**THE DANGER OF ARROGANCE AND IGNORANCE**

**A CASE STUDY FROM ALBANIA**

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Arrogance and Ignorance. One of the most dangerous combinations I have witnessed in the mission field is when missionaries, representing Jesus Christ, encounter the “other” and offer the exact opposite spirit from which our Lord calls us to live. Saint Paul challenged us to have the “mind of Christ” when he lifted up Jesus’ life of extreme humility as a model to imitate - *“Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness; and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”* (Phil 2:6-8).

This self-emptying humility is a cornerstone in Christian life and service. An important aspect of this humility is having the desire to overcome our own ignorance of people, cultures and faiths, even when they seem so different from our own experience. We have to be careful to avoid the simplistic and false caricatures with which we so often portray people who are different from ourselves.

During my more than ten years as a missionary in Albania, I remember encountering numerous examples where arrogance and ignorance intersected. I witnessed this both from the Orthodox encounter with Evangelicals, as well as from Evangelicals meeting Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians.

I remember the many Evangelical missionaries who enthusiastically flooded into Albania following the fall of communism in 1991. Of all the communist countries in the world, Albania held a special place for Christians interested in missions because it was the only country in the world where any and every form of religion was forbidden for 24 years. Albania not only became a militantly atheistic country, as did other Eastern European countries with the rise of communism following World War II, but from 1967-1991, the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha outdid all other communist countries by outlawing any expression of religion and ruthlessly persecuting any believers who tried to hold on to their faith. Thus, every church or mosque in the country was either destroyed or closed, many clergy and faithful were imprisoned and even martyred, and countless others suffered because of their faith.

With this unique history of religious persecution and destruction, Albania became a lightning rod for missionaries in 1991, when the country finally opened up its borders and declared religious freedom for its people. Unfortunately, thousands of missionaries flooded into the country with ignorance and arrogance. I learned very quickly that good intentions are not good enough, because one’s arrogance and ignorance can undermine one’s good intentions!

With many evangelical publications proclaiming Albania as an unreached people group, numerous missionaries enthusiastically came to this country thinking that they were going to preach the Gospel for the first time ever to the people of Albania. Whatever prior orientation or training they received didn’t inform them that Christianity had roots from the first century in the ancient lands of Illyria, from which the Albanians trace their origins. The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that “I have fully proclaimed the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum” (Rom 15:19). Albania is a land where first century martyrs and saints lived and died. For example, St. Caesar and St. Asti were two martyrs coming from the ancient city of Durres in the first century. Christianity thrived, and saints lived in these lands throughout the past 20 centuries. And of course, the second half of the 20th century is covered with the blood of martyrs, people who gave up their lives for the sake of Christ.

Communism tried to eliminate the Church and any signs of faith, and in fact an entire generation or two grew up knowing little to nothing of faith. During this dark period, however, there were still Christians who persevered. I met Fr. Joseph, a Roman Catholic priest who spent 27 years in prison suffering the most inhumane tortures, yet never denied his faith. I admired Fr. Kosma, an Orthodox priest who despite watching his village church burned to the ground and being threatened many times by the authorities, still risked his life and the life of his family by secretly baptizing children, celebrated secret Divine Liturgies in the middle of the night, and practicing his faith during the darkest years of communism. I would sit at the feet of the three “holy sisters of Korca” - Demetra, Marika and Elisabeta - who would pray without ceasing by praying in shifts each hour of the day, so that one of them would always be praying during 40 day Lenten Periods before Christmas or Easter. I became good friends with Fatmir, an Albanian who came from a Bektashi Islamic tradition, and yet during the darkest years of communism discovered God through reading an outlawed text of the Gospel of John in French, was baptized by Fr. Kosma in the 1970s, and following the fall of communism, became Metropolitan John of Korca, the first Albanian Orthodox bishop since the reopening of the churches.

Having met these faithful believers, and seeing what they suffered and risked for their faith during communism, I cringed every time I met an Evangelical missionary who thought that they were introducing the Gospel to the Albanian people for the first time! They ignored the fact that some people persevered and suffered for the faith, numerous people still identified themselves as Orthodox Christian or Roman Catholic, and the older generations that remembered their history before 1967 had some knowledge of faith. Christ was not being proclaimed in Albania for the first time in its history!

I became frustrated with this arrogance and ignorance during evangelistic crusades in Tirana when I witnessed how some Albanians would run to their homes to get an old icon which they had hidden in their home for 30 years (and hidden at great risk) to show the foreign missionaries that they had somehow held on to their faith, only to have these missionaries tell the Albanians to put away their *idolatrous* pictures and stop the *superstition* of making the sign of the cross. These Western missionaries obviously didn’t understand iconography, the theology of making the sign of the cross, or the grave danger these believers risked in order to preserve such religious relics. They ignorantly and quite arrogantly rejected their displays of faith, instead of building upon them.

One organization which I admired on one hand, and yet was quite disappointed with on another, was Campus Crusade for Christ. I was involved in a vibrant Orthodox campus ministry at the University of Tirana from the early 1990s, and I admired how Campus Crusade was also reaching out to hundreds of students, truly introducing this younger generation to the Gospel for the first time. In these early years, they were also involved in trying to show The Jesus Film in every village of Albania. After several summers of this project, I approached my friends in Campus Crusade and suggested that we work together. Since that particular summer they were planning on showing the Jesus film in a number of villages where the people identified themselves as coming from an Orthodox Christian background, I proposed that they show the film, but allow our Orthodox catechists to follow up with the teachings of the Christian faith. Since these villagers already identified themselves with being Orthodox, I hinted that it might be easier after watching the film, for them to embrace the faith by listening to Orthodox preachers and catechists. Also, I reminded my friends that a stated goal of their *non-denominational* organization was to simply introduce people to the life of Jesus through the Jesus Film.

The director of Campus Crusade in Albania suggested that we have a meeting with the head of Campus Crusade for Eastern Europe, who would be visiting Albanian the following week, and discuss our proposal. So three evangelical leaders, along with three Orthodox clergymen, met together, and I presented my ideas. Along with my original idea, I also asked if it would be possible, in any orientation that they might offer to the hundreds of Evangelical Christians who would be coming to Albania during the summer months to participate in this project, for me to give a little introduction into the history of Christianity in Albania, and specifically make the foreigners aware of the form of Christianity with which the people they would be meeting came from. To my deep chagrin, the director of Eastern Europe Campus Crusade told me that he couldn’t give me an answer on whether to work together with us or not, because he admitted that he didn’t know enough about Orthodox Christianity. I was shocked at his response, especially since he was the director for Eastern Europe. “You are the regional director of Campus Crusade for Eastern Europe,” I asked him, “Which includes Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Albania, and you don’t know anything about Orthodox Christianity?!? Before communism, the history of these peoples is intertwined with Orthodox Christianity, and these are the dominant churches still surviving in these areas. How can you as the director not know anything about the majority religions in the region you are serving?” Even after he read up on some material we gave him about Orthodox Christianity, he did not approve of any cooperation. That encounter reinforced in me once again of how precarious arrogance and ignorance can be!

Of course, arrogance and ignorance surely goes both ways as I’m sure Protestant missionaries can share their own stories with overzealous Orthodox Christians who displayed their own arrogance and ignorance towards Western missionaries entering their regions. For many Orthodox, they understood all Western missionaries as the same, and thus clumped Evangelicals, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses and any other such missionaries in the same category of “heretical cults.”

Or I heard stories of Evangelical missionaries passing out Bibles in villages which were traditionally Orthodox, and they were shocked to see the local priest resist their efforts. The Orthodox priests, on their part, felt threatened by the foreigners’ influence and threat of attracting their people away from the Orthodox Church. From the Evangelical side, however, they couldn’t comprehend how a priest could claim to be a Christian and resist the distribution of Bibles! Instead of trying to understand one another, and see if any bridges of cooperation could occur, both groups simply created their own caricatures of one another.

In contrast to this approach, we did experience positive attempts of Protestant Christians and churches working with a sensitivity to the historical reality in Albania. For example, the Presbyterian Church USA wanted to show respect for the local, indigenous church by working in conjunction with us in certain areas of ministry. Thus, they sent four of their missionaries to work within the structure of the Orthodox Church in Albania, helping in our social work outreach as well as in particular educational programs in the early 1990s. This cooperation enriched all who were involved, and helped people come to a better understanding of one another.

Another successful example occurred during the Kosovo War in 1999, when a half million mostly Muslim refugees flooded into Albania, a country of only 3.5 million people. The World Council of Churches and various ecumenical organizations worked hand-in-hand with the Orthodox Church in offering twelve million dollars in emergency relief and aid to tens of thousands of refugees. This cooperation modeled a deep respect and sensitivity for one another.

To combat certain misperceptions that our religious communities had of one another at our Resurrection of Christ Orthodox Theological Academy in Durres, we began to have certain exchanges between our school and the corresponding Roman Catholic seminary in Shkodra and an Evangelical Bible Institute in Durres.

After a lively interaction at the Roman Catholic seminary, one Catholic student told me he had grown up in an all-Catholic village and very rarely met any Orthodox Christians. Such infrequent contact with Orthodox led him to develop strong negative feelings about them, especially whenever he saw the clergy with their long beards and robes. After a stimulating conversation and a wonderful time of fellowship, I left the school, reflecting on the importance of such ecumenical interaction. We cannot afford to stay closed in our little spiritual ghettos, judging others with our misperceptions and distortions of faith.

Another fruitful encounter occurred shortly after that, when twenty students from the Evangelical Bible Institute in Durres accepted an invitation to spend an entire day at our seminary. I offered a two-hour lecture on the Orthodox Church and answered their many questions. Following the class, we had lunch, and then all the students played hours of volleyball together. Some of the Protestant students shared with me how surprised they were by our warm hospitality. One gave testimony to some negative experiences he had had with the Orthodox priest in his village, but said he now had a new perspective on the Orthodox. This encounter was followed up by a similar visit by our Orthodox students to the Evangelical school. Such interactions help us overcome our ignorance of one another, and can create a spirit of humility.

There’s nothing like face-to-face contact and the developing of relationships for breaking down walls of prejudice. We have to start seeing one another as brothers and sisters from whom we can learn and grow. We shouldn’t let our arrogance or ignorance, and even our differences or different beliefs create walls that nourish fear or uncertainty of the other. As Christians we have to love the other through encountering them, and trying to understand who they are and what they believe.