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ORTHODOX ROOTS, BEKTASHI NEIGHBORS

An Interview with Albania's
Metropolitan John of Korca

RTE: Your Eminence, one of the most remarkable things about the Albanian Orthodox Church is that you have been able to co-exist peaceably with your Moslem neighbors, which is a paradox for many westerners. The Albanian Orthodox worked hard to provide medical care, food and housing to both communities during the Kosovo conflict – and that effort continues – but I wonder if there aren't some other unseen affinities at work between you, contributing to this balance?

MET. JOHN: Yes, there are. I think, as Christians, we have a strong dogmatic base for that. We see every human being created as an icon of God, and as the Orthodox Church we have tried to emphasize this to our people. But also there are many other unnoticed affinities, such as family, cultural and historical ties. For example, respect for St. Cosmas of Aitolia is still very widespread among Albanian Christians and Muslims alike. During St. Cosmas' life, southern Albania and northwestern Greece were one region – Ottoman ruled Epirus – and the Albanian ruler Ali Pasha, who governed Epirus in the early 19th century, had known the saint personally. He was a Bektashi Moslem, and even now the Bektashi use the prophecies of St. Cosmas, although they call him by another name. We Albanian Orthodox call him *Shen Kosma* (St. Cosmas). They call him *Choban Baba*. Choban means "shepherd," and Baba, "father."

The Bektashi also revere the saints who lived long ago, like St. Spiridon (whom they call *Sari Salltik*) and who is enshrined nearby on Corfu. Many saints are commonly venerated in the Orthodox and Bektashi Albanian communities. This feeling for the Christian saints was one of the reasons why the tyrant Ali Pasha ordered a church to be built for St. Cosmas over his relics.

There are many stories in southern Albania about St. Cosmas that have been handed down for centuries. Every village in my region has its story...when he passed by, what he said, that he sent a letter... Many are embellished, but there is still something in them.

RTE: Can you tell us any?

MET. JOHN: Yes. Several years ago I was in an Albanian village where there was a beautiful house that had fallen into ruin. The last male of this house died in 1944, and they still tell the story that when St. Cosmas came to the village he stayed in this house. He was respected, welcomed and given hospitality. In the morning he said, "I hope that your lineage will disappear before a certain time comes." They said, "Are you cursing us, Father?" "I am blessing you," he said, "because there will come a time that will be called 'the time governed by women and young people,' when it will be better not to be than to be."

(*His Eminence smiles.*) And this is like it is now... I go into most houses and ask the husband something and the wife answers, or the young daughters or sons from a corner. The husband and father often has nothing to say. As it happens, the last male of this family died in 1944. But "a time governed by women and young people" should not be understood only literally, but in the sense that it was used by the Fathers of the Church. For example, the Holy Mother Sarah said to the brothers: "It is I who am a man, you who are women." With that she wanted to say that true manhood is not only in the differences of sex, but in character.

RTE: I also heard a story in Konitsa, Greece, that when St. Cosmas passed by the future home of Albania's communist dictator, Hoxa, in Gjirokastra, where two centuries later he was born and raised, he said, "An antiChrist will be born here."

MET. JOHN: I've heard this story many times. It is difficult now to say if all of these stories are true or not, but sometimes it doesn't matter. It doesn't

matter in the sense that what people want to emphasize is St. Cosmas' gift of prophecy, that history is under the control of the Lord, so everything that happened to Albania under Hoxa was foreseen.

There is, of course, the famous story among us of how Ali Pasha was arrested by Kurt Pasha when the Pasha governed Berat. Ali was young then, sixteen or so. St. Cosmas came, and when he entered the prison he said, "Now is coming Ali, Ali Pasha." He told him that he would become pasha, but that he would go to Istanbul with a red beard, predicting Ali's death by beheading.

All of these stories were told and retold, and particularly about Ali Pasha because he was the pasha. He was a cruel tyrant, of course, but some of the others who were considered revolutionary "heros" by the Greeks were just as cruel. I know these stories because on my mother's side I am from Christian Souli. The family moved from Souli when it was destroyed, and the stories told about these Greek chieftains were no less cruel than those told of Ali Pasha. Those were the times, and that was what it meant to be a leader.



PHOTO COURTESY NATHAN HOPPE

RTE: If, as you say, the pashas and even the heros were cruel, why then was St. Cosmas allowed to preach and function in these areas, with his very Christian messages of love of God and justice to your fellow man.

MET. JOHN: The Moslem rulers, if they were Albanians, were not necessarily strict Moslems – their positions were motivated by a personal desire for political power, not religious ideology. Also, many of them had mixed allegiances – they still had cousins and friends who were Christians, or *koumbari*! In Albania it was a tradition until recently that many Moslems had Christian *koumbari* and some Christians had Moslems as *koumbari*. These are considered sacred ties. Strictly speaking, this wasn't allowed, of course, but many of these families wanted to maintain these relationships, and sometimes spiritual kinship ties were made for political reasons. Also, as I mentioned earlier, many of the Albanians were Bektashi Moslems and they had traditions in common with Christians.

¹ *Koumbaros* (sing.), *Koumbari* (plural): one's relationship to a best man or maid-of-honor at a wedding, or to the godparent of one's child. In Greek, Balkan, and Arab Orthodoxy, these spiritual ties are extremely important.

RTE: Weren't the Bektashis originally Christians themselves who retained elements of their former faith?

MET. JOHN: Yes, to some degree, but it isn't quite that simple. The Bektashi originated in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. In Asia Minor there were always groups of Christian gnostics circulating different traditions, and this heavily influenced the Bektashi. The Bektashi still use the Gospel of St. John and venerate almost all of the Orthodox saints.

RTE: Did they arise at the same time in Albania?

MET. JOHN: No. The Bektashi order isn't native to Albania, but many Albanians are closer to it than other forms of Islam. When the Turks arrived, becoming Bektashi was one way in which people didn't have to live under the social pressure or pay the special taxes applied to non-Muslims under the Ottomans, but being Bektashi, they could still keep icons and other traditions. The Bektashi in Albania have been here for centuries, and they are about 15 to 20% of the population.

Albania is now the center of Bektashism, and the head of the Bektashi order is here in Tirana, not in Turkey, because Mustafa Kemal Attaturk exiled the Bektashi from Turkey in the 1930's. Attaturk himself was Albanian and became president of Turkey at the time of the Young Turk revolution, suppressing the Dervish orders and others as well. The head of the Bektashi order at that time was also Albanian, and he moved here because it was safer to be part of a large Bektashi population far from Istanbul. There were some Bektashis in Crete, but afterwards they joined the Orthodox Church again. There were others in Bulgaria and the Balkans, but most are in Albania now.

RTE: How close are they to the Shi'ite and Sunni Moslems?

MET. JOHN: They are not Shi'ite or Sunni. Their belief is more a combination of Christian influence mixed with the Islamic thought of Rumi and other teachers of Asia Minor. The Bektashi don't have written doctrine, and rules and belief differ, depending on what an individual has been taught and whose influence he has come under.

RTE: Do the Bektashi have associations with Sufism?

MET. JOHN: Yes, but they are more open to Christianity, and we have outward similarities.. For example, they have an ecclesiastical structure, they have monasteries – not just mosques or tekkes – but real monasteries. They also have three levels of church hierarchy: *Dervish*, which means a helper, a deacon; *Baba*, which is the “father,” the priest; and then the *Gjysh*, which can be translated literally as “grandfather,” who has the function of bishop because he can ordain the others. They have something similar to a diocesan structure and the whole area under the *Gjysh* is called the *Gjyshata*. They also have a kind of baptism; to baptize they use water mixed with the essence of roses, and a kind of communion service with bread, wine and cheese. They also have something that is unique in the Moslem world: they have confession, and a prayer is said by the clergy over the sinner asking God for forgiveness. So, there is a strong influence here of Christianity.

RTE: Now that Orthodoxy is being revived in Albania, is there an interest among the Bektashi?

MET. JOHN: In general there is an openness towards Christianity, and mostly towards Orthodoxy, because we have those common elements. When the Bektashi come to an Orthodox church they don't feel they are in a foreign place. This helps. As I said, we have many of the same saints, although we sometimes use different names for them, and we both circulate the same stories of the saints and their icons. They do use icons.

RTE: I understand you are a convert to Orthodoxy. Was your own family Bektashi?

MET. JOHN: Yes. Although most of my family is back in the Orthodox Church, I still have cousins who are Bektashi. When you speak of people being Bektashi, however, this can be misinterpreted – in Albania you may be referring to a region under their influence, but this doesn't mean that everyone is a practicing Bektashi. In Bektashism, people only take part in the gatherings if they are initiated. Their baptism is a type of initiation and few besides those who go through it know what happens there, they keep it secret. Perhaps this secrecy is also the influence of the gnostics. The part of Asia Minor where the Bektashi were founded was one of the most renowned in the world for gnosticism, and their use of the Gospel of St. John is another sign of their origins. Most of the gnostics also use the Gospel of St. John.

Some Bektashi claim to have a famous, so-called “secret” doctrine descending from Adam or Seth (the third son of Adam) depending on whom you talk to. This is another common characteristic of gnosticism. All of this was eventually overlaid by an Islamic face. Because they lived in places where Islam had risen to power, they didn’t publicly differentiate themselves from the other Moslems. However, their doctrine is completely different.

RTE: How do the Bektashi look at the Lord? Is it a strictly Moslem view?

MET. JOHN: It depends. Because they don’t have a dogma, interpretations differ. You can read things in Sufi texts by Al-Ghazali or Jelalluddin Rumi, (who were very close in spirit to the Bektashis) that could be scandalous for a Moslem. A modern-day Bektashi could be a scandal for other Moslems in the same way. For example, the Bektashi greet each other on Christmas. They also come to church on Pascha and proclaim, “The Lord is Risen!”

For a Shi’ite or Sunni Moslem this would be impossible, so we can see the Bektashi are more open. In the case of Albania this has been a benefit, because it means that we don’t have a heavy block of Sunni. The Bektashi are also more tolerant, they emphasize that all people are the same. You can easily see the heavy influence of Christianity, particularly if you read the books of Rumi; every third or fourth story will be about a priest.

RTE: I remember that in Rumi’s stories, but I thought they were just translating *imam* into the English “priest.”

MET. JOHN: No, it really is “priest.”

There are other influences on the Bektashi as well. Some say there is even a Buddhist influence, although I doubt this, because the particular doctrine they are talking about, the transmigration of souls, also appeared in the Balkans and in Asia Minor. Their most known adherent was the famous mathematician Pythagoras. This was not the influence of far-off Buddhism, it was a belief that originated in this region and, again, had a gnostic flavor. But certainly not all Bektashi believe in transmigration.

When western people hear “Moslem” they think of what they see on television of Iran and the Middle East, but things here are different. There were not only gnostic influences, but there is a kind of crypto-Christianity among the Albanian Moslems in general. Sometimes they are aware of it and sometimes they are not. But many know that they were Christians before the

Turks. For example, the head of the Moslems here, the *Kryemyfti* – his name is Sabri Kochi. His last name, Kochi, is Albanian for Constantine. Their family names are still often Christian.

RTE: So, they might feel closer to Christians than they do to Arab or Indonesian Moslems.

MET. JOHN: Culturally, yes. Their ethics and psychology are closer. There may be a danger in the future if many students go to study in these Arab countries and are indoctrinated to some degree into more strict forms of Islam, but this outlook doesn’t represent the general view.

The Prophetic Role of the Church

RTE: To move on, the Church here is attempting the immense task of reaching out to all of Albanian society, and I believe that you once quoted a sermon by St. John Chrysostom in which he said, “If all of you in this church were Christians, there would be no more pagans in the world.” That was a direct hit to all of us.

MET. JOHN: Yes. He was right. And others have said the same. Mahatma Gandhi said, “I would have become a Christian if I’d ever met one.” Once a holy man was asked, “Why in the first centuries did Christianity spread so fast, and not now?” He answered, “In the first century, Christianity was preached by Christians.”

If we really understand this we won’t be so quick to see the faults of others. The famous “*Mea culpa*” is a basic doctrine of Christianity. St. Seraphim said, “If you receive the Holy Spirit, thousands around you will be saved.” We are not saving thousands because we aren’t saving ourselves. This is the essential thing, and it helps people understand humanity in another light, the light that gives love rather than hatred.

Most of the experience I’ve had of Christian fanatics is that they have a problem with belief themselves. They doubt and they try to repress every doubt that arises around them. Some of the most rigid Orthodox I’ve met, particularly from ex-Communist countries, are those who were previously members of the secret police, etc., because they cannot live without hatred.

Their identity, unfortunately, is a negative identity because it is built from this hatred. They say, “I am against this and that.” They don’t say what Christianity really is. They want an enemy they can point to. I’m not saying this to judge them, but it is a tragedy.

Perhaps this happens on every level of humanity, but here it is obvious. There are few people who can solve this puzzle and say, “I am.” Only if you participate in the true “I AM” can you say, “I am.” Instead, it is usually “I am not...” Only the Lord has the right to say, “I AM,” but everyone who joins Him takes on this identity.

RTE: That is something we’ve also seen in Russia and Serbia with the upsurge of extreme nationalists. These people often use Orthodoxy as a banner, but there is no Christian spirit behind it and it is frightening because simple people become confused and think, well, “I really should support this group because they are “Orthodox.”

MET. JOHN: Yes, but this abuse has always gone on. These people prey on the religious feelings of others because they know how much power religion has and they want to use it for their own benefit. For example, in Yugoslavia – Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia, – most of the people living in these areas are atheists, and the so-called “religious war” simply doesn’t exist. I have coined a phrase, “a religious war of atheists,” because all the people involved in these wars are atheists. I know them personally. They are human beings, of course, but religion is something they use, not what they believe. It is very hard to escape from that.

The Orthodox Church in Albania has spoken out clearly against the misuse of religion. I believe one of the strongest voices is that of Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, whose motto has been, “the oil of religion must never be used to ignite conflicts but to soothe hearts and heal wounds.”

RTE: In Kosovo, the western press bought into appearances. It was always the Orthodox Serbs versus the Moslem Albanians.

MET. JOHN: It’s easier to think like that. To try to figure out the real reasons is too complex and confusing. They wanted a quick explanation.

RTE: Do you believe Kosovo was a war over culture and territory rather than religion?

MET. JOHN: It was an ethnic war. When, for example, either side destroyed mosques or churches it was not because of religion. They were an ethnic symbol.

RTE: Like the decades of violence in Northern Ireland, and how obvious it seems that these aren’t devout Catholics and Protestants fighting over religion.

MET. JOHN: Yes. Do you know the joke... someone asks an Irishman, “Are you Catholic or Protestant?” The Irishman answers, “I am an atheist.” “OK, but atheist Catholic or atheist Protestant?” (*laughter*)

This is why the prophetic role of the Church is so important. The prophetic role, as the Lord Himself said, means that we are all on the cross. There is a very costly phrase in scripture, that I often quote: “Thus saith the Lord.” In general, people don’t want to hear this. They want to feel that they are “better,” so they follow false prophets and kill the real ones. If we would always speak the Lord’s words, “Thus saith the Lord,” we would be in trouble, but because we don’t like trouble, because we avoid the cross, we don’t say it. We say what other people want to hear. This has been one of the main problems of the Church. We need to fulfill that prophetic role of the Church and speak on behalf of the Lord, to repeat His words.

RTE: One of the things that first woke me up to the resurrection of the Albanian Church was when, during the Kosovo conflict, feeling was running high in the West against the Orthodox Serbs oppressing the Moslem Kosovars. But then, little bits of coverage started slipping out about the Orthodox Church in Albania taking in hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Moslem refugees. It blew the preconceptions apart. Albania may be the first country in the modern world where the Orthodox Church has reached out not only to their own poor and unfortunate, but to their “enemies.”

What advice would you give to Orthodox converts about Christian life? In the West we tend to convert eagerly and read the early church fathers, or lives of saints like St. Seraphim, but often our Orthodoxy is a private affair and doesn’t touch our neighbors, our city or our country, at least not as I see the Albanian Church affecting things here.

MET. JOHN: First, as Christians, we shouldn’t have enemies, because having enemies and being a Christian at the same time is impossible.

Secondly, I joke many times (and this is a joke) that reading about St. Seraphim causes more damage than help. I say this because modern Orthodox often have a false St. Seraphim – which is a reflection of the fact that each of us creates a kind of pseudo-Orthodox self which really has nothing to do with us. For example, a prayer rope in one hand and a girlfriend holding the other, while we talk about St. Seraphim of Sarov. There is nothing in common with St. Seraphim here.

People don't begin to understand St. Seraphim, they see only his glorification. They want to read about him being surrounded by light, but they don't stop to think about what it meant to pray a thousand days and nights on a rock. This is a kind of false identification. We identify ourselves with something that doesn't exist and then we judge others from this lofty viewpoint, forgetting that we are worse than them. We don't try to save ourselves.

The famous Rabbi Zusya used to say, "God will not judge me because I was not Moses, He will judge me because I was not Zusya." These people will not be judged because they are not St. Seraphim of Sarov. They will be judged because they were not real.

Everyone is looking for a place where they can feel secure, but this is only in the other world. The Monastery of Chora, in Constantinople, was dedicated to one of the names of Christ, "The Land of the Living." This land exists, but it is not the pseudo-land of spirituality that we create in our imaginations.

RTE: You have been quoted as saying, "The Church doesn't exist to make individuals, but to make persons. An individual is in a state of separation." Later, when you were asked about the Church's motive in offering English classes to young Albanians, you replied, "It's not that we manipulate others into belief through our projects. We are trying to help young people see certain possibilities and certain paths. Our task is to guard their freedom so they can choose their own path." Those two ideas seem to work together. Freedom and the individual.

MET. JOHN: Yes, and this is why we need unity – because we are different. Artificial systems of unity: communism, socialism, fascism, destroy the person. They attempt to make people the same, and use force to make them act the same. But now in the affluent West there is something even more dangerous than this. It is a kind of uniformity from inside oneself. People vol-

unteer to be uniform. Often, before you even ask a person from one of these countries their opinion, you already know what he will answer. The same remarks, the same attitudes and complaints. This destroys the personality.

When we talk about personhood we mean an individual in relation to others, never in isolation. You can't be a Christian alone. *Onos Christianos, nomos Christianos*, is a famous phrase. Between the community and the individual, only freedom and love can keep a balance. As Aristide Briant, the French politician, said about the famous classical painting in the Louvre of the embodied graces of Gratitude and Goodness embracing, "The poor things, they meet so rarely." Freedom and love are the same.

But in critiquing modern life, I don't want to go to extremes like Kierkegaard who said, "The last Christian died on the Cross." The Lord says we must walk the narrow path, and this is not so easy. ✚