

*Julia Kokoshari*  
**Orthodoxy in Albania**

RtE: Didn't you have any old relatives who believed in God?

Julia: On my mum's side the family was Muslim. My mother was brought up completely without God like everyone else, but her background was Muslim. She and her relatives never spoke about it, even at home. They couldn't or they would have been persecuted, and the mosques had been closed down just as the churches were. But, a few months ago she told me, "I remember my grandmother, who was Muslim, praying at night, saying "Kyrie Eleison!" I was astonished. My God, can you imagine! She was such a humble lady and I am so grateful that I was alive during the last years of her life.

RtE: Do you think she was a secret Christian?

Julia: Well, the thing is you never know about Muslim people in Albania. We were an Orthodox country for centuries, but when the Turks invaded in the 14th century many Christians had to change their religion. I think that Christian principles, the Christian faith, somehow remained inside of them, though, and that is why many Albanian churches and monasteries, and even the relics of saints, were preserved by these so-called Muslim people. I mean, it is fascinating, because you would think, "If he or she is a Muslim, they would never save Christian churches or artifacts," but I believe that if someone has had even a distant Christian background, although outwardly he may be a good Muslim, he could do such a thing.

So, my mother said, "Well, let's go and see this mosque." But the mosque, which is in the center of Durres was, centuries ago, the Orthodox metropolis [cathedral] of the town. I was told that during the Turkish occupation, when they converted some of the churches into mosques, they built another wall inside the metropolis to cover all the frescoes. When you enter the mosque now it is just bare walls, but inside those walls there are icons! This was done very secretly, without the knowledge of the Turkish authorities.

RtE: So they actually built a second wall, they didn't just plaster over the frescoes?

Julia: No, no. They built another wall, took the cross down and

turned it into a mosque. But they built the wall to protect the icons, not to destroy them, and the Turks never learned that this had happened. The architect the Turks had chosen was a secret Christian.

RtE: What century was this?

Julia: Probably in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. So, my mother said, "Let's go to see this mosque."

RtE: Had you told her you were interested in religion, or did she just suggest it?

Julia: Well, actually, they had also quietly begun looking, without our having shared this with each other. It was very natural for her to say, "Let's go see," because we all had to find out. So, we went to the mosque on the feast-day of Ramadan, and they were giving out sweets. We looked around and we greeted them, and they greeted us, and that was it, actually. In Tirana there was a metochion, so to speak, of another mosque, and by this time I had learned some other prayers, the "Our Father," and few other things. I went to this metochion, and as I was facing exams, I prayed to the Lord...

RtE: In the mosque.

Julia: In the mosque! I remember that when everyone was praying it clicked in my mind, "I am praying to the Lord in the wrong place. I mean, what does Jesus Christ have to do with this?" I had learned that Muslims didn't accept Christ as God, so I left immediately thinking, "Oh, what did I do?" I never went back. At that point I was really down. I wasn't finding what I wanted and I thought, "Am I going to be left without a God?" So, I went back home and said to my Dad, "Listen, now this, this and this has happened and you are the only one who can help. You have to help me."

RtE: Why did you think your father could help you?

Julia: I don't know. But I always refer to my Dad when I have a problem. Throughout my whole life he has been a tool for God to use to help me. So I said, "So, what can I do?" He said, "Listen...", and that was when I learned that my Dad had been baptized in an Orthodox church when he was a child, that he was born in Athens!

RtE: In Athens!

Julia: Yes, I had never known. He simply couldn't speak about it. "I was baptized," he said, "and my parents were Orthodox." I said, "Is there an Orthodox church here?" He said, "There is a church at the top of the hill dedicated to St. George. If we want to, we can all go there." So we went as a family, and I remember it as if it was just a moment ago. Entering the church made me swallow inside - I had a miniskirt on - not a terribly short one, but still a mini, and a T-shirt, and when I entered the church I just looked at myself and realized without anyone telling me that it wasn't decent for me to go in like that. The priest met us at the door and welcomed us. After we spoke for a while, he said, "It would be better for you to come on a Sunday, then you will see what this is about." So, we thanked him and left, and I thought, "No way, it can't be here. The church can't be here."

I was shocked because just a few years before, this church building had been a club-restaurant with an outside courtyard, and when I was ten we had danced here in traditional costumes. I thought, "Oh, no, I danced at the church." Of course, we hadn't danced inside the building, just outside, but I was still horrified. So, we went on Sunday and it was amazing. I had barely put my foot inside the church when I felt from inside myself, from my heart, the question, "Will you accept me?" I really believe I was like the prodigal son returning to his father, and saying, "Will you accept me?" I cannot describe the feeling. But the great happiness for me was when I saw the icon with the face of Christ. It was the first time that I faced the face of God. I was amazed and thought, "Yes, yes, there He is, there He is!" I didn't need to ask anything.

..... Let me digress for a moment, and say, first of all, that Albania is an amazing country - beautiful landscapes, rivers, lakes and wonderful mountains. During Roman times Illyricum was a great geographical area - up to Montenegro or Bosnia and down to Thessalonica and Ioannina, including Ochrid and Prespa and the lakes. Although it was part of the empire, the inhabitants were native peoples, and Illyrians at that time were known as great fighters and great merchants as well. There were a lot of links between Illyricum and Italy, Spain and other European countries. They had an amazing port and did widespread shipping. In the

Benaki Museum here in Athens there is a helmet of an Illyrian soldier from the Roman times and you can see how much more sophisticated it is than the Greek one beside it. They were very talented people. Physically speaking, they were tall and strong, with blond hair and blue eyes.

During the time St. Paul preached in Asia Minor and Greece, he mentions Illyricum as one of the places he passed through, and perhaps even preached in.

RtE: If Illyricum included Thessalonica and Kavala, then he did preach there.

Julia: Yes. And when he passed through on his way to Rome, he crossed the borders of what is now Albania. In my town of Durres, there is an ancient tradition that his foot stepped on the land of Durres. This was transmitted from one generation to another and because of this Durres has always been called a "second Jerusalem," a real holy place. Let me say that it is even a blessed place. During our civil war of 1997-8 Durres was almost the only town left untouched.

So St. Paul passed through our land, and his disciples taught Christianity to the people there. At that time many of the people were still very pagan, they didn't even have a concept of the Roman or Greek gods, they were still worshipping the spirits of trees and rivers.

RtE: They were more like animists.

Julia: Yes. And these people were the real natives of these places, they weren't transplanted or relocated there by the Romans. There were no borders during the Roman times, though, and people moved freely within the empire. It was long after that the boundaries were set. During Byzantium the entire region was Orthodox Christian until the Turks came. It was then that our country came to be called Albania because of the white-capped mountains. In the Albanian language, however, Albania is called Shquiperia (pronounced Ship-a-rea) which means "the place of the eagles." It had to do with the many eagles in our mountains, but even more because the Albanians themselves were eagles - we had to be to protect our country, traditions and culture. So, in Turkish

times, Illyricum vanished as a political entity and became Albania. With the Turkish invasion people often had to change their religion to Islam, and what I am going to say about this might seem a paradox. I believe that one can be forced to change his religion, and yet inwardly remain a Christian. I believe it has happened. Also, let me say that I believe that God will judge people according to their intention, and the intention of people in those days was to save not only their lives, but those of their children. Probably they hoped that a temporary submission, or living outwardly as Moslems would be temporary. I don't know how much one can call this apostasy. People say, "Oh, but they could have died as martyrs," but we cannot judge it, we cannot say.

RtE: The Church fathers say that martyrdom is a gift from God.

Julia: Yes. Of course, and you can't take it on yourself so simply. This is why today's Albanian Muslims are not Muslim. They are Muslim with a Christian background. This is why in our days "Muslim" people will come to church for Pascha, for Christmas, for the blessing of the waters, for feasts of the Mother of God particularly. They will take holy water to sprinkle their houses. How can a Muslim person do this? Particularly when we have Great Lent or Easter, they have their own feast, and it is Islamic law that when celebrating a Muslim feast they cannot even put their foot into a Christian temple. But in Albania this does not apply. "Muslims" come to the church, light candles, pray. That is why Archbishop Anastasy says, "We have hundreds of Muslim people coming and being baptized in the Orthodox church because they are finding their roots.

RtE: Even if those roots are from six hundred years ago?

Julia: Yes, as I said before, if you find your past you won't want to lose it again, because it is part of your life, your soul, a bit of you. People do come back to their roots, and that's why, when people say, "Oh, you have a lot of Turks in Albania," I think, "For God's sake, how can you say he's a Turk? Because he's Muslim doesn't mean he's a Turk any more than saying, "Because he's Orthodox, he's Greek." Orthodoxy has its own geographical roots far away in the Holy Land. Christianity passed through Greece as it passed through other countries, it didn't originate there, and I feel sorry when I hear Greeks saying, "Oh, if it's Orthodox, it must be Greek."

RtE: Part of that feeling may be because the Greeks are still recovering from their own five hundred years under the Turks.

Julia: Yes, but God gave Orthodoxy as a gift. What we have to be grateful and proud of, as St. Paul says, is the Lord Himself, not what we were born into. I can become an atheist in a second if God leaves me. Whether we are in Albania or Greece or Romania, it is all passing.

So, in Albania there are no Turks, but there are Muslims who are more Christian sometimes than the Christians, because it was these people who protected the relics of saints and the churches. They would turn the churches into storerooms to protect the building from destruction by the communists. In some places they even continued secretly lighting the lampadas. They also protected many of the monasteries and we don't know how many of them lost their lives helping monks and nuns escape from the communists.

..... Another interesting story is that of St. John Vladimir. He was a king of Serbia and was martyred in Albania in the ninth or tenth century, and his relics were protected by the village of El-Basan. The whole village was a Moslem village. After the destruction of the church - I'm not clear if this was during the German occupation of World War II or by the communists, they found his relics floating in the river passing by the village. They opened the coffin and saw they were the relics of St. John Vladimir. One of the villagers put them in his house, and throughout all the years of both the German occupation and the communist regime, they saw that the village itself was protected.

After the German occupation, the Serbs found out that the relics were kept in the village, and came to take him as one of their Orthodox kings. But what is interesting about it is that when the Serbs came to take his relics they did it with prayers and a procession, but as they started off in procession with the relics (both Moslems and Serbs were carrying them) the coffin became so heavy that it was impossible to go any further and the Serbs themselves said, "No. He doesn't want to leave." They begged him, they did a paraclesis and prayers saying, "Come, please come, you are the king of Serbia." The saint appeared (or somehow told them) "You Serbs will take three or four of my fingers, but the rest of me

you will leave here." So, we had the saint back.

They wanted to call the village after Saint John, but during the communist times it wasn't allowed, so they made a contraction of the name and called it Shenionn. Now they have amazingly made a beautiful church - many of the Moslems have been baptized - and they are planning to restore the monastery. They have taken his relics to the Metropolitan Cathedral in Tirana, but they take them in procession also to the village.

Now, when I went with my family to venerate his relics in the village, during the time when the church just had the outside walls standing and nothing else, the relics were inside the church in the place where the altar had been. People would come there to venerate them . (There was a nearby family who kept the relics in their home at night, and took them to the ruined church for people to venerate during the day.) We had a vigil there and it was a wonderful thing. People would go to pray and their prayers would be answered.

.....Could we change the subject a little and go back to your earlier comments about Muslims? I've asked this in other interviews because it is an immediate issue for many European countries who are facing a great influx of Moslem immigrants - some people who are aware of political and social currents are fearful that Islamic influence is spreading very quickly in the West? What do you think?

Julia: Well the situation in Albania, as I said before, is completely different from the Arab countries. I think that if a strict Arab Muslim would come to Albania he would kill these Albanian Muslims who go to the Christian church to pray during the services, or come to light candles to the Mother of God. But I have to tell a story to show the difference.

In a town in southern Albania called Korcha, we had very beautiful churches. Now those churches were protected not only by Orthodox but by Muslims as well, and during all those centuries, the churches were left untouched by the predominantly Muslim population. Now, after the fall of communism, some Arab Moslems came to build Muslim schools for the villagers. As fundamentalists they taught a few adolescents that "this country should be Muslim, and you must follow traditions, etc." And these young children went and

destroyed the frescoes of the saints in these churches. I saw the ruined frescoes myself. But that was something that was incited from the outside - it could never have come from our own Albanian people. You can see, it just took foreigners coming from the outside to destroy not only our church tradition, but part of our culture as Albanians, and to set us at odds with each other, where there hadn't been conflict for generations.

RtE: Did any Muslims speak out?

Julia: They couldn't speak out publicly, but they did testify in private that the desecration had been incited by these foreigners.

I think that not only fundamentalist Islam, but any fundamentalist religion is a threat. Western Christian fundamentalists have done us a lot of psychological harm here. They have even made thinking people become atheist. Although I think it is pointless to fear another religion, with fundamentalists others should take precautions to protect themselves physically and psychologically - praying more about the situation is one thing that comes to mind.

RtE: I know this is a huge subject, but can you tell us how the Albanian Moslems and Christians viewed the conflict in Kosovo with the Serbs?

Julia: It has the appearance of being a religious conflict, but it is deeper than that. It includes the whole history of when the Albanians first came there and why Kosovo was separated from Albania. It is a political and historical issue as well.

RtE: The Serbs complain that they are a badly treated minority.

Julia: It is so difficult to pull out the threads of history from a book. There are thousands of circumstances and factors that decide things, of which we have no record. Personally, I don't care whether it is Albanian or Serbian land anymore. Just leave other people to live in peace. We are in the 21st century and the fact is that we are still fighting over land. Instead of people looking hard at how not have conflicts, our human nature continues to fight itself. This conflict doesn't have any logic.

During the war the Orthodox Church in Albania went to Kosovo with food, with clothes, even though our own people were so desperate



at the time. I was studying in England then, and my mother wrote to me and said, "It is such a pitiful situation seeing these mothers from Kosovo on the streets with their young children, without a shelter, without food even." This is not an image that makes you feel happy or victorious. Americans in this century, and people in northern Europe since World War II have not seen the misery of war in their own home. These are tragedies and one cannot stand aloof. Albanian people felt very sad about the whole thing. It is political chaos, and when there is chaos, you can say nothing, the best thing you can do is to just start helping.

RtE: Did the Church help both Christians and Moslems?

Julia: Everybody! I am so amazed at the work of our Archbishop Anastasy, because he opened refugee camps up and down Albania, and the last and largest refugee camp which is still running is run by Orthodox Albanians. He also opened a very good medical clinic for people in Tirana, and this free clinic is open to everyone, both refugees and people from the town, no matter what faith they are. Now, only a person of love can do that. If we live in the image of our fallen selves we will have many questions in our mind as to why this war began, why this, why that, but if we live in the image of God we will no longer have questions, just solutions.

I had a discussion with a Greek who used the analogy of the Holy Land - I think it is important for us to have those holy places where Christ was born and crucified, and the Serbs consider Kosovo their holy land, but for me that leaves a question mark. If I have to resolve a conflict like this with bloodshed, is it Christian?

When we entered the church where the faces of the saints had been destroyed by the adolescents, I and everyone with me cried. This is not just a part of our artistic culture, this is living and for me especially, that image was so important because that was the beginning of my Christianity. "Yes! God has a face!" So, my point is, is there any other way that we can resolve the problem without shedding blood? Isn't there any other possibility? If we knew that they were coming in a week to desecrate our monastery do we have enough faith to pray to the Lord, to the Mother of God, and do whatever we are enlightened to? If we are to be martyrs, so be it, but if God wants us to do something else, He will enlighten us.

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**email: [umaximov@newmail.ru](mailto:umaximov@newmail.ru)**