

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Interreligious Relations in a Secular Context

Ardela Hyka

---

## ABSTRACT

The leaders of religious communities in present-day Albania do not limit themselves to the tradition of visiting each other during religious holidays. Rather, they have taken further steps to develop and institutionalize the collaboration between them. An example of this is the Interreligious Collaboration Center (IRCC) in Elbasan. Taking this case into account, the present study aims to examine how interreligious collaboration ventures contribute to shaping relations between the state and religions, the relations between different religious communities and, more generally, the conditions of the presence of religions in the public sphere.

The study reveals the contribution that interreligious collaboration ventures, such as the IRCC in Elbasan, make to shaping the secular context. The IRCC's work is founded on a normative vision of interreligious relations. However, "extremism," "religious phobia," and lack of proper education are factors that are considered detrimental to fostering such relations. In addition, the IRCC has managed to create significant relations with state institutions, collaborated with them in the field of human rights and religion-based discrimination, and positioned itself as an influential stakeholder facilitating the state-society interaction.

In addition to legal documents, media reports on religious and interreligious issues,

---

Received 20 Mar 2019; accepted: 3 Apr 2019; published September 2020

© 2020 The Author(s), HBKU College of Islamic Studies.

**Cite this article as:** Hyka, A. (2020). **Interreligious Relations in a Secular Context.**

*Astrolabe: A CIS Student Research Journal*

<https://www.hbku.edu.qa/sites/default/files/preservinginterreligiouscoexistenceinalbania.pdf>

and publications by the IRCC, this study is based on three interviews conducted with members of the executive board of the IRCC.

**Keywords:** Albania, Interfaith, Religion and society, Religious freedom, Secularism

## INTRODUCTION

### Religious Communities in Albania

Secular, with a Christian past, a Muslim-majority population—this is the picture of Albania today. Historically, Albania was a multi-religious country. After the collapse of the Communist regime in 1990, Albanians longed to embrace religion, but they found themselves without a genuine religious culture<sup>1</sup> due to 23 years of atheist ruling. Its religious composition during the beginning of the 1990s consisted of three key religious communities: Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox, similar to what was before the Communist regime. Although there was a lack of credible statistical evidence, it could be affirmed that in the early 1990s, a considerable number of atheists existed in Albania.<sup>2</sup> In the following years, the Bektashi community reorganized itself and was treated just like the other three religious communities.<sup>3</sup> The 2011 Population Registration showed 56.70% Muslims, 10.03% Catholics, 6.75% Orthodox Christians, and 2.09% Bektashi living within the Albanian population.<sup>4</sup> In 2011, an agreement was reached between the state and the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania, making the latter the fifth religious community in Albania.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Jewish community was also present in Albania, with approximately 30 families.<sup>6</sup> Even though they were small in number, institutionally, they were very organized; in 2010, they opened the first synagogue in Albania.<sup>7</sup> Other small religious groups included the Seventh Day Adventists, Swedish Evangelists, the Dutch Evangelical organization God Loves Albania, Scientologists,<sup>8</sup> Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons. According to the State Committee of Cults, there are 256 religious groups, organizations, and religious foundations in Albania.<sup>9</sup>

---

1 Eduart Caka, *Dialogu Ndërfetar; Një Qasje Teoriko-Praktike Dhe Realiteti Shqiptar* Tiranë: Shtypsh-kronja “West Print”, 2015.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Rrapo Zguri, “Analizë E Diskursit Ekstremist Fetar Në Media”, *Instituti Shqiptar I Medias*, 2019, <http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Diskursi%20shqip.pdf>.

5 “Ligj Nr.10 394, Datë 10.3.2011, Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Bashkësisë Fetare “Vëllazëria Ungjillore E Shqipërisë” Për Rregullimin E Marrëdhënive Të Ndërsjella”, *Fletorja Zyrtare E Botimeve Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë*, 2011, 1–7, <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.

6 “Një Sinagogë Për Tiranën”, Top-Channel.Tv, Last modified 2019, <http://top-channel.tv/2010/12/14/nje-sinagoge-per-tirane/>.

7 Ibid.

8 Mentor Mustafa, “What Remained of Religion in an “Atheist” State and the Return of Religion in Post-Communist Albania”, 2007.

9 “Raporti I Departamentit Te Shtetit Mbi Lirine Fetare Ne Bote, SHQIPËRIA”, 2009, 1–4, <https://>

Due to the historical events that took place in the country, the position of religion with regard to the state and society often changed and sometimes abruptly. However, religion has almost always had a role in the public sphere, apart from the Communist period in Albania. As Casanova (1994) states:

“...religions are likely to continue playing important public roles in the ongoing construction of the modern world [which] compels us to rethink systematically the relationship of religion and modernity and, more important, the possible roles religions may play in the public sphere of modern societies.”<sup>10</sup>

This is the broader context for examining the main question of the article: *how do interreligious collaboration projects contribute to shaping the secular context of Albania?*

Secular frameworks, as stated in the Albanian Constitution, promise equal religious freedom to all religious groups; this is the basis of the legitimacy they claim for themselves. Moreover, they are widely seen as essential for enabling multi-religious societies to live in peace. In partial contrast to this view, critical scholarships have shown that not only the promise of equality is often broken but also the real effects of secular systems vary, sometimes considerably, from case to case.<sup>11</sup> Even though secularism is superficially identified as the “confrontation” of religion and the state,<sup>12</sup> religious groups have always been trying to gain position in the public sphere and within the society; for an extended period, it did not take the form of seeing one religion as the “Other” or leftover as some do today with Islam.<sup>13</sup> It shows the efforts religious communities make in order to gain terrain in the public sphere, have a say in specific issues, provide service for the community, and give their verdict on controversial issues, such as the initiative to have mural cemeteries in Albania which were categorically objected by the Muslim community.<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, one can understand that it is not only rules and regulations that are derived by the secular state to provide religious freedom and equality, but also the way religious communities navigate in this competitive secular context. Thus, the purpose of this study is to look beyond the formal mechanisms of secularism, by exploring the interreligious relations in the secular Albania, the religious policies of the post-Communist country, and interreligious institutions such as the Interreligious Collaboration Center (IRCC) in Elbasan.

Based on this multi-religiosity and the study of the IRCC, this article makes a small contribution to our understanding of interreligious collaboration as one element of the “politics of religious freedom” in Albania. This article is based on legal documents, media reports on religious and interreligious issues, and publications by the IRCC. However, the

---

[www.state.gov/documents/organization/132811.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/132811.pdf).

10 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

11 Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Religious Freedom* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

12 Ibid.

13 Arolda Elbasani, “State-Organised Religion and Muslims’ Commitment to Democracy in Albania”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 2 (2016): 18, doi:10.1080/09668136.2015.1136596.

14 “Varrezat Murale “Peng” I Komunitetit Mysliman”, *Gazeta Shqip*, Last modified 2013, <https://www.gazeta-shqip.com/2013/08/02/varrezat-murale-peng-i-komunitetit-mysliman/>.

primary source for conducting this article is the three interviews conducted with the leaders of the Center. The interviewees are Dr. Arben Ramkaj,<sup>15</sup> Mr. Sokol Lulqijuraj,<sup>16</sup> and Fr. Stavri Çipi.<sup>17</sup> The choice of this sampling was made by choosing the actual leaders who governed the Center, as they rotated every four years, and considering the diversity of the religious community's voices.

## PART I. STATE, RELIGION, AND SOCIETY

### State and Religion

Investigation of the relationship between the state and religious communities in the post-Communist Albania cannot be possible without discussing secularism (*laïcité*). Secularism (*laïcité*) has been among the main organizing principles of the state in the post-Communist Albania.<sup>18</sup> To put it simply, four types of secular regimes are usually distinguished in Albanian history: the National Awakening (1878–1912), the “nationalization of religion” or the Kemalist model (1928–1939), the atheist model (1945–1990), and the present regime under study (1990 onwards).<sup>19</sup>

In the present regime, after Communism (1944–1990), Albania reintroduced aspects of the secular regime which was established before Communism; thus, the state does not recognize any official religion. However, it promotes religious equality and independence of religious institutions.<sup>20</sup> According to Elbasani (2016), the specific model of secularism provides religious communities the opportunity to navigate and choose among various options.<sup>21</sup> After the fall of Communism, Albania embraced a democratic and pluralist system, indicating a return to religion.<sup>22</sup> In 1990–1991, the leaders from each main religion in Albania advocated for opening religious community institutions which had been closed during the Communist regime.<sup>23</sup>

---

15 He is the current President of the Interreligious Collaboration Center in Elbasan, and also a member of the executive board as the representative of the Muslim community, and Imam.

16 He is the coordinator of the Interreligious Collaboration Center in Elbasan, and also a member of the executive board as the representative of the Catholic Church, and chairman of the Council of the Catholic Church, and a member of the IRCC.

17 He is also a member of the executive board as the representative of the Orthodox community, priest of the Orthodox Parish “St. Nicholas” (Shën Nikolla) in Elbasan.

18 Arolda Elbasani and Artan Puto, “Albanian-Style Laïcité: A Model for a Multi-Religious European Home?”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017): 53–69, doi:10.1080/19448953.2016.1201994.

19 Piro Misha, “Feja, Laiciteti Dhe Hapësira Publike Shtypit Shqiptar Për Raportet Mes Fesë, Laicitetit Dhe Hapësirës Publike Shtator 2011 – Qershor 2012”, *Instituti I Dialogut Dhe Komunikimit*, 2012, 13–37.

20 Ibid.

21 Elbasani, “State-Organised Religion”, 253–269.

22 Ibid.

23 For further information, see “Katalog I Vepimitarisë Së Komunitetit Mysliman Të Shqipërisë”, *Komuniteti Mysliman I Shqipërisë*, 2014, <https://kms.al/pdf/katalog%20i%20vepimitarisë%20se%20>

Since the collapse of the Communist regime until today, the Albanian Constitution has been modified seven times. The Constitution of 1998, as stated under Article 10, allows the relationship between religious communities and the state to be regulated through an agreement made between the representatives of the religious communities and the Council of Ministers.<sup>24</sup> Based on this article, several agreements have been concluded throughout these years between the state and the religious communities. The first agreement was made in 2000, two years after the Constitution (1998) came into force, between the state and the Catholic Church.<sup>25</sup> This was followed by another agreement in 2002 between the Republic of Albania and the Holy See,<sup>26</sup> in order to regulate the legal status of the Catholic Church in Albania. In 2009, an accord was signed by the Muslim Community of Albania,<sup>27</sup> the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania,<sup>28</sup> the Holy Seat of the World Bektashi Headquarters,<sup>29</sup> and, in 2011, by the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania<sup>30</sup> on the ratification of the “Agreement between the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania and respective religious communities on the Regulation of Mutual Relations” based on the Articles 10 and 24 of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania. Through these agreements, the Constitution

---

komunitetit%20mysliman%20te; Kisha Katolike, “Asambleja Kombëtare E Kishës Katolike Në Shqipëri”, Kisha Dhe Jeta, Last modified 2019, <https://www.kishadhejeta.com/asambleja-kombetare-e-kishes-katolike-ne-shqiperi/>; Super User, “Historia E Kishës”, Kisha Orthodhokse Autoqefale E Shqipërisë, Last modified 2019, <http://orthodoxalbania.org/alb/index.php/al/kisha-jone/historia>; “THE BEKTASHI WORLD LEADERS –”, Kryegjyshataboterorebektashiane.Org, Last modified 2019, <https://kryegjyshataboterorebektashiane.org/en/the-bektashi-world-leaders/>.

- 24 “Kushtetuta e Republikës së Shqipërisë 1998”, 1998, 1–35, <http://www.qbz.gov.al/Kushtetuta%20me%20pjese/Kushtetuta%201998,varianti%201.pdf>, Article 10.
- 25 The agreement was for the ratification of “*the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Albania and the Catholic Church in Albania for the construction and administration of the hospital ‘Our Lady of Good Council’*”, on 27th of April 2000 (See “Ligj Nr. 8608, Datë 27.4.2000, Për Ratifikimin E Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Qeverisë Së Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Kishës Katolike Në Shqipëri Për Ndërtimin Dhe Administrimin E Spitalit “Zoja E Këshillit Të Mirë””, *Fletorja Zyrtare E Republikës Së Shqipërisë*, 2000, 9–12, <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.)
- 26 On the Ratification of the “*Agreement between the Republic of Albania and the Holy See on the Regulation of Mutual Relations*,” (See “Ligj Nr 9865 Datë 31-01-2008, Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Selisë Së Shenjtë Për Disa Çështje Ekonomike Dhe Tati-more””, 2008, 33–36, <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.)
- 27 “Ligj Nr.10 056, Datë 22.1.2009 Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Komunitetit Mysliman Të Shqipërisë Për Rregullimin E Marrëdhënieve Të Ndërsjella””, *Fletorja Zyrtare E Republikës Së Shqipërisë*, 2009, 11–19, <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.
- 28 “Ligj Nr.10 057, Datë 22.1.2009, Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Kishës Ortodokse Autoqefale Të Shqipërisë Për Rregullimin E Marrëdhënieve Të Ndërsjella””, 2009, 19–27, <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.
- 29 “Ligj Nr.10 058, Datë 22.1.2009, Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Kryegjyshitës Botërore Bektashiane Për Rregullimin E Marrëdhënieve Të Ndërsjella””, *Fletorja Zyrtare E Botimeve Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë*, 2009, 28–35, <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.
- 30 “Ligj Nr.10 394, Datë 10.3.2011”.

recognizes four main privileges for the religious communities: representation among state institutions, public funds for building and reconstructing religious objects or paying officials, state recognition, and state protection from every person or group that pretends the name, religious objects, symbols, and the seal of the community.

## Religion and Society

There is a widespread consensus in the literature that interreligious relations in Albania are cordial.<sup>31</sup> These cordial interreligious relations existing among people may be connected with the family-centered point of view within the Albanian culture, meaning that family ties are stronger than even religion, and there is general disinterest of the Albanians in religious inputs of this post-Communist period.<sup>32</sup> It can also be the fact that religion was revived after the Communist period, but the majority is still indifferent towards religion.<sup>33</sup> Other great contributions towards interreligious relations are made, or have been made, by religious leaders who call on believers for mutual understanding and dialogue.<sup>34</sup> They also call on them to avoid conflicts, or offending people of other religions, and to provide help for one another, regardless of religion. Examples for this include the MCA that calls to donate blood for children who suffer from thalassemia, and Islamic and religious groups that are generally engaged in humanitarian and educational programs such as orphans' sponsorship, providing for widows, distribution of food, and improvement of water supplies in rural areas.<sup>35</sup> Some other indicators of intensive interreligious relations in Albania are the high ratio of interreligious marriages<sup>36</sup> and the relatively widespread practice of "celebrating" religious holidays together.<sup>37</sup>

However, there have been moments of controversies within society because of religion. The reasons that may cause these controversies vary across different factors. First, controversies among religious communities themselves can be concluded as a "race" to gain terrain in the public sphere of Albania, be it through gaining the ownership of the church or mosque,<sup>38</sup> erecting crosses,<sup>39</sup> or getting back confiscated land from the state

---

31 Gjergji Vurmo, Enis Sulstarova, and Aleka Papa, "Religious Tolerance in Albania", *United Nations Development Programme*, 2018, 4–73, <http://www.al.undp.org/content/dam/albania/docs/religion%20tolerance%20albania.pdf>.

32 This is the conclusion drawn by the author. See Mustafa, "What Remained of Religion".

33 Mustafa, "What Remained of Religion".

34 Vurmo, Sulstarova, and Papa, "Religious Tolerance in Albania".

35 For further information, see "KMSH: Besimtarët Japin Jetë, Nuk Marrin", Komuniteti Mysliman I Shqipërisë, Last modified 2019, <http://www.kmsh.al/al/2015/11/kmsh-besimtar-et-japin-jete-nuk-marrin/>. Albania", *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, 2 (2014): 1–9.

36 Vurmo, Sulstarova, and Papa, "Religious Tolerance in Albania".

37 Cecilie Endresen, "Albania", *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices*, 2 (2014): 1–9.

38 A dispute that started around 2005 with the so-called "church–mosque" (*kishë-xhami*), located in the castle of Rozafa in Shkodra. The Muslim community of Albania and the Catholic Church of Albania claim for its property. See Cecilie Endresen, "One Object, Several Definitions. The Albanian "Church–Mosque" Dispute", *Annuario*, 2012, 39–59.

39 The erection of the Christian crosses on the hilltops, especially in areas with a mixed population. These incidents created a situation of controversy in the Muslim community. See Endresen, "One Object, Several Definitions"; Miranda Vickers, "Islam in Albania", *Advanced Research and Assess-*

during Communism.<sup>40</sup>

Second, controversies between religious communities and the state rest on the labeling of a particular religion—Islam—as the “Other” or non-national. An example related to these controversies is the so-called “new crusade” over religions, which is supported by atheist propaganda outlets and further intensified by the scrutiny placed over various Muslim Arab organizations in the name of “War on Terror” after 9/11, which led to the closure of some Muslim charity organizations.<sup>41</sup>

Third, the increasing representation of national heroes from a religious perspective has also led to the ongoing controversy. This applies to Mother Teresa (1910–1997) and Skanderbeg (1405–1468). The controversy started after the Communist period when these two figures began to be presented as the heroes of the Catholic Church. During this regime, they were portrayed in secular terms instead of religious terms.<sup>42</sup> This “religious” representation led to the marginalization of Muslims, of whom some of them claimed not to accept these personalities as the heroes of the nation. Therefore, they were considered as the “Other” and “traitors” of the nation.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, the controversies between Albanian intellectuals and religious communities focus more on the negative approach of these intellectuals towards certain religions in the form of (1) public speeches, such as the discourse between Ismail Kadare, who supports what he refers to as the European identity of Albania,<sup>44</sup> and Rexhep Qosja, who promotes Albania as a multi-religious country;<sup>45</sup> (2) declarations, such as the declaration of Kastriot Myftaraj in the media that Europe and America had to deal with Islam, because, according to him, it was a terrorist religion;<sup>46</sup> and (3) publications, such as the books *Të jetosh në ishull* (Living in an Island) of Ben Blushi, a writer and an outstanding member of the Socialist Party, which depicts Muslims as barbarians, violent, immoral, and traitors of the Christian religion,<sup>47</sup> or *A di Zoti Shqip* (Does God know Albanian) of the journalist Gani Mehmetaj, which states that religion offends the national feeling.<sup>48</sup>

---

ment Group, 2008, 3–12.

40 Instituti Shqiptar për Studime Ligjore dhe Territoriale (A.L.T.R.I). *Studim mbi te Drejtat e Pronësisë të Komuniteteve Fetare në Shqipëri*. Albania: A.L.T.R.I, 2016, 20–60.

41 Elbasani, “State-Organised Religion”, 9.

42 Olsi Jazexhi, “Is Albania still a Secular Country”, 2017, 1–6, [https://www.academia.edu/36042746/Is\\_Albania\\_still\\_a\\_secular\\_state](https://www.academia.edu/36042746/Is_Albania_still_a_secular_state).

43 Ibid.

44 The notion “European” implies, according to Kadare, “Catholicism,” “white people,” “civilization,” “Albanian,” “identity,” “mother continent,” and “myth.” See Gëzim Mekuli, *Analizë e shkrimit “Identiteti Europian i Shqiptarëve” të Ismail Kadaresë (I)*, Last modified 2018, <http://www.albaniapress.com/lajme/6839/Analize-e-shkrimit--Identiteti-evropian-ishqiptarëve--te-Ismail-Kadarese-I.html>.

45 For further information, see: Cecilie Endresen, “Is Tthe Albanian’s Religion Really “Albanianism”? Religion Aand Nation According Tto Muslim Aand Christian Leaders Iin Albania.”, *Albanische Forschungen Series*, 2012, 69–81.

46 Olsi Jazexhi, “Albania”, *Yearbook Oof Muslims Iin Europe* 8 (2016): 19–31.

47 “Forumi Musliman I Shqiperise | Organizate Gjitheperfishirese E Muslimaneve Shqiptare”, *Forumi-musliman.Org*, Last modified 2008, <http://www.forumimusliman.org/osce.html>.

48 For further information, see Videoo Shqip, *Emisioni “Papirus”, Vepra “A Di Zoti Shqip” Nga Gani*



## PART II. THE CASE STUDY OF INTERRELIGIOUS COLLABORATION CENTER IN ELBASAN

### General Presentation of the IRCC

The IRCC in Elbasan is a non-governmental organization founded by the four religious communities in Albania, namely the Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, and Bektashi community in 2005. The Tirana Judicial District Court recognized it as a Judicial Person in 2006. Recently, the Protestant community joined this Center. The establishment of the Center came as a result of some events: the centuries-old tradition of mutual respect among the religious communities as an inherited value from the previous generations; the controversy between the Orthodox community and the Muslim community on the erection of a big cross (9 m long) along the national highway of Tiranë–Elbasan, blessed by the Orthodox community; and also the participation of the religious leaders and several believers and activists of different religions in the project titled, “The promotion of religious harmony in Albania,” which was supported by USAID through the implementation of World Learning.<sup>49</sup> According to the coordinator of the IRCC, Mr. Lulgjuraj, “religious representatives and activists of Elbasan were the only ones among all the participants who proposed the idea of creating a committee as a solution to conflicts in general and those religious ones in particular.”

The current staff is composed of three to five people, who are mainly a Muslim President, the Vice President and the coordinator—both from the Catholic community, a Muslim treasurer, and the assistant who is either from the Orthodox or the Protestant community. Moreover, the Center engages many activists and volunteers, which can comprise up to 40 people. The decisions in the Center are made by consensus. The Center’s operations consist of seven administrative departments: the department of dialogue, the department of tradition, the department of education, the department of women, the department of youth, the department of minorities, and the department of communication. Every first Thursday of each month, the committee meets to discuss the long-term strategy (every four years the presidency changes accordingly), as the Center maintains the equality and diversity in the leading positions, plans the annual activities and orientations, and monitors the work of the departments (every three months). Two meetings are also held in September and October where the Center prepares the activities for the upcoming year through committee proposals, by looking at essential dates in the calendar and also considering the current situation of the country.

The work of the Center is developed in two dimensions: in terms of interreligious dialogue, and in terms of collaboration for the benefit of the society. With regard to the

---

*Mehmetaj, RTV21-Ariana Çaka*, video, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fhRMD-NnR4>; Bota Press, “Gani Mehmetaj: A Di Zoti Shqip?”, [Botapress.Info](http://botapress.info/gani-mehmetaj-a-di-zoti-shqip/), Last modified 2015, <http://botapress.info/gani-mehmetaj-a-di-zoti-shqip/>.

49 “U.S. Department of State – United States Department of State”, United States Department of State, Last modified 2015, <https://www.state.gov/>.



interreligious dialogue, the IRCC organizes various meetings with students, religious figures, and public institutions in order to promote the value of interreligious dialogue in society.<sup>50</sup> With regard to the interreligious collaboration, the Center has undertaken various activities such as sending the staff for training and collaborating in interfaith projects, conferences, open seminars whose target group is the youth in order to keep them away from “bigotry and extremist” ideologies, charity activities in Albania or elsewhere (such as the march of peace), various projects, declarations that aim to strengthen interreligious relations, and leisure-based activities participated by around 50 men and women every month.<sup>51</sup>

The Center’s goal is to “build bridges of communication and collaboration between the different religions, to preserve the tradition of religious coexistence in Albania, as well as to prevent individuals and groups from misusing religion and creating controversy in the society.”<sup>52</sup> As Dr. Ramkaj puts it, “the IRCC is the only Center in the Balkans which aims at collaborative efforts between the religious communities through various activities and not just encouraging dialogue among them.” The change that the Center has brought to society, according to Mr. Lulgjuraj, can be seen from two approaches: the mental change and the technical change. Concerning the mental change, he states that, in the initial period, the Albanian society was skeptical of the Center. These included not only the believers of both religions but also religious leaders. Concerning the technical change, the Center has not only managed to win projects from international organizations but was also able to consolidate the administrative work in seven departments as mentioned above.

### **The Relation between the IRCC and State Institutions**

The IRCC has good relationships with public institutions, especially those in the district of Elbasan where the IRCC is also a member of the Security Council of the city since it was first established in 2017 to fight extremism. According to Dr. Ramkaj, “this obliges the Center to share common responsibilities with the local institutions.” Therefore, for “common issues” such as extremism, violence, respect for religion, and human rights, the IRCC consults with the relevant institutions, including the Security Council. It also refers to state institutions in cases of discrimination or human rights. They receive a special fund from the City Hall under the supervision of the mayor<sup>53</sup> and collaborate on issues related to extremism, violence, or human rights. This request for financial support is approved by the City Hall even though legal statutes for non-profit organizations do not allow the

---

50 “Inter Religious Center”, Interreligiouscenter.Com, Last modified 2019, <https://interreligiouscenter.com/>.

51 Vjosana Neziri, “Religious Peace in Albania”, in *Handbook of Research on Promoting Peace Through Practice, Academia, and the Arts*, Chicago: Northeastern Illinois University, 2018, 372–391.

52 “Inter Religious Center”, Interreligiouscenter.Com, Last modified 2019, <https://interreligiouscenter.com/>.

53 Neziri (2018) puts this as a political will to support the Center’s activities. See Neziri, “Religious Peace in Albania”.

financial support of such initiatives from public funds.<sup>54</sup> However, to justify this fund, the mayor of the municipal council, Altin Idrizi, said that this request from the Center has significant importance due to the context of the terrorist attacks in Brussels and is positive in the good work the Center is doing to fight extremism. He stated that “by promoting collaboration through this Center, extremism is fought since in the embryo.”<sup>55</sup> They also signed an agreement with the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, which receives and deals with cases of discrimination including those related to religious practices, in 2016 for joint events in order to fight discriminations based on, amongst other types, religion. Some examples of the work against discrimination are as follows: fighting for the right to education for Muslim girls as the schools are secular;<sup>56</sup> the right of the police to go to the mosque without their uniform; the right of the soldiers to go to the mosque after working hours; and the employment of religious people, especially Muslim women, who have difficulty finding jobs both in the public and private sectors because of their outfit. In addition, the Center signed an agreement with the Regional Education Directorate to educate students against extremism.

Moreover, Mr. Lulguraj stated that the membership in the Security Council is a result of the successful work of the Center. He said that the IRCC has been recognized for its efforts through the activities done for the society, the invitation of public authorities in their activities, and the advertisement of the Center’s work on the local and national media. Many local media (such as ETV,<sup>57</sup> Best Channel,<sup>58</sup> TVS,<sup>59</sup> Elbasani Plus,<sup>60</sup> and Saranda Televizion<sup>61</sup>), national media (such as ABC News<sup>62</sup>), online newspapers (such as Elbasani News<sup>63</sup>), and religious media (such as Radio Islame<sup>64</sup>), as well as online media of religious

54 “Ligj Nr.8788, Datë 7.5.2001 PëR Organizatat JofitimprurëSe”, *Republika E Shqipërisë Kuvendi*, 2001, 1–18.

55 Këshilli Bashkiak Mbështet Kërkesën E Qendrës Për Bashkëpunim Ndërfetar Në Elbasan”, YouTube, Last modified 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTikQjOnQSo>.

56 For more information, see Vickers, “Islam in Albania”.

57 “Qendra E Bashkepunimit Nderfetar, Takim Me Studentet”, YouTube, Last modified 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrBIQlhW1I8>.

58 “Qendra E Bashkepunimit Nderfetar Kontribon Per Femijet Sirian”, YouTube, Last modified 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPJ7K3FexMg>.

59 “Qendra E Bashkëpunimit Ndërfetar, Simpozium Për Martirët E Besimeve”, YouTube, Last modified 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyNiCJlbg0U>.

60 “OSBE Mbështet Qendrën E Bashkëpunimit Ndërfetar Elbasan”, YouTube, Last modified 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETnMeqejR4g>.

61 “Qendra E Bashkëpunimit Ndërfetar Ne Sarande”, YouTube, Last modified 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkFAQKeWyFQ>.

62 “Marshimi I Paqes Ne Elbasan | ABC News Albania”, YouTube, Last modified 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAgpM8yZ5Is>.

63 “QBNF Elbasan, Marshim Ndërgjegjësues Në Sheshin “Aqif Pasha”, *Elbasani News*, Elbasani-news.AL, Video, Last modified 2019, <https://elbasaninews.al/qbnf-elbasan-marshim-ndergjegjësues-ne-sheshin-aqif-pasha/>.

64 “Në Elbasan U Mbajt Marshimi”, Radioislame.Com, Last modified 2016, <http://www.radioislame.com/new/artikulli.php?id=21136>.

communities, have echoed the place and the value the Center in the society, for the simple fact that harmonious interreligious relations for Albania are widely considered as a national value. Such media coverage makes the public authorities unable to ignore the work of the Center.

However, the Center is independent from the state. From an organizational point of view, religious actors can be any individual or group that represents religious beliefs, which can be viewed as civil society but have “limited access” to the political field. They can also create a political party, which would give them direct participation in politics and equip religious groups with political authority.<sup>65</sup> According to Fr. Stavri Çipi, the Center spreads the spirit of collaboration, affection, harmony, coexistence, and listening to the “Other,” elements that political parties should exercise among themselves. Dr. Ramkaj said that the direct involvement of religion in politics is dangerous for the harmony of interreligious relations. Nevertheless, the participation of politicians in several events of the Center is noticed. Politicians from the Socialist Party such as Deputy Evis Kushi and the Chairman of the Parliamentary Group, Taulant Balla, have participated in the march of peace; and called politicians from other political parties to join this march because this would be the best message politicians can convey: “cooperation and integration” among them.<sup>66</sup> The presence of the mayor of City Hall has also been noticed in some of their initiatives—naming the mayor’s presence and support in the declaration of the willingness of the Center to collaborate with the state against *Cannabis sativa* cultivated in the country.<sup>67</sup>

The Center also develops relations with international authorities in order to implement its activities. The Center is currently supported by Switzerland and the Embassy of Switzerland in Albania through the *Lëviz Albania* project, a fund for the empowerment of the civil society. In this project entitled “FUNDAK,”<sup>68</sup> religious people implement active democracy. As Dr. Ramkaj stated, this is the first project in the past years where religious people put positive pressure on the community in order to be part of the local, political decision-making process. Furthermore, as Mr. Lulgjuraj stated, the project demonstrates that the role of the clergy is not just to send the spirits to the hereafter, but also to advise people in their daily life, teach them that everyone should have an active role in society by increasing their awareness to pressure political responsibility, and contribute to the society. Moreover, the Center is supported by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which has published articles and held several projects against extremism in Albania.

---

65 Arolda Elbasani and Beken Saatçioğlu, “Muslims’ Support for European Integration: The Role of Organizational Capacities”, *Democratization* 21, no. 3 (2012): 458–479, doi:10.1080/13510347.2012.738328.

66 “Marshimi I Paqes Ne Elbasan | ABC News Albania”, YouTube, Last modified 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAgpM8yZ5Is>.

67 “Qendra E Bashkëpunimit Ndërfetar Gati Të Bashkëpunojë Me Qeverinë Për Luftën Ndaj Kanabisit”, YouTube, Last modified 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2-tS5yf16Q>.

68 *Fetarët Ushtrijnë dhe Nxisin Demokraci Aktive Komunitare* (The clergy practices and boosts active democracy in the community).

## Perceptions of Interreligious Collaboration Center in Elbasan on Factors Detrimental to Strong Interreligious Relations: “Extremism,” “Religious Phobia,” and Property

This section will provide the Center’s definition of factors detrimental to the development of strong interreligious relations as they define them. Here, notably, it will be examined how the leaders of the IRCC define “extremism” and “religious phobia” and how they aim to combat them. According to the Center, the factors that disturb interreligious relations can be categorized into three types: religious, political, and personal statements.

Religious factors include the incorrect interpretation of various doctrines, the use of hate speech, and the lack of proper education, especially the religious “culture.” According to Dr. Ramkaj, within religious communities, there exists the incorrect interpretation of the doctrine, or the extremist interpretation of some doctrines such as the extremism of an Islamic theological nature. The presence of the *takfir* movement and other movements that are associated with violent extremism in Albania,<sup>69</sup> albeit very few as Dr. Ramkaj added, are a source of disturbance for interreligious relations. Concurrently, there is also Christian extremism, especially in the north of Albania, which results from the simple fact of being a Catholic believer. An example is the case of the violation of the Turkish flag in the business sector in Mirdita.<sup>70</sup> Another disturbing element of interreligious relations is the use of hate speech. As Dr. Ramkaj said, “these extremist beliefs and acts do not come directly from the church or mosque, but from different believers who use hate speech or bully the believers of other religions.” According to Mr. Luljguraj, a factor that troubles interreligious relations is the lack of education, be it comprehensive (low level of culture, which will be explained later) or religious one, which results in not understanding the believers of other religions. In addition, the low level of “culture”<sup>71</sup> creates a stigma and the fear to confront the other. However, the center of Albania is known for maintaining cordial interreligious relations among people.

With respect to the politically oriented obstacle, the interviewees shared the same opinion when they said that political parties cause trouble for the interreligious relations when they try to politicize and favor one religion over others, which leads to discontent within the society. There are some cases of politicization of religion, such as the intervention in choosing the head of the Muslim Community of Albania—when the former Prime Minister of Albania, Sali Berisha, claimed that the Mufti of Tirana was

---

69 Dr. Arben Ramkaj, 2019.

70 For further information, see Olsi Jazexhi, “Albania”, *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* 9 (2018): 19–35.

71 Culture used here by the interviewee has the connotation as generally used by Albanians and explained by Rapper (2008), which is associated with “high culture” as being educated, speaking in a standardized Albanian, speaking foreign languages, and also related to the West as being progressed and modernized. See Gilles De Rapper, “Religion in Post-Communist Albania: Muslims, Christians and the Concept of ‘Culture’ (Devoll, South Albania)”, *Anthropological Notebooks*, 2008, 31–45, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00327200>.

proposed by the Socialist Party to be selected as the head;<sup>72</sup> or the inclusion of some Protestants in the state administration, such as the election of a pastor, Toni Gogu, as the Deputy Minister of Justice.<sup>73</sup> This election affected the harmony within a big religious community such as the Muslim community. Moreover, Mr. Lulgjuraj shares the same opinion with Dr. Ramkaj when he states that “there have been accusations regarding the involvement of a religion with politics.” He gives the example of the Muslim Community of Albania who were accused of being part of the Democratic Party when the latter was in power, and when the Socialist Party came into power, this relation changed. However, the Socialist Party also included some known religious personalities in the ranks of the lists of councilors. In addition, Mr. Lulgjuraj tackled this issue from the “inferiority” point of view. Political parties consider certain religious communities as inferior just because of the low percentage of followers they have in the society, which is translated into the political language as low percentage of voters. Thus, according to him, politicians take into account these religious communities as they know that they will make a difference in the voting process, and this consideration sometimes also means positions in their political parties.

Moreover, Dr. Ramkaj stated that it is vital in this section to differentiate between the personal opinion of individual people and the institutional opinion considered as an official claim because this would help us better understand certain declarations towards certain religions. According to the aforementioned census 2011, Muslims comprise the majority of people living in Albania. However, in the secular context, this does not make Albania a Muslim country, but a multi-religious country with a Muslim-majority population. Therefore, in his speech titled “Religious tolerance in the tradition of the Albanian people” at the Oxford Union in 2005, the former president, Alfred Moisiu, regarded Islam as a “shallow rule.”<sup>74</sup> According to Dr. Ramkaj, this statement does not represent an institutional approach, but his superficiality towards some approaches. Moreover, the attempts of some Christians such as Kastriot Myftaraj, who wants to present Albania as a Catholic country, or others, who take the words of Kadare out from their

---

72 Top Channel Albania, *Open – Gylenistët Dhe Erdoganistë Përplasen Për KMSH? Flasin Ekspertët E Gazetarët*, Video, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2PETeaX-rw>.

73 “Pastori Që Martoi Erion Veliajn, Emërohet Zëvendës Ministër I Drejtësisë”, Te Paekspozuarit, Last modified 2017, <http://www.tpz.al/2017/10/09/nje-udherrefyes-shpirtorer-per-qeverine-dhe-kryeministrin/>.

74 In his talk titled “Religious tolerance in the tradition of the Albanian people” at the Oxford Union in 2005, the President of that time Alfred Moisiu, an Orthodox Christian himself, said that Islam was a shallow statute among the citizens of Albania, and that it was brought by foreigners and has been linked with the “political abuse,” implying the Ottoman Empire. Thus, according to him, it is wrong to consider Albanians as “Muslim people, or with a Muslim majority.” He states, “Islam is not an original religion, nor a religion spread at the time of its origin [...] but a phenomenon that has come and been inherited in the language and liturgy of the factor that brought it [the Ottomans] [...]. Islam in Albania is an Islam with a European face. In general, it is a shallow form of Islam [...]. In any Albanian you will find that his core is Christian if you scratch. See Endresen, “Is the Albanian’s Religion Really “Albanianism”?”.

context and create a *Reconquista* theory of “converting to Christianity in order to join European Union,”<sup>75</sup> are, according to Dr. Ramkaj, very dangerous, because everyone wants to join the European Union. Thus, almost everyone in Albania would convert to Christianity. Moreover, he adds that such attempts to convert everyone have not been stated even by the clergies themselves.<sup>76</sup> However, according to Fr. Stavri, these individual opinions against certain religions that negatively affect interreligious relations result from a lack of religious culture among people, as they are not raised with religion and do not know how to understand someone who believes. His statement is also supported by that of Mr. Lulgjuraj who said that “atheists are the harshest towards believers,” but he also does not negate the fact that hate speech exists among believers of different religions. According to Mr. Lulgjuraj, “freedom of speech can be harmful sometimes, when it has no limits.” The Albanian Constitution guarantees religious freedom, but, according to him, “freedom without limits where specific individuals or groups in the name of religion establish religious institutions without being recognized by the main body—the official institution of a religion—is not freedom, rather than an individual interpretation of religion.” Mr. Lulgjuraj refers here to all the mosques that are opened and led by some believers, but not recognized by the Muslim Community of Albania.

### Extremism

According to the interviewees, extremism is “everything that exceeds the limits.” However, everything that exceeds the limits and produces violence to reach religious or political goals is called violent extremism. According to Dr. Ramkaj, religious extremism is when someone wants to achieve political goals by using religion; whereas Mr. Lulgjuraj sees it more as an approach of achieving “personal” goals, by certain people, because a true believer, according to him, “has no relation to violence or extremism.” Such approaches are wrong and misused in the interest of some people, whom Mr. Lulgjuraj call “religious mafia.”<sup>77</sup> However, Fr. Stavri said that people are never immune to such phenomena, as “extremism” can be innate in all religions,<sup>78</sup> and should never think that particular violent actions are far from them. A reason for involvement in such extremist acts, according to Mr. Lulgjuraj, is the feeling of being more “appreciated” when people expose themselves as someone who offends others and not as someone who thanks or shows gratitude towards people.

---

75 See section on “religious phobia.”

76 According to Kadare, an atheist with a Muslim origin, Albanians have a European identity, and European identity has its roots in Christianity. Today, the European Constitution, which has as its source Christianity, does not clash with other sources or Islamic sources. His context refers to the geographical context of religion and not directly to religion. Kadare states that we are a European state, a continent that has in its origin Christianity. Albania also has in its origin Christianity and later on Islam; therefore, we should live together respecting each other, for the common good, as Dr. Ramkaj added.

77 His justification for this term, which he says there is room for discussion like every other term used, is the long years of experience with various people of religion and politics.

78 Here, it refers to Brendon Tarrant who killed 50 people in a Friday prayer in two mosques in New Zealand, 2019 (Çipi, 2019).

The premises for extremist acts, as defined by the Center's members, are always present. According to Fr. Stavri, it is possible that they are localized in small and insignificant units, but the danger is real. From their study in schools and the questionnaires distributed and filled in these schools, 1–2% of the students were found to express dislike towards other religious communities. This percentage is very dangerous for society, because it takes just one or two people to commit a harmful act in society which may be irreparable. As observed, Fr. Stavri relates this dislike not to a personal approach or like, but to a conviction, which, although small, may lead to extremist views. In Mr. Lulgjuraj's words, "One mistake of a religious person today may send the interreligious relations 20 years back."

### Religious Property

According to Dr. Ramkaj, the issue of properties is a national problem,<sup>79</sup> not just a religious or a district one, which is a result of the problems with laws related to property in Albania, especially the Law no. 7501.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the Center has not made much progress in this issue since it operates within the district of Elbasan even though it is trying to find a solution on how to solve this issue. They do not exclude the opportunity of collaboration with the Interreligious Council of Albania,<sup>81</sup> since they operate on a national scale. Moreover, Mr. Lulgjuraj said that no state institution had invited religious communities to discuss and decide over this issue. The difficulty also lies in the severity of the issue itself since the situation requires a thorough investigation, which means cost in terms of time, money, and professionals, before taking the step of proposing a law or undertaking the solution to this issue by religious authorities. Dr. Ramkaj claims that there is hope in the new legal system in Albania that the issue of the property will be solved, and specific laws for the property of religious communities will be issued soon. Moreover, there may be cases when specific communities claim the same land or religious cult such as the Bektashi community, which after King Zog (1928–1939) was recognized as a separate community from the Muslims. Consequently, these communities claim the same lands. However, these are some cases that can be solved among the clergies by dialoguing with each other. In contrast, Fr. Stavri, seeing it from an Orthodox community perspective, said that the will to find a solution is present in all religious communities. Rather, the issue seems serious since they have not taken back religious cults that are cultural monuments since 1967. He said that the church wealth and the wealth of the religious community in general is administered by the state and kept in the National Museum and not by the church.

### Religious Phobia and Islamophobia in Albania

"Unfortunately, in Albania, there exists religious phobia." The three interviewees assert this statement. According to Mr. Lulgjuraj, atheists do not like religious people, and also

---

79 For further information, see Instituti Shqiptar për Studime Ligjore dhe Territoriale (A.L.T.R.I), *Studim Mbi Të Drejtat*.

80 "L I G J Nr. 7501, Datë 19.7.1991 Për Tokën", *Fletore Zyrtare 5, Viti 1991, Faqe 246*, 1991, 1–5, <http://www.vendime.al/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Ligj7501-dt.-19.07.1991-fl.5.pdf>.

81 Interreligious Council of Albania was founded in 2007 by the five religious communities in Albania.



they call religious people ignorant. From their dislike comes the hate speech. On the other hand, Fr. Stavri said that “those who do not believe are opponents of every religious community,” and in Albania, “unfortunately this group is relatively big.” However, religious phobia is not only atheist-driven towards believers. It also exists between individuals from different religious communities. Fr. Stavri stated that one reason for this phobia is the belief of people that their religious community is the best and only one religious community or individual is right, and the Center is working to minimize this phenomenon.

In addition, there is a general consent that a dislike exists particularly towards Islam in Albania (i.e. Islamophobia). Islamophobia, according to Dr. Ramkaj, is hating everything that relates to Islam or Islamic elements. It is the fear that comes from the Islamic tradition, culture, people who adhere to this religion, their practices, the way they view life, or the way they behave. This type of Islamophobia is frightening. On the other hand, Mr. Lulgjuraj describes Islamophobia as the dislike towards Islam, which creates various formats among individuals to express and not agree with Islam. Concerning the various publications by some Albanian authors,<sup>82</sup> Albanian society has not regulated them by law.<sup>83</sup> “Our society, in principle, is a liberal society,<sup>84</sup> but it has not regulated by law some elements,” as Dr. Ramkaj states. In Albania, there is no such consideration of these acts, which therefore the European concept concerning freedom of expression remains in force.<sup>85</sup> However, if freedom of thought is turned into a political or societal organization, then it is condemned by law. For example, if someone expresses such ideas in a secular school<sup>86</sup> or university, then this action is to be condemned because it affects a part of the community. As long as there is no law to condemn such an action, the prosecution evaluates the issue and the court decides on it. On the other hand, as long as an action is private and does not invade people directly, the Albanian code considers it as freedom of thought.

Moreover, according to Dr. Ramkaj, in the politics of Albania, whether left or right wing, Islamophobic approaches exist, which occur as a result of not having a “proper

---

82 Some publications such as *Të jetosh në ishull* (Living in an Island) and *Otello, Arapi i Vlorës* (Otello, Arap of Vlora) involve comparisons of some important religious figures of Islam with some personalities of the Albanian reality. See Mark Cohen, *Last Century of a Sephardic Community* New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003.)

83 “Kodi Penal I Republikës Së Shqipërisë”, *Botim I Qendrës Së Publikimeve Zyrtare*, 2011, 74–145, <http://www.hidaa.gov.al/ligje/kodi%20penal%20i%20rsh.pdf>.; “Deklaratë Mbi Projektligjin Shqiptar Për Lirinë E Shtypit Nga ARTIKULLI 19 Fushata Globale Për Shprehjen E Lirë”, 2004, 1-7, <https://www.osce.org/sq/fom/34014?download=true>; Forumi Musliman, “Prokuroria E Tiranës Refuzon Të Nisi Proçes Gjyqësor Kundër Kastriot Myftaraj”, Forumimusliman.Org, Last modified 2010, <http://www.forumimusliman.org/vendimikacit.pdf>.

84 Based on liberty and equal rights.

85 For example, the Charlie Hebdo case, according to the European Union, is part of the freedom of speech, whereas, according to the Muslim community, the freedom of religion cannot create negativity towards religious figures (Ramkaj, 2019). See United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19”, 2015, 40, [https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr\\_booklet\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf).

86 The case of a madrasa teacher, Emine Alushi, who was recorded stating that “ISIS” is a good entity. See Jazexhi, “Albania”, 19–31.

understanding of religion, the pressure from European Union and not correctly understanding European Union.” The majority either recognizes religion as a tradition, have little information about religion, or know religion just through the media, which in most cases show religion as backward and uncivilized. According to the European Union, a considerable number of Albanians think that Islam is an obstacle to joining the European Union. For this reason, according to Dr. Ramkaj, many Muslims feel inferior and fear their inherited religious (Islamic) culture. On the other hand, Mr. Lulgjuraj states that “since the majority is atheist, or religiously affiliated who aspire European Union, and value, respect and have an interest towards the Western Christianity, consequently Christianity is seen as more advanced than other religions.” Moreover, even though practicing the rituals is sometimes accepted by those who do not believe, the individual preferences towards dress code encourage a person to push religious people with the Muslim dress even more. On these grounds, Mr. Lulgjuraj said, “considering that such people are dominant in Albania, leads to the belief that there is Islamophobia.” However, he added that he could not say much without first studying this phenomenon.

## CONCLUSION

The question posed at the beginning of this article was to identify how interreligious collaboration ventures contribute to the secular context of Albania. Considering the case of the IRCC in Elbasan, the secular context, and the normative vision about religion in Albania, it can be concluded that interreligious collaboration ventures shape the secular context of Albania.

The IRCC’s work is founded on a normative vision of interreligious relations in which “extremism,” “religious phobia,” and lack of education are factors considered by the IRCC leaders as detrimental to fostering such relations. Such views may also occur due to a certain normative perspective of interrelations among Albanians, and the keyword used in the opening of the Albanian Constitution for this is coexistence. It does not exist next to each other, but being oriented towards each other. This is the institutional discursive context in which the IRCC emerged. Symposiums, conferences, seminars, and various summits held on this topic speak about interreligious relations in a certain manner, and the key term on how they characterize these relations is coexistence.

On the one hand, according to the Albanian Constitution, religious communities in Albania are recognized only if they have signed an agreement with the state. Moreover, the way relations are developed between religious communities and state institutions in Albania become complicated and controversial at times. Thus, on many occasions, there have been various controversies between religion and the state, such as the case of religious communities’ property, favoritism of a certain religion, or the consideration of one religion as the “Other.” Although there is no such thing as political parties or state institutions being run on or having in their program religious ideals, as this would go against the state’s constitution, which recognizes the state as secular, collaboration between the state and religion is still consistent. Moreover, the involvement of one religion in state institutions leads to dissatisfaction among other religious communities.

On the other hand, perhaps through such centers such as the IRCC, all religious communities come together as one voice in the political sphere. Thus, their voice is heard more than when they are not united and each religious community claims for its own interests separately. Moreover, through the Center, religious communities present themselves as being together institutionally, which increases their accessibility to state institutions and their considerations among political ranks. It also represents equality among religious groups regardless of their number of followers and believers. It tries to preserve the centuries-long Albanian tradition of good and non-conflictual interreligious relationships, and shape the relations between religious communities and the conditions of the presence of religions in the public sphere. Such developments speak of a more differentiated understanding of secularism in Albania.

In addition, the IRCC has managed to create significant relations with state institutions, collaborated with them in the field of human rights and religion-based discrimination, and has positioned itself as an influential stakeholder facilitating the state–society interaction. Hence, in the context of Albania, it can be argued that secularism is more complex than just the understanding of the religious sphere as separated from the secular and public sphere. Civil society actors have a crucial role in determining the place of religion in the public sphere and the stance the state has towards religion.

The findings of this study confirm that secularism can have different shapes based on a different social and political context. Therefore, secularism is not a uniform term or practice, but it takes different forms based on the socio-political situations of each place and time. The need for state regulations in a multi-religious society is greater than the liberal assumption of a passive separation of the church from the state, or the indifference of the state towards religious practices and activities. The case of the IRCC suggests that civil society, through collaboration with state institutions and activism, can promote religious harmony, and ensures the common good for the society (i.e., religious freedom, the practice of faith, and the identification of citizens with the state as their diverse “home”). The need for collaboration between religious leaders and/or religious communities is greater than the differences between the “truths.” The case of the IRCC in Elbasan suggests that religious communities can collaborate for the benefit of the society, and that religion cannot simply be ignored and marginalized, especially in a multi-religious society.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "The Bektashi World Leaders –". Kryegjyshataboterorebektashiane.Org. Last modified 2019. <https://kryegjyshataboterorebektashiane.org/en/the-bektashi-world-leaders/>.
- Bota Press. "Gani Mehmetaj: A Di Zoti Shqip?". Botapress.Info. Last modified 2015. <http://botapress.info/gani-mehmetaj-a-di-zoti-shqip/>.
- Caka, Eduart. *Dialogu Ndërfetar; Një Qasje Teoriko-Praktike Dhe Realiteti Shqiptar*. Tiranë: Shtypshkronja "West Print", 2015.
- Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Cohen, Mark. *Last Century of a Sephardic Community*. New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003.
- "Deklaratë Mbi Projektligjin Shqiptar Për Lirinë E Shtypit Nga Artikulli 19 Fushata Globale Për Shprehjen E Lirë". 2004, 1–7. <https://www.osce.org/sq/fom/34014?download=true>.
- De Rapper, Gilles. "Religion in Post-Communist Albania: Muslims, Christians and the Concept of 'Culture' (Devoll, South Albania)". *Anthropological Notebooks* 14, no. 2 (2008), 31–45. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00327200>.
- Elbasani, Arolda. "State-Organised Religion and Muslims' Commitment to Democracy in Albania". *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 2 (2016): 253–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1136596>.
- Elbasani, Arolda, and Artan Puto. "Albanian-Style Laïcité: A Model for a Multi-Religious European Home?". *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017): 53–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2016.1201994>.
- Elbasani, Arolda, and Bekën Saatçioğlu. "Muslims' Support for European Integration: The Role of Organizational Capacities". *Democratization* 21, no. 3 (2012): 458–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.738328>.
- Endresen, Cecilie. "Albania". *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices* 2nd Edition. Ed. Thomas Riggs, 2: Countries, Afghanistan to Ghana. Detroit: Gale, (2014): 13–21.
- Endresen, Cecilie. "Is the Albanian's Religion Really 'Albanianism'?" Religion and Nation According to Muslim and Christian Leaders in Albania". *Albanische Forschungen Series* 4, no. 2 (2012), 69–81.
- Endresen, Cecilie. "One Object, Several Definitions. The Albanian 'Church-Mosque' Dispute". *Annuario – The Albanian Yearbook of historical and Anthropological Studies*. 2013, 2, 39–60.
- "Forumi Musliman I Shqiperise | Organizate Gjithperفشirese E Muslimaneve Shqiptare". Forumimusliman.Org. Last modified 2008. <http://www.forumimusliman.org/osce.html>.
- Instituti Shqiptar për Studime Ligjore dhe Territoriale (A.L.T.R.I). *Studim mbi te Drejtat e Pronesise te Komuniteteve Fetare ne Shqiperi*. Albania: A.L.T.R.I, 2016, 20–60.
- "Inter Religious Center". Interreligiouscenter.Com. Last modified 2019. <https://interreligiouscenter.com/>.
- Jazexhi, Olsi. "Albania". *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* 8 (2016): 19–31.
- Jazexhi, Olsi. "Albania". *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* 9 (2018): 19–35.
- Jazexhi, Olsi. "Is Albania still a Secular Country", 2017, 1–6. [https://www.academia.edu/36042746/Is\\_Albania\\_still\\_a\\_secular\\_state](https://www.academia.edu/36042746/Is_Albania_still_a_secular_state).
- "Katalog I Veprimtarisë Së Komunitetit Mysliman Të Shqipërisë". *Komuniteti Mysliman I Shqipërisë*, 2014. <https://kms.h.al/pdf/katalog%20i%20veprimtarise%20se%20komunitetit%20mysliman%20te%20shqiperise.pdf>.
- Katolike, Kisha. "Asambleja Kombëtare E Kishës Katolike Në Shqipëri". Kisha Dhe Jeta. Last modified 2019. <https://www.kishadhejeta.com/asambleja-kombetare-e-kishes-katolike-ne-shqiperi/>.
- "Këshilli Bashkiak Mbështet Kërkesën E Qendrës Për Bashkëpunim Ndërfetar Në Elbasan". YouTube, Last modified 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTikQjOnQSo>.
- "KMSH: Besimtarët Japin Jetë, Nuk Marrin". Komuniteti Mysliman I Shqipërisë, Last modified 2019. <http://www.kms.h.al/2015/11/kms-h-besimtar-et-japin-jete-nuk-marrin/>.
- "Kodi Penal I Republikës Së Shqipërisë". *Botim I Qendrës Së Publikimeve Zyrtare*, 2011, 74–145. <http://www.hidaa.gov.al/ligje/kodi%20penal%20i%20rsh.pdf>.
- "Kushtetuta E Republikës Së Shqipërisë 1998". 1998, 1–35. <http://www.qbz.gov.al/Kushtetuta%20me%20pjese/Kushtetuta%201998,varianti%201.pdf>.
- "LIGJ Nr. 7501, Datë 19.7.1991 Për Tokën". *Fletore Zyrtare* 5, Viti 1991, Faqe 246, 1991, 1–5. <http://www.vendime.al/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Ligj7501-dt.-19.07.1991-fl.5.pdf>.
- "LIGJ Nr. 8608, Datë 27.4.2000, Për Ratifikimin E Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Qeverisë Së Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Kishës Katolike Në Shqipëri Për Ndërtimin Dhe Administrimin E Spitalit "Zoja E Këshilit Të Mirë"". *Fletorja Zyrtare E Republikës Së Shqipërisë*, 2000, 9–12. <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.
- "LIGJ Nr. 8788, Datë 7.5.2001 Për Organizatat Jofitimprurëse". *Republika E Shqipërisë Kuvendi*, 2001, 1–18.
- "LIGJ Nr 9865 Datë 31-01-2008, Për Ratifikimin E "Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Selisë Së Shenjtë Për Disa Çështje Ekonomike Dhe Tatimore"", 2008, 33–36. <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.

- “LIGJ Nr.10 056, Datë 22.1.2009 Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Komitetit Mysliman Të Shqipërisë Për Rregullimin E Marrëdhënieve Të Ndërsjella””. *Fletorja Zyrtare E Republikës Së Shqipërisë*, 2009, 11–19. <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.
- “LIGJ Nr.10 057, Datë 22.1.2009, Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Kishës Ortodokse Autoqefale Të Shqipërisë Për Rregullimin E Marrëdhënieve Të Ndërsjella””, 2009, 19–27. <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.
- “LIGJ Nr.10 058, Datë 22.1.2009, Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Kryegjyshitës Botërore Bekdashiane Për Rregullimin E Marrëdhënieve Të Ndërsjella””. *Fletorja Zyrtare E Botimeve Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë*, 2009, 28–35. <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.
- “LIGJ Nr.10 394, Datë 10.3.2011, Për Ratifikimin E “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Bashkësisë Fetare “Vëllazëria Ungjillore E Shqipërisë” Për Rregullimin E Marrëdhënieve Të Ndërsjella””. *Fletorja Zyrtare E Botimeve Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë*, 2011, 1–7. <http://www.qbz.gov.al>.
- “Marshimi I Paqes Ne Elbasan | ABC News Albania”. YouTube, Last modified 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAgpM8yZ5ls>.
- Mekuli, Gëzim. Analizë e shkrimit “Identiteti Europian i Shqiptarëve” të Ismail Kadaresë (I). Last modified 2018. <http://www.albaniapress.com/lajme/6839/Analize-e-shkrimit--Identiteti-evropian-ishqiptareve--te-Ismail-Kadarese-I.html>.
- Misha, Piro. “Feja, Laiciteti Dhe Hapësira Publike Shtypi Shqiptar Për Raportet Mes Fesë, Laiciteti Dhe Hapësirës Publike Shtator 2011 – Qershor 2012”. *Instituti I Dialogut Dhe Komunikimit*, 2012, 13–37.
- Musliman, Forumi. “Prokuroria E Tiranës Refuzon Të Nisi Proçes Gjyqësor Kundër Kastriot Myftaraj”, Forumimusliman. Org. Last modified 2010. <http://www.forumimusliman.org/vendimikacit.pdf>.
- Mustafa, Mentor. “What Remained of Religion in an “Atheist” State and the Return of Religion in Post-Communist Albania.” In *The MESS and RAMSES II Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School*, edited by Jaka Repiç, Alenka Bartulović and Katarina Sajovec Altshul, 51-76, Lubjana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2008.
- “Në Elbasan U Mbajt Marshimi”. Radioislame.Com. Last modified 2016. <http://www.radioislame.com/new/artikulli.php?id=21136>.
- Neziri, Vjosana. “Religious Peace in Albania”. in *Handbook of Research on Promoting Peace Through Practice, Academia, and the Arts*. Chicago: Northeastern Illinois University, 2018, 372–391.
- “Një Sinagogë Për Tiranën”. Top-Channel.Tv. Last modified 2019. <http://top-channel.tv/2010/12/14/nje-sinagoge-per-tirane/>.
- “OSBE Mbështet Qendrën E Bashkëpunimit Ndërfetar Elbasan”. YouTube, Last modified 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETnMeqejR4g>.
- “Pastori Qe Martoi Erion Vellajn, Emërohet Zëvendës Ministër I Drejtësisë”. Te Paekspozuarit, Last modified 2017. <http://www.tpz.al/2017/10/09/nje-udherrefyese-shpirtorer-per-qeverine-dhe-kryeministrin/>.
- “QBNF Elbasan, Marshim Ndërgjegjësues Në Sheshin “Aqif Pasha”. Elbasani News, Elbasaninews.AL, Video, Last modified 2019. <https://elbasaninews.al/qbnf-elbasan-marshim-ndergjegjesues-ne-sheshin-aqif-pasha/>.
- “Qendra E Bashkëpunimit Ndërfetar Gati Të Bashkëpunojë Me Qeverinë Për Luftën Ndaj Kanabisit”. YouTube, Last modified 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2-tS5yf16Q>.
- “Qendra E Bashkëpunimit Nderfetar Kontribon Per Femijet Sirian”. YouTube, Last modified 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPJ7K3FexMg>.
- “Qendra E Bashkëpunimit Ndër-Fetar Ne Sarande”. YouTube, Last modified 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkFAQKeWyFQ>.
- “Qendra E Bashkëpunimit Ndërfetar, Simpozium Për Martirët E Besimeve”. YouTube, Last modified 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyNiCJlbg0U>.
- “Qendra E Bashkëpunimit Nderfetar, Takim Me Studentet”. YouTube, Last modified 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrBIQlhW118>.
- “Raporti I Departamentit Te Shtetit Mbi Lirine Fetare Ne Bote, Shqipëria”. 2009, 1–4. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/132811.pdf>.
- Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Religious Freedom*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Super User. “Historia E Kishës”. Kisha Orthodokse Autoqefale E Shqipërisë. Last modified 2019. <http://orthodoxalbania.org/alb/index.php/al/kisha-jone/historia>.
- Top Channel Albania. *Open – Gylenistët Dhe Erdoganistët Përplasen Për KMSH? Flasin Ekspertët E Gazetarët*. Video, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2PETeaX-rw>.
- United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 19, 2015, 40. [https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr\\_booklet\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf).
- “U.S. Department of State – United States Department of State”. United States Department of State. Last modified 2015. <https://www.state.gov/>.

- “Varrezat Murale “Peng” I Komunitetit Mysliman”. *Gazeta Shqip*. Last modified 2013. <https://www.gazeta-shqip.com/2013/08/02/varrezat-murale-peng-i-komunitetit-mysliman/>.
- Vickers, Miranda. “Islam in Albania”. *Advanced Research and Assessment Group*, 2008, 3–12.
- Videoo Shqip. *Emisioni “Papyrus”, Vepra “A Di Zoti Shqip” Nga Gani Mehmetaj, RTV21-Ariana Çaka*. Video, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fhRMD-NnR4>.
- Vurmo, Gjergji, Enis Sulstarova, and Aleka Papa. “Religious Tolerance in Albania”. *United Nations Development Programme*, 2018, 4–73. <http://www.al.undp.org/content/dam/albania/docs/religious%20tolerance%20albania.pdf>.
- Zguri, Rrapo. “Analizë E Diskursit Ekstremist Fetar Në Media”. *Instituti Shqiptar I Medias*, 2016, 45–62. <http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Diskursi%20shqip.pdf>.

