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# Hopes for religious harmony come to life in the Muslim Vatican

Albania wants to put the “state” in “Islamic state”



ILLUSTRATION: PETER SCHRANK

Oct 17th 2024

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**C**HARLEMAGNE MAKES it a point to lay off heavy liquor until after lunch. But what if the booze being proffered is a mere thimble of *raki*, a fruity firewater Balkan hosts foist upon visitors in a gesture of hospitality? What if, furthermore, the host in question is a Muslim cleric, unexpectedly keen to lubricate your columnist as he explains the tenets of his faith while himself puffing away at a stubby cigar? And what if, finally and yet more improbably, the bottle-wielding holy man is soon to become the head of the world's newest state, a diminutive Muslim sovereign enclave carved out of the low-rent suburbs of the capital of Albania? It was pushing noon after all. Perhaps a small shot.

When put in proximity to each other, the words “Islamic” and “state” tend to induce more panic than enthusiasm. To Albanians practising an easy-going local variant of the faith—far removed from the *fatwas*, *jihads*, caliphates and other Western bugbears—that is a perversion to be defied. Proud of the liberal strand of Islam known as Bektashism that is prevalent in this corner of the Balkans, the authorities have decided to grant the order its own state, with flag, passports and all. The birth of most countries can be traced to decades of battles, upheavals and revolutions. The new Bektashi country, in contrast, was announced out of the blue by Edi Rama, the Albanian prime minister, in an interview with the *New York Times* last month. Once a few legal niceties are settled, the world will celebrate its 200th-or-so country perhaps as early as the end of the year—if anyone recognises what has inevitably been termed the “Muslim Vatican”.

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If Vatican this is, Baba Mondi, Charlemagne's genial host, is the Holy Father. Donning a 12-sided hat as he greets visitors in the compound outside Tirana, his white beard flowing over embroidered green robes, the grandfatherly preacher winces at the comparison with the Catholic headquarters in Rome. But that is more an act of modesty than rebutting a theological offence (there are pictures at hand of the head *baba* greeting various popes). The pontiff tends to a billion-strong Catholic flock from the grandeur of Rome. The Bektashi World Centre, squeezed between an industrial estate and some fields being gnawed at by sheep, measures just 11 hectares, barely a few football pitches. A newly built auditorium and museum offer a focal point for visitors keen to add to their country tally. It is no Sistine Chapel, but it will do for now.

There are even more Muslims than Catholics in the world, though only a fraction would recognise their faith in this Albanian variant. Formed in the 13th century in Turkey, the Bektashis are a Sufi mystic order, combining learnings from the Koran with devotion to their own traditions. Once the religion of the Ottoman military elite, the order took in teachings from far and wide until being banned there in the 19th century. When Turkey went secular in the 1920s, the Bektashis' leaders moved to Albania. Through their love of the arts, the order's dervishes have been credited with helping the country shake off the Ottoman yoke in 1912; some describe it as the Albanian "national religion" though more people adhere to mainstream Sunni Islam. The creed's reward was to face persecution, alongside all other faiths, at the hands of the poundshop Stalinist regime that ran Albania from 1944.

Bektashis claim 20m followers spread thinly across three dozen countries. That may be an exaggeration. Counting its adherents is all the harder given its easy-going ways: some describe it as more of a philosophy than a religion. Baba Mondi, the eighth *dedebaba* since the move to Albania, speaks with reverence for all faiths. "Don't constrain yourself while God has made you free," just about sums it up. There is a bit of fasting (but not a whole Ramadan's worth), some daily praying (but no imposing mosques or minarets), and a lot of talk of humans "sharing the same destiny". Being a good Bektashi is about exuding love and tolerance. Their leader calls himself a friend to all, including Israel, whose president he met just last month—hospitality unlikely to be extended in Tehran or Mecca, say. The Bektashis shun politics and decry violence. They are, in other words, easily compatible with the God-shunning ways that prevail in most of Europe these days.

## **Rome Baba**

If Baba Mondi is the Bektashis' religious leader, Mr Rama serves as the faith's chief

survive the rest of time”. Never mind his own (latent) Catholic faith, succouring his Muslim brethren is a roundabout way of showing off Albania’s proud history of tolerance. It was the only country occupied by Nazis during the second world war to end the conflict with more Jews than it started with. A majority-Muslim country, it celebrates Mother Teresa, a Catholic nun with local roots. Why stigmatise do-gooders based on something as mundane as faith? The Bektashis are a deserving lot. “It is precisely because some people in Europe have a problem with the word “Muslim” that this is something to be done,” says Mr Rama.

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Not everyone is a fan of granting the Bektashis their own enclave, decrying what they see as an attempt at religious engineering. Other Muslim interests are busy trying to gain ground in the Balkans; last week Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish president, swung by Tirana to open an 8,000-capacity mosque. Plenty see the Bektashi move as a PR ploy by Mr Rama, a big man—literally, as a former professional basketball player, as well as politically, given over a decade in power with few domestic rivals—in a small country. Perhaps. But the intention is noble, in keeping with the Bektashis’ kindly ways. Showing off Albanian tolerance while subtly shaming that of fellow Europeans is surely worth redrawing a few maps for, and a swig of *raki*. ■

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This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline “The Vatican, but make it Muslim”

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