

One object, several definitions. The Albanian “church-mosque” dispute

In the city of Shkodra, the ceremonial use of the so-called *kishë-xhami*, the “church-mosque” in the Rozafa castle, has been a thorn in the eye between the Catholic Church and the Muslim Community. Apparently the last chapter in the dispute began around 2005 when the Catholic Church in Shkodra organised a mass in the ruins on Saint Stephen’s Day on 26 December. This provoked some representatives of the Muslim Community. At the same time, individuals described as “Wahhabis”, referring to bearded Muslim men with short trousers whom many associate with “Arab” and “foreign” versions of Islam, have been observed performing *dawa* in the ruins. So, we are faced with at least two different religious claims to the object, one Catholic and one Muslim.

In addition, there is a third position: the Albanian state, represented by the State commission for cults, which currently lists it as one of the 201 most important national “cultural monuments/religious objects” and dubs it “Faltorja (kishë-xhami)”,¹ i.e. a “sanctuary” or “prayer chapel”, as well as a “church” and/or “mosque”. With this label, the official definition is at the same time religious, non-religious, Muslim and Christian. The Muslim Community calls it the Sultan Fatihu Mosque, and the Catholic Church, St. Stephen’s Church. In order to emphasise the fact that it is disputed, and that I do not take a stand, I will in the following refer to it by its nickname, the “church-mosque”.

The history of the disputed ruins inside the Rozafa fortress in many ways Albania’s religious history in a nutshell, with a pagan-Christian-Islamic-Communist-atheist past which has gone through several stages of sacralisation, secularisation, and resacralisation. In the ruins, the most visible legacy is that from the Venetian and Ottoman period. A little museum in the castle displays old arms, a statue of the legendary Rozafa, and a souvenir shop. There have been plans to make the archaeological ruins tourist friendly, for instance by building a historical museum. Due to the dispute, USAID funds for restoration were withdrawn. In 2007 the Minister of Tourism at the time planned to turn the area into a national park. At the time of writing, all plans seem to be pending. In the meanwhile, official and unofficial Muslim and Catholic worship occasionally takes place inside the ruins. Reliable information about the course of events is scant, but our interest is the contending interpretations of the situation and the rhetorical patterns of the various positions in the debates.

The term “church-mosque” suggests that we have to do with a place where an intense negotiation of symbolic boundaries takes place. It is also frequent in debates about the character of the place and its usage. At first sight the dispute is simply a Muslim-Christian disagreement over the character and uses of an old cultic place, in short, an intercommunal dispute over symbols in the public sphere, with all that entails of questions of ownership of and access to the object in question. Religious diversity, legalisation of

¹ Komuniteti shtetëror për kultet, “Objekte fetare monumente kulture”, www.kshk.gov.al/?fq=brenda&gj=gj1&kid=19

religion and religious revival necessarily lead to concrete questions of how to share or redistribute space and resources. Since these almost by definition are limited, the Muslim Community and the Catholic Church inevitably become competitors. Also secular actors are part of the debate about Albania's cultural heritage.

The church-mosque debate goes to the heart of many sensitive questions in the Republic of Albania, particularly religion,² and the relationship between religion and Albanian national identity is extraordinarily complex. All this affects the arguments in the church-mosque debate, which shows how multilayered nationalist and religious webs of meanings³ overlap. All this simultaneously illustrates the processual, cultural and discursive aspects of sacralisation and secularisation.

Theoretically underpinned by Anthony P. Cohen's symbolic constructivism,⁴ I will argue that the conceptualisations of sacred, profane, and secular in the church-mosque case, as well as the notion of taboo, are delineated by symbolic boundaries. By combining symbol-oriented and non-essentialist approaches to identity and community from theories of religion on nationalism, I analyse how religion and nation figure on the ideological, conceptual, subjective level. Along this line, I define nationalism as a distinctive way of "talking, thinking, acting, and "imagining" collective identity and social solidarity",⁵ which is also an important aspect of religion.

In this article I will unveil some particular ideas and patterns of thinking of nation, history, religion and ethnicity in the multireligious, secular, post-Communist Albanian context. The qualities which the different religious institutions ascribe to the church-mosque, and competing definitions and claims, all contribute to demarcate collective identities. Some of the most typical clusters of arguments and positions in the ongoing debate will be analysed with regard to the discursive processes of sacralisation, resacralisation and desacralisation, which are simultaneously at work. In this, interpretations of the past and the national culture are central. My main argument is that the church-mosque dispute is characterised by a particular rhetorical pattern grounded in a typical Albanian discourse, which I will define as nationalist.⁶ This is so internalised that it makes the religious communities claim their perceived right to symbolic control of a religious object by defining it as *secular* or *multi-religious*.

Sacralisations, desacralisations, and resacralisations

Shkodra has traditionally been a stronghold of both of Islam and Catholicism in Albania. The inhabitants are mainly Muslims and Catholics, and said to be both more religious and more anxious about religious differences than people in the rest of the country. Across religious boundaries, the Shkodrans nevertheless pride themselves with the Rozafa castle, located on a 113meter high hill at the entrance to the city. Built 4th Century before our era as a fortress by the Illyrians, whom almost 80 per cent of modern Albanians consider their

² See e.g. Zirina Lllambro, "Fetë kundër Censurit", *Panorama*, 15.12.2012.

³ Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, Basic books, New York, 2000, p. 5.

⁴ Anthony P. Cohen, *The symbolic construction of community*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003 [1985]; *Signifying identities: anthropological perspectives on boundaries and contested values*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000.

⁵ Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1997, p. 5, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

ancestors,⁷ the place has been involved in more than one dispute. In Antiquity, it was a hot-spot for warring Romans and Illyrians until the Roman Empire in 168 before our era gained control of the Illyrian lands along the western coast of the Balkan peninsula. During the first centuries AC, the local population was christened, and later divided by the Theodosian line between the Eastern and the Western ecclesiastical sphere of influence.

In the late Roman period, the fortress was conquered both by Byzantines and Slavs. In the early Middle Ages, a castle named Rozafa was built on the hill. This has given rise to the Rozafa legend, according to which a young mother, Rozafa, was immured in the wall of the castle during the construction. Rozafa was chosen because her husband was the only one of the three builders who kept his *besa* and did not warn his wife of their plan to sacrifice the first person who showed up the following day. The idea was that human sacrifice would fortify the building and prevent inexplicable destructions. The Rozafa legend is special in its emphasis on the traditional, cross-religious concept of *besa*, which Albanian nationalists usually have glorified and defined as a core value of Albanian culture.⁸ Rozafa is but one variation of a myth of construction sacrifice found also in other countries,⁹ while it is quite common in Albania to sacrifice an animal or an object when a house is built. To some Albanians, this has religious significance, while others consider it a purely “Albanian” tradition. In the north some people explain their sacrificial practices with reference to the Rozafa legend of the immured wife.¹⁰

Inside Rozafa’s walls, an Orthodox church was built in Gothic style in 1319 during Byzantine domination. This became the city’s cathedral at the time, and was named after Saint Stephen, *Shën Shtjefën* in Albanian, the patron saint of Shkodra.¹¹ In the 15th Century, St. Stephen’s church was expanded by the Venetians who had then taken control of the area and turned it into a Catholic church. Among the many battles and sieges, the most dramatic took place during the Ottoman conquest. The Ottoman siege of Shkodra in 1479 left 60,000 people dead, and meant the defeat of Christian cultural hegemony in the area. St. Stephen was converted into a military mosque, with a minaret added, and renamed *Sulltan Fatihu*. More architectonic changes came through the years, but in 1878 it was badly damaged and afterwards turned into an ammunition dump. Until Albanian independence in 1912, when the Albanian flag with the double-headed eagle was hoisted on the hill, the castle functioned as a garrison.

⁷ IPSOS survey, Symbolic Nation building in West Balkans. Albania, 2011, p. 79, conducted by the internationally-reputed polling bureau using standard techniques of random selection of interviewees. The poll encompassed 1500 respondents over 18 years of age in Albania and in each of the Yugoslav successor states (Slovenia excluded). The results are now available on www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/projects/nation-w-balkan/index.html.

⁸ Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, “Times past: references for the construction of local order in present-day Albania”, in Maria Todorova (ed.), *Balkan identities: nation and memory*, Hurst and Company, London, 2004, p. 107.

⁹ Alan Dundes, *The Walled-Up Wife: A Casebook*, University of Wisconsin, 1996, http://books.google.no/books?id=MDmGX5y40IwC&hl=no&source=gbs_navlinks; Ardian Klosi, *Mythologie am Werk: Kazantzakis, Andrić, Kadare: eine vergleichende Untersuchung am besonderen Beispiel des Bauopfermotivs*, Sagner, München, 1991.

¹⁰ Kristin Peterson-Bidoshi, “The Dordolec: Albanian House Dolls and the Evil Eye”, *Journal of American Folklore*, Volume 119, Number 473, 2006, p. 348.

¹¹ Robert Elsie, *The Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture*, New York University Press, 2001, p. 241.

During the inter-war period, Albania's religious institutions came under increasing pressure to detach themselves from foreign religious influence, as a means of reinforcing, or rather creating a sense of national unity in the young nation as well as to prevent foreign countries with territorial ambitions in Albania from exploiting the religious institutions and divisions politically. The secularisation and albanisation process from the inter-war period was continued by the Albanian Communists and radicalised. After the Communist take-over in 1944, religion soon came under strict governmental control, and religious property was nationalised. The first phase of the Albanian culture revolution from the mid-1960s included the official abolition of religious worship in 1967, when 2,160¹² monasteries, Sufi lodges, mosques and churches, were officially closed. From 1973 Enver Hoxha's regime concentrated its efforts on completely cleansing the Albanians society of religion, and the 1976 constitution completely banned all forms of religious worship. A few religious edifices, like the church-mosque, were basically left intact as museums so the Albanians could observe a bygone stage of history when people had still not ridden themselves of religious beliefs, which Communists teleological historiography defined as alien, imperialist, feudal, backward, revisionist and oriental.¹³

Paradoxically, this culturally devastating policy was presented as a protection of the "ethnic and cultural unity of the Albanian people". As the national Institute of Cultural Monuments enthusiastically phrased it in 1970, the state had preserved "more than hundred" churches and mosques as evidence of the "creative talent of our people" and of the "Illyrian continuity in our land".¹⁴ As a historically irrefutable evidence of Illyrian presence, the Rozafa fortress was turned into a military museum. In this, the visitors would learn the official communist historiography: that the Albanians were the direct descendants of the Illyrians and Illyrian and autochthonous in the area, a small people which through its history had suffered unjust treatment at the hands of the neighbouring peoples, but bravely defended itself.

The opening of the Plumbi Mosque below the Rozafa hill in 1990 marked the rebirth of Muslim life in Albania in public. In January 1991 the government recognised the Muslim Community, which soon moved its centre from Shkodra to Tirana. The same year Catholicism was rehabilitated when Mother Teresa for the first time in 1991 was allowed to enter the country. In 1993, Pope John Paul II visited Albania and consecrated new bishops during his visit to Shkodra.¹⁵ These events were celebrated by both Muslims and Christians.

¹² Egin Ceka, "Atheismus und Religionspolitik im kommunistischen Albanien", in Oliver Jens Schmitt (ed.), *Religion und Kultur im albanischsprachigen Südosteuropa*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2010, p. 223.

¹³ Peter Prifti, *Socialist Albania since 1944: domestic and foreign developments*, MIT press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1978, p. 35-36, 143-167; Enis Sulstarova, *Arratisje nga Lindja: orientalizmi shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadareja*, Globic press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2006.

¹⁴ Adhemi in *Shqipëria e re* 3, 1970.

¹⁵ The incumbent pope has described his predecessor's visit as a demonstration of "the apostolic strength" which enabled the revival of the Catholic hierarchy "for the good of believers and of the Albanian people." Pope Benedict XVI quoted in "Pope notes John Paul II's role in Albania".

Pro-church and pro-mosque arguments¹⁶

In an interview in November 2005, the Catholic vicar of Shkodra, Monsignor Luçjan Agostini explained the ongoing dispute with reference to past injustices during the Ottoman era.¹⁷ In contrast with the Muslim Community which tends to hail the Ottoman period as one of glory and religious tolerance towards non-Muslims,¹⁸ the vicar does, like the other Catholic hierarchs in Albania,¹⁹ interpret it as Islamic destruction of Christian culture:

Historically, St. Stephen's Church has always been a church and it was built sometime around the 13th century [...] Of course, with the fall of Shkodra to the Ottoman occupants, the church was turned into a mosque [...] It was converted violently because it was taken from the Catholic Church and converted by use of violence, like the Cathedral during the Communist era, which was turned into a sports hall; it was taken violently without the approval of the believers, so can we go there and demand a mosque or insist that it should continue to be a sports hall?!²⁰

By this, Agostini draws a parallel between the Ottoman and the Communist approach to the Church, suggesting that the Albanian Communists continued the "Muslim" tradition of desecrating Catholic sanctuaries. This idea is common in Albanian Catholic discourse, in which Albanian Communism, is portrayed as a legacy of brutal Oriental culture, or rather anti-culture, devastating for authentic Catholic and Albanian traditions and values.²¹ The immediate historical background for this is the particularly harsh persecution of the Catholic hierarchy during Communism given the community's alleged "Fascist" and "reactionary" tendencies and supernatural religious structure.

The vicar emphasises that St. Stephen's Church did not lose its "value" even though the "Ottoman occupants" turned it into a mosque:

We have not demanded that it should be returned to the Church as a church [as such] now. We have respected it and honoured it as a historical monument, since it is the citadel of Shkodra and one knows its importance in the history of Shkodra and of the Albanian people. However, the Muslim Community made a problem out of it since it has been a mosque. One [the Catholic Church] does not deny that it has been a mosque.²²

¹⁶ This section and the following have substantial similarities with chapter 2.6, 3 and the epilogue in Cecilie Endresen, *Is the Albanian's religion really "Albanianism"? Religion and nation according to Muslim and Christian leaders in Albania*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2012.

¹⁷ Luçjan Agostini, interview with the author, Shkodra, 8.11.2005.

¹⁸ See e.g. Dorian Demetja, "Përshtypje nga Beogradi", *Drita Islame* 10, 2006, [http://dritaislame.com/tegithe.php?](http://dritaislame.com/tegithe.php?subaction=showfull&id=1150721101&archive=&start_from=&ucat=1&)

[subaction=showfull&id=1150721101&archive=&start_from=&ucat=1&](http://dritaislame.com/tegithe.php?subaction=showfull&id=1150721101&archive=&start_from=&ucat=1&)

¹⁹ See Endresen 2012.

²⁰ Agostini 2005.

²¹ E.g. Zef Simoni, interview with the author, Shkodra, 7.11.2005; Angelo Massafra, *Pajtohuni me Hyjin*, The Catholic Church, Shkodra, 2002.

²² "Por kjo nuk do të thotë se ka humbur vlerën e vet. Ne sot as që kemi kërkuar asnjëherë që t'i kthehet kishës si kishë. E kemi respektuar dhe e kemi nderuar si monument historik, sepse është kalaja e Shkodrës ku dihet se çfarë rëndësie ka si monument në historinë e Shkodrës dhe të popullit

The former church is, according to this, still precious to Catholics due to its historical importance to the nation as a whole. That it for a period of time functioned as a mosque, does not change that since its Christian character is portrayed as timeless and fundamentally untainted by non-Christians' efforts to destroy it. As a contrast to the Muslim Community, Catholicism is here portrayed as generous and forward-looking, and St. Stephen's Church becomes a symbol thereof. An underlying premise in the vicar's argument is probably that the old church represents both Christendom in Albania and national resistance to foreign invaders. The place retains its symbolic value for Catholics, both from its past as a church (triumph) and as a mosque (defeat and trauma).

At a press conference, Agostini's superior, archbishop Massafra of Shkodra, attempted to clarify the Church's position in the dispute. First, he adamantly asserted that the Church had become "involved against its will" in this unfortunate issue full of rumours, media speculations and misunderstandings, for which he implicitly blamed the local mufti.²³ The archbishop assured that Church's only intention was to celebrate St. Stephen, "the patron saint of Shkodra", as part of an old tradition (ibid.). Besides, he noted, "nobody has ever complained" about the celebration there on St. Stephen's Day:

I am sorry about this issue, which concerns a cultural monument which over the last centuries has served the function of a church, transformed into a mosque by the Ottoman conquest [...] Some newspaper headlines like "war between the religious communities" etc. are totally inappropriate. How can there be a war between two parts when one of them does not know anything about it? [...] We are not involved at all. I believe the object in question through its history has served both the religious Communities [...] The object is the property of the culture of the Albanian people [...] The state is in charge of protecting it. As I told the Mufti of Shkodra, it seems that a rumour has become "a mountain out of a molehill" for no reason. There are no reasons to create dissension, which we do not want and do not accept, and we must all not let such a thing happen.²⁴

With this, the archbishop, much like the vicar, portrayed the Catholic Church as an innocent and passive community in a conflict created by others, i.e., the Muslim Community and the mufti. Moreover, the Catholic primate in town referred to the inhabitants' common cultural heritage and praised very old, cross-religious traditions, insinuating that the Muslim Community is trying to disrupt them. "The other" who sows dissension and undermines Albanian traditions is, in the Catholic narrative, the Muslim leadership, while the Catholic community is, by implication, a peaceful protector of religious tolerance, local traditions, and national culture. From this Catholic perspective it is, in short, Albanian and Catholic values which are under threat.

The Muslim Community did not let go of the issue after the Church declarations. On the front page of the Community's monthly *Udha islame*, the Mufti of Shkodra, Bashkim Bajraktari, drew a parallel to the dispute to the ongoing conflict related to the Danish

shqiptar. Megjithatë ja lind problemi prej komunitetit mysliman se ka qenë xhami. Nuk mohohet fakti se ka qenë xhami." Agostini 2005.

²³ Angelo Massafra, "Konferencë shtypi: për çështjen e kishës – xhami tek Kalaja e Shkodrës", www.kishakatolikeshkoder.com/Arqipeshkvia/konference_shtyp1i.htm, 2005.

²⁴ Ibid.

Muhammad cartoons and claimed that the “arrogance against Muslims and Islam increases every day in our country and in the West”.²⁵ He also detected this conflict on the national level: Criticising what he saw as a “tendentious spirit which undermines the tolerance and which is nurtured by certain newspapers and media in Albania”,²⁶ the mufti lamented that people “forget, or pretend to forget the influence, the role and the contribution of Albanian Muslims to culture, civilisation, tolerance, and good will”.²⁷

Bajraktari’s communiqué included some typical Albanian nationalist references to his own Community’s contributions to culture and tolerance,²⁸ but was clearly influenced by an international conflict between parts of the Islamic world and the “West”. As such, he saw the local Shkodra dispute as part of a greater scheme against Islam and Muslims. This bleak picture was reiterated by the young mufti in the neighbouring district Puka, Gëzim Kopani. In a communiqué on behalf of the Muslim Community, Kopani declared his support for their Muslim brothers in Shkodra who had been offended by this “open violation of the religious tolerance”,²⁹ and he denounced what he saw as

The immoderate actions committed by other persons or communities [...] [and] the permission of the state for performing religious rituals such as the case (of the Catholic mass) in the Sultan Fatihu mosque in the citadel of Shkodra. The state’s attitude to these actions is unclear as it is well known that the citadel of Shkodra is a cultural monument and that it is not allowed to have religious rituals. But it seems that the Catholics, headed by Archbishop [...] Massafra, are privileged.³⁰

To both muftis, the Catholic use of the church-mosque became an example of continuous injustice to Muslims and Islam, for which the Catholic Church, in their view, in alliance with the state, is responsible. From this perspective, both the Church and the state have been culpable of violating national interests as well as the Albanian constitution since religious ceremonies should have no place in the public space. The victims are, from this point of view, Islam and Muslims. The way these two *ulama*³¹ to a much greater extent than their colleagues in the Muslim Community claim that Islam is under attack globally, hints at a certain rhetorical influence from fundamentalist rhetoric³² and a stronger identification with the global *umma* than with the Albanian nation. However, their critique is directed at tendencies to disrespect *secularist* principles, which places the two texts firmly within an Albanianist discourse.

The problem in Shkodra must be seen in the light of a series of intercommunal controversies over the last decade, and minor violent incidents in the 1990s with religious overtones, such as grenades against the Albanian-Orthodox church, the mufti’s house, and at a statue of a Franciscan monk. None of these criminal acts ever solved, but occurred during 1997-99, a politically turbulent period in the region. In general, postcommunist

²⁵ Bashkim Bajraktari, “Komunikatë e Myftinisë Shkodër mbi publikimin e karikaturave provokuese”, *Udha Islame*, February 2006.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kopani 2006.

³⁰ Kopani 2006.

³¹ Islamic scholars.

³² Cf. Zeidan 2003, 9-19, 76-83.

religious and political leaders in Albania have promoted “religious tolerance” as a national virtue and turned it into a hallmark of Albanian religious discourse.³³ Also concrete efforts to reduce social tension along religious lines have been made, most prominently when the Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox leaders of Shkodra used their positions to calm their flocks and preach peace and unity in 1997.³⁴ Yet, like any other country, Albania has its religious controversies, and the ceremonial use of the church-mosque is only one of them. That is in turn related to the problem of the redistribution of religious property, one of the main sources of disgruntlement for the Communities in the relation to the state.

Other religious controversies

The church-mosque dispute mirrors a series of other Muslim-Christian disagreement on symbols in the public sphere both in Shkodra and South Albania, particularly over big crosses erected by Catholics or Orthodox on hills and in areas with a mixed population. As Albania does not have strong traditions for indiscrete religious landmarks, some of these crosses have caused considerable controversy and been removed or blown up with dynamite.³⁵ The rhetorical pattern is by and large the same in the case of the church-mosque, and as we will see in the following, with arguments referring to proclaimed ethno-national values like tolerance and secularism.

In early 2006, a landmark cross was erected on a hilltop in a mixed Catholic-Muslim village outside Shkodra, and the national leader of the Muslim Community, Selim Muça, seated in Tirana, demanded that the cross be removed immediately.³⁶ Religious symbols had their proper place, he said, and should be banned in public places not to “cause irritation and antagonism” and jeopardise the “religious harmony and tolerance of our country”.³⁷ As head of Albania’s Catholics, the Catholic Archbishop Rrok Mirdita assured that nobody had meant to impose their religion on others. At the same time, he agreed with his Muslim colleague: “Of course, I do not think religious symbols should be put up uncritically. We do not encourage that. We show our faith through our deeds, with peace, love and good understanding”.³⁸

At a press conference the mufti of Shkodra, Bashkim Bajraktari, who had been active in the church-mosque dispute, continued in the same vein as the Muslim leadership in Tirana. On one point the nevertheless differed as he blamed “malevolent persons” of creating “division and interreligious conflict”, asserting that such acts “in different forms threaten the tolerance and good understanding among the traditional Communities”.³⁹ Repeatedly, the mufti asserted that the crosses “directly threatened the feelings and faith of the Muslims”;⁴⁰ in other words, offended Islam. He also criticised Archbishop Massafra of

³³ Endresen 2012.

³⁴ Cecilie Endresen, “Religious diplomacy in Shkodra, Albania”, in Anne Stensvold (ed.), *Western Balkans: The Religious Dimension*, Syppress, Oslo, 2009.

³⁵ For an overview of disputed religious symbols, see Mickaël Wilmart, “Entre tolerance et concurrence. La communauté catholique et son identité dans l’Albanie post-communiste”, 2004, p. 7-9, <http://balkanologie.revues.org/index541.html>.

³⁶ Selim Muça quoted in Anila Dushi, “Ngrihet kryqi i rrëzuar, Antiterrori në kërkim të autorëve”. *Shekulli*, 12.01.06.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rrok Mirdita quoted in Anila Dushi, “Ngrihet kryqi i rrëzuar, Antiterrori në kërkim të autorëve”. *Shekulli*, 12.01.06.

³⁹ Bashkim Bajraktari, “Konferencë për shtyp e Myftinisë mbi vendosjen e kryqeve”. *Drita e Dijes*, Januar, 2006.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Shkodra for allegedly having blamed “some foreign missionary from England or France” of not taking Muslims’ concerns seriously.⁴¹ Conclusively, the mufti warned that if the Catholic Church did not solve the problem, “other incidents might happen for which we do not bear any responsibility”. Conclusively, he for the third time appealed to the “good understanding and tolerance between the religious Communities”.⁴² In this case both clerics defend the principle that public places should retain their secular profile and thereby embrace “tolerance”, notions which serve to legitimate the religious communities’ national credentials and concerns for Albanians also of other religious affiliations.

A few months later the dispute became more acute when “unknown perpetrators” demolished the cross. However, the top clerics were cautious not to blame each other openly. In Tirana, the archbishop asserted that the perpetrators were not acting on the orders of the Muslim Community, but blamed “extremist elements” for infiltration aimed at destabilising the “spirit of cooperation” by bringing “dissension and animosity” and urged people not to “fall prey” to extremism.⁴³ Another parish priest applauded the supreme interreligious relations in the area and asserted that the incident was “not a conflict between religions, but something else. All religions are pure, and when everything is pure and sincere, things are ok”.⁴⁴

Shkodra’s Vice Mufti Arben Halluni asserted that his Community denounced the “ugly un-Islamic act” of destroying the cross as detrimental to the traditional religious tolerance: “Our institution has opposed and opposes all kinds of violent action”, he stated, also against religious symbols, irrespective of which community they belong to.⁴⁵ By this, the vice mufti was communicating with both insiders and non-Muslims. Not only did he instruct Muslims to refrain from violence; he simultaneously presents his Community as a persistent guardian of peace and tolerance and absolves it from liability.

In the same vein, the highest Islamic leader in the country, Selim Muça, denounced the “vandalism”, committed by “particular individuals and not on command”, which he believed was aimed at damaging the “religious tolerance which rules in Albania”. He elaborated:

I was not happy that the cross was knocked down, but not happy that it was re-erected either. I am not against the cross, but I think religious symbols should be placed in their [religious] institutions and not on hills and mountains, a phenomenon that is occurring more and more.⁴⁶

Even though Muça continued by confirming his friendship with the archbishop,⁴⁷ the discourse above is characteristic of how references to “religious tolerance” in fact often signal some kind of intercommunal disagreement and possibly glosses over it. However, the almost ritualistic reference to “tolerance” at the same time serves to reassure the counterpart that the speaker is committed to such fundamental inter-religious values.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Massafra quoted in Dushi 2006.

⁴⁴ Marcelo quoted in Dushi 2006.

⁴⁵ Halluni quoted in Dushi 2006.

⁴⁶ Muça quoted in Dushi 2006.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

A complex religious landscape

The history of religion abounds with disputes sites, such as the Hindu-Muslim conflict over the Indian Babri Mosque, or the intra-Christian clashed in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. However, there have also been many cases of different religious groups sharing cultic places of worship and pilgrimage rather harmonically.⁴⁸ While the church-mosque rhetoric in Shkodra has contained certain hints of possible escalation, it has not led to violent action.

The worship in the church-mosque, the opposition to it, and the discourse it creates, touch upon certain taboos in Albanian culture and politics, which in turn contributes to give the rhetoric around concepts of sacred and secular some rather conspicuous features. What is sacred to one community on the practical, emotional level may be defined as secular or areligious on the discursive level, and vice versa. At the same time, what one part in fact treats as sacred, the other part defines as “secular”, “public” or non-religious in order to legitimate the community’s claim to control over the place as worthier than that of their counterpart.

The debates outlined above illustrate the fluidity, contextuality and ambiguity of concepts of sacred, profane, and secular. When one part defines the object as “secular”, it serves to construct the religious community in question as its most legitimate caretaker. A common denominator is that “secular” and “tolerant” are depicted as core values by the different religious communities. However, as we see in the case of the cross above, the Archbishop found the violation of the secularist principle less detrimental than his Muslim counterpart did, probably because the problematic object here was the cross rather than the crescent. The presence of one’s “own” religious symbols in a secular environment is generally perceived as less of an infringement to secularist ideals than the others’ religious symbols. Another typical argument is here discernable: the disputed object is defined as a “problem” exactly because it sows inter-Albanian dissention.

The church-mosque is quite literally set in the middle of a national symbol, and the religious communities’ dispute about it, which demonstrates the complex relationship between religious and national identities in Albania. The Albanian society is incredibly complex in terms of religion, situated at a cultural crossroads between the Eastern and the Western Church, and with almost 600 years under the Islamic pluralist polity of Ottoman rule. While the country is close to being ethnically homogeneous,⁴⁹ it can be seen as the Balkans in miniature in terms of religious complexity. Significantly, its territory has historically been claimed by neighbouring countries like Serbia, Greece and Italy with a clear religious profile and co-religionists in Albania. All this has carried significance both for the formation of religious identities, a secularist, linguistically based nationalism, and one of the oldest secular constitutions in Europe.

Since its declaration of independence from the crumbling Ottoman Empire in 1912, various political regimes in Albania have systematically justified the principle of secularism, in different ideological ways, but with reference to national interests. The argument has been twofold: unifying Albania’s religiously divided population with the aim of putting national interests above religious differences, and to fend off foreign countries with territorial and/or religious interests in Albania. Secularism has therefore been

⁴⁸ See e.g. Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000.

⁴⁹ IPSOS survey 2011, p. 14.

implemented in more or less forced ways, most radically during communism when the religious institutions were destroyed.

After the fall of communism in 1990-1991, the constitution has remained secular, although religion and religious symbols again have become a visible feature of Albanian culture and society. The principle of secularism is widely regarded as a benchmark of national identity, also by the religious communities themselves, which tend to see themselves as the main defenders of Albanian values, tolerance, and national interests.⁵⁰ Albanian nationalists, however, have often treated religion as obstructive or even inimical to national interests. A representative of such views is the ideological architect of scientific atheism during the Hoxha regime, Hulusi Hako, who as late as 2012 claimed that religion is “anti-national” and “anti-Albanian”, and that “Albanian nationalism can only be protected and prepared without religion”, with the “active exclusion” of it.⁵¹ At the same time, almost 90 percent of the Albanians say they “believe in God” (although few practice their religion).⁵²

The clerics define religion as important to Albanians, both as a value system, tradition, ideology, and practice. By constructing Albanians as a particularly “tolerant” nation, the Communities seek to increase their leverage in the new Albanian society. Although they do not always succeed, the religious communities try not step on each others’ toes. They also recognise the state’s right and duty to curtail religious activity in the public sphere. Sometimes, however, controversies arise due to diverging interpretations of the character of a certain object: is it an expression of national culture or a specific religious community or tradition and thus religious? And is the place public or “private”?

In spite of the frustration such debates engender, the arguments nevertheless show that it is the Albanian secular-nationalist rules of the game which continue to shape both Muslim and Christian discourses: the communities define religious tolerance and secularism as national core values, best preserved and advocated by their religious tradition. Both the Catholic hierarchy and the *ulama* claim the right to symbolic control of the church-mosque by arguing that it is and should primarily be a secular, shared space. This is, I will argue, due to the fact that traditionally religious claims and terms have been considered problematic for such a long period: the clerics know that religious claims and concepts must be uttered in a nationalist and secularist language to be “valid” in the Albanian public sphere and among religious others.

In this context the communities’ assume the role of vanguard of tradition, be that secular or multireligious, criticising what they see as the others’ illegitimate sacralisation of the place. Paradoxically, the communities’ secularist resistance to the other side’s re-sacralisation of the place signals that their own community considers it sacred itself. Moreover, they are anxious of losing control over the access to their sanctity, or that it will be profaned by the others, as they both have done on several occasions in Albanian history. In other words, they fear that the others’ use of the place signals an imminent takeover and subsequent banishment of all other users.

⁵⁰ Endresen 2012.

⁵¹ Hulusi Hako, 2012, <https://ateistet.org/lende/thenie/hulusi-hako>.

⁵² IPSOS survey 2011, p. 40-41.

Concepts of nation, secularism and religious tolerance

Religious rhetoric in Albania is infused with “banal nationalism”⁵³ and is shaped with reference to bedrock principles and taboos in a wider Albanian secular, inter-religious, a-religious tradition. In the debates above, the different sides tend to associate Albanian identity primarily with their own religious tradition. In the implicit rules of Albanian discourses, what is sacred to a religious community must be defended in secular terms. The two communities’ constructions of own “secularism” as opposed to the other’s “sacralisation” within the nationalist discourse are codes for what within an internal religious discourse would correspond to respectively “sacred” and “profaned”. However, the need for the religious communities to justify their reappearance in public life after atheism make the clerics formulate otherwise religious claims and distinctions in a characteristic secularist, nationalist form. A religious community may see an object or place as “sacred”, endowed with a particular religious significance, but the arguments used to back their claims to it, are primarily based on secular, cross-religious concepts.

Inter-religious disgruntlement in Albania often rests on the idea that the other Communities disrespect religious tolerance, Albanian traditions, and/or the principle of secularism. The church-mosque dispute is but one illustration of the blurred line between “religious” and “secular” in Albanian religious worldviews. While different religious parts sometimes disagree on the exact delineation, their arguments mainly follow the same logic and refer to concepts of “religious tolerance”, “harmony”, and Albanian values. In fact, when the term “tolerance” occurs, the topic is often a dispute among the religious communities in which at least one part expresses discontent with the behaviour of religious others. While each community claims to represent, defend and protect secularism and tolerance, they also blame each other for undermining it.

The Communities’ inclination to identify their own religious tradition with national culture leaves ample room for discrepancies over concrete objects. The heterogeneous interpretation of symbols (“religious” or “national”/“secular”?) creates confusion over “accepted” ways to use them. What one religious community perceives as an infringement of common, secular Albanian values, the other considers a promotion of them. The Muslims and Catholics quoted above all seem to see their own community as the best and most legitimate representative of historical continuity, local traditions, secularism, patriotism, and tolerance.

Symbols are open, contextual, and fluid, and that is why they are central to a community: even though the individual members’ interpretations of them may differ, they are united by them. The church-mosque is such a symbol. In claiming it as “theirs”, from different religious perspectives, the contending communities formulate their arguments in a sort of meta-religious language which refers to common Albanian interests. On this level, the intercommunal disagreement reveals a strong sense of agreement on a set of values which both sides claim to defend: the need to maintain religious tolerance, Albanian unity, and secularism. As such, the church-mosque dispute is a conflict of interests, not of values.

⁵³ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage Publications, London, 1995.