THE SILENT TRUTH OF THE ALBANIAN RELIGIOUS SYMBOL AND THOUGHT DURING THE YEARS 1921-1939 UNDER THE ENGLISH FOCUS OF OBSERVATION AND DESCRIPTION

Ma Benita STAVRE
Ma Erinda PAPA
"Fan S.Noli" University
Korça, Albania
b.stavre@gmail.com
erindapapa@yahoo.com

Abstract:
The aim of this paper is to highlight one of the frequently discussed periods of the Albanian history; that of the years between 1921 and 1939, whose said and unsaid facts have very frequently been misjudged. Its focus is to bring evidence of the way English visitors, writers, missionaries and journalists of the time have perceived the religious co-existence and the problems that accompanied it, the formal measures undertaken by the government to improve the spiritual relations and the sharp contradictions between both main religious faiths at the time. The paper will also bring evidence of other religious sects in Albania and the way they worshiped God through symbols, customs and principles, which made them a means of introducing light and knowledge even in the most remote areas of the country. The data, descriptions and analysis have been mainly withdrawn from books, published diaries and articles written by foreign visitors of the time or later historians of the Albanian life.

Key words:
Religious co-existence and tolerance, symbolism, truth, principles.

Rezumat:
Această lucrare îşi propune să analizeze una dintre perioadele cele mai discutate din istoria Albaniei, aceea dintre anii 1921 şi 1939, ale cărei evenimente - spuse şi nespuse - au fost, în mod frecvent, judecate greşit. Scopul lucrării este acela de a arăta felul în care vizitatori, scriitori, misionari şi jurnalişti englezi din acea perioadă au perceput co-existenţa unor religii şi problemele care au însoţit-o, de a arăta care au fost măsurile formale asumate de către guvern pentru a îmbunătăţi relaţiile spirituale şi de a scoate în evidenţă ascuţitele contradicţii dintre cele două credinţe principale din acea vreme. Studiul se va apleca, de asemenea, şi asupra altor secte religioase din Albania şi a felului în care acestea îl venerau pe Dumnezeu prin simboluri, obiceiuri şi principii, care reprezentau o modalitate de a răspândi lumina şi cunoaşterea chiar şi în colţurile cele mai îndepărtate ale ţării. Datele, descrierile şi analizele au fost, în cea mai mare parte, extrase din cărţi, jurnale publicate şi articole scrise de vizitatori străini din vremea respectivă sau, ulterior, de istorici ai vieţii albaneze.

Cuvinte cheie:
Co-existenţă religioasă, toleranţă, simbolism, adevăr, principii.

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

The Albanian geographical position has always been a lure for foreign visitors. The eagerness to know what is happening in this small country, almost geographically neglected, in spite of its attractive colorful history, has time after time blown fresh winds from abroad. It is interesting to view the way in which the crash of mentalities within the country reveals itself in the writings of the newcomers who carry with them not only a different nationality, but also a completely different cultural background.

The British and American people who visited Albania were numerous and the reasons for which they focused their research in Albania during the years 1921-1939 were various as well. In this respect, the way in which they perceived the Albanian reality at that time depended on their background, their education or profession, on the awareness they had of this small country, the part of the country they visited, as well as the reason for which they entered it. For mere visitors, Albania was a hospitable land of tough people who were used to carrying a gun with them and had little concern about a governmental imposed law. For politicians and diplomats, it was a country whose boundaries had caused enough trouble to the international diplomatic discussion. For economists, it was a nation on the verge of collapse that was still finding enough space to survive financially; for journalists and ethnographers it was a living museum that proudly displayed civilization manners, attitudes, dress and tools elsewhere forgotten for centuries.

Involved in a new reality, which in most cases reveals itself to be not as bad as they had heard about, these visitors observed the Albanian state at the time. Their writings witness the gasp of surprise when their western mentality faces an almost medieval way of life in this country. They are impressed by the traditional clothes and the fanaticism with which the Albanians preserve customs almost forgotten in Europe. There are a lot of aspects which carry the heart of the Albanian life and culture at the time and which attracted the attention of the visitors to the point that they felt the need to write and share their impressions with a larger public. The writings, in which this gist finds itself best described, provide reliable evidence which should be taken into consideration when trying to rebuild an image of that historical period.

One of the things which impressed most English visitors was the religious co-existence in Albania and the problem of tolerance, the formal measures undertaken by the government to improve the state of the

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

religious faiths, the contradictions between main religions and the attitude the Albanian had to religion.

A historical approach to the religious dominance in Albania

In October 1938, *Gazeta e Korçës* published an article written by Glaud Golding entitled "King Zog's Albania" ("Shqipëria e Mbretit Zog")[1]. The journalist described the way Albania had been trying to emerge from the backwardness inherited in centuries and was trying to enter – under the Italian wing – a European age of civilization. The journalist did not forget to write something even about a very hot issue in Albania, *religion*: "*Last April, when the Muslim Zog and the Roman Catholic Geraldine Apponyit got married, the international politicians got pretty surprised; It can't be!"* (Gazeta e Korçës, 8 October 1938) They thought that Albania did not need such a public liberalism in terms of religious tolerance, especially when it came to a very important personality such as the King. Both faiths, the Christian and the Muslim one, had long been setting themselves in opposition and they had been trying to dominate the spiritual world of the Albanians (Ghegs or Tosks[2], rich or poor, living in central Albania or in bordering areas) and to share the political power in terms of national and international politics. With his marriage King Zog tried to crown all the efforts to settle the religious schism which had been disturbing the social peace that he was trying to introduce in Albania. In fact it had not been that easy for him.

For centuries, Albania had been living through sharp religious contradictions, being the dictum of the Turkish rule. Their pitfalls had been felt by the Renaissance long before King Zog got the throne. Edwin Jacques, a protestant missionary who spent 8 eight years in Albania since 1932, preaching and teaching, wrote a book about the history of Albania entitled "The Albanians". In his approach to the religious developments he claimed that history had taught the Albanians to appreciate their being patriots more than members of religious communities. This had been the guiding principle of the Renaissance writings of many patriots like Pashko Vasa and Sami bej Frashëri who had "*encouraged the national feeling over all religions*" (Jacques, 1995, p.438), as a dynamic element of the Albanian War of Independence. Religion had in fact been one of the most influential tools used by invaders to dominate the country; and the root of the religious intolerance in Albania went back to its historical developments of the 4th

[1]The article was published originally in the *London Evening Standard* on 2 September 1938.
[2]People in Albania living respectively in the North and the South.

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

century. Miranda Vickers, who is another well-known researcher and writer of the Albanian history, claims that the religious schism in Albania started during the time this country was inhabited by the Illyrians. While the northern Illyria fully attached itself to the Western Church under the direct influence of the Pope, the southern Illyria felt that devotion to the Easter Church of the Thessaloniki Vicariate would be more convenient for these territories. (Vickers, 1999, p. 3) With the religious movements of the 11th - 12th centuries, Albania was finally organized in three archbishoprics: Naupakt, Durrazzo and Ohrid; most of these still remained under the influence of the Constantinople Patriarchate, while some territories in the northwestern part of Albania kept recognizing the Pope of Rome as they religious authority. (ASHSH, 2007, p. 245) As a result the Albanian North and South were respectively labeled *Catholic* and *Orthodox*.

What happened in Albania after this, can be best summarized in Rose Wilder Lane's words, an American Red Cross missionary that traveled northern Albania with the aim of opening a school there by the early 1920s. She wrote:

"*I introduced Albania as a small Catholic minority in the Old Turkish Empire (...). The Albanians became Catholic before the Roman invasion and were such even when the Turkish came. They remained Catholic (...) till after the death of Gjergj Kastriot, when some of the main landlords in the central area, (...) bought their independence by a verbal submission to the Mohammedan faith. The northern tribes have always remained Roman Catholics, while southern Albania is mostly Greek Catholic.*" (Lane, 1923, p. 218-219)

The general English opinion about the above issue is that the Albanian geographic features added to the above religious discrepancy. In Northern Albania the relief forms, and the opportunities it offered to communication, shaped the cultural and religious views of the people who lived there. The Turkish army could never penetrate the northern Alps completely. The chieftains who controlled the life of these northern tribes did not need to convert their religious faith since there was no one to impose governmental rules to them while under Turkey. Their mates, who lived in more accessible areas of the north – in which the Turkish army could easily exercise its power of invasion – were obliged to convert mainly not because of the religious principles. They did this to be able to protect

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

their office and in order not to be deprived of the power they had in their regions. As a result, the northern Catholics lived in regions that were closer to Rome and too geographically complicated for the Turkish army to reach, while the northern Muslims lived in regions that were closer to Constantinople, alongside the main roads and closer to the main cities.

That is what happened even with the strong families of the south. Vandeleur Robinson, who was an Englishman working for the League of the Nations, in the function of the Regional Manager for the South-Eastern Europe, explained the reasons why the Albanian leading families had been obliged to convert their faith as follows:

"*The peculiar feature of the Turkish or Ottoman Empire was that the distinction between the ruling and subject peoples did not rest upon race, blood, language, geography, or any of the usual criteria of "nationality"; it rested solely upon religion. If you were a Moslem, you counted as a Turk, no matter what your national origin (...) and landowners must turn Moslem if they wished to be sure of retaining their estates*." (Robinson, 1941, p. 13)

This early politics is what characterized later developments between religions and the impact that faith had on the political and social status of the people in Albania.

• ***Religious communities in Albania during 1921 - 1939***

Having always shared a good deal of the historical and political issues in Albania, the religious split in Albania during the years '20 and '30 of the last century, had clear- cut and well-defined boundaries. In order to understand the geographical extent and influence areas of each, the government of King Zog included in a Census organized in 1930, even a question about religious faith. According to its findings, in Albania there were 696.000 Muslims of all sects, 200.000 Orthodox, while only 105.000 were declared Catholics. The most commonly accepted ratio between these main religious communities was respectively 70%, 20% and 10%. Besides, there were even some surprising numbers for other categories: 204 Jewish, 72 Protestants and 85 "others" of which 24 claimed being atheists. (Jacques, 1995, p. 437) Values approximately equal have also been introduced by Joseph Roucek, an American sociologist who wrote many articles about the economic state and cultural heritage of Albania during the 1930s. He claimed that with 71% Muslims, 10% Roman Catholics, and 19% Greek Orthodox, Albania was maybe the only country in Europe where religion

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

and nationality were not virtual synonyms of one-another. With the presence of some Jewish (who had entered Albania in the late '30s to escape the German discrimination), it definitely distinguished itself from other European countries for the lack of anti-Semitism. (Roucek, 1939, p. 85)

A very interesting observation was that of V. Robinson who noticed that a small community of Uniates was living in Elbasan. They used the Greek language, the old Slavic and even their own language in their religious liturgy; their priests could be married and they considered themselves part of the orthodox faith. The only difference is that they recognized pope as their religious authority. In Europe the Uniates used a compromising attitude between the Orthodox and the political position of the peoples that worshiped Latin rites. According to the same writer this sect was born when the Austrians and the Hungarians invaded orthodox nations and tried to denationalize them by converting their religion to Catholicism; there was an angry reaction, however there was a convenient outcome as well: Uniates. "*From a political point of view,"* explains Robinson, *"the Uniates are the Pope's "Fifth Column" in the Orthodox Church, in his perpetual struggle for souls; they are the means by which obstinately Orthodox communities in Catholic countries can be pulled half way over the border. The Vatican sometimes finds it worth to expend money upon Uniate communities; and the Uniate Church at Elbasan is a case in point.*" (Robinson, 1941, p. 94)

During his stay in Elbasan, Robinson noticed that even though the religious conversion was forbidden by law in Albania, the Uniate priest of that church did not hesitate to lure new believers with small sums of money as charity offers of the aid fund sent by Rome. Fortunately matters of religion were a great deal less important than those of honor in Albania and the Albanians were tolerant in terms of religion, therefore the Uniates were not persecuted for their religious conversion. (Ibid.)

Among the above three main religious groups there was a further subdivision, which considered itself a bridge that united the edges of the power gap between the Muslims and the Christians; they were the Bektashi. The duality of this sect dated from the religious gap of after the death of Gjergj Kastriot (Albanian national leader of the 15th century). Jason Tomes, an American biographer of King Zog of Albania, (2004) introduced the features of this somehow more "*synchronic*" religion, by defining it as a "*half-religion*" of "*Muslims who drink alcohol and consume pork*" (Tomes, 2004, p. 150) The first traces of this faith in Albania go back to the 14th-15th

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

centuries when Bektashi missionaries were sent in Albania by the Bektashi headquarters in Dimoteka. Since Albania reflected pagan traces in its Christian faith, this new form of worshiping was welcomed by the Albanians at that time.

Carleton Coon was a professor at Harvard University when he undertook a journey in northern Albania in 1929. He was mostly concerned about the Albanian language and the Dinaric characteristics of the Albanian tribesmen of the north. In one of his visits in these regions he came across a group of Muslims, that he called, members of "a heterodox brotherhood". (Coon, 1950, p. 35) According to the data that they provided for him, the Khevial Family, who founded Egypt, was of Albanian origin. When they moved to Cairo they carried with them even the coffins of their ancestors, one of which had been the founder of the Bektashi sect. Even though by the time C. Coon was writing the report the Khieval Family had converted to Islam and was worshiping the Hannaf rites (part of the Sunni ritual tradition), the temple and the coffins were still preserved. That was the reason why many Albanian dervishes of the XX century were educated in Egypt and the ones that Coon met in north not only had a good knowledge of the Arabian and other Muslim lands, but had also been successful in opening a number of Bektashi monasteries in Has and Gjakova highlands. (Coon, 1950, p. 35)

These findings were supported by John K. Birge (1937), who wrote that according to the data that he had directly received by Nijazi Dedei, the Head of the officially recognized Bektashi Community in Albania, in 1933, the number of the Bekstashi in the old Turkish Empire amounted to 7.500.000; 1.500.000 of them lived in its eastern provinces and 200.000 lived in Albania alone. (14) Later, Ali Pashë Tepelena had encouraged the strengthening of this community in order to alienate the Albanian Muslims from the Turkish influence and function as "*hotbeds of the Albanian nationalism*". (Federal Writers Project, 1939, p. 32) From that time on this sect is reported to have been "*performing charitable offices and spreading the creed of mutual helpfulness and universal love*"; by doing this "*they were incidentally doing what they could to diminish the breach between the Muslim populace and the Christians*". (ibid.) During the years '30 this sect had "its golden age" thanks to the official support they received from King Zog. A number of new tekkes and small centers were reestablished in the south and almost all of them would welcome every visitor that knocked on

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

their doors no matter what his/her religious faith. (Qendra Shqiptare për të Drejtat e Njeriut, 2004, p.170).

The hospitality of this sect is described by Dayrell R. Oakley-Hill, a British inspector of the Albanian Gendarmerie (1928 -1939), in Pilisht near Çorovoda. He was impressed by the atmosphere which was like the "*Arabian Nights*" with "*tables full of chicken, bread, fruit bowls and glasses of grape*", by the look of the tekke Father "*with a long beard (...) wearing a kind of loose dress and carrying on his head a huge high turban*", and by the fact that the Father did not mind "*the presence of a female in the tekke*" (Oakley-Hill, 2002, p. 29)

Melville Charter, an American journalist of the National Geographic Magazine (1931), described almost the same reactions. However, there were two special qualities of this sect that attracted his attention in a tekke in Gjirokastra. The first was that around the bed in which he slept there were "*four angles*" and he could not guess whether they were "*Mohammedan or Christian*" as a sign of the duality of this sect. The second was the message conveyed by the words of the head of the tekke, Father Suleiman, about religious tolerance and the religious common truth. "*The world is divided into religions thanks to what each person thinks he has found. However, it is the unknown, the one we are all looking for, the one which unites the whole human beings in one.*" (The National Geographic Magazine Vol. LIX, No.2 , 1931:142) This explains the tolerant paintbrush that is used to describe Bektashism in Albania as a religion, whose main principle lied on brotherhood and love for the humanity.

- ***Religious co-existence and its reflection in the Albanian life***

Even though in the books and articles referred to in this paper, the Albanian is mostly described as a supporter of the religious tolerance, the discrepancy between religions in Albania during the early decades of the last century was a common phenomenon in social and political relationships. This gap at the time was not only geographic. In the description of the Albanian mentality written by the authors of the book "The Albanian Struggle in the Old World and the New" (1939) noticed that the difference between both main religions went beyond the principles and rites of the respective faiths. In fact there were obvious dissimilarities in diet and the way they got dressed, in the approach that Albanians had to the work of women in agriculture and in the attitude they had towards children's education. However, the sharpest religious divergence in Albania lied somewhere near the center where it took another color, that of the

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

power. In 1921 Harry Eyres, British Minister in Albania between 1922 and 1926, reported to his country's Foreign Office:

"*I have been talking with ministers and they strongly claim that there can be no disparity between both religious faiths, and they wish to truly reveal this. However, they say –"There are more of us, Muslims, and consequently we should take the power (...) The Christians, on the other side, agree on submitting themselves only to a majority government, not to a powerful one.*" (as cited in Vickers, 1999, p.108)

In this respect, English authors report that the Christian community often complained about the way it had been politically treated so far in Albania. Most of the state income in the 1920s was supplied by the national and international trade taxes and duty income that south-eastern Albania (where the orthodox community lived) had with Greece and Yugoslavia (due to its geographical position). However, only a little part of this budget was spent for the southern Albania, the rest went for keeping a national army and the Muslim state administration. Joseph Swire, an English visitor, researcher and historian of the Albanian history of the 1920s and 1930s, in his book "The Rise of a Kingdom" (2005) argues that the Christians had hoped that after the country had gone through its political settlement, they would be fairly treated due to the economic and educational advantages they had in comparison with the Muslim community. However, according to the author that was still a utopic thing to claim for Albania at that period due to the fact that the ex-Turkish functionaries and the powerful Muslim landlords were still in duty and this meant that the order of the past had not changed much till that time.

This was not affected even by the arrival of the American emigrants, who chose to come back to their homeland in the early '20s. Since they were of the southern orthodox origin, they hoped that the education that they had received abroad and the cultural refreshment they were carrying with them when they entered Albania would somehow contribute to a better perspective for the public rights of the Christian community. However they would still have to wait a change of mentality. (Swire, 2005, p. 325) Margaret Hasluck, who resided in Albania for 13 years up to 1939, would address the young Albanians by teaching them:

"*You are Muslim, most of the Albanians are, and Europe considers Muslimism as something of the East, Asia and Africa. You should try to*

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

overcome this wrong judgment; your country is in Europe. (...) You are free to handle your religious conviction as you wish, but you should take care that they do not dominate politics. I don't think you are rigid Muslims, furthermore, I could say you are not that even ardent in terms of religious matters. (...) I know that it is difficult but I would hope Albania would involve itself in a deep religious revival (...)". (as cited in Newman, 1936, p. 209-210)

The government did not wish that the religious diversity – whose ties went back to respective international relations of Albanian sects – had further negative outcomes in the national disparity. (Ryan, 1951, p. 320) In 1930 the parliament declared that the Albanian state was non-sectarian "*which gave it the right to exercise its control over religious institutions*" and stated that "*the heads of these institutions, the bishops, their direct subordinates as well as their parsons, should be of Albanian origin and speak the Albanian language*". (Fischer, 2003, p.169)

In order to calm down the Muslim powerful attitude, Ahmet Zogu chose to create a Cabinet of Ministers which "*balanced the interests of all Ghegs, and Tosks, landowners and merchants, Christians and Muslims*." (Tomes, 2004, p.123) He would rather discourage people from thinking that since he was a Muslim himself, he would prefer to have Muslims around him, and emphasized that "*the government was secular, without any official religion*" (Jacques, 1995, p. 439) He gave important offices to Pandeli Vangjeli and Kostaq Kote, both orthodox from Korça (Tomes, 2004, p. 123); he declared that "*everyone was entitled to worship his proper religion*". (Jacques, 1995, p. 439) At that time Albania was on the top of the holiday list in Europe because of the three religious celebrations; 21 days in a year altogether, and even though by 1929 "*Sunday was a holiday for everyone, Muslims could rest even on Friday*". (Robinson, 1941, p.105)

The government went ever further by giving a patriotic emphasis to the textbooks and educational classes. "*The first reading section of the elementary books started with the sentences: "I am an Albanian. Albania is my country*." (Tomes, 2004, p. 150) These measures were part of a strategy to show that what Albania needed at that time was that religious institutions committed themselves into a more generous treatment of each-other within the Albanian territories. In order to do this, they needed to get independent charters from their respective higher authorities. It was not an easy enterprise since it involved international relations and required the right people to be carried on. As a first step, the government encouraged the

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

organization of a congress of the representatives of the Albanian Muslim community in Tirana on March 1923. At the end of the Congress, it was decided that this institution would function independently from the Caliphate of Constantinople by declaring that "*the Albanians owned their trust to their mother land*". (Swire, 2005, p. 329) The Congress did also approve the abolition of polygamy in Albania and the fact that the Muslim women would no longer be obliged to wear the veil in public places. These reforms were a sign that this sect was inclining its religious tendency to a more Albanian context.

Furthermore, despite some institutional drawbacks, he was able to help the Albanian Church get an autocephalous charter from the Ecumenical Patriarch in April 1937. Soon after, a Church of Albania had been founded under the management of a synod of five bishops and an Archbishop of Tirana; the latter was at the same time as the Head of the Albanian Church. (Robinson, 1941, p. 98) As E. Jacques noticed "*The church and the mosques at the time were meant to serve the state, while the Catholic Clergy, patriotic of each faith, would preach the Albanian gospel*".(Jacques, 1995, p. 441)

The king crowned these cautious dealings with the careful avoidance he paid to the fact that his future Queen was a Catholic. The press dedicated entire pages to her biographic charts, but in none of them did they mention her Catholic belonging. The wedding ceremony was by no doubt "civil", a clear reflection of being an Albanian whose religion was Albanian-like. (Jacques, 1995, p. 441) Even though Geraldine Apponyi (the Queen of the Albanians) was an ardent Catholic and the King had not asked her to convert her religion neither before nor after getting married, the Pope would not approve a marriage of that kind and did not send any official representatives on the wedding day. The Vatican could only unwillingly give its consent to this marriage after thorough discussions carried with the intermediacy of the Italian government later on.

- ***Conclusive thoughts about the Albanian religious attitude***

In the writings of the English who visited and lived with Albanian families in the north, center or south, the religious attitude is described reflected in its simple, basic and human function. In the writings of Rose W. Lane, the religious intolerance takes a softer touch upon the way religion was incorporated into the mountaineer's everyday life. There are two the things which seemed to impress an outsider most. The first one was the "*wooden cross, darkened by the weather and the time*", which "*stood high*

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

in front of them (travellers), *surrounded by piles of stones over a grassy hillock*." It stood there not just to tell everybody passing by that it was a Catholic area. The author thought that it had a more significant function. The missionary priests had thought further. They had "*placed a cross on each pathway resting-place, to remind the outcasts of God*". (Lane, 1923, p. 33)

Furthermore, when *God* or *Cross* was mentioned, the northern Catholics did always relate these with their veneration to the *Sun*. That is why the church in the north had not managed to transform many of the mental perceptions that the mountaineers had about *God*. They were all good Catholics and attended the church ceremonies regularly. Yet they would still bury their dead without a coffin, putting three apples on his/her chest and they would, in most of the cases carve a *sun* besides the *cross* on the gravestones. (*Ibid*.)

It is because of elements of this kind that the researchers of the Albanian life found parallel symbols between the religious faiths of the Albanians in the early 20th century with that of the pagan beliefs. Edith Durham, another traveller and ethnographer of the early 20th century in the northern Albania territories noticed that a cross with a half-moon above and below was a frequent occurrence in the tattoos of the mountaineers. In other cases the cross had small circles at the edges of its three sides, or the cross itself took the form of the sun circle. The cross was there to reveal Christianity, while the other elements symbolized the sun, the life, the light and the good. Durham also noticed that, in the tattoos of the Muslims, the star was formed by two triangles, which, according to her, represented the sun and its rays. In a Muslim graveyard the sun was represented by a circle, while the moon by a sickle. This made her conclude that '*the Muslim Albanian has not really detached himself from Christianity; he has given up the cross but still preserves some of his ancestors' symbols: the sun and the moon*". (Durham, 1990, p. 474) In fact even later researchers in the Albanian historiography showed that the significance of both these elements goes beyond the modern perception of the day and the night, the light and the dark and the good and the bad. It goes back to the Illyrian worship of the cult of the *sun*, as a source of health and fertility and of bracing power. (ASHSH, 2007, pp. 54, 59)

This seems to be the reason why most of the above-mentioned British and American writers conclude their insights of the Albanian religious relation with phrases similar to the one cited below from Joseph Roucek (1939): "*The Albanian does not cling tenaciously to religion, and it forms*

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

no obstacle to social fraternization between Muslims and Catholics." (85) That is because the religious faith, at its basic level, did not deepen the geographical gaps neither worsen the principle of being different because of worshiping different faiths. This led the Albanian of the 1920s and 1930s far from being a religious fanatic. The Sunni Muslims practiced their religious rites in the mosques; they did not do their daily prayers regularly in their houses like other Muslim communities members did. Furthermore, there was an obvious share of power between state and religion to the point that they were both considered authorities of the same level. During one of his journeys in the southern Albania, Nigel Heseltine (a British traveller) noticed that above the fireplace of the monastic house where he spent the night, "*there was a picture of Skenderbeg, a portrait of King Zog and beside them stood pictures of important orthodox authorities*." (Heseltine, 1938, p. 37) This goes to justify the description with which Carleton Coon (1950) concluded his approach to the religious attitude of the Albanians:

"*In Albania one frequently hears the remark that "Albanians are not very religious." This is usually said with pride, for the presence of the three religions in so small a country is deemed a dangerous impediment to political unity. In one sense, the remark is quite true. Few Albanians are religious fanatics; few of them worry about their spiritual salvation. Most of the Catholics go to church with some regularity, and most of the Muslims keep Ramadan. However, their ancient way of life provides most of the ritual which they need to tide them over emotional crises, so that the church and the mosque are in many ways superfluous. A man's loyalty is to his "blood", that is, his extended family*." (37)

To conclude, it seems that, from an English point of view, the Albanians revealed a uniqueness in their particular way of religious belief. Their attitude to worshiping God was more pragmatic, more specific, more earthly. They preferred to worship a more national God, which spoke Albanian and who had been helpful to his ancestors, too. Therefore even though he would swear by putting his right hand on a cross, "*he would not forgo the stone, which is the symbol which gives their oath validity*." (Coon, 1950, p. 37)

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)

Bibliography

Akademia e Shkencave të Shqipërisë. (2007) *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar: Periudha e Pavarësisë 28 Nëntor 1912 – 7 Prill 1939*. Tiranë: Botimet Toena.

Birge, J.K. (1937) *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*. London: Luzac & Co.

Chater, Melville. (1931) *Europe's Newest Kingdom: After Centuries of Struggle Albania at Last Enjoys an Era of Peace and Stability*, in: The National Geographic Magazine, Vol. LIX, No 2.

Coon. C. (1950) *The Mountains of Giants: A Racial and Cultural Study of the North Albanian Ghegs*. Cambridge.

Durham, E. (1990) *Brenga e Ballkanit dhe Vepra të Tjera për Shqipërinë dhe Shqiptarët.* Tiranë: "8 Nëntori".

Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. (1939) *The Albanian Struggle in the Old World and New*. Boston: The Writer, Inc.

Qendra Shqiptare për të Drejtat e Njeriut (2004) "*Fetë dhe Qytetërimet në mijëvjeçarin e ri; Rasti i Shqipërisë - Konferencë Ndërkombëtare, Tiranë 14-15 nëntor 2003*", Botimet e Konferencës, pp.168-178.

Golding, Glaud. *Shqipëria e Mbretit Zog*. Gazeta e Korçës, 8 tetor 1938 (Evening Standard, 2 shtator 1938)

Heseltine, N. (1938) *Scarred background: A Journey through Albania*. London: Lovat Dickson Limited.

Jacques, E. (1995) *Shqiptarët: Historia e Popullit Shqiptar nga Lashtësia deri në Ditët e Sotme*. Tiranë: Kartë e Pendë

Lane, R.W. (1923) *Majat e Shalës*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers.

Newman, B. (1936) *Albanian back-door*. The University of California: H. Jenkins, Limited.

Oakley-Hill, D. R. (2002) *An Englishman in Albania: Memories of a British Officer 1929 – 1955*. London: The Center for Albanian Studies.

Pearson, O. (2004) *Albania in the twentieth century: A History, Vol I;*
Albania and King Zog-Independence, Republic and Monarchy 1908-1939. Great Britain: The Center for Albanian Studies.

Robinson, V. (1941) *Albania's Road to Freedom*. London: George Allen & Unwin ltd

Roucek, J.S. (1939) *The Politics of the Balkans*. London-New York: Mc.Graw-Hill Book Company

Ryan, A. (1951) *The Last of Dragomans*. London: Geofrey Bles.

Swire, J. (2005) *Shqipëria: Ngritja e një mbretërie*. Tiranë: Dituria.

Tomes, J. (2004) *King Zog of Albania- Europe's Self-Made Muslim Monarch.* New York: University Press.

Vickers, M. (1999) *The Albanians - A Modern History.* New York and London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.

BDD-A4008 © 2013 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:39 UTC)