

Folk Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy

among Albanians

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Albanian Evangelical Mission

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A. Animism

1.0 The blindspot of the western worldview

In his seminal article “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle”, Hiebert exposes the weakness in the western worldview. As he relates, the crux of the weakness lies in the fact that westerners often have a worldview which has only two tiers. The lower tier is made up of the natural, physical world of the senses (the needs of which are treated through science, technology and secular knowledge and experience), and the higher tier is made up of the world of high religion (which concerns itself with such matters as the existence of God, eternal life, faith, ethics, injustice etc.).

Arnold summarizes and quotes from Hiebert’s article thus:

Hiebert... came to the conclusion that Western culture has a significant blind spot when it comes to the question of spirits and evil powers – a blind spot he termed ‘the flaw of the excluded middle.’ He describes Western evangelicalism as answering questions of life experience either in empirical (scientific) terms or theistic (divine) terms, but neglecting the middle zone of spirit forces that are believed by non-Western cultures to influence life. He paints the results of this dichotomy in rather startling terms for its implications for missions: ‘When tribal people spoke of fear of evil spirits, [Western missionaries] denied the existence of the spirits rather than claim the power of Christ over them. The result, as Newbigin has pointed out, is that Western Christian missions has been one of the greatest secularizing forces in history.’ Hiebert’s article has begun to have a significant impact on many evangelical thinkers (Arnold 1992:180).

In contrast to this western worldview, the worldviews of many non-western societies and cultures have three tiers. The upper and lower tiers are similar to those described above, but another middle tier exists in between these two, consisting of the unseen world of spirits which is believed to influence and affect everyday life. Even though western evangelical theology theoretically accepts the existence of this middle zone, yet knowledge and understanding of it has been lost in many ways in today’s West.¹ Gilliland confirms this when he says that ‘the activity of the spirit world is something that

¹ Arnold suggested in 1992 that the worldview of the West would undergo a radical change: ‘Many thinkers believe Western society is on the verge of a major world view shift. Scholars such as Hans Küng are anticipating an epochal move from the “Modern Era” to a “Post-modern Era”, a major paradigm change in the way Westerners view reality. There is no doubt that the rising influence of Eastern thought and the burgeoning impact of the New Age movement will have influence on how Western culture perceives the supernatural’ (1992:149).

missionaries from the West have never taken very seriously, even though they present a gospel that was informed and validated by direct revelation' (1983:28). This dichotomy between science and religion has 'often left missionaries with no adequate answers for the animistic questions people in non-western contexts raise' (Hiebert and Shaw 1993:66).

2.0 The beliefs and practices of the practitioners of animism

Defining 'religion' in a simple and general way as 'essentially a search for a relationship to and with the supernatural' (1992:24), Steyne helps us to understand that the most natural form of religion in the history of the world has been that which simply recognizes, responds to and relates to the spirit world. Whereas western life has often tended to deny or ignore the 'excluded middle' zone, this natural form of religion recognizes it as a central part of its worldview and daily life. This form of religion is called 'animism'. Simply put, animism is the belief that interprets the reality of this world as an integration and interdependence of the physical and spiritual realms. For animists, the 'high' God (if one is believed in) is often seen as deistic. Animistic practitioners seek pragmatically to manipulate the spiritual realm around them by various means and methods in order to achieve their own ends in life.

Hiebert and Shaw define animism narrowly as: 'the belief that the natural world itself is alive with spirit beings' (1993:171), whereas Steyne gives a clearer definition of it as: 'the search for and the discovery of power sources by which man may manipulate the spirit world to execute his will' (1992:17). However, Van Rheezen gives a more comprehensive definition as: 'The belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power' (1991:20).

So the animist sees the physical and spiritual worlds as being one integrated whole, and that they are therefore interdependent. The basic principle in the practice of animism is that people attempt to connect with the spiritual world in such a way as to manipulate this for their own ends. 'The term animism not only recognizes spirits but describes spirit involvement with a view to achieving human objectives' (Steyne 1992:17). Whether the person is seeking for protection against evil or from sickness, or whether s/he is seeking success in personal ventures, the core of animism is that it is a system of beliefs and practices which are amoral and power-seeking, and whose motivation and aims are ultimately self-centred:

The animist's approach to religion is essentially pragmatic. He wants a religion that he can use to meet his needs and provide for his wishes.

As a religious pragmatist, the animist recognizes his own key role in making his religion useful. And in order to make it useful, he realizes that a personal relationship... with spiritual beings is essential.

For the animist, life revolves around, and is totally integrated with, the realm of spirits. Meaning in life comes from the effective manipulation of spirits to do man's bidding. This relationship does not depend on moral or ethical preconditions (Steyne 1992:28).

This 'manipulation of spirits to do man's bidding' is done in a complex variety of ways, involving rites, rituals and liturgies. It is a two-way relationship between practitioner and the spiritual realm:

...the spirit beings are thought to be both legalistic and capricious. The animist must practice the proper rites, rituals, and liturgies to ensure a favourable response, but the spirits may change the needed rite at will. If the correct rite, ritual or liturgy is used, however, miracles do happen, and results are achieved (Steyne 1992:28).

There are a whole variety of different practitioners of animism in different countries and cultures, such as sorcerers, witches, shamen, witchdoctors, and so on, whose different practices and roles in their own societies are described in Burnett (2000).

2.1 Biblical examples of animistic practitioners and practices

Some biblical examples of animistic practices would be those of Pharaoh's magicians who were able to reproduce the first few of the miracles of Moses in Egypt using their own occult arts (Ex. 7:11-12,22; 8:7; cp 8:18-19); Nebuchadnezzar's use of animal livers to divine the guidance he needed when making war in Israel (Ezek. 21:21); the sons of Sceva who were Jewish folk practitioners and who would have used incantations and 'power names' to deliver people from the effects of evil spirits (Acts 19:13-16); the slave girl possessed by a spirit of divination in Philippi (Acts 16); Simon the magician of Samaria (Acts 8), and Elymas (Acts 13).

3.0 The syncretism² of animism with the world's religions

Because of the universal existence of the spirit world, it is no surprise when we find that animistic beliefs and practices have pervasively penetrated people's lives throughout the whole world. So neither should it be a great shock to find it in places, countries and among peoples who profess one of the world's major religions. Steyne describes the

² The word 'syncretism' refers to the mixing together of the beliefs and practices of different religious systems.

presence and manifestations of the beliefs and practices of animism within Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism (1992:45-54). The fact that a people have officially professed or adopted a major religion does not mean that animism has been removed completely and replaced by the beliefs and practices of that new religion. Steyne believes that 'animism to varying degrees persists in all religions because of man's strong sinful motivation to be his own god' (1992:17).

3.1 Official religion and magic

Malinowski (an anthropologist who worked in the islands off New Guinea) was the first in modern times to note the difference between official religion and that which he called 'magic' (Hiebert and Shaw 1993:167). By magic, he was referring to the practices he had discovered among the people there who used charms, amulets and spells for protection against evil and for success in personal ventures. Magic, therefore, is a particular form of animism. Hiebert and Shaw define magic as: 'the use of this-worldly, supernatural power to achieve one's desired goals. It basically falls into two types, white magic and black magic' (1993:167). They say that white magic is used to attain 'good' aims (for example, to make it rain or to ensure victory in battle), whereas 'black' magic is used to damage or destroy other people (for example, witchcraft, voodoo or cursing). Arnold describes two other kinds of magic, love magic (used to try to make someone fall in love with someone else) and divination (which attempts to discover the future) (1992:27).

The Albanian word *magji* (literally, magic) is a general word which is used by Albanians to describe all forms and kinds of attempts to engage with the spirit world or to use invisible, supernatural forces with the aim of gaining desired results (e.g. charms and amulets, fetishes, spells, the evil eye, love magic, voodoo etc.). All of these, even though they differ from one another as far as their forms and aims are concerned, are classed as 'magic' by Albanians. In the same way, the word *magjistar* (literally, magician) is used to describe all those who are involved in such practices of magic. So these two words are umbrella terms.

Because of the pervasive nature of animism, the use of magic is also just as pervasive. The characteristics and main ways in which it manifests itself are always similar, and it knows no bounds either in relation to religion or to time. The kinds of magic which were practiced by the ancient Greeks have a close similarity with those of folk practices within Islam today, regardless of the different forms of belief and practice of the official religions. As Arnold says: 'The occult sciences crossed all religious boundaries and borrowed from all religions' (1992:72), and

Magic, witchcraft and sorcery have played a part in every society in the history of religion. The main features are always the same. Of special significance... is the fact that these practices were based on a firm belief in the

realm of good and evil spirits. Those who practiced magic believed the supernatural beings could be manipulated to bring positive benefit or harm. For the covenant people of God these practices were regarded as evil and detestable to the Lord (1992:59-60).

3.2 'High' and 'low' religion

Hence, a religion will often consist of two parts: the 'official' or 'high' religion (consisting of the officially-prescribed orthodox doctrines and practices) and the 'folk' or 'low' religion (which are those things actually believed and practiced by the common people, where these differ from and would not be condoned by the official religion and its leaders). The 'high' and the 'low' exist side by side, but the 'low' can often remain hidden to the unknowing and unobservant outsider, whose attention is naturally drawn to the outward, formal and much more overt 'high' religious beliefs and practices. However, keen-eyed participant observation and appropriate questioning can begin to uncover the real world of beliefs and practices hiding below the surface.

There are several reasons why we find both 'high' and 'low' elements in the same religion. One of these reasons is because of unmet felt-needs. Where the official religion fails to meet the needs of people (e.g. for healing), they will often resort to using animistic practices themselves or will go to local practitioners for help in order to fulfil their needs. Hence, there comes about a syncretism between the official religion and spiritistic animism. In the context of folk Islam in the Balkans, Companjen stated the following:

What religion teaches and what people actually believe is a completely different story. In rural areas, including Albania and Albanian-speaking areas of the Balkans, beliefs still include pre-Christian and Islamic elements. Spirits (good and bad), holy trees and mountains, wise men and women, healers, practices concerning first hair-cuts, birth, death and marriage, fertility dances, etc. are still part of folk culture.

In combination with Islam this becomes folk Islam in which all kinds of syncretism is found. This does not have very much to do with Muslim rules and the Koran, but it is a living reality and is often very occult. It is spiritual territory (Companjen 1995a:5-6).

B. Folk Islam

1.0 The syncretistic nature of Islam

The basic fact which must be recognized with regard to Islam is that it has a syncretistic nature and is often mixed up with a lot of spiritism. Missionaries who expect to find some kind of 'pure Islam' (which is conformed strictly to Qur'anic teaching and practice) will quickly discover their need to learn about the true kind of religion which is practiced by ordinary muslims and which is usually called 'folk Islam'.

Woodberry notes that the origins of folk beliefs within Islam go back to religious beliefs existing prior to Islam, and he gives examples of folk religious beliefs which are still practiced today and which Muhammad allowed in Islam right from its beginnings (quoted in Steyne 1992:49-50). Otis finds the roots of spiritism within Islam in the experiences of Muhammed himself (1991:64-65), and he says that:

This intermingling of orthodoxy and spiritism has remained on through the centuries as a prominent feature of the Islamic community. Today, of the world's approximately one billion Muslims, it is estimated that some seventy percent are practitioners of popular (or 'folk' Islam) (1991:65).

He tells of the kinds of things which are often practiced by the leaders of folk Islamic orders:

Unlike classical Islam, which places authority in the hands of those who have completed both preordained courses of study and official apprenticeships, folk Islam recognizes those individuals who are able to demonstrate proven abilities to contain and/or conjure spiritual forces. Many of these mediums, exorcists and healers... are only nominally identified with Islam, while others... make a concerted effort to incorporate Qur'anic teachings into their exotic arsenals of cures, fortunes or curses.

Virtually all practitioners of folk Islam address routine challenges, such as warding off evil forces and events, through the use of amulets and charms... When really serious power is required, however, pirs and marabouts will sometimes solicit the services of fallen angels (1991:66).

Parshall also claims that about 70% of all muslims are entangled in such folk Islamic practices, and he quotes thus from Musk:

Popular Islam has added a whole life-way of animistic beliefs and practices. The use of the rosary for divining and healing, the use of amulets and talismans, the use of hair-cuttings and nail-trimmings, the belief and practice of saint worship, the use of charms, knots, magic, sorcery, the exorcism of demons, the practice of tree and stone worship, cursing and blessing – these and many other animistic practices belie the gap between the theological religion and the actual religion (1983:16 quoting from Musk 1979:211).

2.0 Sufism and the emergence of the dervish orders

Parshall notes that it is the rigidity of official Islam which makes many muslims feel spiritually empty and consequently to feel the need that this inward yearning be satisfied: ‘as millions of Muslims move beyond cold, dead orthodoxy, we see them desiring that felt needs be met. Their hearts cry out for fulfillment in a love relationship to a more personal God’ (1983:18). It is this inward yearning which led to the emergence of mysticism within Islam (or Sufism, as it is known) in the centuries following the establishment of Islam. Different orders began to be founded within Islam, characterized by asceticism, by the seeking of deep spiritual experiences and by animistic practices. These orders grew and spread, eclectically and syncretistically absorbing (to different degrees) the beliefs and practices of the peoples who converted to Islam as it spread into different places. Practitioners became adepts in many animistic practices, while outwardly remaining faithful to Islam. The emphasis which these practitioners placed on meeting people’s felt-needs made them very popular (Parshall 1983:23-37).

There are several such Islamic dervish orders that still exist and practice today in the Albanian-speaking parts of the Balkans, e.g. the Bektashiyya, the Halvetiyya (with their four sub-groups), the Kadiriyya, the Rifaiyya and the Sa’adiyya. There have also been other orders (e.g. the Tidjaniyya) which have operated historically among the Albanians. Even though official Islam among the Albanians recognizes the heretical nature of Bektashism, nevertheless all these orders (including the Bektashis) officially call themselves muslims. Norris (1993:82-137) and especially Clayer give us useful overviews of the histories, development and the particular beliefs and practices of these orders, especially on those points in which they differ from one another.

2.1 The Bektashi order

The largest of these orders (and the one which has had the greatest influence among Albanians historically) is the Bektashi order (founded by the sufi leader Haxhi Bektash Veliu) which has had its centre in Tirana ever since Ataturk’s government pronounced the dervish orders to be illegal in Turkey in 1925.

2.1.1 A brief overview of the history of the Bektashi order

Many dervish orders were founded around the period of the thirteenth century AD. This came about as a result of the Turkmen conquests of Central Asia, and of the movements of Turkmen peoples into Anatoly around the time of the fall of the Byzantine Empire. Among these population movements, there were so-called 'holy men', Turkmen Islamic religious leaders who practiced mysticism and who spread their sufi Islamic faith in the place which we now call Turkey; Haxhi Bektash Veliu was one of these leaders.

According to tradition, Haxhi Bektash Veliu was born in Khorasan in Central Asia around the year 1248 AD, and came to Anatoly around 1281 when he was 33 years old. It is claimed that he died at the age of 92, around the year 1340. He claimed that he was a direct descendant of Muhammad. He was trained by the well-known sufi teacher Ahmet Yesevi and it is claimed that he performed many miracles even in his youth. He travelled throughout the Middle East and finally settled in Turkey where he gained a great following. There was a rivalry for some time between him and the famous Jelaladin Rumi, the founder of the Mevlevi sufi order in Konia (known in Acts 14 as Iconium). It is said that both of these men could demonstrate supernatural power and that in the end Haxhi Bektash Veliu overcame his rival. He became the greatest sufi leader of that period and it is reckoned that he sent out 36,000 Bektashi missionaries to spread his teachings. The influence of this order in Turkish history was such that it was actually being considered at one time whether Bektashism should be proclaimed as the official religion of the country. It is claimed that the order had about seven million adherents in Turkey around 1826.

Many of the Turkish military (as well as ordinary people) converted to Bektashism. So, as the Ottoman Empire spread, Bektashism spread with it through the Balkans, since the Bektashi missionaries accompanied the Turkish army with many babas serving as army 'chaplains'. The official faith of the Janissary corps (the Sultan's bodyguard) until they were wiped out in 1826 was Bektashism. Among the most famous of Bektashi missionaries was Sari Saltik, who (according to tradition) came to Albania in the 1300s and was buried in the mountains above the town of Krujë after his death. After the year 1431 (when Ioannina was taken by Sultan Murat II), many Bektashi missionaries came to Albania and began to build *teqes* and spread their faith.

One of the early leaders of Bektashism was Balim Sultan who became the head (*dede*) of the order around 1500. It is said that it was he who established the membership rite (which is still practiced today) for new Bektashi believers (so-called *myhypë*), and also that he established the particular order of dervishes within Bektashism which prefer to remain celibate. Balim Sultan is known as the main organizer of the Bektashi order and it was around this time that the order became officially recognized within Islam. The heads of the order lived in the Haçibektash *teqe* in Turkey until 1925 when the administrative centre moved to Tirana, Albania.

When the Janissaries were wiped out in 1826, ordinary Bektashis were also persecuted strongly and many of their leaders were killed. However, the order survived and began to spread again. Many believe that its survival was due to the practice of dissimulation (i.e. Bektashi believers claiming that they were sunni muslims, but practicing their Bektashi faith in secret). By 1849, the order had once again put down strong foundations in Turkish life and was practiced openly. However, Ataturk's decree in 1925 (part of his attempt to modernize Turkey) made all the dervish orders illegal, and this forced the Bektashis to move their administrative headquarters to Tirana, Albania.

The Bektashi order has now begun to re-emerge in Albania after the years of religious persecution under Communism.

2.1.2 Claims to miraculous power among Bektashi leaders

The teachings of Bektashism are eclectic; in its teachings and practices can be found elements which have their sources in Islam, Hurufism, Christianity, shamanism and Buddhism. Companjen says that 'in a world in which Sunni Islam was dominant, [the Bektashis] kept alive social and religious practices of pre-turkic and pre-islamic origin. These also included certain Christian elements, since it all happened in the world that was once Christian' (1995b:1). The official history of this order is written by Ali Tyrabiu, a Bektashi *baba* who lived around the end of the nineteenth century. A study of this history is helpful to us, because it contains examples of the kinds of alleged miracles which tend to characterize folk religion.

In their history, the Bektashis have had many leaders who themselves claimed (or about whom their followers claimed) that they did miracles and practiced occult power. Even though without doubt many of these claims are either massively exaggerated or are simply fictional and made merely to elevate the reputation of these leaders, yet the fact that many Bektashi babas and muslim hoxhas of our own day are involved in spiritistic practices, tells us that we cannot simply dismiss out of hand the claims made by or for early Bektashi leaders. These leaders (like their counterparts today) would be men of the same ilk as Simon Magus or Elymas in the book of Acts.

There are some examples in Tyrabiu's book which are worthwhile to quote, but for the sake of space and simply to underline the point I am trying to make, I will mention just the main examples.

In the early years of the life of Haxhi Bektash Veliu (the founder of the order) we can see claims of several miracles, including the alleged resurrection of a dead person:

in that age he was sent to school to learn, and his holy miracles during these years of learning drew the great respect of his teachers and all the pupils towards him (1929:23; translation my own).

On one occasion, with a small hit with his fist, he brought out a stream of cold water right in the middle of the room... On another, by rubbing the person's forehead with the palm of his hand, he raised a dead person who was ready for burial, just as Christ had raised many dead people (1929:23-24; translation my own).

Similarly, in the early years of his 'ministry', we can find claims to his having performed many miracles and that he practiced the demonstration of his spiritual powers against the leaders of other dervish orders; it seems also that he performed curses against others (1929:25-26). Later in his life, it is claimed that he suffered no harm on an occasion when he was poisoned: 'Once when they had poisoned him, he drank milk and then vomited and was saved from death. Later, in the place where this true saint vomited, there was created a brilliant, shining metal' (1929:43; translation my own).

Tyrabiu also describes the different demonstrations of spiritual power that Haxhi Bektash is claimed to have performed against the power of Jelaladin Rumi, the founder and leader of the Mevlevi order (which later became famous as the so-called 'whirling dervishes') (1929:28-30). We can find examples from the life of Sersem Ali (who became the head of the Bektashi order after Haxhi Bektashi's death) which tell us about such things as receiving guidance through dreams, and we are also told that the ability to perform miracles was the condition that a man could become the head of the Bektashi order:

In the end, in the year 1562 AD, a high-ranking official from the Sultan's palace called Server Ali pasha, an Albanian from Tetova, went to Haçibektash³ under the guidance of some dreams he had seen. There, demonstrating some miracles which proved his competence to become leader of the Bektashis, he became their 'first parent' in the sacred post of Haxhi Bektash Veli taking the name 'Sersem Ali dede' (1929:59; translation my own).

In order to ensure that his message was received, it is claimed that a certain Bektashi leader of a later period, performed a miracle of physical healing: 'To ease his acceptance by the blind king's audience, ... by a great miracle, ... the king's eye was healed without any defects' (1929:52-53; translation my own).

³ The central teqe of the order in Turkey, named after the founder.

Tyrabiu notes also the practice of Bektashi believers of praying in the *tyrbe* of their supposedly holy, dead leaders (1929:62).

Another very interesting example of apparent occult power which is manifested among these dervish orders is found among the Rifaiyya, an order which can still be found and which practices among Albanians in Kosovo and FYROM. When they practice *dhikr* (the remembrance of God through the seemingly endless repetition of the name 'Allah', which they believe causes the person to come into a state of spiritual union with God), the dervishes of this order are known on occasion to pierce their body with iron without shedding blood, to take up poisonous snakes in their hand without being affected by their poison and to place hot embers in their mouth without being burned. Even baba Rexhep (the Bektashi leader and writer of the twentieth century) seems surprised by these practices:

Some surprising things can be seen among the followers of this *tarika*: they pierce their bodies with pieces of metal, place burning embers in their mouth, take hold of poisonous snakes, etc.

The adherents say that this is the spiritual state in which a person enters when he is united to God. They say that a person then loses his bodily feelings which become deadened when he is united to God and he is not damaged by snake poison, the iron which pierces him or the ember which he eats (1995:76; translation my own).

'High' or Official Religion

The existence of God (Allah in Islam).

Often there is little or no understanding of the spirit world.

Sin, repentance, the way of salvation (concepts different in Christianity and Islam).

Eternal life (concept different in Islam).

The Holy Scriptures (the Qur'an in Islam).

Doctrine, teachings, religious rites.

Priests, pastors (imams, hoxhas in Islam; babas in Bektashism) are usually trained in a school (babas are trained in a *teqe*) and their authority comes from their training and their recognized religious and social position.

The meaning and purpose of life, society, family, self, suffering, justice/injustice, ethics, how to live, rites of passage, etc.

'Low' or Folk Religion

God is often seen as being far-away (deistic).

Recognizes the existence of spirits and spiritual forces.

Often there is little or no understanding of sin; animism is essentially amoral.

Manipulation of the present (of spirits and spiritual forces); the use of spiritual power.

The Scriptures are not necessarily important (either Bible or Qur'an).

Official doctrines are not important; pragmatism.

Leaders may not be trained in any formal way; their authority comes from the spiritual power that they can exercise.

The meeting of needs, success, healing, curses, power, crises, guidance, the future etc. through rites and rituals.

Note: Around 70% of all muslims either practice or are influenced by folk religion. These beliefs and practices are more important than the doctrines of the Qur'an.

Folk Islam

<u>Beings</u>	<u>Forces</u>	<u>Places/Objects</u>	<u>Means</u>	<u>Aims</u>
Spirits (good and bad) felt-needs	power	holy places	black and white magic	meet
dead saints	<i>baraka</i>	shrines	charms, amulets	healing
living saints exorcism	the evil eye	<i>tyrbe</i> mausoleum	fetishes, knots, etc.	
babas, hoxhas, etc.	<i>kismet</i> (fate)	the Qur'an	animal sacrifice (<i>kurban</i>)	success
folk practitioner	luck		<i>mëngji</i>	blessing
<i>magjistarë</i>	numbers		<i>këndime</i>	cursing
protection			fasting, asceticism	
			dreams, visions	marriage
			pilgrimages	children
			holy days	
		guidance	divination	future
			fortune-telling	
			astrology	
			spells, incantations	
			incubation rites	
			dolls	
			garlic cloves	
			oaths	
			traditions	
			holy days	
			taboo	

C. Animism, folk religion and magic among Albanians today

An examination of the historic roots of animism among Albanians in the Balkans will demonstrate to us that present syncretistic folk beliefs and practices have roots that go back to ancient times, and will also show us that none of the great world religions which have influenced Albanian life has effectively removed these kinds of beliefs and practices; many of them are still believed and practiced by both muslims and Christians⁴ today. The ancient past is still present today in some ways.

⁴ The word 'Christian' is used here in its widest sense, i.e. including all the three branches of historic Christianity.

1.0 The living relics of the ancient past

The history of pagan religion in Albania can be traced back to the beginning of the first millennium BC (i.e. around the year 1,000 BC). The Mediterranean world of that time and during the following centuries was full of the worship of the false gods of the Romans, Greeks and Egyptians. There were also many mystery religions and much syncretism. It seems that the Illyrians worshipped nature, particularly the sun. Since they were influenced by the ancient Greeks, many of their gods were identified with those of the Greeks. Later on came the influence of Persian Mithraism as well. Syncretistic folk religious practices existed within official sects; for example, archaeologists have found examples of the use of charms and amulets, of love spells, of curses, of the practice of divination and astrology and of people who had 'spirit guides' (Arnold 1992:22-31). Some suggest that there was also a resurgence of polytheism during the medieval period in the time of the invasion of the Slavs into the Balkans (A Servant of God 1992:42-46; cp Young 1990a:7-9; Arnold 1992:21-54).

This was the spiritual milieu in which Christianity emerged. Even though Christianity became the official religion of the whole region during the first centuries AD, much of these folk religious beliefs and practices remained untreated below the surface of people's life (as is clear from the sections below). Syncretism would always have been a temptation for new believers (cp Colossians).

1.1 The legend of Rozafat

This legend is not the only one of its type, but different forms of it (i.e. immurement) are found throughout the Balkans and South-Eastern Europe. Its source was probably from the ancient Greek sacrifices to their gods of the earth. I came across it for the first time during a tourist trip to Albania in 1987.

The legend, as it is told today, tells us of three brothers who want to build a castle. However, the castle falls down during the following night. Everything which they build continues to fall down like this. So a *magjistar* prophesies to them that their work will succeed only if a woman is immured alive. The brothers make an agreement that the first of their wives who comes out the next day to bring them lunch, will be the one who will be immured. Furthermore, they also agree that they will not tell their wives about this plan. However, the two eldest brothers do tell their wives who, naturally, do not come the next day, ensuring that the wife of the youngest brother is the one who becomes the victim. Their building work is subsequently successful.

The ancient Greeks would have felt obliged to make sacrifices in order to appease the wrath of the gods of the earth; this would have been natural for them. The legend of Rozafat seems to be an example of this kind of idolatry and human sacrifice, which comes from a failure to build with success. At the point of failure, it is suggested to the

brothers that they will not have success except by means of the immurement of a woman. When they submit to this lie, the lie is enforced by the subsequent success of their building work. Note also the element of deception present. The three brothers make an agreement not to tell their wives, but the two eldest do not keep their word, so making the youngest brother and his wife the victims. This deception is enforced (i.e. is made to seem acceptable) by the fact that the building is afterwards successful, and also by the fact that there is no punishment for their deception.

1.2 Evidence from various writers

Durham notes that the animism that she found in Albania at the beginning of the twentieth century was without doubt the remains of ancient pre-Christian beliefs:

It cannot be doubted that the whole belief-system is the remains of ancient beliefs and rites, long before Christianity. As is very well-known, the gods of the pagans became devils to the Christians (1991:512, translation back into English my own).

She wrote that the coming of different religions in the history of Albania were like different waves flooding over the Balkans. She noted that none of these religions, be it Christianity, Mithraism, Slavic paganism or Islam, ever managed to successfully and completely remove the animism which continued to remain beneath the surface. Each wave left its own effects, but the bedrock of animism and magic remained and always re-appeared. Her words (my own translation back into the English) were:

It is clear that in these narratives about magic, beliefs and customs from a distant past have survived. Magic played a big role in the Balkans in the past. Wave after wave of invasions have passed over the Balkans. The Romans brought new gods and afterwards Christianity was planted there. While Christianity was fighting to get strongly established, Mithraism rushed in upon it and virtually drowned it. The coming of the pagan Slavs similarly trod on both the old and the new [faiths] and, before everything could develop and get established according to the new order, the Turks flooded in with other beliefs and customs. When each of these waves fell away, the peaks of the pre-Christian rocks which rose from the sea-bed appeared above the surface. Every wave, falling away, left its own ruins, but none of them completely covered that deep rock (1991:516).

In the same way, A Servant of God tells about the syncretistic state of Christianity in Albania before the Ottoman period:

Even though Christianity had spread throughout Albania by the time of the Ottoman occupation, and even though the country was considered to be Christian, the state of the Church was not ideal. In many areas, there was a syncretistic relationship between Christianity and Folk Religion (1992:48-49).

We can see this widespread belief in animistic folk religion (regardless of the superficial outward profession of either Christianity or Islam) in the following quotes from Durham, written around the beginning of the twentieth century:

Some nations have a genius for religion. The Albanians, as a race, are singularly devoid of it. Their Mohammedanism and their Christianity sit but lightly upon them, and in his heart the wild mountaineer is swayed more by unwritten beliefs that date from the world's wellsprings. Of the primitive paganism of the land little is known (quoted in Young 1990b:11).

But the Albanian took Christianity very lightly, and Mohammedanism, too, seems to have had but little effect upon him. Many of the people are extraordinarily lax about it;...

Under the veneer of Mohammedanism often lies a thin layer of Christianity. In many villages 'Moslems' still give each other red eggs at Easter, and I have seen them making pilgrimages to a Christian shrine. I am told that some swear by the Virgin. If a Moslem charm fails to cure they try a Christian one, or vice versa. The cross or verses out of the Koran are simply amulets. Under all lies a bedrock of prehistoric paganism.

The Northern Moslems are Sunnites, or profess to be; but the Moslems of the South all belong to a very unorthodox sect of Dervishes, the Bektashites. The teaching is said to be highly mystical and of a pantheistic nature. For the lower classes, as do most religions, Bektashism supplies a quantity of miracles, and large numbers of lambs are sacrificed at the shrines of popular saints.

Stones jammed in the fork of many a wayside branch told of the beliefs that really sway the people. They are put as resting-places for the feet of the dead as they pass through the air, and the neighbourhood had very considerably furnished the route with plenty (quoted in Young 1990b:2,3).

The ground fact is this. The North Albanian tribesman is an Albanian first. He has never absorbed the higher teaching of either Christianity or Islam (I speak of the masses only). Christ and Mohammed are to him two supernatural 'magic dickies,' each able, if propitiated, to work wonders. Looked at, impartially, through the eyes of a tribesman, which has succeeded better? (quoted in Young 1990b:23).

Durham gives us other examples of these kinds of beliefs and practices among the northern Ghegs (whether outwardly Christian or muslim) at the beginning of the twentieth century. She speaks about such things as the belief in the dualism of Light and Darkness, of Good and Evil, of the Sun and Moon; animal sacrifices and the sprinkling of blood on the foundations of (new) houses; the widespread belief in the power of magic for defence against evil, to lay curses, or to procure *baraka* (blessing); the fear of *magjistarë*, witches, vampires, spirits and the evil eye, and defence against these things using various kinds of amulets; healing through various folk practices; the fear of having your picture drawn in case the picture is then used by someone to perform magic against you; the belief that a life-giving worm lives in everyone's ear; fortune-telling through the reading of the bones of dead animals; dreams and their interpretation; verbal cursing or cursing using fetishes; making oaths over stones; the practice of black magic using someone's hair or finger-nails; keeping your real name secret out of fear that someone will perform magic against you (this was called 'the name taboo'); different taboos connected with food; the power of iron to remove evil spirits; customs and beliefs connected to rites of passage such as birth, the first cutting of hair by the godfather, death and burial. Durham gives concrete examples of some of these things and some of them she links to ancient pre-Christian pagan beliefs (1991:470-536).

Similarly, evidence for the existence of folk religion and for the practice of certain aspects of canon law could be found in the 1960s (and hence during the communist period, but presumably before the official prohibition of faith in 1967). Quoting from the works of Pollo and of Coon, A Servant of God expressed it this way:

We must first note that Christianity spread most widely in the cultured areas, where the Roman influence was firmly established. In the mountain areas (especially of the Ghegs) local traditions still flourished (Pollo 1981:57-61). Descriptions of the Ghegs, in the 1960s, confirm this. Coon reported that local traditions and folk religion existed together, along with Christianity. Coon describes practices in the Northern remote territories such as cross-cousin marriage, trial marriage, blood brotherhood, and the swearing of virginity. He also describes popular belief in vampires, and the widespread practice of divinization. Coon concludes that the people's traditional rituals, "...are of greater importance than the rites of church or mosque, which are not as well adjusted to this particular form of society" (Coon 1968:36-37) (1992:47).

Hence, we can see the fact that animistic folk beliefs and practices have been embedded in the minds and lives of many Albanians in the Balkans for centuries, regardless of their outward profession of faith in Christianity or Islam. As we can see clearly from the above quotations, folk religion is not found only amongst muslims; many of these beliefs and practices (or others similar to them) are also found among the Catholics and Orthodox. An example is the one of muslims which would use 'Christian' charms and vice-versa. Young (quoting partly from Durham) tells us of some beliefs and practices of the Catholics and Orthodox (1991b:8-13, 21-25) and in the same way Thomson shares his own views on what he thought of the beliefs and practices which he himself observed among Albanians in the nineteenth century (1992:5,12,19). I too have observed in the Balkans that many folk religious beliefs are found among both the Christian community and the muslim community.

Companjen sums it up with these words: 'Orthodox and Catholic Albanians, desperate for help, also visit the [Bektashi] babas for miracles. Folk beliefs are not limited by religious borders' (1995b:6).

2.0 Some of my own observations from a missionary perspective

From personal observation during the years from 1989-2004 which I spent living among Albanians in the Balkans as a missionary (and since the renewal of the freedom of religion in 1990 in Albania) and also from interaction with other resident missionaries, I have become aware of many ways in which folk religion is expressed, especially (but not only) amongst muslims; I frequently encountered the kinds of beliefs and practices which are mentioned below.

Even though the practice of magic in Albania is common among adherents of the Islamic dervish orders, it is certainly not confined only to them. There are many people who, as individuals, practice magic in their own homes. The life of the gypsy community (the *evgjitër*), for example, is strongly influenced by it and there are many gypsies who keep shrines in their homes. The homes of those who have gained some kind of notoriety in the magical arts will certainly be visited by people wanting their help; people are prepared to travel far to find healing for their sickness or to get a powerful amulet or charm, and so on.

Many Albanians fear the practice of magic, and unfortunately this fear can be found amongst immature Christian believers as well. The fact that some folk practitioners are believed to be able to demonstrate real spiritual power means that syncretism could be a temptation for immature and untaught believers if the sufficiency of Christ is not realized practically in every area of life.

Very common are ‘simple superstitions’ (*bestytmi*) such as the hanging of garlic cloves or dolls on the outside walls of newly-built homes as protection against the evil eye or evil spirits. When a new home is built by muslims or Bektashis, a copy of the Qur’an is often placed in its foundations and a sheep sacrificed to ensure the protection and blessing of Allah. Many drivers place a copy of the Qur’an on the top of the dashboard of their vehicle to ensure protection when travelling.

Fortune-telling (*tregimi i fallit*) is also common, usually through palm-reading or through ‘reading’ the dregs in a small coffee cup after the coffee has been drunk. The use of horoscopes is not uncommon.

The use of charms and amulets (both translated as *hajmali*) is widespread. Amulets are used for protection against curses, evil spirits, the evil eye, sickness or injury, and charms to bring blessing (*baraka*) and healing from sickness. Fear of the evil eye is also widespread. *Hajmali* can be hung round a person’s neck, be sown into their clothing or placed under a person’s pillow during the time they sleep. They are often placed on horses for protection. *Hajmali* that are considered powerful can also come to be used as family ‘heirlooms’ and passed down for use from generation to generation. Generally they contain a small scroll with verses from the Qur’an. Cursing is common in Albania, either in its verbal form or through the use of hidden fetishes. Love magic is also practiced to influence the feelings of another person. When we came across *hajmali* and fetishes we would take them outside and burn them.

Evil spirits are seen as either good (or ‘white’) or bad (or ‘black’). Often, folk practitioners (in their ignorance) attempt to gather ‘good spirits’ in order to heighten their spiritual power. Spiritual oppression is not uncommon, and cases of possession have been come across. People sometimes complain of seeing, hearing or feeling manifestations of spirits on occasions in their homes (e.g. hearing the sound of walking, objects shaking, doors opening and closing) and the feeling of a sense of evil in homes.

There are many people who are involved in the practice of magic and, among ordinary people, it is not rare for them to keep a shrine in their own home or in the courtyard. They often leave sacrifices of food and drinks for spirits or make *kurban* sacrifices. The practice of spiritism can be found among muslim hoxhas, Bektashi babas and dervishes and women practitioners, and these are alleged to have ability in the healing of sicknesses, in the laying of curses, and so on. People go to these practitioners so that they can ‘sing’ over them (*këndime*, as they express it) when they have physical or spiritual problems. Usually they pay some money for services rendered. Black magic (or sorcery) is also practiced (e.g. leaving the limbs of dead animals outside someone’s house, the piercing of voodoo images).

People often make pilgrimages to so-called 'holy places', and (especially among the Bektashis and Halvetis) many adherents go to the *tyrbe* of dead muslim saints to pray to them. They often leave a handkerchief or towel draped over the top of the 'coffin' for a few days in order to absorb the *baraka* of the saint, lighting a candle, praying to the saint and leaving a small financial gift for the *teqe*. The handkerchief or towel is then taken after a period of several days to a sick person in the hope that s/he will be healed. So-called 'incubation' rites are also practiced, in which a person spends a night sleeping in such a 'holy place' to gain his/her healing.

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David M. Young

ISLAM

What Albanian Moslems really want to know

One Saturday evening in 2006 an evangelistic meeting was held in Gjilan, the fifth largest city in Kosova, at the Luli restaurant booked for the occasion. The town's intellectuals, educated people, writers and thinkers were invited, and a meal was served to each person there, 173 in all. I had been asked to deliver a lecture on the subject of The Gospel among the Albanians. People seemed to listen attentively, and each person had a slip of paper on which to fill in a name, address or phone number for further contact, and/or a question concerning the talk. A good number did so. Femi Cakolli or I answered the questions publicly, all but maybe one which got overlooked. Naim Bllaca photocopied them, and I brought them back to Wrexham to learn what issues are really of interest or concern to Albanian Moslems, rather than those we would wish them to be concerned about.

In April the following year, the same dining hall was hired for another lecture by me on the same subject, followed by a talk by Femi Cakolli. About 120 townspeople came, mainly middle-aged men, probably 95-100% of them Moslems. After the talks, there were again questions, which continued till for no small time, implying that there was significant interest. Also, many took literature as they left. Again as in 2006, I asked Naim Bllaca to photocopy the questions (for they were mainly submitted in writing), to shed further light on Albanian Moslems' actual concerns and questions about Christianity.

The questions submitted on these two evenings in Gjilan showed what they really want to know. They were the matter of their *own* questions. No-one asked about the eternal generation of the Son of God, which we seem so eager to persuade them of. Of course, it may well be that devout, theologically educated Moslems do ask about such things: ours in Gjilan didn't!

Here are their questions in greater detail:

The Bible

What language was the Bible first written in?

After Paul, who wrote the Bible? Who were its founders?

Are there names of Albanian places in the Bible? (This would draw our attention to Nicopolis, Illyricum, Apollonia, Macedonia)

Why did Martin Luther reform the Bible? He was a mere human being, not one sent from God.

Is the Bible in agreement with the Da Vinci Code?

Protestantism

What percentage of the populations of Albania and Kosova is Protestant?

How are you different from Jehovah's Witnesses?

What percentage of England is Protestant?

How many Protestant churches are there now in Kosova, Albania and Macedonia?

When will be the time when baptisms are held?

How difficult do you find it as a missionary these days in Kosova or Albania?

Which is Protestantism nearer to - Catholicism or Orthodoxy?

Are there Protestant sects with great differences from each other?

What are the advantages of Protestantism over other faiths?

Roman Catholicism

Wherein lies the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism as a religion?

What is the difference between pastors and Catholic priests?

Orthodoxy

Does the Bible have the same meaning as the [Eastern] Orthodox Christian faith?

Who built the church in Graçanica?

Christianity and other Religion(s)

What is the oldest religion in the world, and which religion is nearest to God?

Why is a woman never at the head of religious institutions?

What can you tell us about about circumcision?

What about reincarnation?

Christianity

What is the difference between Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants?

What is the difference between crucifixion and baptism?

What has psychology to do with Christianity?

What meaning does spiritual literature have in Christianity?

Can you speak briefly to us about spiritual literature?

Is it true that Jesus said that after him there will be no-one else sent from God?

Evangelical History among Albanians

The Greeks who burnt the house with the people in it, of which you spoke: were they Christians?

Who poisoned Petro Nini Luarasi?

Where did the Evangelical prisoners [in Tirana in the late 1930s] get the Christian literature which they sold in the streets?

Have you looked for other writings by [Gjerasim] Qiriazi in the archives?

Who opened the school for girls [in Korçë], brother and sister, or the Qiriazi sisters? In which year?

What difference have you noticed between the time of the National Renaissance and today?

What national contribution was made by the Qiriazi sisters?

How is your mission working to prevent the total turkisation of the Albanians in Turkey?

There is no doubt about the contribution which the Protestant church made for the Albanian people, so why did Vaso Pasha say: "Let us leave mosque and church, for the Albanian religion is Albanianhood"?

Islam

What is the difference between the Moslem and the Protestant faiths?

Which is more tolerant, the Bible or the Koran?

Bektashi Moslems

The following chapter was published in AEM's book "Battle for Albania", published in 1998 and now out of print.

A Spurious Spiritual Movement

In 1909, Edith Durham wrote that "the Albanian ... pays no more attention to his Hodja than to his priest ... If he be an earnest believer, he belongs to some Dervish sect - preferably the Bektashes - which love the Orthodox Mohammedans as do the Dissenters the Church of England."

Who were these earnest believers, whom the Albania expert Edith Durham, born in 1863, compared to the English Nonconformists of her lifetime? Were there deeper affinities between them and true believers in the Christian gospel?

Hajji Bektash Veli was a 13th century dervish from Khurasan, who migrated to Anatolia. He is a semi-mythological figure capable of astounding miracles and works of power, some of which are similar to those of Jesus and Old Testament prophets. Evidence of the occurrence of three of his miracles was quite regularly shown to visitors to Albania, until the suppression of all religion in 1967.

From the early 14th century, the movement was connected with the Janissaries, the Sultans' bodyguard, and by the end of the 16th century, it was a matter of course that Bektashi clergy should accompany the Janissaries everywhere. They were the official and only religious sect permitted to that branch of the army. Under the protection of the Janissaries, Bektashism was able to spread and thrive, despite its heretical nature.

The study of its spread in Albania is made difficult if not impossible by the absence of definite historical data. Philip Ward, in "Albania: a Travel Guide" (Oleander Press, 1983), reports that it was introduced by a dervish called Sari Sallteku, from Corfu, who lived in the 14th century, and the Bektashis' own tradition is that Bektashi babas came to Albania with the army of Murad II (1421-1451) and many of them settled there.

It is possible that Bektashi dervishes, expelled from the flourishing monastery of Xizirliq near Adrianopolis at its destruction in or about 1644, were given a new home far away from the scene of those events, in the small Albanian town of Kanina, where Evliya Chelebi found a Bektashi monastery in 1662. In Krujë Bektashism certainly goes back to the early 1700s, and there were early teqes at Tepelenë, Gjirokastër, Konicë and Janinë.

Ali Pasha, the Vizir of Epirus from 1790 till 1822, seems definitely to have given his support to the spread of the order. He was secretly converted to Bektashism by Baba Shënim of Krujë, and with his support Shënim re-established Bektashism at Krujë and founded the teqe of Melçani near Korçë. Some Bektashi missionaries were especially influential in winning adherents and opening teqes.

In 1826, Sultan Mahmud II ordered a general massacre of the Janissaries, for fear of their potential for subversion. He abolished the Bektashi order, destroyed their teqes and exiled the dervishes. The order went underground, and most of the exiled dervishes fled to Albania. By the 1880s their numbers were strong enough to take a prominent part in the agitation for Albanian independence.

In Albania Bektashism flourished mainly in the south of the country. It began to spread in northern Albania, but in the 18th century Kara Mahmud Bushati dislodged them from Shkodër, Krujë and Tirana and destroyed their teqes. It is in Albania that it found its most congenial home in modern times and was still strong there up till the Second World War, numbering 15%-20% of the population (150,000 to 200,000), mainly in the South. In January 1922 the Supreme Bektash was an Albanian. Five hundred delegates resolved to break away from the tutelage of Ankara, and the Supreme Bektash's seat was transferred to Tiranë. In 1925 Bektashism was suppressed in Turkey when the government suppressed the dervish orders and closed the Bektashi teqes.

In the 1930s in Albania, Bektashis were gaining ground among Sunni Moslems and Greek Orthodox, their absence of ritual, simplicity, courtesy and hospitality giving them appeal and prestige. Their

influence for good, writes Joseph Swire, in “King Zog’s Albania” (London, 1937), was almost tangible in districts where it prevailed.

There was a careful selection of candidates, for not everyone might become a Bektashi. A satisfactory sponsor must guarantee that the candidate believed in God and was of good moral character. The lives of the Bektashi dervishes were so pure and selfless that no breath of scandal touched them, and they exercised a power for good, thereby winning numerous adherents. They preached a gospel of love, and taught that God is the divine Spirit of Goodness, and that it is evil to boast of one’s own righteousness while denying good in others. They sought to live lives of simplicity, brotherly love and gentleness.

A candidate also had to have reached years of discretion, and to understand his vows. Christians and other Moslems might join the order without forswearing their religion. Lay members were made dervishes only after several years of probation in a teqe under the abbot’s supervision and instruction.

The teaching was mystical, and incorporated pagan elements. It supplied numerous miracles and charms for the more superstitious to believe in. At the banquet which preceded a layman’s admission, there was much talk of the mystery to which he was about to be introduced. A secretly administered dose of opium transported him to an ecstatic state of delight, in which he might fancy he beheld God himself.

Their form of worship was concealed from all but initiates, and is imperfectly known. There was, as mentioned above, little outward ceremony.

Bektashism rejected the harsh doctrines, stern rules and intolerant attitudes of Sunni Islam and allowed its adherents greater liberty of conscience than the more legalistic Sunni Islam. Adherents were permitted to drink alcohol, and formal daily prayer was not required.

Women were not veiled; indeed, one of the outstanding features of Bektashism, unique in Islam, is that women were treated as equals. They participated in all ceremonies and freely conversed with the men. They underwent the same ceremony of initiation and joined in the common festive meals and gatherings.

Social inequalities too were ignored, and it was taught that it is wrong to be full while others are empty.

Work was seen as a duty whereby man earns his right to food.

The Sunni Moslems, who made up the other Moslem party in Albania, abominated Bektashi adherents, who were subject to insult, contempt and sometimes persecution. It was Sunnis, not the Roman Catholics or Greek Orthodox, who were the Bektashis’ principal adversaries.

Bektashism was universally recognised as one of the worthiest elements of Albanian society. Could it have been a movement of the human spirit, spiritual, but spurious, not being centred on Christ as man’s only Saviour and rightful Lord?

Many of their features have much in common with biblical Christianity: close fraternity; high moral standards; serious instruction; “spiritual” experience; rejection of legalism; liberty of conscience; opposition from established religion.

The following extracts under *Turkey* in the British and Foreign Bible Society’s annual reports exemplify the attraction which sincere Bektashi believers sometimes felt to the Gospel:

“Lately, the chief saint of the Bektashee dervishes, a man of some 80 years of age, before whom all pashas rise and kiss his hands, held a meeting, attended by eighteen distinguished dervishes, at his house. He had previously sent to Mr. Williams for a Bible. From this book he read to the meeting, commended the book to all present,

and told them that Selim Effendi⁵ knew the way to heaven: he moreover urged them to listen to him, and sent one of them to Mr. Williams to kiss his hands for him. I am assured that such facts as the foregoing are of frequent occurrence, and they most evidently indicate the change which is gradually coming over the Mohammedan mind in reference to Christianity. Faith in the Koran is daily becoming weaker, the attendants at the mosques are falling off, and the Crescent begins to wane before the Cross.

“I gave one New Testament to a Pasha ... and a copy to each of two Babas, or Bectash Dervishes, from the interior, both of whom are resolved to teach the blessed truths of that Book to their Dervishes ... Many months ago, I became acquainted, through the Baba (Abbot), or chief of certain Bectash Dervishes, with three other Babas of the same sect. I sometimes visited them, and sometimes they came to see me. Some of them attended my meetings, and read their Bibles diligently. I was very much pleased to see these four men, the other day, in the house of the chief Baba, with a Bible open before them, and conversing on the great and fundamental doctrine of Christianity, the Atonement. I was heartily welcomed by each and all, and was requested to speak to them of this marvellous doctrine. After I had done so, the chief Baba recommended their resolution, which I subsequently learnt was to introduce the Bible to their Tekes (houses of worship), and friends and people in Swas (Asia Minor) and Ezroom (Armenia). The Baba said he was convinced of the truth of the Bible ... but said it was necessary to exercise the strictest caution. One of these men afterwards said he wished to be baptized ...”

H. N. Brailsford wrote in “Macedonia: its Races and their Future” (Methuen, London, 1906) that “it is not perhaps too much to say that nearly every Albanian - at all events in the South - who has any interest in religion at all, is a member of the Bektashi sect.” In the absence of widespread and successful preaching of the Gospel, Bektashism appealed to Albanians by its embodiment of the Near Eastern ideal of goodness, and, of course, its superstitious aspects. It was surely a substitute for the true religion of the heart, the faith of Jesus Christ.

Now that Albania has opened up once more to preachers of religion, may the true church of Jesus Christ not be found missing again!

⁵ a term of respect, referring to Mr Williams

EASTERN ORTHODOXY

This section of our book is not an attempt to set before you the history, beliefs and practices of the Orthodox Churches. There is no shortage of books and websites which will guide you to that knowledge. Rather, I hope to give some idea of Orthodoxy as it affects the work of the Gospel *among Albanians*, and to help you decide before the Lord how you might pray for the people of the Albanian Orthodox Church, and how Evangelical work among Albanians might be encouraged to relate or respond to Orthodoxy. I shall in fact not be attempting to tell you how you should decide in regard to these matters, for I respect my readers' thought and integrity before the Lord. I shall try to set some facts before you, and leave them in your hands to do with as you will.

It is worth being aware of a certain vagueness or inaccuracy in the use of words. In Albania, people often speak of the "Greek Orthodox Church", though really it is the Albanian Orthodox Church; but many clergy are Greek and the beliefs are the same. Nonetheless, the church there has its own archbishop; it is autocephalous, having its own head, and is not part of the Greek church.

There is real Orthodoxy and folk Orthodoxy. In this part of this book, we shall:

- start with folk Orthodoxy;
- then ask how and why Orthodoxy is so different from Evangelicalism;
- then look at some aspects of real Orthodoxy;
- then at some possible ways to relate to Orthodox in Albania;
- consider the close association of Orthodoxy with nationalism;
- offer some brief, final personal thoughts.

The most satisfying book I have found on what I have called real Orthodoxy is *Through western Eyes* by Dr Robert Letham (Christian Focus, 2007), who is described on the back as currently a lecturer at WEST (Wales Evangelical School of Theology) at Bridgend. Indeed, I am indebted to his book for some of what follows.

I. Folk Orthodoxy

All religions have mere outward, formal adherents to their organisation whose hearts and lives are devoid of devotion, commitment or love. There are bad Protestants - men and women who bear the name, but lack the love and grace of Jesus. To my sorrow, I have met more of them than I have of such Orthodox, though of course I have spent my life in Protestant not Orthodox churches. There is no doubt that there are similarly members of the Orthodox Church who lack both the beliefs I shall describe below, and a sincere attempt to live a life pleasing to the God before whom we must all live. Every church has such members; so do other religions.

So, as with any religion, there are those who are Orthodox in name but who have little idea, less understanding, and perhaps even smaller concern for what their Church really teaches. They don't know what they ought to believe, they just know that others, including Evangelicals, are wrong!

Shaun Thompson, missionary in Gjirokastër, explains:

A general fault is the focus placed on maintaining a religious ritual, as opposed to seeking the moral and spiritual regeneration of men, women and children, which offers people easy religion, and thus false peace. The emphasis seems to be along the lines of 'go light your candle, make the sign of the cross, kiss the icon and all is well with your soul'.

There is also a tendency to so focus on the saints, as to lose sight of the Saviour.

Edith Durham (1863-1944) was an Englishwoman who began to travel in 1900 on her doctor's orders. Her journeys took her to the Balkans, and she was the first European whom many of the Albanians had seen, but through her travels, study, war work and famine relief, she came to win their respect and affection. What she found in their land intrigued her, and she became a recognised expert on the way of life, traditions and beliefs of the Albanian people. In her book "The Burden of the Balkans" (Nelson & Sons, 1905), where she describes her sixth tour in the Balkan Peninsula, she writes:

Some nations have a genius for religion. The Albanians, as a race, are singularly devoid of it. Their Mohammedanism and their Christianity sit but lightly upon them, and in his heart the wild mountaineer is swayed more by unwritten beliefs that date from the world's wellsprings. Of the primitive paganism of the land little is known... Under the veneer of Mohammedanism often lies a thin layer of Christianity... If a Moslem charm fails to cure they try a Christian one, or vice versa. The cross or the verses out of the Koran are simply amulets. Under all lies a bedrock of prehistoric paganism, which has, perhaps, more influence in their lives than either of the other two... For the lower classes, as do most religions, Bektashism supplies a quantity of miracles, and large numbers of lambs are sacrificed at shrines of popular saints.

Many still believe and practise the pre-Christian pagan ideas to which Edith Durham refers. Shaun Thompson explains again:

When we do gospel work among people with an Orthodox background, really what concerns us most is Orthodox practice. One of the basic faults of the Orthodox church in Albania (as it has been with many other denominations closer to home) is the appointment of men to the ministry who are seemingly unconverted, and often ill-mannered too. These are shepherds that care more for their pockets (or their egos) than the souls of their parishioners. There are, of course, exceptions.

Geoff Townsend, another missionary in Gjirokastër, wrote in 2008:

In our last women's meeting Jen[nifer Thompson] prepared a study on what people depend on for protection (here in Albania they use things like dolls, garlic, horns, blue eye etc., etc., to keep away the evil eye) and then spoke on what the Bible teaches about God's protection of His people. It provoked quite a bit of discussion and we were encouraged also by the testimony of Luli, a believer, in standing against these false forms of protection.

What Geoff is writing of here includes the widespread practice of hanging a string of garlic and a soft toy outside your house, if you fear that an envious and malicious neighbour or enemy will place a curse upon you, or cast the evil eye, so that your prosperity and good fortune wither. The garlic wards off the curse; the toy - usually a teddy bear - absorbs it. By their combined action you are protected. Flags and figures like scarecrows frighten off evil spirits. A talisman depicting a blue eye guards you against the evil eye.

K. L. Jolly's book *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England* (University of North Carolina, 1996) quotes from the mid 10th century Anglo-Saxon *Leechbook*. It contains a list of...:

Leechdoms against every evil sorceress and elf-trick... and if the disease injure a man, or if a mare ride and injure him... If a mare ride a man. Take lupin and garlic and betony and frankincense.

There again you have the garlic, a thousand years ago in England! Just as the Anglo-Saxons used herbs as protection against curses and elves which "shield against horrible night-goers", so also many houses in Albania today are protected by garlic hung on the outside wall.

Not long ago I attended a talk given by a medical doctor on the theme of demons, elves and hags in Anglo-Saxon medicine, and was struck, as I had been previously in my own reading, by the similarity between popular superstition in Anglo-Saxon England and in the Kosova and Albania of today.

I was especially interested in the doctor's words on the experience of being *bag-ridden* - a terrifying experience recorded from ancient times and continuing to this day: indeed, two people in the

audience admitted to having had it. Psychologists call it “the night hag”: a vivid nightmare in which the sleeper dreams that an evil being has fixed upon him and he cannot move. The sense of helplessness stems, of course, from our Creator’s kindness in providing a sort of paralysis for us when we sleep, to guard us against falling out of bed, jumping from a window or trying to operate dangerous machinery. But during the nightmare, or if you wake up from it and the paralysis persists briefly, it *feels* like a night hag, an incubus.

Albanian folk belief ascribes this experience to a curse placed on you by a witch, or a spell cast upon you by a dervish or other magician. Words were seen as channels of power in Anglo-Saxon superstition and are still in Kosova and Albania. Hence, as well as the normal, common but terrifying experience, you now have the additional terror of lying under a curse.

The Revd Irvon Parry, recently retired pastor of a church in Llandudno, and currently Chairman of AEM’s trustees, was born in Llansadwrn on the Island of Anglesey. He writes:

Not long after becoming a Christian, I realised that there was much superstition and many unscriptural beliefs among those who claimed to be Christians. I realised that even when I was in my childhood and long before that, there existed a “Folk Religion” that was full of man made pagan beliefs. People would perform little rituals to ward off evil, such as making the sign of the cross if they were to see the new moon at its first appearance, through glass; they would throw a pinch of salt over their left shoulder if they had spilt salt, and there were many more such unchristian beliefs and practices around.

One of these that I came across was the belief in what was known in my native Celtic Tongue as y dyn hysbys, or the “Informed Man”, or perhaps we could call him “The One Who Knows”. He had, so it was believed, the power to heal cattle and other animals on which an enemy had laid a curse or a spell. People would resort to him to deal with almost anything, ranging from the removal of warts to reversing a curse on one who was believed to have cast a spell to stop the milk from churning into butter.

These kinds of belief are pre-Christian, but can become mixed up with the practices of ill-taught churches in any country. A blending occurs of pagan folklore and Christianity, in which folklore is given a Christian veneer, and Christianity acquires something of the character of folklore. Such beliefs have not died out, nor has the temptation to blend them with the Gospel. A lack of clear, sustaining biblical teaching opens the way to them. And Albanian Christians in the past were largely untaught. Edith Durham again:

But the Albanian took Christianity very lightly, and Mohammedanism, too, seems to have had but little effect upon him... This is a wild, Pagan land, called Moslem, but neither church nor mosque, priest nor ‘hodja’, is to be found in many of the scattered villages.

Of the primitive paganism of the land little is known, and I have failed to learn what man or men converted this very conservative people to Christianity. But the teaching must have penetrated the wilder parts very slowly. Preachers from Salonika bore it across South Albania in course of time, and the wild tribes ceased from human sacrifices and other barbarous rites. But they seem to have taken far less interest in it than did the other converted peoples, who hastened to found independent Churches, and to conduct their services in the language of the people.

The South Albanians alone neither troubled to do this nor to translate the Scriptures. They left all Church matters in Greek hands, and threw in their lot with the Greeks when the final split between the two Churches took place... A large proportion of the priests are Greek, and there is a tendency to replace Albanians by Greeks in the higher posts. Sermons in Albanian are strictly prohibited.

But the Albanian, even when he appears to yield to circumstances, as often as not makes them yield to him. He took Christianity very lightly.

Such was the state of Orthodoxy and other faiths found by Edith Durham in the opening years of the twentieth century. She also reports (*Peoples of all Nations*, Vol. 1, p. 58) that a Greek bishop once excommunicated the Albanian language, and that priests taught that it was useless to pray in

Albanian, as Christ does not understand it. Under such circumstances, it is not astonishing that the people knew so little of the teaching of the scriptures, and were such easy prey to inherited pagan beliefs and practices.

There is a place for preaching in Orthodox liturgy, but in practice it is usually downplayed to this day, and I suspect that many who worship in the churches have very little idea what Christianity really teaches. Also, their view of baptism and the Lord's Supper tends to mean that people focus attention and faith in the sacraments and have a relationship with the Church rather than with Jesus Christ.

II. How and why Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism are different

Scripture

A barrier to clear communication between Evangelicals and Orthodox is our differing views of the place of scripture: for Evangelicals, the Bible has “final authority and perpetual sufficiency in all matters of faith and practice”, to quote AEM's statement of belief, but for Orthodox the Bible's inspired authority, as God's written Word, is one, though the main, factor within Tradition. Protestantism, for example the Westminster Confession, is quite happy with the pronouncements of the first six Ecumenical Councils on the Person of Christ and on the Trinity, but it sees such councils, and all other aspects of Tradition, as capable of error, whereas the Bible will not lead us astray and will not fail to achieve the purposes for which God inspired it, for it is “the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined”. At the time of the Reformation, an opposition was set up between the authority of the Pope and the teaching of the Roman Church on the one hand, and the authority and sufficiency of scripture on the other. But in the Eastern Church, a time never came when two parties arose, one appealing to Tradition, one only to scripture (*sola scriptura*, as the catch-phrase has it), and they have never been considered to be in opposition to each other. They see Tradition as the means to understand the Bible. Orthodoxy was already separate from Rome; when the Reformation came, severing Protestants also from Rome, it did not reach or affect the eastern church, one result of which is that they have never perceived a conflict between their Tradition and the Word of God in scripture.

Doctrine

Until about 400 AD the Christian church in the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire developed together on official doctrine, and the main interests were the Person of Christ and the Trinity. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant still agree with the pronouncements of the Ecumenical Councils on these doctrines.

But after about 400 AD, remembering what I call “the four **A**'s” may help you to understand something of how the west (Catholic and Protestant) grew apart from Eastern Orthodoxy: Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, the Awakening. These have probably fundamentally affected if not effected the faith of everyone reading this book, but they never affected Orthodoxy.

The West: “the four A's”

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was deeply concerned with the nature of man and the grace of God. He taught

- that man has totally fallen away from God and is unable to stir himself to come back;
- that every person inherits Adam's guilt (not just his nature);
- that salvation is entirely of God's initiative and grace;
- that those who will believe and be saved have been chosen and predestined before they are born.

No Christian leader after Paul exercised so deep and lasting an influence upon the Christianity of the Western churches.

Anselm (1033-1109) was an Italian who became archbishop of Canterbury. He taught that in Christ God became human so that Jesus Christ could die in our place as a satisfaction for all our sins: substitutionary atonement. His major work on this theme is easily available today in translation, and is called *Cur deus homo?* (that is, Why did God become man?)

Aquinas (ca 1225-1275) was a Dominican monk who blended Greek logic (from Aristotle's philosophy) into theological method.

The Awakening in the 18th century, led humanly by such men as Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley and George Whitefield, emphasised personal assurance of forgiveness and of the new birth. In fact Methodism claims the doctrine of assurance as being especially characteristic of its own life and teaching.

You need to bear in mind two other factors as well:

- The church in the west was greatly influenced by Roman law and tended to develop its theology with a forensic mindset, seeing salvation in legal terms: God pardoning the guilty. This way of looking at redemption never became central to Orthodoxy.
- The Reformation in the 16th century (led by Luther, Calvin etc) made another change to Augustine's doctrines of man, sin, election and grace. Whereas Augustine taught that justification is being *made* righteous, the Reformers and their followers (e.g. the Puritans) taught that it is being *accounted* righteous by Christ's righteousness imputed to us, that Christ fulfilled God's Law on our behalf and that this righteousness is accounted to us. This justification is received by faith alone ('sola fide') and determines, not our condition, but our objective status before God. It does not change our character or nature, but it changes our standing before God, whereby he counts us as if we were not guilty of sin, but righteous before him. Justification was one of the central issues of the Reformation.

The Reformers also adjusted Roman Catholic teaching on church and sacraments.

The Reformation was a movement which took place in northern and western Europe, and its leaders aimed to purify and reform the Church - that is, their western, Latin church - and to reinstate an evangelical understanding of the sufficiency and authority of scripture, and of justification by faith. When the Roman Catholics responded to the Reformation with the Counter-Reformation, they were asking and answering the same questions as the Reformers, but delivering different answers. The eastern church was not asking the same questions, and therefore was not defining answers to them. It was far away geographically, and it remained untouched by the Reformation movement. It sides neither with the Reformers nor with Rome.

From an Orthodox perspective, Catholics and Protestants are concerned about the same questions and very similar; it is Orthodox who are different. From a Protestant perspective, it is Catholics and Orthodox who are similar, mainly because of their view of priests, sacraments and saints, and it is we who are different. It depends where you are standing, and which things you deem of central importance.

What's more, many Orthodox theologians have seen the Reformation as God's judgement on the Roman Church for its breach with Orthodoxy. The Reformation holds no relevance for them: it is a Catholic/Protestant squabble, and they see Protestants as Catholics with a difference, distorted Roman Catholics.

Most readers of this book probably derive their personal religion from the Reformation or their successors in the 16th and 17th centuries, or from the Evangelical Awakening in the 18th century.

That means up to 1300 years of separate development from the Eastern Orthodox churches. No wonder we are so different!

III. Real Orthodoxy

I believe in one God, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not created, of one essence with the Father through Whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; And He rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; And He will come again with glory to judge the living and dead. His kingdom shall have no end.

The Nicene Creed is the symbol of faith of the Orthodox Church. It summarises the truths that every Christian is required to believe. Composed by the First and Second Ecumenical Synods (325, 381 AD) it has been recognised since then as the authentic and authoritative expression of the Orthodox Church.

The First Ecumenical Synod held in Nicaea was convened by Constantine the Great in 325, to resolve the Arian controversy. This dispute was caused by the priest Arius who denied the divinity of Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity, proposing that there was a time when He did not exist. The 318 bishops present condemned Arius, decreed the correct doctrine regarding the person and nature of Christ, and formulated the first 7 articles of the Creed that bears their name, "The Symbol of Faith of the 318 Fathers." In 381, a second synod was convened to stop the incorrect teaching of Macedonius, who used Arius' reasoning to question the divinity of the Holy Spirit, claiming that He was created by the Son. The bishops at this synod in Constantinople formulated the teaching concerning the Holy Spirit, that He was not created, but proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son.

This Confession, the Nicene Creed, has remained the primary source of the teachings of the Orthodox Church ever since. If Jesus Christ is the heart and centre of Christianity, do we not all agree on the beliefs of the above words? But this is to anticipate a later section of this part of the book.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Christianity is its teaching about salvation, and in this little book we are finding significant differences between the eastern and western churches. The East thinks of salvation mostly in terms of personal union with God and thereby of our transformation into his likeness - our sharing his nature - whereas the West concentrates on the legal business of how a guilty person may be declared not guilty (justified), how his sin may be pardoned. Of course the East thinks about atonement, and the West about union; but their *emphases* are placed differently.

If we understand this, we may perhaps have begun to grasp the major difference between Evangelicalism and Orthodoxy.

We return to “the four A’s” and start once more with that theological giant, Bishop Augustine of Hippo. Orthodox see his teaching that man inherits Adam’s guilt as resulting from his wrong interpretation of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Augustine used a Latin translation of the New Testament, not the Greek original, and in Latin Romans 5.12 refers to Adam *in quo omnes peccaverunt* (“in whom all sinned”). Here are some English translations of this clause:

- for that all have sinned - Authorised Version
- because all men sinned - Revised Standard Version
- because all sinned - New International Version.

Luther’s Bible (in my 1912 edition) has “weil sie alle gesündigt haben” and the Modern Greek *γιατί όλοι αμάρτισαν*.

This seems a unanimous turning away from Augustine’s “*in whom* all sinned”. Nonetheless, the West accepted, and still accepts, Augustine’s doctrine of original sin: we all sinned “in Adam” and thus we all inherit his guilt. The East has never accepted that teaching. They see the result of the Fall more as man’s nature becoming diseased and man falling under the power of Satan and death.

The question of the instantaneous imputation (or crediting) of Christ’s righteousness to our account is another stumbling block between Evangelicalism and Orthodoxy. Orthodox see it as teaching that God accepts people on the basis of a forensic fiction, which they believe is not in accordance with his nature as the God of truth. Never mind, for the moment, who is right: I am only trying to show you the difference. You will make up your own mind what the scriptures teach.

Still on Augustine, we need to observe that Orthodox have a more optimistic view of man and his ability to turn to God than Augustine’s, as commonly held in the western church. They believe that man has the ability to co-operate with God’s grace, or to stifle and reject it. In these days of widespread Reformed ascendancy among conservative Evangelicals this is alien or worse; but it has been (and is) held by many Arminian Evangelicals at least from the time of the 18th century Revival. Again I remind my readers: I am not arguing who is right or wrong; I am trying to describe the differences. You will know yourselves what you believe (and, I hope, *why* you believe it: for if you do not, you may become a prey to every wind of doctrine).

Protestant, or at least Calvinist, Augustinian theology teaches that our reception of salvation is all of God: our nature is so totally fallen away from him, that we cannot stir ourselves to respond to the Gospel invitation, we cannot come to him. “Dead in trespasses and sins,” we can do nothing to make ourselves alive to God: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Eph. 2.1; John 6.44). On the other hand, Orthodoxy teaches a “synergistic” view, that is, that man cooperates with God’s grace in his response to the Gospel, though God’s grace plays the greater part: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden... If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink” (Matthew 11.28; John 7.37).

Here, Wesleyan teaching is closer to Orthodoxy than Calvinism is. Calvinism says:

All may come
None will come
Some shall come.

The ‘Four Alls’ of Methodism say:

All need to be saved
All can be saved
All can know themselves saved
All can be saved to the uttermost.

It is, of course, the first two which are germane to this discussion. Let us look a little more closely at this similarity between Orthodox and some Evangelicals.

The Remonstrants were Dutch Protestants who, after the death of Arminius, maintained the views associated with his name, and in 1610 set forth five articles. Article I disagrees with Calvinism over predestination. Calvinism, like Augustine but unlike Orthodoxy, teaches that our election and predestination are unconditional: “as many as were ordained to eternal life believed” (Acts 13.38). The Remonstrants asserted that election is conditional upon a person’s faith in Christ, that is, that God elects to salvation those who, He knows beforehand, will have faith in Him: “those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8.29). Similarly, an Orthodox statement of belief drawn up by a former Patriarch of Jerusalem - it is explained more fully below - teaches that

“We believe the most good God to have from eternity predestinated unto glory those whom He hath chosen, and to have consigned unto condemnation those whom He hath rejected; but not so that He would justify the one, and consign and condemn the other without cause. For that were contrary to the nature of God, who is the common Father of all, and no respecter of persons, and would have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth; {1 Timothy 2:4} but since He foreknew the one would make a right use of their free-will, and the other a wrong, He predestinated the one, or condemned the other.”

Calvinism also teaches that God’s call and grace towards his elect is irresistible: the predestined must and shall believe and be saved, being “born, not ... of the will of man, but of God”: “For as the Father raises the dead and gives life them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will;” “All that the Father gives me will come to me” (John 1.13; 5.21; 6.37). The Remonstrants’ Article 4 on the other hand teaches that *with respect to the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible, since it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Spirit*: “the Pharisees and lawyers refused the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him” or “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Luke 7.30; 13.34). Once again we find a similarity between Arminian and Orthodox teaching, for the same section (entitled Decree III) of the Orthodox statement quoted in the previous paragraph also teaches that

“we understand the use of free-will thus, that the Divine and illuminating grace, and which we call preventing grace, being, as a light to those in darkness, by the Divine goodness imparted to all, to those that are willing to obey this — for it is of use only to the willing, not to the unwilling — and co-operate with it, in what it requireth as necessary to salvation, there is consequently granted particular grace; which, co-operating with us, and enabling us, and making us perseverant in the love of God, that is to say, in performing those good things that God would have us to do, and which His preventing grace admonisheth us that we should do, justifieth us, and maketh us predestinated. But those who will not obey, and co-operate with grace; and, therefore, will not observe those things that God would have us perform, and that abuse in the service of Satan the free-will, which they have received of God to perform voluntarily what is good, are consigned to eternal condemnation.

“...that He equally willeth the salvation of all, since there is no respect of persons with Him, we do know; and that for those who through their own wicked choice, and their impenitent heart, have become vessels of dishonour, there is, as is just, decreed condemnation, we do confess.”

Now this booklet is not a work of theology, let alone polemics, and I am not pressing for a Calvinist or Arminian interpretation of scripture. What I am saying is, that we have a difference here, not between Eastern Orthodox and Protestants, but between Orthodox and *some* Protestants. This book is not about who is right and who is wrong, but about explaining the differences. We assume the

reader already has his or her beliefs on these matters, or will think them through before the Lord with an open Bible.

Moving on to our second A, Anselm, we observe that the Orthodox do not emphasise guilt, the death of Christ, and forgiveness as much as we do; rather, they put more emphasis on Christ's incarnation and resurrection, when he took our nature in order to redeem it and re-unite it with God, and when he rose from the dead, defeating death and Satan for us. Christ's victory for his people over Satan and death are more central to their view of salvation than his dealing with the guilt of sin by paying our penalty in our place. Theologians call this the "Christus Victor" view of the atonement.

That Christ's death and resurrection set us free from Satan and his principalities and powers is a biblical doctrine, taught for example in Colossians 1 and 2:

He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son... And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him [or in it [i.e. the Cross]].

Likewise, that Christ's death and resurrection defeated death for believers is surely a biblical teaching, found for example in Romans 5 and 6:

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all men because all men sinned... If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ... For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

The two views - payment on our behalf of the penalty for sin, and victory for us over death and Satan and also law and sin - are studied and compared in Gustaf Aulén's seminal book, "Christus Victor" (1931)⁶, which is recommended for readers wishing to get more fully and more deeply into the comparison.

Orthodox see salvation in terms of our union with God in the risen Christ, our glorification, and the renewal of all creation. The sort of passage which encapsulates the Orthodox view of salvation is 2 Peter 1.3-11, which begins:

His divine power has granted to us all things pertaining to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.

It seems to me that there is much in this view of salvation which is fully biblical and which we hear preached in our churches, even if it is not our main emphasis, but we believe that Orthodoxy blurs the distinction between justification, which is received in a moment, and sanctification.

Moving on to our third A, Aquinas, it is noteworthy that Orthodox have more place for mystery and are less concerned to make theology logical. They are often - to use the theological term - "apophatic", that is, they talk more about what we *don't* know about God, while we concentrate on what we *do* know.

Finally, referring to our fourth "A", Orthodoxy's lack of emphasis on the instantaneous receiving of forgiveness does not easily lead to the assurance of acceptance and sonship which was so joyfully emphasised from the 18th century Awakening onwards, and is vibrantly expressed in the verse of Charles Wesley's hymn "And can it be?" omitted from so many hymnbooks:

⁶ Only the title is in Latin!

*Still the small, inward voice I hear
That whispers all my sins forgiven;
Still the atoning blood is near
That quenched the wrath of hostile heaven:
I feel the life his wounds impart;
I feel my Saviour in my heart.*

Or:

*O how shall I the goodness tell,
Father, which thou to me hast showed?
That I, a child of wrath and hell,
I should be called a child of God,
Should know, show feel my sins forgiven,
Blessed with this antepast of heaven!*

Such assurance remains a jewel of evangelical belief and experience.

* * *

Beyond all this, “real” Orthodox have additional beliefs and practices which make us Evangelicals shudder! Not matters in which our emphases differ, but ones which we do not share at all. These are not aspects of ‘folk’ Orthodoxy; they are part of the official doctrine and practice of the Church.

They pray for the dead; they also pray *to* the dead; they believe icons are a meeting point between the living and the dead; they believe God’s grace is active in relics of the saints; they pray to angels. They have a view of sacraments which is very different from ours: salvation is deposited in the Orthodox Church, and the priest transmits saving grace through the sacraments.

Let us look a little more closely at the matter of praying to the saints, and the question of icons.

Praying to the saints

Praying to the departed is, we believe, wrong, because it is not in the Bible, and there is no contact spoken of in scripture between living and departed Christians. We are not told that they hear our prayers, nor that they can answer them. It is also an unnecessary practice, because we have the inestimable privilege of praying to our priest and mediator, Jesus Christ, and also because there are a lot of living saints - our fellow Christians - whom most of us can ask to pray for us. As Shaun Thompson explained above, the practice of praying to the saints has a strong tendency to divert attention from Christ to the departed saints, and often leads to people relate to the saints more than to Christ.

Icons

The second Council of Nicaea, held in 787 AD, decreed that images should receive “due salutation and honourable reverence, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains only to the divine nature... he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented” (Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1990). Orthodox teach that icons may receive veneration, but not worship.

This is quite alien to us. But wait! Have I, who am writing this book, icons here in my office? Looking benignly down upon me are images of three men: one a preacher of the 20th century; one a leader in the 18th century; the third a writer of Christian books.

One summer in the mid 1970s I read a biography of the first, and its effect upon me was almost unique in my half-century of reading: after finishing the book, I went out on to the lawn, lay on my face before the Lord, and prayed with deeply felt tears that God would repeat the work he achieved through that preacher. The photograph of him on my wall reminds me of his life and ministry, and

of the fervent desire and prayer they inspired in me. Could I not say that in some sense it is a channel of grace to me?

The second leader was instrumental in an outpouring of God's Spirit in the 1720s which, in my assessment, led to the beginning of the world-wide outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the modern missionary movement of which AEM is privileged to play its small but God-given part. The print of this man reminds me of God's work, of how it began, of this continuing outpouring of the Spirit and worldwide preaching of the Gospel "as a testimony to all nations", and of my own calling to work with Him within it all.

And the writer? His rare ability to express deep truth in lucid, simple terms has helped me to know, appreciate and love my Lord, his Gospel and his character more than most other writers have. The photograph of him reminds me of these varied and precious truths, and makes me grateful for the appreciation of them which his books have given me.

These are images of three departed saints. They inspire me and draw me forward in loving and serving Christ. Of course I do not pray to the men they depict, nor do I kiss the pictures, but is their effect really so very different from what real Orthodoxy aims for in its use of icons? What was it Nicaea II decreed? - "he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented." Nonetheless, we would be foolish and blind if we overlooked the danger in popular 'folk Orthodoxy' of adoring the icons, of placing faith in them and not the Lord.

Good Works

It sometimes seems to westerners that Orthodox teach salvation by works, but on their part they feel that we western Christians put too little emphasis on good works, when we teach that salvation is through faith alone. There is a small book published in 1984 by the Light and Life Publishing Company called "An Eastern Orthodox Response to Evangelical Claims". It addresses this seeming contradiction, and on pages 26-27 sets out the Orthodox teaching:

We receive our salvation by faith and we persevere in that salvation by continuing in faith. The New Testament makes it clear that the true saving faith naturally issues forth in good works.

I do not know any genuine Protestant who disagrees with that!

Sacraments

I wrote a little earlier that the Orthodox have a view of sacraments which is very different from ours. The question we need to ask ourselves is: are these salvation issues? That is, if we are wrong on these issues, does our error exclude us from salvation? Readers will decide for themselves.

Protestants too are strengthened and nourished by baptism and the Lord's Supper; for us too, they are important commands of the Lord, and times when we meet with Him and receive from him. They are precious - and if there are some who value them too lightly, these are not true to historic western, or Protestant, Christianity.

A book entitled "Common Ground" (by Jordan Bajas) was published in 2006 by the Light and Life Publishing Company, Minneapolis, Minnesota, which claims to be the world's largest supplier of Orthodox Christian materials, including books, icons, and crosses. He writes:

Without a doubt, faith is necessary for the proper reception of the sacraments. What is holy is intended for those who through Christ have been made holy (or "saints" since both words come from the same Greek word, "agios"). The sacraments are a revelation, a manifestation, and an embrace of the Kingdom of God. The unbeliever finds himself out of place here... Apart from one's communion with the brethren in the Local Church, and one's faith in Christ, sacraments

make no sense... To be sacramental, then, is to taste the Mystery of Christ, He who is and will be “all in all” forever (Ephesians 1:23).

The Orthodox book “An Eastern Response to Evangelical Claims” puts it like this (pages 27-28):

Mere mechanical or formalistic reception of the sacraments does not save. In fact, if we partake unworthily, we receive damnation, not salvation (cf. I Cor. 11:29). However, God’s grace is available in the sacraments to those who approach with a living faith in Christ.

Ernest F. Kevan, late Principal of London Bible College, wrote that “The Lord’s Supper is not a mere ceremony. It demands the thoughts, the affection and the will. We are remembering Him in our hearts... It is a feast of understanding joy and of dedication” (*The Lord’s Supper*, 1966, © The Strict Baptist Mission).

All this rightly teaches us that what God seeks in and with our religion is repentance and faith in our hearts. Without these, no rituals do us spiritual good. The psalmist said,

Thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, thou wouldst not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. - Psalm 51.16-17

Good Things and Truth in real Orthodoxy

Eastern and Western Christians seldom understand each other, and this lack of understanding can give rise to a bitterness which no Christian should find in his heart. This ought not to be. So let us attempt to see some good things which there are in the Orthodox Church. For me, as a western Christian, there are certainly aspects of Orthodoxy which are very attractive.

- They have many beautiful churches.
- They are deeply rooted in the past.
- They have ancient and beautiful prayers.
- They aim for stable, long-term communities who have a strong sense of belonging together.
- They have more place for mystery in their thinking about God.
- They aim for reverence and a sense of holiness in their church services.
- The Orthodox Church has not been infected with liberal academic theology in the way the western church has. Real Orthodoxy retains a firm belief in the miracles, the Virgin birth, the Second Coming, Christ’s and our bodily resurrection, judgement, heaven, hell.
- Theology and piety - one’s walk with God - have remained closely and inseparably entwined.

It would (I think) be foolish to look at the Orthodox along the lines that, “We have it all right; you have it all wrong.”

But is there enough truth in Orthodoxy to save the soul? It is not my intention to attempt to answer that question. I wish to describe Orthodoxy for my readers, as it is not very well known in the West. Readers will make up their own minds as to whether they believe there is enough truth there to save the soul. It may be that you conclude that, where we and Orthodox differ in salvific matters, they are not wrong and we right, but rather they and we are emphasising different aspects of our salvation; each aspect is true, each is firmly rooted in the Bible; each is an indispensable part of the work Jesus did to save us. But neither is the complete picture: both are aspects of what Christ did for us. Or it may be that you conclude that Orthodoxy is a distortion of the Gospel, a heresy so poisonous to the soul that the only hope is to rescue its victims from membership of it and to bring them into Evangelical churches. You will come to your own conclusions.

Justification by faith is not something which the eastern church teaches in the same terms as Evangelical Protestantism. But is the truth there nonetheless, among their teachings, though approached from different angles and expressed in different terms? What is certain is that a sincere Orthodox has deep reverence for Jesus's incarnation, death and resurrection; he knows that these alone have made salvation possible, and that man could not have been saved without them.

Here are some things for you to consider. We looked above at the Nicene Creed and its statements about our Lord Jesus Christ. Surely we all agree on its words, for it declares our faith in Jesus Christ, "Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end."

Orthodox presbyter Thomas Hopko wrote a book which was translated into Albanian as "Besimi Orthodhoks" ["Orthodox Faith"] and published by the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, (Tiranë, 1997) with a Foreword by Anastasi, Archbishop of Tirana and All Albania. Hopko writes about Christ's death on pages 126-8:

Pësimi dhe vdekja e Krishtit në bindjen ndaj Atit, zbulon dashurinë hyjnore të mbibollshme të Perëndisë për krijimin e tij. Sepse kur gjithçka ishte mëkat, mallkim dhe vdekje, Krishti u bë mëkat, mallkim dhe vdekje për ne - ndonëse ai kurrë nuk pushoi së qenuri drejtësia, bekimi dhe jeta e Vetë Perëndisë. Në këtë thellësi, që më thellë nuk mund të zbulohet apo imagjinohet, Krishti e përuli vetveten "për ne njerëzit dhe për shpëtimin tonë." Sepse duke qenë Perëndi, ai u bë njeri; dhe duke qenë njeri, ai u bë një shërbëtor; dhe duke qenë një shërbëtor, ai u bë i vdekur dhe jo vetëm i vdekur, por i vdekur në kryq. Nga ulja më e thellë e Perëndisë rrjedh lartësimi i përjetshëm i njeriut. Kjo është doktrina qendrore e besimit të krishterë orthodhoks e shprehur në mënyra të ndryshme gjatë historisë së Kishës Orthodhokse. Kjo është doktrina e Çlirimit (e Shpengimit, Shpëtimit, Shpërblimit) - sepse ne jemi shpërblyer, d.m.th. "blerë me një çmim," çmimin e madh të gjakut të Krishtit (Veprat 20:28; I Korinthianët 6:20).

The suffering and death of Christ in obedience to the Father reveals the heavenly superabundant love of God for his creation. Because when everything was sin, curse and death, Christ was made sin, curse and death for us - although he never ceased to be the righteousness, blessing and life of God himself. In this depth, than which a deeper cannot be discovered or imagined, Christ humbled himself "for us humans and for our salvation". Because being God, he was made man; and being man, he became a servant; and being a servant, he became dead, and not only dead, but dead on a cross. From the deepest lowering of God flows the eternal raising of man. This is the central doctrine of the Orthodox Christian belief expressed in different ways through the history of the Orthodox Church. This is the doctrine of the Deliverance (Ransom, Salvation, Redemption) - for we have been redeemed, i.e. "bought with a price", the great price of the blood of Christ (Acts 20.28; 1 Corinthians 6.20).

Although this was originally published in English, I have printed here the official Albanian translation followed by my own translation of the Albanian back into English. In this way you may know exactly what the Orthodox are circulating among their own people in Albania. The same is true for the following extract from pages 133-4, 136 and 138 where he continues:

Aspekti i dytë i aktit të pandarë të Krishtit, në shpëtimin e njeriut, është kryerja e pajtimit të njeriut me Perëndinë Atë, nëpërmjet faljes së mëkateve. Ky është çlirimi dhe pajtimi, shpëngimi prej dënimit të shkaktuar nga mëkati.

Krishti është Qengji i Perëndisë që shlyen mëkatet e botës, Qengji që është therur, që nëpërmjet Atij të saleshin të gjitha mëkatet. Ai është gjithashtu kryepriifti, që blaton blatën e përsosur me anë të së cilës njeriu është pastruar prej mëkateve të tij dhe është larë prej padrejtesive të tij. Jisui blaton, si kryepriift, blatën e përsosur të vetë jetës së Tij, vetë trupin e Tij, si Qengji i Perëndisë në drurin e kryqit.

Krishti "pagoi çmimin" që ishte i nevojshëm për t'u paguar, që bota të falë dhe të pastrohet nga të gjitha padrejtesitë dhe mëkatet (1 Korinthianët 6:20; 7:23).

Në përgjithësi, në teologjinë orthodokse mund të thuhet, se termat "pagesë" dhe "shpërblim" janë kuptuar më tepër në një mënyrë simbolike dhe metaforike, për të thënë që Krishti bëri gjithçka të nevojshme për të shpëtuar dhe çliruar njerëzimin e skllavëruar tek djalli, mëkati dhe vdekja, dhe nën zemërimin e Perëndisë.

The second aspect of the undivided work of Christ, in man's salvation, is the achievement of the reconciliation of mankind with God the Father, by means of the forgiveness of sins. This is the deliverance and reconciliation, the ransom from the condemnation caused by sin

Christ is the Lamb of God who erases the sin of the world, the Lamb who was slain so that by means of him all sins might be forgiven. He is also the High Priest, who presents the perfect sacrifice by means of which mankind is cleansed from their sins and washed from their unrighteousnesses. As High Priest, Jesus presents the perfect sacrifice of his very life, his very blood, as the Lamb of God on the wood of the cross.

Christ "paid the price" which had necessarily to be paid, that the world might be forgiven and cleansed from all unrighteousnesses and sins (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23)

In general, in Orthodox theology, it can be said that the terms "payment" and "ransom" are understood more in a symbolic and metaphorical way, to say that Christ did all that was necessary to save and set free mankind which was enslaved to the Devil, to sin and to death, and under the wrath of God.

If our Orthodox friends believe these words of their own protopresviter, commended by their Archbishop, are they in fact believing the heart, the marrow, the core of what Jesus Christ accomplished for us when he died at Calvary?

The book entitled "Common Ground" by Jordan Bajis, referred to above, says:

The West often presents the doctrine of salvation as a system reflective of the logic, precision, and order of an exhaustive law text. It is clear, neat, rational, and unambiguous... Eastern Christianity explains salvation more in *relational* terms rather than in rational ones. To the Eastern Christian, salvation is the literal reunion of man and creation in God through Christ. Salvation is the restoration of divine-human intimacy, the joy and love of interpersonal communion, and the healing of all creation. Many Christians in the West, however, frequently cast the doctrine of redemption in the legal terms of "justice," "penalty," and "commitment."... Salvation is an indescribable mystery which neither angel nor man can fully comprehend (1 Peter 1:12). For this reason, the Eastern believer stands aloof from any airtight definitions. God's redemptive love goes far beyond giving payment for broken laws; *it restores relationships*. Salvation is, first and foremost, communion with God and one's fellow man....

Eastern Christianity refuses to give a definitive explanation of Christ's death because it is a saving mystery no analogy or interpretation can ever capture. The cross is not only the place where sins are transferred, God's justice reckoned, or spiritual debts paid. *The significance of the cross is much deeper, and its meaning is much greater...*

In the rite of crucifixion, the crimes of the sentenced were inscribed on a tablet ("the certificate of debt"), and hung over the head of the one executed. A tablet also hangs above

Jesus's head. However, His crimes are not written there, ours are. It is this list of offences that God tore up and disposed of in His Son's death.... it is our union with Christ that saves, and this saving union is accomplished through our faith *in Him*.

If sincere 'real' Orthodox believe this with all their heart, and with the turning of their lives to God, do you consider they believe such things as bring salvation?

Jerusalem: an Orthodox Confession of Faith

Cyril Lucaris (1572-1638) was intermittently Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople from 1620 to 1638. A Confession of Faith, written in Latin, was ascribed to him and published in Geneva in 1629. In it he professed virtually all the major doctrines of Calvinism. This started a controversy in the Orthodox Church that culminated in 1672 in the calling by Dosítneos, patriarch of Jerusalem, of a church council aimed to distinguish Orthodoxy from both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Protestants have always codified their dogmas into neat, comprehensive systems, whilst the Orthodox Church has declined to develop this style of confessional system. Its beliefs are largely set down in the writings of the Patristic period. However, this convocation of 1672 produced *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem* which gave eighteen decrees and four questions, commonly known as The Confession of Dositheus. It is a "major pronouncement" and "an important source of Church teaching", according to the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America:

This Confession was issued in 13 editions in a short period of time. It is considered one of the major pronouncements of the Orthodox Faith, and an important source of Church teaching.

The Orthodox Christian Information Center says:

The Confessio Dosithei presents, in eighteen decrees or articles, a positive statement of the orthodox faith.... It is the most authoritative and complete doctrinal deliverance of the modern Greek Church on the controverted articles.

Here are some extracts from its Decrees, as translated from the Greek and edited by J.N.W.B. Robertson in 1899:

THE CONFESSION OF DOSITHEUS

DECREE VIII.

We believe our Lord Jesus Christ to be the only mediator, and that in giving Himself a ransom for all He hath through His own Blood made a reconciliation between God and man, and that Himself having a care for His own is advocate and propitiation for our sins.

DECREE IX.

We believe no one to be saved without faith. And by faith we mean the right notion that is in us concerning God and divine things, which, working by love, that is to say, by [observing] the Divine commandments, justifieth us with Christ; and without this [faith] it is impossible to please God.

No true Christian, Protestant, Roman or Orthodox, believes that faith is genuine if it is not followed by a changed life, by following of Christ's example in daily life, by a closer conformity to him in union with him (which Orthodox call *theosis*).

DECREE XIV.

We believe man in falling ... to be by nature able to choose and do what is good, and to avoid and hate what is evil... Albeit, being done by nature only, and tending to form the natural character of the doer, but not the spiritual, it contributeth not unto salvation thus alone

without faith ... so that he is not able of himself to do any work worthy of a Christian life, although he hath it in his own power to will, or not to will, to co-operate with grace.

This says that for salvation, we need a spiritual work of God's grace, by His Spirit, in our soul with which we co-operate in willing submission to Christ as Lord. Outward works, whether moral or ritual, however good in themselves, do not impart new life, eternal life.

The Confession concludes:

I, DOSITHEUS, by the mercy of God, Patriarch of the Holy City of Jerusalem and of all Palestine, declare and confess this to be the faith of the Eastern Church.

There are then more than five full pages of signatories.

The Heart's Belief

If these teachings are truly at the heart and centre of Orthodoxy, nay of Christianity, they must be believed from the heart, and practised in one's life. Only religion rooted in the heart and life brings the soul to God, and God's Spirit to the soul.

But that Confession was written in the 17th century. What about more recent Orthodox writings? Do they call for the need of an inward, true faith? In "Common Ground", Jordan Bassis writes:

The Church is a *Community of the Spirit*; her essence transcends denominational boundaries and earthly authority... Church membership is not given to those whose trust is in "churchly" forms, but to those who live in communion with the Spirit Who fills some of these forms... As Orthodox theologian Serge Verhovsky notes:

The presence of grace and of true Christian faith and love are the best criteria of the reality of the Church.

There may also be some relevance to our theme in the words of Richard Wurmbrand (1909-2001), a Baptist pastor in Communist Romania, who wrote in his book *Tortured for Christ*, published in Great Britain in 1967:

It would be unfair to speak only about the Protestant Underground Church.

The Orthodox Christians in Russia are completely changed. Millions of them have passed through prisons. There they had no beads, no crucifixes, no holy images, no incense, no candles. The laymen were in prison without an ordained priest. The priests had no robes, no wheat bread, no wine to consecrate, no holy oils, no books with prepared prayers to be read. And they found out that they could get by without all these things, by going to God directly in prayer. They began to pray and God began to pour forth His Spirit upon them. A genuine, spiritual awakening, very similar to fundamental Christianity, is taking place among the Orthodox in Russia.

So it happens that in Russia, as well as in the satellite countries, there exists an Orthodox Underground, which is in reality evangelical, fundamental and very close to God, keeping only, by the power of habit, a very little of the Orthodox ritual.

IV. Relating to 'real' Orthodox

So how should we relate to all this?

It would be foolish to pretend that Orthodox and Evangelicals are not different. The nub of the matter is not, Are we different? but, Are we and they both true Christians? If the differences are so great that they exclude sincere Orthodox from God's family, then truly we should be calling upon them all to join us and to adopt our ways; but if, despite differences of culture, practice and theology,

they do belong to Christ, then surely we must love and accept them as such. Jesus Christ himself prayed that his followers might all be one.

A question readers need to ask themselves as they approach prayer for the Orthodox world is, Which things bring forgiveness and eternal life to the sinner? What matters can we differ on, and still be true brethren in Christ? Are the matters on which we differ essential to salvation? Are they at the heart of the religion Jesus and the Apostles brought, of Christianity? Again, I have ventured little further than laying the questions before you for your thought and response.

But now let me suggest some pointers, with which of course you at full liberty to disagree.

I wrote above that it is no wonder we and the Orthodox are so different! But it is our faith in the Person and work of Christ that God looks for, not our way of *explaining how* his death and resurrection save us: what matters is believing that they did save us, and then in grateful obedience turning for the rest of our lives to follow Him with true inward love and faith. If Orthodox do that with their emphasis on Christ's victory and on the Christian's union with him, and if we do it with our stress on his death as propitiation for guilty sinners and on God's forgiveness, are we not now and forever brothers and sisters in the same Lord Jesus Christ?

We have looked at what Orthodox believe about Christ, and we have seen that they believe they receive it via the sacraments. To our Protestant way of thinking, this is little more than superstition. The water, the oil of anointing ('chrismation'), the bread, the wine - how can they impart the inward spiritual gift of eternal salvation? But wait! Here is the opening verse of a hymn by the former slave trader and Evangelical leader, John Newton:

*What think ye of Christ? Is the test
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of Him.
As Jesus appears in your view,
As He is belovèd or not;
So God is disposèd to you,
And mercy or wrath are your lot.*

You can find it, among other places, as Hymn 229 in "Gospel Hymns". Now think of another hymn:

*She only touched the hem of His garment
As to His side she stole,
Amid the crowd that gathered around Him,
And straightway she was whole.*

This poor woman, as is recorded in Matthew 9, said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well." Her story is told again in Mark 5 and Luke 8. But Jesus said to her, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." By the time we get to Matthew 14 people are bringing to him all that were sick "and besought him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well." Mark 6 tells us the same, and adds that "a great crowd followed him and thronged about him," so that his disciples said, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'" Many people in the crowd touched him, but this one woman touched him with faith that he would meet her need - and he did. She thought that touching his clothes would heal her: was not that superstitious? But he responded to her, as he delights respond to faith, however imperfect. The beginning of faith may seem carnal and superstitious to onlookers, but the Lord looks on the heart, and he responds to it.

Many press around Christ in the formal services of the Orthodox Church and, to our way of seeing it, their idea of how they receive his grace is superstitious. But if they believe he is the Redeemer, Son

of Man born of the Virgin, the risen Son of God, and Lord of lords who will come again to judge the quick and the dead, I do not feel I am able to say that none of them has that faith which saves the soul. After all,

What think ye of Christ? is the test.

They do think that the actual bread and wine mediate salvation to them. But they think it does so because in some unexplained way it brings them the body and blood of Christ which was given for their redemption at Calvary. Is that so very different from touching the hem of his garment, because you believe it will heal, when really it is Christ himself who heals? Perhaps we have come again to the dividing line between folk Orthodoxy and real Orthodoxy. It would be too easy for them to go away from taking the Eucharist without Christ, because they think the bread and the wine are magically all that matters. But is that what a sincere believer in Orthodox teaching is doing?

John Wesley wrote a "Letter to a Roman Catholic", and I liked its spirit. Here is my abbreviation of it as an approach to Orthodox, making them my words addressed to them. AEM has translated it into Albanian for publication. Please read it seriously and prayerfully, and see whether the Letter throws any light on our discussion of Orthodoxy.

You have heard ten thousand stories of us who are commonly called Protestants, of which if you believe only one in a thousand, you must think very hardly of us. But this is quite contrary to our Lord's rule, "Judge not, that ye be not judged;" and has many ill consequences; particularly this, that it inclines us to think as hardly of you. Hence we are on both sides less willing to help one another, and more ready to hurt each other. Hence brotherly love is utterly destroyed; and each side, looking on the other as monsters, gives way to anger, hatred, malice, and to every unkind affection.

Now, can nothing be done, even allowing us on both sides to retain our own opinions, for the softening our hearts towards each other, the giving a check to this flood of unkindness, and restoring at least some small degree of love among us? Do not you wish for this? Are you not fully convinced, that malice, hatred, revenge, bitterness, whether in us or in you, in our hearts or yours, are an abomination to the Lord? Be our opinions right, or be they wrong, these tempers are undeniably wrong. They are the broad road that leads to destruction, to the nethermost hell.

I do not suppose all the bitterness is on your side. I know there is too much on our side also; so much, that I fear some Protestants (so called) will be angry at me too, for writing to you in this manner; and will say, "It is showing you too much favour; you deserve no such treatment at our hands."

But I think you do. I think you deserve the tenderest regard I can show, were it only because the same God has raised you and me from the dust of the earth, and has made us both capable of loving and enjoying him to eternity; were it only because the Son of God has bought you and me with his own blood. How much more, if you are a person fearing God, (as without question many of you are,) and studying to have a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man?

I shall therefore endeavour, as mildly and inoffensively as I can, to remove in some measure the ground of your unkindness, by plainly declaring what our belief and what our practice is; that you may see, we are not altogether such monsters as perhaps you imagined us to be.

A true Protestant may express his belief in these or the like words:-

I am assured that there is an infinite and independent Being, and that it is impossible there should be more than one. I believe that this one God is the Creator of all things, of angels and men; that he is the Father of those whom he regenerates by his Spirit, whom he adopts in his Son, as co-heirs with him, and crowns with an eternal inheritance; but in a still higher sense, the Father of his only Son, whom he has begotten from eternity.

I believe this God, not only to be able to do whatsoever pleases him, but also to have an eternal right of making what and when and how he pleases, and of possessing and disposing of all that he has made; and that he of his own goodness created heaven and earth, and all that is therein.

I believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Saviour of the world, the Messiah so long foretold; that, being anointed with the Holy Ghost, he was a Prophet, revealing to us the whole will of God; that he was a Priest, who gave himself a sacrifice for sin, and still makes intercession for transgressors; that he is a King, who has all power in heaven and in earth, and will reign till he has subdued all things to himself.

I believe he is the Son of God, true God of true God; and that he is the Lord of all, having absolute, supreme, universal dominion over all things; but more peculiarly our Lord, who believe in him.

I believe that he was made man, joining the human nature with the divine in one person; being conceived by the operation of the Holy Ghost, and born of the blessed Virgin Mary.

I believe he suffered inexpressible pains both of body and soul, and at last death, even the death of the cross, at the time that Pontius Pilate governed Judea, under the Roman Emperor; that his body was laid in the grave; that the third day he rose again from the dead; that he ascended into heaven; where he remains in the midst of the throne of God, in the highest power and glory, as Mediator till the end of the world, as God to all eternity; that, in the end, he will come down from heaven, to judge every man according to his works; both those who shall be then alive, and all who have died before that day.

I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy in himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us; enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of the adoption of sons, leading us in our actions; purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies, to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.

I believe that Christ by his Apostles gathered to himself a church, to which he has continually added such as shall be saved; that this universal church extends to all nations and all ages; that its members have fellowship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

I believe God forgives all the sins of them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel; and that, at the last day, all men shall rise again, everyone with his own

body.

I believe that, as the unjust shall, after their resurrection, be tormented in hell for ever, so the just shall enjoy inconceivable happiness in the presence of God to all eternity.

Now, is there anything wrong in this? Is there any one point which you do not believe as well as we ?

But you think we ought to believe more. We will not now enter into the dispute. Only let me ask, If a man sincerely believes thus much, and practises accordingly, can anyone possibly persuade you to think that such a man is not a real Christian?

Do not you yourself approve of this? Is there any one point you can condemn? Do not you practise as well as approve of it?

Can you ever be happy, if you do not practise it? Can you ever expect true peace in this, or glory in the world to come, if you do not believe in God through Christ? if you do not thus fear and love God?

My dear friend, consider, I am not persuading you to leave or change your church, but to follow after that fear and love of God without which all religion is vain. I say not a word to you about your opinions or outward manner of worship. But I say, all worship is an abomination to the Lord, unless you worship him in spirit and in truth; with your heart, as well as your lips; with your spirit, and with your understanding also. Whatever your form of worship is, in everything give him thanks; otherwise it is all but lost labour. Use whatever outward observances you please, but put your whole trust in him; only honour his holy name and his word, and serve him truly all the days of your life.

Are we not thus far agreed? Let us thank God for this. If God loves us, we ought also to love one another. We ought, without this endless jangling about opinions, to provoke one another to love and to good works. Let the points in which we differ stand aside: here are enough in which we agree, enough to be the ground of every Christian temper, and of every Christian action.

Brethren, let us not still fall out by the way! I hope to see you in heaven. And if I practise the religion above described, you dare not say I shall go to hell. You cannot think so. None can persuade you to it. Your own conscience tells you the contrary. Then if we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike. Herein we cannot possibly do amiss. For of one point none can doubt a moment, "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him."

In the name, then, and in the strength, of God, let us resolve:

- First, not to hurt one another; to do nothing unkind or unfriendly to each other, nothing which we would not wish done to ourselves. Rather let us strive for a kind, friendly and Christian behaviour towards each other.
- Secondly, God being our helper, to speak nothing harsh or unkind of each other. The sure way to avoid this, is to say all the good we can, both of and to one another: in all our conversation, either with or about each other, to use only the language of love; to speak with all softness and tenderness; with the most endearing expression,

which is consistent with truth and sincerity.

- Thirdly, resolve to harbour no unkind thought, no unfriendly temper, towards each other. Let us lay the axe to the root of the tree; let us examine all that rises in our heart, and suffer no disposition there which is contrary to tender affection. Then shall we easily refrain from unkind actions and words, when the very root of bitterness is cut up.
- Fourthly, endeavour to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the kingdom. So far as we can, let us always rejoice to strengthen each other's hands in God.

Above all, let each of us take heed to himself, (since each must give an account of himself to God,) that he fall not short of the religion of love; whatever others do, let us press on to the prize of our high calling!

I am

Your affectionate servant, for Christ's sake.

DUBLIN, July 18, 1749.

Albania

We looked earlier at some aspects of folk Orthodoxy in Albania, and saw how it differs only superficially from inherited pre-Christian pagan superstition. We turn now to a second issue.

In practical terms, the Orthodox have displayed a tendency to curse us as heretics and to accuse us of breaking up the Albanian nation. Early in our work in Korçë, they pasted posters on top of our posters, calling us heretics and sons of Judas Iscariot. Later, from their pulpit, they placed a curse upon our work and all who assist it. In the mid-1990s, AEM missionary Dan Baynes's personal newsletter quoted an Orthodox publication:

The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania is being hit today from many directions. An organised attack is being carried out against it by missionaries... particularly by the Evangelicals... heretics who come in as a wedge to destroy our beautiful faith.... traitors to the Church and successors of Judas Iscariot...

A decade or so later, AEM's Director received a letter in English from an Orthodox priest:

Well, it is a fearful thing to be cursed by a bishop who stands in the shoes of the apostles... an unwelcome incursion into the sheepfold of Christ. What to do about it? Close the door on it... So why exert yourself to hijack the native Christianity of Albania by introducing a foreign mission and belief system?

In terms of working in Albania, therefore, one practical issue is not whether or not there are true, humble lovers and servants of our Lord Jesus Christ within the Orthodox Church, but the aggression and indeed poison with which the leadership have sometimes spoken and written about us and our work.

Apart from disagreeing with our teachings, they see us as breaking up the nation. An Albanian can be Moslem (70% are), or Catholic (10%) or Orthodox (20%); if he is Moslem, he can be Bektashi or Sunni; but if you persuade people to become something else, you are destroying national identity with a foreign belief system.

A third or more of the population of the Republic of Macedonia are Albanian. A Macedonian Methodist minister, now resident in the USA, recently said, "We used to be persecuted by the

Communists - now we are persecuted by the Orthodox.” As ministry to Albanians must aim also for the Republic of Macedonia, this observation has significant relevance here.

The Orthodox in Albania have often portrayed Evangelicalism as a foreign religion, brought in by Americans or other Westerners, alien to national Albanian culture. I can understand something of that. The Orthodox aim to model their services on the worship of heaven, hence the altar, incense, robes and visual splendour: they see these things in Revelation and elsewhere. They aim for reverence, mystery and holiness. They respond negatively to what they see as jarringly American. In 2006 in Albania I attended an Evangelical service, and I noticed a shapely young woman wearing a tee-shirt with this statement on her bosom: “Jesus is my homeboy.” I didn’t (and still don’t) know what ‘homeboy’ means, but it made me wince, and I understood afresh how certain aspects of contemporary Evangelicalism jar on people’s sensitivities. There is also the slick, easy triumphalism one hears so often. In the early 1990s, Barth Companjen, leader of Ancient World Outreach, stated that “According to the statistics, everyone in Albania has received Christ four times.” This facile, unrealistic optimism characteristic of some sections of Evangelicalism is risible and unattractive, a far cry from the thoughtful words of John Wesley: “I wish all our Preachers would be accurate in their accounts, and rather speak under than above the truth” (Journal, March 1779).

But there is another side to all this: many Albanians **want** to become westernised! In fact, the Orthodox Church has Americans serving in Albania, who have converted from Evangelicalism.

To sum up then: there are two problems:

- in folk Orthodoxy they neither know nor practise their own faith, but they are sure we are destructively wrong.
- Within the Orthodox set-up there are those who curse us and deny us the name Christian.

A question is, how many of what I have called ‘real’ or ‘sincere’ Orthodox, with a real respect and, we hope, love for the Lord Jesus Christ, are to be found in the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania? We often refer to the Bible verse which tells us that the Lord knows those who are his (2 Timothy 2.19), and ultimately we must confess that only the Day will reveal it. We simply do not know. For years I visited an old widow in Korçë and enjoyed her hospitality. She spoke spontaneously, naturally and warmly of the Lord, and was always pleased when I read the Bible and prayed with her. Yet she attended the Orthodox cathedral, and doubtless still does if she is still alive. But does she know the Lord? Who can say?

The Bishop in Korçë recently said on the radio that they have gone too far from the Word of God, and from now on there will be preaching in the churches under his leadership. This is a new bishop, not the one who cursed us from his pulpit in the 1990s. Ian Loring, missionary in Korçë, said, “I’ve seen people who I think are saved, with a relationship with Christ. God is working in the Orthodox Church. They accept us, but draw a line between us - as I do.” Ian was speaking of Korçë, but added that the present Archbishop, Anastasios Yannoulatos, has had a good influence. In the Archbishop’s own words: “At a critical moment, wrestling with the question of what is essential, I turned towards freedom and love. It was a turn to Christ, in whom I saw the only answer... What are we doing to share our faith with others? What are we doing to reach all those people who have never heard the Gospel?... We are trying to embrace, respectfully and lovingly, the whole church and the entire world that Christ himself has raised, redeemed and enlightened by his cross and resurrection... Christ’s healing goes to the depth of life, to our need for forgiveness. Healing is another word for peace; Christ is the one who heals our brokenness... It is not our own activity that is important, but what God does through us.” (Quoted from *The Resurrection of the Church in Albania*, by Jim Forest, Geneva 2002)

Larry Stucky, Baptist missionary in Korçë, said in 2006 that some of the clergy and some in the congregations in the Orthodox Church are people of spiritual perception. Some accept the

Evangelicals as Christians but prefer to stay in Orthodoxy. He added, "I hope and believe that the Holy Spirit is working among the Orthodox."

Much of these assessments from Albania fit into a pattern that can be discerned more widely in the eastern Churches during the 19th and 20th centuries, where educated lay people have shown deep concern about the spiritual condition of their churches. "Christianity in the Middle East" by Joyce Napper, published by MECO (Middle East Christian Outreach), refers to Armenian, Coptic and Lebanese churches. She writes, "It has been my joyful privilege to meet many people who are true living members of the Christian Churches, in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria," adding "we can praise God for the changes that have taken place... God is opening fresh springs of life in many places among them, with renewed use of the Bible." But whatever one thinks on this matter, having looked at Eastern Orthodoxy, let us cherish the response expressed by William Sangster after leading a party of people to the Middle East in 1936 and observing much Eastern ceremony first-hand:

I think I am more enamoured than ever of the simple religious services of home. I have hungered for them in the pomp and ceremonies of these Eastern lands, and long to work better than ever before for the things dear to my heart... I have... the marvel of love and home to return to:

*Exults my rising soul...
And swells unutterably full
Of glory and of God'*

V. Orthodoxy and Nationalism

The medieval kingdom of Serbia grew in size and prestige under Stefan Dusan, king of Serbia from 1331, who assumed the imperial title of tsar in 1346. The Archbishopric of Pec was raised to the rank of Patriarchate in 1346, and the period before the Turkish conquest was the time of the greatest flourishing of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Its status increased together with the growth in size and prestige of the medieval kingdom of Serbia.

Then came the Turkish conquest. In 1459, the Ottoman Empire conquered Serbia and although many Serbs converted to Islam, most continued their adherence to the Serbian Orthodox Church, which continued in existence throughout the Ottoman period. After the death of Patriarch Arsenios II in 1463, no successor was elected. The Patriarchate was thus *de facto* abolished, and the Serbian Church passed under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople.

The Koran says God gives the earth to whom he will of his servants, who, of course, are interpreted as the Moslems. Moslems should rule the world, as it is they who are God's servants.

Their rule does not distinguish between religion and politics: all law comes from God via his Prophet Mohammed, and covers equally matters as diverse as prayer and tax. Religion and state are the same thing, hence the head of one is the head of the other.

When Moslems conquer a country, they distinguish between two kinds of unbeliever: kafirs, that is idolaters, worshippers of false gods; and Kitabis, People of the Book, who worship the true God but in the wrong way, that is Jews and Christians. The latter (called *raya* by the Turks) are not to be persecuted, but must obey certain rules by which they:

- pay poll-tax and land tax
- may not serve in the army
- may not convert a Moslem
- may not speak against Islam
- may not marry a Moslem woman
- may not make a treaty with people outside the Moslem empire
- must dress differently from Moslems

- may not have houses as high as their masters
- may not display signs of their faith outside their churches nor ring church bell
- may not bear arms
- may not ride a saddled horse
- cannot give acceptable evidence in court against a Moslem.

If they obey these laws, they are not to be molested, they may keep their customs, practise their religion, and rule their own domestic affairs - though in practice many of these rules were set aside during the XIX century under the Ottomans. Raya always remained a separate subject people under their Moslem conquerors and masters: Turk and raya belonged to two different nations.

Following the conquest, the Turks began to organise their subject peoples, including classifying the raya according to their religions. A nation and a religion were considered the same nation (or 'millet'): the 'millet' was defined exclusively by its religion, with no account taken of language or race. Each millet was a separate political unit, almost an empire within an empire.

The largest was the *rum millet* (Roman nation), a term looking back to the long-defunct Roman empire with its eastern capital at Byzantium. This "Roman millet" consisted of all members of the Orthodox Church. Every person of Orthodox faith in the Turkish empire belonged to the *rum millet*, regardless of race, geography or language. A smaller 'nation' was the *yahudi millet*, the Jews. Protestants were not numerous or united enough to be a millet, and formed a small irregular organisation under the Minister of Police.

Because each 'nation' was thus also a religious unit, the Porte chose their ecclesiastical leaders as their heads and representatives of the millets, in accordance with the Moslem practice of uniting political and religious authority. Hence, the Ecumenical Patriarch at Istanbul (Constantinople) was head of the 'Roman nation'. He was given precedence in religious affairs over other Orthodox patriarchs, and authority over all Orthodox Christians in civil affairs. And he was Greek. This Greek hierarchy, based at Istanbul, enjoyed considerable power, greater in some respects than before the Ottoman conquest, for the patriarch was now virtually the regent of an enslaved empire, the civil and religious head both of the Greek nation and of all other Orthodox believers.

The Greek Orthodox leadership persuaded the Porte that any national organisation among the Serbs, even a purely ecclesiastical one, was a danger to the Sultan's rule, and that it would be safest if the Sultan destroyed the church at Pejë (Ipek) and subjected the Orthodox Serbs to Constantinople. In 1765 the Sultan put an end to the Serbian church. Constantinople pursued a policy of trying to hellenise the Serbian church by allowing only Greek as the liturgical language and sending Greek bishops, who had very little understanding of their Serbian flock. Opposition by local clergy was virtually impossible due to the absolute civil and religious power which the patriarch exercised in the name of the Sultan.

Not surprisingly nationalism flourished under these repressive conditions. For the Greeks, Greek nationalism identified Orthodoxy with a longing for Greek independence. The millet system enabled the continuance of the Greeks as a separate nation during the centuries of Moslem rule, but with Greek political and religious life both deriving from the Greek church and patriarch, they had - and sadly by and large still retain - very little interest or willingness to distinguish between being Greek and being Orthodox. To this day, this is a major factor in the heaviness and disdain under which Evangelical churches labour among the Greeks.

Serbs sometimes refer to their church and religion as the "Serbian faith," and Slavic nationalism was strengthened by the millet system. Serbs pressed for and achieved the restoration of an autocephalous Serbian church. We have already seen that no successor was elected to Patriarch Arsenios II after his death in 1463, and that the Serbian Patriarchate was thus effectively abolished,

so that the Church passed under the jurisdiction of the Greek Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. Yet the Serbian Patriarchate was restored in 1557 by Suleiman the Magnificent, with Macarios, brother of the famous Mehmed Pasha Sokolovic, made Patriarch in Pec. There were later Serbian uprisings against the Turkish occupiers in which the Church played a leading role, and the Turks abolished the Patriarchate again in 1766. The Church came once more under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

In 1810 part of the lands occupied by Serbs became independent under Kara Georg, broke away from Constantinople, and set up an independent metropolitan in Belgrade in 1830. The church's close association with Serbian resistance to Ottoman rule led to Serbian Orthodoxy becoming intimately linked with a sense of Serbian national identity and with the new Serbian monarchy that emerged from 1817 onwards.

The Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia finally regained its independence and became autocephalous in 1879, the year after the recognition by the Great Powers of Serbia as an independent state. After World War I all the Serbs were united under one ecclesiastical authority, and the Patriarchate was reestablished in 1920, the Patriarch's full title being "Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgrade and Karlovci, and Patriarch of the Serbs."

It was thus that nationalism became identified with Orthodoxy, both among the Greeks and among the Serbs, a entwining has remained a bane and disgrace in Orthodoxy till our own day.

VI. Personal

Now a personal note, with which (as I wrote above) you are entirely free to disagree. We shall not fall out over it - or certainly, I on my side shall not be offended if you graciously dissent. I believe we can pray for the Lord to work within the Albanian Orthodox Church, and I believe his Spirit is well able to bring souls to Christ through drawing them to the Bible and opening its truths to them. There is, I believe, enough of Christ in their teaching to save the soul. My heart's desire is that Albanians should know the Lord, and on dying should be received into his eternal kingdom. If such people wish to transfer to a local Evangelical church, they should be made welcome; if they remain where they are, whether we think they are wise to do so, or foolish, we should rejoice in their salvation and look forward warmly and eagerly to their company at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Nominal Orthodox, who have no heart's faith, or at best a residual pre-Christian pagan belief with a 'Christian' veneer, I think we should regard as we would regard nominal Methodists, Baptists, Anglicans or whatever: as unconverted men and women who need to hear the Gospel, to repent, and to believe. We should vigorously, sensitively and lovingly evangelise them, and aim to draw them into Christian life and fellowship. May the Lord give strength and persistence in our efforts to do so.

O Lord, thou wilt ordain peace for us, thou hast wrought for us all our works.

- Isaiah 26.12

May it be so for us. Amen.

* * *

Recommended Reading:

Through western Eyes, Robert Letham, Christian Focus, 2007

Christus Victor, Gustaf Aulén, SPCK 1931 (many reprints)