

Statistical Study on Religious Belief in Albania

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Executive Summary

Albania is a unique case on a global scale, even in the history of humanity, as the country in which religion was banned by law for almost a quarter of a century, from 1967 to 1990.

Even before this period, starting from the establishment of the communist dictatorship immediately after 1944, religion in Albania came under constant pressures of all kinds – through politically militant atheism propaganda, state intervention in religious institutions, and clergy imprisonment or execution.

The closure of religious institutions and the ban on religion in 1967 marks the beginning of a new phase of Albanian totalitarianism. Historically, as is well known, freedom of opinion as a human right originated with religious freedom in some Western European countries in the 17th century, i.e., the non-interference of state authorities in a sphere as deeply individual as that of religious beliefs. Thus, it is particularly important to stress a point not adequately stressed up to now, that the prohibition of religion in Albania constituted a severe shrinkage of individual autonomy, an attempt to deepen totalitarian control in people's consciousness, including indirectly non-believers, non-believers. In this war against religion, more clearly than in any other area of the country's life, terror was intertwined with ideological propaganda, a combination that forms the very essence of totalitarian control, as Hannah Arendt explains. It can be said that it objectively prepared a suitable ground for one of the

darkest chapters in the history of the communist dictatorship in Albania: the repressive wave of the seventies, during which, in parallel, the cult of the dictator rose to paroxysm.

With the prohibition of religion, Albania was declared an atheist state, which was also sanctioned in the country's constitution. During that period, not only was the exercise of religious rites prohibited, but also simply the expression of religious belief was considered a crime against the state, specifically included in an article of the penal code distinct from the article on "agitation and propaganda against the state", but with the same degree of penalization, i.e., three to ten years in prison. It is significant to note that the decomposition of totalitarianism in Albania led eventually to the decriminalization of religion and the restoration of religious freedom in 1990.

All three of the above stages are reflected in the country's current demographic structure. Thus, the generation that experienced the period before the ban on religion constitutes 27.2% of the adult population; the generation that was formed during the period of state atheism constitutes 40.1% of the adult population; and the generation that was formed after the restoration of freedom of belief constitutes 32.7% of the adult population.

In the latest census in Albania, conducted by the state agency INSTAT (CENS-2023), 45.9% of respondents declared themselves as Sunni Muslims, 8.4% as Catholic Christians, 7.2% as Orthodox Christians, 4.8% as Bektashis, 3.5% as atheists, etc. Meanwhile, a very high percentage of respondents (13.8%) did not declare their religious belief, 10.2% refused to respond and 5.6% were unavailable – in total, almost 30% resulted unidentified about their religious beliefs.

In our statistical study with face-to-face interviews in the field, we have aimed to explore more deeply than INSTAT. Our goal was not merely to measure the percentages of self-identification in relation to religion, but to also understand the depth of religious belief (in cases where it exists) and the impact of former state atheism on Albanians' current religiosity

– for which we conducted a survey with almost 60 questions, interviewing face-to-face 820 adults. The full battery of responses and the sampling error for each answer can be found in the full report in Albanian¹.

Main Findings

- 59% of respondents stated that, based on personal beliefs (regardless of family background), they fully believe in a certain religion. 56% of respondents believe in their family's traditional religion.
- 21.7% of respondents stated that they go to church/mosque/tekke/etc. at least once a month.
- Only 6.8% of respondents can be considered deeply religious believers, as determined by positive answers to all of the following questions: go to church at least once a week to church/mosque/tekke/etc.; believe that things happen by God's will; believe that humans are God's creation; think that, with the death of a person, his/her soul continues to live in the afterlife; think that, depending on the deeds of a person in this life, his/her soul can go to heaven or hell.
- Respondents who regularly fast/observe Ramadan/Lent account for 22.2% of the total.
- The older generation (65 years and older), which experienced the period before the ban on religion, has the highest percentage of those who go to church/mosque/tekke/etc. at least once a month (23.5%), while the middle generation (40-64 years old), which grew during the forced atheism, has the lowest percentage (19%).
- Almost half of those who do not believe in any religion go to church/mosque/tekke/etc., in the hope that this can help them with their life/health problems, and over half of the non-religious that go to church/mosque/tekke/etc. say there are cases when it has really helped them or their kin.
- Nearly 40% of the respondents declared that they/their parents/ grandparents continued to perform religious rites secretly during the period when this was punishable by law.

¹ <https://www.kas.de/sq/web/albanien/titujt/-/content/studim-statistikor-mbi-besimin-fetar-ne-shqiperi-1>

- 79% of respondents stated that they have no problem with a family member (including themselves) marrying or cohabitating with someone from a family of different religious background; such marriages/partnerships currently represent 21.5% of all marriages/partnerships.
- Only 75% of respondents share the same religious belief or nonbelief as their fathers and 72% as their mothers. Among married people, only 69% share the same religious belief or nonbelief as their spouses/partners.
- Someone with a mother believing in any religion is 6.27 more likely to believe in a certain religion than someone with a mother who does not believe in any religion, when all other characteristics are the same. In the case of the father, the odds ratio is lower: 4.2.

Main Results

1. Based solely on your personal views (regardless of your family's religious background), do you fully believe in a particular religion?	Percent	Sampling error (+/-)
1. I believe in God but not in any religion	33.8	2.3
2. Atheist/Agnostic	7.2	0.5
3. Bektashi tariqa	5.2	0.4
4. Other Shia tariqas	0.5	0.0
5. Main Muslim Branch (Sunnis)	36.0	2.4
6. Catholic Christian	7.9	0.5
7. Orthodox Christian	8.0	0.5
8. Protestant/other Christian	1.3	0.1

2. Based solely on your personal views (regardless of your family's religious background), do you fully believe in a particular religion?	18-39 years old	40-64 years old	65+
	%	%	%
1. I believe in God but not in any religion	34.4	36.2	29.6
2. Atheist/Agnostic	7.1	7.4	5.3
3. Bektashi tariqa	4.3	4.6	7.2
4. Other Shia tariqas	0.8	0.0	0.9
5. Main Muslim Branch (Sunnis)	36.9	32.4	42.2
6. Catholic Christian	7.0	10.4	5.3
7. Orthodox Christian	7.8	7.2	9.6
8. Protestant/other Christian	1.7	1.8	0.0
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

Discussion

To put into perspective the main statistical results of this study, comparisons with other European countries can be of great help. Thus, the percentage of Albanian citizens who believe in a certain religion (59%) is very comparable to the percentage of believers in Western Europe, i.e. in countries where there was no restriction on religion (about 60%)², but is smaller than the proportion of believers in most other Eastern European countries, where religion was not banned by law, but where the state had almost the same attitude as the communist regime in Albania until 1967³.

² [Attitudes of Christians in Western Europe | Pew Research Center;
https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20\(22%25%20median\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20(22%25%20median))

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-affiliation/>

With respect to generational differences within Albania, the percentage of believers in any given religion is the largest among respondents of the older generation (65.1%), but it does not differ much from that of the middle generation (raised during the period of state atheism (56.4%): the difference seems relatively small, considering state actions against religion during that period. The percentage difference is even smaller between the older generation and the one that was raised after 1990 (65.1% vs. 58.5%).

An indicator of religious belief depth is the frequency of visits to places of worship (church/mosque/tekke/etc.). Overall, 21.7% of respondents go at least once a month. By age group (always bearing in mind the background of the state's struggle against religion in the period of state atheism), the middle generation does not differ much from the rest of the respondents in terms of frequenting places of worship at least once a month: 19% versus 23.5%. Meanwhile, we have a significant difference between the older generation and the other two in terms of the percentage of going to the places of worship at least once a week: 14.1% versus 10.7% for the middle generation and 9.4% for the younger generation. Those who go to places of worship once a week can be considered deeply religious – currently, 11.2% of all respondents. If we include other indicators, such as believing that things happen by God's will; believing that humans are God's creation; thinking that, with the death of a person, his/her soul continues to live in the afterlife; thinking that, depending on the deeds of a person in this life, his/her soul can go to heaven or hell – then only 6.8% of respondents enter the category of deeply religious.

Going back to comparisons with other countries, let's analyze the cases of France and Spain – very different to each other within Western Europe, while representing interesting cases from comparison with Albania in terms of historic relationships between state and religion. France has a militant secular state, while in Spain Catholicism has historically been a state religion and until less than half a century ago it was still the main component of the ideology

of a dictatorial regime (even to this day education is partly under the guardianship of the Church).

In these two countries, the percentage of people who believe in a certain religion is comparable to that of Albania: 64% in France (2018)⁴ and 58.5% in Spain (2024)⁵. Another indicator available from these two countries for a comparison with Albania is that of the frequenting of prayer sites at least once a month, 22% in France and 23% in Spain⁶; at least once a week, 10.6% in Spain⁷. So, in all these indicators, the percentages in these two countries are close to those of Albania.

One indicator where Albania differs greatly from them, as from Western Europe in general, is that in Albania, among those who do not believe in any certain religion, the percentage of atheists/agnostics is very small compared to the corresponding percentage in Western Europe⁸. In the two aforementioned countries, the number of atheists/agnostics has increased rapidly in recent decades: in France, between 1990 and 2012 it increased more than threefold⁹; in Spain, it has increased more than 2.5 times in the last quarter century¹⁰;

⁴ [Attitudes of Christians in Western Europe | Pew Research Center; https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20\(22%25%20median\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20(22%25%20median))

⁵ [es3485mar_a](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20(22%25%20median))

⁶ Për të dyja shtetet: [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20\(22%25%20median\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20(22%25%20median))

⁷ [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgicfindmkaj/https://aelpa.org/web-2018/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Es3318marMT_A.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20(22%25%20median))

⁸ [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20\(22%25%20median\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20(22%25%20median))

⁹ [Religion et irrégion. Quels effets sur l'orientation politique et le système de valeurs ? - TRIELEC - WEB Public](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20(22%25%20median))

¹⁰ [Religion et irrégion. Quels effets sur l'orientation politique et le système de valeurs ? - TRIELEC - WEB Public](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/#:~:text=of%20religious%20commitment.-,Few%20people%20in%20Western%20Europe%20attend%20religious%20services%20on%20a,monthly%20(22%25%20median))

and they make up 30% to 35% of the population in each of these two countries¹¹, versus 7.2% in Albania.

Given the above comparisons, both between the age-groups in Albania and those between Albania and western European countries, it can be said that state atheism not only could not eradicate religion, but it also did not bring about any major changes in this direction. This is also confirmed from our finding that almost 40% of families were secretly performing religious rites during the communist period – even while facing jail time. The factors that lead to religious beliefs erosion in society and to loss of religious institutions' authority are diverse and cannot have a common denominator. For example, Romania, where religion was never banned by law but which, among former European communist countries had in the 1970s and 80s the greatest similarity to Albania in terms of the severity of dictatorship, currently has the largest proportion of believers in the whole of Europe (99.5%). The Czech Republic, with a regime that was less harsh than Romania during the communist period, currently has the smallest proportion of believers in all of Europe (21.6%). The panorama becomes even more complicated if we look at Slovakia, which for almost half a century was part of the same communist state as the Czech Republic: in Slovakia, believers make up 84.2% of the country's population.

In addition to age-group comparisons, we also have made comparisons between believers in a certain religion and those who do not believe in any religion. The comparisons between the two groups show that attitudes related to religious belief have a very distinct difference, albeit the specific weight of atheists and agnostics in the second group is small. This comparison shows that among deists (more than a third of respondents), belief in the existence of a supernatural being is not important in their lives. Indeed, as Blaise Pascal, a philosopher and theologian, says, deism is as far apart from religious faith as atheism.

¹¹ [Religion et irrégion. Quels effets sur l'orientation politique et le système de valeurs ? - TRIELEC - WEB Public; Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas - CIS](#)

Finally, two widely spread phenomena to be emphasized:

1. About 79% of respondents answered that they would not mind marrying or cohabiting with a person of a different religious background; among the believers of any religion, the percentage was 75%. On the other hand, interreligious marriages/cohabitations (by origin) accounted for 21.6% of the total number of marriages/cohabitations. If we add to this finding the fact that over one third of the population of Albania consists of rural residents, i.e. areas homogeneous from a religious point of view (which reduces the possibility of choice), these percentages speak of widespread religious tolerance in the Albanian society. For most respondents, even among those who believe in a certain religion, interreligious marriage/cohabitation is quite acceptable.
2. The results concerning visits to religious sites with the hope that they might help with health or other life problems show that this superstition is widely spread even among people who do not believe in any religion. It can also be deduced from our results that, in people who believe in a certain religion, religious belief is not infrequently mixed with superstitious beliefs – a common mixture in southern Europe, especially among rural populations or of rural descent.

Conclusions

- Religious belief continues to be quite widespread in Albania, with a percentage of believers comparable to that of Western Europe (see summary of results below).
- The number of those who can be considered deeply religious is relatively small, compared to the total number of believers, which can be observed today even in countries with diametrically opposed historic state-religion relations.
- State atheism not only failed to achieve the goal of eradicating religion, but it also did not bring about any major changes in this direction. Religious belief, it seems, is one of the most refractory layers of human conscience in the face of political violence.

Further Research

Further research with in-depth field interviews will be needed to better understand the relations between religious faith, deism and superstitions among Albanian adults of different generations.