

Albania: Potential Pitfalls of Introducing Religious Education in Public Schools

The site of the current Albanian parliament building in the centre of Tirana was a mosque before the Second World War. The mosque was demolished during the communist period. Currently the Muslim community in Albania wants to re-build it on part of the original site. While the government is reluctant to implement the restitution laws which would legitimise the Muslim claim to the site, this community, the largest religious community in Albania, claims that it does not want to take the parliament's place, and that all it asks for is what it considers to be a fair share of space in the garden. This particular example can be seen as a metaphor for the current situation regarding religion in the public sphere in post-Communist Albania.

The country has no official religion and all religions are regarded equally, although the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) are seen as having more formal influence than others due to their historical presence in the country. There are no legal restrictions on demonstrating religious affiliation in public schools, although there have been a few cases where students in practice have been prevented from displaying religious symbols such as a beard or *hijab*. The Government is secular, and religion is not taught in public schools, apart from brief descriptions in history and geography, for instance a couple of paragraphs about the Abrahamic religions under the heading "History of the Middle East". Private schools with a religious ethos are allowed, but their curriculum must be approved by the Ministry of Education and religion must be an optional course.

Normally Albanian politicians shun religious issues, apart from polite visits to pay respect to the religious communities during religious holidays, where they all praise Albanian religious tolerance. Many religious leaders want to introduce courses on religion in public schools, but there has been little debate on this after the ban on religion was removed and religious institutions were re-established in the early 1990s.

However, in spring 2004, the issue of religion in school resurfaced when a group called *Mëmëdheu* ('the Motherland') tried to register as a political party.¹ One of its aims was to increase the public awareness of the religious issue by creating some new institutions to implement religious tolerance. One such proposed mechanism was the introduction of religion in public schools. The party chairman stressed that such a subject should be unbiased and for pedagogical reasons, would focus on Albanian traditions. For similar reasons the party planned to establish Christian and Islamic theological faculties at the same university – of which the newspapers critical of Islam picked up only the "Islamic" part.²

Immediately, the Motherland project hit the headlines and became a scandal. According to parts of the press, the Motherland had a secret agenda, planning to reinforce religious doctrine in the education sector, undermine the secular character of the state and even turn Albania into an Islamist country. Such suspicions were above all fuelled by the information that the

¹ Renamed "Fatherland" (Atdheu), the Motherland party finally managed to register later that year. In the parliamentary elections in July 2005, the Fatherland Party remained marginal, did not pass the electoral threshold and did not receive any attention in the media.

² The various arguments referred to in the following paragraphs are found in articles in the Albanian daily newspapers *Albania*, 16.03.2004, *Korrieri*, 06.04.2004, *Shekulli* 31.03.2004, 06.04.2004, *Koha Jonë*, 06.04.2004, *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 13.03.2004, 14.03.2004, and *Klan*, 27.03.2004.

chairman was a former imam, educated in Damascus, Syria – an Arab country, which common Albanians and the governmental institutions look upon with suspicion.³

Motherland's programme assured that it would "respect the individual's religious beliefs ... irrespective of which religion he belongs to". It also opposed "any kind of restrictions by the state on the freedom of religion".⁴ Motherland also claimed to nurture love for the Fatherland and for Albanian culture. A high representative told me that belief in God endows people with a higher morality so they become better citizens and patriots. However, he said that which religion one had was not so important, because he had "embraced Islam to become a better Christian" himself.⁵

The political reactions triggered by the rumours of Motherland's allegedly Islamist agenda, exemplify the contemporary Albanian thinking about religion in the public sphere. For example, a representative of a small Christian-Democratic Party (a non-religious party with both Muslim and Catholic members) believed Motherland was one of the games of the (Orthodox) Prime Minister, Fatos Nano, to improve his international image as an honest 'Christian' ally in the war on terror. A Muslim MP for the biggest opposition party admitted he did not know anything about Motherland, but was sure it had illegal funds and could become extreme. Additionally, the leadership within the Muslim Community distanced themselves from the alleged combination of religion and party politics. An independent Muslim intellectual saw Motherland as a strategy to increase the State's control over religion by deliberately playing with the ambiguous attitudes to Islam in Albania with the ultimate intention of attracting votes.

From one particular point of view, Motherland's understanding of religion echoes the views of Albanians across the board, praising the pluralist tradition and religious tolerance as national values, while equating 'religion' with 'morality'. At the same time, the Motherland case illustrates how easily the combination of religion and politics become controversial in a country where conspiracy theories find fertile ground and things easily become politicised. Above all, it shows the impact of secularism on Albanian society and is a reminder of the deep-seated suspicion of religion in the country formerly known as the first atheist country in the world.

There are two main reasons why I think that even a debate about introducing religion in public schools may stir sentiments and resentment in Albania. First and foremost, it touches upon the central question of *national unity*. Secondly, an increased focus on religion would go against the widespread claim that 'religion is not important to Albanians'.

Since no real debate has taken place, I will first create a hypothetical situation by deducing arguments and counter-arguments from reactions to other cases involving religion in the public sphere. I will then comment on some general, methodological concerns regarding religion in schools, and point out some concrete challenges this could create. Finally, I will make some recommendations on how the issue should be dealt with in order to minimise the disagreement if religion in public schools should appear on the political agenda.

³ Merita Dhimgjoka, 'Albanian Arabs Worry About Expulsion', October 13, 2001, <http://www.balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/oct01/hed4222.shtml> [accessed on 20.02.2003]

⁴ The quotations from Motherland's political platform are my own translations from Albanian, found in the paragraphs on religion in the draft version of Motherland's political platform, spring 2004 (private copy).

⁵ The anonymous comments in these paragraphs were uttered by various politicians in Tirana, spring 2004, in other contexts.

Albanian problems with religion

Without going into complex historical, demographic, cultural and socio-economic reasons for the Albanian tendency to shun the “religious issue”, it is sufficient for the moment to say that there is a traditional cross-religious anxiety that religion may tear the nation apart along religious lines.

The Albanian Communists considered religion a political virus, and the religious communities were considered potential quislings with their spiritual loyalty outside the nation. In my view, this idea was reflected even in the Motherland programme, which in many ways sought to re-nationalise religion and make religious education independent from religious brethren abroad.

The strict anti-religious policy of the Communists ended less than two decades ago. This has undoubtedly left imprints on the way one thinks about religion in the public sphere. A crucial factor when it comes to religion in school is people’s lack of trust in the state, which would be responsible for the curriculum through the Ministry of Education. This may be problematic in itself. In post-totalitarian, semi-anarchic Albania there is disagreement on the role of the state. School is normally a child’s first formative contact with the state. Due to this it is noteworthy that the State Committee of Cults, a governmental body established to protect religious freedom after Communism, has allegedly been planning to amend the Family Code to ban the imposing of religion on children until they reach a certain age. Even though this refers to foreign sects with a problematic reputation, such as Baha’i and Jehova’s Witnesses, and not to the national traditions, it illustrates the official scepticism to religious influence.

The issue is further complicated by disagreement on the role of religion in society. One position is strict secularism or laïcism, comparable to what Turkey has normally represented, with a huge gap between state and religion, and religion kept under tight control through state institutions. On the other hand we have those, typified by Motherland and the religious establishments, who want to soften the relations and see religion as a constructive social force. To a certain extent these two positions are reflected in the thinking of the two main parties: some consider the Socialists currently in power as more hostile to religion than the Democratic Party in opposition.⁶

The strictly secular position unites the religious communities in a common front since they all complain that the State does little to protect their interests. In addition, all of them believe that their community is treated worse than the others. There is also a tendency to associate negative socio-political phenomena with other religious traditions than one’s own. For instance some Muslims and Catholics who disapprove of the Socialist government claim that the majority are ‘Orthodox’, ‘Greekophiles’ and conduct respectively anti-Muslim or anti-Catholic policies. The Orthodox adversaries of the government, however, will probably argue that the Socialists are Muslim-dominated. In the same way, Socialists on their side occasionally allege that the leader of the Democratic Party is a Muslim fundamentalist undercover.⁷ I am quite sure one also finds Muslims who think the Democrats are agents for the

⁶ The Socialists have been in power since 1997, although the next government in all probability will be headed by the Democratic Party after the general elections on 3 July 2005, where the final results are still lacking due to procedural obstacles.

⁷ On different occasions, Prime Minister Fatos Nano, leader of the Socialist Party, has alleged that his main adversary, the Muslim Sali Berisha, leader of the oppositional Democratic Party, has a politico-religious agenda, and once the mouthpiece of his Socialist Party printed a manipulated photo of Berisha with the headpiece of a Mufti. There has therefore been some concern that Nano would play the anti-Islamist card in order to attract Western support for his own government. In an interview with the Albanian newspaper *Tema*, published on the Government’s homepage, Nano told the journalist that “I have the impression that you are far too sensitive and do not fully understand the meaning of the word fundamentalist, which I have never used with the opposition,

Vatican, given the party's support in the north, at the same time Albania's Catholic stronghold. Allegations of religious influence on politics do circulate, although in reality it is hard to see any clear patterns.

Finally, the role of the religious traditions in Albanian history is a sensitive issue, and also one which inevitably would receive greater attention if one were to introduce religion in schools. It is highly conceivable that some Catholics would argue that the way in which religion is taught does not do justice to the Catholic tradition, does not place enough emphasis upon what they see as their Western cultural contributions to the nation, underestimates the reality of Ottoman and atheist actions against their community, and so forth. Their historical deep-founded scepticism against the central government could therefore become more vocal if faced with a debate on religion in school since some Catholics feel that Muslims have a more favourable position and are still purging Catholics from the public sector.⁸

Another debate likely to arise in this context is how the Greek-Albanian relations should be treated. The Orthodox Church history in Albania is greatly influenced by the historical Greek suppression of Albanian language claims, non-recognition of a distinct Albanian Orthodox identity, etc. If the perspective of the Albanian Orthodox Church's struggle for independence from the Greek Church is bypassed, it will in all probability feed Albanian conspiracy theories of Greek influence on the government, alleged Greek territorial interests in southern Albania, Christian prejudices against Muslims, and so on. In this context one must also keep in mind that southern Albania has an ethnic Greek minority. Another sensitive inter-Christian issue is the schism between the Eastern and the Western churches and the many centuries of antagonism between them in the area, which again some may project on to contemporary matters.

The country's Ottoman legacy is another delicate question, and the Muslim and the Christian communities have conflicting narratives about this period, i.e. whether the Albanians' massive conversion to Islam was voluntary or forced. The Muslim Community emphasises the Islamic tolerance of religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire in comparison with Christian Medieval Europe.⁹ At the same time, quite a few Christians believe that the Ottomans massacred Christians and blame the Islamic legacy for everything they disapprove of in Albania, ranging from corruption to Communism.¹⁰

An additional challenge is how to present differences between local Albanian traditions on the one hand and orthodox dogma or more widespread ways of practising the same religion

but for its leader. The word fundamentalist does not relate only with religion... I mentioned above, some of the qualities of Berisha. In that wide meaning, and not only in the religious one, he remains a fundamentalist.” <<http://www.keshilliministrave.al/english/lajm.asp?id=3255>>, 12.05.2004 [accessed on 10 April 2005]. In another interview with the American Christian conservative WorldNetDaily.com, Nano called his opponent “very aggressive to fellow neighbors and (...) a disoriented fundamentalist in international affairs”, clearly referring to Albania's attempt to become a member in the Organization of Islamic Conference during Berisha's presidency (1992-97). Aaron Klein, ‘Albania 'ready to join international community'. Prime minister talks of troops in Iraq, fighting al-Qaida, EU membership’ 01.06.2005, <<http://www.worldthreats.com/Europe/Albania.htm>> [accessed 3 June 2005]

⁸ A complaint of the conditions was recently voiced by a group of intellectual Catholics and sent to e.g. the Holy See, EU offices in Albania, foreign embassies, etc. ‘Promemorie’ <www.mirditaonline.net> [accessed on 8 March 2005]

⁹ The reiterated view of the Muslim Community of Albania, e.g. in the official publication *Drita Islame*, Tirana, Feb/2003- Mar/2004, is that conversion to Islam was peaceful and that the Ottoman administration treated non-Muslims well.

¹⁰ Among Christians, it is often emphasised that the Albanians were forced to convert to Islam and that the Ottoman heritage in general explains later misfortune. See e.g. auxiliary bishop Zef Simoni in Shkodra Simoni, Zef. ‘Drejtësia e dashunia – dy elementet themëlore të lirisë’. Camaj-Pipa, Shkodra, 2002.

elsewhere. This could start debates about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ interpretations in Albania. One example is the almost universal Islamic ban on eating pork or drinking alcohol, both of which almost all Muslims in Albania happily do. Moreover, the leadership of the Muslim Community has not been overtly zealous about reinforcing the ritual aspects of Islam. To make textbooks balancing the presentation of Islam as a world religion and Islam in a local context in a universally satisfactory way, may therefore be a challenge. My assumption is therefore that any attempt to introduce religion in schools will be faced by a myriad of problems based on different understandings of Albania’s history and the position of religion in it.

Methodological pitfalls

As one begins to hypothesise about the introduction of religion into the Albanian school system a number of key questions emerge. Should the classes be normative or theological in character, or completely disinterested? Will the inclusion of religion into the school system be satisfying or dissatisfying to the major actors? Now I will discuss some feasible arrangements with different theoretical bases.

Confessional approaches

A confessional model implies a normative approach to religion, where its truth is taken for granted. Within this framework, participation in religious rituals is normally integrated in the classes. In theory, there are at least two ways of organising a confessional model.

The inter-denominational, confessional approach

A confessional, inter-denominational model would mean that all the pupils, regardless of their private religious affiliation, undergo the same education with a normative approach. Since the definition of Albanian identity disregards religious affiliation, it is actually not inconceivable that some would opt for such a model. Given the traditional positive approach to other religions in Albania, it is theoretically possible to find a way to teach that all the historical religions among Albanians are equal and have a common core, and for instance emphasise that all the traditions share some constructive and patriotic elements.

However, with Albania’s abundant religious traditions, it might be difficult to reach an agreement on what makes the religions equal, which in itself is a theological interpretation others may contest. A widespread Albanian theological definition of religious pluralism as something essentially good runs the risk of being challenged by other more exclusivist theological positions, such as the purist Wahabism or conservative Catholicism.¹¹

Regarding the ritual side of the confessional, inter-denominational model, cross-religious participation might not be all that strange in Albania, since cross-over rituals have been widespread. Here politicians and religious leaders could be used as models in the way that they pay their respect to the religious communities by attending other religious services as a sign of respect.

A confessional, inter-denominational approach would have to emphasise that the different religions are ‘almost the same’, and this might stretch the Albanian tolerance. Both the

¹¹ *Dominus Iesus*, a normative document from the Vatican in year 2000, written by Joseph Ratzinger, at that time cardinal and the Pope’s prefect of doctrine, states that the Church is “endangered by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism”. *Dominus Iesus*, Introduction, § 2.

theological and the ritual sides of the model I have outlined might highlight the disagreement between purists and those who favour the Albanian syncretistic or ‘hybrid’ traditions. It would also be hard not to alienate atheists or pupils with a religious background that is considered ‘foreign’, such as Pentecostalism. The confessional model is probably ideal for the religious establishments, which by all accounts would try to influence the aims, curriculum and methods. For that reason, I cannot see how this would not contain a proselytising element.

Confessional teaching of religion is problematic in a pluralistic and secular society. Unquestionably, any confessional model in public schools fundamentally challenges the secular constitution of the state and is problematic regarding freedom of religion. My final argument against this model is that it simply becomes an academic mess.

The multi-denominational, confessional approach

A multi-denominational version of the confessional model implies segregation of the pupils according to their religious affiliation. Not only is this a taboo in Albania. It would above all create major logistical problems. How many versions of religion should each school offer – one class for Christians, both Orthodox and Catholics, and one for Muslims, lumping together Sufis and Salafis? Most Albanians would probably delimit it to four main religious communities. However, it is questionable whether this would be compatible with religious freedom for all, in all public schools. It would also be problematic with the many believers in Albania with an indecisive attitude to fixed categories, such as the disinterested, the atheists, the anti-religious, the many Albanians from mixed families, not to mention those individuals who have several religious affiliations at the same time.

Given a certain reluctance to define one self or to register religious affiliation to the authorities, this model may be a provocation to Albanian individuals and families that have never paid attention to such formalities and are proud of that. Above all, religious segregation of Albanian children would mean that one deliberately makes religion a significant social marker with practical consequences in the public sphere. This would certainly be controversial in Albania. Accordingly, all the confessional models outlined above seem so problematic that they better be avoided altogether in public schools.

A non-confessional, secularised approach

According to a non-confessional model, religion should be taught in a neutral, disinterested manner, treating religion as a cultural fact without considering its truth claims. This logical distinction corresponds to the different approaches between theology and history of religion, which are, at times, regrettably also blurred by academics.

Leaving any religious truth claims aside, a non-confessional approach may gather the religious communities in a united front. Religious leaders and believers may react to presentations of their own religion that disregard what they see as eternal and uncontaminated by historical events and social conditions. Again, there would be the problem of how to define religion, and even to define who would be the right authority to do so in this context – religious experts, common believers, politicians, or academics?

Furthermore, there would be a question of how much room each religion should have in the curriculum. If the focus is on religion in Albania, should it be decided by their percentage of

believers in the country? Would Catholics be happy with 10%¹² if they consider their culture as superior in contributing to Albanian development?

A further complicating factor seems to be that in Albania, as in any other country, common people do not think too much about logical distinctions between the descriptive and normative level. In this way also a neutral, descriptive, unbiased subject would easily be perceived as normative, or politicised.

Avoiding the worst pitfalls

The question now is how to reduce the disagreement and at least facilitate the parties' definition of the problematic points, where it seems that a non-confessional education of religion will be the least troublesome. Admittedly, I think the easiest solution would be to avoid any special subject on religion, simply because the word itself is like a red rag to a bull. In my view, the least controversial solution would be to integrate the history of religion in Albanian and in the world into ordinary history or geography classes, connecting them to various regions and historical periods, basically as it is today. This implies a certain element of relativism that may be difficult for the religious establishments to accept.

The current system seems compatible with the pragmatic approach and pluralistic traditions in Albania. In this way one reduces issues or comparisons likely to generate controversy, such as the Islamisation process. Controversies themselves should be explained by showing how the parties feel about the particular issue. Teaching religion under a heading other than "religion", in fact the way it is done today, will make it easier to avoid generalisation of religious problems in the past, without confusing religion with morality. This might hopefully generate better mutual understanding of the historical experiences of the other religious groups, without relating it to the pupils' own religious affiliations or presenting problems as a result of religious differences as such, but rather as a result of historical and geographical circumstances.

Albanians often say they have very little knowledge about religion, pay little attention to the differences and display a tolerant attitude to religious others. A debate on religion in school is not necessarily advantageous, and it may be better to keep the current system in school as it is when it comes to teaching religion. It is hard to argue that *not* having a special subject in public schools represents a violation of human rights, and at present it seems more beneficial for the problem-ridden Albanian society to put ambitions of more religion in school on hold. Even though the religious communities may not be content with the present situation, arguments that people will attain a higher moral state and be less inclined to commit crime if they learn about religion, do not hold water.

Many observers consider the socio-political situation in Albania fragile, and the country is not yet a robust liberal democracy with a solid infrastructure to deal with disagreement and sanction injustice. I do not think Albania would easily become a new Lebanon or Bosnia if the inhabitants were to start a discussion on religion, and the population is certainly used to disagreement on religion with a well-developed common sense in terms of pluralism as a social fact. However, there are good reasons to say that Albania does not need another controversy, keeping in mind, for instance, that the state has already collapsed twice in the last 15 years. Today the state structures are largely dysfunctional, and the political climate is one of polarisation, not reconciliation. Many politicians have connections to organised crime, and the country is filled with arms. Lately, competing mafia clans have started to sort things out among themselves by remotely controlled bombs in cell phones. Common Albanians are

¹² According to the only statistical survey of religious affiliation in Albania, which is more than 60 years old.

very poor, and many gladly risk their lives leaving the country in a dinghy across the Adriatic to get away. This is the situation, which cannot be ignored when discussing religion in the public sphere.

Although the religious issue in Albania should be treated with care, the local lay and clergy in general show a more mature approach to 'religious others' than what one finds in many other countries with a shorter experience with pluralism. Generally speaking, Albanians are proud of their traditions of religious tolerance. Since the fall of Communism it has normally been the international community that has taught the Albanians how to develop the country in fields like education, infrastructure, judiciary, security, and economy. When it comes to religious tolerance, however, Albanians think that the world has something to learn from Albania.¹³

¹³ Examples of this self image are frequent. For instance in interviews after he was awarded the Man International Booker Prize 2005, the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare referred to religious tolerance as "one of the wonders of the Albanian world" (my translation). Aleksander Furxhi, 'Kadare i befasuar nga Man Booker Prize' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/albanian/news/2005/06/050610_kadareint.shtml> [accessed on 12 June 2005]. Another example was when President Alfred Moisiu during the celebration of Orthodox Easter in 2004 underlined that Albania's religious tolerance represents a "European value". News bulletins at TVSH, TV Koha, and Top Channel, 11.04.2004