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Crossing Categorical Boundaries: Religion as Politics - Politics as Religion

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The specific situation of Religion in Albania and the Albanian Bektashis –
An example for Crossing Religious and Political boundaries


Summary

The topic of this paper is the historical and present position of the Bektashi Dervish order in Albania. In accordance with the general conference theme "Crossing categorical boundaries - religion as politics - politics as religion", special emphasis is given to the alleged role of the Albanian Bektashis in the emergence of an Albanian nation and in Albanian nationalism, with reference to the special significance the Bektashis might have in future for the political development in Albania, thereby also raising questions for further research.

The author argues that the relationship between religion and politics in Albania is different from that in other Southeast European nations and raises the question, which political implications this might have for the future. Unlike other nations in Southeast Europe, the Albanians did traditionally not adhere to one single faith. Instead, Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, and the faith of the heterodox Islamic Bektashis prevailed among them, crossing the boundaries of an ethnically grounded identification with a specific religion which is so characteristic for the Balkans. After the very rigid, anti-religious policy of the Hoxha regime, all four major religions re-emerged in Albania after 1991. Religion became one among several factors in determining the country's historically developed position between the West (Western Europe, the U.S.), and the Muslim-orientated countries of the Middle East, leading to contested religious identities among the Albanian population. The present relationship between religion and politics in Albania is exemplified by special reference to the Bektashis who presumably played an important role in the "national awakening" (rilindja) at the end of the 19th century, and whose unorthodox belief system is crossing the boundaries of orthodox Islam as well as Christianity.

1. Introduction

The Bektashis are a sufî order or a tarikat (to use the Arabic-derived term), and they are considered to be one of the many heterodox branches of Islam, being closely connected with the Alevis, Kızılbaş and other Ali-orientated religious groups in western Asia, namely in Turkey (Kızılbaş-
Alevi), Syria (Alawites), Kurdistan, Luristan (Ahl-e Haqq), and Azerbaijan including Nakhichevan (cf. Mélikoff 1995: 4, 1998: 1-7). Certain features of their religion distinguish them from other Muslims, for instance the participation of women in all rituals, no strict adherence to times of prayer and fasting, individual search for the unification with God, tolerance towards Christians and other non-Muslims, and the ritual use of alcohol. Besides that, Alevis and Bektashis usually do not frequent mosques.

The name of the dervish order is derived from their legendary founder Haji Bektash Veli who lived in Asia Minor in the second half of the 13th century and originally came from Khorassan (or Bukhara; cf. Frembgen 1993: 52). Shortly after their emergence in Anatolia, the Bektashis established themselves as one of the most influential dervish orders (tarikat) during the Ottoman period and were closely connected with the Janissary troops (Mélikoff 1998: 2; Frembgen 1993: 52). After repeated revolts and rebellions, the Janissary troops were finally dismissed in 1826, and their resisting forces were massacred. This also meant that the Bektashis were subject to state repression and had either to move to the margins of the Empire or to lead a clandestine existence (Bartl 1967: 100, Jacob 1908: 8). A hundred years later, in 1926, the Bektashi tarikat was again subject to state prosecution, and was officially abolished altogether with the other dervish orders in the newly founded Turkish Republic (Clayer 1990: 225; Gashi and Steiner 1994: 76; Vorhoff 1998: 24, 37).

Bektashism is a syncretic religion and bears an essential shi'a and pantheistic character (Bartl 1993: 594, 595; Birge 1937: 213; Clayer 1990: 153; Fremdgen 1993: 52. Popovic 1983: 5) but has also many other, heterogeneous origins, with pre-Islamic Turkic, Nestorian and local Christian, Zoroastrian, Manichean and Buddhist influences shaping doctrines and rituals (Mélikoff 1998: 6, 7; Haas 1987: 135, 136, 150; Birge 1937: 217, 218; Faroqhi 1995: 26; Esin 1995: 31-37). Christian influences on Bektashism are expressed in the perception of Ali, Muhammad and Allah as a Holy Trinity (Haas 1987: 65, 101). According to Birge, the Bektashis "... combined in this order a considerable number of both doctrines and practices that show the influence of various types of Christian, Islamic, Greek and pagan thought" (Birge 1937: 22), thereby preserving pre-Islamic and non-Islamic thoughts originating in Christianity and classical antique religions as well as ancient Turkic elements. Thus, remnants of the ancient pre-Islamic Turkic religion could be preserved until the present day in tales, legends, customs, magical practices and techniques of ecstasy among the Bektashis. Contrary to that, the shi'a component of Bektashism may be a relatively late development of the 15th and 16th centuries (Faroqhi 1995: 26; Kehl-Bodrogi 1988). This component manifests itself in the belief in twelve Imams and special worship of the seventh Imam Jafr Sadiq (Clayer 1990: 80), as well as in the celebration of Ali's birthday on the Iranian New Year's feast (newroz; cf. Birge 1937: 219-231) and the celebration of muharram, the 'ashura lament (ibid.: 172, 173, 213). Ali's sons Hassan and Huseyn are also highly venerated as martyrs (Birge 1937: 79). Usually three days of fasting are observed in ramadan, compared to ten days during the shi'a commemoration month of muharram (ibid.: 99-102). — Concerning the question of shamanic
remainders among the *Bektashis*, Ocak claims that their importance is far less than usually assumed (Ocak 1983: 10, 11, 24-26).

2. **The spread of the Bektashis to the Balkans**

In the course of the Ottoman occupation of the greater part of the Balkan Peninsula, the Bektashi *tarikat* was also introduced into South-Eastern Europe where it gained a foothold especially in the Albanian-inhabited areas, but also in Crete, Dubruga, and to a certain extent in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cornell 1998: 9-13; Ilic 1998; Šamic 1990). For Albania, reliable sources indicate that the emergence of the Bektashis cannot be dated earlier than the turn of 16th to the 17th century (Kissling 1962: 283; Bartl 1968: 103, 104; Stadtmüller 1971), even though hagiographic sources ascribe a much earlier spread of Bektashism to the Balkans and especially to Albania, as the tales surrounding Ballim Sultan and Sary Salktuk indicate. In this respect, the relatively late Islamisation of the Albanian population has to be taken into account — it lasted until the 17th and 18th century, before the majority of Albanians converted to Islam and embraced the new faith (Popovic 1986: 151).

At least it appears to be quite secure that the Bektashis were present in Albania long before the times of Ali Pasha of Tepelena (1741-1822) who is often held responsible for propagating the Bektashi faith in the Albanian-inhabited areas of the Balkans (Vickers 1995: 22). From later developments of Bektashism under Ottoman rule it becomes quite evident that Albania often served as a kind of exile for the adherents of the Bektashis (Kissling 1962:281). Until 1967, 25% of the Muslims and 17% of the whole Albanian population were counted to be adherents of the Bektashi faith (Lakshman-Lepain 1996, 2002: 39 ff.).

The assumed close relationship between Ali Pasha and the Bektashi order was apparently deliberately used as a means of propaganda, often having been exaggerated and constituting one of the many myths surrounding the Bektashis (Clayer 1990: 36; personal communication 1999). The role ascribed to Ali Pasha from Tepelena in propagating Bektashi faith has to be severely questioned. Although it is often assumed that Ali Pasha himself was initiated member of the Bektashis (Birge 1937; Vickers 1995: 22) and played a crucial role in the spread of the order, it can be shown that he mainly supported the *sufi* orders of the *Halvetiyye*, *Sabiyye* and *Nakshbandiyye*. Many *tekkes* of the Bektashis (even those who are said to have been founded by Ali Pasha) in Albania were only established at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. If at all, the Bektashis were supported by Ali Pasha because of pure political reasons, to find a common platform of opposition against the Sunni leadership of the Ottoman Empire. One fact contributing to the myth
of Ali Pasha's close connection to the Bektashis was he was executed shortly before the abolition of
the Bektashi order in the Ottoman Empire in 1826.¹

3. The distinctive character of religion in Albania

I will now make a few general remarks on religion in Albania which is in several instances distinct
from other regions of Europe and the Balkan Peninsula, e.g.:

(1) In recent history Albania was (before the independence of Bosnia-Hercegovina) the only
European state with a Muslim majority (cf. Popovic 1983: 201).
(2) Albania was the only country worldwide where atheism was declared a compulsory state
doctrine in 1967 (Bartl 1993: 608 ff.).

Generally, in South-Eastern Europe ethnicity tends to be closely linked to the adherence to a
specific religion: Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks and Romanians are Orthodox, Slovenians and Croats
are Roman Catholics, Pomaks and Turks are Muslims (cf. Cornell 1998: 9). Among Albanians, as
an exception from this rule, traditionally four different confessions prevailed: Catholicism in the
North, Christian Orthodoxy in the South, Sunni Islam in the central and Eastern parts of the
Albanian-inhabited areas, and Bektashism in the South. Thus, Albanians were crossing the
boundaries of the prevailing identification of religion with nationality (e.g. Serb = Orthodox;
Croatsians = Catholics) in the Balkans. Within the declining Ottoman Empire, "Albanians were the
only people in European Turkey among whom Muslims and Christians fought together against the
Muslim government in Istanbul" (Bartl 1968: 145).

As we have seen, religion among Albanians is diverse, and the adherence to a specific religion may
be contested, as will be shown. Furthermore, there is general agreement about the fact that religion
in Albania tends to be syncretic: Authors like Peter Bartl, for example, emphasise the strong
influence of dervish orders, particularly the Bektashis, who contributed to a merger of religious
distinctions among the average population (Bartl 1967: 119).

Thus, it is not surprising that a typical feature of the "religious landscape" in Albania seemed to
have been the people called larame, literally "the spotted ones" or "the coloured ones", referring to
the fact that many Albanians adhered to more than one confession at the same time (Bartl 1967:
119). There are numerous accounts of Christians and Muslims visiting the sacred sites of each
others' congregation, worshipping the same saints and exchanging amulets (Lakshman-Lepain
1996; Bartl 1968: 92). Even in the 19th century, Islam did not seem to be very deeply rooted in the

¹ Ali Pasha is almost venerated as second national hero after Skanderbeg who is assumed to have been a predecessor of
the Bektashis' fight against Ottoman power. Bektashi origins have even been ascribed to King Zogu and Enver Hoxha -
myths, which are constantly perpetuated in Albania as well as in Western Europe and North America.
country. Many traits of Christianity survived among Muslim converts in form of the so called Crypto-Christianity. To quote Antonia Young (1999:7): "In many places during Ottoman rule, people took two names: a Muslim one to avoid capitation tax and to be eligible to undertake government positions, and a Christian one to avoid having to serve in the Ottoman army." An early example for this pragmatic attitude is Gjergi Skanderbeg's father Gjon who changed religion several times during his lifetime (Gashi and Steiner 1994: 56).

Another reason why the fixed adherence to a specific religion tends to be contested or changed is, that among the followers of Islam as well as among the Christian Albanians, traits of the autochthonous folk religion have been preserved to a much greater extent than in other regions of Europe. (Çabej 1996 [1946]: 333-387; Lakshman-Lepain 1996, Prifti 1980; Vlora 1911). As examples I would like to refer to the feast of patron saints and ancestor worship to be found on the northern Albanian Dukagjin Plateau. (Çabej 1996: 349, 350; Eberhardt and Kaser 1995). As a conclusion, it might therefore be assumed that a common, folk religious substratum exists for all four religions in Albania, and that a typical Albanian form of religiosity developed (Lakshman-Lepain 1996, 2002: 39). As Antonia Young points out: "... it is in fact remarkable that religious differences, the basis of so much antagonism and violence in all parts of the world, has not been a cause of conflict in Albania" (Young 1995: 5).

In this respect, the Bektashis deserve special attention because of the pantheistic and unorthodox character of their faith (which had already developed in their Asian regions of origin). Acceptance of Bektashism in Albania was largely facilitated by the fact that Bektashi syncretism combined elements of shi'a Islam and folk religion with Christian elements, for example belief in the Holy Trinity, confession of sins, and the sign of the cross (Clayer 1990: 15, 16, 31). To quote Peter Bartl once more: "The religious ideas of the dervishes found more ready acceptance among the native population than orthodox Islam" (Bartl 1968: 30).

2 "As it is a well known fact, Albania has never been colonised by the Turks to such an extent that the orthodox Islam could have constituted the only religion of the country ... Albanian Crypto-Christianity did exist well until the 19th century" (Kissling 1962: 285, 286). In this sense, Crypto-Christianity describes a situation where the population overtly adheres to Islam, but still practises Christianity in secret (cf. Bartl 1968: 9), or, to quote Stavro Skendi, the term Crypto-Christianity applies to "individuals or groups who, while publicly professing Islam, satisfied their conscience by proclaiming Christianity (Orthodox or Catholic) in private." (Skendi 1980: 246-247).

3 Cf. Vickers (1995:16, 17): "Throughout their turbulent history Albanians had shifted with relative ease from one religion to another: Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim according to momentary interests. During the late middle ages, their country had become the battlefield between the Catholic West and the Orthodox East: whenever the west was advancing, the Albanian feudal lords - often followed by their population - espoused Catholicism; whenever Byzantium was the victor and the West retreated, they embraced Orthodoxy ... The Albanian saying 'Ku është shpata është feja' - 'Where the sword is, there lies religion' - is directly related to this history. Of all the Balkan subjects, the Albanians were most inclined to convert to Islam."

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4. The alleged role of the Albanian Bektashis in the emergence of an Albanian nation and Albanian nationalism

Generally, a prominent role in the Albanian movement of *rilindja* (renaissance or "national awakening") from 1878 onwards is ascribed to the *Bektashis* (Bartl 1968: 108 ff., 1993: 595; Clayer 1990: 15–16; 31; Frashëri 1926: 226–256). Compared to the other nations in Southeast Europe, national feelings among Albanians emerged rather late. Usual reasons given for this are:

1. The Albanians did not adhere to a single, unifying religious faith which would have served as a tool of national identification (as already mentioned), and
2. the majority of Albanians had converted to Islam and therefore remained loyal to the institutions of the Ottoman Empire during most of the 19th century, the time of nationalistic uprisings of Southeast European peoples like the Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, and Romanians.

Let us now have a look on the development of the Bektashi *tarikat* in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Partly due to the oppression the *tarikat* had to face in the core areas of the Ottoman Empire (1822-1826; cf. Bartl 1968: 105), the Bektashi faith became more and more deeply rooted in the Albanian-speaking areas, leading Nathalie Clayer to speak about "a consolidation of a primarily Albanian Bektashism at the Western borders of the Ottoman Empire" (Clayer 1996: 470). This development was further enhanced by the dismissal and abolition of all dervish orders in the Turkish Republic in 1925/26. After that, the Bektashis' "centre of gravity" changed towards a number of successor states of the Ottoman Empire (Mélikoff 1998: 7; Dauer, Kaleshi et al. 1970: 9). It is generally said that in the Albanian-inhabited areas, especially in the southern parts where most of the Bektashi *tekkes* were situated, Bektashism merged with elements of Albanian nationalism. Nathalie Clayer claims that "the Albanian Bektashis were 'partisans of emancipation' against Turkey" (Clayer 1990: 42 [31]) – a view that might be further enhanced by the following quote of Margaret Hasluck:

"To an outsider it appears that the Albanian temperament has evolved a form of Bektashism in which the social organisation rather than the religious-superstitious side is uppermost ... Characteristic of the time at which Bektashism won its foothold in Albania - the era of the French Revolution - is the prominence given here, in theory at least, to certain liberal ideas, such as the Brotherhood of Man and the unimportance of the dogmas and formalities of religion as compared with conduct" (Hasluck 1925: 538).

Leading members of the *rilindja* movement belonged to the Bektashis (Bartl 1968: 108; Popovic and Veinstein 1995: xi; Stadtmüller 1971: 687, 688), and a central role of the Bektashis within the famous Ligue of Prizren (1878-1881) is usually acknowledged (Clayer 1990: 41). It was Bektashis

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4 The order assumed a decisive national Albanian character in the course of the 19th century which was further fostered in the first half of the 20th century (Bartl 1968: 108; Popovic and Veinstein 1995: xi; Stadtmüller 1971: 687, 688). Most of the *Bektashi tekkes* in Albania were founded at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century (Faroqhi 1995: 22; cf. Bartl 1968: 9).
who organised the introduction of the Albanian language for educational purposes and founded patriotic clubs, for example Bashkimi in Elbasan (cf. Clayer 1990: 42, Bartl 1968: 132-141). It is said that the Bektashis — because their lore and ritual practice are very deviant from orthodox Muslim faith — opposed the sunni dominated Ottoman state. Because of the religious tolerance usually ascribed to them, they are said to have favoured the political unification of all Albanians regardless of their religious affiliation. In the second half of the 19th century, Bektashi prayer texts were increasingly written in Albanian (the so-called fletorë e Bektashinjet). Naim Frashëri even attempted to turn Bektashism into an all-encompassing national religion for all Albanians, because: "Of Bektashism he expressed the hope that it would one day become the religion of all Albanians, since Bektashism drew its inspiration from both the Gospel and the Koran" (Bartl 1968: 135; Hasluck 1925: 552, 553). It is usually held that national Albanian positions were to a large extent fostered by Bektashi writers, with the Frashëri brothers being their most prominent representatives. Especially Sami Frashëri — who published in Turkish under the name Şemseddin Sami und is regarded to be one of the most famous writers in Turkish language — is considered to be one of the ideologically leading personalities of the Albanian national movement. His thinking was deeply influenced by Bektashi doctrines (Gashi and Steiner 1994: 95). His his elder brother Abdyl Frashëri represented the Ligue of Prizren at the Congress in Berlin. Their individual stand, however, was far from lacking internal contradictions: Naim Frashëri's goal, for example, was the complete independence of the Albanian-inhabited territories, although he had been in Turkish service for all his life.

On the other hand, the inspiration and large scale participation of Bektashis in the rilindja movement and their orientation towards a unified Albanian nation have been severely questioned.5 Apparently, the role which the Bektashis played in the foundation of the Albanian national consciousness has often been exaggerated due to the prominent role which the Frashëri brothers (Naim, Sami and Abdyl Frashëri and the latter's son Midhat) played in that movement. They all belonged to a wealthy Bektashi family of Southern Albania, and Bektashi doctrines highly inspired also influenced their writings and their proposals concerning the further fate of Albania. Even though the national Albanian awakening movement (rilindja) was largely supported by Bektashi writers6 who were seeking an ideological backing in their conflicts with sunni authorities, the League of Prizren was mainly supported by feudal families who were trying to achieve greater independence from Ottoman administration and taxation, but who were, however, not at all inclined to support an independent Albanian state.

According to Artan Puto, the popular saying attributed to Pashko Vasko Shkodrani "The religion of the Albanians is to be Albanian"7 was never supported by the majority of the population. Instead,

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5 For example during the conference The Role of Myth in Albania in History and Development, organised by the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) in London, June 11-13, 1999 (Puto, personal communication on the occasion of this conference).
6 This attitude is very well expressed in the writings of Saim Frashëri (cf. Bartl 1968: 138).
7 This line is a quote from a poem which in full lengths reads as follows: "Get up, Albanian, get up from sleep; brothers, gather in a besa and do not look on either church or mosque: The Religion of the Albanian is being Albanian
during the times of the *rilindja* movement, general mistrust against all central authorities was widespread, nobody thought of a unified religion or of common administrative structure for all Albanians within the framework of an Albanian state. The Albanian national movement can be regarded as a retarded reaction towards the Greek War of Liberation, being instigated also by a delayed perception of the ideas of the Great French Revolution. At the end of the 19th century, the primary concern of the Albanian *rilindja* seemed to have been to avoid claiming that the Albanians were greatly effected by the decline of the Ottoman Empire, since the confidence of the few Albanian intellectuals in the Ottomans as a protective force in the Balkans had been severely shaken at the Congress of Berlin in 1878.

Independent of whether or not there has been a decisive Bektashi influence on the national awakening of the Albanians, the national character of the Albanian Bektashis was further fostered in the course of the 20th century, leading Nathalie Clayer to speak of a divorce between Turkish and Albanian Bektashis (Clayer 1996: 470), since after the independence of Albania in 1912, ties with the Bektashis' order centre in Hacibektaşköy, Cappadocia, and the order's hierarchy in Turkey were further cut (ibid.: 46). Following the official abolition of all Sufi orders in the newly founded Turkish Republic, the Albanian Bektashis decided to move the world centre (*kryegjyshat*) of the congregation to Tirana in 1929 (Bartl 1993: 595; Lakshman-Lepain 2002: 39 ff.).

5. **The Bektashis in Albania after independence**

Between 1921 and 1950 the Albanian Bektashis organised five congresses "to accomplish the change of an Ottoman dervish order towards a religious congregation of the new Albanian Nation" (Bartl 1993: 595), and Albanian was introduced as the official ritual language (ibid.). Despite these attempts to solidify the position of the Bektashis in Albania, it was not until 1945 that they were officially recognised as a religious congregation independent from the Sunni community, and they still have not been accepted as a major religious congregation after 1990 (Lakshman-Lepain 1996, 2002: 42).

Information on the Bektashis' position during the Second World War is sparse and contradictory: members of the Bektashi order sided both with the Communist partisans as well as with the nationalist *Balli Kombëtar*. Nevertheless, the statute of 1945 had shown a clear opposition against Communist leadership, with internal strife within the Bektashi community escalating in March of 1947 when *babalar* (*prindët*) Faja Martaneshi und Fejzo Dervishi (who were loyal towards the Communist regime) were shot and killed by the then *kryegjysh* Abaz Hilmi. Hilmi committed suicide after this incident (personal communication, „Baba Mondi“, Tirana, August 2000). Ahmed Myftar de, being a loyal follower of Communist doctrines, was appointed *kryegjysh*, staying in office until 1958 (cf. Lakshman-Lepain 2002).

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[The Albanianness].” Vaso Pasha Shkodrani was, by the way, Christian (as is indicated by his surname meaning “from Shkodra”).
Already shortly after 1947, the tarikat had been totally government-controlled, leading Bektashis abroad to declare their independence from the Albanian kryegjyshat. The Bektashis in Egypt and Turkey (constituting a clandestine movement) declared their independence from the Albanian kryegjyshat (world centre) and elected Ahmed Sirri Baba in Cairo as head of the order in 1949 (Bartl 1993: 595-597); or in 1947, according to Clayer (Clayer 1990: 123). In Detroit, a Bektashi tekke was founded by Rexhebi Baba in 1954 (ibid.; Popovic 1983:203), publishing the journal Zëri i Bektashizmës ("the Voice of Bektashism").

After 1967, when the general prosecution of all religious activities in Albania set in, little is known about the fate of the Bektashis in the country and further developments affecting the order (tarikat). When, after the very rigid and brutal policy of anti-clerical prosecution under the regime of Enver Hoxha, the ban on religion was lifted in 1990, religious life re-emerged again in the country. The Komunitet Bektashi re-established itself and is de facto recognised by the state, though they do not have the status as the three "official religions": Sunni Islam, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism. This means also that they are not represented in the State secretariat of Religion, "... and all their activities are placed under the supervision of the Sunni community" (Lakshman-Lepain 1996, 2002).

According to my own experience, Bektashism seems to be well accepted especially among younger, well educated Albanians. As an example I would like to quote a (female) journalist working for Televizion shqiptarë, saying "I am not fond of Christianity, I am a Bektashi. There women enjoy equal rights, and you are permitted to drink". Bektashi ceremonies have been frequently broadcasted on TV — at least this was the case in 1996 with a funeral for two girls having died in a car accident, with the ceremony being conducted by kryegjysh Reshat Bardhi. tekkes which had been destroyed or abandoned in Communist times are now renovated and reconstructed, like the one beneath the fortress of Kruja, situated above the assumed footprint of Sari Salltik, the so-called Bektashi missionary in the Balkans.

6. Remarks on the present State of Research on the Bektashis

Hasluck 1925; Jacob 1908, 1909; Jokl 1929; Kissling 1962, 1964; Lakshman-Lepain 1996; Rexhebi 1970; Stadtmüller 1971; Tschudi 1914; Vlora 1911, 1955), or cover the *tarikat* in its Turkish region of origin and in other areas of the Balkans besides Albania — often also with an historical orientation (cf. Atalay 1991 [1921], Birge 1937, Eröz 1990; Haas 1987; F. W. Hasluck 1929; Kadr 1923; Köprülü 1976, 1992, 1993; Kehl 1988; Kehl-Bodrogi 1988, 1989; Luschan 1891; Noyan 1937, Ocak 1983). As Vorhoff writes, "Alevi-Bektashi studies were until recently largely the domain of Orientalists. They concentrated on the history of the Bektashi order (tarikat), which goes back to the 13th century, and the Babaî and Kızılbaş [literally 'Redhead'] movements" (Vorhoff 1998: 24) — or to quote Nahtalie Clayer again: studies on the Bektashis "... restent rares et insuffisiant" (Clayer 1990: 1). Regarding this situation, I would like to recommend certain avenues for further research.

The first suggestion regards the maintenance of independent Albanian forms of religiosity in the face of growing antagonistic influences from the East and West. Since Albania traditionally is a predominantly Muslim country, a number of countries of the Middle East (especially Iran and the Gulf states) try to gain religious as well as political influence. This is indicated, for instance, by Turkish Albanian joint ventures, the foundation of the Arab Albanian Bank (cf. Hall 1994: xxv), and hotels constructed by entrepreneurs from the Arabian Emirates. In 1992, Albania joined the Conference of Islamic States (ibid.; Lakshman-Lepain 2002). Intense missionary work is taking place both from Eastern (Muslim) and Western (Christian) directions: denominations like the Mormons, Baptists, Mennonites or Jehovah's witnesses try to convert people in Albania. From the East, the oil-rich countries of the Gulf and Iran are trying to intensify Muslim influence in Albania. Thus, in the present situation Albania is once again, as so often in her history, the object of contradictory outside influences from West and East — which basically has always been the country's position since the early Middle Ages.9

In the case of the Bektashis, there is strong evidence for attempts by the Iranian government and leading clerics of the Islamic Republic to influence Bektashism in Albania by sending Bektashi adherents to the holy city of Qom for religious training (Lakshman-Lepain, personal communication 1996). This leads to the question if and how of religious identity will change, and to which extent the independent, heterodox and specifically Albanian contents of the Bektashi lore and religious performance might be maintained under such influences - meaning specifically, what will be left of the liberal attitudes of the Bektashis, such as equal participation of women in religious ritual or the use of alcohol. The question of shifting and contested Alevi-Bektashi identity and the impact of foreign influences on this religion in the Diaspora has been investigated in a number of studies in recent years (for example Cornell 1998; Olsson, Özdalga and Raudverde 1998; Olsson 1997; Özdalga 1997; Raudverde 1998; Raudverde 1999).

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9 Starting with the division of the Roman Empire, from the 6th century onwards, Albania was caught between the spheres of the Roman West and the Byzantine East. This fact also found its expression in the religious division between Catholicism (in the north) and Orthodoxy (in the south of the country). From the 15th century onwards, the influence of the Ottoman Empire further enlarged foreign domination and put the country in a marginal position between Occidental Christianity and Oriental Islam (cf. Kressing 2002: 11 ff.).
Rittersberger-Tiliç 1998), but until now no such study has yet been carried out concerning the Albanian Bektashis.

On the other hand, missionary efforts by Western and Middle Eastern congregations alike seem to contribute to the historically grounded fact that loyalty to one specific religion in Albania is fluid and might be divided (or contested): It is, for example, not uncommon that a contemporary Albanian might declare himself or herself to be a "Protestant Muslim", if he or she has converted to one of the several Protestant congregations being engaged in missionary work in the country (Lakshman-Lepain 2002). As Antonia Young (1999:6) points out, "... people in modern-day Albania attend religious ceremonies regardless of which faith they belong to, as a form of social gathering."

At the same time, the identification with one of the existing religious communities might become an expression of an orientation towards a specific type of foreign influence and the external powers behind it (Catholicism: Italy, generally "the West", Orthodoxy: Greece, also Romania [in the case of the Vlachs/ Aromanians], Sunni Islam: the Arab World and Turkey), and also an attempt to participate in the resources provided by that respective power (as in the case of working visas or university grants). Thus, in present-day Albania, "... religion is perceived much more in terms of its sociological meaning than in terms of its spiritual content, " to quote Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain (1996): "The adherence to some religious community [called fe in Albanian] needs to be distinguished from the essence of one's individual faith [called besim]", as in the case of the „Protestant Muslims“ mentioned before.

7. Summary and concluding Remarks

To summarise, I would like to argue that:

(1) In Albania, unlike other Balkan nations, ethnicity is not synonymous with adherence to one specific religion. Religious differences have not been a source of conflict, as in so many other parts of the world. Adherence to a specific religion was and is treated rather loosely and might be changed during one's lifetime, or an individual might identify with more than one religion at a time, thus crossing the categorical boundary of religion. Missionary efforts by Western and Middle Eastern congregations alike seem even to have further contributed to the fact that loyalty to one specific religion in Albania is fluid and might be divided among more than one faith. I hope to have shown that in the Albanian-inhabited areas of South-Eastern Europe, borders of religion and politics have been transgressed in several ways which are unique within the cultural context of the Balkan Peninsula.

10 Formerly the word din of Arabic-Turkish origin was used (cf. Lakshman-Lepain 1996).
11 Formerly the word imam was used (ibid.).
12 See the above quote by Antonia Young (1995: 5).
Even after a period of intense and very brutal prosecution directed against religion under the Hoxha regime, a "diversified religious landscape" survived in Albania which - to a certain extent - could successfully cope with state repression.

The multi-confessional situation of Albania allows- in a historically derived situation of being in between Christian Occident and Muslim Orient - an orientation towards the West as well as towards the East. Albania's religious diversity creates the opportunity for an orientation towards both directions and the same time facilitates external interference from the West as from the East.

In this regard, the faith of the Bektashis as an eminent syncretic religion deserves special consideration, especially since this faith assumed a decisive national character in the course of the 19th and 20th century and became gradually independent from the order's centre in Anatolia. Future developments will show whether this independence will be maintained during the 21st century or might be replaced by an orientation towards a more orthodox variety of Islam which based in one of the Middle East centres of the Muslim world.

Even though there is a revival of Bektashism in present-day Albania, the Albanian Bektashis have since now been rather neglected by Cultural and Social Anthropologist, Orientalists, Balkanologists, and by scholars being engaged in Comparative Studies of Religions alike. Most studies on the Albanian Bektashis and on religion in Albania in general are historically orientated. This is a remarkable difference to Alevis, Bektashis, and other Ali-orientated groups in the Middle East and the Western Diaspora.

I hope to have shown that in the Albanian-inhabited areas of South-Eastern Europe, borders of religion and politics have been transgressed in several ways which are unique within the cultural context of the Balkan Peninsula. Concerning the present situation of the Bektashis in Albania, within this paper a number of questions have been risen which can not be readily answered, which nonetheless will be the topic of further research by myself. I also hope that my remarks demonstrated the need for further research in this matter (cf. Kressing 2002: 65 ff.).
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