls or some other public buildings, everybody was a victim of the regime. So there was no preferred religion – let’s say that one religion would be kept, and the others were persecuted. This would create conflict, for sure. But this was not the situation.

E28: Might one say that the fact that both were persecuted by the same communist / atheist regime, and also to the same extent and in the same manner, created some solidarity among them, between the different groups?

M28: That’s what I would say. Then it was also many years that religion was banned, so there was a whole generation of people that was raised without religion. And they were only aware of the fact that their family was Muslim of Christian. But they could not go to church and there was no religion in their everyday lives. […]

J4: (…) During the regime of atheism – none of the religions was allowed to express itself, it abolished all the religions – and now we have a kind of new situation (before, this was not so obvious): we have a lot of mixed marriages, so the people of different religious communities were married together. (E: During the regime?) Yes, until now. For sure the children are half and half – let’s say – and we don’t make a pressure: they are free to participate where they want. But it is a way of living together. So you can imagine a child: his father is a Christian, his mother a Muslim, so for him it is difficult to see the other side as an enemy, as totally foreign. So this has helped to keep this kind of relationship. In every kind of ceremony that we do in church – baptism, wedding, funeral – always almost half of those who participate are not Christian. Because they are related with each other through friendships, through marriages, through a lot of things. This has helped to keep this tolerance and harmony210. […]

E12: Do you see the Enver Hoxha period, the communist regime, as an important factor with regard to this harmony?

“H13”: It has helped a lot. At that time, we were not allowed to believe in God and in priests, in religions; and people were more common to get married without asking: ‘What’s your religion?’, before entering marriage, for instance. I do not think it happened before communism – before communism you married within your religion. (E: So interreligious marriage was a new phenomenon?) Yes, a new phenomenon – and it helped a lot, of course. Back to your question: communism has helped to harmony. In one way, we just forgot to which religion we belong. I was grown enough to say that in one classroom we had friends, belonging to different religions in their origin – Orthodox, Catholic or Muslim – but we did not look at each other as that. This is number one. Number two: Enver Hoxha treated all the religions more or less in the same way. He destroyed all the churches, tekkes, mosques. […]

E13: Yes, but on the whole: the fact that all of them were oppressed, gave a kind of unity?

“H14”: Yes, this helped to harmony, because he did not make any distinction between Muslims and Orthodox; he just demolished everything, [joke about bunkers and mosques]. And I think also that this mass education that took place under communism, helped a lot.

E14: Because you mean that before people were analphabet?

“H15”: Many of them, 80% were analphabet. And by obliging people – because it was an obligation to go to school; at least eight years of school was an obligation – it has helped, I think, towards harmony between the two religions.

E15: But how can you explain it does not work in many other countries, where they also have education?

“H16”: I do not know in other countries, but I think that by going to school instead of being analphabet [when] you are living in a society where there are Muslims, and Christians and Orthodox – you just look at them, thinking that they are humans before being Orthodox, and Catholics and Muslims and treat them with love; it doesn’t matter if your name is Mohammed, or Christian, or I don’t know – you are the same. At least, we were taught like this under communism. [...]

B 2: Communism has imposed atheism, by law and by violence. After the fall of communism in 1990/1991, when we have restored the freedom of religion, of faith, we have observed that this historical heritage has not been destroyed by atheism – which is a positive point.

E 3: Yes – and then you mean that communism has not only failed to destroy people’s religious beliefs, but that it has even failed to destroy the harmonious [interreligious] relationships?

B 3: Exactly. Even if the atheist regime here in Albania was more extreme than in whatever Eastern European country, it did not destroy the belief in God among the Albanians, neither did it disfigure the perception of the other. So, the other, who is different, is not perceived as an enemy. Concluding, the cohesion in the Albanian society where religion is concerned, has survived this attempt of the communists, who justified their prohibition of the religion by saying that religion divides the people. In reality, the Albanians proved that they did not believe this propaganda; and when religious freedom was restored

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211 This seems to implicate that it was rather the content of the education, than the education per se that made the difference.

twenty years ago, the Albanians have shown that it did not serve to disfigure213 the perception of the other. The Albanians experience religion as something personal: for them it procures no reason to hate the other, but to love him, even if he prays in a different way.

E 4: *It is something very important, very positive that the interreligious harmony has continued to exist, even throughout the regime. Could we even say that the regime has involuntarily contributed to the harmony? You said that the harmony has the same intensity as before the regime.*

B 4: *If one sees it from a certain angle, the regime has made a contribution, because there have been an enormous number of mixed marriages; which means that the people from different confessions, from different denominations have married with each other. As a result many families are composed of people from different religious origins. So, husband and wife do not have the same religious background. This implies that the children will love and appreciate both religions. In this sense, even if it is not entirely conform the theology, the reality procured by the regime has positive effects. I think, however, that the reality should not be viewed in such a mechanical way. Because the same reality existed in Bosnia, where in the past there have been marriages between Serbs, Bosniacs, and Croats, who had children together, but who made war to each other none the less; a terrible war, with a lot of bloodshed (...) But I think that the Albanian identity in relation to the nation, the country, the culture of daily life of the Albanians in relation to the other, that this identity has survived. It did not214 get caught in the trap of communist propaganda; it has survived. And in this respect the family has played a much more significant role than the regime. In my opinion, in order to safeguard this identity, even where religion and the difference with the other are concerned, I think that the antidote, which has saved our society from the ideological poison, has been: the family.*

E 5: *Unintentionally, the regime has stimulated the interreligious marriages – was it more the case than before?*

B5: *It was unintended, but the Albanians have been, and still are, a young population. And when communism arrived in Albania in 1945, there were about one million Albanians. When communism fell after 45 years, in 1990, there were four million Albanians. That means that four out of five Albanians are born under communism. So, the prejudices of the past could not prevent marriage, because they were defeated by the education in the first place. Secondly, an entire young population has lived through too many difficulties together, because everything was collectivized. Unintentionally, these mixed marriages have been stimulated by the contact in schools, factories, etc. But I do not think that today’s reality, which is no longer a communist reality, is the fruit of these mixed

213 As the communists had asserted.

marriages. This is not the case. It can be an element, a factor; but the foundation is much more important, and goes back much further in history. It is part of the Albanian identity. [...] 

E11: And for instance during the communist period (K: We were prohibited) all religious groups were prohibited; does that also contribute: that you felt oppressed by the same enemy, that you feel some solidarity between the religious groups?

K12: As I said, we don’t really mind; before or after the communists prohibited religion, people were the same.
8. Threats

E12: How do you see the future for Albania, when you look at [the adherents of] the two religions [Islam and Christianity] living together? Do you think it will continue like this or...?

S12: Yes, I think it is going strong day by day. Because many Muslims have come to be baptized and even they get married here [in the Orthodox church of Berat].

E13: So you mean the relationships become even better and stronger?

S13: Yes.

E14: Oh, that is good. Do you see any threats; that something is threatening the peace and the harmony; that some people from outside the country, for example from Saudi Arabia, from Western Europe or from America influence it negatively?

S14: I do not think so. […]

W20: [Just after the revolution] everybody needed a ‘houvast’215 [E: grip?] Yes, to overcome the new life, the new situation, the new troubles. Everybody was looking: ‘Where can I find help?’ And from the Netherlands there came also evangelists to bring the Gospel. The Islam came with a lot of money and there was an influence from outside to obtain domination. […]

E 15: Do you see any threats for the religious relationships in Albania; either now or in the future?

D 15: Yes: sometimes the Arab world tries to play an active role. Until now the Albanian reaction is rather reserved, lukewarm. On the other hand: Albania is a member of the O.I.C., the Organization of the Islamic Conference, in which for instance Syria also participates. This is an organization that advocates formally the application of the Shari’aa. There are people who are of the opinion that Albania should not participate in this O.I.C.; in the Netherlands there are people – especially from PVV-side – who say: “A nation that is a member of this organization, can of course never become a member of the European Union.” About this I.O.C., this Islamic Conference: actually they are there to propagate the moderate point of view. [E: Within the O.I.C.?] Within the O.I.C. The fact that resolutions on the Shari’aa have been adopted, does not mean that the Albanian

215 Cf. Slootweg, p.44. Vickers and Pettifer, 1997, pp. 112-3: a central issue for the foreseeable future will be the high rate of ‘conversions’ to Orthodoxy as a result of economic pressures, as hundreds of Albanians have changed their names to Greek ones and agreed to be baptized into the Orthodox faith in order not only to receive precious aid parcels [distributed in the early 1990s by Greek orthodox personnel among the Greek ethnic population], but also to become eligible for a visa to work in Greece.
government supports this for a full 100%, far from that. None the less, by means of such connections, external forces try to exert influence in this country. That is absolutely true. As I just said, Albania does not have a national identity crisis: the national trump-card is not – and consequently neither the ethnical or religious trump card – being played in an electoral campaign or at whatever occasion, because it is not an issue, actually. As long as this is the case, I do not see much danger. But if it does become an issue… that is unpredictable. Of course, something can happen. Forty or fifty years ago we could not foresee in the Netherlands that potential religious conflicts would rise to such an extent. [E: Some things are impossible to foretell.] Indeed. […]

E33: (…) I heard about – mainly Protestant – churches, from outside, from abroad, that tried to convert people; to convert Muslims to Christianity or to push on Orthodox or Catholic believers here in Albania to become Evangelical Christians. How do you see that factor: is it a real threat, or has it been a threat for a moment, and has it faded away?

M33: I do not think it was ever a threat. It was on a very small scale. There are some Protestant churches, that have a very low number of believers in Albania and in Kosovo. But since the Protestant church is so alien to the tradition of the Balkans, they have very few sympathizers. It is like [the situation] with the fundamentalists: it just doesn’t go together with the culture here\textsuperscript{216}. And people also do not have a motive to turn to these religions. So it is on a very small scale.

E34: Do you see other factors as a threat for the future relationships between Muslims and Christians in this country?

M34: I do not think so, considering the centuries’ long tradition of co-existence of different religions in Albania, and the changes that the country went through in the last years. I do not think that there is a threat to religious tolerance. Since all the religions here are not new\textsuperscript{217}; they are not linked to political power; they are not linked to economic power; and they are part of the historical cultural heritage of the region. […]

E41: (…) So there are good, warm relationships now, between Muslims and Christians. Do you think that this will remain like that for the future or is there anything from outside or from inside that might damage the good relationships, the harmony?

\textsuperscript{216} Cf. Vickers and Pettifer, 1997, pp. 117: after so many decades under a rigid, stifling dictatorship which enforced intolerable rules on the Albanian people, the last thing most Albanians want is to be told what they are allowed and not allowed to do, let alone see Sharia-law, or repressive Evangelical codes concerned drinking and relaxation introduced.

\textsuperscript{217} This stands in clear contrast with the introduction of Islam to a western-European country like the Netherlands (apart from its colonial past in an outspokenly Islamic Indonesia).
G41: I am afraid it started to be damaged; not really damaged, (E: a little bit perhaps...) Yes, because of these influences from outside. These schools, which I mentioned for example; there are some private schools, which are giving their orientation to the children, so these children are growing up with an idea that is different than the other part. So maybe, this started to make fences in the religion.

E42: Yes, and this phenomenon of...

G42: But in the longer run it will be shown much more.

E43: You mean you cannot see it clearly now, it will appear...

G43: Yes, but as it started I think that the direction is: the fences.

E44: Yes, that is a pity. Is it so that these private schools, that have some Italian or Greek or... (G: Turkish) or Turkish orientation are a new phenomenon? Is it since five or ten years, or has it been already for a longer time?

G44: No, let us say, fifteen years since it started, yes.

E48: From the inside, do you see any negative influences or negative developments, or do you think that this will remain the same – that people really like to live in harmony with each other and want to put effort for it; that they will want to keep the tradition of good harmony?

G48: I think they will do, they will exert themselves to have a good harmony with all the religions. And the families will help a lot in this, because Albanians themselves are very warm, very pleasant with each other and with the others. I think this point will help, their character.

B 29: Of course, there are threats. There are permanent threats\textsuperscript{218}. You have to take them seriously, even if they apply to minorities\textsuperscript{219}. Because there are financial flows nowadays, which arrive in a suspect manner. [...] During several decades atheism has created a vacuum where theologians are concerned. This means that quite often priests and imams have been educated abroad, in a different context. They come back with a different outlook, a different practice\textsuperscript{220}...

E 29: So it is not an uninterrupted line.

\textsuperscript{218} Liolin (p.182) mentions the ‘old recurring threat of irredentist elements in neighboring countries which covertly lobby for the annexation of Albania, which encourages the abuse of religion as a martial instrument for ulterior purposes.’

\textsuperscript{219} Cf. Vickers and Pettifer, 1997, pp. 112-3, mention the appointment in 1993 of an ethnic Greek as Albania’s Archbishop forming the first religious issue to divide Albanians on a serious and national level.

No, and they try to impose their views on the faithful. So there is the influence of global events as well. I mean: it is not a matter of genetics, with the Albanians that they would be immune for negative influences. But it is an individual dynamics of the mentality, of the individual’s relationship with God, the Bible, the Koran, etc. So, we have to work in a positive way.

It develops further continually. And you intended to say that the Albanians will be...

They are not immune.

No, definitely not.

Like all people.

Yes, that is normal. They have the influence of the media, the news from abroad.

The influence of the media, the influence of money, the influence of the cultural education, when they go to the Middle East, or to Greece.

Not only the future theologians: priests or imams.

It means, you have to be alert at all times. It is not about a marble statue; they are living people. They can easily be influenced.

Is it possible to say that the Albanians, because of their centuries long tradition, have a slightly more independent mentality than those who do not have this heritage from the past?

Yes, undoubtedly they have a more independent and more open mentality. But this openness and independence have to be fed always. We have to work positively. Otherwise it can get spoiled, infected.

And the fact that certain organizations and certain governments, for instance Kuwait, Saudi Arabia or the USA, and European countries send financial support...

When I spoke to you about finances, I implied that money can have negative effects as well.
9. **Spontaneous and Organized Dialogue**

E32: (... Do they really have special interreligious dialogue initiatives [in Albania] or other activities to promote the interreligious relationships or is it just daily life?

W32: It belongs to the habit... it is normal for them. They do not even realize it, that it is special, they do not realize it that they have such a really special...

E33: It is just their normal way.

W33: Yes. [...]

E13: Do you have, through your position [as an ambassador], or through the experience of living here in the country, any view on specific initiatives, undertaken to promote the interreligious relationships; by official, religious organizations, governmental departments or UN-related organizations? Or would you rather observe a general attitude among the population such as: ‘It is going on well – no need to pay specific attention to it.’?

D13: Yes, I think this last remark is true: I feel there is a broad consensus among the population that there is no problem, and that we should certainly not create one. A salient point is that the Albanians themselves – the intellectuals, the NGO’s – start to realize that they have something very special in their hands; and that the other nations in the region, and perhaps even Europe at large, can learn from their example, where the interreligious harmony is concerned. [...] Initiatives to enhance the interreligious relationships do not exist [here in Albania] – and they have not really been necessary in the past – but initiatives to make the Albanian example more visible to the outside world, have been undertaken positively in recent years.

E14: Well, in the Balkans several – also UN related – organizations are being active, either to maintain peace or to stimulate the rebuilding of societies in post-conflict stage. Are there any branches of these organizations here in Albania?

D14: Yes, absolutely. There is a UN office, here in the capital Tirana; UNDP, UNICEF and the WHO (World Health Organization) are active – undoubtedly I forget a few – but, as far as I know, not with a special focus on religion. [...] 

E29: (...) [T]he interreligious dialogue nowadays – you told me you’re involved in that; can you say something about how it is going on, the interreligious dialogue in your association or group, and perhaps also in a general sense in Albania?

A29: If we consider the interreligious dialogue, there are two things actually; one thing is the spontaneous interreligious dialogue we have every day because of the life we have together, sharing the same town, sharing the same institutions, the same market and
the same streets, and so on. There is good normal communication, when we speak with each other, we never have in mind: ‘I am speaking now to a Catholic’ or ‘now I am speaking to a Muslim’. This is – how to say – the normal, the spontaneous everyday communication; it is a kind of intercommunication. There is also another angle of intercommunication, which is that I as a Catholic, I read more than 7 times the Koran and a lot of other Muslim literature, because a close friend of mine has a library with such books, and I am interested to know more and more about Islam and its details, about everything; because [it is good to] know what my neighbor believes in, what my neighbor is reading. The same applies to Muslims: it is not uncommon that Muslims read the Bible. This is a second way of intercommunication. Because, once I am at table with a Muslim discussing religious topics, then I have to know [things]: if I am only telling what is written in the Bible and the other one is only telling things that are written in the Koran, then there might be a huge misunderstanding. But if both sides know both books then it is easy to realize that it is never wise to make war against each other. In the Koran you can find a lot of advices about how to treat other people and how to treat people who do not belong to the Islam. What is going on nowadays with terrorism etcetera of course does not have anything to do with the religion actually, it is only political. And religion is only used or misused as a coverage. But it has nothing to do with Islam – it is only politics. And the third point of dialogue between religions we have in Albania is this so called Federation for International Interreligious Discussion. We organize meetings in hotels in Macedonia or in a Montenegro, in Durrës [city in Albania], but many used to be outside, to be more independent, being outside Albania, (E: yes, more neutral) to discuss as equals – yes more neutral. And of course we have Muslims, imams and Orthodox priests, Catholics and Bektashis and a lot of followers in this organization. Once you see these people together exchanging points of view and discussing how a good understanding between the religions can help a country like Albania, then you can easily understand that not religion itself is the problem, but the way you use it. […]

E 15: To return to the contemporary situation, you told me that you have founded an organization at a certain moment. Can you tell me something about your motivation for this initiative?

B 16: Yes. My organization that I preside and that I created with friends from intellectual, diplomatic and political circles, is called ‘Le Forum Albanais pour l’Alliance des Civilisations’ [The Albanian Forum for the Alliance of Civilisations]. We have had a myriad of reasons to create this organization. First, this very positive heritage of Albania that we spoke about before and which is not widely known abroad. We wanted to make this Albanian experience known and the voice of Albania heard in the world-wide debate on the Christian-Muslim dialogue; we wanted to contribute positively in the mondial dialogue by means of our national experience, aiming to accomplish a goal that matters to the entire world: dialogue. Because when there is dialogue, there is no war. When dialogue stops, tensions start rising. Secondly, our motivation came from the conviction
that this very positive heritage that we have, is not something genetical. This implies: in
Albania, which is an open society, both information and disinformation arrive from every
side, so it is necessary to work positively in the dynamics of the evolution, the
development of the mentality, in order to counterbalance the intoxication that can come
from different horizons and that can be detrimental to the Albanian secularism. So, we
want to work in order to make this secularism survive and function well. We, as an
organization, intend to invite foreigners here, so that we can learn mutually from each
other’s experience in this field. It is an organization with a social and cultural aim [the
cohesion of society] and with a diplomatic aim [the promotion of the debate between the
religions], so: ‘diplomatic’ in the sense of: working for the civil society.

E 16: So you have really made the choice of creating a Non Governmental Organization.

B 20: We participate in different ‘networks’ of NGO’s for intercultural and interreligious
dialogue in Europe, in the Middle East and in the Southern Mediterranean. We are a
partner organization of the UN for the interreligious dialogue. And we are a partner
organization for the EU through the Anna Lindt Foundation.

E 20: Anna Lindt?

B 21: This is an intergovernmental foundation, created by the EU for the fostering and
sponsoring of the interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the region of the
Mediterranean. We cooperate with the Union for the Mediterranean as well. These are
political, diplomatic and intergovernmental organizations. Yes, we try. But with modest
financial means.

E 21: Could you give an example where Albania in particular has contributed something to
other countries?

B 22: It is difficult to speak about a contribution in a very particular sense. It is like rain falling
down softly but afterwards the earth is soaking wet. But to give you an example: in 2009
we have organized a conference on the Mediterranean, in which the countries from both
sides of the Mediterranean [Southern Europe and Northern Africa / Middle East] have
participated. There have been over 43 experts on the fields of civil society or
interreligious dialogue. And for them it was very important to see and hear the leaders of
the Albanian religious communities, these important leaders [of different backgrounds]
who delivered the same discourse; who all promoted the same message, namely for the
necessity of dialogue; for the possibility of dialogue. Often the representatives of religious
institutions say that interreligious dialogue is impossible. And there, these people from
the northern and southern side of the Mediterranean, saw people [the Albanian religious
leaders] who said: ‘Yes, dialogue is possible. We have things in common, that we need to
discuss.’

E 22: Yes, because we live this reality.
B 23: Yes, indeed.

E 23: So, this is a message of hope.

B 24: Yes, it is a message of hope, and of mobilization as well.

E 24: Did you feel that this has encouraged the others?

B 25: Yes, it has been very encouraging. It started to circulate in the reports, in the analyses of several countries, which had a good effect. Not that the problem has been solved, but these are the efforts we put. Some organizations for instance have been active in ‘monitoring’ the written press. Five experts in this field read through the written press in order to identify stereotypes.

E 25: That was something specific.

B 26: Where the attitude towards religion is concerned, quite often the information that comes from abroad is being translated by non-professionals in the cultural domain. They put a word, ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ for instance, and they translate the term while taking it out of its context and treat all Muslims as a monolithic entity. But this category of stereotype, when published, can hurt Muslims, can hurt Orthodox, and can hurt Catholics. Our goal was to identify this, because our journalists are not very cultivated, or because they do not have enough time for research as the newspaper comes out every day, or because of a thousand other reasons. We have organized four seminars for journalists with the purpose of telling them: ‘So this is what you have written; this is how you represented it [in your article], but it is erroneous.’ (…) We also held a conference four months ago with the UNESCO, the embassies and the Albanian journalists on our findings, our results. A lot of things pass in the press, without any bad intention, just by immaturity. It passes in the press and then the press is taken as an authority, which risks creating provocations.
10. Lessons to learn

In Western Europe we have important lessons to learn from the exemplary religious harmony in Albania. In addition to the points mentioned in the now following interview fragments, I’d like to add a few more, derived from the interview selections presented earlier – in previous chapters:

• We should create room for contacts\(^{221}\) between people of different religious backgrounds – by stimulating mixed neighborhoods, mixed schools, mixed working places, and by stimulating friendships between children of different backgrounds: only by getting to know each other, we can start appreciating each other. However, this means a preparedness from both sides, and especially so from the dominant (white, autochton) group, as well as from politicians and employers, to become more open, more positive and more ‘generous’ (e.g. in employing people from foreign background) than is the case now.

• We should show little tolerance for fanaticism in whatever form – xenophobia, ethnic nationalism or religious extremism. We should keep in mind that the best – and only – way to defeat those forms of fanaticism is by exposing them timely and in a polite, but determined way – without resorting to inappropriate or inimical (verbal) attack: for, it’s only through goodness that we can conquer wrongs and stimulate goodness in others.

• Neither should we tolerate ourselves to be influenced by such fanaticism: especially by being remarkably ‘immune’ to such efforts towards influencing or manipulation by outside forces, Albanians have been able to keep phenomena like ethnic nationalism at bay, for the most part.

• We should not so much fear conservatism or even fundamentalism as such (in the content of someone’s religious outlook), but rather the political misuse of any ideology or religion and the (political, outward) radicalization of a group or person – which is normally not caused by the conservative outlook itself (only artificially connected to it), whereas the real causes for radicalization usually lie in socio-economical subordination, frustration and / or envy because of this, a feeling of alienation from the state or society and the fact of being constantly depicted in a negative way, both in the media and in public discourse in general.

• We should not tolerate the wide socio-economical gap between groups of different religious or ethnic origin: being an African Muslim in Western Europe should not automatically mean: having a significantly lower socio-economical position. As long as this does prove to be the case, there is important work to do for the entire society, so as to reduce this automatism and the socio-economic gap. For this, Albania is a very good example: neither by the type of neighborhood, nor by the luxury (or lack of it) of someone’s clothes or car, nor by the kind of position (job) in society the person holds, any observer could guess with certainty what the religious denomination of the person could be.

\(^{221}\) Cf. Peacock et al., pp.214, 221.
• We should not speak (negatively) against each other, especially not through the media. If we bear a grudge against a particular (person from a) group with a different religion or ideology than our own: let’s talk with the person or group directly and privately, to explain what bothers us (cf. interview fragment J5 in chapter 10).

Furthermore, we should of course keep in mind that not all aspects of the religious harmony in Albania can be transplanted in a one-to-one relationship to Western European countries: the contexts are different. But yet, it is of enormous importance for the future peaceful relations in our part of the world to draw all the lessons we can from the Albanian example.

Next to what we, as Western Europeans, can learn from the positive interreligious situation in Albania proper (‘good practice’), we can equally learn from the bitter experiences in the successor states of former Yugoslavia (‘negative practice’) – also in comparison with the Albanian example:

• (Lesson learnt from almost entire ex-Yugoslavia:) It is important to remain at all times extremely vigilant of attempts by political or religious leaders to politicize ethnicity, to mobilize groups against each other or to depict one group or minority in a pejorative or stereotyped manner – and if we notice that this is happening it is equally important to react swiftly and adequately to such attempts. So called ‘strong leaders’, characterized by rigidity, one-sidedness, over-simplifying and harsh language, ruthlessness, and an authoritative and demagogic leadership style should be extremely distrusted. They should not be offered a political / public platform – but neither should they get the opportunity to create a ‘martyr’- or ‘victim’-status for themselves by being excluded ‘unfairly’. The examples of politicization of ethnicity and verbal attack in the pre-war period in ex-Yugoslavia show only all too clearly that the ultimate – implicit or explicit – aim of these discriminative and verbal assaults is the elimination of the ‘different’ other; this elimination does not just mean: ‘ignoring’, or ‘exiling’, but in its ultimate consequences: annihilation – even if the person or group involved does not realize this in a conscious way. (And even if the person or group that started the discrimination would never become active themselves in later, physical assault, yet they prepared the ground for others.)

• (Lesson learnt from almost entire ex-Yugoslavia:) In society at large and in the education of children in particular – at home and at school – it is important to construct the individual and the group identity – of the particular societal subgroup we belong to – in positive terms, i.e. in terms of what we are, and not of what we are not, or as opposed against others.

• (Lesson learnt especially from Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo:) It is important to remain alert that solidarity and alliances with groups outside the country with a similar religious, ethnic or political background as ourselves do not prevail over solidarity and alliances with

222 See interview fragments M 35 – M 38 in chapter 10.
other subgroups within our own society: ‘internal’ brotherhood, as opposed
to ‘international’ brotherhood. (As a matter of course, this does not preclude
any international friendship or alliance as such; only the prevalence of such
alliances over internal coherence within the own society.)

- (Lesson learnt especially from Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo:) Every
  successfully functioning nation state needs a (founding) myth, to ‘explain’ its
  origin and identity; it is crucial however, that such myths are – or remain –
inclusive towards the whole of society, without excluding entire groups (or
even: without functioning at the expense of entire groups). For, being the
founding myth of a state, it should include the entire population within that
state.

- (Lesson learnt especially from Macedonia and Albania [1997 revolts!]:) It is
  important to include all cultural and ethnic subgroups within society in the
  social and medical welfare system, so as not to stimulate, or even to make
  necessary the setting up of informal networks among societal subgroups,
  which would fill the gap of social and medical care, or paramilitary
  protection. Because later on, these informal networks, restricted to one
  particular subgroup, and out of control of the official government, can
  become important hindrances to internal stability and unity in the country.

- (Lesson learnt especially from Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and
  Kosovo:) A healthy separation between ‘church and state’ – i.e. between
  religious and political power – should be kept and monitored at all times.

- (Lesson learnt especially from Kosovo:) For a well-functioning co-existence
  of different groups within society three aspects are of particular importance:
  1) the willingness to live together – which is not the same as: living alongside
each other indifferently; 2) actually practicing this in the daily life
  experience: living in heterogeneous settings; 3) a maximal degree of equality
  among the different substrata of society.

- (Lesson learnt especially from Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and
  Kosovo:) Misdeeds from the past between different subgroups – ranging
  from discrimination to war crimes – should be acknowledged and accounted
  for, both by the perpetrators themselves and by the official judiciary. There
  should be genuine informal, next to adequate professional care for the
  victims, as soon as they return to their normal daily lives, or as soon as the
  armed conflict is over. NB. This might be one of the most important lessons of
  the bloody 20th century that we failed to learn – namely that the victims (or:
  traumatized eye witnesses of atrocities) should not be ignored in their
  trauma after their return to ‘normal society’; as was unfortunately the case
  with, by far, most victims after the 20th century’s genocides – mainly, but not
  only, during World War II; in Europe, and elsewhere in the world. If the
  victims do not receive timely (i.e. immediate!) informal care and attention by
  their relatives and friends, as well as adequate professional help, and also
timely and appropriate official acknowledgement of their victimhood (i.e.
official acknowledgement concerning the responsibility and guilt of the
perpetrators) both by the offenders themselves and by the official judiciary,
they are at high risk of developing psychological problems, and of cultivating
a self-constructed – and thereby: one-sided, and unhealthy [instead of an
officially recognized, and therefore: much healthier] status of victimhood,
which will remain with them much longer than necessary [in case the post-war care had been adequate], in the utmost case even lasting a life-time. In that case the erstwhile victims risk becoming perpetrators themselves – either in a next armed conflict or in domestic violence, for instance. The 20th century's examples of these phenomena, also in – but definitely not confined to – former Yugoslavia, are countless.

- **(Lesson learnt especially from Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo:)** It is important not to provoke each other unnecessarily, either by massive meetings and events, or by mega buildings (like mega church buildings or mega mosques), etcetera. This would only contribute to a climate of anger, fear and rivalry.

- **(Lesson learnt especially from Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo:)** In case of a development, or an escalation towards, armed conflict, the international community can play a decisive role, because of its potential influence on the (nascent) conflict; e.g. through unbiased media coverage or timely protective measures in case of an ethnic minority under threat.

**Interview fragments:**

E49: What do you think people could learn from the Albanians? For instance, I come from a Western European country, the relations between Muslims and Christians are not that good in my country at the moment, nor in some other countries. What could we learn from you?

K38: Love and respect, is my suggestion for the people – and the religious harmony would be much stronger. [...] 

G49: [I’d say:] This good relation, this tolerance we have.

E50: And what is it exactly, this tolerance; is it just: 'You do your own thing, I do mine', or is it something else?

G50: It is much more than 'you do your things and I do mine'; I think it is to accept, to accept what the other is doing and to ask the same from the other, to accept you.

E51: Yes. So you really learned that through the generations.

G51: Yes. My best friends for example are Orthodox. (E: Christians.) Yes, at school, in the office.

E52: Yes, so for you it is not an important factor to choose [Muslims as] your friends or [as] your husband just because you are a Muslim [yourself].

G52: I respect their [Christian] religion, I respect it when they have a fixed date, if there is a feast of their church. I send messages, I write them for this feast; they do the same to
me. This I like, this kind of tolerance and respecting each other. Respect will lead people a very long way together, it is a very strong bond. [...] 

J4: (...) Although, we should understand that this is not a given, like everything it can be lost. So it is our duty to work and to keep it, for the benefit of peace and harmony will help all, not only one. And from hatred we will suffer all, nobody will win; the tragic history – sometimes it happened in the Balkan – taught us that nobody will win, we will all be losers. I think we should develop what we have because we have something from centuries – something about which has been said in Albania: ‘Maybe it is the only thing that we can export.’ And maybe this model can be not only a model for Europe, but even wider: different religious communities can live together if they are not manipulated. Because sometimes they are manipulated. During the wars in ex-Yugoslavia, in the Balkans, religion was abused and people were joking, at least in the Balkans; they used to call these: ‘the religious wars of the atheists’, because most of those who participated had nothing to do with religion, they were just trying to use it. I think it is our duty to watch, not to allow religion to be manipulated or abused. The true religion will always preach – I believe at least – peace; it will always preach that you have to see the other as your brother. If this is manipulated, religion can be a destructive force.

E5: How can such preventive work take place? What are the preventive steps that can be taken?

J5: First in preaching. So our duty is to preach the good news – evangelion means good news – not the bad news. It is not necessary to preach against the others, we should preach about our values that we have. The second is to develop friendship with the other religious leaders, because many things are done on the level of personal relations. You cannot do everything just by decrees, just by speaking from the pulpit. You should develop this in everyday life. And we visit each other in every feast: all the religious leaders, Muslim leaders, come here for Pascha and Christmas, while we always go to their feast of Bajram. (E: That is ‘Id al-Adha?) Yes, the two main feasts that they have. And people see these things and for sure it is a message of peace. So two people staying together, talking together, having a coffee together, it is a sign of peace. (E: You mentioned an example before, of you preparing an interview with a Muslim leader…) The mufti, the mufti of Korça. The mufti is a leader of the Islamic community. We have a good relationship, we even have a friendship. Sometimes we go and drink a coffee together, or we have a discussion. I think all this helps (E: People see you walking together, drinking coffee together…) – it is a sign of peace and tolerance. Not just only tolerance, we also have a kind of cooperation, things that we do together. And traditionally, in Albania there was a kind of unwritten law that says: ‘We do not speak against each other’, so we try to teach in our schools, what we have: our values, our doctrines. We don’t speak against the others. And another thing that has helped a lot,
we have tried to build theological schools here in Albania. The archbishop from the beginning built a school here. Having this in mind, I think the people educated here are much more tolerant than elsewhere because here we live in the reality that we have different communities. If you go to a country where you only have one color, it is more difficult to accept the other. A student from Korça for example going to Durrës to the Shimblashit school, will see a church and a mosque on the road; and if he does not like the other, he will still accept that as a reality. And we have done something else: we have tried to have annual meetings between different religious schools, theological schools. A friendship that is developed when they are young, will stay forever. And if they develop a friendship, for sure they will respect each other, love each other, they will tolerate each other. If they will be isolated, maybe the hatred would be present and they can be manipulated easily. So the students of our theological Academy go and visit them and they come to visit us. During the discussions they develop a friendship. They met when they were very young, in the early 90s – now they are not young anymore and they are in different positions, in their different religious communities. So all these things have helped to keep this harmony and cooperation in different religious communities in Albania. (E: Very positive I think.) I think so and the world needs this model. We live in the same world and without this, it would be impossible. Without this respect for each other. For sure it is not easy, because sometimes we fool ourselves: we respect the other, but we want the other to be like ourselves. To respect the other as other is not that easy and we have to encourage this. According to our doctrine all people are the sons and daughters of God, so a 'foreigner' doesn't exist. And if somebody says: 'we believe it is wrong', it is our brother who is wrong – we have to develop these things. (E: You mean to criticize or to correct a person when he is doing wrong things?) No, to develop this: that even if he is doing wrong things, he is still our brother. So an 'enemy' does not exist. This is something created by us. And for sure it was easier in Albania, because we spoke the same language, we shared the same culture, the same ... and it was easy to understand that this other is not an enemy, is not a foreigner. But we have to develop this with the people that may look different from us; still they are our brothers and they are not different from us.

J6: (...) Things are changing here in Albania, influences from outside are stronger now and of course our society should find ways to keep what we have and to develop it. We cannot just hide ourselves, to be in a bunker, there is a globalization that is happening – it doesn’t matter if I like it or if I don’t like it – it is something that is a reality; I think the church should find ways to use this to our benefit.

E7: Are you already thinking of concrete steps to take, now that Albania is opening more and more to the world? How you should take new steps to protect this harmony between the religions?

223 The importance of adequate theological education is also strongly emphasized by Stricker (pp.15-6), who points at the dangers in case of a lack of sufficient theological education – dangers which are far from negligible (so Stricker).
J7: Yes, we are doing all this and we are doing the things that I mentioned before. Not everything can be with a strategy, because you cannot control everything: so many forces, so many ideologies, so many trends that are coming you cannot stop; and not everything is bad, there are good and bad [trends], like in everything. But in this new life and change there is sometimes a danger to lose what we had before and we are trying to keep that; to try and educate the new generations with this; and we try to explain that to them, we make them know it will be for their own benefit: hating each other not only creates a lot of social problems, but also personal problems. I believe strongly – from my own experience – that if somebody has hatred in his own soul, he does not have peace or joy. So we should try to protect a new generation from the poison of hatred. [...]

E 16: What could we, in the Netherlands, or in a larger context: in Europe, learn from Albania, in a very concrete, tangible form? Certain aspects might be too specific for Albania to transplant to another situation; other aspects might possibly be transferred successfully, with some creative adaptation, if necessary.

D 16: What I do appreciate here, is the religious harmony. Regardless if it is indifference or mutual respect, in any case it is a manifestation of the attitude: ‘This religion is mine, it is something personal, and it need not have consequences for my way of looking at you, for my way of being politically active or for my view on this country’s future. Religion is an individual experience, for me as well as for the other – so I do not interfere in the other person’s Weltanschauung.’ I think that this is the case in the Netherlands as well – theoretically at least, but in practice this is less true. According to me we can learn from this.

E 17: Do you imply with that: manifesting oneself in public life in a less conspicuous, a less provocative manner, through a more reserved attitude?

D 17: No, ‘reserved’ would imply that you restrain yourself, as if you should feel ashamed somehow; that is not what I intended to express. Rather, I meant to say: considering spirituality as part of your innermost individuality. It is not about being reserved or restrained; I do not know anybody in Albania who would say: ‘Let me restrain myself in my public behavior, otherwise I might be provocative.’ This mode of thinking simply doesn’t exist. It is not an issue.

E 18: Something that struck me during our trip through Albania in the past weeks – both in Berat and in the capital Tirana – was that the call to prayer, and even the more extensive version of it, sounded extraordinary soft and pleasant; whereas those of my fellow-travellers and myself who either live near a mosque in Western Europe or who have lived in an Islamic country, are used to something entirely different: a very sharp and penetrating sound. And about churches: the ringing of church bells you hardly hear at all, here in Albania...
You still plan to go to Shkodra, don’t you? The same applies to that city as well: it is soft and lovely – that is absolutely true.

In a direct line with this: could this subtle audible presence coincide with a certain type of behavior, which implies a different positioning of the religious group – I am just thinking of the Netherlands – so that the interreligious relationships run more smoothly here in Albania? One possible example of this public behavior could be the way language is being used or misused in the media.

I personally think that public expressions in the Netherlands could – and should – be a bit less explicit and provocative. Quoting Theo van Gogh’s parents: ‘You may say everything you want, but you do not always need to.’ But returning to Albania: it is not that people restrain themselves – not in their language either. It just doesn’t fit the Albanian spirituality to express it very overtly.

It need not be shouted from the housetops?

No, it need not. It even is not shouted from the housetops. In the Netherlands we have had these discussions about shaking hands, or not, with a person who has difficulty with it on religious grounds. I have never seen that this type of things is an issue at all, here in Albania. (E: Neither from the Christian, nor from the Muslim side?) From neither side. There are no, or hardly any, keen edges to it. In the Netherlands such debates are so often sharp in tone, confronting. Perhaps the climate plays a role in that things go more smoothly here: you organize your life in such a way that you reach the maximum of comfort and smoothness for yourself and the people around you – meaning that you will not involve in hard confrontation.

Flexibility, could that be a key word?

Yes, flexibility, that is true. I’d almost say ‘tolerance’, but that’s not the right word in this context. ‘Respect’ perhaps – although in some ways there is less respect here than in Holland, for instance if you have to queue up in the post office, then there is no queue – but there is respect for someone’s own space, his own experience, his own humanness. ‘Flexibility’ in a certain sense, yes: why creating a problem if it is not relevant? Because religion is not that relevant; there are enough other things to worry about – that is more or less the mode of thinking here. […]

Well, the problem of Western Europe with Muslims is of a completely different character, since these Muslims are immigrants from either the Middle East, or North Africa or Turkey. They are Muslims, but first of all they are from a completely different cultural area, cultural circle. And it is not only the problem that they are Muslims by religion, but it is also about some other cultural features that they represent, and that they wish to protect; (...) while in Albania nobody suddenly came and changed the religious structure. The changes took centuries to take place. And it was so slow, and
spread in time, that it was much easier to absorb. It was not a phenomenon that took place in the last twenty years, or fifty years, or on a mass scale.

E36: But was the Ottoman conquest of this part of Europe not in any aspect comparable to the coming of Muslims to Western Europe?

M36: I do not think so, because immigrants in Western Europe, first of all, have lower status. (E: Sure.) They come from a different cultural background; while Ottoman Turkey is close and there are similarities in culture. (E: Already before the Ottoman Empire, you mean; there were already similarities between...) between the cultures, yes, yes. The situation is almost incomparable, in almost all aspects.

E37: But you were also talking about the speed...

M37: I am also talking about the speed; and I am also talking about the fact that there was also no conflict between an existing state and a new coming state either, with people changing the religious or ethnic structure of a state and posing challenges to the labor market, to the social policy system, and so on. So, the situation is hardly comparable. In Albania it were changes in religious structure, that took years, and centuries, within Albanians themselves. It was not\textsuperscript{224} imposed. While the conflict in Western Europe between Muslims and the local population is also cultural and political in character.

E38: Do you think that this is even more important, or stronger than the religious aspect?

M38: I am not sure, since it is not my daily experience. And in Poland we do not have experience with Muslim immigration. But it is definitely much more difficult to solve in Western Europe. One thing Western Europeans should learn – or that all Europeans should learn – is that Muslims, despite the image created by the media, are not – or not all Muslims – a threat or fundamentalists. We should understand that Islam has different faces. And we should not automatically link Islam with terrorism and threat. I also think we should get more knowledge about Islam, and about the culture of Muslims in order to understand the people better. Because one thing that leads to conflict, is also prejudice. [...]  

P 11: \textit{Here in the Netherlands there is a clear distinction between Muslims and Christians.}

E 12: \textit{A wider gap? A wall between them?}

P 12: \textit{Yes, a higher wall. That is not the case in Albania. There the relationship between the two religions is better. Muslims here in Holland are a bit extremist at times, which is not the case in Albania. They are believers, but not in such an extreme manner as to say: ’All these Christians are no good people’, or the like. They do have a good relationship with each other.}

\textsuperscript{224} Neither is it in western-Europe, fort hat matter (even less).
For instance, if you are a Muslim, you might go to church.

Are there Muslims [in Albania] who go to church every week?

Yes. And then they do not have the feeling: ‘I am a very strict, pious Muslim and I do not want you to see me going to church.’ Church people go to the mosque, and people from the mosque go to the church. It is just nice and pleasant. Not the feeling of: ‘You are a Muslim, and I don’t come to your mosque, I only go to my church.’ No, that doesn’t occur then.

No. So there are also Christians who really believe in Jesus [as God’s Son] and in the Trinity, who go to the mosque as well, e.g. every Friday at the prayer?

Not every Friday, they just go out of curiosity.

How frequently do they go?

It depends. Many Albanians live abroad, and when they come to Albania once, or twice a year, they go to the mosque and throw some money [which brings good luck], or they say: ‘Let’s go to the church, to light a candle.’

They just go to all the places, yes.

Here in the Netherlands you’d never see a Muslim going to church; which is a bad thing, I find. That is different from Albania.

I heard that it is quite common in Albania to celebrate each other’s religious feasts; Muslims attend a baptism in church, or Christians attend a circumcision festivity.

Yes, people celebrate together: Ramadan, e.g. – everybody celebrates it; Easter – everyone celebrates it; Christmas as well is celebrated by everybody.

And in their spirituality, their personal religious conceptions, do they create a kind of mix between Christianity and Islam?

No225.

What can we learn here in Holland from the way the Albanians approach religion?

Well, I think this should come by itself; you cannot learn it. People are very different here [in Holland] – you cannot change them. This is the culture, and it has been like this for many years.

225 Norris (pp.264-5) however, sees syncretism as a major factor in the conversion of Balkan peoples to Islam.
Partly, things have to occur spontaneously, I agree with you upon that. But just as people can exert negative influence from outside, in an active and conscious manner, as you mentioned just before, likewise one might try to exert positive influence as well.

Yes, but I do not think that many people feel the need to change now and learn new things. [...] You have said that the harmony between the religions is not something genetical, acquired forever. We always have to work on it. Which are the lessons that we, people from Western Europe for instance, can learn from Albania? Which steps should we take? You have to believe that it is possible. That is what you can learn from the Albanians.

Also in the Netherlands, people should understand: the presence of Islam is a reality; a reality that we should deal with actively. The Netherlands of today is not that of 1700. There are three times more Muslims in France than in Albania. There are six million in France. What could France do with these six million citizens? So, you have to work on this reality, in favour of dialogue and with the intention of isolating the extremists; it is through dialogue that one can isolate extremists. And it is not the Christians who can isolate the extremists; they have to be isolated by the Muslims.

It is a particular task for the moderate Muslims.

One has to give prevalence to the dialogue with moderate Muslims and to point out that the extremists are criminals who should be condemned by everyone. For the remaining, society has a common goal, namely to construct and advance a shared prosperity, a shared peace and a shared future.

This means that the dialogue in your country [the Netherlands], according to me, is a dialogue for the coherence of society. Well, this type of dialogue cannot be practiced at a theological level. There, the state should be present to guarantee the respecting of legal rights, the education of the marginalized and the poor, so that this poverty cannot be used against the [white] Christians. Education and culture should play an important role in the integration of minorities. Diversity in society should be stimulated and protected, because ‘integration’ does not mean: assimilation. It could only become assimilation, if it is used in a wrong way. It is not identical. One can be very well integrated and be a Muslim, pray, keep Ramadan. (...)

If I get you well, you intend to say also that the contents of the dialogue in the Netherlands should not only, or not necessarily, be theological in character, but rather concrete.

Indeed, not only theological. In the first place it should be cultural, social and political. Because human rights are a political issue. [...] A last question: what could we learn from the situation for the Netherlands?
Q 16:  *The reality. For us, the relationships between the religions do not produce any real problem.*

E 17:  *How can we create these good relationships?*

Q 17:  *The religious leaders and politicians should cooperate and support the relationships. It should be influenced and supported from above. [...]*

E 27:  What could we learn from this? Because it is not easy for Muslims and Christians, for instance in my country, to live together: there are frictions, there are irritations, there are stereotypes, prejudices...

I 28:  The same as in Macedonia, our neighbor here.

E 28:  Yes, what could we, Macedonians, Dutch or Germans, learn from you in Albania?

I 29:  I think that this model has to be spread. And we must have more [of initiatives such as] the project of USAid in Albania. The USA runs a project of Religion for Peace for the Interfaith Council of Religions. We have a great experience of values and we are having meetings in other countries. Also we had a congress in Kyoto, in Japan, with all kinds of religions. It was a great experience that we gave to each other. They made a beautiful picture with the *Baba* in the middle; and we see how they carried the Bible and the Koran together. And that model, I think we have to keep it and to continue to have contacts, to give that example and to have meetings around, in other countries; not just by talking, but by doing.

E 29:  And are there also some small steps to take, that you could advise, in order to create respect or tolerance? Are there small steps that you could recommend?

I 30:  First of all, life is very short. Let’s live it with happiness and love. That is the best. People think it is going to last forever. There come kings who want to stay a hundred years; what are they going to take with themselves? It is good to enjoy life, with love, with the others, to enjoy the family; and to respect all the other religions. Look, if you want to be extreme, you have to be ignorant, not seeing the other’s richness to respect him, you have to not to love life, not to love people. (E: So if you want to be respectful and tolerant, you need education, you mean?) Education, and love for others, and to accept the others as they are: that’s the beauty – we learn from each other, we share love and help each other; that’s the beauty of life.
Conclusions

Below I will mainly formulate the conclusions in view of the hypotheses that formed the starting point of my research (see introductory chapter). This means that the conclusions are relatively succinct. For a more elaborate overview of all conclusions drawn – especially on the basis of the comparison between the outcome of the conducted interviews on the one hand and the results of literature study on the other hand, I refer the reader/listener to § 3.8 and to the factors 1 – 31 mentioned in chapter 2. The recommendations of chapter 10 have been mentioned not so much with the intention of representing conclusions of the research, but rather as a practical application of the lessons learnt throughout the research. It is my intention to use the concrete recommendations of chapter 10 as a crucial piece of information to be transmitted to the general public, in case an official radio documentary can be generated from this more theoretical version, and broadcasted in one of the Western or Southern European countries.

Affirmation or refutation of the hypotheses:

Ad 1) The first hypothesis can mainly be affirmed: the situation of shared suffering because of persecution during the Communist regime has created a sense of solidarity among the different religious groups; especially so because: a) the persecution was directed explicitly [though not exclusively] against religious persons and leaders; b) the distinguished religious denominations were all persecuted with more or less the same226 intensity, so there were no privileges for one single denomination or religion, which could break the reciprocal solidarity or cause rivalry; c) as religious praxis was entirely forbidden after 1967 – even in private – religion did not play an important role any more in the individual and collective lives of the Albanian population; which meant that it could not be misused as a political tool either; d) as people from different religious family backgrounds were forced by the regime to live and work together – without knowing, or asking about each other’s religious background of origin – the regime (involuntarily) contributed to good interreligious relationships that even continued after its own collapse; e) by displaying an infinitely more brutal and totalitarian character than the Titoist regime e.g., the Hoxha regime did not allow any [religiously-based] nationalistic tendency to develop.

Ad 2) The second hypothesis can partly be affirmed: undoubtedly, the possibility of being influenced by interreligious and/or interethnic tensions in the region, especially where ethnic Albanians [in Kosovo or Macedonia e.g.] would be involved, was effectively precluded by the almost complete isolation of the country for almost half a century; on the other hand, in the more than twenty years since the termination of the closing-off of the country from the outer world, the population of Albania proper has proved to be rather immune for such external influences anyhow. So it remains questionable to what extent the isolation of the population has been decisive in this respect.

226 Although some authors state that the persecution was most strongly directed against Roman Catholics in the country.
Ad 3) The third hypothesis can be affirmed, but needs to be specified: indeed, one can speak of explicitly moderate, and even of typically Albanian227, brands of religion, and many of the interviewed persons as well as sources in the concerned literature have confirmed that this moderateness is an important, or even decisive, factor in the interreligious harmony among the Albanians; yet, even if this moderateness applies to e.g. Bektashism as a whole, it does not automatically apply to any form of Eastern Orthodoxy. On the contrary, the Balkans have given ample proof of the opposite effect: Eastern Orthodoxy having a strongly manipulative and radicalizing impact on interethnic and/or interreligious relationships. In the neighboring countries Serbian Orthodoxy has been the most prominent example of this phenomenon. In Albania however, the Orthodox Church did not play a comparable role.

Ad 4) The fourth hypothesis can be affirmed, although other countries in the immediate region equally belonged to the Ottoman Empire (even if not always for such a lengthy period of time as Albania). The phenomenon of crypto-Christianity, which occurred much more frequently in Albania than elsewhere in the region has often been mentioned by informants and several authors in the relevant literature as a crucial factor contributing to interreligious harmony during [and in its effects: continuing even after] the Ottoman period. Related to this, is the factor of mixed marriages, as conversion to Islam in the initial stages of the Ottoman Period, mainly took place among male heads of the households, whereas their wives and other relatives remained Christians, in most of the cases.

Ad 5) Indeed, the homogeneous ethnic composition of the population in Albanian proper is a strong, positive factor towards intra-societal (and therefore also: interreligious) harmony: as there are no relevant ethnic distinctions within society, these cannot be manipulated towards ethnic or quasi-interreligious strife either. So the fifth hypothesis can be affirmed as well.

Ad 6) The strong tradition of hospitality and respect for the stranger will undoubtedly have contributed to respect for the ‘otherness’ of fellow-Albanians from a different religious background than one’s own. This hypothesis however, is the most difficult (of the six hypotheses) to corroborate convincingly, as it is such a strongly psychological and subjective factor. Yet, especially the non-Albanian informants (with a thorough knowledge of the Albanian situation, though) strongly emphasized the particular Albanian mentality, which they characterized by terms as: open minded, hospitable, warm in relations – also towards people outside the own subgroup – and relatively immune for external manipulation (not easily being influenced).

Summarizing: although the communist period/regime has – unwittingly – contributed to the interreligious harmony in Albania, it cannot be indicated as the most decisive factor. The specific mentality of the Albanians and the centuries’ long tradition of, and experience with, interreligious harmonious relationships (in which crypto-Christianity, mixed marriages and moderate forms of religion seem to be factors of crucial importance) rather turn the scale.

227 For instance, several sources stated that the type of Catholicism that can be found in Albania, is incomparable to Catholicism elsewhere, even if Catholicism is a world-wide denomination (in contrast with some Protestant and Eastern Orthodox denominations that are nation-bound).
Recommendations for further research

After having concluded my research, I have the following recommendations for further research:

- More detailed research of why exactly very important, or even: decisive factors in the interreligious harmony in Albania that were also – clearly – present in surrounding countries or area's [most notably: mixed marriages, crypto-christianity and moderate / secularized forms of religion] could not prevent recent armed conflict, and even genocide;
- More detailed research into the psychological implications of a self-constructed victimhood after an armed conflict and into preventive measures in this direction (to avoid repetition of violence).
- More detailed research into the relationship between psychological phenomena (not only of the fore mentioned self-constructed victimhood, but also of the remarkable ‘immunity’ among Albanians for [negative] external manipulation and influences) at a societal level on the one hand, and at a personal, individual level on the other hand.
Glossary

NB: All lemmata below are printed in *italics* in the main text corpus of the thesis.

Atatürk  Statesman who founded the modern Turkish state at the beginning of the 20th century.

Autocephaly  The right to administrate a church without interference of other churches.

Baba  Literally: ‘Father’; Sufi Shaykh or *Bektashi* religious leader.

Bajram  See *‘Id al-Fitr*.

Bektashism  A heterodox sect in Turkey and in countries formerly part of the Ottoman Empire. The Bektashis are sometimes considered to be a Sufi *tariqah* (brotherhood), since they are organized as such. Rather than an esoterism, however, they represent instead a mixture of beliefs and practices which includes elements from Shi‘ism, Christianity, and other sources.

Berat  City in south Albania.

Besa  Archaic patriarchal legal and moral code, based on a solemn oath, a given word that is of importance even today (in nowadays’ northern Albania, and neighboring regions).

Bosniacs  Term mainly used to indicate Bosnian Muslims (esp. after the Bosnian war).

Četniks  Serbian paramilitary group, mainly active in World War II.

Crypto-Christianity  A phenomenon where individual groups of people, or entire regions, publicly declared that they had quit Christianity, while privately continuing its practices.

Dervish  Member of an Islamic mystic order; in *Bektashism*: assistant religious leader in a *tekke*.

Devşirme  Child levy, or blood levy; obligation for Christian families (being *dhimnis*) in the Ottoman Empire to send one son at the age of 10 to Constantinople to be trained for the elite corps of the *Jannisars* or for another high post in the Empire. Upon their return, the young men brought an Islamic education with them. This construction of the child levy resulted in many conversions to Islam, especially in Albania and Bosnia.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition/Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dhimmi</td>
<td>A person belonging to the category of ‘protected people’ in the Islamic state, i.e. belonging to one of the recognized monotheistic religions. On the one hand, these minorities were granted autonomy of institutions and protection under Islam; on the other hand, they were required to pay extra taxes and were sometimes confronted with certain social restrictions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibra</td>
<td>Partly Albanian, partly Macedonian province.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dürres</td>
<td>Portal city in Albania.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Question</td>
<td>The gradual stagnation of the Ottoman power in Europe raised the problem – dubbed the <em>Eastern Question</em> by contemporary politicians and journalists – of who would profit from the empire’s demise, e.g. Austria-Hungary or Russia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecclesiology</td>
<td>Teaching of the Church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoxha, Enver</td>
<td>Albanian dictator, ruling from 1945 till his death in 1985.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exarchate</td>
<td>(Bulgarian-) The official name of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, before its <em>autocephaly</em> was recognized by the Ecumenical See in 1945 and the Bulgarian Patriarchate was restored in 1953. The <em>Exarchate</em> functioned as <em>de facto autocephaly</em> since 1872.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genocide</td>
<td>(According to the Geneva Conventions of 1948:) Acts committed to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such. (Such acts include killing, torture, and efforts to prevent the procreation, and regeneration of the targeted people. Also the wiping out of cultural objects or expressions can be reckoned under this deliberate destruction of an ethnic or religious group as such.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gjirokastër</td>
<td>City in south Albania.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hajj Bektash</td>
<td>Founder of <em>Bektashism</em> (13th century).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoja</td>
<td>Turkish term for a teacher of Islam or a leader of Islamic prayer (imam).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Id al-Fitr</td>
<td>(In Albanian: big <em>Bajram</em>). After the ‘<em>Id al-Adha</em> (in Albanian: <em>kurban Bajram</em>), the second most important holiday in the Islamic calendar, marking the end of the fast of the month Ramadan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iftar</td>
<td>The first meal eaten to break the fast during Ramadan (right after sunset).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illyrians</td>
<td>Ancestors of modern Albanians, living in the region (Illyria) of nowadays southern Albania and northern Greece from 1000 BC onwards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jannisars  Elite troops in the Ottoman Empire, bodyguards of the Sultan, often recruited as young boys from Christian families in the Empire.

Jihadist  Activist striving towards the creation of an Islamic state.

Khalifa (Caliph)  The head of the Islamic community in Sunni Islam, mainly during the Umayyad and Abbasid period. In later times the caliphs became distant semi-divine potentates, whereas they were reduced to virtual puppets, controlled by military rulers, by the end of the caliphate.

Korça  City in south Albania.

Kruja  Town in central Albania, where the Skanderbeg museum is housed.

Madrasa  Islamic (Koran) school.

Maqam  A spiritual station such as a virtue or an attitude (an aspect of Divine knowledge) which becomes the dominant complexion of the soul. In Bektashism: a sacred place or the tomb of a saint.

Medan  Next stage of initiation, after having been a Muhib.

Metropolitan  Orthodox bishop.

Millet  Administrative unit in the Ottoman Empire according to religion (of one of the monotheist minorities).

Mufti  Someone empowered to give a fatwa: religiously based judgment on issues of daily Islamic life.

Muhib  An initiated Bektashi.

NGO  Non Governmental Organization

Non-aligned movement  Cooperation between neutral states (neither involved in NATO nor Warsaw Pact) during the Cold War period.

Ottoman Empire  In Albania: from the 14th century until the beginning of the 20th century.

Partizans  Communist, pan-Yugoslav paramilitary group, mainly active in World War II.

Patriarchate  The office or jurisdiction of a patriarch, one of the highest ranking bishops in Eastern Orthodoxy.

Porte  The central office of the Ottoman government.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rijasset</td>
<td>Highest Islamic council (in Bosnia-Herzegovina).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sandjak</td>
<td>(Also: Sanžak); region in the Balkans (formerly in ex-Yugoslavia), mainly inhabited by Muslims; small Ottoman administrative unit. (Also: name of a specific small strip of land between Serbia and Montenegro.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shari’a</td>
<td>If the term is used synonymously with <em>fiqh</em>, it refers to the entirety of Islamic law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi’ism (Shi’a)</td>
<td>A branch of Islam comprising ca. 10% of all Muslims, which differs from other forms of Islam on two general points, the line of successorship from Muhammad and the elements of foundation for Islamic law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shkodra/Shkodër</td>
<td>City in north Albania.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skanderbeg</td>
<td>National hero of Albania, who fought against the Ottomans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufism</td>
<td>Mystic movement within Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzimat</td>
<td>Reforms in the late Ottoman period, specifically the centralizing and Westernizing reforms of 1839 – 1873.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tariqa</td>
<td>Branch, or brotherhood in <em>Sufism</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tekke</td>
<td><em>Bektashi</em> or <em>Sufi</em> place of teaching and worship, usually containing the shrine(s) of one or more saints. Cf. a Sunni or <em>Shi‘i</em> mosque, but with a dome instead of a minaret.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turks</td>
<td>(In the context of the southern Balkans:) Generally not an ethnic category, but a term used for Albanians with a Muslim background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ustaša (pl. Ustaše)</td>
<td>Croat fascist and paramilitary group, mainly active in World War II.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vizir</td>
<td>Originally an assistant to the <em>caliph</em>, the term came to have the sense of an important governmental minister in charge of a major department of the Ottoman bureaucracy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahhabi</td>
<td>Conservative Saudi form of Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yugoslavia</td>
<td>First Yugoslavia: 1918 – 1941; part of the time in the form of a monarchy. Second Yugoslavia: 1945 – 1991; mainly under Tito’s communist rule. The federation consisted of the six constituent republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia / FYROM), as well as two autonomous provinces of Serbia (Kosovo and Vojvodina). After the collapse of the Second Yugoslav Federation in 1991, Milošević used the name of ‘Yugoslavia’ for a while, to indicate his truncated state, mainly consisting of a confederation of Serbia and Montenegro.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
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II. **Kosovo**


III. **(Religion in) the Balkans / Eastern Europe**


IV. **Bosnia-Herzegovina**


V. **Croatia**


VI. **Ethnic & Religious Conflicts**


VII. **Articles (from periodicals, newspapers & conferences)**


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VIII. Other literature


Appendix: some samples of integral interviews

I. Interview Besnik Mustafaj

(M. Besnik Mustafaj est ancien Ministre des Affaires Étrangères ; couramment il est écrivain / poète et président de l’Alliance des Civilisations.)

E1: Je suis ici au café Piazza dans la capitale de Tirana pour rencontrer monsieur Besnik Mustafaj qui est représentant de l’Alliance des …..

B1 : Civilisations.

E2 : Des Civilisations, voilà, merci bien. Monsieur Mustafaj, je voudrais bien vous demander : quel est votre avis sur la relation interreligieuse en Albanie?

B2 : J'ai un avis très politique. Je pense que l’Albanie a eu toujours une coexistence harmonieuse entre les trois communautés religieuses. Il n'y a pas eu de frustrations héritées du passé entre les musulmans et les chrétiens. Ça, c'est très important, parce que nous sommes la seule nation parmi les nations des Balkans, où les gens ne s'identifient pas d’abord à la religion. Les Albanais sont d'abord Albanais et après ils sont chrétiens-orthodoxes, chrétiens-catholiques, ou chrétiens-protestants, ou musulmans, Bektashi-musulmans, Sunni-musulmans. C'est une spécificité albanaise qui nous vient de l'histoire. Parce que les Grecs, ils sont d’abord orthodoxes et puis Grecs aussi, les Serbes sont d’abord orthodoxes et après Serbes, les Croates sont d’abord catholiques et après ils sont Croates. Chez les Albanais il n'y a pas ce que nous voyons chez nos voisins balkanais. Dans ce sens, il est très important que cette réalité qui nous vient de l'histoire, - le communisme qui a imposé l’athéisme par la loi et la violence. Mais après la chute du communisme, en 1990 et 1991, quand nous avons réinstallé la liberté de religion, de croyance, nous avons constaté que cet héritage qui nous vient du passé n’a pas été détruit par l’athéisme non plus. Donc ça, c'est très important, qu'à travers l'histoire, nous recevons un message positif. Nous avons une réalité positive aussi, parce que nous n'avons pas de problèmes importantes. Bien sûr, il y a de temps en temps des signaux qu’on doit prendre au sérieux, mais en général, les musulmans et les chrétiens s'entendent bien en Albanie, et les chefs des communautés religieuses travaillent en parfaite harmonie pour l'intérêt commun du pays et de la société. Donc, ça c'est mon avis.
E3 : Oui. Et si vous dites que le régime communiste n'a pas détruit l'héritage positif du passé, c'est pas seulement qu'ils n'ont pas réussi à détruire la croyance dans les gens, mais même les relations harmonieuses.

B3 : Voilà. Donc, le communisme a interdit par le code pénal l'existence de la religion en Albanie. Nous avons certainement connu cette histoire. [Le communisme a] essayé de créer un peuple athée, une société athée. Là, il est très important, que cette expérience communiste et négative, est unique, même dans les pays de l'Est. Chez nous, c'était extrême. Ils n'ont pas détruit la croyance en Dieu chez les Albanais, et en même temps, ils n'ont pas réussi à déformer la perception de l'autre. Donc, l'autre, qui est différent, n'est pas aperçu comme un ennemi. Donc, la cohésion de la société albanaise par rapport à la religion, a survécu à cette tentative des communistes qui ont justifié l'interdiction de la religion. Ils ont l'justifié devant les Albanais, en disant que la religion sépare le peuple. En vérité, les Albanais ont montré qu'ils n'ont pas cru à cette propagande et quand la liberté de confession a été installée en Albanie il y a vingt ans, les Albanais ont démontré qu'elle n'était pas déformée, la perception de l'autre. Les Albanais vivent la confession comme quelque chose de personnel qui ne constitue pas une raison pour haïr l'autre, mais pour l'aimer, même si il fait la prière différemment.

E4 : C'est une chose très importante, très positive, que l'harmonie interreligieuse a continué à exister, même à travers le régime. Est-ce qu'on pourrait même dire que le régime a même, sans le vouloir, contribué à l'harmonie ? L'harmonie, dites-vous, a la même intensité qu'avant le régime.

B4 : Si on voit dans un sens, le régime a contribué parce qu’il y a eu énormément de mariages mixtes. Ce qu’il veut dire que les familles sont composées de différentes confessions. Donc, le mari et la femme n’ont pas la même origine religieuse. Ce qui veut dire que les enfants vont aimer les deux religions, ils vont respecter les deux religions. Dans ce sens, même si ceci n’est pas très conforme à la théologie, cette réalité produit par le régime a des effets positifs. Mais je ne pense pas que la réalité doit être vue si mécaniquement. Parce qu’il y a eu la même réalité en Bosnie, où dans le passé il y a eu des mariages entre les Serbes et les Bosniens et les Croates qui ont eu des enfants, mais ils ont fait la guerre.

Et une guerre très sanglante et terrible. Mais je pense que l'identité albanaise par rapport à la nation, par rapport au pays, la culture quotidienne des Albanais par rapport à l'autre, a survécu. N'a pas tombé dans le piège propagandiste, idéologique du communisme, a survécu, et là, la famille a joué un rôle beaucoup plus important que le régime. Je pense que pour garder cette identité, même par rapport à la religion et à la différence de l'autre, je pense que l’antidote, qui a sauvé la société contre le poison idéologique, a été la famille.

E5 : Et sans le vouloir peut-être, le régime a stimulé le mariage mixte, c'était le cas plus qu’avant ?
B5 : Ce n’était pas un objectif, mais les Albanais étaient et sont surtout un peuple jeune. Et quand le communisme est arrivé en Albanie, il y avait un million d’Albanais, en 1945. Quand le communisme est tombé, en 1990, après 45 ans, il y avait 4 millions d’Albanais. Ce qu’il veut dire que 4 Albanais sur 5 sont nés sous le communisme. Donc, les préjugés du passé n’ont pas pu empêcher le mariage, parce que c’était combattu par l’éducation, l’école, premièremen. Deuxièmement, tout un peuple jeune a vécu trop ensemble, parce que tout était collectivisé. Sans le vouloir, ces mariages mixtes ont été favorisés par le contact dans les écoles, dans les usines, etc. Mais je ne pense pas que cette réalité maintenant, que nous n’avons plus la réalité communiste, que cette réalité est le fruit de ces mariages mixtes. Ce n’est pas ça. Ça peut être un élément, mais le fond est beaucoup plus important et va beaucoup plus loin dans l’histoire. Ça fait partie de l’identité albanaise.

E6 : Et comment vous expliquez cela, si vous regardez en arrière sur l’histoire ?

B6 : C’est-à-dire Skanderbeg, qui est notre héro national, du 15me siècle, il est né orthodoxe, il a grandi musulman, il est mort catholique, pour montrer. Deuxièmement, je pense, je ne suis pas très compétent, donc il faut prendre ça avec un certain réserve, mais la ligne de Théodose, quand il y a eu la séparation des deux églises, passe par l’Albanie. Donc depuis le 11me siècle, les Albanais étaient la moitié orthodoxe, la moitié catholique. Alors ces Albanais qui vivaient ensemble et qui par la guerre à l’intérieur de l’église sont séparés entre le Vatican et Constantinople, ont continué à vivre ensemble de la même façon. Donc ça a créé une origine qui, petit-à-petit dans l’histoire, a fait que la nation et la religion n’ont pas été identiques. Donc, ça fait que petit-à-petit dans l’histoire, l’identité nationale a pris priorité par rapport à l’identité confessionnelle.

E7 : Alors, est-ce qu’on pourrait dire que le fait que l’Albanie était à peu près à la frontière entre Constantinople et Rome, et que la moitié de la population se constituait des catholiques et l’autre moitié d’orthodoxes, a déjà donné un fondement de coexistence depuis beaucoup de siècles.

B7 : Je pense que cela a créé un contexte. Donc la guerre entre les deux églises n’est pas arrivée chez l’Albanais du terrain. Ils ont continué de prier dans l’église: par ici les catholiques, par là les orthodoxes,

E8 : Vous dites que c’était surtout l’hiérarchie qui s’est combattue ?

B8 : Oui, l’hiérarchie n’a pas pu infecter, si on peut dire, les croyants.

E9 : Et comment ça s’est fait, que les croyants étaient apparemment indépendants dans leur esprit ou dans leur attitude ?
B9 : Ça, il faut que les historiens vous expliquent, je ne veux pas prendre le rôle de l'historien. Je suis un poète, un poète peut imaginer ce qu'il veut. Moi, je parle de la réalité que je constate.

E10 : Oui. Et pour la réalité contemporaine, si l'on compare la situation en Albanie avec celle du Bosnie par exemple, ou bien du Kosovo, ou bien de la Serbie, ou bien de la Croatie, quelle est la différence essentielle, pourquoi....

B10 : Par rapport à la Serbie par exemple, par rapport à la Grèce, par rapport à la Croatie, c'est qu'elles sont des nations homogènes du point de vue confessionnel. Donc, tous les Grecs sont orthodoxes, à peu près, tous les Serbes sont orthodoxes, à peu près, bien sûr, tous les Croates sont catholiques, à peu près. Les Albanais n'ont pas eu un élément confédérateur, n'ont pas eu la religion comme élément qui pourrait créer la cohésion de la nation. Donc, ils ont eu l'Albanie: la langue et la Patrie. Ce qu'il fait que la différence entre un Albanais et un Grec, ou un Serbe ou un Croate, est que l'identité confessionnelle est secondaire par rapport à l'identité nationale. Et ça, c'est important pour comprendre la différence. Chez les Albanais de l'Albanie, en comparaison avec les Albanais de Kosovo ou macédoines, il faut dire que la réalité de l'Église Orthodoxe Serbe, a été un élément d'assimilation nationale pour les Albanais. Ils ont essayé d'utiliser l'église pour assimiler les Albanais. Là, la religion, surtout musulmane, mais catholique aussi, la religion était un élément d'identité par rapport aux Serbes. Ce qui explique qu'il n'y a pas d'Albanais orthodoxes macédoines, ou il y a très peu. Parce qu'ils ont été assimilés ou ils sont convertis à l'islam pour avoir une face de l'ennemi serbe, donc ennemi entre guillemets. Dans ce sens- là, la religion, musulmane surtout, a eu un élément de résistance nationale aussi. Ce qui fait que en Albanie, la religion orthodoxe, musulmane ou catholique n'a pas été un élément de résistance nationale, parce que nous avions un ennemi commun, les Ottomans ou les fascistes, etc. Mais le voisin n'était pas tout à fait à coté.

E11 : Ça fait une grande différence. Et je pense, si je vous comprenez bien, qu'on pourrait dire qu'il y a une différence de 180 degrés à peu près si on compare la situation en Albanie avec le reste du Balkan.

B11 : Non, ce n'est pas 180 degrés, non. Sauf que, par rapport aux voisins, qui étaient Serbes, dans le cas concret, le rôle de la religion à Kosovo est plus évident qu'ici. Parce que la religion en Albanie, musulmane, catholique ou orthodoxe, en général a participé dans la lutte pour l'indépendance nationale. Par exemple, si on voit le jour de l'indépendance, il y a des prêtres et des imams aussi qui ont participé dans la politique nationale. Si on voit par exemple, là où les gens ont décidé l'alphabet que nous avons, le latin, ils sont pour 95% des gens qui ont été éduqué en Istanbul, ce sont des musulmans qui décident de ne pas utiliser l'alphabet de leur culture, mais d'appliquer l'alphabet latin. C'est très important de noter ça. Pourquoi les gens, 15 ans avant Atatürk, ont décidé...
E12 Je voulais juste vous demander : est-ce que ce n’était pas en même temps que Atatürk ?


E13 Oui, c’est vrai.

B14 Le drapeau albanais, c’est le drapeau de Skanderbeg qui a fait la guerre aux Turcs. Donc, parce que les gens les plus éduqués étaient des imams, aussi les prêtres, mais la majorité du peuple était musulman. Et tous ces gens qui ont été le produit du Shari’a, parce que au temps du Sultan, il y avait le Shari’a, donc tous ces gens qui ont été le produit culturel de Shari’a décident de reprendre le drapeau national de Skanderbeg comme si cinq siècles d’occupation n’avaient pas existé.

E14 C’est remarquable.

B15 Donc, ce sont des faits très intéressants à étudier.

E15 Oui, oui. Pour retourner à l’époque contemporaine, vous avez dit que vous avez fondé une organisation à un certain moment. Est-ce que vous pouvez dire quelque chose sur votre motif de créer cette organisation ?

B16 Oui, mon organisation que je préside, je l’ai créé avec des amis intellectuels, diplomates, politiques, etc. : elle s’appelle le Forum Albanais pour l’Alliance des Civilisations. Nous avons eu des raisons multiples pour créer cette organisation: d’abord cet héritage très positif de l’Albanie que nous avons mentionné ensemble, qui n’est pas très connu à l’étranger. Nous avons voulu faire connaître cette expérience albanaise et faire entendre la voix de l’Albanie dans le débat mondial, sur le dialogue chrétien-musulman, sur le dialogue entre les civilisations, et donner une contribution dans ce dialogue mondial, par notre expérience nationale, de donner une contribution positive pour réaliser un objectif qui intéresse tout le monde; le dialogue. Parce que quand il y a le dialogue, il n’y a pas de guerre. Quand le dialogue s’arrête, les tensions commencent. Et deuxièmement, notre raison, c’est que nous sommes convaincus que cet héritage très positif que nous avons, ce n’est pas génétique. Donc en Albanie, qui est un pays ouvert, la société albanaise est une société ouverte, l’information et la désinformation arrivent, de tous les cotes, donc il faut travailler positivement dans le dynamique de l’évolution de la mentalité pour faire face aussi à l’intoxication qui peut arriver de différents horizons, qui peut faire mal au sécularisme albanaïs. Donc, nous voulons travailler pour que ce sécularisme survive et soit renforcé. Ça aussi, c’est une raison. Nous voulons, avec mes amis, faire venir des étrangers qui parlent de cette réalité, qui nous apportent leur expérience et qui connaissent notre expérience aussi. C’est une organisation qui a un but culturel, un but social, la cohésion de la société, un
but diplomatique dans le sens que ça aide au débat entre les religions, un débat diplomatique aussi, mais dans le sens toujours de la société civile.

E16 Vous avez fait vraiment le choix d'avoir une organisation non-gouvernementale.

B17 Et c’est un ‘challenge’ intellectuel aussi pour les intellectuels albanais, de participer dans ce débat. Parce que c’est aussi un débat intellectuel, un débat d’idées, de perspectives, de la pensée.

E17 Et si je vous comprenez bien, le focus est envers l’extérieur, pour faire connaître l’exemple de l’Albanie à l’extérieur, à l’étranger et en même temps pour stimuler le dialogue en Albanie…

B18 Oui.

E18 Et ça fait combien d’années que vous êtes actifs ?

B19 C’est la troisième année que nous existons.

E19 Et j’ai compris que vous coopérez aussi avec des autres organisations semblables…

B20 Oui, nous faisons parti de différentes ‘networks’ d’organisations non-gouvernementales pour le dialogue interculturel, interreligieux en Europe et en Moyen-Orient et aussi le côté Sud de la Méditerranée. Nous sommes une organisation partenaire des Nations Unies pour le dialogue interreligieux. Et nous sommes une organisation partenaire de l’Union Européenne aussi à travers la Fondation Anna Lindt, qui est une fondation créé par l’Union Européenne pour le dialogue dans la Méditerranée.

E20: Anna Lindt ?


E21 Oui. Est-ce que vous pouvez donner un exemple, où de l’Albanie en particulier a contribué quelque chose a l’étranger, par exemple?

B22 C’est-à-dire, que c’est difficile à parler d’une contribution dans un sens précis. C’est comme la pluie qui tombe doucement, mais après, la terre est mouillée. Mais nous avons organisé en 2009 une conférence de la Méditerranée, où les pays de deux côtés de la Méditerranée ont participé. Des pays membres de l’Union Européenne, […] d’Egypte et de Palestine et deux organisations qui viennent du Tunisie et du Maroc, de l’Algérie et de l’Israël, de la Turquie bien sûr, etc. Il y a eu plus de 43 d’experts des organisations civiles, ou du dialogue interreligieux. Et pour eux, c’était très important
de voir les chefs des communautés religieuses de l’Albanie, les grands chefs qui tenaient [tous] les mêmes discours pour la nécessité du dialogue, pour la possibilité du dialogue. Souvent les gens des institutions religieuses disent que le dialogue interreligieux n’est pas possible. Et là, ils voyaient des gens qui venaient du Nord et du Sud de la Méditerranée, même de la Hollande, ils voyaient là-bas des gens qui disaient; oui, le dialogue est possible. Nous avons des choses en commun, que nous devons discuter.

E22  Oui, parce que nous vivons cette réalité.

B23  Oui.

E23  C’est donc un message d’espoir.

B24  Oui, c’est un message d’espoir et un message de mobilisation aussi.

E24  Est-ce que vous avez ressenti que cela a pu encourager les autres ?

B25  Oui, ça a encouragé beaucoup: ça a commencé à circuler dans les rapports, dans les analyses de différents pays, ça a fait du bien. Ce n’était pas que le problème a été résolu, mais ce sont des choses que nous essayons de faire. Mon organisation par exemple, a travaillé pendant un an sur un projet de ‘monitoring’ de la presse écrite, avec cinq experts de la presse écrite, comme collaborateurs, nous avons lu chaque jour la presse écrite pour identifier les stéréotypes.

E25  Des stéréotypes religieux?

B26  Concernant l’attitude vers la religion, souvent surtout les informations qui viennent de l’étranger, sont traduit par les non-professionnels de la culture. Ils mettent un mot, ‘l’intégrisme islamique’, par exemple, ils traduisent en sortant du contexte, ils mettent tous les musulmans dans le même panier. Mais ce genre de stéréotype, sorti dans la presse, peut blesser les musulmans, peut blesser les orthodoxes, peut blesser les catholiques. Et notre but était d’identifier cela, parce que nos journalistes ne sont pas bien cultivés, parce que ils n’ont pas beaucoup de temps à voir, car le journal va sortir tous les jours ; pour mille raisons. Nous avons fait quatre séminaires pour les journalistes, pour leur dire : voilà, ce que vous avez écrit. Voilà, comme c’est ...vous avez dit, c’est une erreur que vous avez fait. Et on a fait une conférence il y a 3 ou 4 mois - c’était au mois de mai, je crois - avec l’UNESCO, avec les ambassades et les journalistes albanais sur ce que nous avons constaté. Il y a beaucoup de choses qui passent dans la presse, même sans avoir une mauvaise volonté, mais par l’immaturité. Ça passe par la presse et puis la presse est prise comme quelque chose et ça risque de créer l’encronage les provocations.

E26  Oui, absolument, c’est très important et concret aussi.
C’est ce que nous essayons de faire dans la réalité albanaise aussi. L’archevêque de l’église catholique en Albanie a publié ces discours en 3 volumes. Et j’ai organisé une conférence où les musulmans, les protestants, les orthodoxes, les bektashis et bien sûr les catholiques ont parlé tous ensemble sur le message qui nous vient de l’archevêque. Avec l’amour qui vient de là, la philosophie qui vient de là, la morale qui vient de là, pour dire que l’archevêque, ou le chef des bektashis ou le chef des orthodoxes, ils parlent à tous les Albanais, et pas strictement du point de vue morale théologique, mais du point de vue morale [général] ils s’adressent à tous les Albanais. Je ne parle pas d’un pays, ou un autre, je parle des principes. Et ça aussi a été très bien perçu. Les musulmans disent: « Nous avons beaucoup à apprendre. Et le Coran nous apprend de dire la même chose. » Donc je parle des théologiens musulmans, sur ce qu’a dit l’archevêque catholique. Donc, ça c’était très bien.

Oui. C’est encourageant.

Oui, pour dire : qu’est ce que nous essayons de faire sur le terrain national.

Est-ce qu’il y a des menaces aussi pour l’harmonie interreligieuse ?

Bien sûr, qu’il y a des menaces. Il y a des menaces permanentes. Il faut les prendre au sérieux, même si ce sont des minorités. Parce qu’il y a maintenant l’argent qui arrive [de façon] douteuse. Et les Balkans sont un terrain mercenaire traditionnellement. L’athéisme pendant plusieurs décennies a créé un vide du point de vue des théologiens. Ce qui veut dire que souvent, les prêtres ou les imams sont éduqués dans un contexte différent, ils sont formés à l’étranger. Et ils viennent avec une autre conception, avec un autre pratique…

Ce n’est donc pas une ligne ininterrompue.


Ça se développe continuellement. Et vous voulez dire que les Albanais seront…

Ils ne sont pas immunisés.

Voilà, non.

Comme tous les gens.

Oui, c’est normal. Ils ont l’influence des médias, des nouvelles de l’étranger.

Pas seulement les futurs théologiens, prêtres ou imams.

C'est-à-dire, il faut toujours faire attention. Je ne pense pas que c'est un statut en marbre, ce sont des gens vivants. Ils sont influенçables.

Est-ce qu'on pourrait dire que les Albanais, grâce à leur tradition de plusieurs siècles, ont un esprit un peu plus indépendant que ceux qui n'ont pas cet héritage ?

Oui, sans doute ils ont un esprit plus indépendant et plus ouvert. Mais toujours, il faut nourrir cette ouverture et cette indépendance. Il faut travailler positivement. Sinon, ça peut être abîmé, infecté.

Est-ce que certaines organisations, certains gouvernements, par exemple de Kuwait, ou d'Arabie Saoudite ou bien des Etats Unis, des pays européens donnent des financements...

Quand je vous parlaits de l'argent, [j'impliquais que] l'argent peut faire du mal aussi.

Oui. Bon, vous avez dit que l'harmonie entre les religions n'est pas quelque chose génétique, acquise pour toujours. Il faut toujours travailler. Quelles sont les leçons que nous, Européens occidentales par exemple, peuvent tirer, peuvent apprendre de la part de l'Albanie ? Qu'est ce qu'on pourrait faire comme démarche ?

Là, je dirais qu'il faut croire que c'est possible. Les Albanais peuvent vous dire que c'est possible. Il faut travailler sur des réalités concrètes, non pas sur des réalités imaginaires. Je vais vous donner un exemple. Dans une ville allemande importante, je croyais que c'était Düsseldorf, le maire de la ville, il y a deux ans déjà, a donné le permis aux musulmans de sa ville de construire une mosquée. Les chrétiens du quartier ont protesté.

Ah, c'était à Cologne.

Bien sûr, c'est un problème d'une communauté à Cologne. Mais repris par les médias albanais, ça a risqué de devenir un problème aussi ici. Parce que des démagogues, des manipulateurs, et il y en a toujours dans l'humanité...

Partout.

Ont voulu dire : voilà, on n'aime pas les musulmans en Europe. Il y a eu un imbécile, un Hollandais qui a parlé au parlement européen, un extrémiste tout droite. Il a dit : nous ne pouvons pas donner le permis de voyager aux Albanais en Europe; enleve les visas, parce que c'est un pays de Shari'a. Ce qui veut dire qu'il ne connaissait pas du tout l'Albanie.
Non.

Parce qu’il y a beaucoup plus de mini-jupes ici qu’à Amsterdam.

Ça peut être un homme de mon âge avec des cheveux blonds.

Oui. Donc ça a été repris par les medias albanais. Et tout de suite ils ont dit : voilà, les députés du parlement européen ne nous aiment pas, parce que nous sommes musulmans. Alors, quel est le fait ? Le fait est que, si les musulmans commencent à dire: Voilà, on ne nous aime pas, les chrétiens [en Albanie] peuvent dire: Voilà, vous les musulmans, nous empêchez d’entrer en Europe. Et ça peut être traduit par un problème d’ici. Donc là, il faut qu’en Hollande aussi, les gens comprennent : c’est une réalité, la présence de l’Islam. Et il faut travailler sur cette réalité. La Hollande d’aujourd’hui n’est pas la Hollande de 1700. Il y a trois fois plus de musulmans en France qu’en Albanie. Il y a six millions en France. Qu’est ce que la France peut faire avec six millions de ses citoyens ? Donc, il faut travailler sur cette réalité, pour le dialogue et pour isoler les extrémistes. C’est par le dialogue qu’on isole les extrémistes. Et ce ne sont pas les chrétiens qui peuvent isoler les extrémistes musulmans. Ce sont les musulmans qui peuvent les isoler.

C’est une tâche particulière pour les musulmans modérés.

Il faut favoriser le dialogue avec les musulmans modérés et montrer que ce n’est pas la doctrine qui est contre l’Islam. Ce n’est pas l’objectif de la société qui est contre l’Islam, mais c’est que les extrémistes sont des criminels qui doivent être condamnés par tout le monde. Sinon, le reste de la société s’entend un but commun de construire la prospérité commune, de construire la paix commune, de construire l’avenir commun. Les enfants sont ensemble. C’est dans ce sens.

Et si je regarde très spécifiquement la situation concrète dans mon pays par exemple, et aussi les pays alentours, je vois, si je compare avec l’Albanie, que les musulmans dans mon pays, presque 100% sont d’origine ethnique différente que les Hollandais en général.

Oui.

Donc, il n’y a pas seulement la ligne entre les deux religions, mais aussi entre les deux ...

Cultures, en général.

Oui, c’est ethnique, et en même temps, il y a aussi la différence socio-économique entre les deux groupes. Ce n’est pas comme ici, on ne peut pas voir par les salaires qu’on reçoit si c’est un musulman ou un chrétien. Parce qu’un salaire modeste peut être chrétien ou musulman. Chez nous, un musulman avec un salaire assez élevé, c’est très rare. Donc, pour nous, la situation où l’on commence, ou plutôt: où on continue
maintenant, est différente. Et si vous regardez cette situation là, qui est un peu plus compliquée qu’ici : nous n’avons pas une longue histoire de coexistence, on avait un grand nombre de musulmans dans le Royaume holländais, mais c’était en Indonésie, c’était très loin. On en avait beaucoup, 100 millions, mais ils étaient loin. Nous n’avons pas l’expérience, comme vous, mais quand-même, est ce que vous avez certaines idées ou certaines suggestions ?

C’est-à-dire, moi, je pense que le dialogue chez vous, c’est un dialogue pour la cohérence de la société. Donc, un dialogue pour la cohérence de la société ne peut pas être mené au niveau théologique. Là, il faut que l’État soit présent pour assurer les droits, pour favoriser la scolarisation des démunis, des pauvres, des enfants des immigrés qui sont pauvres, pour que cette pauvreté ne soit pas utilisé comme argument contre les chrétiens. Il faut que l’école joue un rôle important, il faut que la culture joue un rôle important, en ce qu’on appelle l’intégration. Il faut assurer les gens de la diversité de la société. Que l’intégration ne veut pas dire : assimilation. Parce que souvent, ceux qui n’aiment pas disent : l’intégration c’est l’assimilation. Non, ce n’est pas le cas. Ne pas à priori ; ça peut devenir [ainsi], si ce n’est pas bien utilisé. Ce n’est pas à priori, ce n’est pas identique. Tu peux être tres bien intégré, être musulman, faire la prière, le ramadan, et en même temps contribuer à la consolidation du pays où tu as choisi de vivre. Je pense que dans une réalité comme la vôtre, il y a beaucoup plus d’acteurs en cela. Des acteurs qui doivent prendre un rôle direct. Ici, c’est normal, c’est naturel. Tout le monde travaille ensemble. Mais le manque de l’histoire rend plus évident le rôle de tous les acteurs. Il faut que tous les acteurs sont mobilisés.

Et si je vous comprends bien, vous voulez dire aussi que le contenu du dialogue en Hollande devrait pas être seulement, pas forcément, théologique, mais surtout concret.


Non.

Elle n’est pas liée à une seule religion ou à une seule confession. Il faut travailler contre l’idiotie.

Oui.
Et l'idiotie a une énergie terrible. Il ne faut pas croire que l'idiotie est une chose facile à combattre.

Non. Il faut toujours utiliser toutes les forces pour la lutter. Un grand merci pour l'interview.

Oui.
II. Interview Van den Dool

(Interviewer geeft wat informatie over de omgeving)

E1: Ik ben hier aanwezig met de Nederlandse ambassadeur, ik zou u graag willen vragen of u zich zou willen voorstellen?

D1: Zeker, mijn naam is Henk van den Dool. Ik ben Nederlands ambassadeur in Albanië, ik ben het sinds de zomer van 2008, dus drie jaar nu, en ik vind het een genoegen om hier te zitten.

E2: Had u al enige band met Albanië voordat u hier gestationeerd was?

D2: Nee, eigenlijk niet. Ik ben in 1987 bij het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken komen te werken. Ik heb er een aantal verschillende functies gehad zoals: ... vooral op internationale samenwerking gericht, Afrika en Europese integratie. En dat waren – nu niet meer – maar dat waren alle twee terreinen die voor Albanië ook relevant waren, dus er waren een aantal redenen, maar dit is er zeker één van dat ik Albanië bovenaan mijn verlanglijstje heb gezet, toen ik te horen kreeg dat ik ambassadeur mocht worden. En ik heb het gekregen, dus ik ben er zeer gelukkig mee.

E3: En had u al enige band met de Balkan?

D3: Nee, ook dat niet. Nee, wij hadden als Nederland tot 2010 een bilaterale ontwikkelingssamenwerkingsrelatie met Albanië, dus mijn O.S. achtergrond, dus mijn ontwikkelingssamenwerkingsachtergrond was er wel, en dat was één van de redenen waarom men mij geschikt vond, kennelijk. En de andere reden is dat Albanië een potentiële kandidaat lidstaat van de E.U. is en mijn Europese ervaring daarbij van pas zou komen. Specifiek Balkan niet, nee.

E4: Hoe zou u uw eigen verstandshouding met het land beschrijven, met de bevolking van het land?

D4: Nou, ik denk dat ik zo na 3 jaar wel een vriend ben geworden van Albanië en van de Albanese bevolking. Het is wel een land dat in je gaat zitten, dat onder je huid kruipt; maar ik ben wel een heel kritische vriend, en dat is ook een beetje de houding van Nederland ten opzichte van Albanië: wij zijn een kritische vriend. Wij zijn op zijn Nederlands uitgesproken, open, direct en wij zijn dat vanuit de gedachte dat we het beste met Albanië voor hebben. Dat is een positie die mij persoonlijk ook wel aanspreekt. Er is ontzettend veel veelbelovends in dit land, maar er zijn ook een hoop problemen, dingen die niet goed gaan. Ik vind dat een Nederlandse ambassadeur de vrijheid moet nemen om daar wat van te zeggen en dat doe ik dan ook.
E5: Kunt u voor beide terreinen, dus zowel voor datgene waarvan u zegt: 'Daar zit potentieel in voor dit land', de positieve punten, als ook de punten waarop u meer de kritische vriend bent; kunt u van beide punten enkele voorbeelden noemen ter illustratie?

D5: Ter illustratie – positieve punten: Albanië is een ontzettend mooi land wat natuurschoon betreft, er is veel potentieel voor wat betreft toerisme. Albanië heeft een jonge, goed opgeleide bevolking; ambitieus, hardwerkend. Helaas uit zich dat er deels in dat mensen graag emigreren. Het zou mooi zijn als ze die hardwerkende ambities voor hun eigen land aanwenden. Albanië heeft naar mijn smaak een ongebruikelijk niveau van religieuze harmonie, wat voor veel buitenlanders, en zeker ook voor Nederlanders vaak een verademing is, om dat te zien; en dat zou ook in enigerlei vorm zou dat een Albanees exportproduct kunnen zijn. Dat is echt wel iets waar de rest van de wereld een voorbeeld aan kan nemen. Dat zijn positieve kanten. Negatieve kanten zijn: Albanië is niet gezegend met een erg hoog niveau van democratie, met een hoog niveau van respect voor de mensenrechten, met een hoog niveau van rule of law. Erg veel gaat nog steeds in dit land over persoonlijke macht, over persoonlijke rijkdom, familiebanden, clanbanden en andere groepen, wat deels gepaard gaat met een hoge mate van corruptie, met een hoge mate van georganiseerde criminaliteit. En de Albanese bevolking – en dit soort dingen spelen zich af in de hogere lagen van de bevolking, dat wil zeggen binnen de politieke en de economische elite, die ook nog met elkaar verweven en verknoopt zijn op allerlei manieren – en de Albanese bevolking – helaas, denk ik – heeft in de afgelopen vijf, zes eeuwen geleerd, of is er aan gewend geraakt dat ze daar geen invloed op kan hebben, dat dingen nu eenmaal zijn zoals ze zijn. Dus ik zie daar nog weinig verandering. Deels heeft dat met generaties te maken, dus uiteindelijk zal er wel iets veranderen, maar het gaat allemaal erg moeizaam. En komend uit een Westeuropese land, één van de oprichters van de Europese Unie, met een open economie, met in elke geval een geschiedenis van democratie en tolerantie, en respect voor mensenrechten, is het wel eens frustrerend om daarmee te moeten werken, om daarin te moeten opereren.

E6: Ja, dat kan ik me voorstellen. U noemde zojuist een uitzonderlijke religieuze harmonie, als ik goed citeer; hebt u enig zicht op wat daarin factoren zouden kunnen zijn, die daar in het verleden, door de eeuwen heen, of door de decennia heen, of misschien in het heden aan toe hebben bijgedragen; aan die religieuze harmonieuze verstandhouding?

D6: Ja, ik denk – wat opvalt als je voor het eerst in Albanië komt, is dat het niet opvalt. Dat is het eigenlijk. Religie is eigenlijk afwezig in het straatbeeld. Natuurlijk zie je moskeeën, je ziet kerken, maar niet heel prominent. Je ziet, uitgezonderd de hoogtijdagen – Pasen voor de Orthodoxen, Ramadan voor de moslims - zie je religie zich eigenlijk niet manifesteren op straat. En naar mate je Albanezen leert kennen, merk je dat mensen behoren tot verschillende geloofsgemeenschappen, met elkaar
trouwen, in één familie zitten, met elkaar uitgaan. Eigenlijk is het geen factor van betekenis. Je hoort wel dat mensen zeggen – en ik weet niet of dat nou helemaal terecht is: 'Het is geen religieuze harmonie, maar het is in zekere zin religieuze onverschilligheid, het is geen echt issue. Mensen beschouwen hun geloofsbeleving als iets heel individueels, waar verder ook niemand iets mee te maken heeft, iets pragmatisch ook, in veel gevallen – je bent Katholiek omdat je nu eenmaal in een Katholieke familie geboren bent, of je bent moslim omdat je nu eenmaal in een islamitische familie geboren bent – mensen gaan niet in heel grote getale naar de kerk of naar de moskee. Ze komen er wel, maar er is heel weinig religieus fanatisme, van welke groep dan ook. In zekere zin is dat een verademing. Er zijn natuurlijk in zekere zin wel uitzonderingen op: ik heb het idee dat de Protestantse geloofsgemeenschap, die overigens vrij klein is, nadrukkelijk bezig is met het geloof. Dat komt deels denk ik doordat de Protestantse gemeenschap vrij nieuw is in Albanië en dat mensen er dus een bewuste keuze voor hebben gemaakt: ze zijn niet Protestants, omdat hun ouders dat zijn, maar ze hebben dus een bewuste keuze gemaakt. Dit in tegenstelling tot moslims of Katholieken, in veel gevallen. Wat moslims betreft, er zijn een aantal moskeeën waar toch wat meer fundamentalistische geluiden de kop op steken, maar dat zijn er heel weinig en door de grote meerderheid van de moslims wordt dat ook allemaal niet erg serieus genomen. Vanuit Saoedi-Arabië, de Arabische wereld, Koeweit worden wel pogingen ondernomen om toch een wat strakkere vorm van de Islam hier binnen te brengen. Dat gaat gepaard met het cadeau doen van prachtige moskeeën en dergelijke. Albanezen zijn daar niet echt van onder de indruk. Je ziet het gebeuren: ook de Islam Development Bank is actief. Er zijn nu plannen om een nieuwe parlementsgebouw te bouwen voor het Albanese parlement, een nieuwe vergaderzaal; daar schijnt Saoedische financiering voor te komen. Je ziet het allemaal gebeuren, maar het heeft weinig invloed. Je komt in een klein stadje ergens in de bergen en er staat een fantastische moskee, een nieuwe moskee, en je vraagt 'waar komt die moskee vandaan?' Die is dan geschonken door Koeweit. De Albanese reactie is in het algemeen toch van: 'Nou, dank u wel, mooie moskee, zet hem daar maar neer.' Verder heeft dat niet zoveel invloed. Sterker nog, er is sinds heel kort, sinds ongeveer een half jaar, een islamitische universiteit – althans het heet een islamitische universiteit – het is een Albanese Imamopleiding, waar delen van de internationale gemeenschap wat ongerust over waren, totdat duidelijk werd dat tot nog toe Albanese imams in het algemeen opgeleid werden in het buitenland, en dan in sommige gevallen toch terugkomen met een wat meer fundamentalistische benadering van de Islam. En de Albanese moslim gemeenschap zelf vond het nodig dat die imamopleiding in Albanië zelf plaatsvond, omdat hier de Albanese vorm van de Islam onderwezen kan worden. (E: Dus dat is in principe een gunstige ontwikkeling?) Dat is een gunstige ontwikkeling. Ik denk zeker ook – dat is altijd relatief, dus altijd in vergelijking met andere situaties – maar de grote religieuze spanningen en conflicten die in buurlanden aan de orde zijn geweest en soms nog zijn, tussen Orthodoxie en katholicisme, tussen christendom en islam, dat die in veel gevallen gecreëerd zijn door politieke leider of
militaire leiders met een nationalistische agenda, en een dergelijke agenda is in Albanië nooit nodig geweest. Dit land is een land, dit land heeft geen behoefte, heeft niet de noodzaak om een nationale identiteit te construeren. (E: Waarom niet?) Want die nationale identiteit is er: er is nationale eenheid. Albanen zijn niet nationalistisch, maar ze zijn wel chauvinistisch, ze zijn trots op hun nationale held uit de 15e eeuw, die de Turken een tijdje buiten de deur heeft gehouden. Een heel bekende dichtregel zegt: ‘De Albanese religie heet Albanië’. In zekere zin geloof ik ook wel dat het zo is. Er is denk ik heel weinig tolerantie bij de Albanese bevolking voor religieus fanatisme, voor zietjeswinnewij, voor het uitventen van de eigen waarheid boven andere waarheden; het is gewoon niet zo aan de orde. Om een voorbeeld te noemen: we hebben hier op de ambassade een zevental Albanese medewerkers. Ik weet van allemaal waar ze vandaan komen, dat is het eerste wat een Albanees tegen je zal zeggen: waar hij vandaan komt, niet welke religie hij aanhangt, maar waar hij vandaan komt. En inmiddels weet ik natuurlijk ook van allemaal van welke religieuze gemeenschap ze zijn – als ik dat zo mag zeggen – maar ik merk het verder nergens aan. We hebben een Rooms-Katholiek, we hebben een Bektashi, we hebben een traditionele moslim, Orthodox, alles is hier, en ik heb nog nooit gemerkt dat het een issue is. (E: Onderling ook niet, tussen de werknemers?) Onderling ook niet. Één van mijn medewerkers is moslim, getrouwd met een Grieks-Orthodoxe vrouw, hun zoontje is – ik moet eigenlijk zeggen: Albanees-Orthodox – hun zoontje is Orthodox gedoopt vorig jaar, ik was er bij uitgenodigd, dat was een fantastische gebeurtenis. En dan gaat ook de hele familie van de vader gewoon naar de Orthodoxe kerk en die is daarbij. En na afloop wordt er nog vrolijk een glaasje met iets alcoholisch met z’n allen gedronken, en dat is absoluut geen issue. (E: Mooi.) Dat is mooi. Nogmaals: deels is het ook onverschilligheid. (E: Ja, want u noemde dat straks als een citaat van iemand anders, maar u deelt die mening dus zelf ook wel?) Ja als je ziet hoe weinig – ik moet er aan toevoegen: ik ben zelf niet kerkelijk opgevoed, dus het valt mij misschien minder direct op dan mensen die wel kerkelijk zijn opgevoed – maar als je wat dieper kijkt, dan zie je dat mensen zichzelf wel nominaal moslim of christen noemen, maar daar in veel gevallen niet actief mee bezig zijn. En er zijn fantastische statistieken bekend over hoeveel procent van de bevolking katholiek is, of moslim, of Bektashi, of wat dan ook, maar in feite zegt het allemaal niet zoveel: ik denk dat een ruime meerderheid van de bevolking niet religieus actief is; wel nominaal bij een geloofsrichting hoort, maar daar niet actief in is.

E7: En als u het hebt over de meerderheid van de bevolking, hebt u het dan over 60 à 70 procent? (D: Zeker) Misschien wel hoger? (D: Misschien wel hoger) En de nominale betrokkenheid, hoe zou u dat ongeveer classificeren, qua percentages?

D7: 60% moslim, 20% Orthodox, 10% Katholiek en dan de resterende 10%: 5% Bektashi en 5% Protestant.
Dus van de moslims denkt u dat maar een heel laag percentage Bektashi is, of u hebt het zelfs over een aparte groep? (D: Ja) U noemde eerder in het interview dat er een houding is van: mijn geloof, is een privézaak; dat houd ik voor mezelf. Ik hoef het niet zo nodig uit te dragen, uit te venten ten koste van andere religies. Ik hoef het ook niet te laten zien in het straatbeeld. U bent zelf Nederlander, u hebt een Nederlandse achtergrond: hoe vergelijkt u dat, is dat vergelijkbaar met hoe we daar in Nederland mee omgaan? Want we tenderen nogal in de richting van: mijn geloof is het mijne, jouw geloof is het jouwe en wat ieder gelooft moet hij voor zichzelf weten; ieder zijn overtuiging, zolang je mij er maar niet mee lastigvalt en zolang je het maar niet publiekelijk uitdraagt. Is het vergelijkbaar of zijn er belangrijke verschillen, naar uw inzicht?

Ik denk wel dat er verschillen zijn. Ik denk - zoals u nu de Nederlandse situatie kenschetst – zo ligt het niet altijd: ik denk dat de verschillende geloofsrichtingen in Nederland elkaar niet altijd in de weg zitten, maar zich wel altijd nadrukkelijk manifesteren. En dat geldt zowel voor de vorm van islam die in Nederland zichtbaar is, bijvoorbeeld Rotterdam Zuid ziet er echt anders uit dan Albanië: het straatbeeld is anders. (E: De zichtbaarheid?) Ja. Maar dat geldt ook voor wat in Nederland de Bible Belt genoemd wordt – bepaalde christelijke geloofsgemeenschappen, of bepaalde gereformeerde geloofsgemeenschappen, die misschien niet zozeer trachten zieltjes te winnen en ten koste van anderen actief te zijn, maar die zichzelf wel heel zichtbaar neerzetten, die zichzelf wel heel zichtbaar manifesteren.

En dan hebt u het met name over de kledingkeuze?

Zeker, dat hoort erbij. Maar dan heb ik het ook over de Ramadan van de moslims, die in Nederland naar mijn inzicht veel zichtbaarder is dan hier. Maar ook – en dat klinkt een beetje als een simpel voorbeeld: de luidruchtigheid in Nederland van zowel de moskeeën, de muezzins, die oproepen tot het gebed als het klokgelui van de christelijke kerken; dat hoor je in Albanië nauwelijks. Het zichtbaar en hoorbaar manifesteren [van de religies]. Wat ik ook wel boeiend vind – maar dat heeft wellicht meer met semantiek te maken: er wordt vaak gesproken over religieuze tolerantie. Dat is een woord dat ik voor Albanië niet zou gebruiken: het is geen tolerantie, maar interreligieuse harmonie. ‘Tolerantie’ suggereert dat je de ander tolereert; dat impliceert naar mijn gevoel een ongelijke verhouding. (E: Een hiërarchische verhouding?) Een hiërarchische verhouding. Die hiërarchische verhouding is in Albanië niet aan de orde, het is geen issue, omdat de hele religie geen issue is.

Kan ook een rol meespelen, of kan ook een factor zijn in het totaalbeeld, dat je niet kunt zeggen dat er twee onderscheiden etnische groepen zijn, met een verschillende sociaaleconomische positie, zodat de ene partij kan zeggen: ‘Wij zijn de economisch sterkere groep en ook de dominante groep’, die vervolgens de andere groep buitensluit of discriminert, net naar gelang; maar dat het hier veel meer een niet-
onderscheiden geheel is, of misschien ook wel heterogeen, zonder dat het in groepen te onderscheiden valt?

D10: Nee, ik denk ook wel dat dat juist is. Ik denk dat de Albanese bevolking, etnisch gezien, wel homogeen is – in elk land, met name in de grensgebieden, zijn natuurlijk wel eens wat problemen; er zijn groepen die zich in etnische zin wat anders definiëren dan de rest van Albanië. Ik heb niet de indruk dat er nou veel discriminatie is, afgezien van de Roma, maar dat is natuurlijk sowieso een moeilijk te vatten groep, die ook slecht geregistreerd is, en waar ook verder geen onderscheiden religieuze component bij hoort. Een homogene bevolking. Het is zo dat de sociaaleconomische posities gelijkmatig verdeeld zijn. Ook daar geldt – ik weet zo langzamerhand, nu ik hier 3 jaar ben, van de premier en van de voorzitter van het parlement, en van de burgemeester van Tirana, en van de politieke leiders tot welke geloofsgemeenschap zij nominaal behoren, maar ik weet het omdat ik het ooit eens ergens gelezen heb. Het is niet dat ik het zie. En als er een iftar is, zoals vorige week het geval was, bij het begin van de Ramadan, dan organiseert de Mufti van Tirana een iftar diner. Afgezien van de Orthodoxe bisschop, de Katholieke bisschop en de Bektashi Baba, die daar gewoon naast hem aan tafel zitten, zit daar ook de premier, van wie ik weet dat hij nominaal moslim is, en de voorzitter van het parlement, die nominaal Rooms-Katholiek is. Die gaat daar naartoe, die betuigt daar eer. Hetzelfde gebeurt met Pasen. Ik was afgelopen Pasen in Korça, dat een Orthodoxe stad is, met een erg indrukwekkende Orthodoxe Metropoliet ook daar, een indrukwekkende man; hij heeft in Harvard gestudeerd, spreekt vloeiend Engels, heel bijzonder – het is overwegend Orthodox, maar het Paasfeest wordt daar door iedereen gevierd, ook door de moslims. En die komen dan ook naar de Orthodoxe kathedraal. En dat is prachtig om te zien: er komt dan midden in de nacht uit de kathedraal het licht, het kaarslicht. Iedereen heeft kaarsen bij zich, dat dus wordt overgegeven en uiteindelijk zijn er vlammetjes in de hele stad en er zijn ongelofelijk veel moslims die daar met een kaars met een vlammetje rondlopen. (E: Echt één geheel.) Absoluut.

E11: Tijdens de voorbereiding van het interview, in één van uw e-mails, hebt u iets genoemd over de afspraken die gemaakt zijn met de vijf onderscheiden religieuze groepen – kunt u iets zeggen over welk orgaan of welk staatsorgaan die afspraken gemaakt heeft, en wat het inhoudt, wat het behelst?

D11: Wij kwamen er eigenlijk achter – ik wist dat niet eens - maar wij kwamen er eigenlijk achter, doordat de SGP-fractie in de Tweede Kamer zich zorgen maakte, na het bezoek van de heer Van der Staaij aan Albanië, over de positie van de Protestantse christenen in Albanië, over de evangelische geloofsgemeenschap – of hoe je dat ook maar noemen wil – in Albanië. (E: Welk jaartal was dat?) Dit is twee jaar geleden, 2009. Hij vroeg aan de minister, minister Verhagen was dat op dat moment, om daar eens in te duiken, om te kijken hoe dat nou zit met die Protestants-christelijke geloofsgemeenschap. Die vraag kwam natuurlijk bij ons terecht en wij zijn gaan praten met de leider, voorzitter
van de koepelorganisatie die de Protestantse geloofsgemeenschappen onder zich heeft – dat is niet het goede woord – maar: verenigt. Daaruit kwam naar voren dat heel veel Protestantse geloofsgemeenschappen hier – dat loopt tegen de honderd, meen ik; deels heel klein: enkele tientallen mensen, deels groter – die hebben zich georganiseerd in zo’n koepel. Hun klacht was dat zij zich niet gelijkgesteld voelden met de vier grote geloofsrichtingen, moslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, Katholiek. Wij zijn gaan vragen: ‘Hoezo niet gelijkgesteld?’ Deze vier bleken een overeenkomst te hebben met de Albanese overheid, en meer specifiek met het Ministerie van Cultuur; een overeenkomst waarin verschillende dingen worden geregeld: het ene dat wordt geregeld is dat de geloofsgemeenschappen bepaalde belangenvoordelen krijgen, geen of heel weinig belasting betalen over kerkgebouwen bijvoorbeeld; dat was iets waar de Protestantse geloofsgemeenschap in geïnteresseerd was om ook het voordeel van te krijgen, want die werden gedwongen om tegen commerciële prijzen gebedsruimtes te huren, terwijl dat voor de andere vier niet het geval was. Maar het andere dat geregeld wordt in die overeenkomst, is dat de geloofsgemeenschap toezegt zich niet te zullen mengen in zaken van de overheid – politiek – en dat andersom, de overheid zich niet mengt in zaken die met de religieuze beleving te maken hebben: volkomen vrijheid van opereren, zolang men maar uit elkaars vaarwater blijft. De Protestantnen hadden dat niet en we zijn gaan vragen bij het Ministerie van Cultuur. Toen bleek dat die overeenkomst er wel was, maar dat dat ergens in een la verdwenen was en dat er niemand op had aangedrongen, ze waren het dus eigenlijk een beetje vergeten. Wij zijn dus uitgebreid gaan vragen daar: ‘Kunnen we dat niet weer eens afstoffen?’ Nou, dat is gebeurd, ze hebben het afgestoft. Ik ben daar vorig jaar geweest, waar de Minister van Cultuur en het hoofd van deze koepel samen de overeenkomst ondertekenden, in aanwezigheid wederom van de Mufti - de nummer twee meen ik – de Orthodoxe Aartsbisschop, de Katholieke bisschop en de Bektashi Baba. Dus nu hebben we er vijf. Als u geïnteresseerd bent in de precieze inhoud van deze overeenkomst, die voor alle vijf volgens mij vrijwel identiek zijn, die moet te vinden zijn bij het ministerie. Het is een afdeling, het is niet een apart ministerie voor religieuze zaken, want dat zou het teveel gewicht geven; het is een afdeling binnen het Ministerie van Cultuur, Toerisme en Sport, die zich hiermee bezighoudt.

E12: Een goede zaak, lijkt me, dat er duidelijke afspraken zijn gemaakt over de verhouding tussen kerk en staat. Althans ik neem aan dat de voornaamste insteek is geweest binnen het geheel; en misschien ook wel om ondersteuning te bieden aan deze instituten?

D12: Ja. Maar de andere kant is ook van belang: het waarborgt ook dat de religieuze leiders zich niet tegen de politiek aan gaan bemoeien. (E: Dus geen situatie zoals op Cyprus bijvoorbeeld?) Bijvoorbeeld, bijvoorbeeld.

E13: Hebt u vanuit uw positie, of vanuit uw wonen in dit land enig zicht of er vanuit officiële religieuze instanties, overheidsinstanties, of wellicht vanuit V.N.-gerelateerde
organisaties specifieke initiatieven worden ondernomen, of in het recente verleden zijn ondernomen, om de interreligieuze verstandhouding te bevorderen, of is er meer een houding van: ‘Het gaat eigenlijk zó goed en er is eigenlijk geen reden om er specifieke aandacht aan te besteden; dat laten we mooi rusten zo’?

D13: Ja, dat laatste is wel waar. Ik heb het gevoel dat heel breed gevonden wordt dat er geen probleem is, en dat het vooral ook niet gecreëerd moet worden. Dus dat het goed is zoals het is. Wat wel een bijzonder punt is, is dat Albanezen zelf - intellectueelen, moet ik dan zeggen, NGO’s – zich beginnen te realiseren dat zij hier wel iets heel bijzonders in handen hebben en dat er voor de rest van Europa – ik moet eigenlijk zeggen: voor de rest van de regio hier – maar misschien ook voor de rest van Europa dat er wel iets te leren valt, wat dit betreft. Er is een – misschien heeft u die al gesproken – er is een oud-minister van Buitenlandse Zaken hier, een oud-politicus en romancier, een erg aardige en slimme man, die teleurgesteld uit de politiek gestapt is en die voorzitter is geworden van zijn eigen NGO en is aangesloten bij de Anna Lindt Foundation, dat is een Europa-brede verzameling van NGO’s, die zich bezighouden met gelijkberechtiging, discriminatie, tolerantie etcetera. Een deel daarvan heet de Alliance des Civilisations – die meneer spreekt uitstekend Frans en heel slecht Engels, dus om met hem te praten is het van belang om goed Frans te spreken. Hij is met name iemand die artikelen schrijft, seminars organiseert, mensen naar Tirana haalt, om die religieuze harmonie zichtbaarder te maken en te proberen daar lessen uit te trekken. (E: Ook voor het buitenland?) Ook voor het buitenland. Ja, zeker. De Alliance des Civilisations is een – de naam zegt het eigenlijk al – een internationale alliantie, waar veel intellectueelen actief in zijn. Hij denkt daar op een indrukwekkende en constructieve manier over dat soort dingen na, kan daar goed over spreken en organiseert allerlei dingen. Soms ondersteunen we hem wel eens – ik ondersteun hem wel moreel bij dit soort initiatieven, want hij heeft natuurlijk ook wel eens geld nodig om dingen te kunnen organiseren, om ons hier naartoe te halen. Dat wil niet altijd want onze ambassade heeft het niet zo heel erg breed wat dat betreft, maar dan zijn er vaak wel anderen die bereid zijn om iets te doen. Initiatieven om de zaak te verbeteren, zijn er niet, en die zijn in het verleden ook niet echt nodig geweest, maar initiatieven om het Albanese voorbeeld wat zichtbaarder te maken zijn er wel degelijk.

E14: Nu zijn er in de Balkan wel diverse, ook V.N.-gerelateerde, organisaties actief, om vrede te handhaven of wederopbouw te bevorderen, en dergelijke; zijn er ook takken hier naartoe, naar Albanië?

D14: Jazeker, absoluut. Er zit een V.N. kantoor hier in Tirana, U.N.D.P. is actief, Unicef is actief, de Wereldgezondheidsorganisatie is actief – ongetwijfeld vergeet ik er een aantal – maar, voor zover ik weet, niet specifiek met religie. (E: Dus niet met een speciale focus op religie?) Nee. (E: Dat is ook goed om te weten, wat er wel of wat er niet uitgekozen wordt, geselecteerd wordt) Ja.
E15: Ziet u ook bepaalde bedreigingen voor de religieuze verhoudingen in Albanië, nu of in de toekomst?

D15: Ja, wat ik net zei: je ziet soms dat de Arabische wereld probeert actief te zijn. Tot op heden is de Albanese reactie daarop nogal afhoudend, lauw. Aan de andere kant: Albanië is lid van de O.I.C., the Organization of the Islamic Conference, waar ook bijvoorbeeld Syrië lid van is. Dat is een organisatie, die formeel, via een resolutie of een verklaring invoering van de shari’a bepleit. Er zijn stemmen die vinden dat Albanië daar niet in thuis hoort; er zijn in Nederland stemmen – met name in PVV-hoek – die zeggen: ‘Een land dat lid is van deze club, kan natuurlijk nooit lid van de Europese Unie worden’. De Albanese reactie daarop is: ‘Hoor eens, we zijn ook lid van allerlei andere clubs’ – en daar zit wel een grond van waarheid in, geloof ik: na de val van het regime waren ze zo eager om internationale erkenning te vinden, en om vrienden te vinden, dat ze overal lid van zijn geworden waar ze lid van konden worden. Albanië is ook lid van de Francophonie; dat is wel bijzonder, want er zijn maar weinig mensen hier die behoorlijk Frans spreken. En als ze lid zouden kunnen worden van de Commonwealth, dan zouden ze dat ook doen. En over die O.I.C., die Islamic Conference, die zijn er eigenlijk ook om het gematigde geluid te laten horen. (E: Binnen die O.I.C.?) Binnen de O.I.C.. En het feit dat er resoluties worden aangenomen over de Shari’a, dat betekent niet dat wij dat 100% zouden onderschrijven of ondersteunen, verre van dat. Niettemin, via dat soort connecties wordt natuurlijk getracht invloed uit te oefenen in dit land. Dat is absoluut waar. Zoals ik zojuist zei heeft Albanië geen nationale identiteitscrisis: de nationale kaart, en daarmee ook de etnische kaart en de religieuze kaart, wordt niet getrokken in de verkiezingscampagne of wat dan ook, omdat het eigenlijk geen issue is. Zolang dat zo is, zie ik eigenlijk weinig gevaar. Als dat wel een issue wordt – dat is natuurlijk in een kristallen bol kijken: natuurlijk kan er iets gebeuren. We hadden in Nederland ook niet verwacht, vijftig jaar geleden of veertig jaar geleden, dat potentiële religieuze conflicten, zo de kop zouden opsteken. (E: Bepaalde dingen zijn niet te voorspellen.) Nee.

E16: Ten slotte heb ik de vraag: wat zouden wij in Nederland, of in bredere zin: in Europa kunnen leren van Albanië; echt heel concreet punten? Bepaalde dingen zijn echt Albanië eigen, die zijn gewoon niet over te planten in een andere situatie; andere dingen zijn misschien wel, óf in dezelfde vorm over te planten, óf misschien is daar een parallel voor te bedenken, een creatieve omvorming, zodat je het ook in je eigen land zou kunnen toepassen.

D16: Wat ik wel een hele mooie vind, is die religieuze harmonie. En of dat nu onverschilligheid is of wederzijds respect, het is in elk geval een manifestatie van: ‘Die religie is van mij als persoon, en het heeft niet perse consequenties voor hoe ik tegen jou aankijk of voor hoe ik politiek voer of voor hoe ik de toekomst voor dit land [zie].’ Het is individuele beleving. En dat is het ook voor de ander, en daar bemoei ik me dus niet mee. Ik denk dat – en daar hadden we het zojuist ook al even over – dat het in
theorie in Nederland ook wel zo is, maar in praktijk is dat minder het geval, denk ik. Ik denk dat we daarvan wat kunnen leren.

E17: Hebt u het dan over minder provocerend, minder hoorbaar aanwezig zijn in het publieke leven, door je wat terughoudender op te stellen?

D17: Nee, ‘terughoudend’ klinkt alsof je je moet houden, alsof je voor zou moeten schamen op de één of andere manier; dat nou ook weer niet. Maar geloofsbeleving beschouwen als deel van je aller-individueelste eigenheid. Tja, ‘terughoudend’: het is niet terughoudend; ik ken niemand in Albanië die zegt: ‘Laat ik me nu maar even terughoudend opstellen, anders provoceer ik.’ Die gedachtegang is er gewoon helemaal niet. Het is geen issue.

E18: Wat ons tijdens onze rondreis van afgelopen weken opviel – het viel ons zowel in Berat als in Tirana, de hoofdstad, op – dat de oproep tot het gebed, en ook de wat uitgebreidere versie daarvan, buitengewoon zacht en buitengewoon prettig klonk; terwijl diegenen in de groep die óf in een islamitische wijk wonen in Nederland, óf in het buitenland in een islamitisch land hebben gewoond, dat heel anders gewend zijn: een heel schel, doordringend, bijna opdringerig geluid; en kerkklokken hoor je hier haast al helemaal niet luiden...


E19: In het verlengde daarvan: zouden daar ook bepaalde gedragingen bij horen, waardoor er toch een wat andere positionering is van de religieuze groep - even denkend aan Nederland – om de religieuze verstandshouding wat soepeler te doen lopen? Ik denk even aan het taalgebruik in de media, bijvoorbeeld?


E20: Het hoeft niet van de daken geschreeuwd te worden, als het ware?

D20: Nee, het hoeft niet; [sterker nog:] het wórdt niet van de daken geschreeuwd. We hebben in Nederland wel eens van die discussies gehad – en het komt nu weer een beetje op, geloof ik – over: of je iemand nu wel of niet een hand moet geven, als die daar uit geloofsredenen problemen mee heeft; ik heb nog nooit hier in Albanië gezien dat dat soort dingen überhaupt aan de orde zijn. (E: Noch van de ene kant, noch van de andere kant?) Noch van de ene kant, noch van de andere kant. En er zijn geen, of heel weinig scherpe randjes aan. In Nederland komt er zo vaak een scherp randje aan. Dan moet het ook confronterend naar buiten gebracht worden. Misschien heeft het ook te
maken met het klimaat, dat het hier allemaal wat soepeler en smoother gaat; je organiseert je leven, waarmee je het zo prettig mogelijk hebt, en waarmee je het voor de mensen om je heen zo prettig mogelijk maakt, en dan ga je dus niet head on confrontaties aan.

E21: Flexibiliteit, zou dat een sleutelwoord kunnen zijn?

D21: Ja, flexibiliteit, dat is waar. Ik wou ook weer ‘tolerantie’ zeggen, maar dat is in dit verband niet het goede woord. ‘Respect’ ook wel – hoewel er op een hoop andere punten ook wel weer minder respect is dan in Nederland: als je hier in de rij moet staan voor een postkantoor, dan is er dus geen rij – maar het respect voor iemands eigen ruimte, eigen beleving, eigen mens-zijn; ‘flexibiliteit’ in zekere zin, ja: waarom zou je een probleem maken als het niet relevant is? Want religie is niet zo relevant. Er zijn wel andere dingen om je druk over te maken; dat is zo’n beetje de gedachte.

E22: Heel hartelijk bedankt voor dit uitvoerige interview.

D22: Graag gedaan.
III. Interview Marta Kołczyńska

E1: I am sitting here in the almost deserted lounge of our hotel in the capital, Tirana. I am sitting here with a scholar of Polish origin, Marta Kołczyńska. Marta, may I ask you if you could introduce yourself: who you are, what your background is and to tell us a little bit of your research, with a link to this region: Albania / Kosovo?

M1: Okay, my name is Marta Kołczyńska. I’m a PhD-student of the Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. My adventure with the western Balkans, including Kosovo and Albania, started years ago. Before I did University Studies about the region. I just came on holidays not knowing the countries of the region. I became very much interested in the history of Kosovo and Albania. I started Master Studies of the culture of the Balkan, with a specialization of the Albanian speaking regions, mainly Kosovo – in Poland. During these studies I was focusing on changes in religious structures in Kosovo during the Ottoman Period, from the 14th/15th century until the 17th century. So I was in literature research; I was on field trips to Kosovo and Albania; I was writing about what the situation was before the Ottoman conquest and writing on what motives, and how fast, and why, people were converting to Islam; for what reasons, what kind of Islam it was; what kind of Ottoman administration there was in the area that is today’s Kosovo – obviously it was not Kosovo at that time, there was no administrative unit known as Kosovo at that time. I graduated in these studies and now I’m doing research on – I spent a year in Albania doing research about Poles in Albania, and also some other subjects – I am continuing my studies on interreligious relations now in Albania.

E2: Thank you. So if I understand well it has been for over five years that you have been researching on this region, Kosovo and Albania. (M: Something like four years, yes.) Yes. So you’ve been meeting a lot of people here, scholars? (M: Yes.) That is interesting. I would like to speak about the situation of the religions in Albania and I would like to compare them; the relation between these two religions, Christianity and Islam here in Albania, with the relation between them in Kosovo. If we look first to the situation in Albania, what is your opinion on the relationships between Muslims and Christians here in this country, in Albania?

M2: Well, actually, there are three major religious groups; or some people say that actually it is four; although the last census was done in the 1990s and there are no new statistics available, you can say that some 70% of the Albanians are Muslims, spread all over the country, 20% are Orthodox and they live mainly in the south and some 10% are Catholic and they live mainly in the north. Within the group of Muslims there are also two sub-groups: the majority is Sunni and there is also a big minority of Bektashis. (E: Can you give percentages of Sunnis and Bektashis?) It is difficult to estimate. I would say that of the whole population of Albanians some 50 to 60% are Sunnis, some 10 to 20% are Bektashis, then 20% are Orthodox and 10% are Catholic.
(E: So then you are speaking about nominal followers, not practicants?) I am speaking about self declaration, because one important thing to understand is that in Albania people do not consider religion purely in terms of faith and practice; they consider religion more in terms of their traditional family background. This means that if somebody tells you that he is a Bektashi, it may mean that he has never been to a tekke and doesn’t really know a lot about Bektashism, what it is all about, the doctrine and so on; about the saints, about the practice. The thing is that his family is Bektashi traditionally, that it has been so for generations; while the idea of atheism is practically nonexistent. I’ve never met with anyone, or talked to anyone who said he was an atheist or agnostic. People often consider themselves as religious, not really practicing; meaning, they believe in some superpower, superspirit, supernatural, but they don’t – for instance Sunni Muslims don’t go to mosques, they don’t pray five times a day, they do drink alcohol, they don’t observe Ramadan and so on. So this religion is not perceived strictly in religious terms.

M3: I couldn’t say any number, but a vast majority does not practice religion. I would say – I can say more about Kosovo; can we switch to Kosovo? (E: Yes.) In Kosovo some 90, 95% of the Albanians are Muslim and some 5% are Catholics. The small minority of Catholics observe their religion much more. (E: Much more than Catholics in Albania?) Much more than Catholics in Albania, but also much more than Muslims in Kosovo. Meaning Catholics in Kosovo go to church every Sunday and their religion is more visible, it is more valid. While Muslims in Kosovo don’t go to a mosque, some of them have never been in a mosque and they don’t observe the basic rules. (E: So they are comparable to the Muslims in Albania?) That is what I would say: the vast majority of Muslims in Albania do not practice their religion; with Catholics, I would say that a higher percentage of Catholics do practice their religion. (E: In Kosovo a higher percentage of Catholics than in Albania?) In Albania a higher percentage of Catholics than of Muslims. (E: Ah, that is what you mean.) I’m sorry, it is a bit complicated. (E: Yes, okay.) What concerns Orthodox: they are practically more religious than Muslims, but I don’t have a lot of experience with the Orthodox. (E: And then you are speaking about the Orthodox in the south of Albania?) Yes. It is one of the consequences of the circumstances, since the Catholics mainly live in villages, in the city of Shkodra, but also in villages in the mountains. And there religious life is not only religion, individual religion, like in Tirana – which is a huge city, largely anonymous – but it is quite a community life: everybody knows each other in the village, and Catholic holidays, Church holidays are also a social occasion. While in Tirana - obviously the everyday life is different in the city: people are much more busy, they don’t have time; so the way of life is something different.
E4: Yes, I see. When you were introducing yourself, I forgot to ask one question, but it might be interesting also to know: how did it come about that you have become so interested in this region, in this subject? What is your personal link to it?

M4: Well, the link was created with my first visit here. Because earlier I didn’t have any connection whatsoever; as I mentioned, the first time I came here, it was simply on holiday. I was also taking part in the work-camp, in the volunteer work-camp in Serbia. And after I finished, I was traveling around in the region. And at that time, during these Summer holidays, I didn’t go to Albania actually, but I went to Kosovo; which was still Ünje Kosovo at that time, before the declaration of independence and I just decided that it is an interesting subject to study. So when I went home in September, I decided to start university studies. (E: And why did you find it so interesting, or why did you feel involved?) Although the Balkans, the Western Balkans, are geographically and historically and politically in Europe I found many things here that I think Poland has been losing over the last years: the tradition, the hospitality, the principles of some values attached to aspects of life that are typical for – one can say: less-developed countries, but not in the negative meaning of the word; meaning more close communities, the type of friendships, friendship bounds, families: this kind of interpersonal ties and contacts (E: Yes) which I found very attractive. That’s one thing. And then the culture, I didn’t know anything about, so I didn’t understand the meaning of a lot of things, I didn’t know a lot about history, so I just decided to study it. (E: You were interested, you were curious to know more?) Yes, exactly. And I also quickly noticed that not many people know anything about Albania or Kosovo, most people were just scared of the war; and in Poland not many people speak Albanian, that’s one of the reasons I wanted to learn the language, and that’s it.

E5: Returning to the topic of Muslim-Christian relationships in Kosovo and Albania: do you consider them as good or bad, relaxed or tense, intensive or rather indifferent, how would you characterize these relationships?

M5: This again is a very complex question. I would say that religion is not only considered in terms of faith – which an important aspect of religious life of Albanians – and another very important aspect is that Albanian national identity is not based on a religion, like e.g. in Poland. In Poland the link between Catholicism and being Polish is very close. If I meet somebody and he asks me: ‘Where are you from?’ and I say: ‘I’m from Poland’, then he will say: ‘Oh, then you are a Catholic.’ While here, Albanian identity – since the population were believers of different faiths – the national identity in the late 19th century was not built on principles of a common religion – as there was no common religion – but on the ideas of common ethnic origin and language. In terms of language, this is a very favorable factor in this situation, because no language around Albania is even similar to Albanian. So the language and ethnic origin was a differentiating factor from e.g. Greeks or Macedonians or Serbs. So people consider themselves first of all as Albanians, and then the religion is part of their family
tradition. When we keep that in mind, it is understandable that there are so few religious tensions between Albanians themselves. I wouldn’t say exactly that there are no tensions at all, since people find divisions always a good occasion to argue. And in villages in the north, that are mixed villages, Catholic-Muslims, if there is a conflict and it turns out that the one family is Catholic and the other family is Muslim, this division is also used in the conflict. Meaning that the Catholic family engages the Catholic community, the Muslim family engages the Muslim community. The conflict is upgraded to the level of religious communities, involving the Catholic priest and the Muslim hoja. But what I know from my conversations with people and interviews, religion is almost never reason for conflict itself. Meaning conflicts don’t stem from religious divisions. Sometimes religious differences are adopted as part of the conflict, but only later on. (E: Secondary.) Secondary, yes. Of course the situation is very different if you consider e.g. the situation between Albanians and Greeks. If there is a conflict between Albanians and Greeks, it is on the level of national identity. So Albanian Orthodox can have a problem with Greek Orthodox, just as Albanian Muslims with Greek Muslims. But also in this case, religion is only secondary.

E6: And if you are speaking about conflicts between Albanians and Greeks, are you speaking about border conflicts at the Albanian-Greek border, or are you rather referring to conflicts in the southern region of Albania, where Greek minority groups are living in the villages?

M6: I am talking in general about territorial claims, since Albanians say that the Greeks occupied, and are still occupying, part of Albanian lands; and that they are also responsible for the massacre of Chams in the early 20th century, and also now the problem with the Greek minority in the south. So, basically, in general: throughout the centuries. What I want to point to, is that the conflict is on the level of national identity and not on the level of religious identity. Religion is only used as an additional aspect to power relations, since the Greek national identity is so much linked with the Greek Orthodox Church, but this is an ethnic conflict; (E: Yes.) at least from the point of view of the Albanians, it is not a religious conflict. While for Greeks there is not such a great difference between ethnic and religious: for them it is the same, ethnicity and religion, the Greek Orthodox Church and being Greek as a nationality. While Albanians have a completely different point of view. (E: So even if they are involved in the same conflict, they view it differently, from their different points of view?) They would say: ‘The Greeks are invading us’, but they would consider it ethnic, community based.

E7: If I get you well, you are saying that basically the relations between Muslims and Christians here within Albania are good, but sometimes they are being used as a secondary factor in a conflict that is already there, that has some different backgrounds?
M7: But only on the micro level, in the village. Not on a state level, between hierarchies of different religions. (E: Then you would say that they are just living in peace and harmony together?) Maybe they do not have that kind of interactions, but there are no conflicts. Especially that in Albania the division between religion and state is strict. (E: You mean a secular state?) Yes. And it is even easier with so many religions. Now that I compare it with Poland again: in Poland there is a division between Church and state, but in practice everybody knows that the Church has a huge influence on politics; and here it doesn’t.

E8: And if you say there might be not that many interactions between the different groups, do you also imply with that that there might be some indifference towards each other, or towards each other’s faith or denomination?

M8: I’m not sure if it is indifference, because it has a slightly negative meaning. I would say: it is co-existence. All communities accept that the other exists and ultimately they all consider themselves as Albanians; and that’s what counts. You probably heard about Pashko Vasa. He was an Albanian poet and one of the activists in the Albanian national Awakening, the national building movement in the late 19th century, the Rilindija combëtar Shqiptar, and he [Pashko Vasa] wrote a famous poem: ‘Oh Albania, my Albania’. One of the verses there is: ‘The religion of Albanians is Albanianism’, which was a call for national unity, but it also made people realize that they are Albanians, and that’s what counts, and religion is only part of their family identity or regional identity; since Catholics live in the north and Orthodox live in the south, people are very much tied to their region of origin. But ‘The religion of Albanians is Albanianism’ also became the slogan, the motto of the Albanian national movement; and that is actually how it is in practice.

E9: Was it invented just then, or did it already exist beforehand and was it giving a voice by this poet?

M9: The situation was like this, I would say, but he just formulated it thus.

E10: I see. I am just thinking back – you were talking about the 19th century and in the introduction you have told me that you are doing research on the Ottoman period, in the region that is nowadays Kosovo, I suppose you could also consider it a bit broader, in the region – once upon a time there were no Muslims at all here, in this region. Then, at a certain moment, they came into this part of the Balkans, this part of Europe. Can you tell me something about that situation: how was the situation within the Orthodox Church, or within the Orthodox and Catholic streams here in the region, and how did the integration with the new Muslim invaders take shape?

M10: First of all, before the Ottoman conquests in the middle ages, Albania and Kosovo were on the border of the influence zones of the Orthodox and Catholic Church. The mountains of northern Albania and Kosovo were more on the influence of the Vatican,
while the lowlands and especially the south of Albania were under the influence of Constantinople. And that was more or less the situation when the Ottomans came. Ottomans took control over the region politically, in terms of administration, while they did not force Islam – there were no forced conversions to Islam. Just Ottoman clerks or authorities came to administer cities and regions among the Christian population. Of course when someone wanted to make a career in the Ottoman state, one had to convert to Islam. Since, however we consider a secular state as a principle now, in the middle ages there was nothing like a secular state. Secular states just didn’t exist and the Ottoman Empire was in principle a Muslim state. But the Ottoman Empire was largely tolerant: they accepted and tolerated the presence of Christians and Jews, all monotheist religions. Islam says that Christians and Jews have the status of dhimmi and that means that they have simply the right to live and to keep and to practice their religion. And that also was the situation in the Ottoman Empire. The only drawback was that non-Muslims had to pay higher taxes, which by time became very high. And now we have another motive to turn to Islam. The first one was to make a career in the administration, the second was to pay lower taxes, and the third one – I would say – was [the wish] to turn to the privileged religion. In the cities it was obvious that ‘culture’ was Islam, since mosques were founded in towns and one could clearly make a link between welfare and Islam. So Islam first spread in cities, but then gradually also in the villages. But Catholicism e.g. remained strong in the mountains, where the Ottoman Empire didn’t have real power. Because the mountains between Montenegro, Kosovo and north Albania were never really conquered. People were living there in a kind of isolation from the lowlands, but they were also free: they didn’t have any authorities above them. And one of the factors that was also important in spreading Islam was that Ottoman Islam was also tolerant; especially Bektashis or other Sunni sects whose doctrine is a mix of Islam, but also with influences of Christianity, Judaism and some pagan beliefs. They were islamicizing the population, but largely nominally. I mean, people were changing names into Muslim names, they were not going to church anymore because there was a mosque built, they venerated saints in the same place but the saints got a different name. So on the level of folk religion not much really changed, only that nominally they were Muslims. And that was the character of islamization in the Balkans.

E11: Could you say that in the Balkans - even perhaps a majority of them – converted just in name, but remained Christians in their hearts and perhaps even transmitted that to the next generations?

M11: There was a phenomenon called ‘crypto-Christianity’, which meant that – [you know] in the Balkans, at that time, families were huge. And a family was a basic unit for taxation purposes, among others, and was represented by the head of the family. So there was this phenomenon where the head of the family converted to Islam and the rest of the household did not. And since in the Ottoman state Christians had the right
of priest visits or service, there was the situation that the priest – let’s say Catholic – came to serve a family and the head of the family, nominally Muslim, also participated.

E12: And if you say: ‘the priest came to serve the family’, do you mean that he made a small mass inside the house, Eucharist, or so?

M12: Yes. Or the priest came to baptize the children or to bless the household and so on. And also it is important to remember that Albanians, regardless of their religion today, have a strong consciousness of their Christian religion of origin. I often heard Albanians saying that ‘we were the first Christians in Europe’. Since Albanians are very much convinced that they stem directly from Illyrians, and Illyrians have been here forever, they are autochthons here; many Albanians say that Illyrians adopted Christianity just after Christ’s life, meaning that they were the first Christians in Europe. And this consciousness is very much present among Muslims and Christians alike, and they are very proud of this: they say they were Christians before the Romans. But coming back specifically to your question: the phase that many families – so to say – kept Christianity in their hearts and became nominally Muslim, was for sure a widespread phenomenon. Of course, there are no statistics, we can say nothing about the scale; but especially in the mountains it was like this, in many places. And there are also documents from missionaries from the Vatican in the 17th/18th century to Albania, writing reports that ‘there are these families, nominally Muslim, but they considered them as Christians. And it was also a common phenomenon for Muslims – nominal Muslims – to baptize their children. But actually, this happened also in Turkey, in Anatolia. My hypothesis is that, on the level of folk religion and local customs, it was most important for people to be lucky; in terms of: to protect their health, their welfare, their family. (E: You mean, it was their priority in life?) It was a priority, and they used all the religions that were around to protect themselves. So, even if they were Muslims, they baptized their children, because maybe it helped. And they had amulets, or some talismans; Muslims had for instance an amulet with Saint George, which is an Orthodox saint. But at the same time for instance they kept a note with a Koran verse, written by the hoja, the imam. So, that was on a folk level, on a local level. But I think that in the mind of Albanians it still remained.

E13: So you could perhaps say that they are considering religion, or using religion in a kind of pragmatic, or perhaps even an opportunistic way – or is that too strong?

M13: I’d say that it is too strong. But in rural areas, in the end: what’s religion there for? It is something you believe that is moving the world, but it is also something we want help from, where we are in trouble. So, if there is more than one religion around, why not protect ourselves more? And this also contributed to the co-existence of all religions: if there was a holy place, somewhere on the mountain – especially in north Albania you find a lot of pagan elements in local customs – if there was some mountain that was considered holy for some reason, throughout the centuries, and it was a place for
pilgrimage for both Muslims and Catholics, it didn’t create divisions between the communities, because they shared it. Maybe they made pilgrimages on different dates, but maybe [also] on the same date. [Or] maybe they went there on one day and Muslims stayed for the night, and Catholics didn’t. So, it was very much inside the community.

E14: We were talking about the history; what the ottoman invaders found here, when they came, and also what they brought here. A few days ago I spoke to somebody who knows Bulgaria quite well, who has been travelling there very often and also during a long period of time. She told me that, compared to Albania, there were many more forced conversions in Bulgaria – more violence has been used, so the problems between Muslims and Christians have been more intense there, throughout the times. How do you explain that in Albania it went relatively smoothly, do you have any theory about that?

M14: First of all, I think – from what I know; I know more of Serbia, but I think it was also the case in Bulgaria – that the [let’s say] myth of forced conversions to Islam was also created during the Bulgarian national movement in the 19th century. But the difference between Bulgaria in the Middle Ages and Albania, is that Bulgaria had a state tradition: the Bulgarian empire and the state religion, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. While Albania never had this. In history there were some princes, that are now considered Albanian, but what they thought themselves, in the 12th or 14th century: no idea. Albanians say that these were the first Albanian states. But the fact is that Albania never had a state, that was similar to today’s borders and that was a state, country of Albanians. And there was also no Albanian Church, like the Serbian Orthodox Church, a Patriarchate, like the Bulgarian Exarchate, or like the Greek Orthodox Church. So, behind Albanians there was no institution or hierarchy that would be crushed or threatened by the Ottomans.

E15: Just for the information of the listeners: the Albanian independence was in 1912 – if I am not mistaken – so that was the first time that there was a state in the nowadays form, and – as far as I know – the autocephalous Church is of a later date; or around the same time, perhaps?

M15: It was created around the 1920s, but it was recognized ten years later. (E: Yes, okay. So it all dates from the 20th century.) And one of the differences between Albania on the one hand, and Serbia and Bulgaria on the other hand, is also the thing that I mentioned, that religion was not part of an identity. And of course when – let’s say – Bulgarians were invaded by Muslims, the fact of being Bulgarian – or Slavic, at that time – was closely linked to being Orthodox. And suddenly there was a Muslim administration coming. The opposition of the people – not really of the people, but of the Church hierarchy – that was motivating the people to uprisings and protests, was much stronger [in these two areas]. In Albania there was nothing like this. I’d also say
that Albanians, during the Ottoman Empire, had a largely pragmatic attitude to
religion. And there were many cases of Albanians actually achieving the highest levels
in the Ottoman administration, becoming *vizirs* or *grand vizirs*; making careers, and
then coming back as a local administrator, after making career in Istanbul. (E: Former
Constantinople.) Former Constantinople.

**E16:** So, in fact there were two factors [why the integration of the Ottoman invaders in
Albania went relatively smoothly]: firstly the attitude, the pragmatic attitude of the
people, who just wanted to have a good career, or to avoid taxes, and secondly, the
non-existence of a very strong structure of the state or a the national Church?

**M16:** That’s what I would say. And in the case of Albania, it was also that – e.g. in
Skanderbeg times, when Skanderbeg’s uprising was crushed eventually, after several
years of the uprising. (E: Yes, Skanderbeg, the national hero here in Albania.) And after
the death of Skanderbeg, after the uprising was crushed, many people who were, or
could be, potential leaders of the population, were killed. And a population without
leader is more prone to influence. That could be, in some regions, another factor
[reason] for the willingness to adopt Islam.

**E17:** Yes. So, for the historical information: the conquests – let’s say – of Skanderbeg, or his
military successes were just before the Ottoman Empire?

**M17:** It was in the late 15th century and it was after the Ottoman conquest. (E: Alright.) The
Ottomans came – the battle of Kosovo was 1389 – and one can say that whole Albania
and Kosovo was conquered by the Ottomans till the early 15th century. And
Skanderbeg, which is an interesting story, he was originally Christian; he was taken as
a boy to Istanbul and he converted to Islam; he made a career in the Ottoman
administration, and then he came to Albania, converted back to Christianity and
motivated people to make an uprising against the Turks. The story of Skanderbeg is
actually a good example of how Albanians treat religion. (E: You mean, pragmatic?)
Maybe it is too simplistic to say it is purely pragmatic – of course – but, it is largely
pragmatics, also today.

**E18:** In connection to that [pragmatic attitude] and also in connection to what you said
before about *crypto-Christianity*, can you say something about mixed marriages,
before or nowadays: how that plays a role in the whole context?

**M18:** Mixed marriages, already at that time, were frequent. Of course we cannot say that e.g.
there were more mixed marriages than marriages within one religion. Of course, every
mixed marriage is somehow an exception to the rule, since people usually marry
people that are just similar: Poles marry Poles, Albanians marry Albanians. If I say that
there are a lot of Albanian-Italian marriages – that is true – but it also means that it is
still much fewer than Albanian-Albanian marriages, of course. But it was not
unfrequent and... (E: Now you are speaking about that it was not unfrequent to have
Catholic-Muslim, of Orthodox-Muslim [marriages], but both [partners being] Albanians?) Yes. The thing is, that in Islam a Muslim man can marry a Christian woman, and the woman doesn’t have to convert to Islam – that is a principle. But a Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man. So, when we speak of Muslim-Christian marriages, we always have to keep in mind that these were Muslim men, taking Christian women, and not the opposite.

E19: And were there no cases, like nowadays in Western Europe e.g. that they did form such marriages, but then with a compulsory conversion of the person who is Catholic, or…

M19: Now it is totally different. Now nobody really cares what is the religious background of the partner. Meaning, maybe it does play a role in some cases, but it is not so important. But in – let’s say – the 15th, 16th or 17th century it was the only way. And nowadays mixed marriages are – maybe it is not right to say that they are popular but they are absolutely not a problem. Sometimes they are linked with the conversion of the partner – usually the woman; since Albania is a patriarchal society. So it is the woman who has to adapt – but not necessarily.

E20: You mean that the conversion may follow the plans for the marriage?

M20: Yes. May be, but it doesn’t have to.

E21: No, okay. And do you see any link between the relative high frequency of interreligious marriages and on the other hand the relative large extent of tolerance between the religions?

M21: Yes, of course these factors will contribute, one to the other. Meaning, the relatively high level of tolerance leads to a higher number of mixed marriages and also the other way round.

E22: Yes, it is a two-sided effect. Could you think of other factors that contribute to the good relationships between Muslims and Christians here in Albania?

M22: Maybe the presence of the need for unity of all Albanians, in opposition the Serbs, and in opposition to Greeks and Italians. And this kind of unity doesn't support internal conflict, which would make Albanians weaker, if they were inter-conflicted.

E23: What kind of threat do Greeks, or Serbs, or Italians pose; what type of threat do they pose to Albanians?

M23: They are strong neighbors. And Greeks have territorial claims to Albania. Italians invaded Albania before World War II and Albania was a protectorate of the Italian Kingdom. And Serbs are related to the conflict of Kosovo.
E24: So these are mostly political threats, with the threats of the expansion of their territories? (M. nods). And also in other terms, e.g., that the elderly generation in Albania might fear the influence of Italian lifestyle on the young people?

M24: No, no, no. Albanians are largely fascinated by the western way of life. After the years of being a closed, isolated country under Enver Hoxha’s regime, Albanians still received Italian television, although it was illegal. But Italy is so close that the communist authorities could not restrict this TV-signal. So for years Albanians were looking at Italy – on their TVs – and all the things that they didn’t have and could not afford, like e.g., cars. Since, during the 50 years of Hoxa’s regime, private cars were illegal, people were not allowed to have cars. So, Albanians were largely fascinated by Italy; in terms of way of life, standards of life, quality of life.

E25: Yes. So there is no perceived threat on that level.

M25: Although Albanians are very much aware and close to their own traditions, they consider themselves as a part of Europe and they want to participate in the modern European cultural way of life.

E26: Yes. Next to this factor, could you see other factors that might contribute to the harmony between Muslims and Christians here in the country?

M26: I don’t know, can’t think of anything now. Do you have anything in mind?

E27: I’d suggest for instance the fact that there are no really very distinguishing socio-economic differences between the two groups, might that be...

M27: That is linked to the fact that, under Hoxha’s regime, under the communist regime, everybody was exactly as poor. Another element, which was also connected to communism, is that all religions were banned in 1967, officially. And Albania, according to the constitution, was the first atheist country in the world. With all religions banned and persecuted, all – not all, but most – churches destroyed, most mosques destroyed, some converted to sport halls or some other public buildings, everybody was a victim of the regime. So there was no preferred religion – let’s say that one religion would be kept, and the others were persecuted. This would create conflict, for sure. But this was not the situation.

E28: Might one say that the fact that both were persecuted by the same communist/atheist regime, and also to the same extent and in the same manner, created same solidarity among themselves, between the different groups?

M28: That’s what I would say. Then it was also many years that religion was banned, so there was a whole generation of people that was raised without religion. And they were only aware of the fact that their family was Muslim or Christian. But they could not go to church and there was no religion in their everyday lives.
E29: Not even some hidden practicing of religion in the homes?

M29: Hidden of course, but not on a large scale; since the Albanian secret police was very powerful.

E30: I see. I'd like to turn now to the comparison of the situation in Kosovo and in Albania. Can you indicate some factors that led to the difficult situation in Kosovo, even leading to a war, a civil war in Kosovo, if you compare it to the Albanian situation: why did the Albanians in Kosovo have a war with the Serbs, and not e.g. the Serbs against the Albanians in Albania; or some other type of interethnic, or interreligious war?

M30: First of all, in Yugoslavia the Albanians were a minority: everyone, apart from the Albanians, were Slavs – whether Croats, or Serbs, or Bosnians, or Slovenians. And Serbs, with the rise of nationalism in the 1980s, considered them a threat and as an intruder in their country. This was also not a religious conflict, of Albanians and Serbs over Kosovo. This was an ethnic conflict. And for Albanians religion became a secondary factor. The situation in Kosovo is different from that in Albania, because some 95% of Albanians in Kosovo are Muslim and there is a small minority of Catholics; while virtually all Serbs are Serbian Orthodox. So, although this was an ethnic conflict, and a political conflict, inspired by Serbian nationalists, it acquired a religious aspect. Just because in practice, most Albanians were Muslims, while Serbs were Orthodox. And also because of the link between the Serbian Orthodox Church with the Serbian State. While in Albania, there are no Serbs. Albania is 95% or more homogeneous Albanian. There is a small Greek minority in the south, and there are problems with Greeks about territorial claims. And there are Roma, but Roma don’t have a tradition of state[hood], which means that they cannot pose a political threat; and there are some tiny minorities of Macedonians, of Bosnians, but they are very few, so there was not really an occasion for Albania to have a conflict with Serbia.

E31: Because there were no groups threatening them within the borders? (M: Yes.) And is that all there is to it, or are there other factors; e.g. do the Kosovo-Albanians practice or live their religion in a different way, so that they might provoke more aggressivity from the Serbs, than the Albanians in Albania proper do?

M31: The problem of religion in former Yugoslavia is that religion is linked to national identity, while for Albanians it is not. So, Serbs are Serbian Orthodox, Croats are Catholic and Bosnians are Muslim. They all speak the same languages, more or less. There are some differences between Croatian, and Serbian and Bosnian, but they are minor. And when you consider the fact that there was a war between Serbia and Bosnia, and between Serbia and Croatia, it was also a political conflict, over power. Religion was used to motivate people to fight. It was not a purely religious conflict, like the Crusades – although I would argue that also the Crusades were wars for political power and recourses, and not for faith. So, from the point of view of the Serbs, maybe one of the elements of the conflict was that Albanians are Muslims – especially in the
propaganda it was [said] that they are fundamentalists, a threat to Europe’s Christianity, which in fact is not true. Because also Kosovar Islam is very moderate, very tolerant. There were some attempts to plant some fundamentalist Islam groups – from Saudi Arabia, let’s say – but they were never popular. Because they suddenly told the people, who considered themselves as Muslims, that they are bad Muslims, that they should dress differently, that they should behave differently, that they shouldn’t drink alcohol, that they should fast during Ramadan, which in Albania or Kosovo people don’t do on a mass scale. So these Islamic groups were trying to impose their traditions.

E32: Was it just before the Kosovo wars, or afterwards?

M32: It was in the 1990s, early 2000s. There were some attempts; which was interesting, because with these Islamic groups, there came a lot of funding – from Saudi Arabia, let’s say. And Kosovo was, and now is, a very poor country. But still, this fundamentalist Islam didn’t find good ground in Kosovo, because it’s so alien to the Kosovar tradition and culture. But of course, Serbs use this argument of these Islamic groups, to say: ‘This is in fact a religious war against the spreading of Islam in Europe (E: So it was misused). It was misused. Like religion in case of almost all conflicts in the Balkans.

E33: I see. Just now you were talking about the threats from outside; or at least the attempts to gain religious power over the people, e.g. in Kosovo – and I also heard from people that it was the case here, in Albania; that e.g. Saudi or Egyptian Muslims tried to make a kind of fundamentalist reform and to impose that on the people, trying to influence them into that direction. Also I heard about – mainly Protestant – churches, from outside, from abroad, trying to convert people; to convert Muslims to Christianity or to push on Orthodox or Catholic believers here in Albania to become Evangelical Christians e.g. How do you see that factor: is it a real threat, or has it been a threat for a moment, and has it faded away?

M33: I don’t think it was ever a threat. It was on a very small scale. There were some Protestant Churches, that have a very low number of believers in Albania and in Kosovo. But since the Protestant Church is so alien to the tradition of the Balkans, they have very few sympathizers. It is like with the fundamentalists. It just doesn’t go together with the culture here. And people also don’t have a motive to turn to these religions. So it is on a very small scale.

E34: Do you see other factors as a threat for the future relationships between Muslims and Christians in this country?

M34: I don’t think so, considering the century long tradition of co-existence in Albania of different religions, and the changes that the country went through in the last years. I don’t think that there is a threat to religious tolerance. Since all the religions here are
not new; they are not linked to political power; they are not linked to economic power; and they are part of the historical cultural heritage of the region.

E35: And are there any lessons to be learnt for us, as foreigners: for you, from North Eastern Europe, and for me, from Western Europe? What can we learn from people who live, coexist here peacefully?

M35: Well, the problem of Western Europe with Muslims is of a completely different character, since Muslims are immigrants from either the Middle East, or North Africa or Turkey. They are Muslims, but first of all they are from a completely different cultural area, cultural circle,. And it is not only the problem that they are of Muslim religion, but it is also about some other cultural features that they represent, and that they wish to protect. (E: You are thinking of...?) I am thinking of differences in culture, in way of life, in family issues, in opposition to assimilation, in different state traditions, in different relations of power in their home countries; while in Albania nobody suddenly came and changed the religious structure. The changes took centuries to take place. And it was so slow, and spread in time, so it was much easier to absorb. It was not a phenomenon that took place in the last twenty years, or fifty years, or on a mass scale.

E36: But was the Ottoman conquest of this part of Europe not in any aspect comparable to the coming of Muslims to Western Europe?

M36: I don’t think so, because immigrants in Western Europe, first of all, have lower status. (E: Sure.) They come from a different cultural background; while Ottoman Turkey is close and there are similarities in culture. (E: Already before the Ottoman Empire you mean; there were already similarities between...) between the cultures, yes, yes. The situation is almost incomparable, in almost all aspects.

E37: But you were also talking about the speed...

M37: I am also talking about the speed; and I am also talking about the fact that there was also no conflict between an existing state and a new coming state, with people changing the religious or ethnic structure of a state and posing challenges to the labor market, to the social policy system, and so on. Meaning, the situation is hardly comparable. In Albania it were changes in religious structure, that took years, and centuries, within Albanians themselves. It was not imposed. While the conflict in Western Europe, between Muslims and the local population is also of cultural and political character.

E38: You think that that is even more important, or more strong than the religious aspect?

M38: I am not sure, since it is not my daily experience. And in Poland we don’t have experience with Muslim immigration. But it is definitely much more difficult to solve in Western-Europe. One thing Western-Europeans should learn, I think – or all
Europeans should learn, is that Muslims, despite the image created by the media, are not – or not all Muslims – are a threat or fundamentalists. We should understand that Islam has different faces. And we shouldn't automatically link Islam with terrorism and threat. I also think we should get more knowledge about Islam, and about the culture of Islam in order to understand the people. Because one thing that leads to conflict, is also prejudice.

E39: Definitely. I could imagine that those lessons that you mentioned, are extremely important lessons, but that you could even draw those lessons without knowing the situation in Albania. If you look very specifically at this particular model of such peaceful co-existence during so many centuries, could there be any lesson to be drawn?

M39: I don’t think you can transplant it. Since the way the situation was created in Albania, was just so different from Western Europe. Because the problem with... in Albania everybody is Albanian; and they just have a different religion. They are similar, they speak the same language. In Western Europe the problem with immigrants is also that they don’t speak the language, they don’t know the culture, they don’t know the cultural code, they don’t want to assimilate, they don’t want to participate in a state, they want to maintain their traditions, which sometimes is contradictory to the environment they enter. So they are just foreign people with foreign cultures, while in Albania the culture is largely the same, only the religious element is distinguishing.

E40: Yes, I agree with you that the differences are much deeper and [that changes went] much faster in Western Europe, but at the same time there are already Muslims living in Western Europe for the 3rd and even 4th generation. So, that might make a difference for daily life.

M40: Yes, especially that some of them consider themselves – let’s say – British or French or... (E: Dutch.) Dutch.

E41: Might be open-ended?

M41: Might be open-ended.

E42: Yes, yes. Anyway it’s good to be informed about the situation here and to see it also as a very beautiful example of how it can be if factors are positive and if people are willing to meet each other as persons and not – in the first place – as an enemy or as an alien. Thank you very much for all the details and well-informed things you have been telling me during this interview, thank you.

M42: Thank you very much, my pleasure.