

Missiology in the Orthodox Seminary in Albania

Dear Folks,

After our trip to South Africa and the missiology conference in January, I joined an e-mail list called "family missiology". This report about Christianity in Albania grabbed my attention and we got permission to include it as a THTH.

Enjoy,
Robin

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After just over a week in Albania, I thought I might write something about my impressions of my first visit. One week is not enough to get to know a country, and so some of the things I say here will no doubt be revised after I have been here longer.

I was invited to teach missiology in the Orthodox Seminary in Albania for a term, and arrived here with my wife Val on Sunday 7 May 2000. We travelled on the plane from Athens with Fr Luke Veronis, the principal of the seminary. Fr Luke had been to Athens to attend the "Orthodoxy 2000" conference, which was arranged by the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece. He read a paper on "Missionary problems in the Orthodox Church at the end of the 20th century". We listened to some of the other papers, as there were several others of missiological interest. There was translation in English, French, Greek and Russian, as papers were read in all those languages.

I began teaching at the seminary on Monday 8 May. The seminary is at Shen Vlash, about 40 km from Tirana near the port of Durres on the Adriatic Sea. There had been a church and monastery there before, but they were demolished by the Hoxha (pronounced Hodja) regime about 30 years ago. In 1967 Albania was declared to be an atheist state, and all temples, mosques and other religious buildings were closed. Some were converted to other uses, and many were demolished altogether. Shen Vlash (Saint Vlash) was regarded as a holy place by Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Muslims, the three main religious groups in Albania, and so the communist youth of Durres had travelled out there to break down the buildings in 1967.

In 1991 democracy came to Albania, and religious freedom was restored. No Orthodox bishops had survived the Hoxha regime, and most of the few surviving priests had been in prison. Bishop Anastasios Yannoulatos was appointed Archbishop to revive the Orthodox Church of Albania, and he decided to build the seminary at Shen Vlash to symbolise that revival. The seminary now has about 60 students doing a three-year course, with about 20 students in each year. About two-thirds of the students are male, and one-third female. I am teaching the same course to all three years, with the aid of Joana Malaj, who translates everything into Albanian. The students all learn a foreign language, either Greek or English, since there are few theological books available in Albanian, but most, and especially the first years, do not know enough English to follow lectures.

For the first couple of classes, I asked the students to teach me, and to tell me a little about themselves and their churches. In some ways it seemed a bit silly for me to go from South Africa to Albania to teach mission and missiology. If mission is happening anywhere in the Orthodox Church, it is happening in Albania, and the students can probably teach me more than I can

teach them. It was also important to have a better idea of the context of the students ministry. So the students told their stories.

Many of the stories were very similar. There was a church, or two or three or four churches in their village. The communists demolished them in 1967. One of them has been rebuilt, or is being rebuilt. Some went further back, and said that people in the village knew of sites of churches that had been demolished much earlier – by the Turks in the 15th or 16th centuries. Students from Durres told me of the tomb of St Asti, the first Albanian bishop, and the second bishop of Durres (the first had been Jewish). St Asti had been martyred in AD 98. For a South African, the Church in Albania seems mind-bogglingly old, and in its 2000-year history the periods of persecution have been far longer than the entire existence of Christianity in South Africa.

Some of the students had little experience of the persecution at first hand. Many of them were only 10-12 years old when the communist regime fell in 1991. But some said they now understood some things they did not understand back then. Joana Malaj, the translator, said she sometimes thought that her grandmother was talking to herself. When she asked what she was saying, her grandmother would say that it was nothing. Now she knows her grandmother was praying. But to tell children this would have been too dangerous, because they were frequently asked about such things at school, and could innocently say something that would betray the family. Teachers would ask children if they ate a lot of eggs. It may perhaps seem very difficult for Western Christians to understand the extent to which apparently peripheral things like Easter eggs could be a vital symbol of faith, and of a refusal to deny Christ, but in Albania that was so.

The communists demanded that all priests shave their beards, and forcibly shaved (or jailed or killed) many of those who did not. In one village, where people knew each other and were often old friends, the priest was faced with a demand to shave his beard. His friend, who was the village leader, allowed him to retain his beard, but in order to do so, he had to remain inside his house, in voluntary house arrest, for over 20 years. For that priest, that was his witness, his refusal to deny Christ. In the West, many Orthodox priests shave their beards, and assimilate to the dominant culture, and think nothing of it. It seems a casual matter, that means nothing. Yet in Albania, between 1967 and 1991, such things could be matters of life or death.

On Tuesday 8 May I spoke to students at the University of Tirana, where Fr Luke is the student chaplain. The locks had been changed on the room where we were to meet, and no one had a key, so we sat on the grass outside the student residences, surrounded by grazing cows and sheep. There were about 20 students, and I spoke about South Africa, and our struggle for democracy, and some of the similarities and differences between South Africa and Albania. One major difference, of course, was that in Albania Christians were persecuted in the name of Atheism, whereas in South Africa Christians were persecuted in the name of "Christian civilisation". Trying to explain that to students in Albania made me aware just how crazy the South African setup was. Persecuting Christians in the name of atheism may be evil and wicked and cruel, but there is at least some logic in it.

An even more significant difference was that in South Africa we have the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Much has been said and written in South Africa about the shortcomings of the TRC – that it let too many people off too lightly, that it has failed to deal with the question of restitution, or, from the other side of the political fence, that it was a witch hunt, or an

example of the winners rewriting history. In the Balkans, and especially in Albania, such criticisms seem trivial and petty. I think that the contrast made more of an impact on foreign missionaries, who have experience of life outside Albania. For the Albanian students themselves, it was perhaps inconceivable, something from another universe, another dimension. It struck me that if the Balkans had an institution half, or even a tenth as effective as the TRC, the situation would be enormously better than it is now.

Val and I met Archbishop Anastasios briefly in the cathedral at a baptism last Thursday. "Welcome to Africa in Europe", he said.

But Africa in Europe is hardly the word for it. Perhaps Mocambique after the floods might be comparable, or the Democratic Republic of Congo in the throes of civil war. The poverty, dirt and squalor of Tirana, the capital city, are hard to believe. Yes, there are places in South Africa that compare with it, but they are isolated, and in a way exceptional. Places like Kwaggafontein in KwaNdebele were perhaps as half bad as Tirana in the mid-1980s – they are much better now. Such settlements in South Africa are going from bad to better. In Tirana, they are going from bad to worse.

In 1991 three things came to Albania. Religious freedom, democracy, and capitalism. I am no doubt prejudiced; as a Christian and a liberal, I believe that religious freedom and democracy are good things. But in Albania capitalism has been an unmitigated disaster, with no redeeming features whatever.

Under its socialist economic system, Albania achieved autarky. The government was cruel and oppressive, but the towns were clean, and children could grow up healthy and safe. In South Africa, under apartheid, the combination of sanctions and the desire of the National Party government to ward off undesirable

foreign influences achieved a certain amount of isolation. The end of isolation has brought something of an economic boom. In Albania the end of isolation led to mass impoverishment and underdevelopment.

Albania under Hoxha managed to achieve almost complete isolation and economic self-sufficiency. The countryside is littered with mushroom-shaped concrete bunkers that make Magnus Malan's war psychosis of the "total onslaught" era seem comparatively sane. Albania isolated itself even from other communist countries. It broke with Yugoslavia when Tito abandoned Stalinism. It broke with the USSR in the 1960s, and for a long time its only friend was China. But by 1978 even China was too liberal, and Albania stood alone.

In 1991 when communism fell, so did the Albanian economy. Industrial production fell by more than 60%, as people destroyed factories, smashed greenhouses, and chopped down orchards in an almost suicidal orgy of destruction. Now almost all food has to be imported, and Albania doesn't produce enough to have a balance of trade. The dirt and squalor and pollution have come in the last 8 years. Jerry-built flats have gone up all over Tirana. Almost half the buildings look unfinished, and even before they are finished, they look like dilapidated ruins. Most South African "informal settlements" are much better. A canal running through the middle of Tirana was a grassy and pleasant place 10 years ago. Now it is choked with rubbish, smells of raw sewage, and the once grassy banks are all over spaza shops. The parks have vanished, taken over by illegal structures and piles of rubbish, built with bricks that are often stolen from public buildings, which have just enough bricks left in the walls not to collapse entirely. The culture of non-payment is alive and well.

Travelling from Tirana to the seminary near Durres takes about

an hour. This is probably the main trunk road in the country, and its surface is broken up. Travelling at 40 km an hour is a breakneck speed. And all the way along one passes derelict abandoned factories, and derelict abandoned vehicles, which litter the side of the road and the streams and rivers.

In 1991 Albania wooed capitalism, and the result has been very ugly indeed. In 1997 there was a financial collapse, and many Albanians fled as economic refugees to other countries. Criminals were let out of jail, or escaped in the general breakdown of law and order, and they too went to other countries, where they gave all Albanians a bad reputation. At the time of the fall of communism, Albanian refugees and immigrants were welcomed. Since 1997, however, they are treated with suspicion, and there is growing xenophobia and racism.

So it's three cheers for religious freedom, two cheers for democracy, and a big boo for capitalism.

Keep well,
Steve Hayes