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Dalle Tenebre alla Luce: Lo sviluppo dell'Evangelismo in Albania

Fares Marzone

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For those of us who studied history at school before 1970—in the days when modern history ended in 1945—there may still be a vestigial memory of a topic called ‘The Eastern Question’—a topic that was very little concerned with the fate of the people who lived in the Balkans. We only studied it because it shed light on the rivalry of Russia, Britain and Austria in their ambition to profit from the weakness of the Ottoman Empire—unforgettably referred to by Czar Nicholas I as the ‘Sick man of Europe’. If we are honest we must admit that little has really changed. When the disintegration of Yugoslavia began to become genocidal, the outside world was primarily concerned with whether this would have wider ramifications; as a result intervention was delayed for years with devastating consequences. Apparently it is only for specialists, that Balkan countries are of interest in their own right.

Albania is a classic illustration of our ignorance. Perhaps we know that it was created in 1913 because the Austro-Hungarians were afraid of Serbia having access to the Adriatic, but after that, apart from King Zog (whose wonderful name is probably three-quarters of our information of the man) our knowledge of Albania is minimal. The country was either a subset of Italian expansionism under Mussolini or a curious exception to Soviet post war domination of Eastern Europe. Yes, we can recall the name of Enver Hoxha—we had forty years in which to learn it... Of Albania and Albanians we are woefully ignorant. Perhaps we know that while we refer to them as Albanians on account of their fair hair, they call their country ‘Land of Eagles’ (Shqipërija), but that’s about all.

For Italians the situation is somewhat different. Geographically they are nearer and as a result they have been exposed to some of the

consequences of Albanian upheaval in the last ten years. Fabio Martelli has observed that for Italians Albanian means little more than 'a refugee, an illegal immigrant, a wheeler-dealer or an organizer and beneficiary of prostitution'. It is partly to rectify this prevalent Italian perspective as well as a more widespread ignorance that Fares Marzone has written this excellent book *From Darkness to Light: the Progress of Evangelism in Albania*. His other aims are to encourage Albanians (both Christian and otherwise) and to foster interest in Albanian (and also Turkish) missionary outreach. Marzone is well aware of the wider evangelical perspective but he has chosen to concentrate on the work of the Brethren (*I Fratelli*) with whom he is associated and the abundant fruit of whose recent work in some other countries may come as a surprise to English readers. The author cites Chad and Romania as spectacular examples of recent Brethren expansion in addition to the work in Albania.

Marzone is a good historian and enumerates his sources meticulously. Some twenty pages of bibliography include details of periodical literature (both secular and religious) of particular value. There were moments in the book where the author assumed more knowledge than this reader had at his fingertips, but to Marzone's credit his footnotes later provided the necessary information. For example, on page 48 he gives us details of Enver Hoxha's successor, Ramiz Alia, a reference to whose surname had had me guessing on the first page. In fact, the footnotes (supplemented by two superbly instructive appendices of chronological and factual material) are consistently informative of details of Albanian language, history and culture. In only one instance do I venture to question his judgement. There is, I fear, a little Albanophile sleight of hand on page 19 where the implication is that St Jerome was born in Albania. Strido, his birthplace is far to the North in Istria, Croatia.

However all this wealth of general instruction is merely by way of a bonus. The body of the text (after a chapter describing the country's isolation before 1991) is concerned with the remarkable work of *I Fratelli* in Albania (and among Albanians in Kossovo) in the last ten years. Marzone tells his story with numerous examples of courageous initiatives and enthusiastic responses. Sometimes discretion leads him

to omit surnames but it is clear that he is not just making broad generalizations; he writes of real people and individual experiences. Marzone is not a secular historian. He delights to trace the hand of God in the affairs of men and women. Indeed in places Leibnitz would have called this a work of theodicy. For example Marzone suggests that a period of atheistic materialism has been used by God to soften the resistance of hearts previously hardened by Islam. He also draws attention to the tradition of tolerance that has sweetened relations with people of other religious conviction. Marzone's work is scholarly, realistic and infectiously enthusiastic and we commend it very warmly. It is perplexing to find no details of the book's place or date of publication, and it would also benefit from the addition of an index but it should most certainly be translated into English.

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