



“Hello from the Other Side” Albania and Kosovo’s Distinct Approach to Religion and Politics

JETA ABAZI GASHI

Abstract

Albania and Kosovo, both secular states in Southeast Europe with Muslim-majority populations, have complicated relationships with religion and politics. This paper employs the concept of secularity as a process of boundary-drawing in politics, primarily by examining the symbolic roles of two Albanian national figures: Saint Mother Teresa, and the medieval Albanian hero, Skandeberg. I use these examples to highlight the struggle of differentiating the boundary between the secular and the religious. Saint Mother Teresa represents how philanthropic work can transcend religious boundaries, whereas Skanderberg’s resistance to the Ottoman Empire promoted secularity during Albania and Kosovo’s integration into Europe, as well as reinforcing the notion of Albanian Muslims being a part of European identity. While both countries have adopted secular language in their constitution, tensions persist due to historical, cultural, and global influences making it difficult to define the secular in the context of European integration and global geopolitics. This analysis finds that while it may seem that Islam and secularism would be incompatible, both countries provide evidence that they can coexist. Finally, this paper addresses the broader implications of US foreign policy shifting away from the Balkans, which has an effect on the region’s religious and political landscape as well.

Keywords: Albania, Kosovo, Secularism, Religion, National Identity

Jeta Abazi Gashi
Fulbright Research Visitor, George Washington University, USA
jeta.abazi@gmail.com

DOI: 10.53483/ZCPA3594

Amid the economic and geopolitical shifts taking place around the world, there is understandably less attention being paid in the US to the religion and politics of the Balkans. While the Balkans is often perceived negatively as the *Other* in Europe,¹ and the countries of Southeast Europe (SEE) may not directly compare to the US in terms of religion and politics, their unique historical and cultural contexts offer a distinct perspective—one rarely represented in the US public discourse. This paper examines the relationship between religion and politics in two Balkan states—Albania and Kosovo—that have adopted a strictly secular approach both in their normative regulation and in their institutional differentiation, as well as in public life. Despite this, ambivalence remains regarding secularity, due to local and global pressures. In this analysis, I employ the concept of secularity as a process of boundary-drawing in various fields,² including politics. The analysis focuses on two Albanian national figures: (i) Saint Mother Teresa (1910–1997), the Albanian Catholic nun,³ and (ii) Skanderbeg (1405–1468), the medieval Albanian hero.⁴⁵ They represent the struggle of multiple versions of secularity and the negotiation of what is religious and what is not.

In SEE, no country strictly adheres to a church-state model. Instead, various elements of the church and state cooperative model are seen across the region,⁶⁷ with some countries going beyond that model. Greece, for example, has an established state religion,⁸ the Orthodox Church, with clergy employed by the state, yet it has recently legalized same-sex marriage (in February 2024).⁹ The Bulgarian state has, to some extent, followed the Hellenic example by assigning a distinctive, traditional role to its Orthodox Church; still, its legal framework regarding religion is designed to foster religious pluralism and promote tolerance.¹⁰ The Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) is not referred to as the “national church,” and all religions are free to practice and operate independently according to their own rules and regulations (Romanian Constitution, Article 29).¹¹ However, Romania stresses the significance of the ROC in the country’s history.¹² Indeed, Romania’s public space has reflected this, exemplified by the construction of what is set to become the world’s largest Eastern Orthodox Cathedral in Bucharest at 417 feet tall—slightly smaller than the Washington National

1 Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2 Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika, and Burchardt, Marian. “Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities.” *Comparative Sociology* 11, no. 6, (2012): p. 882. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341249>.

3 Mother Teresa quote, “By blood, I am Albanian. By citizenship, I am Indian. By faith, I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the Heart of Jesus”. Mother Teresa was of Albanian origin; she spoke Albanian and was born in Skopje when it was considered a vilayet of Kosovo. For more about perceptions of Mother Teresa read the several works of Gëzim Alpion.

4 Gjergj Kastrioti, known as Skanderbeg, was born into an Orthodox Christian family, converted to Islam during his time as a hostage in the Ottoman Empire, and later reverted to Catholicism.

5 Skanderbeg was one of the most prominent figures in Southeast Europe. For more information, see the work of Oliver Jens Schmitt.

6 Koenig, Matthias. “Politics and Religion in European Nations: Institutional Varieties and Contemporary Transformations.” In *Religion and Politics*, edited by Bernhard Giesen and Daniel Šuber, (Leiden: Brill, 2005): 291–315. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047407850_015.

7 Kalkandjieva, Daniela. “A Comparative Analysis on Church-State Relations in Eastern Orthodoxy: Concepts, Models, and Principles,” *Journal of Church and State* 53, no. 4, (2017), p. 609.

8 Kokosalakis, Nikos. “The political significance of popular religion in Greece.” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 38, (1987): 37–52.

9 Gregory, James. “Greece Legalises Same-Sex Marriage.” *BBC News*, 15 February 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68310126>.

10 According to the Denominations Act of 2002, the “orthodox religion” is no longer considered the “traditional” religion; instead, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is officially recognized (excluding the Alternative Synod, which operates without legal status).

11 Elkins, Zachary, Ginsburg, Tom, & Melton, James. “Constitute: The World’s Constitutions to Read, Search, and Compare.” <https://www.constituteproject.org>.

12 The Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Denominations.

Cathedral. With respect to the Western Balkans, North Macedonia is also secular and does not grant the Orthodox Church a special status as a “traditional” religion.¹³ Its model, redefined by the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement,¹⁴ keeps religious communities independent of the state. However, the relationship between church and state is somewhat cooperative, primarily due to the preferential treatment afforded to the Macedonian Orthodox Church. This is evident in the allocation of public properties free of charge, delays in administrative decisions concerning other religious communities, and the comparatively fewer obstacles the Church faces from local authorities when constructing new places of worship.¹⁵ Secular Serbia (Article 11 of the Serbian Constitution states: “The Republic of Serbia is a secular state”) also goes beyond the “cooperative model,” with a much closer and politically intertwined relationship between the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC).¹⁶ The SOC has strongly and continuously advocated for Serbia’s control over Kosovo, despite Kosovo’s Declaration of Independence on February 17, 2008.¹⁷

Albania and Kosovo,¹⁸ which both have an Albanian majority population, are secular states that differ from their Orthodox neighbors. Albania and Kosovo have autocephalous Orthodox churches: the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania and the SOC (among Serbs) in Kosovo. However, in both states Muslims constitute the majority (as in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Overall, Albania and Kosovo have adopted a significantly secular model both in legislation and in practice, an approach that is also reflected in how citizens tend to identify themselves—placing less emphasis on religious affiliation and more on national identity.

First, I will aim to elaborate on the scholarly assumption that, in contrast to other SEE states, the relationship between secularity and Islam in Albania and Kosovo—both Muslim-majority countries—is more confrontational. This view is grounded in the broader theoretical debate that Islam presents particular challenges to secular frameworks. My focus is on how this debate is constructed and contested within the literature. Some scholars challenge the argument that Islam and secularism are inherently incompatible. They argue that secularism itself is a colonial import, particularly in the Arab Middle East, India, and former colonies.¹⁹ Others contend that Islam and secularism can actually coexist.²⁰ Some even point to early Islamic practices as evidence of secular elements,²¹ while historians and sociologists suggest that the religious and secular spheres have historically coexisted.²² Religious and

13 Elkins, Zachary, et al. “Constitutes.”

14 The “Skopje 2014” program, which focused on monuments and statues, reflects a national identity centered on antiquity, exemplified by the statue of Alexander the Great, and an asymmetric policy that excludes Albanians—an exclusion rooted not in religion but in complex identity issue.

15 *North Macedonia 2023 International Religious Freedom Report*. U.S. Department of State. (2024), <https://www.state.gov>.

16 Ramet, Sabrina. “The Politics of the Serbian Orthodox Church.” In *Serbia Since 1989 Politics and Society under Milosevic and After*, (ed.) Pavlakovic, Vjeran I., (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), p. 257.

17 According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel is the latest of 96 states to recognize Kosovo (see MPJD | MFAD. “Lista e Njohjeve.” <https://mfa-ks.net/lista-e-njohjeve/>).

18 Data from the Albanian National Census in 2023 is as follows: Muslims: 1,101,718; Bektashi Muslims: 115,644; Catholics: 201,530; Orthodox Christians: 173,645; Evangelicals: 9,658; Other faiths: 3,670; Undefined: 332,155; Atheists: 85,311; Did not answer: 244,331.

19 For those interested in this subject, the works of Anadita Bajpai and Betrice Renzi are relevant.

20 Göle, Nilüfer. *Islam and secularity: The future of Europe’s public sphere*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

21 Krämer, Gudrun. “Secularity Contested: Religion, Identity and the Public Order in the Arab Middle East.” In *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West*, (eds.) Burchardt, Marian, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, and Matthias Middell, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

22 Krämer, Gudrun. “Religion, Culture, and the Secular: The Case of Islam.” Working Paper Series of the CASHSS *Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities*, no. 23, p. 78

secular institutions are not rivals in Islam as they are in Western secularism,²³ and they are increasingly interconnected.²⁴ Building on recent scholarship, I assume that Albania and Kosovo offer contemporary examples of how Islam and secularism can coexist, challenging assumptions rooted in Western secularist frameworks.

Second, I will compare how both Albania and Kosovo have adopted a strongly secular approach in their legislation on religion. In this case, the reference highlights differences between the two states. Despite their commonalities in language, history, and culture, the states have followed distinct political trajectories that shape their approaches toward religion. As mentioned, although Albania²⁵ and Kosovo²⁶ have Muslim-majority populations, with Albania being more heterogeneous, they also show differences in their constitutional frameworks regarding religion. Albania's Constitution references "God and universal values," allowing presidents to take their oath with the phrase "So help me God!" (*Zoti më ndihmoftë*).²⁷ Given that Albania for decades was an officially atheist state, this is a phrase that some presidents have chosen not to use. Recently, however, the state—while proudly using the slogan from the 19th century that "The religion of Albanians is Albanianism"²⁸—has made some ambiguous moves that raise questions about the extent to which secularism may be in jeopardy. In particular, Albania is planning to establish a new Muslim state within its capital, with the prime minister proposing a Vatican-style sovereign enclave that would control an area approximately the size of five New York City blocks.²⁹ As for Kosovo, it is the only state in the Western Balkans that explicitly uses the term "*laik*" in its constitution: In the Albanian and Turkish versions of the Constitution, the term *laik* is used, derived from the French *laïque*. In contrast, the English and Serbian versions use the term "secular." Kosovo's Constitution was drafted with the involvement of international and local actors, and its secular character was viewed as one of the key pillars for promoting harmony within its multicultural society.³⁰ This marks another difference between Albania and Kosovo, as the latter's constitution is more recent, having been adopted on April 9, 2008.

Third, I will discuss the construction of national identity in Albania and Kosovo through their national symbols and what that means for their religion and politics. In their nation-building process, both states have placed religion in a secondary position (albeit in completely different epochs). Some scholars do not consider this to be entirely true, however.³¹ Compared to other SEE states, there is no "church" or "mosque" that could unify Albanians as a national community. As a result, it was

23 Jackson, Sherman A. "The Islamic Secular." *American Journal of Islam and Society* 34, no. 2 (2017): 1–38. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v34i2.184>.

24 Roy, Oliver. "Secularism Confronts Islam." (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2009).

25 Data from the Albanian National Census in 2023 is as follows: Muslims: 1,101,718; Bektashi Muslims: 115,644; Catholics: 201,530; Orthodox Christians: 173,645; Evangelicals: 9,658; Other faiths: 3,670; Undefined: 332,155; Atheists: 85,311; Did not answer: 244,331.

26 National Census 2011: Ninety-five percent of the population identify as Muslim, including the majority of Albanians, as well as Turks, Roma, and others. Around 2.2 percent identify as Catholic, primarily ethnic Albanians. The last census was boycotted by Orthodox Serbs and Roma, and with incomplete results, they make up approximately 1.5 percent of the population.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Pashko Vasa's poem "*O moj Shqypni*" (XIX) includes a phrase that national leaders used to convey that religion was not the primary element in the construction of national identity. Cecilie Endresen argues about this in Endresen, Cecilie. *Is the Albanian's Religion Really "Albanianism"? Religion and Nation According to Muslim and Christian Leaders in Albania*. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013).

29 Higgins, Andrew. "Albania is planning a new Muslim state inside its capital." *The New York Times*, October 2, 2023.

30 Hellenbrand, Thomas. "Whose Secularism? Which Laïcité? Negotiating Transnational and National Constitutionalism in Kosovo." *Notre Dame Law Review* 97, no. 2 (April 1, 2022).

31 Endresen, Cecilie. "One Object, Several Definitions. The Albanian 'Church-Mosque' Dispute." *Annuario - The Albanian Yearbook of Historical and Anthropological Studies* 2 (2013): 39–60.

the Albanian language that came to be claimed as the primary and common marker of Albanian national identity. Apart from a common ethno-identity,³² Albania and Kosovo have chosen national symbols such as Skanderbeg and Mother Teresa not only to reinforce ethno-national identity but also to unify different religious groups.³³ However, for certain religious individuals, these symbols have become a site of contestation.

What these two national figures have in common is that, in both countries, they represent the dichotomy between West and East, even in the current political debate.³⁴ Skanderbeg, a symbol that has played a key role in Albanian nationalism and state-building, was a man who fought against the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century, at a time when the concepts of nation and state did not exist. Today, in Albania and Kosovo, he is often romanticized in history books and political discussions, while monuments to him are found in main city squares and his likeness even adorns alcoholic beverages. Skanderbeg symbolism has been utilized across various political periods. One of his main merits is his resistance to the Ottoman Empire ("the Turks"). His symbolism has been preserved, reproduced, altered, transformed, and at times even dismantled in public discourse—processes often involved in discussions surrounding national identity.³⁵

My assumption is that Skanderbeg today serves as a symbol in two ways: Both for secular Albanians and for religious Albanians, he represents secularity for the sake of transnational integration and national consolidation.³⁶ He is a counter to the global narrative of "religious extremism" often associated with Islam. Only a small minority of Muslims, those who prioritize their religious identity over their national identity, reject him. Their rejection is framed in discourse as "anti-Western" and "anti-American," particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In Albania, it sounds like this: "*Skanderbeg resembles a terrorist, if he had lived in our day, Americans would have called him a terrorist and maybe would have killed him with a drone.*"³⁷ This is in contrast to the historical context where Albanians have placed religion in a secondary position within politics, keeping it in the realm of the private. These dissenting voices criticize the national narrative that emphasizes secular Albanian identity and recalls Skanderbeg's deeds (fighting against the Ottoman Empire, being honored with the title *Athleta Christi*—Champion of Christ—and converting to Catholicism). Meanwhile, for secular proponents and national leaders, especially in the context of the global discourse on "Islamic extremism," where Muslims are often viewed as a threat, the figure of Skanderbeg has served as a tool for promoting secularity during Albania's and Kosovo's transitional integration into Europe. It also reinforced the notion of Albanian Muslims as being a part of the European identity, like this example: "*Skanderbeg was the first to build up Albania's path, whether it would go toward the East or the West.*"³⁸

32 See the work of Natalie Clayer arguing for other identity differences (like the intra differences between the South and North).

33 Endresen, Cecilie. "The nation and the nun: Mother Teresa, Albania's Muslim majority and the secular state." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 26, no. 1 (2015): 53-74.

34 Voß, Christian, Lumnije Jusufi, and Evelyn Reuter, (eds.) *Innovative Paths of Albanology*, (2023). p. 177.

35 Wodak, Ruth, and Michael Meyer, (eds). *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. (Washington DC: Sage, 2015). p. 71-72.

36 Gashi, Jeta Abazi. "Negotiating Secularity: Institutional Differentiation and Conceptual Distinction of Religion and Secularity in Albania and Kosovo (2009–2019): A Media Analysis." (PhD Dissertation, University of Leipzig, 2024).

37 Data used in this paper come from the PhD thesis Gashi, Jeta Abazi. "Negotiating Secularity: Institutional Differentiation and Conceptual Distinction of Religion and Secularity in Albania and Kosovo (2009–2019): A Media Analysis." (PhD Dissertation, University of Leipzig, 2024).

38 Ibid.

Mother Teresa, unlike Skanderbeg, is not as central to national identity construction; rather, it is primarily her philanthropic work and celebrity status that make her a symbol for Albanians. Throughout her career, she embodied the opposite of banal nationalism—Albanians, regardless of religion, took pride in her.³⁹ She was seen as the sister and mother of the nation, a figure who demonstrated Albanian heritage to the world and represented a positive narrative. Her symbolism is used in both secular and religious contexts in Albania and Kosovo. In Tirana, her portrait is displayed in the Supreme Court, while in Pristina, her quote and image are hung in the National Assembly, which includes Albanians and minority nationalities. Furthermore, the Pristina Roman Catholic Cathedral bears her name, and during her canonization in 2016, national leaders from Albania and Kosovo traveled to Vatican City. In reality, she was allowed to come to Albania only after the death of Enver Hoxha, the leader who had banned religion in 1967. Mother Teresa visited Kosovo five times after she became a nun. She proudly mentioned her connection to the village of Letnica, in southeastern Kosovo, the place where she embraced her religious calling, and did actually visit Kosovo. For secular leaders, Mother Teresa serves the purpose of promoting secularity and balancing religious diversity in the context of European discourse, which opposes the “politics of exclusion” in which Europe is portrayed as a region solely for Christians. Mother Teresa’s figure resists the political exclusion sometimes pursued by certain European politicians. For Muslim leaders, it is her worldwide charitable work and celebrity status that are elevated and embraced. However, some Albanian imams have misogynistically criticized her.⁴⁰

Albania and Kosovo offer a perspective from the *other* side. Both states have adopted a strict secular approach in their constitutional frameworks and public life. Yet ambivalences remain: both continue to struggle with defining their national identities, often shaped by fears of exclusion. While the United States does not view the Western Balkans as the *Other*, its policies have influenced Albanian and Kosovar elites, including on matters related to religion and politics (especially after 9/11). International engagement has focused primarily on facilitating dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia—a dispute that has remained unresolved to this day. Notably, religion has neither been central to this dispute nor remains a topic within it.

39 Alpion, Gëzim. *Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her Nation*. (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Academic India, 2020).

40 Gashi, Jeta Abazi. “Discursive strategies in constructing Albanian identities online.” In Voß, Christian, Lumnije Jusufi, and Evelyn Reuter (eds.), *Innovative Paths of Albanology*, (2023). p. 177.