

## Orthodox Witness or Colonialism? The Church of Albania in Modern Times

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The Church of Albania is a unique case in the modern history of the Orthodox Church. In 1967, by decree of the communist regime then ruling the country, all religions were banned. Albania was the first officially-declared atheist nation in the world.

When Albania's communist regime collapsed in 1991, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which had previously granted the Albanian church autocephaly in 1937, acted to resurrect the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania. The Patriarch sent Anastasios Yannoulatos, then Metropolitan of Androusa and a professor at the University of Athens, as Patriarchal legate to investigate the situation. The next year, Metropolitan Anastasios was elected Archbishop of Tirana and All Albania by the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. He immediately began the enormous tasks of reorganizing the church and, above all else, rekindling the faith of the people after twenty-four years of horrific persecutions.

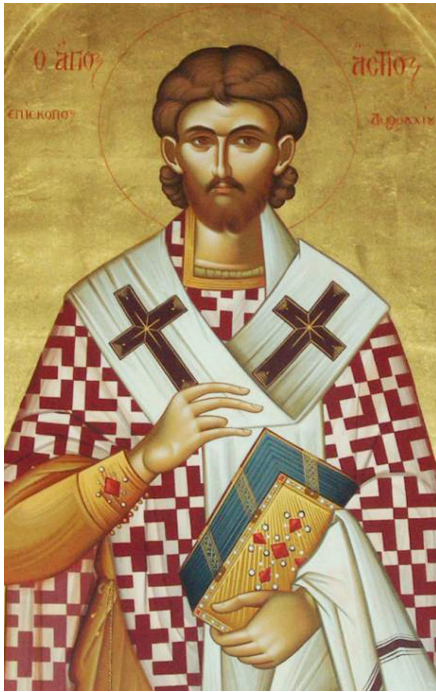
Some critics have accused the Church of Albania of failing to engage with Albanian culture and even of financially incentivized proselytism with the aim of promoting Hellenism. These critics raise the specter of colonialism, suggesting that the Alba-

nian Church is working to make Albanians subject to foreign religious leaders. This article will rebut this allegation by outlining the history of Christianity in Albania and exploring how and why the Orthodox Church of Albania was reorganized.

### The History of Christianity in Albania

The first reports on Christianity in Albania—or Illyria, as it was known in the Roman period—come from the Apostles. Paul describes the expansion of his missionary work, “so that from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19). His epistle to the Philippians mentions Caesar, martyred bishop of Dyrrhachium (today Durrës), as among the *Seventy Apostles* (Phil. 4:22). Furthermore, the martyrs Astius, Peregrinus, Eleutherius, and Antia, along with the saints from the region included in the lives of the saints, are a compelling evidence that Christians—and therefore ecclesiastical communities—have existed in what is today Albania since ancient times.

Throughout this time, the region has been part of various ecclesiastical jurisdictions. It belonged to the Roman Vicariate of Thessaloniki (first through eighth centuries), to the Patriarchate of Constantinople (eighth



through eleventh centuries), to the Archdiocese of Ohrid (eleventh century until 1767), and finally again to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (1767 to 1937), which granted the Church of Albania autocephaly in 1937. Then, after the Second World War and the end of the German occupation, communism prevailed in the country and a ruthless persecution of religion began. The declaration of state-imposed atheism meant the full abolition of the Orthodox Church.

After the collapse of the regime, the Ecumenical Patriarchate initiated the re-establishment of the Church of Albania (1991). Metropolitan Anastasios, who was appointed to undertake the revitalization of the local church, found a complete lack of administrative organization. He sought to address these logistical concerns as he simultaneously worked to reawaken the Orthodox faith, touring

throughout the country, preaching, teaching, and celebrating the Divine Liturgy in open spaces where churches had once stood.

He sought out Albanian nationals to consecrate as bishops, with the intention of making one of them the new Archbishop of Tirana, Durrës, and All Albania, but this search proved unsuccessful. Soon, a delegation of local clergy and laity visited the Ecumenical Patriarchate to ask that Metropolitan Anastasios himself be elected archbishop. On June 24, 1992, the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate did exactly that.

### Reestablishing the Albanian Church

Immediately, Archbishop Anastasios began the work of re-establishing the local church, drawing on his many years of experience as a missionary in Africa as well as time spent as an administrator in the education department of the Apostoliki Diakonia, the missions and publishing arm of the Church of Greece.<sup>1</sup> In his work, he took into consideration the peculiarities of the Church of Albania. Orthodoxy is not a majority faith in this Balkan nation. Moreover, among the Orthodox of Albania, a number of ethnic groups are represented, including Albanians, Greeks, Slavs, and Macedo-Romanians—a fact that threatened to divide the fragile church along ethnic lines. In order truly to represent “the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” and to maintain her independence from outside influences, the Church of Albania would need to embrace all her people, regardless of racial or ethnic identity. To accomplish these goals, the Church of Albania had to adjust its witness

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Hieromartyr Astius,  
first- or second-  
century bishop of Dyr-  
rhachium (Durrës,  
Albania).

<sup>1</sup> Nikolaos Tsirevelos, *Θεολογική θεμελίωση της Ορθόδοξης μαρτυρίας. Σπουδή στο έργο του Αρχιεπισκόπου Αλβανίας Αναστασίου* (Thessaloniki: Ostracon Publishing, 2015), 25.

to meet the unique social, cultural, and political challenges in a country where people were only just experiencing religious freedom after twenty-four years of persecution.

With these considerations in mind, Archbishop Anastasios made it his chief priority to bring the message of the Gospel to the hearts and lives of the religiously free Albanians, so they could experience the Orthodox faith as a living faith. Thus the word of God needed to be codified to the language and the culture of Albania. For the first few years, the archbishop and his Greek and American partners preached with the help of interpreters, who translated their homilies into Albanian and other local dialects. Soon enough, though, Archbishop Anastasios began celebrating the Divine Liturgy in Albanian, and—to the extent he could—communicating with his flock in their native language.

Catechetical schools were also established—even in the nearly inaccessible mountainous regions of the country—staffed by clergy and laity, both men and women. From the beginning, the schools sought to educate children as well as adults. The study of theology in Albania was further expanded through the establishment of the Resurrection of Christ Theological School in Durrës. The academy's location at the Monastery of Saint Vlash was particularly poignant as the monastery was the first Orthodox place of worship to have been destroyed during the era of Communist religious persecution. In 1998, the Spirit of Love Foundation was established to coordinate the educational efforts of the Church. Today it also oversees Logos University College, an institution of higher education in Tirana.

An ecclesiastical printing house has also contributed greatly to the cause of Orthodox Christian education in Albania. The publishing house has worked to make available liturgical, theological and ecclesiastical books, both translated from other languages and work written in Albanian. In 1992, the monthly newspaper *Ngjallja* (*Resurrection*) entered publication, along with the childrens' magazine *Gezohu* (*Rejoice*), the youth magazine *Kambanat* (*Bells*), the student bulletin *Fjala* (*Word*), and the English bulletin *News from Orthodoxy in Albania*. All this was part of an effort to bring the message of the gospel to the public.

Along with efforts to provide a spiritual foundation for Orthodoxy in Albania, there has also been a massive effort to support the creation of a durable infrastructure for the Church. Within a few years of the reintroduction of Orthodoxy to Albania in 1992, a hundred and fifty churches had been built. The Cathedral of the Resurrection, with its intricate bell tower and attached synodical center, cultural center, conference hall, and museum provides a true center for Orthodoxy in a country in which the public expression of faith had been completely erased within most of our lifetimes. In addition to these new church buildings, monasteries, schools, icon workshops, and ecclesiastical music schools have also been built.

Alongside these efforts, the Church of Albania has undertaken innovative social work. Though sometimes misunderstood as a missionary effort aimed at converting non-Orthodox Albanians, the church's social programs provided for people's basic needs, such as food, water, work, education, and health care. As



Archbishop Anastasios greets patients at a mobile clinic run by the church. Photo: Jim Forest.

such, these services are a witness to Christ's love for humankind.

The Church's social services are now many, including the Evangelismos Orthodox Diagnostic Medical Center, which hosts over two million appointments a year in a number of practice areas and serves patients regardless of their religious faith. Similarly, Diakonia Agape performs a wide variety of social and charitable work throughout Albania, including the distribution of food, clothes, and medical supplies. Finally, the Church oversees programs for agricultural and livestock development, the protection of the environment, and the construction of aqueducts and hydroelectric power stations. This work is only possible because of the participation of laypeople of various professions, including scientists, doctors, and educators.

### An Albanian Church For Albanians

One of the principal goals of the ecclesiastical revitalization efforts has

been to ensure that, ultimately, the Church of Albania is run by Albanians. In Orthodox tradition, native people work as "bridges of trust" with their compatriots of other religions or no religion at all. Moreover, they transmit the message of the gospel to their specific cultural context. Thus, the fundamental objective of the church's educational efforts has been for those that are taught to become teachers themselves, so that the church is established within and able to witness to its cultural context, allaying any suspicions of colonialist exploitation.

This approach follows the historic practice of Orthodoxy and demonstrates a direct continuation of and connection with the work of the apostles and saints.<sup>2</sup> The aim is to establish an independent local church that participates in the one Church. As now-Archbishop Anastasios wrote in the 1960s, Orthodox witness has as its perspective "the planting and growth of a native Church, self-powered and self-gov-

<sup>2</sup> Antonios-Aimilios Tachias, *κύριλλος και μεθόδιος* (Thessaloniki: Κυριακίδη, 1997), 174.

<sup>3</sup> Anastasios G. Yannoulatos, "Initial Thoughts toward an Orthodox Foreign Mission," part 1, *Porefthendes* 38-39 (1968): 21.



erning, able to turn to account all the genuine strands of national tradition, transforming and hallowing them in harmony with the people's nature, to the glory of God."<sup>3</sup>

The Church of Albania has also created the conditions for communication and cooperation with other churches and non-Christian religions. Within the volatile Balkans, the Church of Albania works toward reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. It has taken the lead in establishing the interconfessional Biblical Society of Albania, which aims to create a new Albanian translation of the Holy Scriptures. A harmonious relationship with the Roman Catholic Church has helped prevent the emergence of a Uniate community. The Orthodox Church also helped establish the Inter-Religious Council of Albania, which includes Sunni and Bektashi Muslims along with Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians. This effort reflects the fact that all people, no matter how different they are, are images of God and therefore brothers and sisters.

Outside Albania, too, the Church of Albania has made her presence felt

in ecumenical events. It is a regular member of the Conference of European Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the interfaith organization Religions for Peace, in addition to participating in inter-Orthodox initiatives. In these efforts, the Church of Albania offers an ecumenical vision stemming from the Holy Scriptures and the church fathers.

### An Autonomous or a Colonial Church?

Despite these efforts, some nationalist voices have accused the Archbishop, who was born in neighboring Greece, of self-interest. They assert that he has worked to make the Church of Albania into an ecclesiastical colony of the Greeks:

The simple explanation for why the Church is not responding to Albanian interests is that the Hellenistic Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul appointed an explicitly non-ethnic oriented clergy. . . . The consistent preaching of a universalist message, even with a suggested Greek-centric underpinning,

<sup>4</sup> Isa Blumi, "Navigating the Challenge of Liberalism: The Resurrection of the Orthodox Church in Post-Communist Albania," in ed. Sabrina Ramet, *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe: Nationalism, Conservatism, and Intolerance* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 206.

<sup>5</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Θέματα Ορθόδοξου Θεολογίας* (Athens: Άγιος Ζωής, 1989), 196.

Archbishop Anastasios with other leaders and staff of Religions for Peace.



has only exasperated Albanian nationalist fears.<sup>4</sup>

But are these accusations founded? Do Archbishop Anastasios and the local church serve the interests of all Albania? Is the ecumenical character of the message of the gospel as it has been revived in Albania an invention of the Archbishop, wholly foreign to the Orthodox tradition?

As a matter of both history and theology, the Orthodox Church has never denied local cultures. On the contrary, it has received them and transformed them in order to convey the message of salvation to all people. According to Father Georges Florovsky, “the Church is catholic for each of its members. A member who is isolated and solitary cannot be part of a fraternity.”<sup>5</sup> The Church seeks to transform local reality in a way that is specific to the place.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the Archbishop’s original staff comprised only sixteen people, a truly small number compared to the masses of people sent to Albania by the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches. The Archbishop’s associates were mainly Albanian, together with a few Greeks and Americans, and they worked under his guidance to re-establish the local church in a way that was respectful of the local circumstances. In other words, the Archbishop directed the Albanian church’s participation in the polyphonic and multinational unity of the one Church.

To limit the Church to national borders would deny the Church’s very self-understanding. Its purpose is the salvation of the whole world. The salvific message of Christ is timeless and universal, and thus cannot be

confined within the shifting borders of nation-states. As Archbishop Anastasios has written: “By encouraging [a] sense of universality, the Church not only helps bring people together but also proclaims—both symbolically and in practice—a worldwide communion of love. The Church offers us a foretaste of this global society or communion (the Greek word *koinonia* has both meanings) in the form of an eschatological hope, a vision, and a celebration.”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the Orthodox Church of Albania, true to the tradition and ecumenical spirit of Orthodox Christianity, promotes the mutual acquaintance, fraternization, and cooperation of the Christian churches and of other religious traditions, with the aim of promoting peace, fighting poverty and violence, promoting gender equality, and solving contemporary social problems. The theological tradition of the Orthodox Church includes the aim to cultivate and develop the reconciliation of all people, so they can coexist harmoniously. Accordingly, the Orthodox ethos can transform the ideal of freedom into action in a way that is distinct from nationalistic ideals, psychopathological fanaticisms, or colonial expectations. This dialogue, which belongs to the ancient tradition of the Church, must perpetually be renewed in light of modern challenges.

Is it possible that the social service programs of the Orthodox Church in Albania exist only to offer a financial incentive to converts? In response to this accusation, it is important to note that during the reorganization of the Church in Albania, the pastoral and missionary work was never connected to the social services. All of these projects actively rejected the

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<sup>6</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, trans. Pavlos Gottfried (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2003), 197–98.

transfer of the Greek cultural traditions. The establishment of schools and libraries by the Church in cooperation with the state is important for the wider Albanian society. These projects promote education and cultivate local culture. The social ministry is an actual witness to the love of the Triune God, manifest in the construction of schools and hospitals and in food distributed to the hungry regardless of race, religion, or language. Social work, in combination with evangelism, is consistent with the faith of the Church and invites people to come to know the Church through her efforts to relieve all kinds of pain and evil. In this way, the universal embrace of Christendom is revealed in action.

Finally, all these efforts depend ultimately on the establishment of a local church, a local church which in turn relies upon the theological education of local people. Any other approach—for example, missionary efforts in the service of nationalist expansion—leads with mathematical precision to failure. Conversely, the direct cultivation of local membership, both clergy and laity—that is, the continued apprenticeship of the apostles—excludes all suspicions of colonial exploitation. For this reason, the main concerns of the local church have been the establishment of a theological academy where members can study, the designation of local clergy and lay leaders to help in the evangelical work and in founding missionary efforts that respect the specificity of this place. These projects reflect a firm hope that this seed will bear valuable fruit in the future (John 12:24). Faith in Christ, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8), together with the effort

of all his Church, is able to bring remarkable results. As Archbishop Anastasios puts it, “In the Orthodox tradition a local church can be independent as well as ‘catholic’—in the word’s original meaning of ‘all-inclusive,’ ‘universal,’ or, as used here, ‘global’—and complete. This is so because localness epitomizes the all-inclusiveness of salvation and of the Church, which is universal in space and time.”<sup>7</sup>



The Church of Albania was established during the earliest centuries of Christianity. It received its autocephaly in 1937, but the Communist-era persecution that occurred between 1967 and 1991 tore down all its structures, spread fear and death among the faithful, and humiliated and wiped out the clergy. Upon the collapse of the totalitarian regime, the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania was reorganized in a remarkable and rapid manner thanks to the systematic and effective initiatives of its gifted leader. His companions in this huge, multifaceted work were a few Greeks and Americans and, importantly, many Albanians. They worked together with humility, as brothers, in order to share the message of the gospel and set the foundations for the revival of the Orthodox Church, working with the passion of the first Christians.

The reestablishment followed a plan that combined missionary witness and the re-evangelism. In this way, the Church was reborn from the ruins, even as local traditions and peculiarities were respected. Local members have created relationships of trust and have contributed to the building of the Christian faith and

<sup>7</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, trans. Pavlos Gottfried (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2003), 40.

to the further work of evangelism in the local society. The method of apprenticeship, taught by Jesus Christ and practiced by his disciples over the centuries, has been followed consistently. In this way, the church has been free to spread the message of the gospel and not to operate as the propaganda wing of another church or nation, nor to seek conversion or economically based proselytism as a colonial church. On the contrary, it stayed true to the gospel, in order to spread its message to all people.

During periods of turmoil in the Balkans, the Church of Albania has fostered faith, love and hope for Orthodox Christians while operating as a vehicle of reconciliation in Albanian society. Simultaneously, she has acted in an amicable manner towards her neighbors, as evidenced by the refugee crisis of Kosovo. This crisis showed in action, against the accusations of nationalist circles,

the teaching of Orthodox theology regarding the human person. It showed that the biggest problem of humanity is egotism. The Church of Albania demonstrated actively that “from one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth” (Acts 17:26, NIV). This is why the church has worked for ecumenical reconciliation and fraternity in Albania and the Balkans.

The reestablishment of the Church of Albania grafted the universal gospel onto the peculiar tree of Albania. A church within the Church was re-established, with a face and identity that is totally its own. This Church embraces all Orthodox Christians of the country, regardless of national or racial origin, and stands against the influence of foreign interests. The Albanian Church now has voice of her own, which harmonizes with other churches in catholic polyphony for the doxology of the Triune God. ✱



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